

## Growing Up in Scotland – 2010 – Topic Research Findings

### Growing Up in Scotland: Children's social, emotional and behavioural characteristics at entry to primary school

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#### The Growing Up in Scotland Study

The Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) is an important longitudinal research project aimed at tracking the lives of a cohort of Scottish children from the early years, through childhood and beyond. The study is funded by the Scottish Government and carried out by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen). Its principal aim is to provide information to support policy-making, but it is also intended to be a broader resource that can be drawn on by academics, voluntary sector organisations and other interested parties. Focusing initially on a cohort of 5,217 children aged 0-1 years old (birth cohort) and a cohort of 2,859 children aged 2-3 years old (child cohort), the first wave of fieldwork began in April 2005.

#### Background to the report

This document is one of a series that summarises key findings from the fourth sweep of the survey, which was collected in 2008/09 when children in the birth cohort were aged 3-4 years and those in the child cohort were aged 5-6 years. It presents key findings from the Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) report *Children's social, emotional and behavioural characteristics at entry to primary school*.

Adequate social, emotional and behavioural development is recognised as being central to a child's success at school. Difficulties with inattention, social interaction and emotion regulation can all provoke a poor reaction to the school environment and experience and ultimately lead to more negative school outcomes. The significance of early identification of social and behavioural difficulties is acknowledged by the Scottish Government's Early Years Framework which looks to shift focus from 'crisis interventions' to early years preventative and early intervention work.

This report presents a detailed exploration of children's social, emotional and behavioural development during the early years of their lives up to their entry to primary school. The aim of this report is to explore patterns of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties amongst children in primary one and examine how these are related to early familial experiences and earlier assessments of development in the same domains. This report aims to answer a number of distinct research questions:

- What is the extent and nature of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties among Scottish school children around the age they enter primary one?
- Which children are most likely to have social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties at entry to primary school?
- To what extent are earlier behavioural difficulties predictive of later difficulties?



## The extent and nature of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties

Social, emotional and behavioural development is measured by administration of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a brief behavioural screening questionnaire designed for use with 3-16 year olds. The scale includes 25 questions which are used to measure five aspects of the child's development: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship problems and pro-social behaviour. Scoring information for the SDQ provides a useful, although admittedly rough and ready, method through which individual scores on each of the scales can be classified as normal, borderline or abnormal indicating no, moderate or severe difficulties.

- At the point of entry to primary school the vast majority of children do not present with any social, emotional or behavioural difficulties as measured via the SDQ.
- Amongst the difficulty scales, on all but conduct problems, over 80% of children return scores within the accepted normal range, that is the range in which most children would be expected to score. 73% do so in relation to conduct problems.
- Between 10% and 27% of children are reported by their parents to have behaviour which places them outwith the normal range on any subscale indicating moderate or severe difficulties. These proportions broadly match that which is expected of SDQ scores taken from any community population.
- Conduct problems were the difficulties most prevalent, whereas emotional problems were those least so.

## Patterns of shared difficulties

Cluster analysis was undertaken to explore in what combination and to what extent children exhibit difficulties concurrently across each of the individual domains. The analysis produced 5 clusters (i.e. groupings) of children. The majority of children fell into clusters where behaviour was generally non-problematic. Only two clusters contain children who exhibit a particularly concerning pattern of shared difficulties. Children in one of these clusters have high scores on all of the problem scales with particularly high hyperactivity scores. Children in the other cluster also have higher scores on the problem scales, but with particularly

high emotional symptoms scores. Around one-fifth of children fell into one of these groups.

## Characteristics of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties at primary school entry

Various background characteristics of children were explored to identify the children most likely to score in the borderline or abnormal ranges of each of the SDQ scales at entry to primary school. These factors included socio-demographic, socio-economic, parenting and early child development characteristics.

- The socio-economic characteristics which were related to difficulties at school entry varied according to the subscale being examined. Overall, these characteristics had limited bearing on behavioural difficulties at school entry. Level of household income was the measure most consistently related to behavioural difficulties with children in lower income households at higher risk of difficulties with conduct, emotional development and hyperactivity than those in higher income households.
- Health and development factors (such as general health or early physical development) also affected different behavioural domains in different ways. The condition of the child's general health over the period from age 2 to age 5 was consistently and strongly associated with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties at age of school entry. Children with poorer general health tended to have greater behavioural difficulties than those with better health.
- Delays in motor development at age 2 were associated with having more emotional difficulties at school entry. Delays in language development at age 2 were also statistically significant, being associated with greater difficulties in hyperactivity and peer problems as well as a high score on the total difficulties scale.
- Parenting factors, such as use of particular discipline styles or taking children on social visits, tended to be more related to issues of conduct and hyperactivity. Those children who experienced no shouting or smacking, higher levels of parent-child social interaction, and a higher frequency of social visits were less likely to score in the problem ranges of conduct and hyperactivity scales.

- No statistically significant differences in difficulty scores were found according to differences in children's age at school entry.

## The continuity of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties

GUS has included the SDQ annually in the child cohort questionnaire since sweep 2 (age 3), at which point 99% of children in the cohort were attending some form of pre-school or nursery provision. Analysis was undertaken to explore the relationship between patterns of social development observed at age 3 with those seen at school entry.

- Children's difficult behaviour tends to decrease, and pro-social behaviour increase as they move from the pre- to primary school stage, although the changes are small.
- Emotional problems show a small increase between pre-school and entry to primary. Around two-thirds (65%) of the 123 children with emotional symptoms scores in the abnormal range at school entry had scored in the normal range at pre-school.
- There is a strong correlation between a child's total difficulties scores at pre-school and primary school suggesting that the particular social, emotional and behavioural characteristics which children exhibit at pre-school remain, for the most part, at the point they start primary school.
- Almost half of all children (47%) whose total difficulties score at pre-school was in the abnormal range also had a score in the abnormal range at school entry.
- There were no significant differences in mean SDQ scores between entry to primary one and entry to primary two indicating that children's social and behavioural characteristics remain more similar over the first two years of primary school than they do in the period from pre-school into primary school and that those children who have difficulties in relation to social, emotional and behavioural development at entry to primary school tend to still have them at entry to primary two.

## Conclusion

The findings have a number of important implications. The first is that, whilst the majority of children display no problematic behaviour at school entry, a significant minority showed mild or severe difficulties. Those who displayed the most problematic behaviour often had higher than average difficulties in several domains although their core difficulty was different – one being hyperactivity, the other emotional symptoms. Each of these core difficulties was shown to have a different developmental pathway. Difficulties with hyperactivity/inattention were considerably more likely to have been present at age 3 and persist through to school entry. Emotional difficulties, in contrast, had a greater likelihood of developing between pre-school and entry to primary school. These children are likely to respond to the transition to school, and the early and continuing school experience in different ways. Earlier research has shown that children with hyperactivity and conduct difficulties in particular, may find it difficult to adapt to the educational and social constraints of the classroom impacting on their adjustment, further behaviour and later attainment. Given the often long-term nature of these difficulties, it appears there would be benefit to early screening, in the preliminary pre-school period for example, of these behaviours and their patterns of co-occurrence. Those children displaying difficulties matching the most problematic groupings could, along with their parents, be provided with the necessary support to manage and improve such difficulties. Furthermore, a more tailored transition process to ensure that moving into the school environment does not encourage deterioration of behaviour may be advisable.

Further information on the Growing Up in Scotland Study can also be found at: [www.growingupinscotland.org.uk](http://www.growingupinscotland.org.uk)

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