

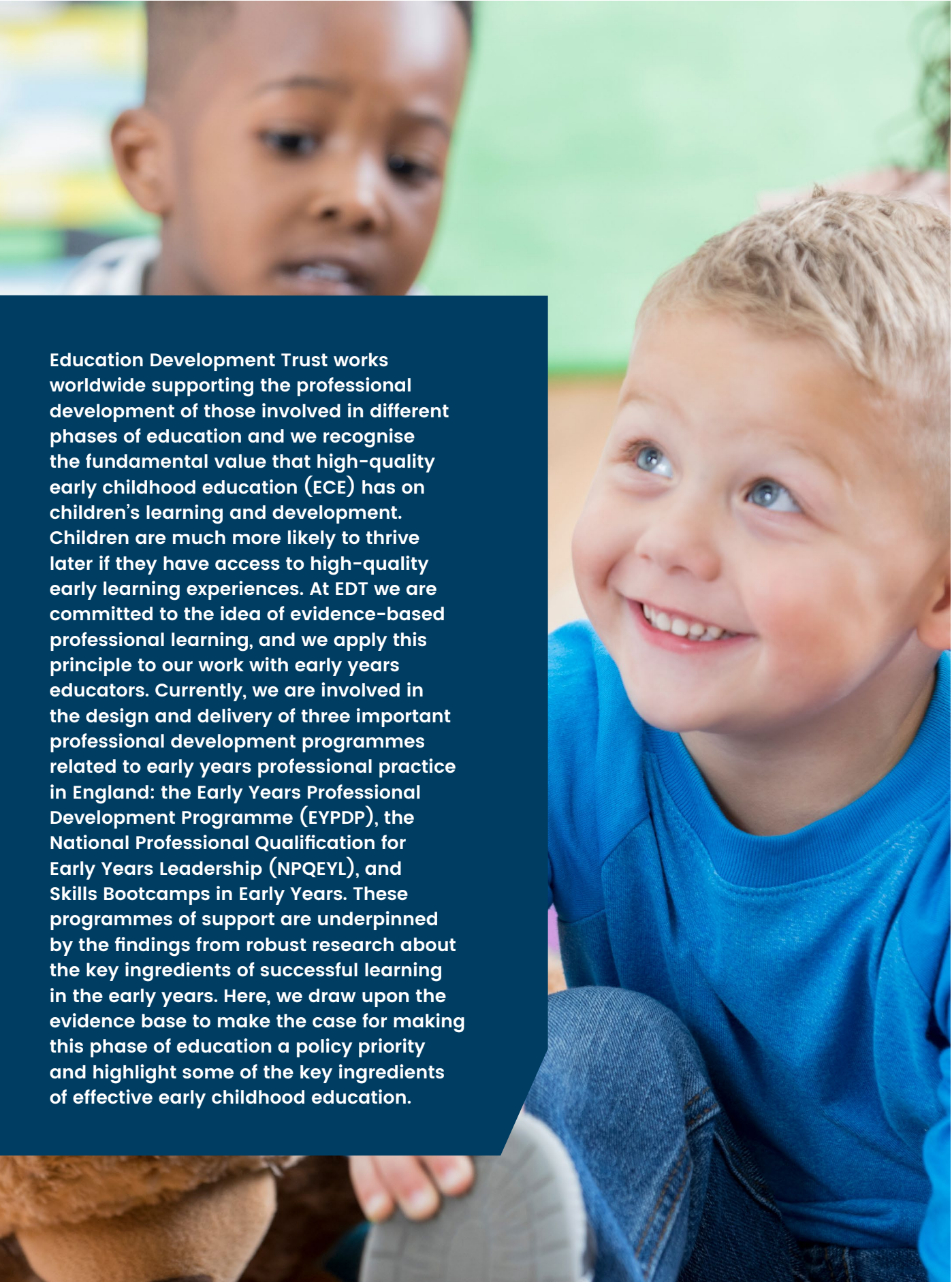


THINKPIECE

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High-quality education in the early years

What we know about providing high-quality
early years education and why it matters



Education Development Trust works worldwide supporting the professional development of those involved in different phases of education and we recognise the fundamental value that high-quality early childhood education (ECE) has on children's learning and development. Children are much more likely to thrive later if they have access to high-quality early learning experiences. At EDT we are committed to the idea of evidence-based professional learning, and we apply this principle to our work with early years educators. Currently, we are involved in the design and delivery of three important professional development programmes related to early years professional practice in England: the Early Years Professional Development Programme (EYPDP), the National Professional Qualification for Early Years Leadership (NPQEYL), and Skills Bootcamps in Early Years. These programmes of support are underpinned by the findings from robust research about the key ingredients of successful learning in the early years. Here, we draw upon the evidence base to make the case for making this phase of education a policy priority and highlight some of the key ingredients of effective early childhood education.



The importance of early years education

Early years are some of the most formative in life. During this period, children's brains are in the most potent stage of development and as a result, they learn at a faster rate than at any other time in their lives. In this time, they are developing crucial physical, cognitive and socio-emotional skills, which are fundamental for their future achievements in education and in adult life. High-quality early years education is therefore hugely important. It sets the foundation for lifelong learning and behaviour: the experiences children have early in their childhood shape their brains and capacity to learn, to form good relationships, and to develop resilience to life's challenges.

Research findings show that high-quality early years education provides long-term foundations for both cognitive and socio-emotional skills, and there is a growing interest in ensuring that early years educators are trained to optimise the quality and impact of their interactions, enhancing the quality of early years environments (as well as children's home learning environments) to give children a strong start in life. A study from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project recognised some time ago that 'two-to-three years of high-quality early years education can provide up to eight months of developmental advantage in literacy-related outcomes compared to children who enter school with no pre-school experience, with similar effects on other cognitive and social outcomes.'¹

The importance of, early childhood education is increasingly being recognised by many governments around the world, who are reorientating their understanding of early years provision to focus more on early education than simply on childcare. However, simply increasing the availability of early years programmes is not enough: quality is key. Indeed, at a population level, countries need to pay attention to the quality of children's early years education as the most effective means to assure the wellbeing and skills of the next generation – and to achieve more equitable outcomes across families and communities.

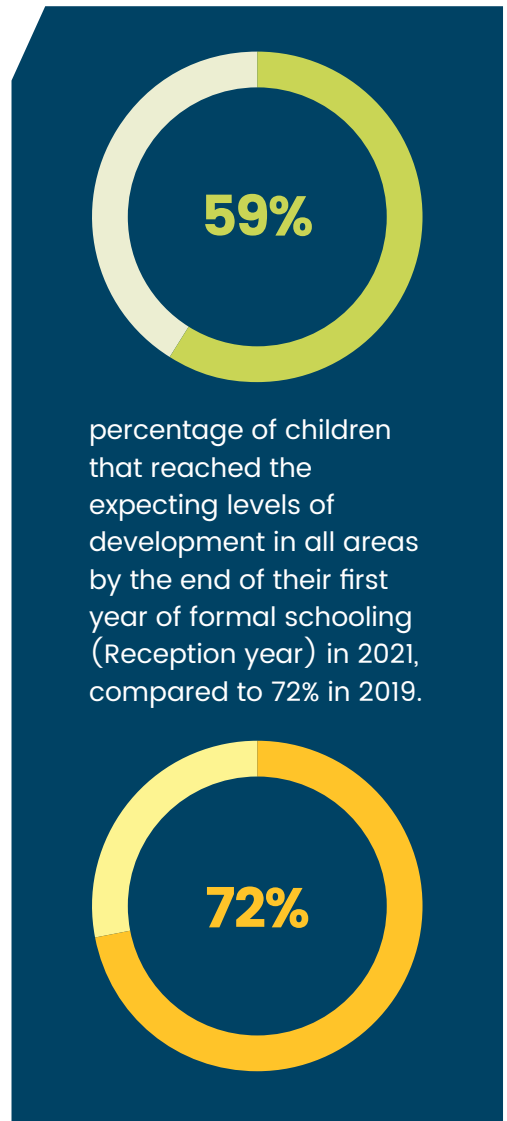


¹ Sylva, K. & Melhuish, E. & Sammons, P. & Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2014) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report*. Available at: tinyurl.com/5n8wzf8 [Accessed: 17/05/2023].



The recent Covid-19 crisis has accentuated even further the significance of good-quality early years education. It is well documented that the pandemic had a catastrophic impact on children's learning and development around the world. Many children now aged between two and five years old spent the first part of their lives under lockdown conditions, with little or no access to usual early years settings or educational provision. The problem was global but some of the world's poorest countries were hardest hit. A 2020 World Bank survey of 26 low- and middle-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, East Asia and Pacific, Latin America, South Asia, and Europe showed that most countries were slow to adapt and provide remote learning opportunities for early childhood education when usual settings were forced to close. Many countries faced limitations including poor internet connectivity and insufficient practitioner training for remote learning, making teaching and learning difficult for young audiences, while only half of countries using a national e-learning platform had content that specifically included young children. More than a third of countries surveyed indicated that they had reduced spending in pre-primary education as a result of the pandemic.² It may therefore be no surprise that many early years providers have reported noticing delays to children's expected progress in speech and language, as well as less developed core skills in mathematics and personal, social, and emotional development (PSED). There is evidence to suggest the expected level of child development for pre-school-aged children has been further affected. In the UK, the Education Endowment Foundation reported in 2022 that just 59% of children were reaching the expected levels of development in all areas by the end of their first year of formal schooling (Reception year) in 2021, compared to 72% in 2019.

As a result, early years educators – regardless of their experience or tenure in the sector – are now faced with new challenges which their prior experience and training will not have prepared them for. The sector is also historically prone to high levels of staff turnover, and those who trained in the pandemic did not have the same levels of 'on the job' learning experiences as their predecessors. In such a context, high-quality professional development opportunities and support for early years educators is all the more important: their role in helping to recover learning progress and support children's development is absolutely critical.



² Galewski, M., Adona, V. J. A., Barbosa, B. B., Ben Yahmed, Z., Currimjee, A., Ibrahim, R., Song, C., Tazi, S. & Yacoub, R. (2021) 'COVID-19 and the Early Years: A Cross-Country Overview of Impact and Response in Early Childhood Development'. World Bank, Washington, DC



The importance of early years educators and high-quality professional development

The quality of early years provision is, inevitably, very closely linked to the quality of the early years' workforce.³ One of the key determinants of the quality of early years provision is the collective professionalism, experience, knowledge and skill of the practitioners who work in these settings. As with education more generally, high-quality education starts with high-quality educators. Training and professional development for early years professionals is therefore crucial – and the cornerstone of our own work in early years.⁴

In this context, we welcome the fact that the Department for Education (DfE) has invested in the professionalism of the early years workforce in England through the Early Years Professional Development Programme (EYPDP), which supports early years practitioners working with children aged between two and four, helping them to improve their practice and children's outcomes in communication and language, early mathematics and PSED (personal, social and emotional development). In the following sections of this paper, we consider in more depth these vital aspects of the early years curriculum.

Communication and language development

Communication and language are crucially important skills for young children to develop, with far-reaching implications. Language is the 'golden thread' that runs through the other areas of learning and development, underpinning a child's ability to access quality provision.

Gaps in communication and language development can emerge early in a child's life, but their effects can be felt throughout their school lives – and even into adulthood. For instance, an average of 40% of the development gap between disadvantaged 16-year-olds and their peers has already emerged by the time they are five years old. Moreover, by the age of three, the language development skills of disadvantaged children are, on average, almost a year and a half behind those of their more advantaged peers. Children whose language development is less advanced at the age of five are six times less likely to reach expected standards in English by the age of eleven – and are eleven times less likely to reach these standards in mathematics.

What do we mean by language development skills?

- » **Vocabulary acquisition** – As language is the residue of thought, the more sophisticated and complex a child's vocabulary retrieval is, the more this enables and supports cognition and connection. Vocabulary heard, learned and used in a context that is meaningful and purposeful for the child impacts on their development and progress.
- » **'Serve and return'** – Similar to the manner in which a tennis rally takes place, this refers to the importance of understanding the nature of a conversation, and the practice of 'taking a turn' in the conversation that builds on and adds to the subject. This is an important element of development which deepens and extends the significance and scope of the exchange.
- » **Questioning** – This is the ability to construct questions to elicit more information or test a hypothesis is a sophisticated skill. In addition to being asked 'open' questions (as an invitation to conversation), a child generating their own questions demonstrates a deeper complexity of thought and enquiry.
- » **Protocols of language** – As children develop and grow, part of their enculturation is understanding that different types of speech, language, forms of address and subject content change in different circumstances and with different people.

³ Melhuish, E. & Gardiner, J. (2019) 'Structural factors and policy change as related to the quality of early childhood education and care for 3–4 year olds in the UK', *Frontiers in Education*, 4. Available at: doi.org/10.3389/feeduc.2019.00035 [Accessed: 17/05/2023].

⁴ Footnote needed



There are several areas upon which early years practitioners should focus to help support children's language development. Given the importance of the subject, we believe that it should receive extensive focus in training and professional development. In our own professional development modules for early years practitioners, the coverage includes:

- » understanding typical language development (i.e. how communication and language skills develop in children)
- » creating communication-supportive environments (i.e. considering what we want children to learn in communication and language and creating an environment that will be conducive to such learning)
- » achieving high-quality interactions (using adult-child interactions to help children to learn communication and language)
- » measuring progress and identifying needs (checking children's progress in communication and language and assessing these against expected levels of development)
- » how language supports behaviour and wellbeing (i.e. understanding how developing communication and language skills supports children's self-regulation and executive function)
- » building partnerships with parents (enabling quality care and early intervention when needed to ensure that children have the best possible support to reach their full potential)
- » embedding good communication and language within an early years setting (ensuring that all children have access to high-quality communication and language role modelling, including where this may not be the case at home).



Early mathematics

As well as developing generally recognised mathematics skills (e.g. counting), early mathematics learning supports skills such as problem-solving. This may look like recognising, describing and creating patterns. Meanwhile, some areas of mathematics, notably using shapes and measurement, improve children's spatial awareness. Evidence has also shown that early mathematics learning helps to bolster children's skills and confidence in learning at school level.

Our EYPDP programme offers professional development content focusing on counting, cardinality, measurement, pattern, space, and shapes. We have found this to be a comprehensive approach to covering what all early years practitioners need to know to offer effective early mathematics education to the two-to-four-year-olds in their care.



Personal, social and emotional development (PSED)

PSED supports children's development by helping them to have a positive sense of themselves, social skills, respect for others, emotional wellbeing and self-regulation and a positive attitude towards learning – all of which are seen not only as important markers for school readiness, but also as important skills to help them thrive throughout life.

However, this development relies heavily on influential adults such as parents and early years practitioners providing them with positive feedback and modelling appropriate behaviour. It is therefore a critical area to be covered in professional development opportunities for early years staff.

To most effectively support these PSED skills, we believe that it is critical that early years practitioners have a strong knowledge of:

- » The cognitive development of children aged between two and four years old
- » How to help children manage their emotions and relationships
- » How to help children to process trauma, loss and disruption
- » How to effectively engage with parents and carers (especially in a post-pandemic context, where children born at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic may have had very early family relationships impacted by the restrictions that were in place).

Of course, the wellbeing of staff is also an essential characteristic of any high-performing educational setting. Working in the early years phase can bring problems of stress and workload and it is important that practitioners know how to look after their own wellbeing while supporting children's development.

Leadership and the importance of embedding learning into practice

Effectively supporting children at the early years stage is clearly critical and requires significant knowledge and skills acquisition from early years staff. It is therefore important that models for professional development for these practitioners are effective and sustainable, and – crucially – that they translate effectively into practice. Embedding professional learning requires not only professional learning but also well-informed support from the leaders of early years settings. In England, as in many other countries, the providers of early years education come in many different forms. Those in management positions need to ensure that each setting has a high-quality curriculum conducive to child development and learning in the key areas described above, ensuring that all members of staff can identify additional needs early. Leadership for learning and child development depends upon senior staff who themselves understand what excellence looks like in an early years environment and have the management skills needed to drive improvement and promote best practice. These evidence-based dimensions of effective early years leadership are central to our new national professional qualification in England: the NPQEYL.





Conclusion

The early years is arguably both the most important phase of a child's education and the stage that has been historically least well-supported. We know from robust evidence what works and what young children need. The challenge is to ensure that practitioners and leaders in early years settings have the professional knowledge and skills they need. Politicians worldwide have to make difficult choices about resources, but they would be well-advised to make investment in the professional learning of the early years workforce a top priority.



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To find out more about early years leadership, our research, and how EDT is working to transform lives through education, please get in touch.

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