

# High-quality, centre-based childcare can prevent difficulties

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High quality centre-based childcare appears to prevent the development of language and behavioural difficulties over time, particularly among vulnerable children. The factors that appear to affect children include space for learning activities, staff education, relationships with staff,

activities offered, time spent in childcare and group size.

This comes from the report "Vulnerable children in centre-based childcare - the significance of quality" produced by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH) in collaboration with the Norwegian Ministry of Education.

Vulnerable children include those with a neurobiological risk such as premature birth or low birth weight, or children who had a difficult temperament in infancy.

"The main findings in the report are particularly significant for vulnerable children. We see that poor quality centre-based childcare can affect these children's development negatively over time," says Ragnhild Eek Brandlistuen, researcher at the NIPH.

## **Quality is important**

Together with colleagues at the NIPH, she examined the significance of centre-based childcare quality for vulnerable children and their peers. Data were taken from the Norwegian Mother and Child Cohort Study (MoBa), where questionnaires for almost 7,000 five-year-olds had been completed by both parents and centre-based childcare teachers.

## **Group size and space**

"We found that for vulnerable girls, large groups with 25 to 40 children were clearly linked to several symptoms of language difficulties at 5 years of age. Meanwhile, we saw that the symptoms of language difficulties among this group decreased over time if they were in small groups of children with 1 to 14 children," says Eek Brandlistuen.

The researchers also saw a clear association between too little space for learning activities and increased symptoms of language difficulties and [behavioural problems](#) such as anger and aggression. This relationship was true for all the children but was strongest for vulnerable boys.

## Creative and physical play

"The results also indicate that in centre-based childcare with well-organised creative and physical play, the symptoms of language difficulties were significantly reduced for vulnerable boys. When planned creative or physical play was offered infrequently, this was associated with increased symptoms of language difficulties for all children, although this was strongest for vulnerable boys. In addition, this was also linked to sadness and depressive symptoms in boys in the entire sample," says Eek Brandlistuen.

### Main findings:

- Group size is related to language development and behaviour.
- Inadequate space for learning activities is associated with greater symptoms of language difficulties and behavioural problems such as anger and aggression (externalising behaviour).
- Starting centre-based childcare before 1 year of age was not linked to greater symptoms of language difficulties, emotional difficulties such as sadness and anxiety (internalising behaviour), or symptoms of behavioural problems such as anger and aggression at 1.5 years of age.
- Long days in centre-based childcare, 40 or more hours a week, were associated with greater symptoms of [language difficulties](#) and symptoms of behavioural problems such as anger and aggression at both 1.5 years and 5 years of age.
- A high percentage of unskilled staff is linked to greater symptoms of emotional difficulties such as sadness and anxiety

among boys.

- Lack of closeness and a confrontational relationship with the centre-based childcare teacher is linked to increased symptoms of language and behavioural problems in all children.
- Poor co-operation and low enthusiasm among staff are related to greater symptoms of language and behavioural difficulties in girls.
- Infrequent planned creative and physical play is related to greater symptoms of language and [behavioural difficulties](#).

In 2013, 90 per cent of children in Norway aged between 1 and 5 years attended centre-based childcare.

## Significance for development

"Many have questioned whether increased centre-based childcare use could have negative consequences for children. The previous report on centre-based childcare quality released in 2014 showed no clear correlation between how old children were when they started in childcare and their subsequent mental or linguistic ability. We also found no effect from long days in centre-based childcare, or strong correlations between childcare quality and psychological and linguistic ability among 5-year-olds in general," says Ellinor F. Major, Director of the Division of Mental Health at the NIPH.

This new report used a larger data set, and was based on [children's](#) different needs for adaptation and follow-up.

"In summary, we can show that high quality centre-based [childcare](#) has some relevance for child development, and it appears that this is greatest for [vulnerable children](#)," says Major.

She adds that these results must be interpreted bearing some limitations

in mind. "With multiple testing, as in this study, some of the effects may have occurred randomly. It is also possible that we did not identify all possible associations that are yet to be discovered."

This is the fifth report from the Language and Learning Study (SOL), a collaborative project between the NIPH and the Norwegian Ministry of Education. The NIPH is responsible for the contents of the report.

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