



Will policies for the early years reduce inequalities in health? A case study on childcare

- Over the last decade, policies have given greater focus to reducing inequalities in health and increasing investment in early childhood.
- This study examined if and how policies targeting the early years could contribute to reducing health inequalities, using two case studies: unintentional injury and childcare. Information and analysis from different sources were combined to build a 'jigsaw' of evidence. This short report summarises findings from the childcare case study.
- A review of reviews highlighted that there was little research exploring childcare in relation to unintentional injury, breastfeeding, and overweight (including obesity). We therefore focused on these areas using national datasets, particularly the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), which is following children born in the UK in 2000/02.
- Between birth and age 9 months, 35% of MCS children were cared for in informal childcare and 17% in formal childcare. For the period 9 months to 3 years, the proportions were 31% and 28% respectively. At both ages, children from less advantaged backgrounds were less likely to be cared for in formal childcare than those from more advantaged backgrounds.
- In the MCS, 8% of children had an unintentional injury between birth and 9 months, and 36% between 9 months and 3 years. Those from less advantaged backgrounds were more likely to have been injured. Compared to those looked after only by a parent, children from less advantaged backgrounds were more likely to be injured (anywhere) if they were looked after in formal childcare, whereas those from more advantaged backgrounds were less likely to be injured.
- In the MCS 33% of mothers breastfed for at least 4 months and those from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely to breastfeed than those from less advantaged backgrounds. Infants who were looked after in informal and formal childcare were less likely to be breastfed than those who were looked after only by a parent, although the reduced rates in formal childcare were only seen in more advantaged groups.
- In the MCS 23% of children were overweight or obese by 3 years, and the prevalence of overweight was socially distributed. Children looked after in informal childcare were more likely to be overweight at age 3 (compared to those looked after only by a parent), although the elevated risk was only observed in those from more advantaged backgrounds.
- Only a few aspects of health and wellbeing were explored using secondary data analysis. Evidence from the review of reviews indicates that childcare can also have a wide range of important benefits, particularly for children's development and long term outcomes.
- While this study helps to build a 'jigsaw' of evidence, further research is required to establish causality. Qualitative research is also important to better understand the associations observed.

Details of the research team

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