

# Is the availability and quality of local early childhood education and care services associated with young children's mental health at school entry?

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**Purpose:** This study investigated availability and quality of local early childhood education and care services and cross-sectional associations with mental health outcomes for all children entering their first year of full-time school in Melbourne, Australia.

**Methods:** We capitalise on a population linked dataset, the Australian Early Development Census –Built Environment, which combines geospatial measures of children's neighbourhoods with demographic information and child mental health outcomes for all school entrants in 21 Australian cities. We analysed data for all children in Melbourne (approximately 50,000 children), stratified by urbanicity (inner, middle, outer and growth areas). Objective early childhood education and care service location and quality exposures were developed for each study child based on home address. Four availability exposures (counts within 3km from home) were examined for associations with mental health outcomes using multilevel logistic regression, adjusting for demographics and stratifying by urbanicity.

**Results:** Children with higher counts of high-quality preschool services within 3km of home had lower odds of difficulties and higher odds of competence, compared with children with fewer high-quality preschool services available. Associations were not uniform across Melbourne's urbanicity strata and results varied depending on whether service quality was accounted for in availability measures.

**Conclusion:** We found some evidence that availability of high-quality preschools was associated with better child mental health outcomes, but results varied by urbanicity. Future research should unpack these nuances. There is also a need to develop datasets which combine information on early years service attendance, quality, and geographic availability to better quantify exposure.

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