

## Growing Up in Scotland – Sweep 2 – Topic Research Findings

### Experiences of pre-school education

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. 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 and a cohort of 2,859 children aged 2-3 years old, the first wave of fieldwork began in April 2005. This document is one of a series that summarise key findings from the second sweep of the survey which was launched in April 2006. At the second sweep, interviews were successfully completed with 4,512 respondents from the birth cohort and 2,500 from the child cohort.

#### Methods

GUS is based on a cohort or longitudinal design involving the recruitment of a 'panel' of children (and their families) who will be revisited on a number of occasions over an extended period of time. Members of the panel were identified in the first instance from Child Benefit records. For the second year of the study, interviews were sought with the person who had responded at sweep 1. In virtually all cases (98%), this proved to be the child's mother. As well as the main interview, at sweep 2, interviews were also undertaken with the resident partner of the main respondent, where applicable. A total of 2,975 partner's interviews were successfully completed in the birth cohort and 1,541 in the child cohort. As well as information on pre-school, the main interview also collected data on food and nutrition, parenting, childcare, child health and development and local neighbourhood.

This report summarises findings from sweep 2 on children's experiences of pre-school education. Since 2002, the Scottish Government has provided free part-time pre-school early education places for 3 and 4 year-old children in Scotland<sup>1</sup>. Children in the older GUS cohort were aged 46.5 months (just under 4) at sweep 2. They were thus all eligible to attend one of these free pre-school education places. The sweep 2 questionnaire included a range of questions designed to explore children's and parents' experiences of pre-school education, covering:

- take-up and type of pre-school provision used
- information and advice needed/sought
- support required/received with adjusting to pre-school
- their child's early feelings about pre-school, and
- perceptions of their child's 'readiness' to start pre-school.

<sup>1</sup> This initiative was introduced under a previous Scottish Executive administration.



## Main Findings

- The vast majority – 94% – of children aged just under 4 are attending a pre-school education place.
- Using data on pre-school attendance in combination with data about childcare, we can estimate that 85% are attending pre-school places provided via local authority nurseries, nursery classes or playgroups, compared with 15% whose pre-school places are provided via a private nursery or playgroup.
- Six in ten parents had sought some kind of advice or support before enrolling their child in pre-school, most commonly from pre-school staff themselves. Respondents were more likely to seek advice or support if the sample child was their first born. More highly educated respondents were also more likely than those without qualifications to have sought advice.
- Only a minority of parents (8%) felt they or their child had needed support adjusting to pre-school, and the majority of those who needed it felt they had received it (again, primarily from pre-school staff themselves).
- Eight in ten parents say their child said good things about pre-school at least once a week in their first 3 months. Only a small proportion of parents report that their child regularly said things that might indicate difficulties with their pre-school place during the first two months.
- While the majority of parents had no or few concerns about their child's readiness to start a pre-school place, a substantial minority had some concerns, particularly around whether their child would find being apart from them difficult and whether the child would be reluctant to go.
- Parents of boys and those who had only used informal childcare at sweep 1 were more likely both to say that their child had said things about pre-school that might indicate difficulties and to have some concerns about their child's readiness for pre-school.

## Overview of pre-school attendance

The vast majority – 94% – of our child cohort were attending a pre-school place at the time of their sweep 2 interview, with 79% of the remainder planning on starting within the next year. Across Scotland, the most commonly attended pre-school place was a nursery class or department attached to a primary school (53%) followed by separate nursery schools (35%). However, there were variations by area, with use of playgroups higher in small remote towns and remote rural areas relative to more urban areas.

Local Authorities have flexibility to deliver statutory free early education places using a mix of public and private providers. GUS results suggest that overall around 85% were attending local authority pre-school places, while 15% were receiving their early education at a private provider. Use of private pre-school providers was highest in large urban areas (20%) and lowest in remote rural areas (8%).

**Table 1 Whether use state or private pre-school provider by area urban/rural classification**

	Urban-Rural classification						
	Large urban	Other urban	Small accessible town	Small remote town	Accessible rural	Remote rural	All
State	79.7	88.1	87.3	85.8	84.4	91.8	84.7
Private	20.3	11.9	12.7	14.2	15.6	8.2	15.3
<i>Bases (All attending a pre-school place)</i>							
<i>Weighted</i>	842	739	261	66	328	112	2361
<i>Unweighted</i>	771	727	272	75	370	136	2362

## Reasons for enrolling in pre-school

The most common reason parents give for enrolling a child with their pre-school provider is so that they can socialise or make friends with other children (58%), followed by seeing pre-school as preparation for primary school (30%) and as beneficial for educational development (24%). Around one in ten (12%) say they enrolled their child in pre-school to allow themselves to work or study, with respondents in managerial and professional occupations more likely than those in routine and semi-routine occupations to cite this as a reason.

## Advice and support needs

Six out of ten parents sought some kind of advice or support before enrolling their child in pre-school – most commonly from pre-school staff (32%) or friends (31%), less commonly from other professionals, like GPs, health visitors or others (11%), local authority education staff (7%), other childcarers (5%) and social or community workers (1%) (Table 2).

**Table 2 Sources of advice and information looked for before enrolling child in pre-school**

	%
I didn't look for advice or information	39.6
Pre-school staff (e.g. nursery or playgroup staff)	32.1
Friends	31.3
Other professionals (e.g. GPs, health visitors, etc.)	10.5
Respondents'/partners' parents or grandparents	9.1
Respondents'/partners' siblings or cousins	7.5
Local authority education department staff	7.2
Other childcarers (e.g. childminders)	4.7
Internet	4.5
Books, magazines or newspapers	2.2
Social workers or community workers	1.1
Other	2.8
<i>Bases (All attending a pre-school place)</i>	
<i>Weighted base</i>	2360
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2361

Parents whose child was their first born were more likely to have sought advice than those who had older children (75% compared with 46%). Those who were *not* using childcare at sweep 1 of the survey were relatively *less* likely to seek advice about the move to pre-school – a fact probably explained by the fact that those who do not use childcare are

less likely to have qualifications, and education is strongly associated with propensity to seek advice.

Just 8% said they or their child had needed support with adjusting to pre-school. Among this relatively small group, 90% felt they had received enough support at the time – most commonly from pre-school staff again (77% of those who needed support).

## Feelings about pre-school in the first 2 months

Attending pre-school appears to be a positive experience for most three year-olds. Parents report that 81% of children said good things about pre-school more than once a week while the same proportion looked forward to going. Although overall the proportion indicating their child had said anything which might indicate difficulties was small, parents of boys were slightly more likely than parents of girls to say their child had complained about their pre-school place (32% vs. 25%) or expressed reluctance to go (37% vs 29%). Parents who were using informal childcare only at sweep 1 were also more likely to say their child had indicated some problems – perhaps suggesting that the move to pre-school can be more challenging for children without prior experience of formal early years settings.

## Parental perceptions of 'readiness' for pre-school

The majority of parents did not appear to have any concerns about their child's readiness for pre-school – e.g. 82% disagreed they were worried their child was not independent enough to cope at pre-school. However, a significant minority did indicate some concerns, with three in ten (31%) agreeing they were worried their child might find being apart from them too difficult. Again, parents of boys and parents who had not used formal childcare at Sweep 1 were slightly more likely to express concerns. Further, those who were not working expressed more concerns on average than those in employment (full-time or part-time). Of course, these questions only measure parents' perceptions of their child's readiness, which may in some cases relate more to parental anxieties rather than 'objective' problems with the child's readiness. That said, understanding parental feelings about their child starting pre-school is still important in terms of targeting appropriate support to parents.

## Conclusion

Overall, the vast majority of parents take up the free pre-school provision available to them and our findings suggest they support the aims of this provision. The transition to pre-school does not appear to be problematic for most children and parents, and the minority who need support appear to receive it – usually from pre-school staff themselves. The findings highlight the importance of pre-school staff from pre-enrolment, through the transition to

pre-school and beyond. This may provide opportunities to target support at the most vulnerable families. Other issues raised by these findings that could be explored in more detail in future analyses include reasons why a minority of parents seem to have concerns about their child's readiness for pre-school and why this is more common among parents of boys.

If you wish further copies of this Research Findings or have any queries about the GUS project, please contact:

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