



Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

HIGHLIGHTS FROM “RESEARCH BRIEF: MINIMUM STANDARDS MATTER”

What are minimum standards?

- Minimum standards are often defined by structural indications, such as space per child, maximum group size, programme duration, staff qualification levels, and curriculum to shape staff behaviours.

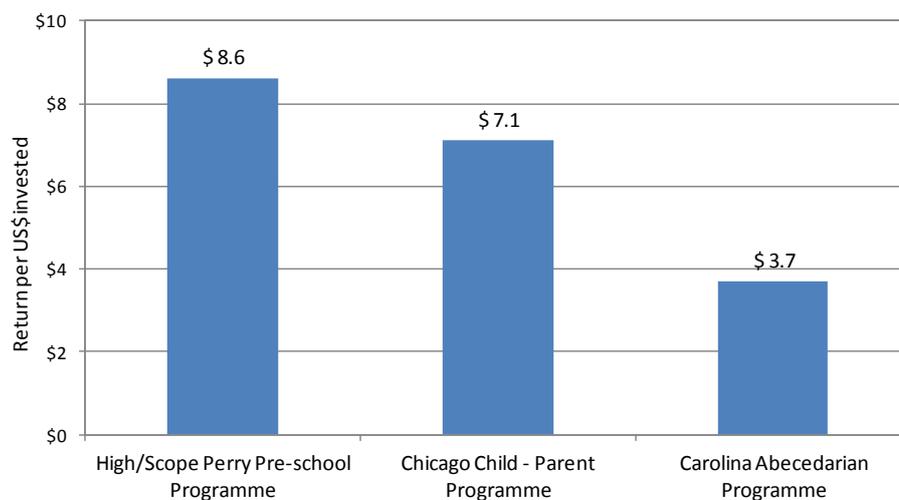
Why do standards matter?

Setting high-quality standards for ECEC can be costly, but appropriately defined standards can:

- Ensure a positive effect on children’s developmental outcomes.
- Reinforce quality in healthy environments for children’s well-being and learning.
- Ensure a certain degree of equity for parents and children in different ECEC settings.
- Help minimise developmental gaps for all children, particularly disadvantaged children.
- Ensure high returns of investment and is found to be more cost efficient than remedial education interventions later in life (Figure 1 and Table 1).

Figure 1. Returns on investment from high-quality ECEC programmes

Based on model pre-primary programmes for low-income, disadvantaged children



Source: Schweinhart, L. (2006), "Preschool Programmes", *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*, Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development, Montreal; Heckman, J. *et al.* (2009), "The Rate of Return to the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program", *Journal of Public Economics*, 94(1-2), pp. 114-128.

Table 1. Features of high-quality ECEC programmes

	High/Scope Perry Pre-school Programme	Chicago Child - Parent Programme	Carolina Abecedarian Programme
Age range	3-4 years	3-4 years	0-5 years
Duration	2 years	2 years	5 years
Max. class size	13	17	12
Staff – child ratio	1:6.5	1:8.5	1:6
Teacher qualification	BA + certification	BA + certification	BA or equivalent

Source: Schweinhart, L. (2006), "Preschool Programmes", *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*, Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development, Montreal; Heckman, J. et al. (2009), "The Rate of Return to the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program", *Journal of Public Economics*, 94(1-2), pp. 114-128.

Which aspects of standards matter most?

- **Staff-child ratios** play a key role in ensuring quality for better child development. Of various research findings, it is the most consistent predictor of high-quality learning environments; it increases the potential for frequent and meaningful interactions between staff and children.
- **Small group size** is also considered as a strong predictor for more individualised attention and frequent interactions. Especially younger and disadvantaged children tend to benefit from smaller class sizes than older and more advantaged children because of the increased attention level of staff and more interactive learning opportunities.
- **Staff qualification and training** play a key role in ensuring healthy early child development. It is not the qualification *per se* that affects outcomes, but the ability of the staff member to create a better pedagogical environment with stimulating interactions that makes the difference. Qualified ECEC workers are found to be better able to engage children and monitor their progress; and they tend to provide children with more stimulating, warm and supportive interactions, leading to longer-term positive impacts.
- **Staff wages** can indirectly influence child development; staff compensation is consistently associated with staff satisfaction, which is also associated with better child outcomes. Competitive wages attract a strong professional staff that is more likely to be satisfied with their job, perform well and make long-term career commitments, leading to lower staff turnover rates; which, in turn, results in stronger relationships between children and staff, less aggressive child behaviour and greater language development.
- **Diversity among staff members**, including professionals of different gender and cultural backgrounds, is critical to counter stereotypes, ensure that (early) learning remains gender neutral, and create respect for multi-cultural learning and societies.
- The **duration of programme participation** has been associated with short- and long-term intellectual gains and future achievement, including greater vocabularies, better math achievement and improved memory. The OECD PISA study found that an extension of participation in ECEC with one year leads to an improvement of ten score points in the PISA assessment.

- A **curriculum or learning and well-being standards** can help ensure more consistency among different ECEC services. A curriculum framework helps promote a more even level of quality across age groups and provisions; guides and supports professional staff in their practice; facilitates communication between staff and parents; and can ensure continuity between ECEC and school.
- The **design, layout and space of ECEC environments (physical environment)** can influence a child's development, creativity, behaviour and cultural interests. Well-designed spaces with sufficient space per child for motor development are associated with more positive interactions and increased time spent on exploring environments.

Policy implications

- Minimum standards and regulations should apply to all ECEC settings, whether they are publically or privately operated, and should cover provisions for very young children, as well older children, recognising that different settings and age groups may require different standards.
- Providers need to be supported by well co-ordinated national, state and local mechanisms with adequate public investment levels to assure a good level of quality provision as well as to offer parents consistent and affordable ECEC options.
- Affordable access for all children to ECEC with minimum standards should be ensured by governments, as universally covered ECEC systems generally organise services more equitably, observe higher standards and employ more qualified personnel. At the same time, it is important to recognise that there are variations in needs and demands regarding ECEC.
- Defining and assuring quality should be a participatory and democratic process, involving different stakeholder groups, such as parents, families, professionals and children. The enforcement of standards is more likely to succeed when the authorities engage in consultative policy making and build up a consensus about the needs and relevance of minimum standards.

Research gaps

- There is still little known about the long-term impacts of minimum standards on child development later in life as well as which combination of structural inputs work best to improve key cognitive areas and socio-emotional skills.
- There is also little known about how minimum standards impact certain groups of children, such as younger versus older children, boys versus girls, or other sub-groups.
- There is no solid research base on the effects of a diverse workforce on children's development, such as cultural perspectives and respect for and understanding of differences.
- There is very little data on, and only a few monitoring practices in, informal and non-formal ECEC services, while it is important to ensure a minimum level of quality in these settings.