



INFANT  
COHORT



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

# GROWING UP IN IRELAND

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

### NO. 1 SCHOOL AND LEARNING

#### INTRODUCTION

This is the first 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 mothers' reports of how their children were doing in terms of their schooling and learning. Children's early experiences of the classroom, their transition to formal school and their acquisition of key skills such as literacy and numeracy typically have a lasting effect on their short- and long-term educational development.

At the time of the postal survey 36% of the children in the study were 7 years old and the rest were 8 years old. At this stage, most of them had been in Primary School for 2-3 years. Overall, 69% started school in 2012 (mostly in September), the remainder in 2013. Just over 1% of the children were in Junior or Senior Infants, 32% were in First Class and 66% in Second Class. Just less than 1% were in third class, home-schooled or at a special school.

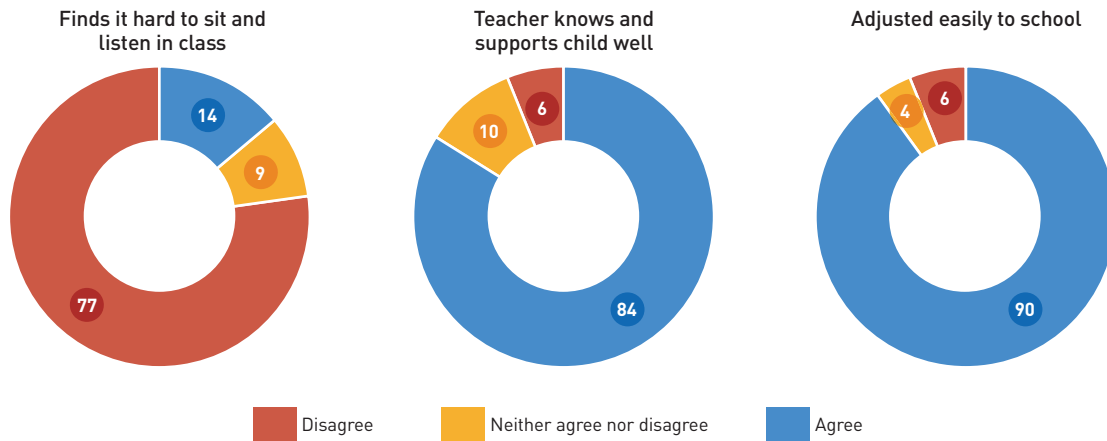
<sup>1</sup> As almost all Primary Caregivers were the child's mother they will be referred to collectively as 'mothers' in this *Key Finding*.

## SETTLING IN TO SCHOOL

### THE MAJORITY OF CHILDREN WERE REPORTED TO HAVE ADJUSTED EASILY TO SCHOOL, BUT SOME DIFFICULTIES WERE IDENTIFIED

As children who adjust better to school tend to make better progress in learning, mothers were asked how well their child had settled into school. The results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Percentage of mothers agreeing and disagreeing with three statements on how their child settled in to school.

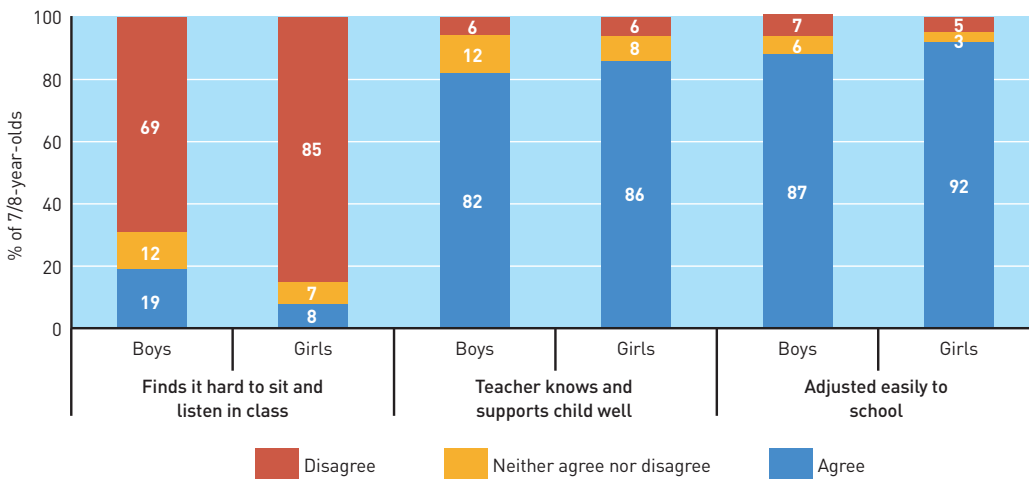


Most children were reported to have adjusted well to school. Over three-quarters (77%) of mothers said their 7/8-year-old did not find it difficult to sit still and listen in class, although 14% did report they found it difficult. 84% of mothers reported that their child’s teacher knew their child well and provided the support they needed. 90% of mothers reported that that their child had adjusted easily to school.

### IN GENERAL, GIRLS ADJUSTED TO SCHOOL BETTER THAN BOYS

Figure 2 shows that a higher percentage of boys than girls were reported to find it difficult to *sit still and listen in class* (19% compared to 8% of girls). Small differences between boys and girls were found in terms of how well the *teacher knows the child and gives them the support they need* (82% of boys compared to 86% of girls) and their general ease of *adjusting to school* (87% of boys compared to 92% of girls).

Figure 2: Mothers’ agreement with how well their sons and daughters had adjusted to school by 7/8 years

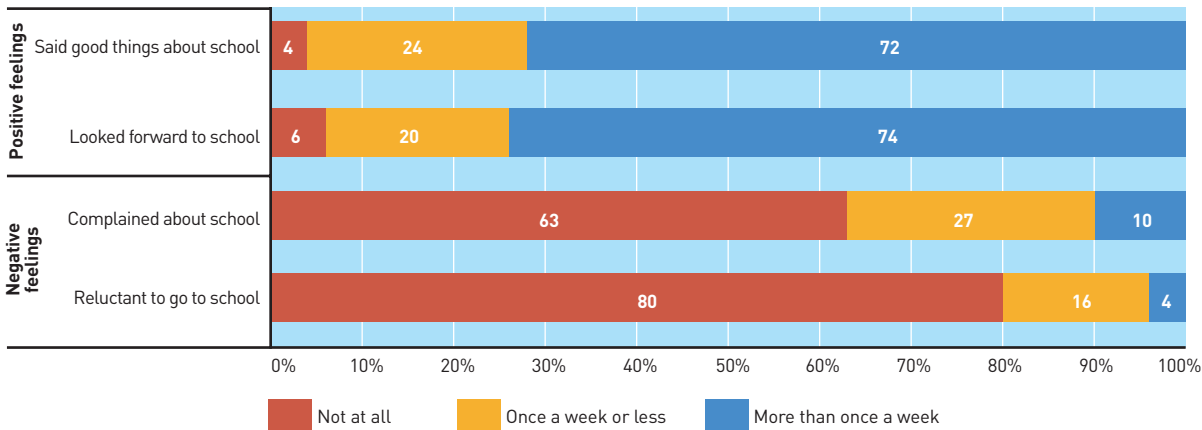


## LIKING AND GETTING ON AT SCHOOL

### ABOUT THREE QUARTERS OF ALL CHILDREN FELT POSITIVELY ABOUT SCHOOL

Positive feelings among children towards their school are important for fostering good peer relationships, integration and academic performance. Mothers were asked how their child felt about school. Figure 3 shows that most mothers thought their child was generally positive about school.

Figure 3: Attitudes of 7/8-year-olds to school as reported by their mothers



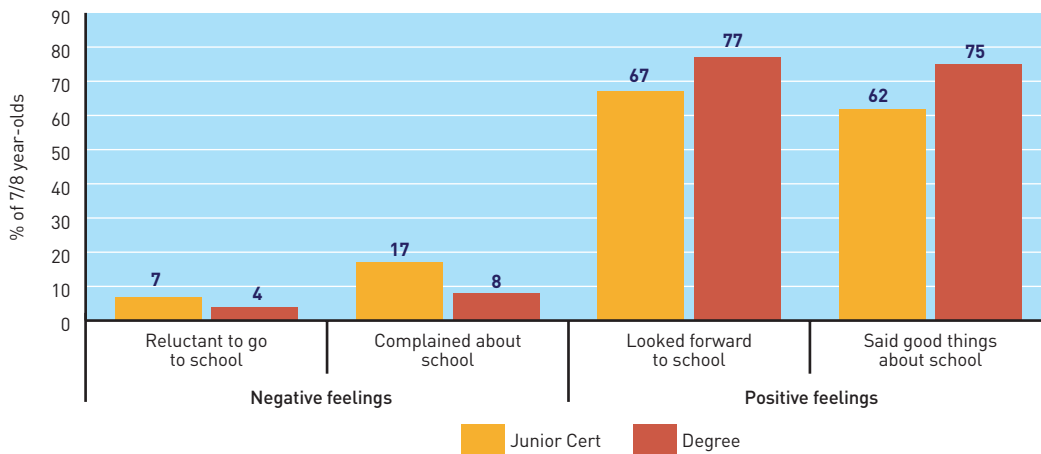
Most children were positive about school 'more than once a week'.

Boys complained about school more often than girls: 43% compared to 31%.

Boys were more likely than girls to be reluctant to go to school: 22% compared to 17%.

Figure 4, however, shows that although the majority of mothers reported their children were positive about school, there were differences by mother's level of education. Mothers with higher levels of education were less likely to say that their child was frequently reluctant to go to school or complained about it than mothers with lower levels of education. Only 8% of mothers with degree-level education said their child complained about going to school *more than once a week* compared to 17% of mothers who had Junior Cert level education (or less).

Figure 4: 7/8 year olds' attitudes to school (expressed more than once a week), reported by mothers with the lowest and highest levels of education

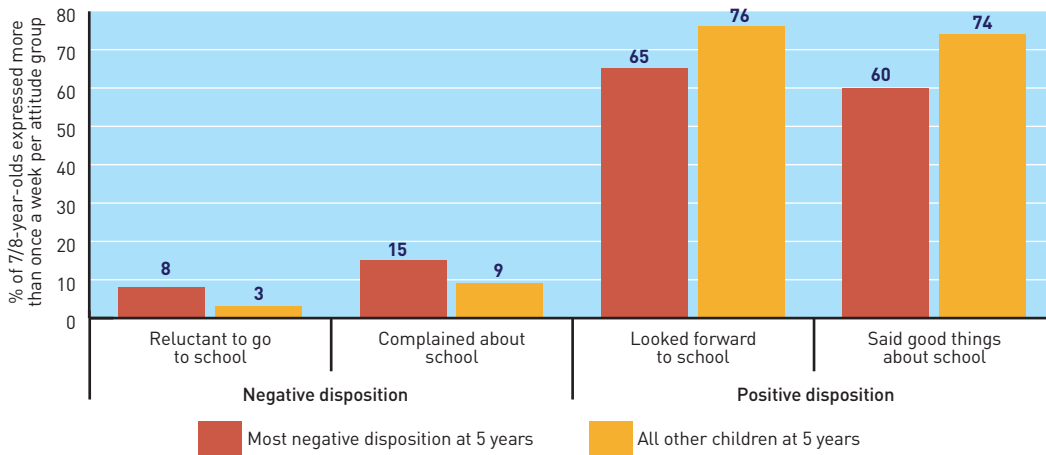


When these children were 5 years of age, their teacher had been asked to provide information on the child's disposition and attitudes towards school and learning<sup>2</sup>. The children whose teachers had described them as having the most negative disposition at 5 years of age<sup>3</sup> were more likely to be reported by mothers as negative about school when they were they were 7/8 years old. Figure 5 shows that children with the most negative disposition as reported by their teachers at age 5 were more likely to complain about or to be reluctant to go to school *more than once a week* than other children, and tended to be less positive about it, when they were older – according to their mothers.

<sup>2</sup> A 10-item teacher-reported sub-scale on children's dispositions and attitudes to school and learning (known as the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile) was used. This included questions about whether children showed an interest in classroom activities, displayed involvement, were motivated and excited to learn and maintained attention and concentration

<sup>3</sup> Based on the lowest decile - 10% - in the teacher scale mentioned above.

**Figure 5: Differences in mother’s reports of attitudes to school among 7/8 year-olds (expressed ‘more than once a week’), according to whether or not their teacher at 5 years had rated them as having a more negative disposition towards school**



Teachers’ reports of a less positive disposition towards school at age 5 years were associated with mothers’ reports of negative attitudes two years later.

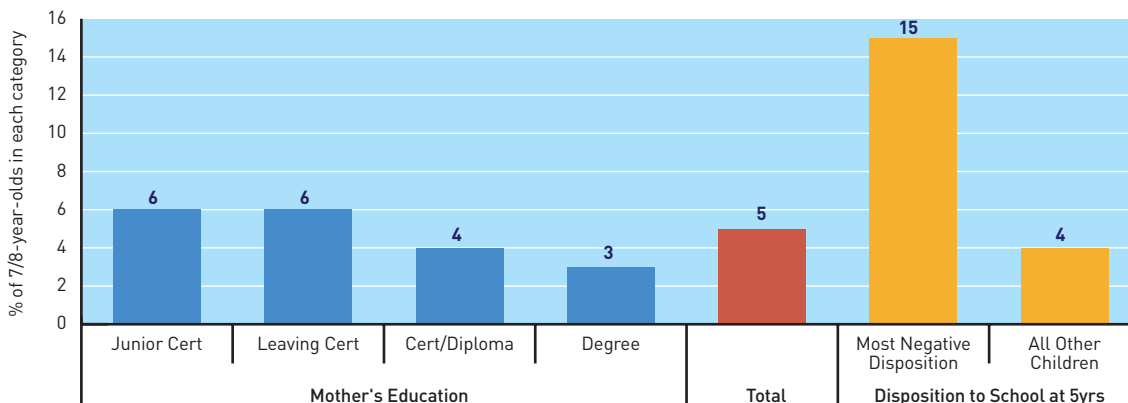
## PACE OF LEARNING AND COPING WITH SCHOOLWORK

### MOST MOTHERS FELT THE PACE OF LEARNING AT SCHOOL WAS JUST RIGHT FOR THEIR CHILD

While 86% of mothers felt that the pace of learning at school was *just right* for their 7/8-year-old, 5% said it was *too fast* and 9% that it was *too slow*. Mothers who had degree-level education were less likely to say it was *too fast* (3%) compared to mothers with lower levels of education (6%), as shown in Figure 6.

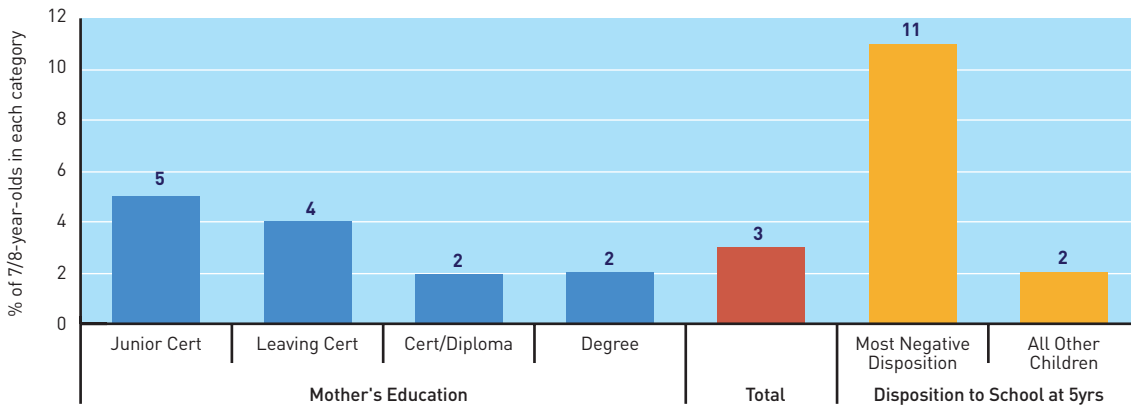
Figure 6 also compares mothers’ views on the pace of learning at 7/8 years according to teachers’ ratings of the child’s disposition towards school at the age of 5 years. Children whose teachers said they were more negatively disposed towards school at 5 years were almost four times more likely to be described (by their mother) as less able than other children to keep up with the pace of learning (15% compared to 4% - Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Children reported by mothers as finding the pace of learning too fast, classified according to mothers’ level of education (left) and teacher reports of child’s disposition to school at 5 years (right)**



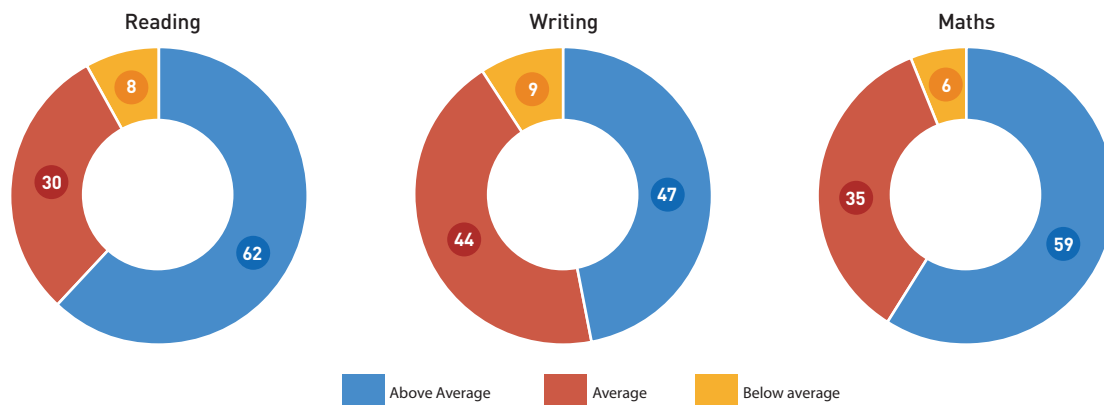
Over half of mothers (52%) said their child *never* found school-work hard while just 3% *usually* found it hard. The remaining 45% *sometimes* found it hard. Figure 7 shows that mothers who had third-level education were less likely to say their child *usually* found schoolwork hard (2%), compared to mothers who had left school at Junior Cert level or earlier (5%). Children whose teachers said they had the most negative disposition to school at 5 years were almost six times more likely than other children to *usually* find schoolwork hard at 7/8 years (11% compared to 2% - Figure 7).

Figure 7: Children reported by mothers as usually finding their schoolwork hard, according to mothers' education level (left) and teacher reports of the child's disposition to school at 5 years of age (right)



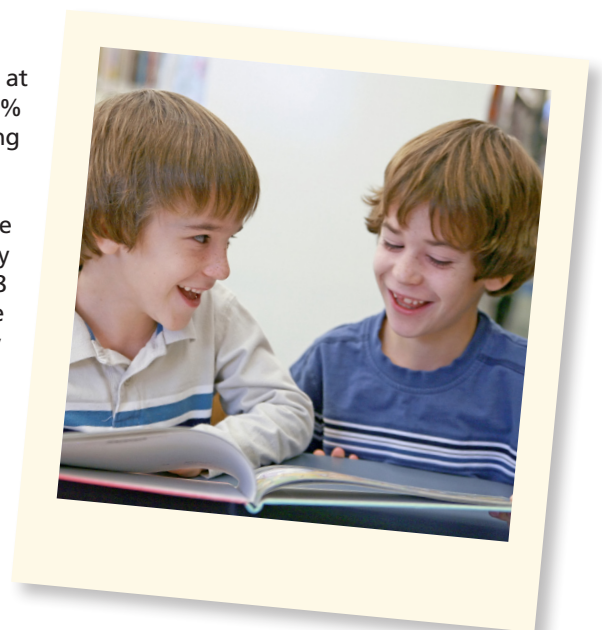
Mothers were asked how their child was doing in Reading, Writing and Maths. Figure 8 shows that only a minority of mothers felt their child was *below average* in these subjects. A majority of mothers described their child as *above average* for reading and maths, at 62% and 59%, respectively. Somewhat fewer mothers gave their child the *above average* rating for writing however (47%).

Figure 8: Mothers' ratings of the child's ability in the areas of reading, writing and maths

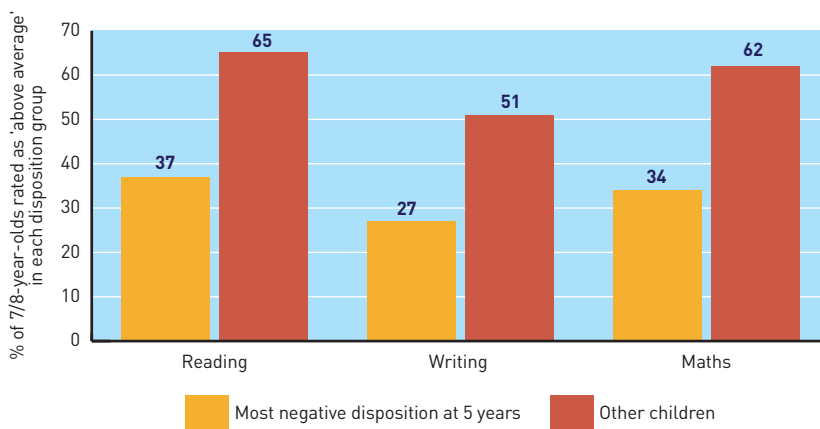


Mothers were more likely to rate girls as being *above average* at reading (65% for girls, 60% for boys) and writing (54% for girls, 41% for boys). In contrast, they were more likely to rate boys as being *above average* in maths (63% for boys compared to 55% for girls).

Children who were felt by their teacher to have the most negative disposition towards school two years previously were much less likely to be rated as *above average* by their mothers when they were 7/8 years old (Figure 9). The early identification of children who have less positive dispositions and attitudes towards school can clearly help to target those who need greater support from an early stage.



**Figure 9: Percentage of mothers rating their 7/8-year-old as 'above average' in Reading, Writing and Maths, according to whether or not the teacher rated their disposition to school in the lowest decile at age 5 years**



A poor *disposition* rating from a teacher at age 5 years was linked to a lower parental rating of *achievement* by the time the child was 7/8 years old.

## LEARNING ACTIVITIES

### MOST MOTHERS DID A VARIETY OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES WITH 7/8-YEAR-OLDS IN THE HOME

The educational activities which parents undertake with their children at home are very important for supporting and encouraging the child's learning in school. Mothers were asked how often they did any of eight different types of activities which are supportive of the child's educational development to varying degrees. Table 1 shows how frequently each activity was carried out with the 7/8-year-old.

**Table 1: Frequency of educational activities with the 7/8-year-old as reported by mothers**

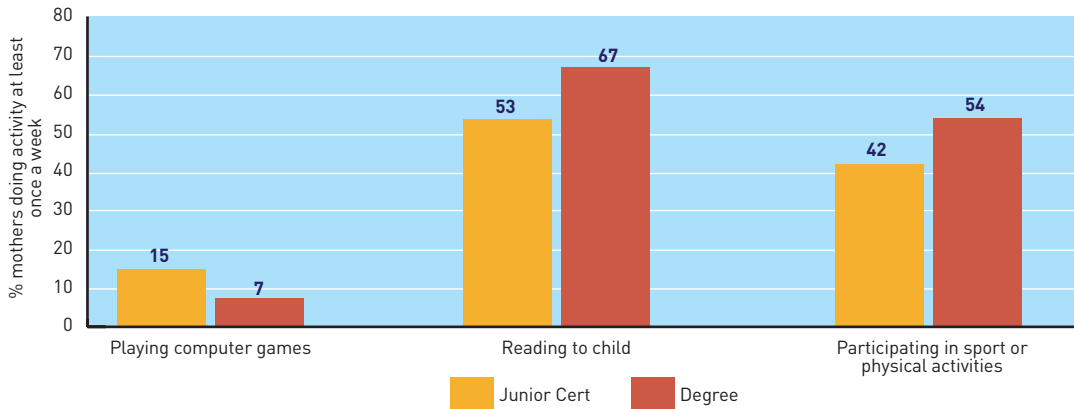
| Activity   | Never/<br>Hardly ever | Occasionally | Once or<br>twice a<br>week | Every day |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|----------------------------|-----------|
| Listening to him/her read                                      | 2%                    | 12%          | 23%                        | 63%       |
| Reading to him/her   | 12%                   | 27%          | 27%                        | 34%       |
| Participating in sport or physical activities                  | 17%                   | 34%          | 39%                        | 10%       |
| Playing with the Study Child using toys or games/puzzles       | 8%                    | 45%          | 38%                        | 9%        |
| Using the computer with him/her in educational ways            | 40%                   | 42%          | 16%                        | 2%        |
| Visiting the library   | 34%                   | 52%          | 14%                        | 0%        |
| Going on educ. visits outside the home, such as museums, farms | 15%                   | 74%          | 11%                        | 0%        |
| Playing computer games with him/her                            | 67%                   | 23%          | 9%                         | 1%        |

Activities involving reading were the most frequent parent-child learning activity: 34% read to the child and 63% listened to him/her read every day.

Computer-based activities were the least frequent activity: 67% never/hardly ever played computer games with their 7/8-year-old and 40% never/hardly ever used the computer with him/her in educational ways.

In general, there were few significant differences in the frequency of home learning activities among mothers with different levels of education, except in three areas: 'playing computer games', 'reading to the child', and 'participating in sport or physical activities' (Figure 10). There were few significant differences observed between boys and girls.

**Figure 10: Percentage of mothers participating in selected parent-child activities 1-2 times per week or more often: a comparison of mothers with Junior Cert or degree level education.**



## DISCUSSION POINTS

- In general, 7/8-year-olds appeared to be settling into school well, with most described by their mothers as being able to sit and listen in class, having teachers who support their needs and doing well in reading and maths.
- Overall, in common with other Western countries, girls appear to have adjusted to school better than boys.
- Social disadvantage (largely as reported in this Key Finding according to maternal education) was generally associated with more problems adjusting to school and keeping up with the pace of learning.
- The child's previous poor disposition and attitudes to school (as recorded by their teacher at 5 years of age) was also associated with problems around adjustment to school and keeping up with the pace of learning.



**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