

INTRODUCTION

The first five years of everyone's life are some of the most crucial. They are a period of unprecedented growth and cognitive, social and emotional development. They are the foundations for a life-long ability to learn, thrive, cope with adversity, be healthy and build strong relationships, providing an "irreplaceable window of opportunity to set a path towards success in primary school and later in life".ⁱ However, the early years are also a time of risk, especially for vulnerable babies and toddlers; without access to services and support, cycles of disadvantage, poor mental health, low academic achievement and poverty can become entrenched.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is fundamental for children's development and vital for giving them the best possible start in life. The Department for Education's (DfE) ongoing Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) states that "attending high quality ECEC helps prepare young children to be 'school ready', which is important as a foundation for a successful educational career and long-term life outcomes".ⁱⁱ While evidence shows that attending high-quality ECEC settings has a positive impact for all children, a 2004 DfE study showed that the benefits are even more significant for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.ⁱⁱⁱ

While attending a formal childcare setting is not compulsory, it is well established that accessing high-quality ECEC can be difficult for many children across the UK. As the UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) outlined in the Early Moments Matter report, ECEC provision is geographically patchy, often unaffordable, and disproportionately locks out disadvantaged children who stand to benefit most from vital early education and its positive lifelong impacts.^{iv}

What is less documented, and certainly not well known, is the effect this has on some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised children in England: refugee and asylum-seeking babies and young children under the age of five. The number of these young children is not known, but there are likely significant numbers of children in England whose experiences of accessing high-quality ECEC are overlooked.

This report presents findings from research carried out by UNICEF UK in partnership with Refugee Education UK (REUK), which contributes important evidence on the overlooked ECEC experiences of the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children. This report sets out to:

- Provide insights into the opportunities to access and thrive in ECEC for a largely hidden group of children in England;
- Increase understanding of the barriers to accessing quality ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children and what is needed to overcome these barriers;
- Identify practical recommendations for local and national stakeholders to reduce barriers and increase provision and uptake of quality ECEC.

Terminology and scope

This research refers to **refugee and asylum-seeking children**, who are defined, for the purposes of this report, as the youngest children (under the age of five) whose parents have been forcibly displaced from their home countries, for reasons including conflict, persecution, violence and trafficking – regardless of their immigration status.

On occasion, this report specifies where findings relate to asylum-seekers or refugees only.

Asylum-seeker is used to refer to someone who has left their country of origin and has formally applied for asylum in the UK, but who is still waiting on the outcome of an asylum claim from the UK Government.

Refugee is used to refer to someone who has received an outcome on their asylum claim and has been granted protection status by the UK Government, including refugee status, humanitarian protection, and other forms of leave to remain. It is also used to refer to someone who has been granted leave to remain as part of a Government scheme (such as for Afghanistan or Ukraine).

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is defined as the education and childcare provided in regulated settings from birth to the start of primary school. The term is used to refer to formal ECEC settings. While this could include childminders, this report focuses on nursery settings in both the maintained and private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) sectors. This report also includes reference to children's ability to learn outside these settings, known as their home learning environment (HLE).

A snapshot of research on ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children

A literature review was conducted for this study (published as a separate report). It reveals significant research and evidence gaps on the experiences of ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children in England. This is a trend mirrored at the European level, with a 2019 European study on ECEC for refugee families finding that the very youngest refugee children are practically invisible in research.^v Recent analysis by the Hub for European Refugee Education – an initiative that provides a comprehensive database of academic and grey literature on refugee education across Europe – shows that pre-primary education is the most understudied level of education across Europe.^{vi}

Despite this, the literature review did provide valuable insights. It underscored the importance of high-quality ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children, particularly given common features and constraints of their home environments (particularly when housed in temporary accommodation), and its lifelong benefits,

including for a child's cognitive, social and emotional development, healing from trauma, school readiness, and long-term outcomes. It also provided a strong economic and social case for investing in early childhood education for refugees, as well as establishing the many significant barriers that refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families face, including at the policy, institutional, and family level, that contribute to poor take-up of ECEC.

However, these insights are mostly drawn from the broader evidence base on experiences of ECEC for disadvantaged children in the UK more broadly,^{vii} or from research on ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children at a global or European level.^{viii} To the best of the authors' knowledge, few directly relevant studies exist in the UK context. Those reviewed tend to focus on desk-based research and do not include the voices of refugee and asylum-seeking families,^{ix} or examine access to childcare as a smaller focus in a broader study on refugees' and asylum-seekers' lives.^x

Structure of the report

The **Background and Context** section provides an overview of ECEC context for the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK by providing a statistical snapshot of the forced displacement context in the UK, and an overview of relevant policy in England. The **Methodology** section describes the methodology underpinning the primary research with parents and key informants and the questions addressed. This is followed by the **Research Findings** section, which analyses data from the qualitative primary research with parents and key informants. The **Reflections and Conclusions** section discusses key and pertinent research themes and their relevance in the current context. The **Recommendations** section identifies a range of evidence-based recommendations to national and local Government and researchers.

ⁱ *ibid.*

ⁱⁱ Department of Education, Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact study on early education use and child outcomes up to age four years (London, 2021).

ⁱⁱⁱ Sylva, K. et al., 'The Effective Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report: A Longitudinal Study Funded by the DfES 1996-2004' (London: Department of Education, 2004).

^{iv} O'Meara, C., Moody, J., & Bradley, D. Early Moments Matter: Guaranteeing the Best Start in Life for Every Baby and Toddler in England (UNICEF UK, 2022).

^v Vandekerckhove, A. and Aarssen, J. (2019). High time to put the invisible children on the agenda: supporting refugee families and children through quality ECEC. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 28:1, pp.104-114.

^{vi} Aleghfeli, Y.K., 'Here's what we know about early childhood education for refugees in Europe', Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (2023).

^{vii} Such as for minority ethnic groups, EAL students or Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. See, for example, Melhuish, E. et al., Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to Age Five Years (Department of Education, 2020); Bonetti, S. et al., 'Structural Elements of Quality Early Years Provision: A Review of Evidence', Education Policy Institute (2018).

^{viii} Park, M., Katasiaficas, C., & McHugh, M., Responding to the ECEC Needs of Children of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Europe and North America (Migration Policy Institute, 2018).

^{ix} Poulter, M., Post, B., & Tsimpli, I.M., Refugee Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in the UK (Cambridge University, 2018).

^x Pinter, I. et al., A Lifeline for All: Children and Families with No Recourse to Public Funds (The Children's Society, 2020).