

The early learning and childcare experiences of children in out-of-home care

What does the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study tell us?

Snapshot

- Early learning experiences are important for children's development.
- Most children in the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) were attending some form of childcare or early childhood education in the early years of out-of-home-care (OOHC): around 90% of 3 year olds and 96% of 4-5 year olds.
- Children under 3 years old in foster care were less likely than those in relative/kinship care to be attending any type of childcare and spent fewer hours in childcare.
- Almost all caregivers had read to children aged 9 months to 5 years on one or more days in the past week.
- The majority of children took part in activities such as playing with toys/games, musical activities and playing outdoors with their carers on most days of the week. Foster carers were slightly more likely to engage in these sorts of activities with the children in their care than were relative/kinship carers.
- Practitioners can assist carers to choose high quality childcare by supporting them to visit a centre before enrolling a child and to ask questions to assess the quality of the care provided.

Introduction

The childcare and early learning experiences of young children are important factors that influence their wellbeing outcomes. This Evidence to Action Note outlines key findings related to the childcare and early learning experiences of a group of children in OOHC in New South Wales aged 9 months to 5 years, drawing on the first interview with their carers for POCLS. Links to current best practice and resources are also included.

POCLS examines the developmental wellbeing of a group of children living in OOHC in NSW. Wave 1 data was collected during their first years in care. The group of children in the study does not represent all children in OOHC and so care should be taken in making comparisons.

The data discussed in this note is reported in detail in the POCLS Wave 1 Baseline Statistical Report¹ Chapter Six.

Why are childcare and early learning experiences important?

Research shows that access to early learning experiences is important for children’s development. These experiences can be gained through quality formal childcare or preschool, and informal social and learning activities.

High quality childcare has been associated with more highly developed cognitive and language capacities, as well as more cooperative and less oppositional or aggressive behaviour.^{2,3,4} While some studies link long hours of childcare to poorer outcomes, these findings are mostly observed in a low-quality childcare context.² When the quality is high, long hours of childcare have been found to be associated with better outcomes.⁵ Formal centre-based childcare can be associated with higher levels of language and cognitive development than informal, home based care.⁶ Overall, childcare type, quality and quantity can be significant influences on children’s development.

Home learning environments also influence children’s cognitive and language development.^{7,8,9} Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children showed that parents’ engagement in activities such as reading to the child, story telling and doing musical activities were associated with greater school readiness, as well as social and emotional wellbeing.¹⁰

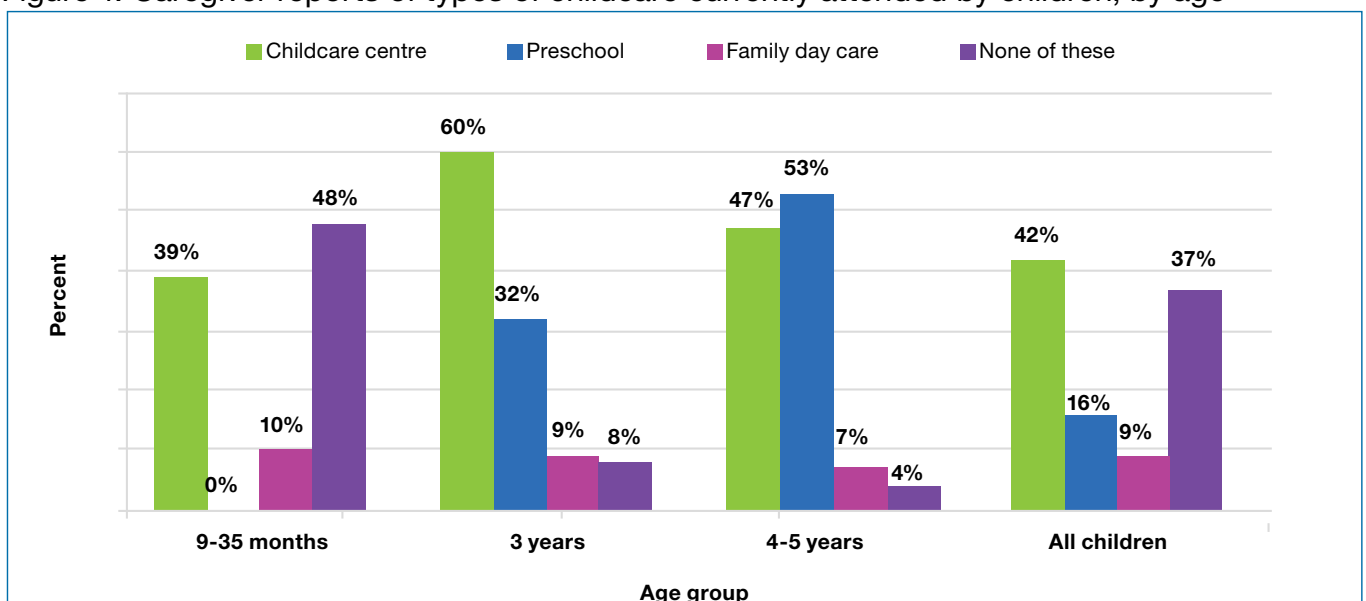
What did the study find?

Patterns of childcare attendance

The POCLS Wave 1 baseline interviews with caregivers found that the majority of children aged between 9 months and 5 years attended some form of childcare: 52% of 9-35 month old children; more than 90% of 3 year olds; and 96% of 4-5 year olds. Comparing these findings to Australian national data collected in 2008¹¹ shows that a higher proportion of POCLS children were attending some form of childcare than Australian children in general.

Attendance was most often at a childcare centre, except for the 4-5 year olds when preschool was the most frequent type (Figure 1). The most common amount of time spent across all types of childcare was 2-3 days (per week) for 9-35 month olds and 3-4 days for 4-5 year olds.

Figure 1: Caregiver reports of types of childcare currently attended by children, by age



Source: Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study, Wave 1 Baseline Statistical Report

Children in foster care were less likely to attend any type of childcare and spent fewer hours in childcare than children in relative/kinship care. The difference in hours may be partly due to the age of children in different care arrangements, as there were a higher proportion of 9–35 month old children in foster care (49%) than in relative/kinship care (41%). On other measures, foster carers were slightly more likely to engage in activities in and outside of the home with children than relative/kinship carers.



Childcare arrangements appeared to be very similar for Aboriginal children and other children (excluding children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds). A higher percentage of children from culturally diverse backgrounds (57%) did not attend childcare as compared with all other children (34% of Aboriginal children and 37% of other children).

While it is positive that so many children in the Wave 1 cohort attended a type of childcare, it is beyond the scope of POCLS to assess the quality of childcare attended. It is also not possible to determine the total proportion of children in the study who participated in an early childhood education (preschool) program.

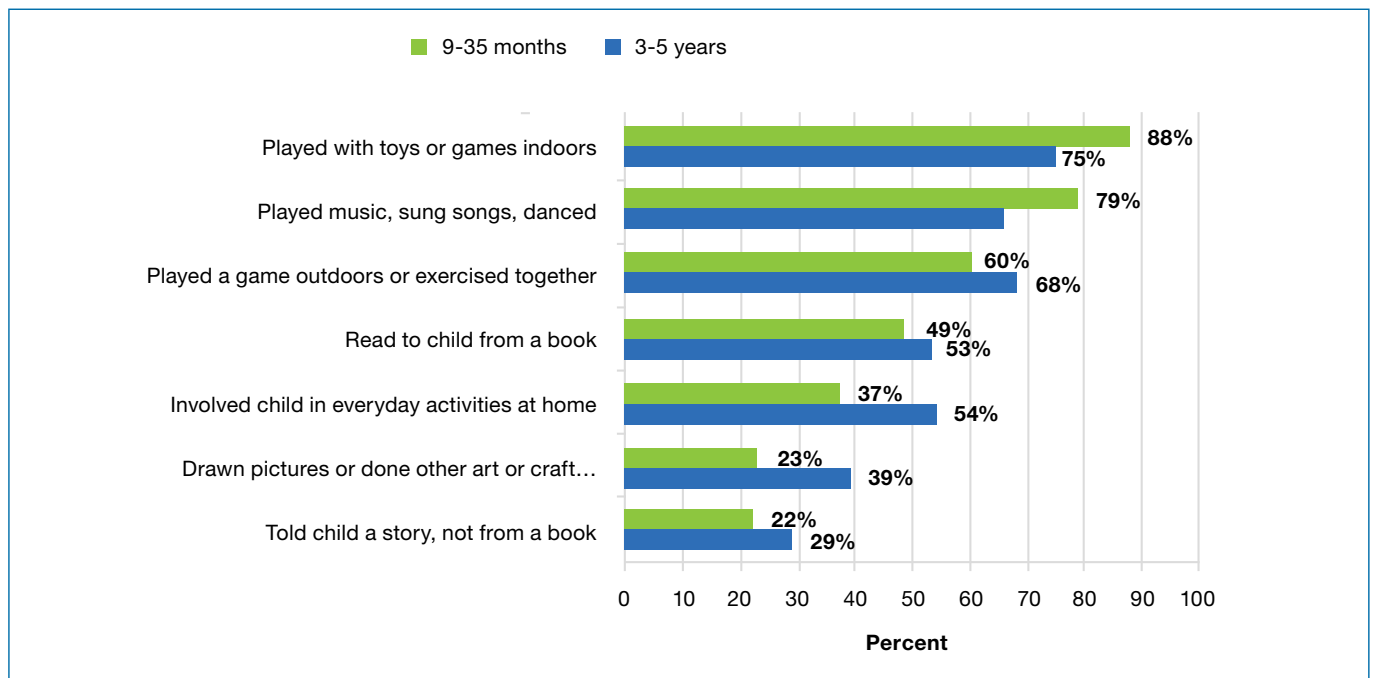
Participation in social and learning activities

The most frequently cited activity between carers and children was playing with toys or games indoors, with 88% of carers of children aged 9-35 months and 75% of carers of children aged 3-5 years indicating that this had occurred on six or seven days in the previous week (Figure 2). Playing music, singing songs or dancing were also common activities, with 79% of 9-35 month olds and 66% of children aged 3-5 years participating in these activities on six or seven days in the past week.

Around 9 in 10 carers of children in both the 9-35 months and 3-5 years age groups had read to the child from a book on one or more days in the past week (89% and 94% respectively).

Foster carers appeared to have slightly higher rates of very regularly participating (on 6-7 days in the past week) in most activities with the child. The largest differences were in reading a book to the child on 6-7 days in the past week (56% of foster carers and 43% of relative/kinship carers) and playing with toys or games indoors with the child (89% of foster carers and 78% of relative/kinship carers).

Figure 2: Caregiver activities undertaken at home with the child on at least 6-7 days in the previous week, by age



Source: Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study, Wave 1 Baseline Statistical Report

Participation in activities outside the home

Of all children aged 9 months to 5 years old, 26% attended playgroup, with a higher percentage of children aged 9-35 months attending regularly than older age groups (31% of 9-35 month olds; 17% of three year olds; and 18% of four-to-five year olds). One quarter (25%) of carers reported children participating in other organised types of group activity, such as going to Church or Sunday school and physical activities. About half (53%) of all children aged 9 months to 5 years had not been involved in any activities outside of the home. Children in foster care were more likely to participate in activities outside the home than those in relative/kinship care.

Next steps for the study

The POCLS Wave 1 baseline data provides important information for understanding children's experiences of early learning activities and childcare (type and frequency) and to examine how that influences children and young people's developmental outcomes. The POCLS Study Working Group is currently undertaking in-depth analyses of Wave 1-3 data to better understand how the frequency and type of early learning activities and childcare influence the long-term outcomes of children and young people in OOH. The researchers will also compare POCLS results with the results of other studies such as the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children to see the similarities or differences between the POCLS sample and general population.

Current best practice and resources

Research shows that high quality child care is associated with better child outcomes, while low quality care can exacerbate pre-existing social emotional difficulties.¹² Caseworkers can assist carers to choose high quality childcare by considering the child to staff ratios (lower is better), group size (smaller is better), worker qualifications (higher qualifications are associated with higher quality service delivery) and the play opportunities offered to the child during the day.

Before enrolling a child in a centre, carers should visit the centre to see how staff interact with the children. Asking the following questions may help carers assess the quality of a centre:

- How will you let me know what happens during my child's day?
- What is the daily routine and activities? Is there variety in the activities?
- Are there opportunities for children to play outside and learn about the environment?
- How are children's interests included in the learning program?
- How do you deal with sickness and accidents?
- Has your service been assessed under the National Quality Standard? What rating did you receive? (Starting Blocks, How do you know if the child care service you've found is high quality?: Fact sheet).

Under the National Quality Framework, child care services in Australia are assessed and rated against seven key areas as set out in the National Quality Standard. Caseworkers and carers can review the ratings given to child care centres by accessing the [Starting Blocks](#) website.

Information about choosing high quality child care can be found in the fact sheet, [How do you know if the child care service you've found is high quality?](#) on the Starting Blocks website.

About the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study

POCLS is the first large scale prospective longitudinal study on OOHC in Australia. The study examines the safety and developmental wellbeing of a group of children in NSW who entered OOHC for the first time between May 2010 and October 2011 and received final care and protection orders by April 2013. It is led and funded by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) with independent expert researchers providing advice on study design, and undertaking the interviews and analyses. Wave 1 was conducted in the child/young person's first years in OOHC. A total of 1,285 children and young people aged 9 months to 17 years, and their caregivers, participated in the Wave 1 interviews between May 2011 and August 2013.

As the children and young people in the study are first time entries to OOHC they are not representative of all children in OOHC and so caution should be taken in generalising the findings to the total OOHC population.

All publications will be uploaded to the study webpage www.community.nsw.gov.au/pathways

Endnotes

- ¹ Smart, D 2015, 'Children's childcare and educational experiences', in Australian Institute of Family Studies, Chapin Hall Center for Children University of Chicago and New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services, Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in NSW. Wave 1 Baseline Statistical Report, Sydney, NSW: Department of Family and Community Services.
- ² National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Early Childcare Research Network 1998, 'Early child care and self-control, compliance, and problem behavior at twenty-four and thirty-six months', *Child Development*, vol. 69, no.4, pp. 1145–1470.
- ³ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Early Child Care Research Network 2000, 'The relation of child care to cognitive and language development', *Child Development*, vol. 71, no. 4, pp. 960–980.
- ⁴ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Early Child Care Research Network 2003a, 'Does amount of time spent in child care predict socioemotional adjustment during the transition to kindergarten?', *Child Development*, vol. 74, no.4, pp. 976–1005.
- ⁵ Love, JM, Harrison, L, Sagi-Schwartz, A, van Ijzendoorn, MH, Ross, C, Ungerer, JA, Raikes, H, Brady-Smith, C, Boller, K, Brooks-Gunn, J, Constantine, J, Kisker, EE, Paulsell, D, & Chazan-Cohen, R 2003, 'Child care quality matters: How conclusions may vary with context', *Child Development*, vol. 74, no.4, pp. 1021–1033.
- ⁶ Harrison, L & Ungerer, J, 2002, The Sydney Family Project: Family and child care predictors of school adjustment at age six, Paper presented at the Longitudinal Studies of Early Childhood in Australia, Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Brisbane.
- ⁷ Linver, MR, Brooks-Gunn, J & Kohen, DE 2002, 'Family processes as pathways from income to young children's development', *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 38, no. 5, pp. 719–734;
- ⁸ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Early Child Care Research Network, 2003b, 'Does quality of child care affect child outcomes at age 4½?', *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 39, no.3, pp. 451–469.
- ⁹ Yeung, WJ, Linver, MR, & Brooks-Gunn, J 2002, 'How money matters for young children's development: Parental investment and family processes', *Child Development*, vol. 73, no.6, pp. 1861–1879.
- ¹⁰ Smart, D, Sanson, A, Baxter, J, Edwards, B, & Hayes, A 2008, Home-to-school transitions for financially disadvantaged children, Report commissioned by The Smith Family, Sydney: Australia.
- ¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008, Childhood education and care, Australia 2008, Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- ¹² Huntsman, L & Tully, L 2008, What determines quality in child care?, Research to Practice Note, Department of Community Services: Ashfield.

Produced by

Katie Page and Christie Robertson

Evidence to Action

FACS Analysis and Research

223-239 Liverpool Rd, Ashfield NSW 2131

www.facs.nsw.gov.au

Email: facsar@facs.nsw.gov.au