

# New report on five-year-olds and their families

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Growing Up in Ireland published new findings from the national study of almost 9,000 five-year-olds and their families. The report was recently launched by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald.

Growing Up in Ireland – the Infant Cohort at Five Years examines how five-year-olds and their families are faring across a range of areas including: the transition to school, socio-emotional well-being, physical well-being, play and diet and [family](#) circumstances. These new findings from are based on in-depth interviews completed with the families of five-year-olds between March and September 2013.

It is the latest report from the Growing Up in Ireland study, which is a Government funded study following the progress of almost 20,000 children and their families. The study is being conducted by a consortium of researchers led by Trinity College Dublin and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). A full copy of the report is available [here](#).

Speaking at the report launch Minister Fitzgerald said: "The Growing Up in Ireland study continues to provide a wealth of data on Irish children's lives. The addition of data on five-year-olds will provide a further valuable contribution to our knowledge of child development over time. I welcome the positive messages from the findings presented today, particularly the findings that the vast majority of Irish five-year-olds experience a positive transition to school, have positive relationships

with their parents and are in good health."

"However, these findings again confirm the worrying reality that one fifth of Irish five-year-olds are classified as overweight or obese. The findings further highlight the range of differences among Irish children in terms of social advantage. These key findings provide important first insights across a number of areas relating to the lives of Irish five-year-olds, further analysis of this data will greatly aide Government and policy-makers in responding to the challenges facing Ireland's children."

## **Key findings include:**

### **Transition to school**

- About one-tenth of families registered their child for school in the year in which the child was born, although over half waited until the year in which the child started school. Earlier registration was more usual among more advantaged families (57 per cent of children whose mother had lower levels of education were registered in the year in which they started school compared to 47 per cent of those whose mother had a degree).
- 19 per cent of parents registered their child in more than one school. Multiple registration was also more common among socially advantaged families – 8 per cent of children whose mother was educated to Junior Certificate were registered in more than one school compared with 29 per cent of children whose mothers had a degree.
- The majority of parents reported that their children had adjusted well to school. 84 per cent of children looked forward to going to school more than once a week. A small proportion (5 per cent) of children didn't look forward to or complained about school more than once a week. Girls were more positive about school than boys.

## The Free Pre-school Year

- 95 per cent of children who had started school in September 2012 had previously availed of the Free Pre-School Year scheme. The main reason for a five-year-old not having availed of the scheme was related to the child already attending a different childcare setting.
- 25 per cent of parents who availed of the Free Pre-School Year reported that they would not have been able to send their child to pre-school had it not been for the scheme. This was especially so among less advantaged families – 39 per cent of families in the lowest income group compared to 9 per cent of those in the highest group (quintile).

## Socio-emotional well-being of five-year-olds

- Most parents have a positive relationship with their five-year-old, scoring very highly on positive aspects of parent-child relationship scales and being in the lower ranges of scales measuring parent-child conflict.
- In general, girls were given higher ratings than boys on social skills such as assertiveness; empathy; taking responsibility; and self-control. Better social skills among five-year-olds were associated with lower levels of parent-child conflict.
- Only a very small proportion (1 per cent) of five-year-olds were reported as having a doctor-diagnosed problem with their emotions, concentration or behavior. Just less than 4 per cent of five-year-olds were reported by their mothers to have definite or severe difficulties with 'emotions, concentration, behavior or being able to get on with other people'. A further 15 per cent were reported by their mothers to have minor difficulties in one or more of these areas.

## Well-being, diet and weight among five-year-olds

- The vast majority (98 per cent) of five-year-olds were in good health with the remaining 2 per cent being described by their mother as sometimes quite ill or almost always unwell.
- Five-year-olds from more socially disadvantaged families had higher levels of daily 'screen-time' (hours spent each day in front of any type of screen – TV, smart phone, computer, Ipad, DVDs, electronic games etc.). For example, 8 per cent of five-year-olds whose mother had a degree spent three or more hours on an average weekday in front of a screen compared to 20 per cent of five-year-olds whose mother had a Junior Certificate or less.
- Higher levels of 'screen-time' were also associated with poorer eating habits – crisps, snack foods, biscuits etc., even when account was taken of family income.
- As previously identified in Growing Up in Ireland among children at three years of age, overweight and obesity is a continuing cause of concern among our [young children](#). 20 per cent of five-year-olds were overweight or obese – 15 per cent overweight and 5 per cent obese. Girls (23 per cent) were more likely than boys (18 per cent) to have an elevated BMI.
- In line with international trends, there is some movement in terms of the children's BMI status between three and five years. 91 per cent who were not overweight at three years remained not overweight at five. 39 per cent of those who were overweight at three years remain overweight at five years with 11 per cent moving from the overweight category to obese. 38 per cent of those who were obese at three years remain so at five.
- The child's socio-economic background continues to be associated with overweight and obesity, both being higher among less advantaged families. A total of 9 per cent of children whose mother had a Junior Certificate or less were in the obese range compared with 4 per cent of those whose mother had a degree.

- Calorie intake is clearly related to overweight and obesity. Growing Up in Ireland found that the average five-year-old consumed approximately 1,500 calories per day. Children from less advantaged backgrounds (such as lower income groups) consumed around 23 per cent more calories on average each day.

## **Families with five-year-olds**

86 per cent of five-year-olds lived in two-parent families at five years of age. There were, however, some changes in family structures over the three interviews, with some children moving from a one-parent to a two-parent family and vice versa. Approximately 4 per cent of children moved from a one-parent to a two-parent family between nine months and five years of age, with a compensating flow of 4 per cent of children from a two-parent to a one-parent family over the same period. This allows us to look at the effects of changes in family composition on child development in a way never previously possible in Ireland.

One-parent families were the most socially disadvantaged regardless of which measures of advantage/disadvantage were used (e.g. family income, parental education etc.)

## **Family and financial circumstances**

- The economic downturn has been affecting families with young children in many ways, including reduction in wages and ability to afford luxury items. In addition to this, however, 43 per cent of families said they couldn't afford or had to cut back on basics; 17 per cent said they were behind with utility bills and 14 per cent said they were behind with the rent/mortgage.
- Not surprisingly, increasing proportions of families with young [children](#) were experiencing difficulties in making ends meet. In

2013 a total of 25 per cent of families with a five-year-old said they were making ends meet with great difficulty or with difficulty. This is more than twice the percentage of families in 2008/2009, when the child was nine months of age (12 per cent).

**More information:** Read the full report:  
[www.growingup.ie/index.php?id=61](http://www.growingup.ie/index.php?id=61)

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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