



INFANT  
COHORT



**Growing Up**  
**in Ireland**  
National Longitudinal  
Study of Children

# GROWING UP IN IRELAND

## KEY FINDINGS: INFANT COHORT AT 7/8 YEARS

### NO. 3 SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT, RELATIONSHIPS AND PLAY

#### INTRODUCTION

This is the third in a series of *Key Findings* from the fourth wave of data collection from the Infant Cohort in *Growing Up in Ireland*.

The families of just over 11,100 infants were first interviewed between September 2008 and March 2009, when the child at the centre of the study was 9 months old. They were re-interviewed when the child was 3 years old and again at 5 years of age. In 2016, a fourth wave of data was collected from the child's primary caregiver (mainly their mother<sup>1</sup>), through a postal survey when the child was 7/8 years old.

This *Key Finding* focuses on reports of children's socio-emotional development and their behaviour, social skills, family relationships and play activities. Children's progress in developing social and emotional skills is important for coping with relationships at school and at home, as well as being an important part of their overall well-being.



<sup>1</sup> As almost all Primary Caregivers were the child's mother they will be referred to collectively as 'mothers' in this *Key Finding*.

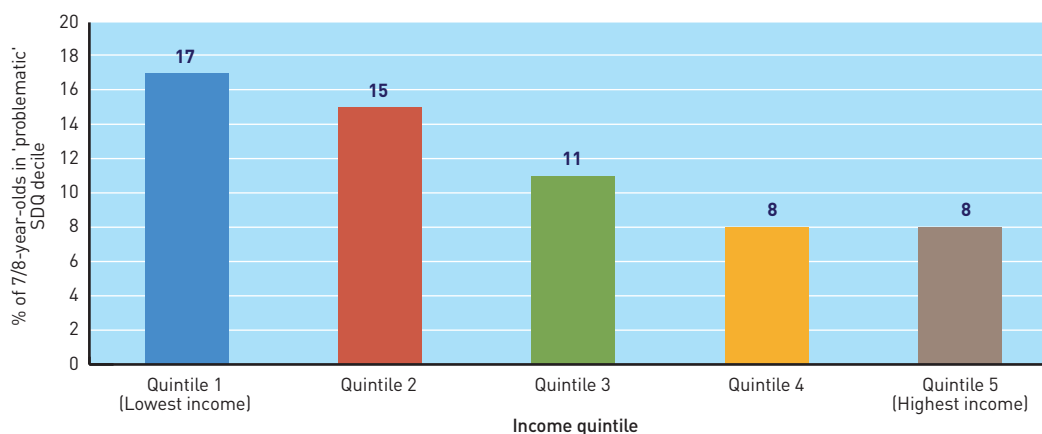
## EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL WELL-BEING

### MOST CHILDREN AT 7/8 YEARS WERE DOING WELL IN THEIR SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A set of questions called the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used to collect information from mothers on the child's socio-emotional development and behaviour. Typically children in the highest 10% (decile) of the SDQ 'total difficulties' score (which includes questions on conduct, hyperactivity, emotionality and peer interactions) have more problems in these areas compared to other children and are likely to be at a significantly increased risk of socio-emotional problems.

At age 7/8 years, boys were much more likely to have a high total difficulties score with 15% of them being in the top decile compared to 8% of girls. More children from more socio-economically disadvantaged families had high scores, although there were some children with problems in every income group. Figure 1 shows that 17% of children in low income families<sup>2</sup> had a 'problematic' SDQ score in the top decile compared to 8% among the higher-income families.

**Figure 1: Percentage of 7/8-year-olds in each family income group with a score in the 'problematic' or highest SDQ total difficulties decile (10%)**

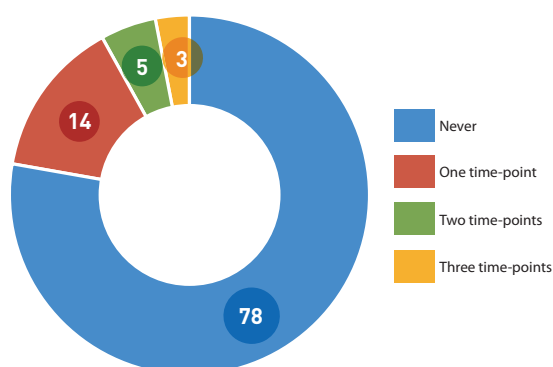


Mothers in low income families were more likely to report difficulties with their child's socio-emotional development

Children who had difficulties when they were younger were more likely to have problems later. Half of the children who had a high total difficulties score (in the 'problematic' decile) at age 5, had a high score again at age 7/8 years. Only 7% who were *not* in the 'problematic' decile when they were 5 years old had a high score when they were 7/8 years. While only a small number of children (just over 4%) had a high difficulties score at 3 years *as well as* 5 years, almost two-thirds of this group (64%) went on to have another high score at 7/8 years.

Overall, 3% of children were in the 'problematic' total difficulties decile at all three ages (3, 5 and 7/8 years) and 78% never had a high score (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Persistence of being in the 'problematic' SDQ total difficulties decile (10%) over time – 3, 5 and 7/8 years**



**3%** of children had emotional or behavioural problems at the ages of 3, 5 and 7/8 years

<sup>2</sup> Family income is based on total family net disposable income from all sources (including transfers), adjusted to account for the size and composition of the household (equivalised income), as recorded in the face-to-face interview at 5 years of age. Each income quintile includes 20% of families, according to their equivalised income.

The SDQ measure also includes a set of more positive items that reflect 'prosocial' behaviour such as being 'considerate of people's feelings' and 'sharing with other children'. Higher scores reflect more frequent prosocial behaviours. Overall, mothers gave their children high ratings on this prosocial measure: one-third got the maximum score of 10 and the average (mean) score for the whole group was 8.4.

Girls tended to get somewhat higher scores than boys for prosocial behaviour (8.7 compared to 8.1) although both were quite high relative to the maximum score. Comparisons using an indicator of socio-economic advantage such as maternal education showed relatively small group differences. There was little or no difference in scores between children whose mothers had Leaving Cert, certificate/diploma or degree-level education – all around 8.4. Mothers with Junior Cert level education or less tended to give their children slightly lower scores (7.9) on the prosocial measure. These between-group differences are statistically significant although the mean scores as such would not be a cause for concern.

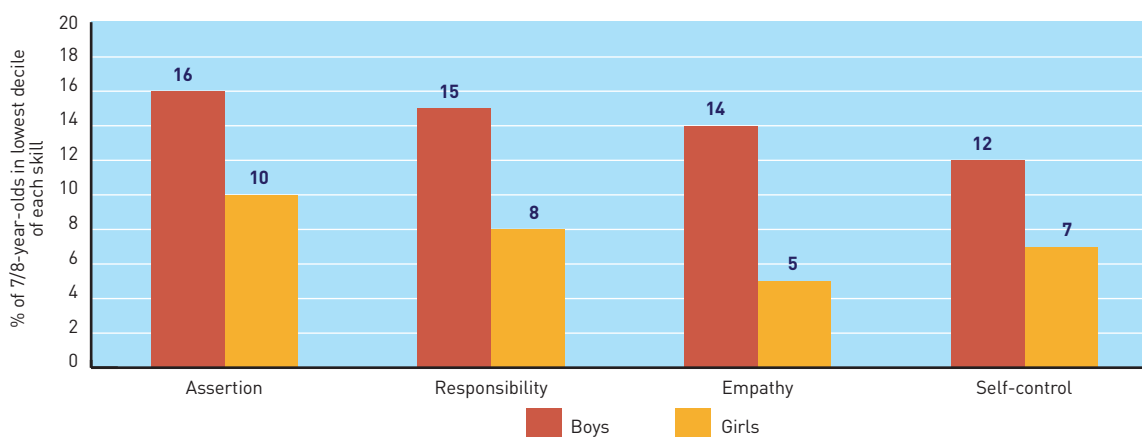
## SOCIAL SKILLS

### CHILDREN WERE GENERALLY DOING QUITE WELL IN THEIR SOCIAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT WITH CHILDREN GETTING THEIR HIGHEST RATINGS IN RELATION TO EMPATHY

To provide further information on children's positive development, beyond the prosocial scale of the SDQ discussed above, mothers were also asked a range of questions to assess the child's social skills in the four areas of assertion, responsibility, empathy and self-control<sup>3</sup>. In general, children did well in these areas but parents were more likely to give higher ratings on the empathy and responsibility scales (20% and 11% respectively on the maximum score) than for assertion and self-control (4% and 2% respectively on the maximum score). However, children of this age would not necessarily be expected to get the maximum scores on these scales.

The four sets of social skill scores were divided into categories such that children whose scores were in the lowest 10% (the 'least-skilled decile')<sup>4</sup> could be compared with other children who got higher scores on these social skills. Figure 3 shows that boys were more likely to be in the lowest-scoring decile group on each of the four social skills.

**Figure 3: Comparison of boys and girls with scores in the lowest decile (10%) on different aspects of social skills**



Mothers had also completed the same questions about social skills when the child was aged 5 years. In general, those children who had the lowest scores (in the lowest decile) when younger were three to four times more likely to be in the lowest-scoring group again at age 7/8 years. In the case of assertion scores, for example, Figure 4 shows that 35% of children who had the lowest scores at 5 years of age were in the least-skilled group again at 7/8 years. In contrast, only 9% of other 5-year-olds were in the lowest-scoring group by the time they were 7/8 years old.

### SOCIAL SKILLS EXAMPLES

**Assertion:** 'expresses feelings when wronged'

**Responsibility:** 'is well-behaved when unsupervised'

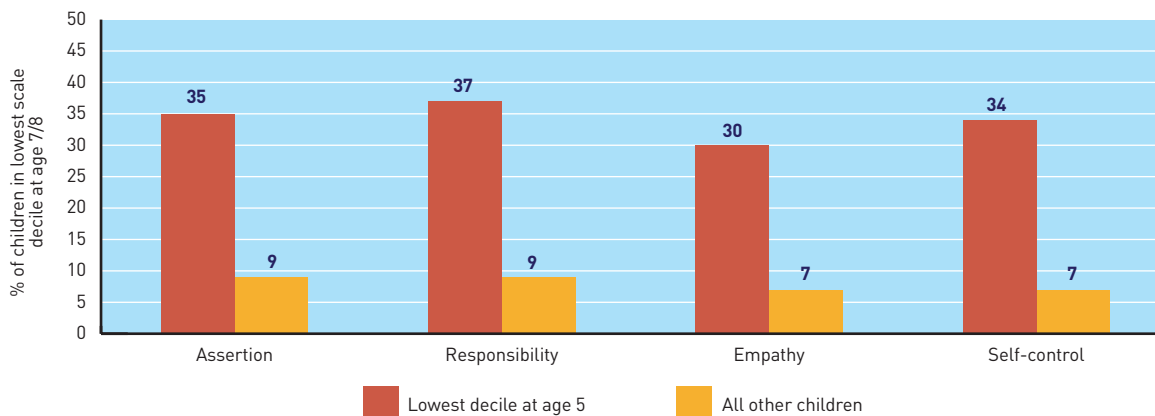
**Empathy:** 'shows concern for others'

**Self-control:** 'stays calm when teased'

<sup>3</sup> Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scales

<sup>4</sup> Due to the distribution of scores there were actually 13%, 12%, 10% and 9% in the lowest decile category of the assertion, responsibility, empathy and self-control scales, respectively

**Figure 4: Percentage of children with scores in the lowest decile (10%) of four aspects of social skills at age 7/8 years, classified by whether they were in the lowest decile group at age 5 years**



Children with poorer social skills at age 5 were more likely to get poorer scores again at age 7/8 years.

## PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

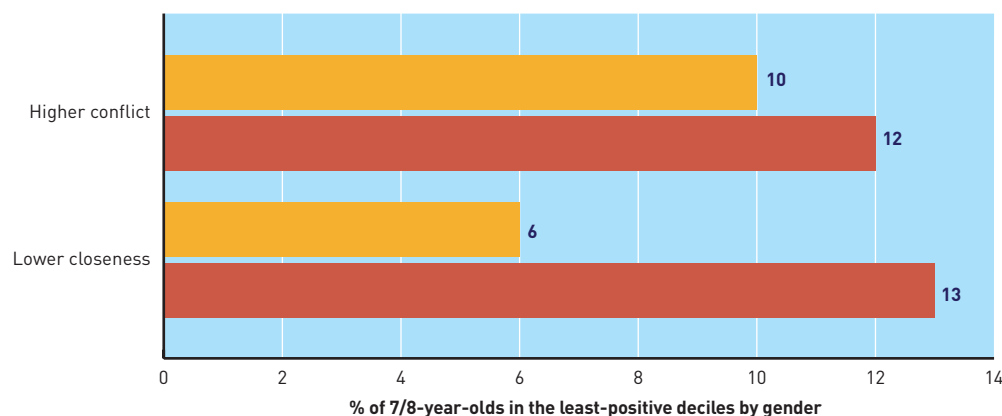
### MOTHERS TENDED TO REPORT HIGH LEVELS OF CLOSENESS AND LOW LEVELS OF CONFLICT IN THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR CHILDREN.

Strong relationships between mothers and their children are characterised by more positive aspects such as closeness and fewer negative aspects like conflict<sup>5</sup>. Overall, mothers reported high levels of closeness and low levels of conflict when their children were aged 7/8 years, although there was more variability in the latter. Three-quarters of mothers gave a closeness rating that was at or near the maximum score (47% on the actual maximum). Around one-third gave conflict scores that were at or near the minimum score (12% on the actual lowest); trends on both scales are illustrated below.



A lower closeness score was defined as being in the bottom 10% (decile) of scores whereas a higher conflict score was one in the highest decile, although scores on these measures tended to be very positive overall. There was little difference in mothers' reports of conflict between those who had boys rather than girls, but 13% of mothers reported a lower closeness score with their sons compared to just 6% among mothers of daughters (both in Figure 5). This suggests that mothers of girls tended to report somewhat higher feelings of closeness.

**Figure 5: Percentage of girls and boys with scores in the least-positive decile (10%) on the measures of closeness and/or conflict in the mother-child relationship**



#### SAMPLE ITEMS:

##### Closeness:

'share an affectionate, warm relationship'

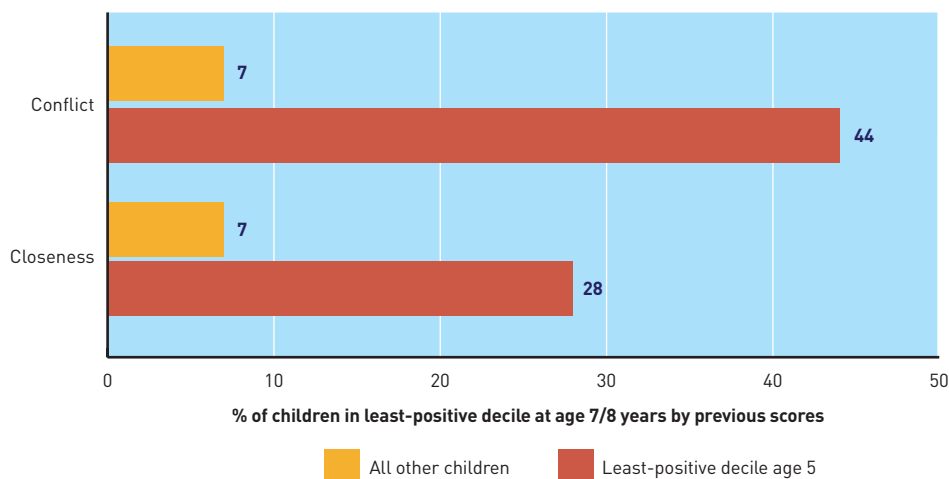
##### Conflict:

'always seem to be struggling with each other'

<sup>5</sup> Closeness and conflict concepts were measured using the Pianta parent-child relationship scales.

Problems in the mother-child relationship sometimes persisted as the child got older. Over a quarter of mothers who described a less close relationship when the child was 5 years old also reported a less close relationship when he or she was aged 7/8 years (Figure 6). Among those mothers whose relationship with the child was higher in conflict at age 5 (by definition, 10%), 44% described a higher-conflict relationship again two years later. This contrasts to 7% of children who 'moved into' the least-positive decile having had higher closeness or lower conflict scores when they were 5 years old.

**Figure 6: Percentage of children with scores in the higher conflict/lower closeness decile (10%) at age 7/8 years according to whether they had been in the least-positive decile at age 5 years**



Less positive scores for closeness or conflict at age 7/8 years were more likely when the mother-child relationship had been less positive at age 5 years.



## PLAY

### READING, 'MAKE-BELIEVE' AND PLAYING ON A COMPUTER/TABLET DEVICE WERE THE MOST FREQUENT PLAY ACTIVITIES FOR 7/8 YEAR OLDS

Play has the potential to foster cognitive and physical, as well as social, development. Having the time and opportunity for play is generally considered an important part of the lived experience of childhood.

The most popular form of play for 7/8-year-olds, according to their mothers, was 'reading for pleasure' with 35% doing this every day. The next most frequent activities were 'make believe' play (30% every day and 29% 3-6 times per week) and play on a computer (25% every day and 33% 3-6 times per week).

**Table 1: Frequency of different play activities for children at age 7/8 years according to mothers<sup>6</sup>**

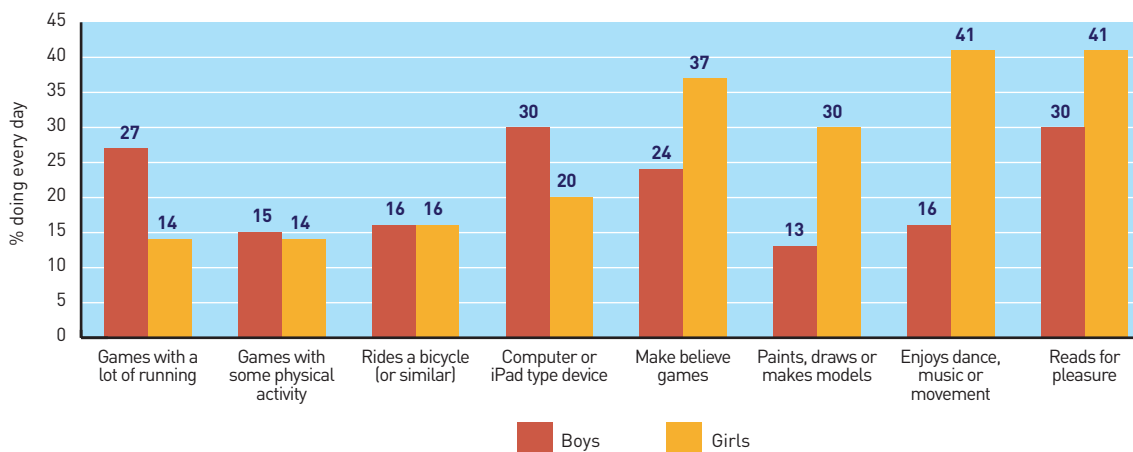
| Activity                          | Less often/<br>never | 1-2 times a<br>week | 3-6 times a<br>week | Every day |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| Games with a lot of running       | 15%                  | 38%                 | 26%                 | 21%       |
| Games with some physical activity | 32%                  | 32%                 | 22%                 | 14%       |
| Rides a bicycle (or similar)      | 24%                  | 32%                 | 29%                 | 16%       |
| Computer or iPad type device      | 16%                  | 26%                 | 33%                 | 25%       |
| 'Make believe' games              | 18%                  | 23%                 | 29%                 | 30%       |
| Paints, draws or makes models     | 21%                  | 30%                 | 28%                 | 21%       |
| Enjoys dance, music, movement     | 21%                  | 29%                 | 23%                 | 28%       |
| Reads for pleasure                | 22%                  | 21%                 | 22%                 | 35%       |

35% of 7/8-year-olds read for pleasure every day – but 22% did so less than 1-2 times per week

85% of children played games with a lot of running at least 1-2 times per week

There were significant gender differences in many play activities. Girls tended to favour 'make-believe', crafts, dance and reading, while very physically active games and computers were more popular among boys. There were few gender differences in terms of 'games with some physical activity' or 'riding a bicycle'.

**Figure 7: Gender differences in the frequency for play activities engaged in 'every day' as reported by mothers**



Boys were more likely to play very physically active games but also more computer games

Girls were more likely to enjoy dance, music or movement; crafts and reading

## SCREEN-TIME

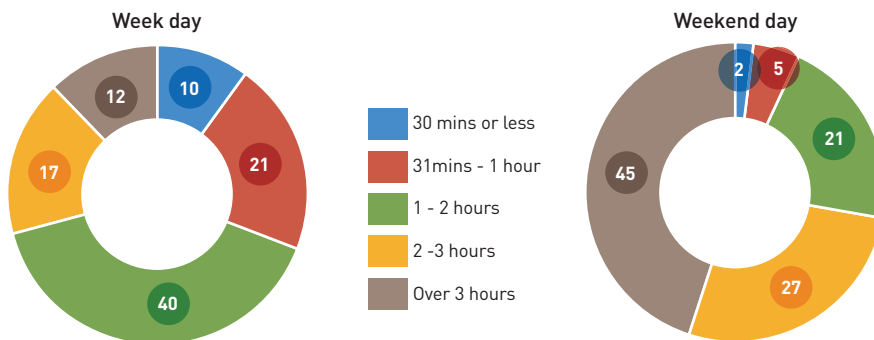
### TYPICAL SCREEN-TIME ON A WEEK DAY WAS 1-2 HOURS BUT THIS INCREASED TO OVER 3 HOURS ON A WEEKEND-DAY

Spending extended periods of time on screen-based activities (e.g. television, internet, computer games) has the potential to displace other play activities and affect developmental outcomes. Although children often enjoy screen time activities and they may offer some opportunities for learning (depending on its content), the majority of research tends to be concerned with the negative impact of too much screen-time on sleep, diet and behaviour.

<sup>6</sup> Some rows may total more than 100% due to rounding

Figure 8 shows that children spent much longer on screen-time at the weekend with 45% spending over three hours per day and just 2% a half-hour or less. In contrast, on a week day 40% of children spent 1-2 hours on screen-based activities and 12% spent over three hours.

**Figure 8: Amount of screen-time on a week day compared to a weekend day as reported by mothers**

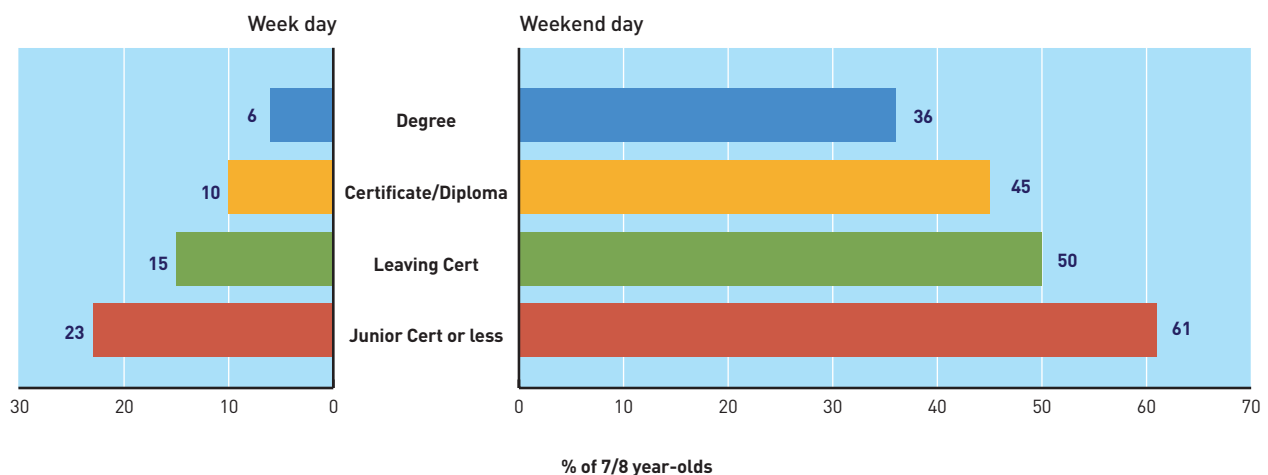


14% of boys and 10% of girls had more than three hours' screen-time on a typical WEEKDAY

51% of boys and 39% of girls had more than three hours' screen-time on a typical WEEKEND DAY

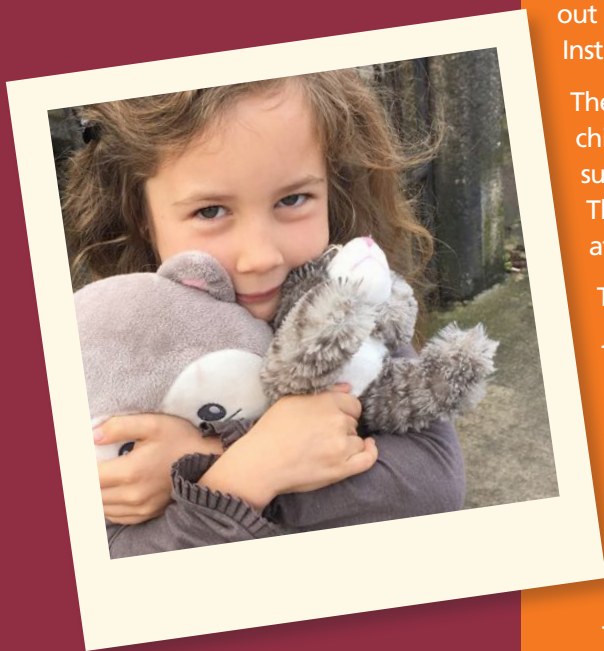
Screen-time varied significantly with mother's level of education. Figure 9 shows that 23% of 7/8-year-olds had more than three hours of screen-time on a week day where their mothers had Junior Cert level education compared to 6% where their mothers had a degree.

**Figure 9: Percentage of children reported to spend more than three hours screen-time on a week day or a weekend day for each category of maternal education**



## DISCUSSION POINTS

- Most children were doing quite well in terms of their socio-emotional development and relationships with parents, but for some children earlier problems persisted over time.
- Girls were less likely to have problems with socio-emotional development, social skills or in the mother-child relationship.
- Reading for pleasure was a favourite play activity, and has been shown to benefit children's development. However, many children also spent long periods of time on screen-based activities and the implications for later development need careful attention.



**Background:** *Growing Up in Ireland* is the national longitudinal study of children and young people. The study is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, with a contribution from The Atlantic Philanthropies. 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 study tracks the development of two nationally representative cohorts of children over time. One is the **Infant Cohort**, interviewed initially at 9 months, subsequently at 3 years, 5 years and, most recently, 7/8 years (on a postal basis). The second is the **Child Cohort**, initially interviewed at 9 years and subsequently at 13 and, most recently, 17/18 years of age.

The first round of fieldwork with the families in the Infant Cohort involved just over 11,100 9-month-olds, their parents and carers. Interviews took place between September 2008 and March 2009. The second round of interviews took place when the children were 3 years of age, between January and August 2011, and the third round of interviews, when the children were 5 years of age, was completed between March and September 2013. All interviews in these rounds of fieldwork were carried out on a face-to-face basis in the Study Child's home. The response rate at the first wave of interviews was 65% and 90% at both the second and third waves.

The fourth round of data collection (which forms the basis of the current series of *Key Finding*) was conducted on a postal basis (between March and October 2016), when the children were 7/8 years of age. The questionnaire can be found at <http://www.growingup.ie>.

The response rate to the postal survey was 55 per cent, representing 5,308 families. The information recorded in the postal surveys was statistically adjusted on the basis of mother's education, family income and family social class. This ensures that the data are representative of the population as a whole. All figures presented in this *Key Finding* are based on the statistically adjusted data. The figures presented in this *Key Finding* are purely descriptive and do not control for potential interactions or confounding effects. *All figures are preliminary and may be subject to change.*

Several indicators of family advantage/disadvantage were used in this set of *Key Findings*. These include the family's income group, level of mother's education and family social class.

These background variables have been 'carried forward' from the detailed interviews conducted with the families on a face-to-face basis when the child was 5 years of age.

**Access to Growing Up in Ireland data:** Anonymised versions of all quantitative and qualitative data collected in *Growing Up in Ireland* are available for research through the Irish Social Science Data Archive (ISSDA) (<http://www.ucd.ie/issda/data/growingupinirelandgui/>) and the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) (<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/iqda/collections>).

## 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 numerous occasions to make this study possible. A very big 'thank you' to all the children and their families.



If you would like further information about *Growing Up in Ireland* visit [www.growingup.ie](http://www.growingup.ie)  
email [growingup@esri.ie](mailto:growingup@esri.ie)  
Freephone 1800 200 434



An Roinn Leanaí  
agus Gnóthaí Óige  
Department of  
Children and Youth Affairs