



Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

HIGHLIGHTS FROM “RESEARCH BRIEF: WORKING CONDITIONS MATTER”

Why do working conditions matter?

- The ability of staff to provide high-quality care and education is influenced by their working conditions, such as salary and non-financial benefits.
- Working conditions have an impact on staff job satisfaction, their ability to carry out their tasks, and their possibilities to positively interact with children and stimulate early development.
- Staff who are happy in their job provide better care and education than unsatisfied practitioners, which leads to lower staff turnover rates.
- When staff provision is stable (*i.e.*, low staff turnover rate), professionals are better able to develop close relationships with children and provide nurturing stimulating interactions, resulting in more safe, healthy and high-quality learning environments and improved child development.

Which aspects of working conditions matter most in improving the quality of ECEC services or child outcomes?

- Six aspects of working conditions in ECEC are found to positively impact the quality of provision, while the direct impact on child outcomes is less clear (Table 1).

Table 1. Effects of staff working conditions

Optimal staff working conditions	Areas of improvement	
	<i>ECEC services</i>	<i>Child outcomes</i>
1. High staff-child ratio and low group size	X	X
2. Competitive wages and benefits	X	unclear
3. Reasonable schedule/workload	X	unclear
4. Low staff turnover	X	X
5. Stimulating and playful physical environment	X	unclear
6. Competent and supportive centre manager	X	unclear

Note: Areas of improvement that remain “unclear” present important opportunities for future ECEC research.

Source: Ackerman, 2006; Burchinal *et al.*, 2002; De Schipper *et al.*, 2004; De Schipper *et al.*, 2006; De Schipper *et al.*, 2007; Diamond and Powell, 2011; Han and Kwon, 2009; Huntsman, 2008; Litjens and Taguma, 2010; Loeb *et al.*, 2004; Moon and Burbank, 2004; Raikes, 1993; Sheridan and Shuster, 2001; Sheridan *et al.*, 2009; Torquati *et al.*, 2007

1. High staff-child ratio and low group size

- Higher staff-child ratios (*i.e.*, fewer children per member of staff) are found to be associated with better developmental outcomes of children, allowing staff to give sufficient attention to important developmental domains and create more caring and meaningful interactions with children, which results in less stress for practitioners. When staff-child ratios are high, children become more co-operative in activities and interactions, and they tend to perform better in cognitive and linguistic assessments. Younger children (infants and toddlers) especially benefit from high staff-child ratios.
- Smaller group size results in more caring and stimulating staff behaviour, although effect sizes are usually small.
- Higher staff-child ratios are also found to encourage quality in ECEC services, creating less stressful work environments for staff.
- The quality of the provision is found to improve with the number of adults in the room. Where multiple practitioners work together in a room, there is greater opportunity for supervision, consultation and discussion of work challenges, leading to greater job satisfaction.

2. Wages and benefits

- Higher wages result in higher job satisfaction, greater work motivation, and, indirectly, higher quality teaching, caring and interactions with children. Low wages, on the contrary, impact quality by preventing qualified and committed individuals from considering work in the sector, are associated with high staff turnover rates, and negatively influence children's language and socio-emotional development.
- In addition to wage, non-financial benefits, such as overtime compensation and number of vacation days, are also found to positively affect job satisfaction. Little financial and non-financial benefits are also correlated to the perception that working in the ECEC sector is not perceived as a high status profession, giving the job an image of "low social status and professional identity".

3. Workloads

- Heavy workloads, such as long working hours, little possibility to combine work with family life and great physical demands of a job, are associated with stressed staff, which in general, perform less well in their profession.

4. Turnover rates

- Staff stability (*i.e.*, low turnover rates) has been found to be strongly and consistently positively related to child outcomes. High turnover rates disrupt the continuity of care and make it harder for staff to engage children in appropriate and meaningful activities.

5. Physical environments

- With more physical space and suitable instruments and materials available, *i.e.*, the physical aspects of an ECEC setting, staff are better able to organise children in appropriate groups and interact with each child, which in turn, creates better learning conditions and opportunities for children.

6. Support from manager

- Good management of ECEC centres by qualified managers is a key factor in providing favourable working conditions for staff and supporting professional development. ECEC practitioners who experience little support from management have lower job satisfaction and perform their tasks less well.

Policy implications

- Governments can consider introducing equal working benefits (salaries, benefits and professional development opportunities) for equivalent qualifications across the early childhood and primary education fields to improve recruitment and quality.
- In terms of children's experiences, evidence suggests that there are benefits from focusing on better staff-child ratios and low staff turnover rates.
- Providing financial and non-financial support and incentives for well-trained practitioners to remain working in the ECEC sector, such as giving overtime compensation in additional pay or holidays, and improving their knowledge and practices by, for example, financing training opportunities improves staff well-being and staff professionalism.
- Raising awareness among managers of the importance of favourable working conditions and how to facilitate these is important for raising ECEC quality and key to improving provision.

Research gaps

- The evidence base for the impact of working conditions on child outcomes has not been fully explored. Research on the relationship between working conditions and child development and how work conditions affect child outcomes could shed new light on the importance of working conditions.
- Little is known about which aspects of working conditions affect which groups of children most.
- There is a need for further research on which aspects of working conditions have the largest impact on improving the quality of ECEC services (and which aspects of ECEC services).