

POLICY BRIEF 1/2026

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Two-year pre-primary education trial

- ▶ Belonging to the trial group increased five-year-olds' participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) or pre-primary education.
- ▶ The amount and nature of play as well as support arrangements for children were similar in the trial and control group.
- ▶ The trial group had more qualified teachers, children of the same age, and guided activities than the control group did.
- ▶ Children's academic and socioemotional skills developed at an equal pace in the two-year pre-primary education and in the current system.
- ▶ In comparison to home care, the two-year pre-primary education improved children's skills at the age of six, but the effects at the beginning of primary education remained unclear.



In spring 2021, thousands of Finnish families received a letter, which started as follows: “Congratulations, your child has been selected to take part in the trial group of the two-year pre-primary education trial.” The letter stated that the child would start pre-primary education in the autumn exceptionally at the age of five and would participate in it for two years before primary school. The pre-primary education would be compulsory and free of charge, and it would follow a curriculum designed for the trial programme.

The letter was part of a large, randomised field trial. Between 2021 and 2024, two-year pre-primary education was provided in 396 daycare centres, and their operation and the development of the participating children were compared to a control group consisting of 560 daycare centres and their children. The division into the trial and control groups was randomised so that the possible benefits of two-year pre-primary education in contrast to the existing system could be reliably evaluated. In total, the trial included 37,357 children, of whom 15,944 belonged to the trial group.

The trial was prompted by a long-standing discussion about the importance of ECEC and pre-primary education for children’s development and learning. Political decision-makers had largely concluded that the education system should be reformed by extending pre-primary education to two years.¹ However, before implementing a full-scale reform, it was decided to investigate what consequences the change would have. Specific legislation (1046/2020) was enacted for the trial, and a budget of 30 million euros was allocated for its implementation.

In the full report (in Finnish), we share what has been learnt so far from the two-year pre-primary education trial (link on the back cover). This brief overview presents some of our major findings.

The amount of play remained unchanged

The curriculum for two-year pre-primary education shared much of its content with the ECEC curriculum for five-year-olds and the curriculum for one-year pre-primary education. Although the implementation of the trial varied between municipalities, the differences were small. The amount, significance and nature of play were similar in two-year pre-primary education to those in ordinary ECEC for five-year-olds. There were also no significant differences between the trial and control groups in children’s support arrangements or implementation.

The trial group had more qualified teachers and children of the same age

The daily life of the trial group children, however, differed from the control group in at least two significant ways. First, the municipalities reacted to the trial by transferring qualified teachers to two-year pre-primary education. As a result, in comparison to the control group children, the trial group children were 9 percentage points more likely to be in a group with at least one qualified teacher. In addition, the trial groups had more teaching staff with bachelor’s or master’s degrees in education and fewer with bachelor of social services degrees.

Another significant difference was that the trial groups typically consisted of only five-year-olds or of five- and six-year-old children. In the control group, it was more typical to have groups composed of three- to five-year-olds. In the trial groups, slightly more time was spent on guided activities and less time on daily routines. Furthermore, guided activities and play focused more often on activities related to literacy and mathematical skills.

Five-year-olds’ participation rate increased

In the trial group, five-year-olds’ participation rate in ECEC or pre-primary education was 3.5 percentage points higher than in the

control group. The effect of belonging to the trial group on the participation rate was independent of the family's income level or mother's education level.

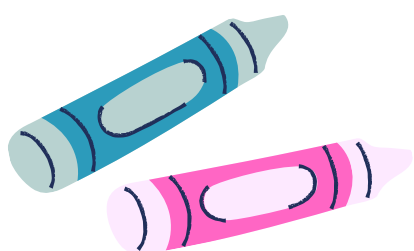
However, the trial did not increase the participation rate of children with an immigrant background. The increase in the participation rate was greater for those born in 2017 than for those born in 2016, as well as for children who were entitled to free transport to the daycare centre because they belonged to the trial group. The difference in the participation rate disappeared at the age of six, when almost the entire age group participates in pre-primary education in the current system as well.

Guardians and teachers satisfied

The guardians' attitudes toward two-year pre-primary education were mainly positive. They especially valued that the pre-primary education was free of charge, the stability of groups of five- and six-year-olds and the everyday continuity. The teachers, moreover, considered the trial to be pedagogically meaningful and felt it supported children's learning and group activities in the long term.

Skills developed at an equal pace in the trial and the current system

The trial was designed so that it enabled reliable evaluation of the impacts of two-year pre-primary education on children's skills. The development of the children's skills was assessed at the beginning and midpoint of the trial and finally at the beginning of primary school. In the assessments of academic skills, the children completed age-appropriate tasks assessing their reading and mathematics readiness under adult guidance.



The assessments of socioemotional skills were based on evaluations completed by teaching staff members who knew the children in question.

The left panel in Figure 1 shows that children's academic skills developed as quickly in two-year pre-primary education as in current ECEC for five-year-olds. At the beginning of primary school, the teachers considered that on average the socioemotional skills of children were similar in the two-year pre-primary education trial and the current system.

Owing to the exceptionally large number of participants in the trial, these results are accurate. In academic skills, we can exclude² effects corresponding to a few weeks' normal development if the alternative for two-year pre-primary education would have been participation in the current system. As regards socioemotional skills, we can exclude effects greater than those equivalent to a few months' normal development. In other words, we can fairly safely conclude that the skills we looked at developed similarly in two-year pre-primary education and in the current combination of ECEC for five-year-olds and one-year pre-primary education.

In comparison to home care, the results are promising but imprecise

The results are very different for children to whom the alternative for two-year pre-primary education would have been home care at the age of five. The right panel in Figure 1 shows that, for this group, two-year pre-primary education greatly improved the children's skills as assessed at the age of six. In academic skills, the most likely effect equals typical development of about six months. The effects are also large and positive in terms of peer relations and emotion regulation.

At the beginning of primary school, the short-term effects seem to disappear. It should be noted, however, that the number of children shifting from home care to pre-primary education for five-year-olds was

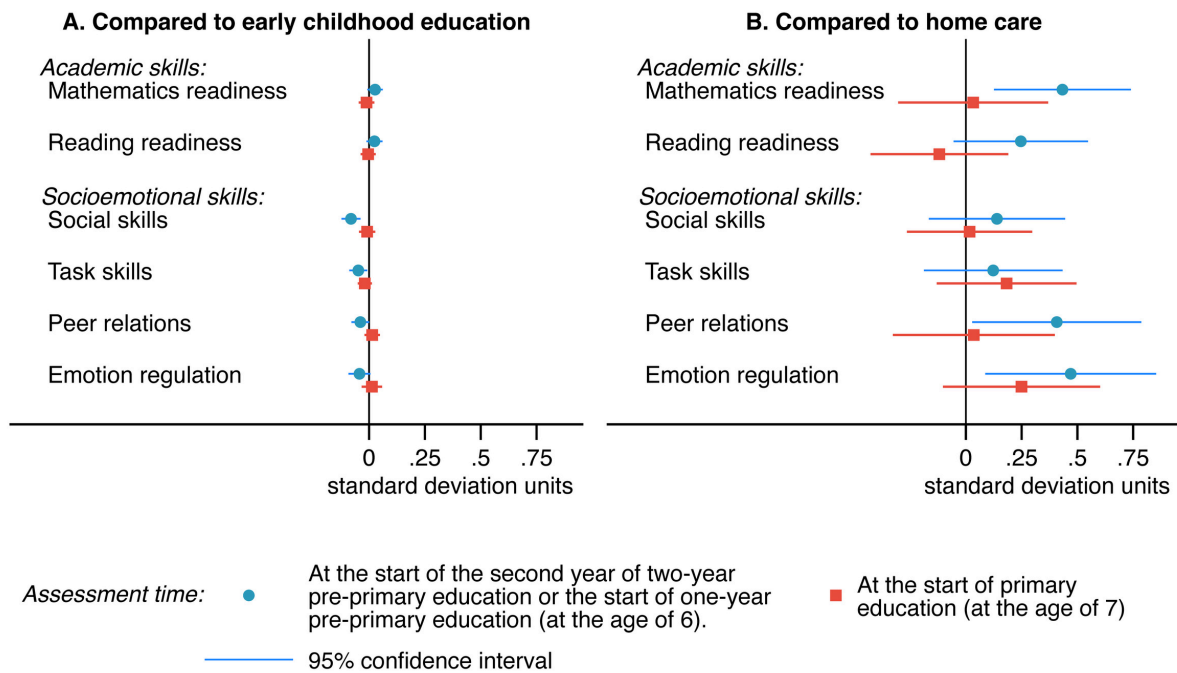


Figure 1. Effects of participation in two-year pre-primary education in comparison to two alternatives: (a) participation in ECEC for five-year-olds and (b) home care at the age of five. The circles and squares show point estimates, meaning the most probable effects. Horizontal lines illustrate the level of uncertainty associated with the results; a shorter line refers to a more accurate assessment.

quite small. For this reason, the results for this subgroup are imprecise, and we cannot rule out the possibility of significant effects. In addition, the point estimates of working skills and emotion regulation indicate moderate positive effects. However, these results are not statistically significant either.

The trial did not reduce skill differences

Being selected for the trial group did not reduce the differences between children in terms of skills assessed at the beginning of primary school. Nor did the effects vary between children coming from different backgrounds.

Potential consequences of introducing two-year pre-primary education

The research team gives no recommendation whether Finland should switch to two-year pre-primary education. That change is an education policy decision, the sensibility of which depends above all on the objectives of

the potential reform. Instead, we seek to support decision-making by offering information that is as precise as possible about the likely consequences of such a reform.

Our findings suggest that extending compulsory and free-of-charge pre-primary education to two years would probably increase the participation rate of five-year-olds. The skills of children transitioning from home care to pre-primary education would develop faster on average, at least in the short term. In the overall picture, however, these impacts would remain small, as about 90 percent of five-year-olds already participate in ECEC. Moreover, this percentage has also risen in recent years under the current system.

For most children, shifting to two-year pre-primary education would result in small changes. Above all, as five-year-olds, they would spend their days in groups that would more rarely include children younger than

them and spend slightly more time on guided activities. Yet their skills would, on average, develop in the same way as in the current system.

Nationwide introduction of obligatory two-year pre-primary education would have many other consequences as well. First, it would affect the distribution of costs for the education and teaching of five-year-olds since obligatory pre-primary education would probably be provided free-of-charge to families in the future as well. Furthermore, shifting to two-year pre-primary education with current resources would probably mean changes to ECEC for younger children. During the trial, we noticed that municipalities transferred qualified teachers from other groups to the trial ones. If two-year pre-primary education were to be implemented nationwide using the trial model and with current resources, qualified teachers would probably be transferred from younger children's groups to the two-year pre-primary education groups.



Towards knowledge-based decision-making

The two-year pre-primary education trial is a good example of how the probable consequences of a possible education policy reform can be reliably assessed in advance. Its success demonstrates the strength of Finnish policymakers, administrative culture, research infrastructure, and committed education and teaching staff.

These strengths can, however, be used and developed more widely. It is impossible to set up randomised trial studies to support every decision, but they are often possible and justified. It is also advisable to organise carefully planned trial programmes in the future.

In addition, as a by-product this trial has yielded large and unique sets of research data, providing a basis for new cohort data on education. Accordingly, the current government programme is committed to continuing the assessments of the children involved in the trial throughout their primary school years. These future assessments may potentially change our understanding of the significance of two-year pre-primary education in the long term. Above all, the new data set enables research into many other issues related to ECEC and basic education and thus lays a stronger foundation for knowledge-based decision-making.

¹ For example, in their platforms for the parliamentary election in 2019 the National Coalition Party, the Greens, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People's Party stated that they wanted to change compulsory pre-primary education to last for two years, while the Christian Democrats supported voluntary free-of-charge pre-primary education for five-year-olds, and the Social Democrat Party stated that they would make the decision on extended pre-primary education on the basis of trial projects.

² "Exclude" refers to values outside the 95% confidence intervals. Such outlying values are typically regarded as improbable enough and can thus be ignored.



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