

ECDE research brief



Key Themes and Considerations: Enabling Early Years Child Development in Ealing (ECDE) - Children's Focus Groups

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Enabling Early Years Child Development in Ealing (ECDE) – Children’s Focus Groups

Janine Shaw, Institute of Development Studies

This briefing highlights key themes and findings from children’s engagement in the Enabling Early Childhood Development in Ealing (ECDE) study. For details on the whole project’s findings, please visit [the full report](#).

In two focus group sessions on school readiness, we asked children aged 8–9:

- 1) what skills they thought their younger siblings needed to start school,**
- 2) what their siblings might struggle with and how their parents/carers could help them overcome these challenges and be ready to succeed in school.**



How can families be better supported to strengthen core life skills?

Approach

In July of 2023, one focus group was held with children in each of two local primary schools in Ealing borough. Each child participant had a younger sibling due to start school in September 2023. The focus groups took the form of the children working together to create an advice guide for parents. Our aim was to make the sessions as informal and low pressure as possible. The children enjoyed participating and were forthcoming with their opinions.

These sessions were part of a wider study on early childhood development, in which we consulted a diverse group of parents and carers to understand their lived experiences of raising young children in Ealing. We took a qualitative research approach which allowed us to develop a rich, nuanced and holistic understanding. Our work with children complemented this broader work, and lent itself well to discussions on school readiness in particular.



Karolina Grabowska

Our approach was informed by our theoretical framework which incorporated aspects of the **Harvard principles for supporting early childhood development**.¹

The **principles for supporting early childhood development** are based on in-depth long-term research conducted by the Harvard Center for the Developing Child.

These principles are as follows:

- 1) to support responsive relationships for children and adults;
- 2) to strengthen core skills for planning, adapting, and achieving goals; and
- 3) to reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families.

These three principles provided a solid foundation to frame our research and ensure that the focus remained on the lived experience of the children and their caregivers in Ealing. The following sections highlight some of our key findings from the sessions.



Key skills children felt were important to be school ready



Adapting to the school environment and academic expectations

One of the things that the children felt their younger siblings might struggle with at school was leaving the family environment. Particularly difficult might be the amount of people on the playground and the different expectations at school compared with home.

The children expressed it was important for younger siblings to adapt to the more rigid structure of the school day. For example, their sibling would have to get used to eating at a prescribed time, being away from parents and asking permission to use the toilet. This was in addition to meeting the behavioural expectations of school, such as following instructions, sitting quietly and completing academic tasks.



RDNE Stock Project



Social communication and emotional development

The children in the focus groups felt grasping core skills in communication and social interaction were important to enabling success at school. One child described his own struggles starting school and not understanding English, saying it was good to **'practise speaking English at home'** first. The children also believed communicating with peers and adults was an important skill to learn. This included having to wait to speak in class instead of shouting out, listening to other children, and having the confidence to speak in larger groups. One child said **'it's important to be able to speak up when making friends'**.



Pavel Damilyuk

The children in the focus groups also emphasised social and emotional development, talking about the importance of being able to have fun, make friends and compromise. One child explained it is important to be able to resolve disagreements on the playground, saying **'If you can't agree on what game to play in the playground you should take turns'**.

To do this effectively children need to learn to regulate their emotions and see things from the other children's perspectives. One child talked specifically about emotional expression linked to communication and the importance of being able to communicate feelings, and suggested to parents, **'You can teach your child to communicate so they can ask for help'**.



How the children felt parents could help with school readiness



Independence in completing practical daily tasks

Also touched upon were issues surrounding practical development. The children expressed the need for greater independence at school than at home. To be school ready, the children felt practical skills like dressing themselves, and eating and using the toilet independently were important. The children commented on how parents could encourage the development these skills, saying **'Parents can help me to learn to eat on my own'** and they could **'help by making sure their children are potty trained'**.

> Modelling of positive behaviour

The primary way children felt parents and carers could prepare their younger siblings for school, was through the modelling of behaviour, and leading by example. Questions such as 'How can your parents help you be polite?' were met with responses such as **'by speaking nicely in the home, showing good manners and treating you nicely'**. Other examples children gave included **'using good language to others'** and **'parents help you learn manners by saying please and thank you'**. This demonstrates that the children felt it was important for younger siblings to develop the skills they might need in the classroom at home.

> Preparation through play and fostering a learning mindset

When asked about how parents could help prepare the children to learn, they spoke about core needs such as good nutrition and getting enough sleep. To develop academic skills the children suggested parents should encourage learning at home. For instance, by **'practising joined up handwriting'** and promoting confidence and encouraging **'believing in yourself when you are struggling with homework'**.

Preparation through play was also mentioned as a tool for acclimatising the children to school routines, such as playing schools and classrooms. One child who had a sibling how struggled to speak, described how their parents tried to expose their sibling to new situations. The parents asked a variety of family members to engage in conversation with the child. This ultimately helped the child gain confidence in speaking to different adults in new environments.



Mariah Cannon

> Emotional support

The children recognised the importance of giving and receiving emotional support in relation to school. The children talked about how parents are key to fostering resilience and self belief. They shared how their parents can **'help me to be brave without them'** and **'help give confidence'**. The children conveyed that it was also important for parents to help with emotional expression. One child commented **'It's good to talk about your emotions because it's better to get it off your chest'**. The same child also shared that it is important to check in with siblings about how their school day went, saying **'It's good to ask them about their day to see if they had fun or not and you can make them feel better'**. This checking in gives children the chance to express themselves and talk about any problems or difficult feelings. This also suggests how the children recognised that they also had a role in supporting their siblings with the transition to school.



It's good to ask them about their day to see if they had fun or not and you can make them feel better"



Pavel Damilyuk



Moving forward

In sum, through the children's focus group discussions we were able to gain a unique insight into what children thought was important to support school readiness. The children were able to narrate their own experience as well as consider the experiences of their younger siblings. These findings not only echo elements of our theoretical framework but the social intelligence of children in recognising how adults can support the development of their siblings.

The children's responses can predominately be broken down into two categories when looking at the Harvard Pillars: **reducing sources of stress** and **building core skills**. Responses relating to the reduction of stress include the importance placed on emotional and social development such as being prepared to spend time in a new environment, and the encouragement of emotional expression. Responses that can be linked to development of core skills include the emphasis the children placed on being able to complete practical tasks independently and have some base of academic knowledge before beginning school.

Overall, one of the main takeaways from the children's focus groups is the importance of helping parents to support their children in a holistic child centred way, considering what it might be like from the child's perspective to be embarking on the major milestone of beginning school. It is important for local authorities to recognise the importance of the transition to school and the turmoil this can cause in the lives of families, and to invest in resources that could help ease the transition to school.

References

1. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2021). *3 Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families: 2021 Update* (p. 16). Harvard University. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/#:~:text=To%20be%20maximally%20effective%2C%20policies,lives%20of%20children%20and%20families>



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