Seeds of learning

The SEED project will follow thousands of children from age two to the end of Key Stage 1. Charity 4Children reports on the story so far.

Launched in the autumn of 2013, the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) is the first piece of major research to assess the impact of childcare and early education provision on the educational development of young children since the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study.

The £5m, eight-year study, funded by the Department for Education, is being led by NatCen Social Research, with early years academic Professor Edward Melhuish (University of Oxford). Also working in collaboration with NatCen on the project are 4Children and Frontier Economics.

Sue Robb, head of early years at 4Children, says, 'We are pleased to be part of the SEED longitudinal study because we recognise how the findings will influence early years and childcare policy in the years to come.'

With the introduction of funded early learning for some two-year-olds last October, the study will follow thousands of children from age two to the end of Key Stage 1 (age seven). It will also assess provision in early years settings, including nurseries, pre-schools and childminders, in order to test the impact of time spent in these settings on the educational development of young children.

FACE TO FACE
The initial stage of the study involves 6,000 face-to-face interviews, carried out by NatCen interviewers, with the families of two-year-olds. Roughly two-thirds of these interviews have now taken place. Parents interviewed have been asked about:
- activities they do with their child
- words their children know, and
- details of any childcare they are using.

Questions about their child’s healthy development have also been asked.

About two-thirds of the families contacted to date have agreed to participate in the project. The interviews, which started last October, take place in the families’ homes and last about 50 minutes. As part of the interview, participants are asked how they feel about taking part in the survey. More than 85 per cent have said that they find the interviews enjoyable and interesting.

Charlotte Clarke, research director at NatCen Social Research, says, ‘We have made huge progress in the SEED study since it began last autumn.

‘Not only have we completed 4,000 interviews, but we have received a great response from parents taking part in the study, many of whom find it both interesting and helpful in thinking about their child’s learning and development.’

A second family interview will take place when the child turns three. This interview will involve the children, who will be asked to take part in naming vocabulary and picture similarities exercises.

A further interview will take place when the child is four and will be combined with information from the child’s Early Years Foundation Stages (EYFS) Profile scores, phonics reading test at the end of Year 1 and Key Stage 1 results.

EARLY YEARS EDUCATION
The part of the project exploring the delivery of early years education will begin in May. 4Children has recruited a team of highly trained consultants with strong track records in supporting quality improvement in the EYFS.

The team will visit all types of provision to look at the delivery of early years education. This part of the study will see the consultants visiting a provider for about half a day to observe the early education that the children are accessing.

For the first time ever in a major study of this kind, the team will be visiting private, voluntary and independent provision, maintained nurseries and schools, children’s centres and childminders.

Judith Stevens, SEED programme consultant, says, ‘I am delighted to be part of such an exciting new early years project. As an early years local authority and national adviser for over 18 years, I have been privileged to visit so many settings to see first hand what works well for children.

The longitudinal nature of SEED, and in particular the very early links with families, makes this innovative project of great interest to early years practitioners, leaders and managers.

Helen Moylett, also SEED programme consultant, says, ‘I am very pleased to have been asked to contribute to SEED. In the long term, our work will contribute to a sound evidence base for understanding the long-term impact of quality provision for two-year-olds.’