

**INFANT  
COHORT**

AT 5 YEARS  
NOV 2013



**Growing Up  
in Ireland**

National Longitudinal  
Study of Children

# GROWING UP IN IRELAND

## KEY FINDINGS: INFANT COHORT (at 5 years)

### NO. 1 TRANSITION TO SCHOOL AMONG FIVE-YEAR-OLDS

#### INTRODUCTION

This is the first in a series of *Key Findings* from the third wave of interviews with the Infant Cohort in *Growing Up in Ireland*. The families of around 11,100 children were initially interviewed in 2008/2009 when the Study Children were nine months old. They were re-interviewed between January and August 2011 when the children were three years of age, and between March and September 2013, when the children were five years old. This Key Finding presents descriptive information on the child's transition to primary school.

Starting school is a very important milestone for the developing child. Primary school plays an important role in the child's life and can have a substantial impact not only on their educational development but also on their emotional and social well-being.



## STARTING PRIMARY SCHOOL

**A large percentage of children started school in September 2012, though the percentage declined for children born after April 2008, especially for those from advantaged families, who were more likely to defer starting school until September 2013.**

In Ireland, by law, children must have started primary school by six years of age. There is no minimum age for starting but few start before they are four years old.

Children in the Infant Cohort in *Growing Up in Ireland* were born between 1st December 2007 and 30th June 2008. The start of school is dependent on the birth month and hence the age of the child in September when school commences each year.

- The percentage of children starting school is strongly linked to month of birth. Table 1 shows that 98% of those born in December 2007 started in September 2012, aged 4 years 9 months. The percentage dropped progressively to 34% of those born in June 2008. These children were 4 years 3 months in September 2012. The drop is most noticeable for children born in April 2008 or later.
- The table shows, for example, that 47% of children born in May 2008 started school in September 2012, the remainder deferring to September 2013. It is clear from the figures that deferring school start seems to be more common among more advantaged families. While two-thirds of the children born to the lowest-income families in May 2008 had started school in September 2012 (aged 4 years 4 months), only about a third of their counterparts in the highest-income families had done so.

**Table 1: Proportion of children by month of birth who had started school in September 2012, and their school starting age – broken down by family income**

	Month of birth						
	Dec '07	Jan '08	Feb '08	Mar '08	Apr '08	May '08	June '08
Age in Sept 2012 (yr: mths)	(4:9)	(4:8)	(4:7)	(4:6)	(4:5)	(4:4)	(4:3)
Started School Sept 2012	98%	93%	91%	80%	70%	47%	34%
<b>Family Income</b>	<i>Percentage of children who had started school</i>						
Quintile One (Low)	98%	95%	94%	77%	76%	62%	52%
Quintile Two	99%	93%	92%	84%	76%	49%	37%
Quintile Three	99%	88%	94%	83%	69%	44%	29%
Quintile Four	99%	95%	93%	76%	61%	45%	32%
Quintile Five (High)	97%	97%	86%	84%	64%	38%	23%

*The remainder of this Key Finding focuses exclusively on the children who started school in September 2012.*

## SCHOOL REGISTRATION

**Early and multiple registration of children for primary school was more likely among more highly educated parents.**

- About one-tenth of families registered their child as early as the year in which they were born but over half waited until the year the child started school<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1).
- 57% of mothers with the lowest level of educational attainment (Junior Certificate or less) registered their child in the year in which he/she started school. This compares to 47% of mothers with the highest level of education (Degree) (Figure 1).



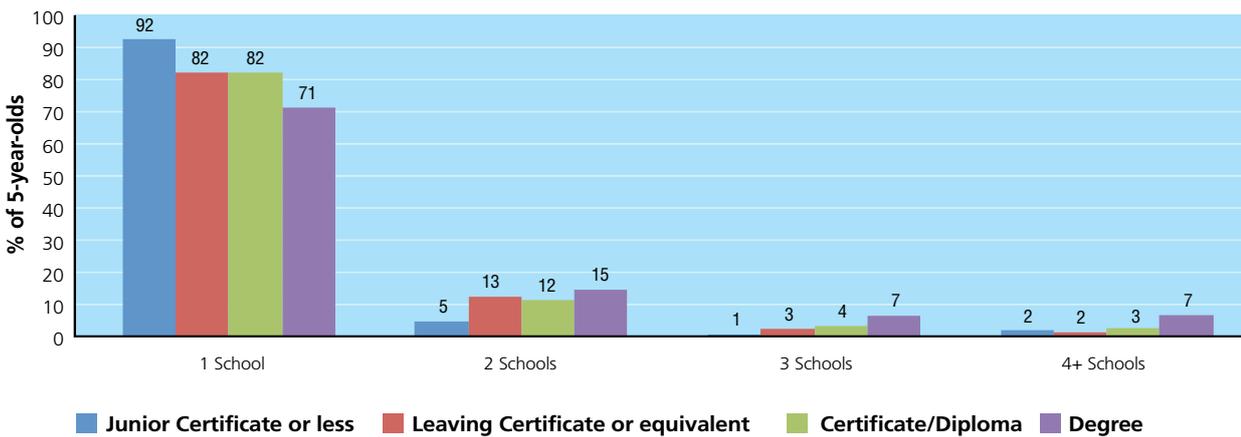
<sup>1</sup> Date of registration may be affected by individual school policies on when registration opens for potential incoming students.

**Figure 1: Year of school registration by mother's education**



- Most parents registered their child in only one school but 19% of parents said that they had registered their five-year-old in more than one primary school. Multiple registration was much more common among more socially advantaged families. Figure 2 shows, for example, that 92% of children whose mothers had a Junior Certificate or less had been registered in only one school compared with 71% of the children whose mothers had a degree.

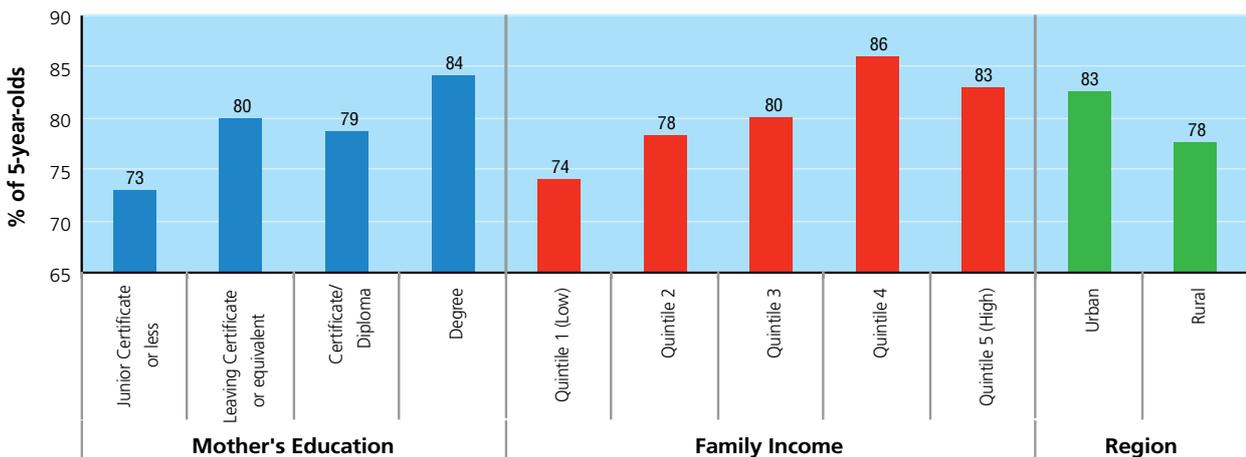
**Figure 2: Number of schools in which child was enrolled, by mother's education**



## SCHOOL CHOICE

- Overall, 80% of parents reported that they had a choice about which school their child attended. This was strongly related to mother's education, family income and whether the family lived in an urban or rural area, as shown in Figure 3.

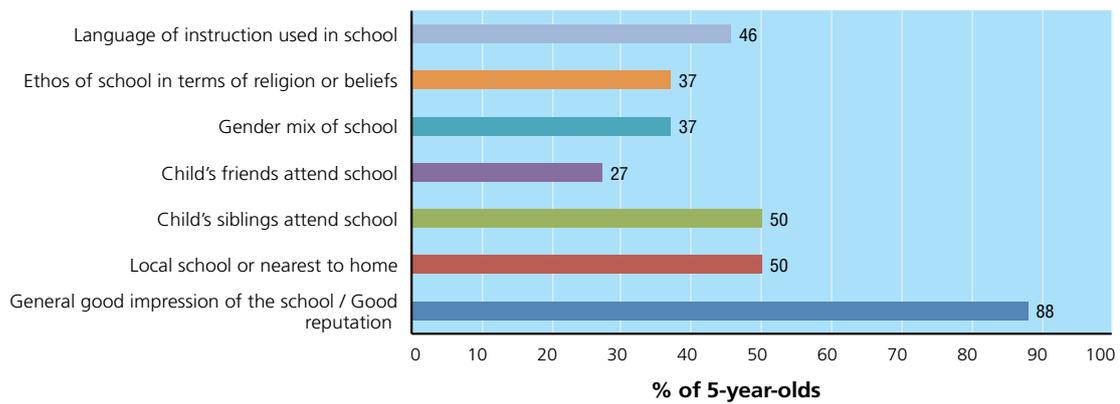
**Figure 3: Percentage of parents reporting they had a choice about which school their child would go to by mother's education, family income and region**



Parents who said they had a choice of school were presented with a list of seven factors which could have affected their choice. They were asked to indicate how important each was in their choice of school. They were asked to indicate if each was *very important*, *somewhat important* or *not at all important*.

- The most important factor in choosing between schools was a *general good impression or reputation of the school* – 88% (Figure 4).
- *Proximity to home* (50%), *siblings attending the same school* (50%) and *language of instruction* (46%) were other important factors which affected choice.

Figure 4: Factors affecting school choice reported as being 'very important'



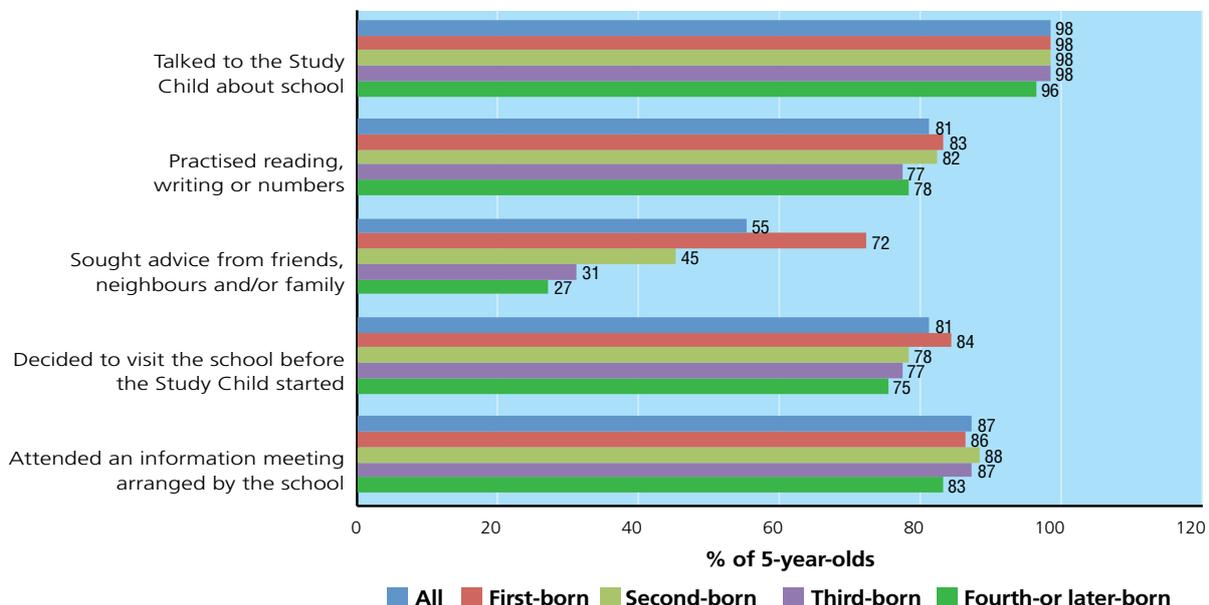
## PREPARING FOR SCHOOL

Most parents undertook a range of activities with their children to help them prepare for the transition to primary school. This was especially evident with first-born children.

- There was a high level of participation by parents in a wide range of activities to prepare their child for school (Figure 5).
- Parents were more likely to seek advice and visit the school in the case of first-born children.

- Parents were more likely to practise reading, writing or numbers with first-born children: 83% of parents of first-born children did so, compared to 78% where the Study Child was the fourth or later-born child (Figure 5). This relationship held even when mother's education was taken into account.
- The birth order of the child (whether they were first-born or had older siblings) was not associated with whether or not parents talked to their child to prepare them for school or if they attended an information meeting arranged by the school.

Figure 5: Percentage of parents undertaking activities with children to prepare them for starting school by child's birth order



## ADJUSTING TO SCHOOL

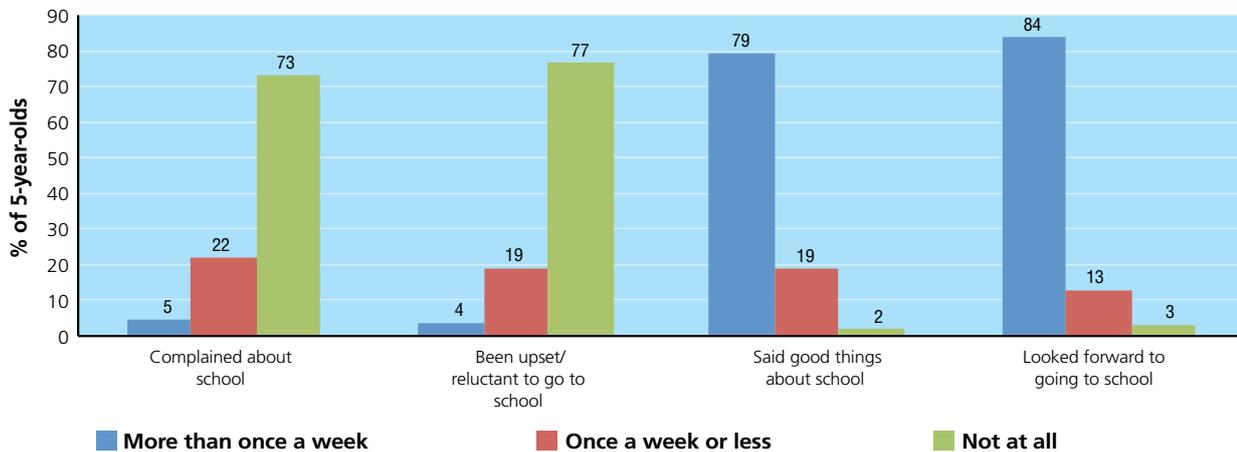
The majority of parents reported that their children had adjusted well to school. A small proportion of children complained about school or were reluctant to go to school more than once a week. Girls were more positive about school than boys.

All children who had started school in September 2012 had been in school for at least seven months when their parents were asked how they had adjusted to it.

- In general, children were reported as having a positive attitude towards school.
- The majority of children did not complain about school (73% – *not at all*), but 5% complained about school *more than once a week* (Figure 6).

- Similarly, most children were not upset or reluctant to go to school (77% – *not at all*), with 4% upset or reluctant to go to school *more than once a week* (Figure 6).
- 79% of children said good things about school *more than once a week* and 84% looked forward *more than once a week* to going to school (Figure 6).
- Girls appeared to be more engaged with school at this early age. They were less likely than boys to complain or be reluctant to go to school, and were more likely to say good things about school, and to look forward to going to school.

Figure 6: How children were adjusting to school



## FREE PRESCHOOL YEAR

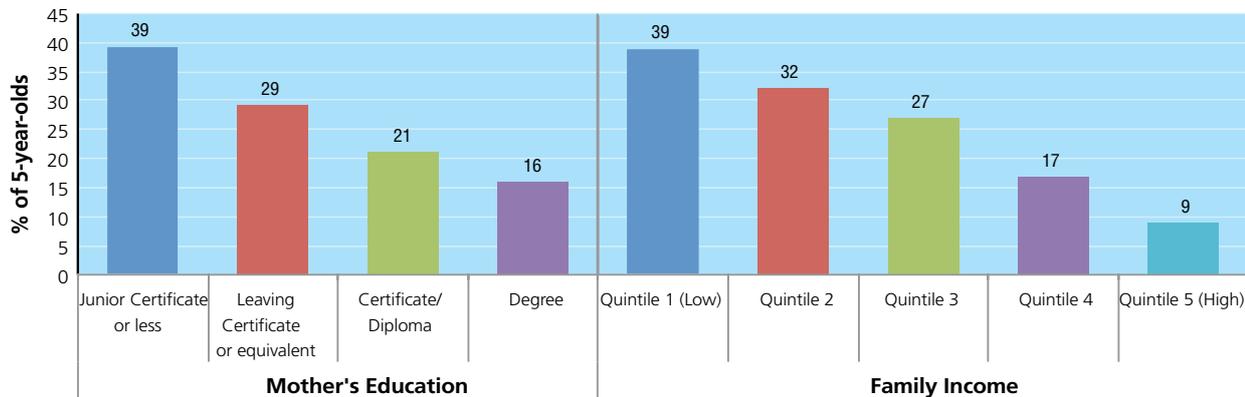
The vast majority of parents availed of the Free Preschool Year. Approximately 25% of families said they would not have been able to send their child to preschool in the absence of the scheme.

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme (known as the 'Free Preschool Year') started in 2010. All children aged between 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months on 1st September are entitled to free preschool care for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week, over 38 weeks. This is a free benefit available to all children.

- 95% of children who started school in September 2012 had availed of the Free Preschool Year.
- The main reasons reported for not availing of the scheme related to the child already attending a different childcare setting, and unavailability of suitable free preschool places.

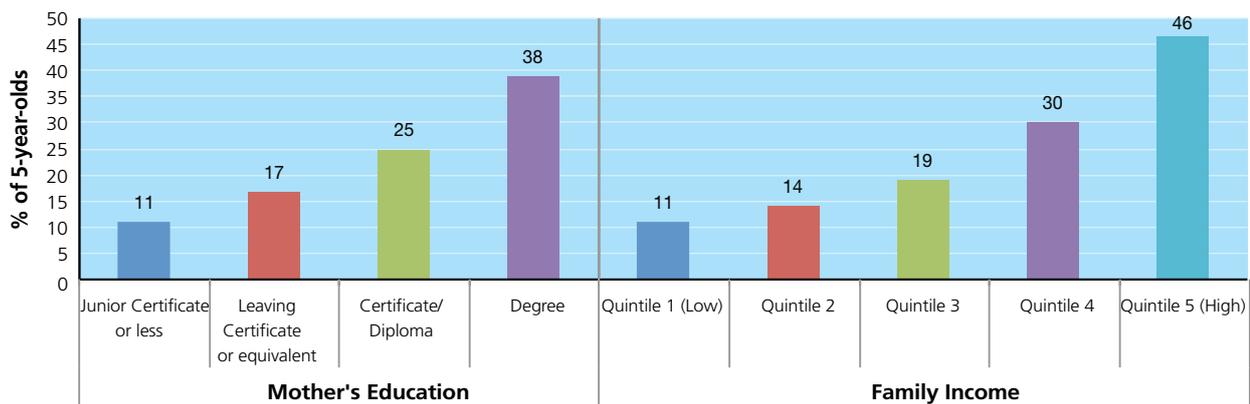
- One in four parents (25%) who availed of the Free Preschool Year reported that they would not have been able to send their child to preschool had it not been for the scheme.
- Less advantaged parents were more likely to report that they would not have been able to send their child to preschool without the scheme. For example, 39% of families in the lowest income quintile said they would not have been able to send their child to preschool had it not been for the Free Preschool Year compared to 9% of those in the highest income group (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Percentage of parents who said they would not have been able to send their child to preschool without the Free Preschool Year, by mother's education and family income**



- One-quarter of parents paid to top up the free three hours per day available under the Free Preschool Year scheme with more hours in the same setting.
- Advantaged families were more likely to top up the free preschool hours; 46% of the highest income families did so compared to 11% of families in the lowest income group (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Percentage of parents who "topped up" the free 3 hours per day, by mother's education and family income**



**Parents with higher levels of education were more likely to use *Montessori* and less likely to use *Preschool* settings for the Free Preschool Year. Overall, parents rated highly the quality of the childcare received.**

Parents were asked to indicate from a list of five types of Preschool Year setting which type of facility they had used for their child. *Preschool* is a generic term used to describe a range of setting types providing childcare/early learning opportunities to children under six years of age who are not attending a primary school. *Montessori* is a specific curriculum approach used in preschools where staff are specially trained to deliver the Montessori method of education using a specially prepared environment and materials. *Crèche* is a term used to describe full daycare settings as opposed to part-time services

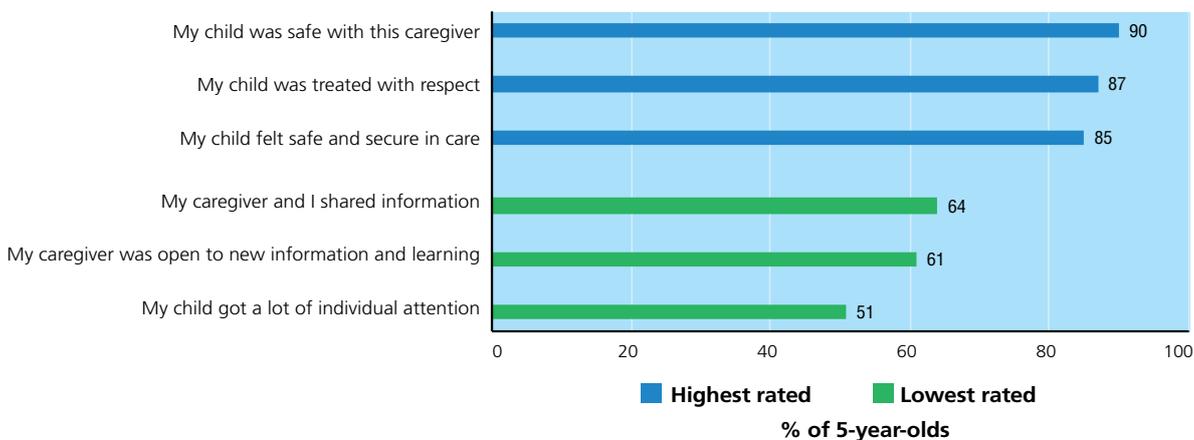
which are more likely to be offered in *Playgroups*. Finally, *Naíonraí* are Irish-language preschools.

- *Preschool* and *Montessori* were the most commonly used settings (37% and 36%), followed by *Crèche* (11%), and *Playgroup* (11%). *Naíonraí* was the least commonly used setting (6%).
- More highly educated mothers (with a degree) were more likely to choose *Montessori* (46%) than less educated parents (22%).
- Mothers who completed their education with a Junior Certificate or less were more likely to choose *Preschool* (48%) than mothers with a degree (24%).

Mothers were asked to assess the quality of the facility in which their five-year-old had spent the Free Preschool Year, by indicating whether or not each of 18 attributes was *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *often* or *always* characteristic of the facility.

- Overall, mothers rated the quality of childcare highly, though some aspects were rated more highly than others. Figure 9 shows the three aspects of care which were rated highest (blue) and the three rated lowest (green).
- The majority of parents reported that they felt their child was safe and treated with respect in the care facility which they use.
- Although still rated quite highly (by over 50% of parents), issues around information-sharing and individual attention for the child received lower parental ratings in terms of quality of care.

**Figure 9: Parent rating of quality of childcare setting – percentage who answered *Always* to each statement**



## SUMMARY

Parents showed a high degree of interest in ensuring that their child got a good start in school, by registering them in a school which they felt had a good reputation and which was close to their home. Most parents also engaged in a variety of activities to prepare their child for the transition, and enrolled their child in the Free Preschool Year scheme. Most children appeared to adapt to formal education and to have a positive view of school.

Over half (53%) of the children who had started school in September 2012 had been registered in 2012. A total of 11% had been registered in the year in which they were born. Early registration was more common among children whose mothers had a higher level of education.

A total of 80% of mothers said they had had a choice in deciding which school their child attended. The key factor for choosing the school was *good impression or reputation of the school*. *Language of instruction*, *proximity to home* and *siblings attending the same school* were among other important factors which affected school choice.

A large percentage of parents engaged in a range of activities to prepare their child for school. This was especially the case with first-born children. A substantial majority of children appeared to have settled well into school and to have had a positive attitude towards it. However, 5% of children complained about it *more than once a week*. Gender differences were evident at five years of age; girls were more positive about school than boys.

There was a very high take-up of the Free Preschool Year scheme (95%). Most significantly, one in four families who had availed of it said they would not have been able to provide preschool for their child had it not been for the scheme. This rose to more than one in three among more disadvantaged families.

This Key Finding gives a first glimpse of how children are transitioning to primary school. Longitudinal analysis with future waves of data can be used to examine how these early experiences influence later school experiences and academic outcomes.



*Growing Up in Ireland* is the National Longitudinal Study of Children. It tracks the development of two nationally representative cohorts of children: an Infant Cohort, interviewed initially at nine months and subsequently at three and five years of age, and a Child Cohort, interviewed initially at nine years of age and subsequently at 13.

The study is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, in association with the Department of Social Protection and the Central Statistics Office. It is being carried out by a consortium of researchers led by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD).

The first wave of fieldwork with the families of the Infant Cohort involved around 11,100 nine-month-olds, their parents and carers. Interviews began in September 2008 and were completed in March 2009. The second wave of interviews with this cohort (at three years of age) took place between January and August 2011, and the third wave of interviews (at five years of age) was completed between March and September 2013. The response rates in both the second and third waves were 90%.

#### **Access to *Growing Up in Ireland* data**

An anonymised version of all quantitative and qualitative data collected in *Growing Up in Ireland* is being made available through the Irish Social Science Data Archive (ISSDA)

(<http://www.ucd.ie/issda/data/growingupinireland/>)

and the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA)

(<http://www.iqda.ie/content/growing-ireland>).

#### **Thank you to all participants**

The success of *Growing Up in Ireland* is the result of contributions from a large range of individuals, organisations and groups, many of whom helped to recruit the sample and collect the data. We are particularly grateful to the thousands of families from every part of the country who gave so generously of their time on three occasions to make this study possible. A very big 'thank you' to the children and their families.

(The figures presented in this Key Finding are purely descriptive. They do not control for potential interactions or confounding effects. All figures are preliminary and may be subject to change.)

[www.growingup.ie](http://www.growingup.ie)



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