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MEDIA RELEASE

Two years of funded kindergarten boosts children's outcomes, Victorian study finds

Every child deserves a strong start to their learning. Victoria's landmark universal three-year-old kindergarten reform is delivering just that. New findings from a major study at University of Melbourne's Faculty of Education have revealed that children who receive two years of funded kindergarten compared to one year have an additional five-months of progress in language development and two to three-months of progress in memory and problem-solving skills by the time they begin school.

The initial findings from the Educational and Developmental Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) Study provide some of the first Australian evidence on the impact of two years of quality early learning prior to formal schooling.

The five-year study, led by the University of Melbourne in partnership with The Front Project and supported by the Victorian Department of Education, is examining whether providing children with two years of kindergarten leads to better learning and development outcomes than one year of funded kindergarten.

Funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation and The Ian Potter Foundation, the study has involved 149 early childhood services across Victoria and collected data from approximately 2,200 children, their teachers and families.

Researchers found children who received 15 hours a week of funded three-year old kindergarten had better language and problem-solving skills by the time they started school compared with children who did not receive funded three-year-old kindergarten.

Professor Tricia Eadie, lead researcher of EDGE and Director of the REEaCh (Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood) Centre at the University of Melbourne, said the findings provide important evidence about the benefits of giving children an additional year of high-quality early learning.

"The EDGE study adds robust, contemporary evidence that early childhood education is a critical investment in children's futures," said Professor Eadie. "These are meaningful developmental advantages that matter from day one in the classroom. What's encouraging is that these findings come about from accessible, funded early learning that's available to all families."

The EDGE Study is one of the largest Australian evaluations of three-year-old kindergarten and is the first Australian study of its kind to combine child outcome data with detailed information about children's actual kindergarten attendance and the quality of programs they experience.

Researchers have collected detailed attendance data from participating services, allowing them to examine the relationship between the amount of kindergarten children actually attended and their learning and development outcomes.

The research also highlights the importance of the quality of the kindergarten programs, not simply whether children are enrolled.

The study's definition of high-quality early childhood education focuses on the quality of everyday interactions between educators and children and between children themselves – including responsive, sensitive and warm interactions, as well as play-based and intentional learning. Researchers found that a services National Quality rating and location, along with teacher experience, were important factors in program quality.

“The EDGE findings underscore that the presence of experienced, skilled educators is what transforms kindergarten programs into quality learning environments,” said Professor Eadie. “This means that quality can happen everywhere if we invest in our early childhood workforce — their qualifications, their experience, and their ongoing professional support.”

The findings are particularly significant as Victoria continues its rollout of funded three-year-old kindergarten and other major early childhood reforms.

Researchers say the next step is to examine whether the benefits are experienced equally across different groups of children and whether participation in two years of kindergarten could reduce existing inequalities.

The study's qualitative research has also captured the perspectives of early childhood teachers, service leaders, families and other stakeholders involved in the rollout. Teachers reported valuing the opportunity to have their experiences heard, highlighting the importance of involving the early childhood sector in the design and implementation of major reforms.

Dr Caroline Croser-Barlow, CEO of the Front Project said “Victoria's experience shows that three-year-old kindergarten is a wise investment for governments. This study charts the roadmap for other states and territories as they roll out, or consider rolling out, two years of kindergarten. Fund the workforce and conditions, alongside the places, so children get the full benefit of a high-quality program.”

The EDGE Study team will continue analysing linked data to strengthen the findings and examine longer-term outcomes, with approval to link the research data to measures including NAPLAN and the School Entry Health Questionnaire. Economic analysis is also planned as part of the study's final outputs in 2027.

Professor Eadie presented the initial EDGE Study findings at the Faculty of Education's annual Jenny Leaper Lecture in Early Childhood Education last night.

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