

What does the research say about home-based ECE?

Paucity of research information

Most early childhood research studies have focused on early childhood centres. In comparison, there has been **very** little research into home-based early childhood programmes such as KidStart. This reflects the fact that the majority of early childhood placements, both here and overseas, are in a centre of some kind. In New Zealand, the home-based sector has grown markedly within the early childhood arena over the last fifteen years, yet home-based enrolments still represent only 6% of all early childhood enrolments.¹

Although some of the research listed here is research that has focused on a wide range of different early childhood programmes, these research findings are included because they are relevant and applicable to home-based early childhood options.

Quality in early childhood education

Although early childhood researchers in New Zealand and overseas have studied aspects of quality in early childhood education, it is difficult to draw accurate conclusions because there is variation in the way quality is defined in these studies. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education states that “research shows that quality is the result of interaction of the ratio of trained adults to children, the number of children (of group size) and, in some services, the qualification levels of teachers.”²

According to research by the Children’s Issues Centre at the University of Otago, it is not one of these factors alone that makes the difference, but the combination of all three. The researchers also make the point that it is the quality of the interactions between teachers/caregivers and children that matter – for example, “there might be a good ratio in a centre, but the adults might not engage with the children.”³

Despite these cautions, these three factors are considered to be very important in early childhood education (they are often referred to as “the iron triangle” of quality⁴). Accordingly, some research information about these and other important factors, is outlined here.

Group size

According to the Ministry of Education, “many children are more comfortable and can learn more in small groups. They get on better with others and can express themselves. In small groups, teachers more easily treat children as individuals. Often there’s greater cooperation between adult and child.”⁵

These observations are supported by research findings that associate small groups with “less noise and more opportunity for adults to relate one-to-one with children in joint activities.”⁶ Extremely large groups can lead to children having to compete for equipment, space and teacher time; and teachers themselves report difficulties because their role becomes largely supervisory with little time for individual interactions with children. In extremely large groups, teachers have reported low morale because they can not give children the attention they require, and because they become increasingly concerned about excessive noise, the

¹ Ministry of Education, *Early Childhood Education Statistics 2005*. There were 164,521 early childhood enrolments during the Ministry’s 2005 reference week, and 9,770 of these were in home-based early childhood programmes.

² Ministry of Education, *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki*, p.12

³ A. Smith et al, *Strategic Research Initiative Literature Review: Early Childhood Education*, pp.49-50

⁴ *ibid*, p.49

⁵ Ministry of Education, *Choices in Early Childhood Education*, p.20

⁶ A.B. Smith et al, *Strategic Research Initiative Literature Review: Early Childhood Education*, p.55

potential for accidents and the neglect of quiet children.⁷ These negative impacts can be lessened if there is a large number of staff (ie a high adult:child ratio), and it is also important to bear in mind that different countries have different attitudes to group size.

In KidStart and other home-based early childhood services, New Zealand law requires that there are no more than four children under school age at any one time and within this group, there can be no more than two children aged under 2 years.

Adult:child ratios

There are never more than four children to one adult in KidStart home-based care and learning. The law requires this.

Research on adult:child ratios shows that high ratios of adults to children “have been linked to such factors as increased frequency of adults playing and talking to children; fewer upset and apathetic children; more child engagement in complex play; more physical contact and smiling; more appropriate (less restrictive and controlling) caregiving; and greater staff job satisfaction”.⁸ As with group size, researchers are often cautious about over-stating the importance of any one factor, but a number of researchers believe that the “burden of evidence suggests that better outcomes for children and staff are associated with higher staff:child ratios.”⁹

Early childhood experts caution against identifying ideal ratios because there are a number of other factors involved. However, one researcher gives some guidelines for appropriate ratios. Cathy Wylie states that “research does not provide... a guaranteed formula. In the case of staff:child ratios... it comes closest to an agreed limit with infants, those under two years old, of 1:3 or 1:4; above 2 years, it suggests an age related range of 1:5 for 2-3 years to 1:8 for 3-4 year-olds and 1:9 for 3-5 year olds.”¹⁰

Qualification levels and supervision in home-based early childhood education

In New Zealand, the little research information we have available on home-based early childhood programmes has often focused on staff training. This is likely because international studies have demonstrated the importance of qualified caregivers in home-based early childhood programmes. For example, American research studies on home-based early childhood services “support the importance of: licensing and regulation of services, qualifications of providers, and commitment of providers to taking care of children and to learning about children’s development and care.”¹¹

In New Zealand, home-based early childhood programmes are regulated by Government, and subject to inspections by the Education Review Office. There is no legal requirement, however, for caregivers to be trained.

Yet research has highlighted the importance of training in home-based early childhood programmes. Here in New Zealand, Lyn Foote and Pat Davey have investigated the impacts of training courses for caregivers, and conclude that training and professional development for caregivers do make a difference. They state that “caregiver training can influence the ways in which caregivers interact with children, the quality of education and care they provide, and how they perceive their role. Training can enhance not only the quality of the family day care environment but also the nature of the relationships and curriculum experiences of the children”.¹² Training encourages caregivers to value their role as a professional – without this, home-based early childhood programmes may suffer from common perceptions that staying at home with children is simply mother’s work for which there is no need for training.

⁷ *ibid*, p.55

⁸ *ibid*, p.50

⁹ *ibid*, p.52

¹⁰ Cathy Wylie, 1989, quoted in A.B. Smith et al, *Strategic Research Initiative Literature Review: Early Childhood Education*, p.52

¹¹ Valerie Podmore, *UNESCO Policy Briefs of Early Childhood*, no.6, September 2002, p.2

¹² Foote and Davey, ‘Training for Home based educators – an empowering experience’, p.2

Barnardos recognises the importance of training and requires all KidStart caregivers to complete our training course in order to obtain their practice certificate. KidStart caregivers also receive ongoing professional development as a requirement for the renewal of their practice certificates.

As part of a professional service, KidStart caregivers are supervised and supported by early childhood qualified and registered Visiting Teachers. This is a legal requirement and stands to reason because research has showed “that providers offering good quality care were overwhelmingly regulated, trained and involved in home-based support networks.”¹³

Rich learning environment

There have been recent studies of home-based early childhood programmes that demonstrate the rich learning environment available to children within home settings.

One example is Lyn Wright’s study¹⁴, which closely observed two ‘exemplary’ family day care homes. The two caregivers were identified as exemplary by their coordinators, and both held recognised early childhood qualifications. Wright’s research reinforces the potential value of home-based early childhood education as she found that children commonly have the opportunity to interact in a number of different settings outside the caregiver’s home, such as parks, libraries and shops. This provides a rich learning environment for children and encourages them to see themselves as members of a community. Wright also found that relationships in home-based settings are close and enduring, and that this extends to children’s families.

Other studies support these findings. Fiona Ellis and Lyn Foote from the Dunedin College of Education have highlighted the rich learning opportunities available through home-based early childhood education. If used creatively, many activities can be “extended to the rich learning that happens in authentic and meaningful happenings in everyday life.”¹⁵ In investigating this learning in home-based early childhood programmes, the authors make the point that professional development made a difference to caregivers recognising and optimising these opportunities.

Mixed age groups

Some research indicates that there are social and intellectual benefits accrued when children are mixed with others of different ages. Lilian Katz’s research¹⁶ indicates that children learn to associate different sets of expectations with age – this means, for example, that they will modify their own behaviour when comforting a baby as opposed to a peer of the same age. Preschool children will also modify their language depending on the age of the person they are addressing – they will, for example, modify the length and complexity of their speech, and change their voice and tone in order to communicate favourably. Through the opportunity to hone communication skills, mixed-age groups are shown to have some very positive impacts.

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¹³ Elizabeth Everiss, ‘From one home to another’ in *Childrenz Issues*, p. 33

¹⁴ Lyn Wright, ‘Early Childhood Curriculum in Home-Based Settings’

¹⁵ Foote and Ellis, ‘Authentic Learning in Home-Based Settings – Is It Undervalued?’

¹⁶ Lilian Katz, ‘The Benefits of the Mix’

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