A field trial was carried out for the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study in England, Estonia and the United States at the end of 2017. Over 1 000 five-year-olds, their parents and their teachers participated. This brief summarises the findings and provides an overview of the study.

Children enjoyed participating in the field trial

- Children actively engaged with the animated stories and games and rated them highly.
- Children also enjoyed using the tablet to interact with the stories and the games.
- The two day format for each child worked very well, with little attrition across the two days.

The study was well received in the field

- Parents readily provided their consent for their children to participate.
- Schools and early childhood education and care centres supported the study and agreed to be involved, resulting in high participation rates.
- Teachers willingly completed questionnaires on participating children.

The digital design worked well

- Children with limited experience with devices had no difficulty in engaging with the tablet and were not disadvantaged in any way.
- The tablet format enabled each child to go at his or her own pace.
- The digital delivery of the assessment, and parent and teacher questionnaires increased the accuracy of results and efficiency of administration.

The field trial produced robust, valuable information

- Parents, teachers, trained study administrators and the children themselves provided a wealth of information.
- These multiple sources of information gave valuable insights on each child.
- Cross-country findings were reliable, valid and comparable.
What is the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study?

The International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study is designed to help countries improve children’s early learning experiences in order to better support children’s development and overall well-being.

The early years of children’s lives are critical to their development. During this period, children learn at a faster rate than at any other time in their lives, developing sensory-motor, cognitive, and social and emotional skills that are fundamental to their future in school and as adults.

These skills are also the foundation for general well-being – laying the groundwork for how individuals interact with others, and cope with successes and setbacks, both professionally and in their personal lives. Just as important, early childhood is also a period when children discover and explore their surroundings as active participants in their own learning.

The study provides countries with a common language and framework to foster growing interest in and commitments to early childhood development. By collecting robust empirical information, countries can identify factors that promote or hinder children’s early learning.

The knowledge generated by the study will support sharing of best practices across countries and taking action within countries, with the ultimate goal of improving children’s outcomes and overall well-being. The study is led by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with support from an international consortium of early childhood and research experts.

How is the study conducted?

The study involves five-year-old children, their parents and staff from early childhood education and care centres or schools, as well as trained study administrators. A random sample of early childhood learning centres or schools serving five-year-olds is selected within each participating country.

Then, a random sample of five-year-olds is selected within each of these centres. The children’s parents and staff members or teachers who know the children best are also asked to participate. This two-stage sampling procedure is designed to produce a representative sample of children within participating countries.

Ensuring the well-being of children is the study’s first priority. New tools for data collection were developed specifically with children in mind. Custom-made activities were created involving stories and games that are interesting, fun and developmentally appropriate for five-year-olds.

The interactive tablet format provides an innovative way for children to demonstrate their skills and abilities and does not involve any reading or writing. Instead, children listen to stories on the tablet and respond by touching or moving pictures on the screen. Further, the activities do not require any previous experience using a tablet.

The tablet and the activities are presented to children one-on-one by study administrators over the course of two days.

On each day, children complete two blocks of activities on the tablet, each lasting 10-15 minutes. Parents and staff also participate in the study by completing questionnaires.
What aspects of early learning are included in the study?

The study takes a holistic approach and includes multiple domains of early learning: **emergent cognitive skills** such as literacy and numeracy, **social and emotional skills** such as empathy and trust, and skills that draw from both cognitive and non-cognitive capacities, such as **self-regulation.**

As active participants in their own learning, children should be given opportunities to demonstrate their growing abilities. Children are asked to provide feedback on the tablet activities and respond to questions on their preferences. In this way, the study gives children a voice, recognising them as individuals in their own right and more than just the skills they have acquired.

In addition to including a comprehensive set of learning domains, the study collects information from a wide range of sources: children, parents, staff and study administrators provide information about children’s emergent skills.

Early learning occurs across these domains with gains in one domain contributing to gains in other domains. This ongoing cycle of reinforcement means that early learning must be assessed using a whole-child approach, taking into account the overlapping nature of outcomes for young children.

Collecting **contextual information** is critical for understanding how children’s skills develop and how they can be strengthened. Children learn in different settings throughout their lives, including in their families, early childhood education and care centres and schools. For this reason, the study collects information from both parents and centre/school staff on the child’s family background, home learning environment and early childhood education and care experiences.

**Custom-made for young children**

- **Stories and games** - Interesting and fun, and developmentally appropriate
- **Tablet delivery** - Simple and intuitive, no previous experience needed
- **No reading and writing** - No text involved, only visual and audio materials are used
- **Personalised approach** - Each child assessed individually, with one-on-one support
Who participated in the field trial?

Approximately 1,200 children from over 70 schools or early childhood education and care centres in three countries (England, Estonia and the United States) participated in the field trial.

This represents a participation rate of 91% of sampled children in participating schools/centres and 80% of sampled schools/centres. In addition, across the three countries, 87% of teachers/staff and 58% of parents completed the questionnaires on participating children. These high response rates - compared with other similar types of studies - reflect the value early childhood education and centres, schools, teachers/staff and families place on understanding children’s early learning. In addition, the main study will focus on and improve the parent response rate by increasing the parent questionnaire’s accessibility and reducing barriers to participation.

Parents readily gave their consent for their children to participate in the field trial, showing their support for the study. Moreover, children willingly participated in the assessment on both days, confirming that the two-day schedule is a positive design feature and that children enjoyed their experiences with the tablet activities.

Findings from the field trial

The purpose of the trial was to review how well all aspects of the study were carried out in the field before moving on to the main study at the end of 2018.

More specifically, the field trial provided an opportunity to identify improvements to the study’s design, methodology and operations. Four primary criteria were used to review findings from the field trial:

- the well-being of children during the assessment
- engagement of parents, teachers and centres/schools
- the quality of the information collected, specifically the reliability, validity and comparability of the data across settings
- the effectiveness of the administrative processes used to implement the study at a country level.

Child well-being was assessed with reports from the study administrators, who worked one-on-one with children, and by asking children to provide feedback on their experiences. Together these reports confirm that children enjoyed the games and activities. Importantly, the field trial showed that no prior experience with tablets is needed for children to engage successfully in the study. Children with no or limited access to devices demonstrated similar learning outcomes to children with occasional or moderate access to devices.

Parents, teachers and centres/schools showed their support with high participation rates in the field trial. These rates are significantly higher than in many comparable studies.

Items and questions that work best in the assessment have been identified thanks to the extensive analysis of the information collected from the field trial.

Finally, the way the test was administered and the data collected resulted in a successful collection of comparable data across participating countries. The methods have been fine tuned and streamlined for the main study.
What are the next steps?

Building on the success of the field trial, the main study is taking place at the end of 2018.

Samples of 3,000 children have been selected in each of the participating countries, and their parents and teachers have also been asked to participate. Study administrators will continue to be another key source of information regarding children’s behaviours and engagement in the activities.

International and country reports - published from late 2019 onward - will present results from the study.

Children were asked to identify (using emojis) how Ruby the turtle felt when her friends bird and rabbit left.

Timeline

- **2016/2017**
  - Planning, tendering & contracting

- **2016/2017**
  - Domain, survey & instrument design & development

- **2017**
  - Field trial

- **2018**
  - Instrument finalisation

- **2019/2020**
  - International & country reports

- **2019**
  - Data verification & data analysis

- **2020**
  - Preparation for the next cycle of IELS

- **2020**
  - Countries use the results to inform policies and practices

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How can I learn more about the International Early Learning Study?

Visit our website for more information on the study and the importance of early learning:


Contact the International Early Learning Study Team at:

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