



The determinants of experiences and outcomes for children and young people in Childminding: A Rapid Review of the Research Literature

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About Early Childhood Ireland

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading national children's advocacy and membership organisation. We work in partnership with Early Years, School Age Care and Childminding settings to ensure that every child is thriving and learning. We advocate for an effective and inclusive system which values, supports and invests in childhood, children and services.



01 405 7100



info@earlychildhoodireland.ie



[@EarlyChildhdIrl](https://twitter.com/EarlyChildhdIrl)



www.earlychildhoodireland.ie

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Foreword

Childminding has long been an intrinsic element of the Irish Early Years and School Age Care system in local communities alongside centre-based provision. Childminders have been the education and care choice for many parents and children, forming close relationships and bonds that are often sustained throughout and beyond childhood.

In mid-2024, Childminding in Ireland is at a pivotal turning point with the phased regulation of all Childminding services and the development of a national system of quality development supports. Decisions are being made by policymakers and politicians that will continue to reverberate as Childminding regularises and eligible parents receive public subsidies to meet the cost of fees for using registered Childminding.

The policy and political systems need to be child-centred and use research evidence of what is best for children in decision-making processes. Early Childhood Ireland commissioned this research report to provide policymakers and stakeholders with an unprecedented, state-of-the-art systematic review of the literature on the factors in Childminding associated with positive experiences and outcomes for children to inform their decision-making. We all need to see and use this research as the childminder's family home is a different learning and development context from centre-based services and is experienced differently by children.

Early Childhood Ireland believes that there is huge potential for Childminding to retain its unique status while also growing and professionalising to meet children's and families' needs and their right to high-quality services. All children should have access to consistently excellent Early Years and School Age Care as a basic right, through guaranteed high-quality service provision for children in their communities, including in childminders' homes.

This systematic review was conducted on behalf of Early Childhood Ireland by Dr Suzanne McCartney, Dr Franka Winter, Dr Glenda Walsh and Dr. Karen Orr, Centre for Educational Underachievement, Stranmillis University College, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Early Childhood Ireland thanks them for their expertise and concern with research rigour, their professionalism, and their commitment to using research evidence to enhance Early Years and School Age settings for children.

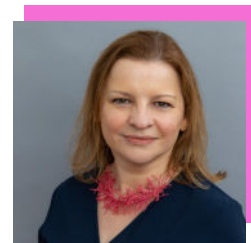
Thank you to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth for providing the funding to undertake this research.

A final thank you to the members of the Research Advisory Group: Fiona Kelleher, Quality Support Manager and Frances Byrne, Director of Policy, Early Childhood Ireland and Karen O'Sullivan, National Childminding Coordinator, DCEDIY.

This report is not the final word on research evidence on Childminding, but it is the most rigorous and comprehensive analysis available to Irish policymakers at this moment. That substantial research gaps exist is evident in this report, particularly for children under 3 years and of school age, and with children on their lived experiences in Childminding.

The report's findings are relevant to the continued implementation of the *National Action Plan for Childminding*, and to the delivery of *Nurturing Skills and Partnership for the Public Good*. We hope that this report will stimulate discussion and reflection among a wide audience on the determinants of positive high-quality experiences and outcomes for children from birth to 15 years participating in Childminding.

Liz Kerrins
Director of Research
Early Childhood Ireland



Glossary

Term	Definition
Confounders	Confounders are factors that predict both the outcome of interest and the exposure
Determinants	Factors found to influence experiences and outcomes
Experiences	In this study, process quality indicators (such as the quality of caregiver interactions), structural indicators (such as adult-child ratios), types of activities, and children's preferences and dislikes
Process quality	Process quality concerns the more proximal processes of children's everyday experiences and involves the social, emotional physical, and instructional aspects of staff-child and peer interactions while being involved in play, activities or routines (OECD, 2018)
Structural quality	The more regulable features of settings, such as child-staff ratios, group size and staff training/education. Structural features are considered important preconditions for process quality, which in turn is most strongly related to child development, well-being and learning (OECD, 2018)
Global quality	A measure of stimulation and support in early education and care environments. It combines several elements, including organisation of the environment, learning materials, and variety of activities and environments
Systematic review	Identifies, appraises and synthesises all the empirical evidence that meets pre-specified eligibility criteria to answer a specific research question using explicit, systematic methods that are selected with a view aimed at minimising bias, to produce more reliable findings to inform decision-making (Campbell)
Observational study	Where researchers directly and systematically observe and record the behaviour of research participants, precisely recording activities, events, processes
Exposure	The 'dose' that may be associated with an outcome of interest, e.g., the frequency and duration of Childminding participation
Longitudinal cohort study	Researches the lives of groups of individuals who experience the same life events over time, sometimes from birth or pregnancy. Growing Up in Ireland and the National Institute of Child Health and Development (USA) are examples

Note: The terminology used to describe Early Years and School Age Care varies throughout the report to reflect the terms used in the research cited.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Childminding, also known as home-based childcare or family day care, is an essential Early Years and School Age Care service that intends to support children's learning, development and wellbeing and enables parental employment. Despite its importance, research on Childminding has historically been limited, leading to an incomplete understanding of the factors that contribute to positive outcomes and experiences for children in these settings. This report aims to address this gap by providing a comprehensive review of existing literature on the determinants of experiences and outcomes for babies, toddlers, children, and young people who participate in Childminding.

Methodology

The report employs a 'rapid review' methodology to synthesise findings from existing international literature on Childminding. This approach, part of the "systematic review" family, allows for a rigorous yet swift examination of relevant studies, ensuring that the review covers a broad range of factors affecting children's experiences and outcomes in home-based Early Years and School Age Care settings.

Search terms for the key concepts "Childminding", "outcomes" and "experiences" were developed through term harvesting from a set of known articles, database thesauri, brainstorming by the research team and consultation with the advisory group. Search strings were adapted to match the conventions and functionality of each database. Titles and abstracts were searched. Searches were not restricted by date or language.

Covidence, a digital screening and data extraction tool for conducting systematic reviews, was used throughout the screening and data extraction process. Screening was carried out in two stages – title and abstract screening, and full-text screening – to exclude ineligible publications. The initial search produced 13,062 results. After removing duplicates, 9,221 studies were retained for title and abstract screening. Following title and abstract screening, 279 studies were moved on to full-text screening and full texts were sourced. Full-text screening of publications found in the main search (excluding 15 full-text publications that were unable to be retrieved) produced 47 included publications. In addition to the main search, a grey literature search was carried out. This yielded an additional three results (all of which were academic studies). These studies are reported alongside the results from the main literature search, giving a total of 50 included studies.

Included studies were first coded and grouped by outcome domain. A second stage of analysis was then carried out to identify key determinants of Childminding experiences and outcomes. In this way, the identified determining factors emerged directly from the review findings, rather than being predetermined by the research team.

Finally, a critical appraisal of the included studies was conducted, using the 'Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT)' (Hong et al., 2018), to assess the quality and reliability of the evidence. This involved examining the methods used in each study, the handling of confounders, and the completeness of data. Many studies were found to have limitations, such as not accounting for potential confounders or having incomplete data sets.

Findings

The review has identified four groups of determinants of Childminding experiences and outcomes, namely, child, caregiver, structural and pedagogical.

1. Child determinants

Several child level determinants emerged, such as sex, age, temperament and socioeconomic status. Boys were found to be more sensitive to frequent childcare changes and the age of entering Childminding, which was associated with poorer communication and social outcomes compared to girls. Child temperament was also found to play a significant role, with different temperaments associated with how children adapt to and benefit from Childminding participation.

The child's age and family economic status were also identified as determinants. Younger children and those from lower economic backgrounds tended to experience different outcomes compared to their older and more economically advantaged peers. Some evidence suggested the quality of emotional support was overall higher than the quality of educational support, especially for toddlers. This suggests a prioritisation of nurturing care and supportive interactions for this age group. Economic status influenced the quality of Childminding environments and the resources available.

2. Caregiver determinants

With regards to caregiver (childminder) determinants, caregivers with appropriate qualifications and ongoing, relevant, training were better equipped to provide high-quality care. This suggests that the specificity of training plays a crucial role in shaping interaction quality. This education appeared to enable them to manage stress and challenges effectively, further improving the Childminding environment.

The caregiver's sensitivity, passion, commitment, and genuine interest in the children were positively associated with enhanced experiences and outcomes. Caregivers who are motivated and engaged tend to create more nurturing and supportive environments.

3. Structural determinants

A range of structural factors, such as the frequency and duration of care and the numbers of adults and children in the setting were considered as potential determining factors. The impact of time spent in Childminding on children's outcomes was mixed. While some studies found no significant correlation between hours spent in Childminding and outcomes, others noted that spending more than two to three days a week in these settings could have a negative impact on long-term behavioural outcomes. Likewise, the age children begin to attend Childminding and the duration of care showed varied impacts. Later entry was linked to better play competence, while early full-time care had mixed effects on child behaviour and learning. Longer exposure to Childminding may enhance cognitive outcomes but it may also increase child social and behavioural issues, suggesting the importance of care quality and stability.

Lower adult-child ratios (i.e., fewer children per adult) generally lead to higher process quality and more individualised attention. However, their impact on overall quality varied, primarily affecting specific caregiver behaviours like tone and discipline. Larger groups were associated with fewer but better-planned activities and higher caregiver stress. Group size did not significantly affect infant-caregiver relationships but influenced caregiver stress levels. The mixed-age groups in Childminding settings were found to offer unique benefits and challenges. While they support diverse learning experiences, they can hinder activities like physical exercise due to varying age-related needs. Effective activity planning is essential to address these challenges.

Socioeconomic factors were reported as influencing Childminding quality. Childminders in wealthier, urban areas tended to engage more in planned activities compared to those in poorer or rural settings. Furthermore, stricter regulations, higher-cost settings and financial support were associated with enhanced quality in Childminding settings.

4. Pedagogical determinants

The types of activities and the nature of interactions between caregivers and children were significantly associated with positive experiences and outcomes for children. Frequent positive interactions, such as responsiveness and story reading, were linked to better language and social outcomes. Conversely, negative interactions and a lack of engagement were associated with poorer outcomes.

Inclusive practices that cater to children with diverse needs are essential for maintaining high-quality environments. However, these practices were also found to pose challenges, as inclusive providers may struggle to maintain quality due to the complexities involved in caring for children with diverse needs .

The physical environment, including space, furnishings, and noise levels, may also impact children's experiences. Well-structured and inclusive environments that minimise noise and offer diverse learning opportunities were found to contribute to better outcomes.

Conclusions

The findings of this comprehensive review underscore the complexity of factors influencing the experiences and outcomes of children in Childminding. The evidence reviewed, whilst not without its limitations and weaknesses, suggests that by focussing on child-centred approaches, supporting caregiver well-being, improving structural and financial conditions, and fostering playful pedagogical practices, policymakers and practitioners can enhance the quality of Childminding services. The available evidence suggests these efforts may contribute to children receiving the support they need to thrive in home-based Early Years and School Age Care environments.





Registered Charity: CHY20078904

Early Childhood Ireland
Hainault House
Belgard Square South
Tallaght
Dublin 24
D24 RFV0



STRANMILLIS
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

A College of Queen's University Belfast

