

Caring, Sharing, Daring

**SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AT
AGE FIVE**



EARLY SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT MATTERS FOR CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING AND BROADER SKILL DEVELOPMENT



¹ Non-disruptive refers to the absence of disruptive behaviours, such as fighting with other children or preventing other children from doing their own activities.

For this study, information was collected on just under:

7 000 CHILDREN

in England, Estonia and the United States



The study collected information on a broad range of children's skills, including:



Emergent literacy



Self-regulation



Emergent numeracy



Social-emotional skills

The study includes a direct assessment of children's cognitive and social-emotional development, in addition to information from parents and teachers, and the children themselves.

The International Early Learning and Child Well-being study (IELS) is designed to help:



Governments



Education leaders



Teachers



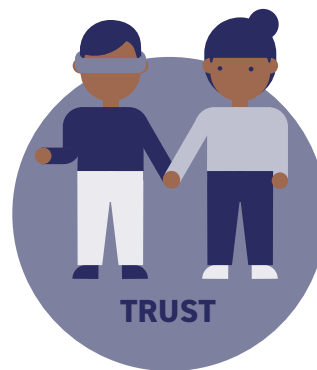
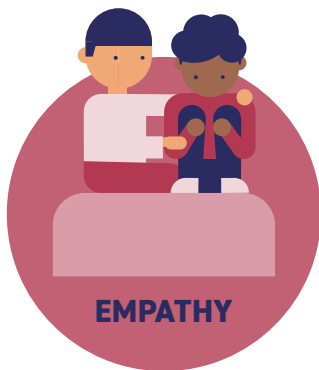
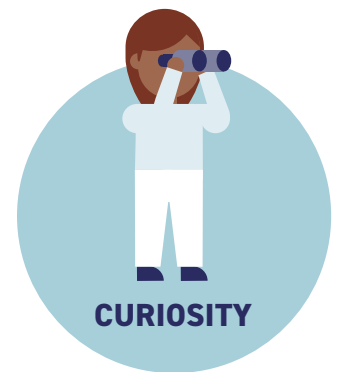
Parents

give every child the strongest possible start in life.



SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS ARE AN INTEGRAL PART OF CHILDREN'S OVERALL DEVELOPMENT

This report outlines the information provided by teachers and parents on the following six skills and behaviours:



SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS HELP CHILDREN INTERACT MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH OTHERS

This includes:

- Empathising with others' perspectives
- Interacting well with others
- Making and sustaining friendships
- Resolving conflict
- Operating as a part of a group.²



2 Bush, G., P. Luu and M. Posner (2000), "Cognitive and emotional influences in anterior cingulate cortex", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 4/6, pp. 215-222, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1364-6613\(00\)01483-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1364-6613(00)01483-2).

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT SUPPORTS COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

The neural circuits involved in regulating emotions overlap with those associated with cognitive processing.³ More specifically, positive interactions with others enhance children's language and self-regulation skills, creating a positive upward spiral.⁴ Social-emotional skills help children to:

1 Persist in tasks



2 Try new approaches



3 Cope with setbacks⁵



EARLY SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS AFFECT LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

A child's emotional health is one of the strongest predictors of life satisfaction, well-being and mental health in adulthood – it is a better predictor than family resources or early cognitive ability.⁶

Early emotional well-being is also linked to:

- Higher educational attainment
- Higher income and socio-economic status in later life.⁷



3 Bush, G., P. Luu and M. Posner (2000), "Cognitive and emotional influences in anterior cingulate cortex", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 4/6, pp. 215-222, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1364-6613\(00\)01483-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1364-6613(00)01483-2).

4 Shuey, E. and M. Kankaraš (2018), "The Power and Promise of Early Learning", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 186, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/f9b2e53f-en>.

5 Schoon, I. et al. (2015), "The impact of early life skills on later outcomes", *Report for the OECD*, University College London, <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10051902/>, accessed on 1 April, 2021.

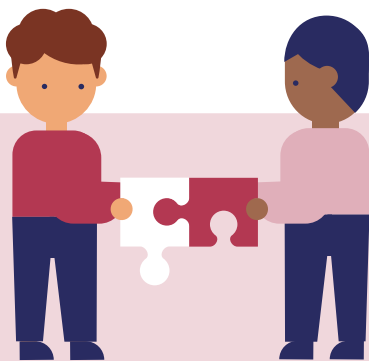
6 Flèche, S., W. Lekfuangfu and A. Clark (2019), "The long-lasting effects of family and childhood on adult well-being: Evidence from British cohort data", *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/J.JEBO.2018.09.018>.

7 Rutter, M., J. Kim-Cohen and B. Maughan (2006), "Continuities and discontinuities in psychopathology between childhood and adult life", *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 47/3-4, pp. 276-295, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2006.01614.x>.

Buchanan, A., E. Flouri and J. Brinke (2002), "Emotional and behavioural problems in childhood and distress in adult life: Risk and protective factors", *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 36/4, pp. 521-527, <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1614.2002.01048.x>.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS LINKED TO COGNITIVE SKILLS

CHILDREN WHO ARE CURIOUS AND SHOW EMPATHY TOWARDS OTHERS TEND TO HAVE STRONGER COGNITIVE SKILLS THAN OTHER CHILDREN



Empathy enables children to build relationships and collaborate with others, strengthening their ability to learn and their well-being.

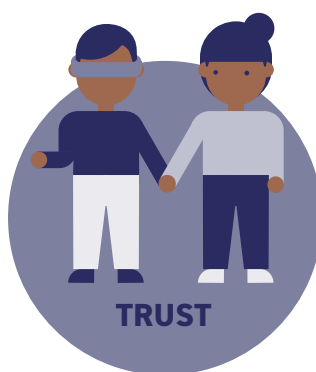


Curiosity is essentially a disposition to learn, and has a positive relationship with levels of creativity.⁸

BEING SOCIABLE, CONFIDENT AND TRUSTING IS ALSO POSITIVELY RELATED TO COGNITIVE SKILLS



CONFIDENCE



TRUST



SOCIABILITY



These aspects of children's social-emotional development relate most strongly to **emergent literacy** and **numeracy skills**, but also show positive relationships with other cognitive indicators such as **mental flexibility** and **working memory**.



⁸ Arnone, M. P. (2003). "Using instructional design strategies to foster curiosity", ERIC clearinghouse of information and technology, Syracuse, NY. No. ED 479842.

DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR IS MORE WEAKLY CORRELATED WITH COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT THAN OTHER ASPECTS OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Although disruptive behaviour can negatively impact other children's learning and well-being.⁹



RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ASPECTS OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COGNITIVE SKILLS

Key

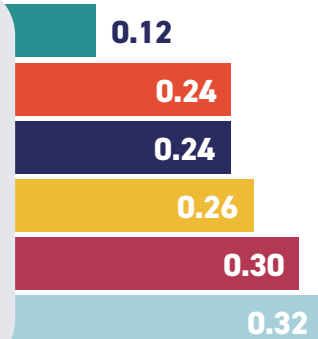


Bars depict the correlation between each social-emotional skill and the cognitive skill shown (in this figure, numeracy skills). The longer the bar the stronger the relationship between the two.



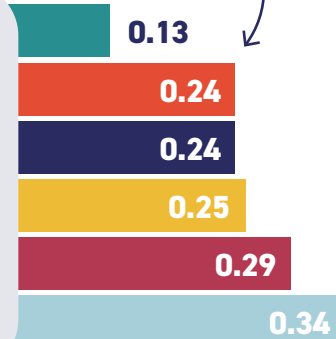
Emergent literacy

Emergent literacy has positive relationships with social-emotional development, especially curiosity and empathy



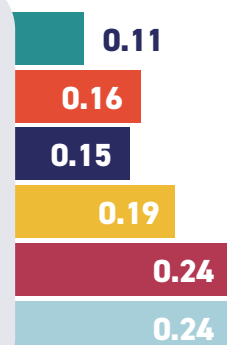
Numeracy skills

Levels of curiosity also show the strongest relationship with children's early numeracy skills



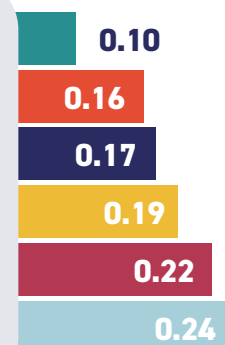
Memory skills

Children's working memory skills at five years-of-age are linked most closely to their levels of curiosity and empathy



Mental flexibility skills

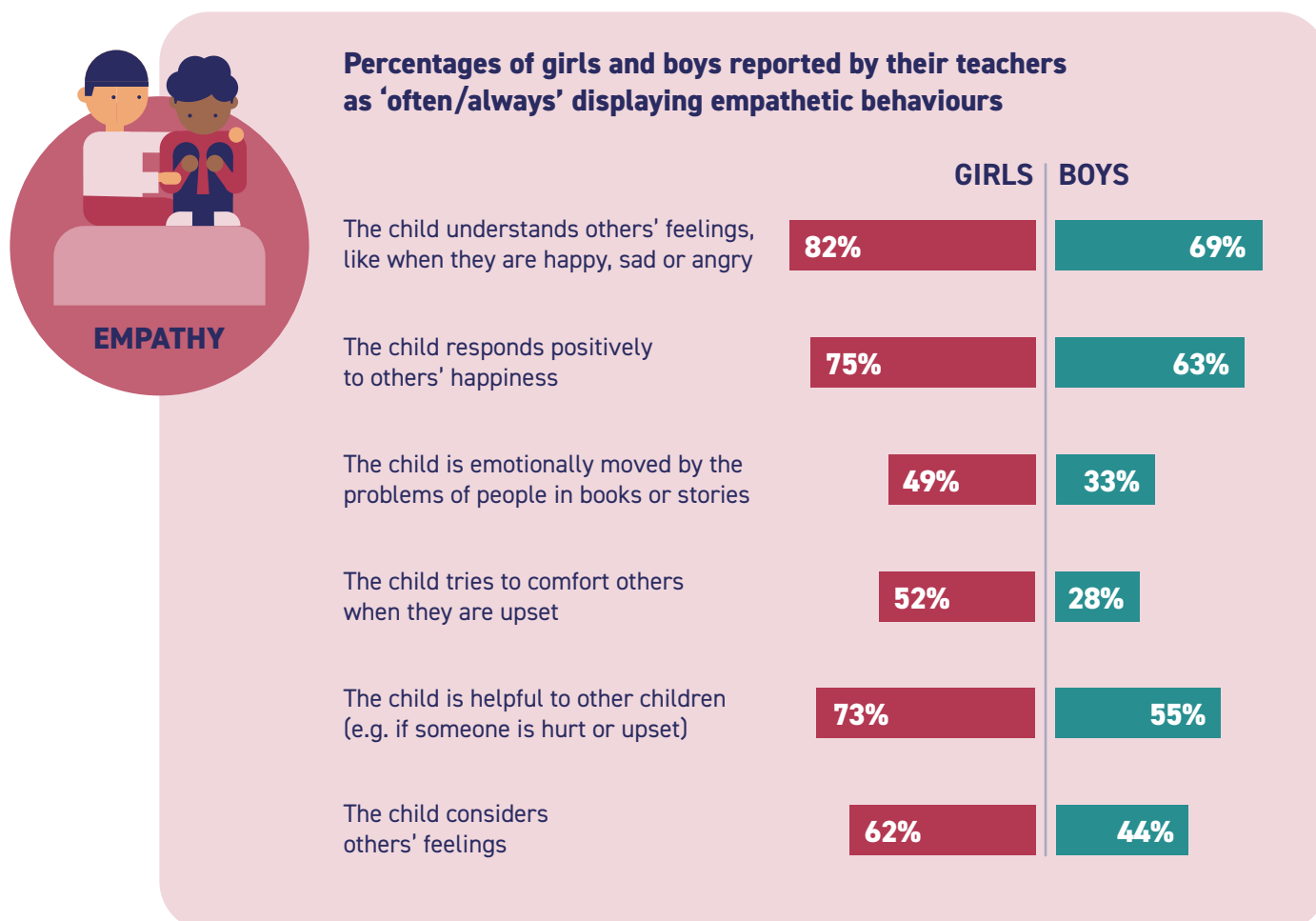
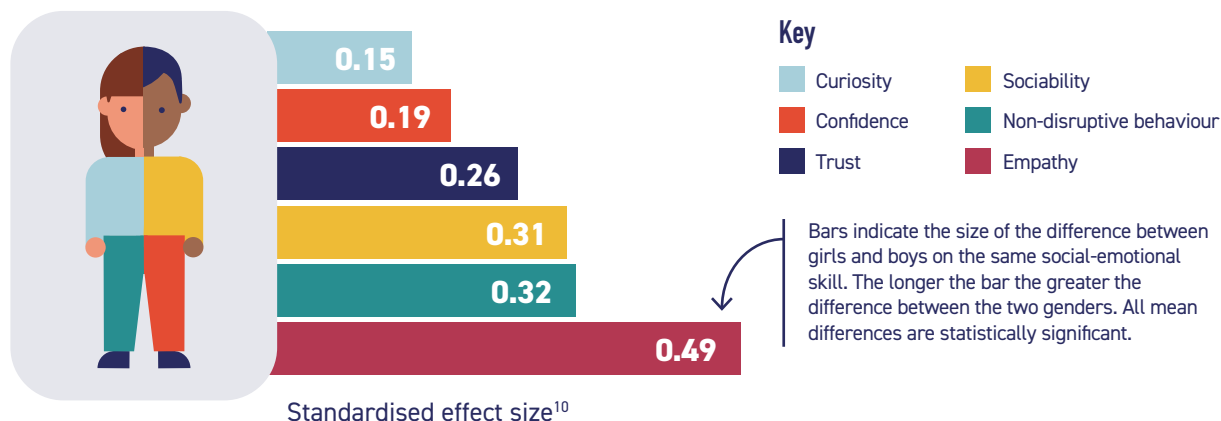
Children's mental flexibility is most strongly correlated with their levels of curiosity



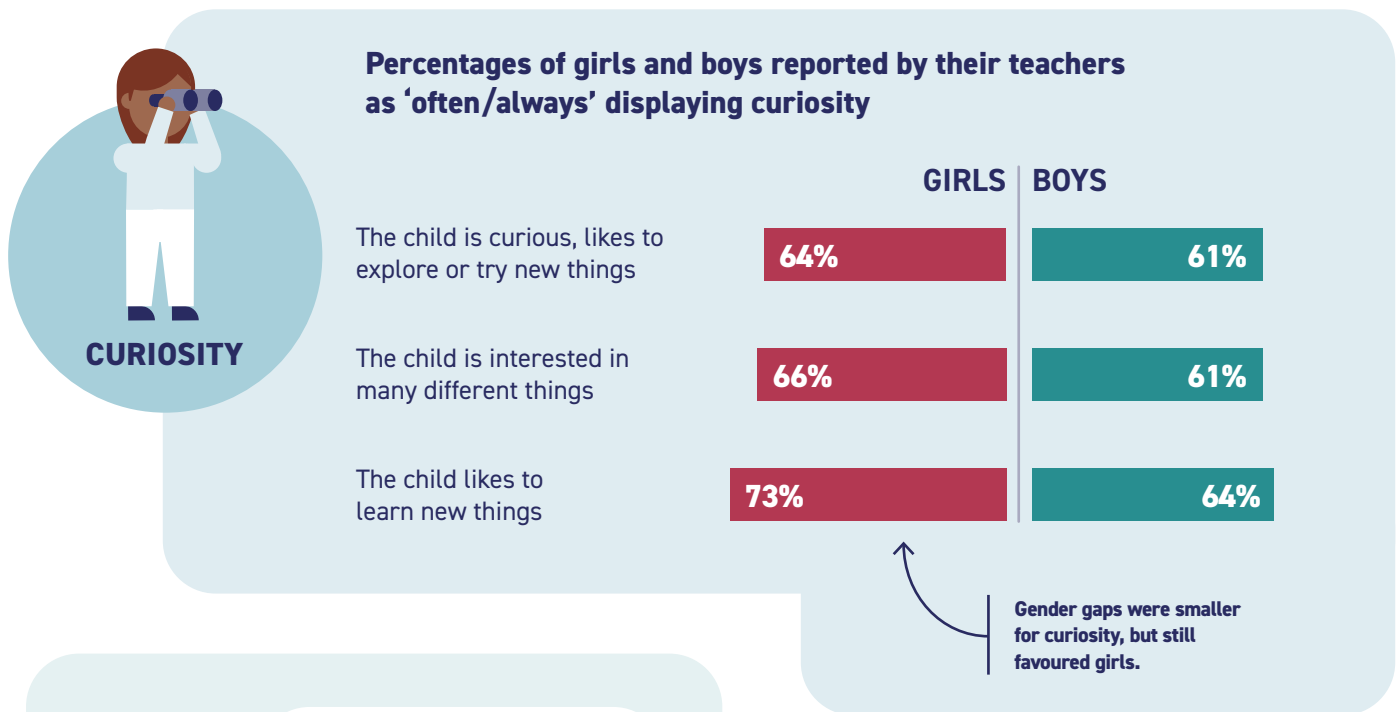
Note: All correlations are statistically significant

TEACHERS RATE GIRLS AS MORE EMPATHETIC, SOCIABLE, TRUSTING AND LESS DISRUPTIVE THAN BOYS... BUT AS MORE SIMILAR IN TERMS OF CONFIDENCE AND CURIOSITY

Differences between teachers' ratings of aspects of the social-emotional development of girls and boys



¹⁰ Cohen's d is the effect size used to indicate the standardised difference between two means. An effect size of .1 can be considered as small, .3 as medium, and .5 large. Cohen J. (1988). *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences*. New York, NY: Routledge Academic.



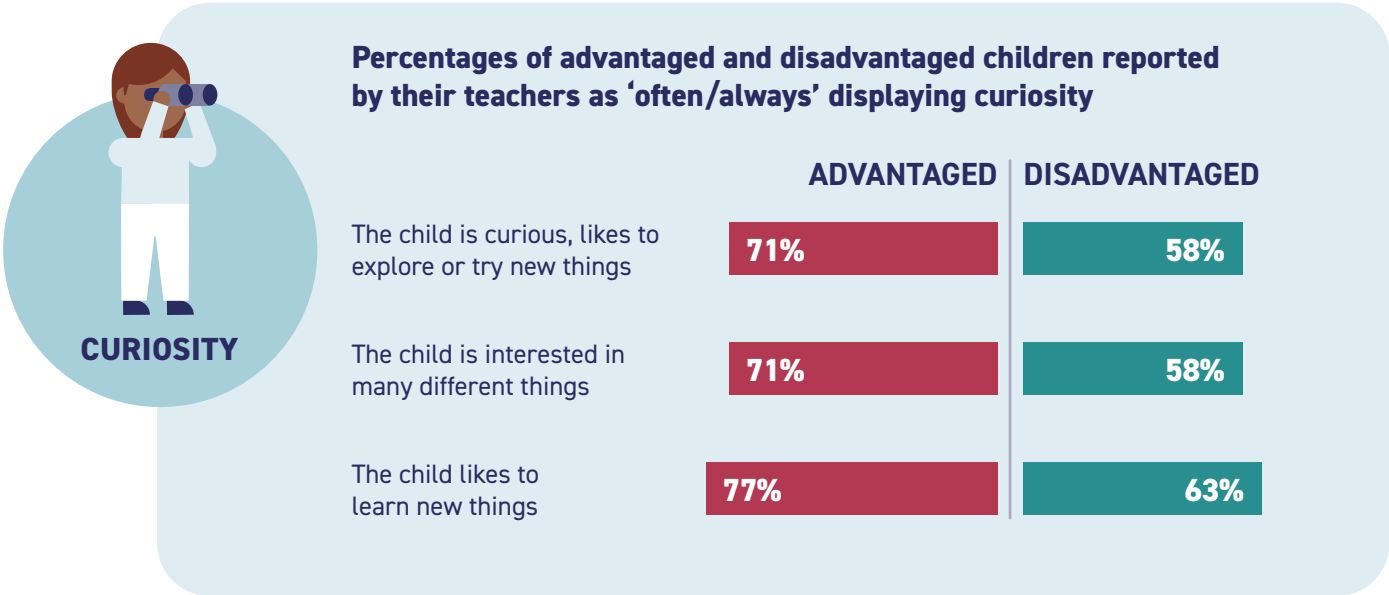
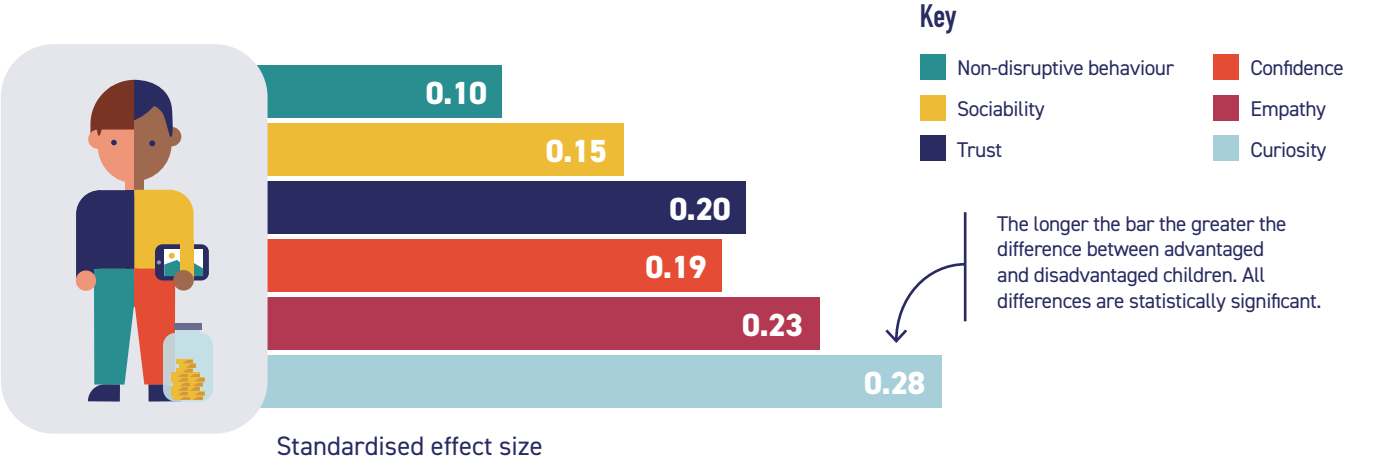
“
Girls like learning new things more than boys.
”



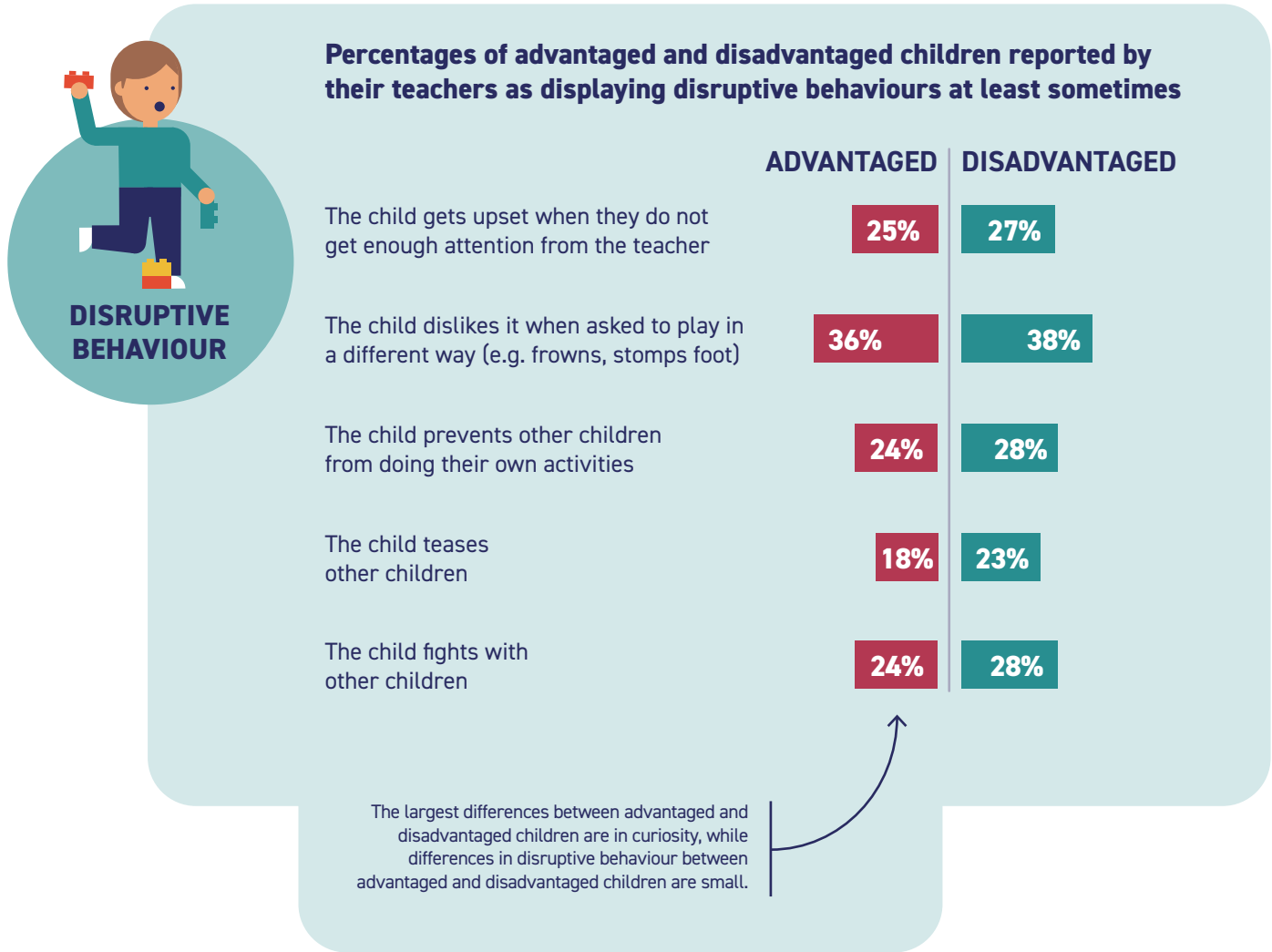
DIFFERENCES BASED ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS ARE NOT AS STARK AS GENDER DIFFERENCES

DIFFERENCES IN TEACHER RATINGS OF ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN FROM ADVANTAGED AND DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS

Children from advantaged backgrounds were rated by teachers as having stronger social-emotional development than children from disadvantaged backgrounds¹¹



¹¹ Children in the top quartile of socio-economic status (SES) are described as 'advantaged' here, and children in the bottom SES quartile as 'disadvantaged'.



“
Children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds show similar levels of disruptive behaviour.
”



CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURS CAN VARY BY CONTEXT

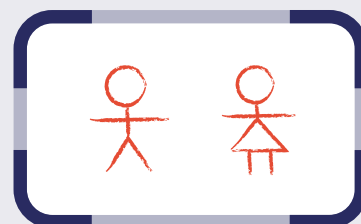
PARENTS RATE CHILDREN'S SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS MORE FAVOURABLY THAN TEACHERS



This is likely to reflect:

- **The different contexts** of home versus the child's early childhood centre or school
- **Teachers' experiences** with a greater number of children at this age.

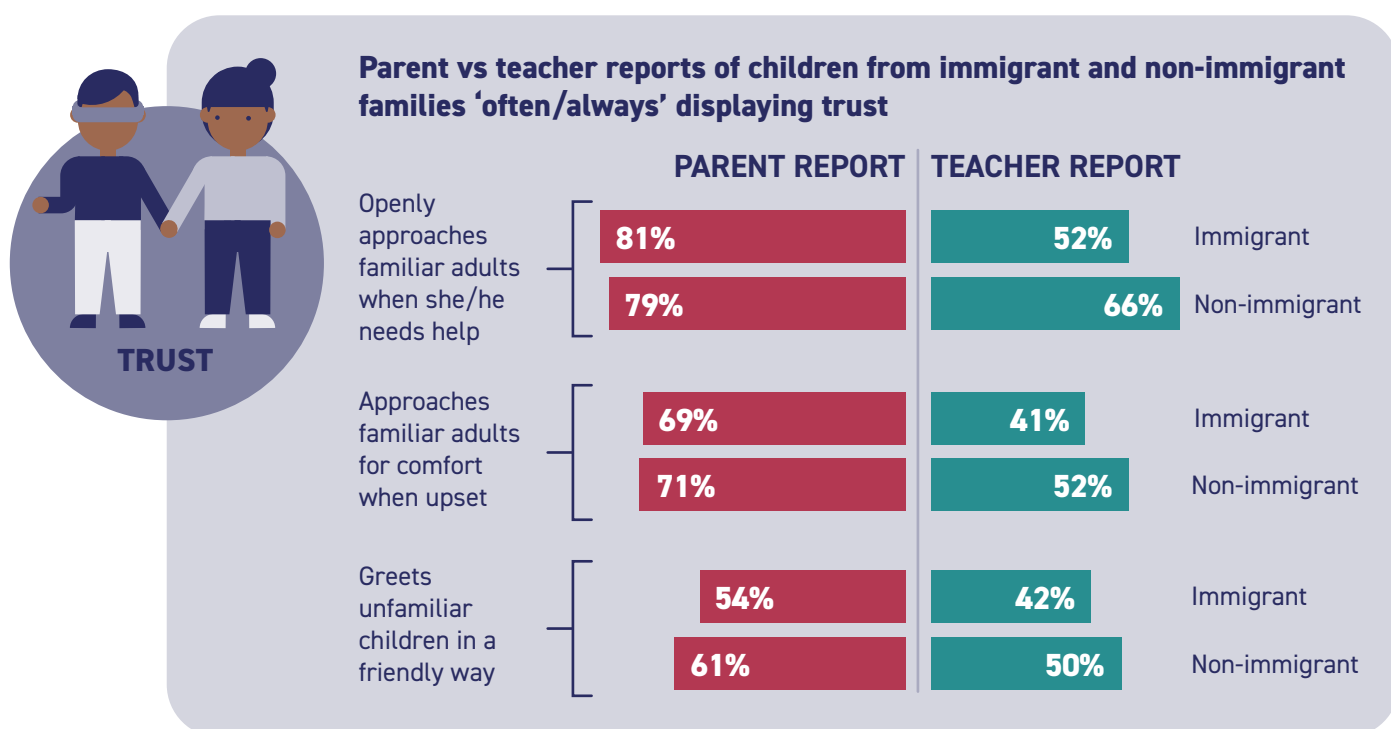
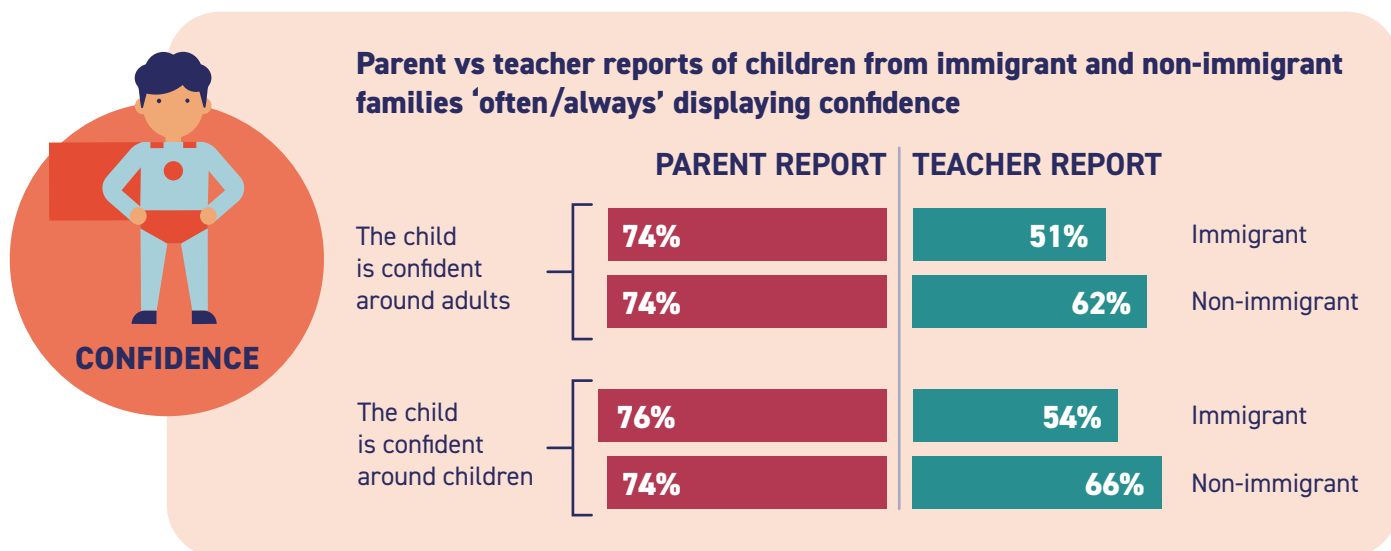
When **differences are seen in teacher ratings between different groups of children** (e.g. between girls and boys or between advantaged and disadvantaged children), these **also tend to be seen in parent reports** (parents are much more likely to say girls are frequently empathetic than to say boys are, for example).



An exception is the case of children with and without an immigrant background.

Teachers tend to rate children with an immigrant background as having lower levels of confidence and trust than children without an immigrant background. However, such differences tend not to be seen in parents' ratings, **implying that lower levels of trust or confidence among children with immigrant backgrounds are confined to the school or ECEC environment.**





TEACHERS REPORT THAT CHILDREN WHO HAVE PREVIOUSLY ATTENDED ECEC TEND TO BE MORE CONFIDENT IN INTERACTING WITH ADULTS

56% of children who previously attended ECEC are 'often/always' confident around adults, compared to 46% of children who had not.



49% of children who previously attended ECEC 'often/always' approach familiar adults for comfort when upset, compared to 42% of children who had not.



PARENTS' ACTIVITIES WITH THEIR CHILDREN ARE POSITIVELY LINKED TO EARLY SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

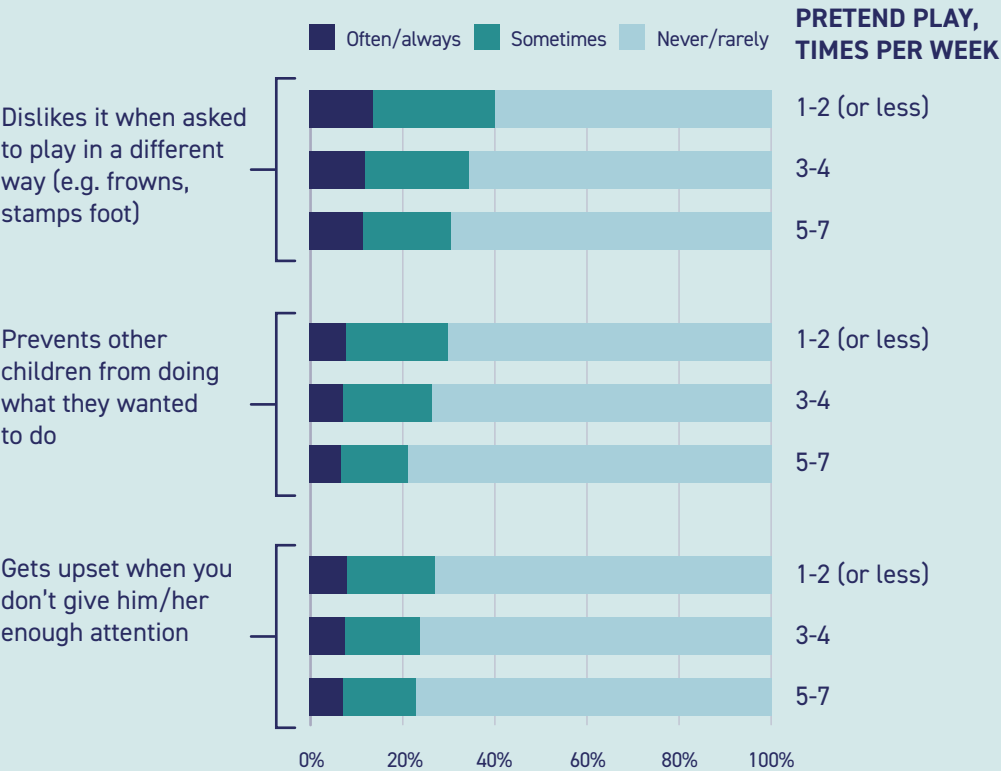
These activities include:

- **Back-and-forth conversations** with children about how they feel
- **Frequently reading books** to their children
- The extent to which **parents are involved in the child's ECEC centre** or school.¹²

Children whose **parents frequently engage** them in imaginative or pretend play have significantly **higher than average levels of non-disruptive behaviour** than children whose parents do so less frequently.



Disruptive behaviour at age five, by frequency of imaginative or pretend play with parents



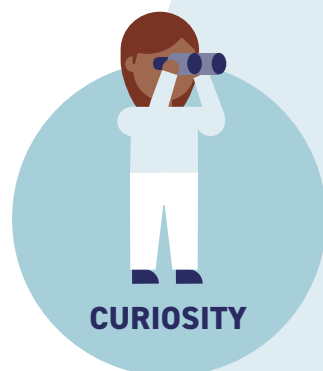
12 OECD (2020), *Early learning and child well-being: A Study of five-year-olds in England, Estonia and the United States*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3990407f-en>.

FOSTERING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS

THE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS CHILDREN NEED TO INTERACT WELL WITH OTHERS AND TO ACHIEVE WELL-BEING ARE LARGELY LEARNED

This learning occurs initially in the child's family and community environments in the first few years of life and then in formal education settings, such as in early childhood education and care.

In addition to parental activities there are a number of other environmental conditions that help children to develop these essential skills. These vary across the different types of social-emotional skills that children need to develop.



CURIOSITY

While curiosity is innate in newborns and toddlers, it is enhanced in the early years by positive early environments, but can be severely diminished in negative environments.

Children's levels of curiosity are strengthened when they are, for example, encouraged to:

- 1 Ask questions and receive genuine answers** (also building their confidence)
- 2 Actively (and safely) explore their world**
- 3 Have choice and autonomy** over the activities they engage in.¹³



EMPATHY

Empathy develops through a learning progression requiring secure early attachment with the child's parent or primary caregiver, and a consistently warm, responsive, nurturing and affectionate parent-child relationship.

As a next step, children learn to recognise, express and regulate their own emotions, which then allows them to recognise and respond appropriately to the emotions of others.¹⁴

Thus, the development of social-emotional skills is complex and deeply embedded in the early, day-to-day lived experiences of children.

While families and communities are key to healthy development of these skills, more formal early learning environments can also play a key role in fostering these skills.



13 Arnone, M. P. (2003). "Using instructional design strategies to foster curiosity", ERIC clearinghouse of information and technology, Syracuse, NY. No. ED 479842.

14 Spinrad, T.L. and D.E. Gal (2017), "Fostering prosocial behaviour in young children", *Current Opinion in Psychology* 2018, Vol. 20, pp 40-44.

FIND OUT MORE:

To learn more about the social-emotional development of five-year-olds:

- Read the summary report on the International Early Learning and Well-being Study (IELS): <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/early-learning-and-child-well-being-study/early-learning-and-child-well-being-3990407f-en.htm>
- Watch the video presentation by Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education and Skills at the OECD, on the key findings of the IELS study, including key gender differences: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_g4p7-FYRYk&feature=emb_title
- Read the full international report: Early Learning and Child Well-being – A study of five-year-olds in England, Estonia and the United States: <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/early-learning-and-child-well-being-study/early-learning-and-child-well-being-3990407f-en.htm>
- Check out the OECD Early Learning and Child Well-being website at: www.oecd.org/education/school/early-learning-and-child-well-being-study
- Learn more about the OECD's wider work on child well-being via: <http://www.oecd.org/social/family/child-well-being>
- Send questions and comments to the OECD Early Learning and Child Well-being team: earlylearning@oecd.org

JOIN THE NEXT CYCLE OF THE STUDY

The International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study will continue to help countries monitor and improve the early development and well-being of children.

To join the next cycle of the study please contact the OECD Early Learning and Child Well-being team: earlylearning@oecd.org.

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