

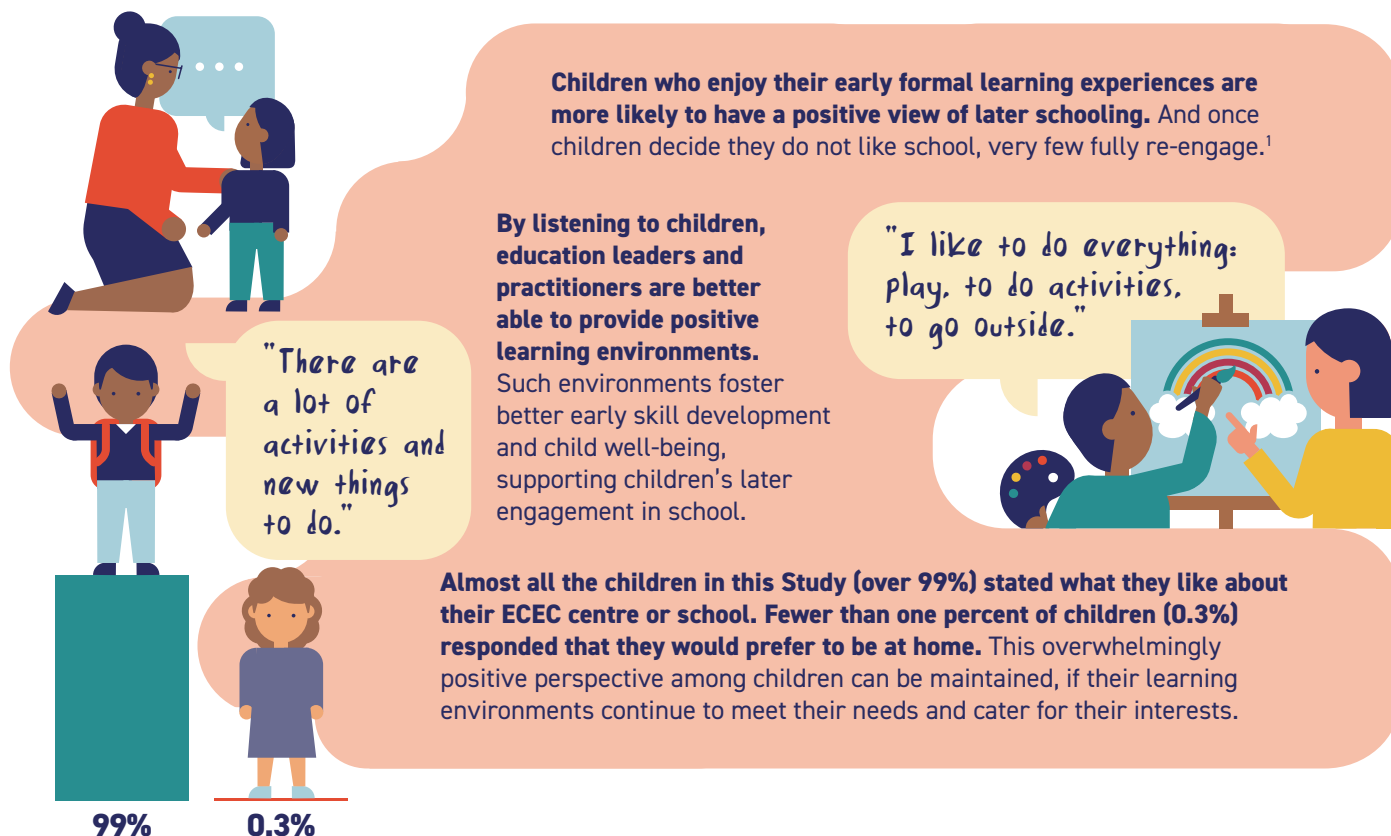
Play, Create and Learn:

WHAT MATTERS MOST FOR FIVE-YEAR-OLDS



LISTENING TO CHILDREN

CHILDREN'S VIEWS ON LEARNING AND SCHOOL ARE SHAPED AT AN EARLY AGE



Children like many aspects of their early learning environments. For many, it is the combination of having time to play and being able to participate in organised activities. Children like being creative and making things, and they enjoy learning.

What children like most about their ECEC centre or school is:



Children's views on their early learning environments do not differ significantly between girls and boys, or between children from high and low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds.

However, **children that enjoy learning and who enjoy having choice over their activities have higher cognitive and social-emotional skills than other children.**



¹ Alexander, K.L., Entwistle, D.R., & Kabbani, N.S. (2001). The dropout process in life course perspective: early risk factors at home and school. Teachers College Record, 103.

THE INTERNATIONAL EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD WELL-BEING STUDY

THE INTERNATIONAL EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD WELL-BEING STUDY (IELS) PROVIDES COUNTRIES WITH RELIABLE, COMPARABLE DATA ON HOW WELL CHILDREN ARE DEVELOPING AT FIVE YEARS-OF-AGE.

Findings based on more than

4500

five-year-olds in
England and Estonia.

The Study focuses on the cognitive and social-emotional development that best predicts children's later success in education and that impacts on their well-being. **This information assists countries to improve their early learning systems and to monitor children's outcomes over time**, including for specific groups of children such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds.



IELS IS DESIGNED TO HELP:



Governments



Education
leaders



Teachers



Parents

... give every child the
strongest possible
start in life.



In addition to assessing children's early learning outcomes, the Study asks children their views and perspectives on their lives. One of these questions is:

"What do you like
best about your
centre or school?"

Almost all five-year-olds gave clear and often very specific responses to this question. Approximately three-quarters of these children specified one thing that they liked best about their ECEC centre or school, while around one in four children listed multiple things.

BEING ABLE TO PLAY IS MOST IMPORTANT TO FIVE-YEAR-OLDS

PLAY IS FUN FOR CHILDREN, BUT IT IS ALSO ESSENTIAL FOR THEIR DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING.²

Play provides a means for children to build social connections with other children and to learn to negotiate with others. It also assists language development.

Play enables children to

- **use their imaginations**
- **create their own scenarios and stories.**

Play is associated with physical activity and physical development for many children, such as gross motor skills.



4 out of 10

five-year-olds in this Study state that being able to play is the best part of being at their ECEC centre or school. Playing is more popular than any other activity identified by the children in this Study.

While some children refer to playing in general, others are specific about the types of play they prefer.

"To play with blocks, to go outside, to do arts and crafts, to learn letters, to play with friends."



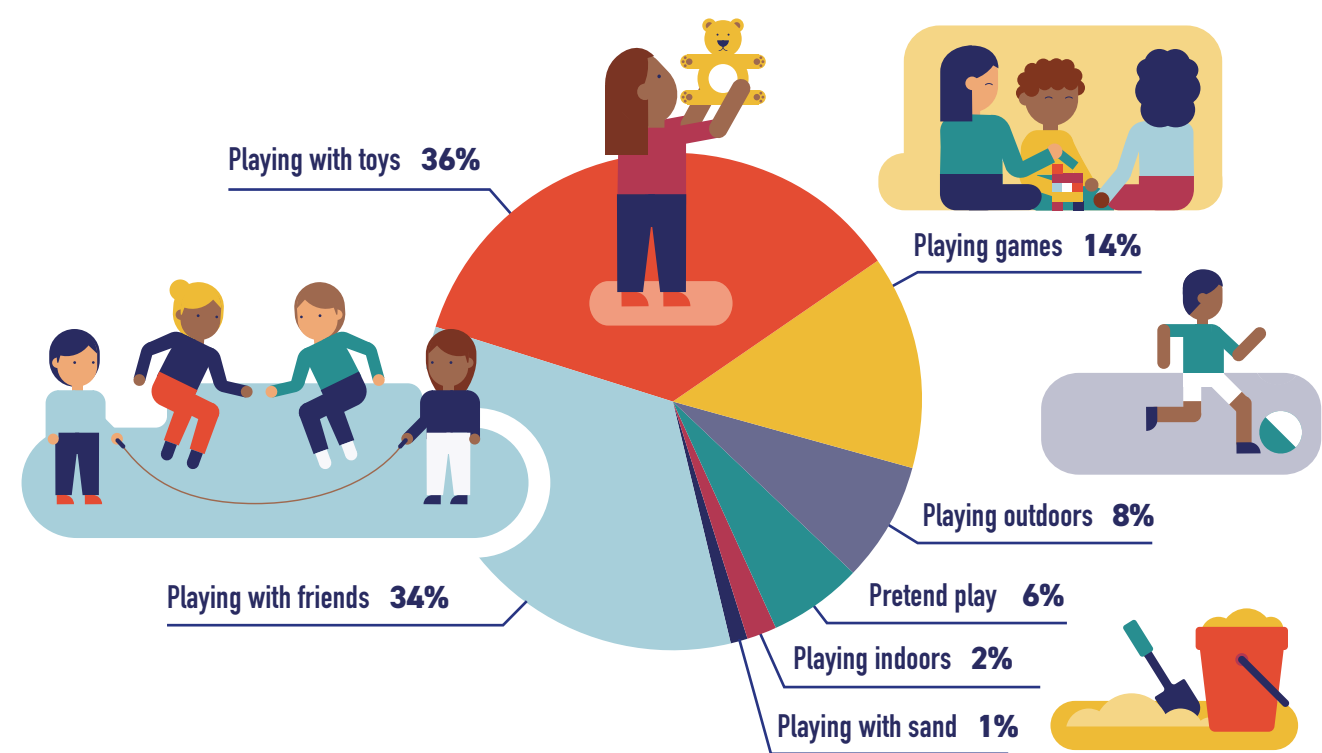
Many children value the opportunities to play with their friends, including the games they play with other children such as hide-and-seek, pretend play and board games.

Other children like playing with the toys available at their centre or school, including dolls and toy animals. Some children prefer playing outdoors or with sand, and a very small proportion of children prefer to play alone.

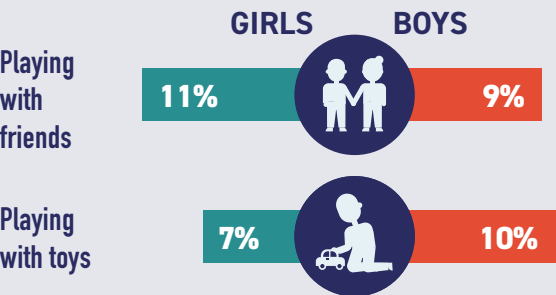


² OECD (2019), Providing Quality Early Childhood Education and Care: Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/301005d1-en>.

CHILDREN'S FAVOURITE TYPES OF PLAY



Playing is equally popular among girls and boys



Playing is equally popular among girls (mentioned by 42% of girls on average) and boys (43%). Girls prefer playing with friends, followed by playing with toys and playing games. Boys' favourite type of play is with toys, followed by playing with friends and playing outdoors.

Play was also equally popular among five-year-olds from the most and least socio-economically advantaged backgrounds.

Popularity of play among SES quartile



"I like sledding with my friends and also sharing toys with each other."

"I like to run and climb with my friends ... and to play dentist because they have interesting tools."



MAKING AND CREATING

FOR MANY FIVE-YEAR-OLDS, WHAT THEY LIKE MOST ABOUT THEIR ECEC CENTRE OR SCHOOL IS BEING ABLE TO MAKE OR CREATE THINGS.

In particular, children like doing arts and crafts activities (mentioned by 9% of children on average). While some children mentioned ‘art’ in general, others specify the types of art or craft activities that they particularly enjoy.

Overwhelmingly, children’s favourite art activity is **drawing** (mentioned by 71% of children who mentioned art and crafts). Other responses included colouring, making crafts, painting, and using modelling clay.

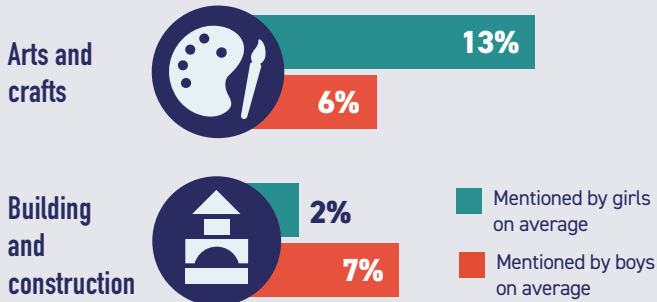


GIRLS’ AND BOYS’ FAVOURITE CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

GIRLS	RANK	BOYS
Drawing	1	Building
Building	2	Drawing
Colouring	3	Making crafts
Music	4	Colouring
Making crafts	5	Painting
Painting	6	Music
Modeling clay	7	Dance
Dance	8	Modeling clay

Art activities were somewhat more popular among girls than boys at age five, with arts and crafts the second most common response among girls and the third most popular among boys.

Favourite things to do at ECEC centres and schools



"I like art – drawing, painting, colouring and cutting."

"Playing with the LEGO – making a ship and a house."



Boys were much more likely to say that they enjoyed building or construction activities, with many mentioning that their favourite thing about their ECEC centre or school is using building blocks (like LEGO or Duplo) or other construction materials. This was the second most popular response overall amongst boys and the eighth most popular overall for girls.

There was no relationship between children's socio-economic background and their liking of arts and crafts or building activities.

CREATIVE ACTIVITIES ARE SHOWN TO FOSTER CREATIVE AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Engagement in creative arts in early childhood has been shown to foster:

- **creativity**
- **innovation**
- **problem-solving.**

The use of building blocks and other construction materials in early childhood has been shown to link to mathematical abilities.³



Gender differences in the frequency of use of such materials in childhood have been implicated in the gender gaps consistently observed in spatial skills.

Other creative activities that were reported by five-year-olds in the Study were singing and dancing, as well as cooking and baking.

"I like to sing and model with playdough."



³ Jirout, J.J. and Newcombe, N.S. (2015), Building blocks for developing spatial skills: Evidence from a large, representative U.S. sample, Psychological Science, Vol. 26./3, pp 302-310, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614563338>.

YOUNG CHILDREN ENJOY LEARNING

THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN MATTERS MOST FOR A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF CHILDREN.

Some children say they enjoy learning generally, others like learning about new things, and many children specify particular areas of learning. The latter most commonly include **literacy and language learning and numeracy/mathematics**.



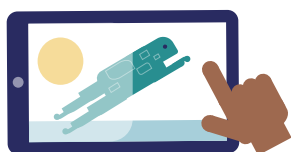
The most popular learning activity is language or literacy learning (the third most popular response overall among children).

More specifically children said they liked writing and handwriting best (e.g. "I like writing in the writing area." or "Writing and making neat letters."), **followed by reading or looking through books** (e.g. "I like doing reading, I read at home with Mummy and when I'm in school I like choosing books" and "I like looking through books").

Other popular responses relating to the literacy and language theme include phonics, learning letters or spelling, and going to the library (e.g. "I like the activities like going to the library."). Less frequently, children mentioned listening to stories, a named literacy programme, and learning grammar as their favourite activities.

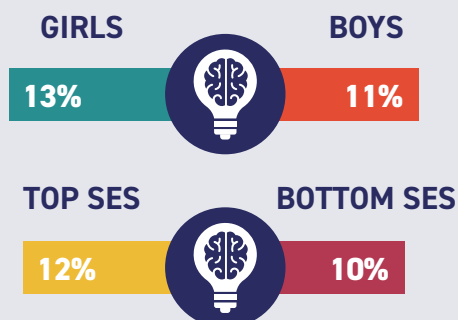
Many five-year-olds also like learning about numbers and mathematics (seventh most popular response overall). Most of these children did not specify which aspect of maths or numeracy they liked best. Typical responses included, for example, "I like math classes", "Maths, because I'm good at maths", and "I really like maths". Small numbers of children specified that they liked learning about shape, counting, subtraction or addition (e.g. "Adding in maths" and "Doing take-aways in maths").

"You get to learn lots of stuff. I like maths best."



Very few children (just over 1%) **described information technology or using digital devices as something they like doing at their ECEC centre or school**. Nonetheless, these children talk of "Playing on the computer and the iPad" and "Doing things on computers".

Five-year-olds who mentioned enjoyment of learning



Some children described the satisfaction they gain from learning, demonstrating an awareness of their processes of learning and their own learning progressions.

Learning was mentioned by roughly similar proportions of five-year-old girls and boys and by children in the top and bottom SES quartiles.



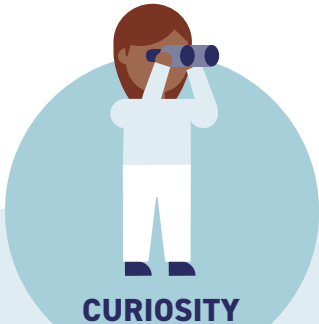
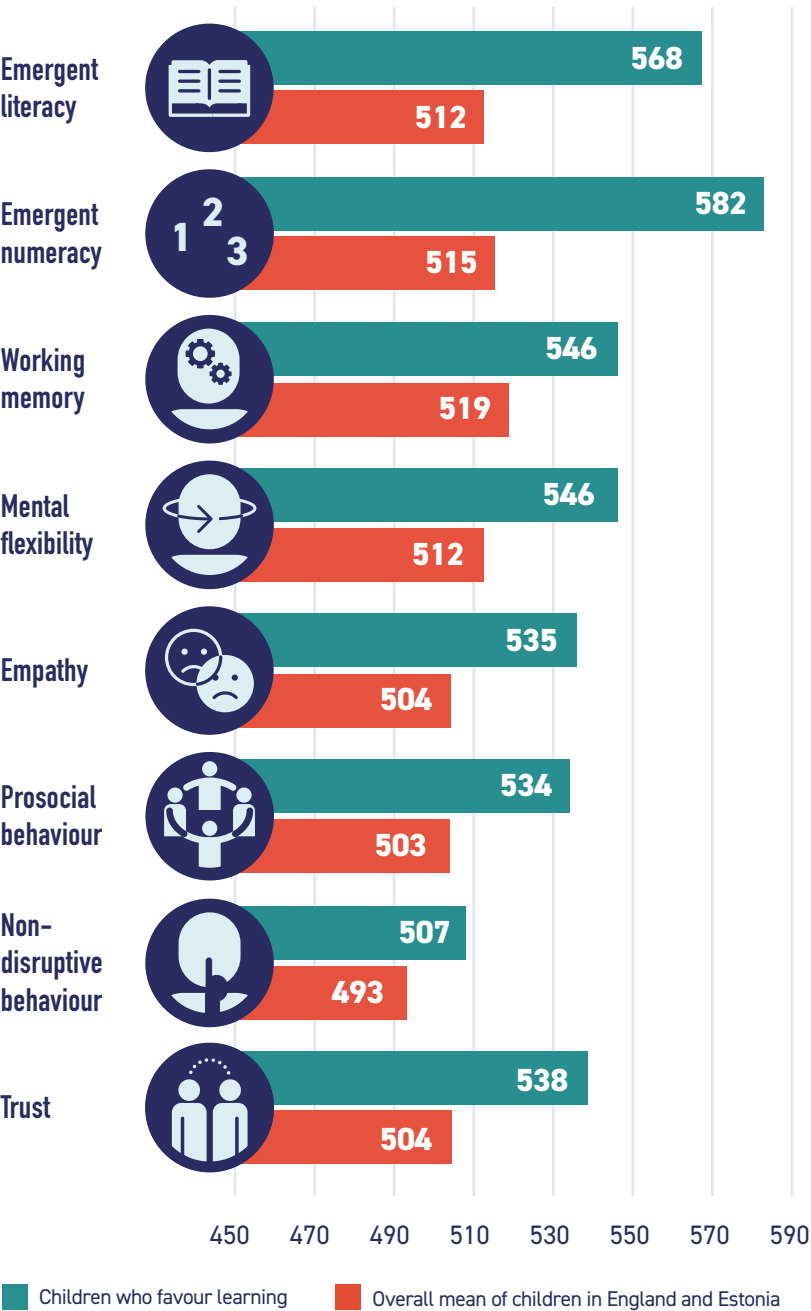
"Learning new complicated stuff because it's hard first then you get better and better."

ENJOYMENT OF LEARNING IS LINKED TO EARLY SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Children for whom learning (either generally or a specific aspect of learning) is their favourite part of being at their ECEC centre or school have significantly higher early learning scores than the average scores of five-year-olds in this Study.⁴ This effect is most pronounced for the cognitive domains, i.e. emergent literacy and emergent numeracy.

Children who say that 'learning' is what they like most about their early learning setting have mean emergent literacy and emergent numeracy scores over half a standard deviation higher than the overall means of children in England and Estonia (a gap of 56 points for literacy and 67 points for numeracy). This is equivalent to approximately nine months of expected development in emergent literacy and eight months of expected development in emergent numeracy.

Mean scores of children for whom learning is their favourite ECEC or school activity



The relationship between children's enjoyment of learning and early skill development is mirrored in the positive link between children's levels of curiosity and early skill development.⁵

Children who particularly enjoy learning also have higher mean scores in the assessments of social-emotional skills than other children, although the differences are not as pronounced as for cognitive skills.



⁴ IELS directly assessed the emergent literacy and numeracy, self-regulation and social-emotional skills of children in participating countries. The metric for all learning scales in IELS is the same, with the means around 500 and standard deviations around 100.
⁵ OECD, (2021), Caring, sharing daring: Social-emotional development at age five. <https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/caring-sharing-daring-social-emotional-development> (accessed on 22 October 2021).

BEING PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

MANY FIVE-YEAR-OLDS FIND THAT THEIR BEST TIMES AT THEIR ECEC CENTRE OR SCHOOL ARE WHEN THEY CAN BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE.

Sports and exercise is the fourth most popular response overall (mentioned by an average of 5% of children). This is in addition to the group of children whose favourite thing is playing outdoors.



Being physically active is slightly more popular among boys than girls at age five, with sports and exercise the fourth most common response among boys (mentioned by 7% of boys) and the fifth most popular among girls (mentioned by 4% of girls).

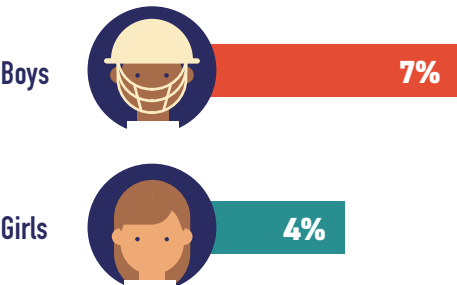
Children’s favourite ways of being physically active at ECEC/school:

- Physical education
- Running
- Going for a walk
- Football
- Climbing.



The nature of the physical activities mentioned also varied by gender; while football is the most popular type of physical activity among boys, it was not mentioned by any girl in the Study. The second most popular physical activity for boys is running. The two most popular activities of girls at age five are physical education and going for a walk.

POPULARITY OF SPORT AND EXERCISE AMONG BOYS AND GIRLS



Sports and exercise is favoured by equal proportions of five-year-olds in England and Estonia, although there are some differences in the types of activities. Children in England are more likely to mention playing football, while there are winter activities only identified by children in Estonia, such as skiing, sledding, ice-skating and ice hockey.



An additional 1.6% of five-year-olds responded that their favourite thing about ECEC or school was being or going outside, without mentioning exercising or physical activity.

BUT EATING AND RESTING ARE ALSO TOP-OF-MIND FOR MANY FIVE-YEAR-OLDS

The fifth most popular response among five-year-olds is break or meal times (5% of children on average).



5%

"I like to eat because the food is very good."

"Lunchtime because you have a long play."



For some of these children, the focus is on having a break from organised activities or a rest, while for other children, food seemed to be the most important point.

"When someone has a birthday, then I get candies and gingerbreads."

Several children mentioned the food associated with celebrations at their centre or school, such as provided at parties or other special events.



While seemingly not a feature of the early learning settings of five-year-olds in England, **sleeping/napping was the favourite part of kindergarten for just over 2% of children in Estonia** (the 9th most popular response among children in Estonia).

"To play, to eat and to sleep."

Z Z

Z Z Z



BEING WITH THEIR FRIENDS AND TEACHERS

Peer relationships are also important for five-year-olds. Altogether, **14% of children on average mentioned relationships with other children as being their favourite thing** about being at their ECEC centre or school.



Five-year-olds who mentioned friends

Mentioned playing with friends



Mentioned friends with no reference to playing



FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS ALSO FEATURED IN SOME CHILDREN'S DESCRIPTIONS OF WHAT THEY LIKE MOST ABOUT ECEC OR SCHOOL.

For example, some children like to see or play with their **siblings, cousins or other relatives** who attend the same centre or school.



Other children mentioned their parents in their responses, such as when their parents visit their centre or school.



For some five-year-olds, **being with their teacher is the best part of being at their ECEC centre or school.** These children very much like their teachers, noting that their teachers are nice to them and are kind, and that their teachers help them to learn.



For some children, **what they like most is being able to help others**, both other children and their teacher.



Social relationships were mentioned with roughly equal frequency by girls and boys, by children from high- and low-SES backgrounds, and by children in England and Estonia, indicating that they are important to young children regardless of context.

BEING ABLE TO CHOOSE WHAT THEY DO IS ALSO IMPORTANT

Another common response among children is having the opportunity to select their own activities, i.e. unstructured windows of time when they can choose what they do.

"It's fun because when it's Choosing Time you get to do what you want to do."



Some children simply indicate that their favourite thing at their ECEC centre or school is "choosing", while others name specific times of the day or week when they are allowed to self-direct their activities, such as "Free Flow Time", "Green Time" and "Choosing Time".



Some children see such periods as opportunities for play or being with their friends, while for others it is time they can spend in self-directed learning, such as working on a project or practising their writing skills.



Children whose favourite aspect of their ECEC centre or school is **being able to choose their activities** have **early learning scores that are significantly higher** than average, across a range of domains.

Similar to **children who state that learning is their preferred activity**, children who most like choosing have **higher emergent literacy and emergent numeracy** than other children. In addition, children who like to choose the activities they undertake also have significantly higher levels of self-regulation, pro-social skills and trust than other children.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ECEC SETTINGS AND EARLY SCHOOLING?

THE FIVE-YEAR-OLDS IN THIS STUDY INDICATE FOUR KEY POINTERS FOR ECEC AND EARLY SCHOOLING SETTINGS

Provide children with ample opportunities to play with other children, to be outdoors and to have breaks. Over-scheduling young children may have adverse effects on their enjoyment and well-being, as well as their attitudes to learning and to later schooling.

Enable children to have some level of control over the activities they undertake. This may include the types of play they engage in, choice over other activities they can do and with whom, and the extent to which they can self-direct their own efforts and learning.

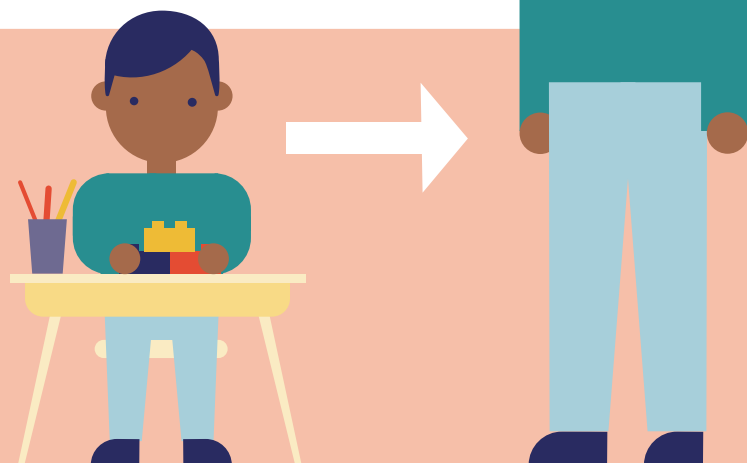


Give children regular opportunities to make and create their own designs and structures. Encourage girls and boys to experiment both with arts and crafts and with toy building materials.

Engage children in developmentally-appropriate learning, such as language-related and emergent numeracy activities, making sure that children are able to regularly learn new things. Support children to see and understand their own learning progressions.

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EARLY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS ARE IMPORTANT FOR BOTH THEIR CURRENT WELL-BEING AND THEIR FUTURE PARTICIPATION, ENGAGEMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT IN EDUCATION⁶

Ensuring that young children are happy and engaged in their early learning environments links to their later liking of and engagement in school, and subsequently a host of other positive educational outcomes.



Asking children directly what they like most about their early learning environments (ECEC or early schooling) is an important way of learning about what children value and enjoy.⁷

This study supports a growing body of evidence demonstrating that children are capable of clearly expressing their views on their early learning environments. Such information can help educators and policy makers to improve children's early learning experiences.



WHAT'S NEXT FOR IELS?

The International Early Learning and Well-being Study will continue to help countries monitor and improve the early development and well-being of children. Subsequent cycles of the study will also continue to prioritise young children's voices, inviting them to share their views. To join the next cycle of the study please contact the OECD Early Learning and Child Well-being team:

earlylearning@oecd.oecd.org



⁶ O'Farrelly, C. et al. (2020). Reconstructing readiness: young children's priorities for their early school adjustment, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol 50/2, pp. 3–16, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.12.001>.

⁷ Barnikis, T. (2005), Children's perceptions of their experiences in early learning environments: An exploration of power and hierarchy, *Global Studies of Childhood*, Vol. 5./3, pp. 291-304, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610615597148>.

FIND OUT MORE:

To learn more about the early learning and well-being of five-year-olds:

- Read about five-year-olds' aspirations for their futures: <https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/future-at-five-gendered-aspirations-five-year-olds>
- Read more about social-emotional development at age five: <https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/caring-sharing-daring-social-emotional-development>
- Read the summary report on the International Early Learning and Well-being Study (IELS): <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/early-learning-and-childwell-being-study/early-learning-and-child-well-being-3990407f-en.htm>
- Read the full international report: Early Learning and Child Well-being – A study of five-year-olds in England, Estonia and the United States: <https://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: <https://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: <https://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

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