What is the aim of this review?
This Campbell systematic review examines the effects of school and centre-based education programmes on school readiness, compared to no treatment or treatment as usual. The review summarizes evidence from 32 studies.

What studies are included?
We found 32 studies involving 16,899 children aged three to seven years old. Four studies compared centre-based early education interventions with no treatment. Twenty-two trials compared an enriched school curriculum to treatment as usual. The largest study was in 3,726 children and the smallest study was in 59 children.

Centre-based early education programmes may have little to no effect on school readiness

Centre-based early education programmes for improving school readiness probably make little to no difference to children receiving either no programme or a standard curriculum.

What is this review about?
In many parts of the world, children are legally obliged to attend school at a particular age. The age at which compulsory education begins can range between three and seven years. Being ready for school could have life-long benefits.

School readiness covers elements of a child’s development that promote learning such as positive behaviour, emotional well-being, social skills and intelligence. Interventions can foster play and sharing, listening skills and emotional regulation which all help contribute to a positive learning environment.

We wanted to find out if attending a centre-based early education programme for school readiness was better than not attending any programme or receiving a standard pre-school programme.

We found evidence for:
- school readiness (two studies involving 374 children)
- cognitive development (four studies involving 497 children)
- emotional well-being and social competence (15 studies involving 5,438 children)
- health development (one study involving 142 children)
- physical development (one study involving 334 children).

This systematic review found very low, low and moderate certainty evidence.
Studies were conducted around the world, mostly in the USA (28 studies).

Studies, on average, lasted for 12 months; the longest trial lasted six years. The US federal government funded most studies.

What are the main findings of this review?
Centre-based interventions may have little to no effect on school readiness but we are very uncertain about the results. We have very low, low and moderate confidence in the evidence for a number of reasons:

- It is possible that people in the studies were aware of which treatment they were getting.
- The studies used different ways of delivering the intervention.
- Not all of the studies provided data about everything that we were interested in. The evidence focused on specific academic outcomes whereas the question we wanted to answer was broader, and
- There are not enough studies to be certain about the results of our outcomes.

What do the findings of the review mean?
Future studies should consider how best to measure school readiness, and over a longer timeframe. There should be more studies conducted in countries other than the USA.

How up-to-date is this review?
The review authors searched for studies up to October 2021.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?
Campbell is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary

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