

International Family Day Care Conference 2009 Seminar

Growing Up in Ireland – the National Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland: What can the study tell us about childcare in Ireland

Elaine Harris¹

Abstract

Launched in 2006, *Growing Up in Ireland* - the National Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland is funded by the Department of Health and Children through the Office for the Minister for Children in association with the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Central Statistics Office². The main aim of the study is to describe the status of two representative samples of children in Ireland and how they are developing in the current social, economic and cultural environment to assist in policy formation and in the provision of services which will ensure that all children will have the best possible start in life. The study incorporates a mixed methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, to gain a holistic understanding of children's lives in Ireland. The first phase of the study takes place over seven years and follows the progress of two groups of children; 8,500 nine-year-olds and 10,000 nine-month-olds. During this time two longitudinal sweeps of quantitative data will be conducted with each group of children. Smaller scale qualitative studies, each involving 120 children and families drawn from the main cohorts, will take place shortly after each sweep.

The aims and objectives of the study

GUI has nine stated objectives as follows:

1. To describe the lives of children in Ireland, to establish what is typical and normal as well as what is atypical and problematic.
2. To chart the development of children over time, to examine the progress and well-being of children at critical periods from birth to adulthood.

¹ Elaine Harris is a research fellow on Growing Up in Ireland - the National Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland a joint collaboration by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), and the Children's Research Centre (CRC) at Trinity College Dublin. Elaine is based in the Children's Research Centre.

² See www.growingup.ie

3. To identify the key factors that, independently of others, most help or hinder children's development.
4. To establish the effects of early childhood experiences on later life.
5. To map dimensions of variation in children's lives.
6. To identify the persistent adverse affects that lead to social disadvantage and exclusion, educational difficulties, ill health and deprivation.
7. To obtain children's views and opinions on their lives to inform policy making.
8. To provide a bank of data on the whole child.
9. To provide evidence for the creation of effective and responsive policies and services for children and families.

The Domains of the Study

Data is being collected from both the parents and the children through both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The themes of the surveys and follow on qualitative interview with the children include the following themes: health and wellbeing; child's diet and exercise; hobbies and activities; socio-emotional development; family relationships; school; community and neighbourhood. The themes covered in the parents' survey and follow on qualitative interviews include: socio demographics; parents' health and lifestyle; service utilisation; parent-child relationship; perception of being a parent; concerns and aspirations for their children.

The Policy Applications

The Irish National Children's Strategy was launched in 2000 and it highlights three main goals. The first goal is to give children a voice in matters which affect them, by providing children living in diverse circumstances with a platform through which they can have their voices heard. In effect, the children are positioned in the Strategy as important stakeholders whose views should be taken into account in the development of policies which can and do influence their lives. The second goal of the Strategy is that children's lives will be better understood. The third is that children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development. *GUI* touches on all three goals of the National Children's Strategy. The study will collect crucial baseline statistics on children's lives and children's

development. It differs from any previous Irish studies being representative of the whole population of children and being longitudinal in design. The scale and breadth of the main survey component will generate invaluable data on children's lives and the factors that influence their development. The qualitative component will provide rich data that would not be accessible using an entirely quantitative methodology. The Study is designed with a view to its value in informing policy. It is expected that *GUI* will inform our understanding of how children grow up in Ireland and provide a stronger platform for informed decision making in relation to child-related policies and services.

The relationship between research and policy is complex and rarely direct. However it is widely accepted in recent decades that good policy-making should be evidence-based. In relation to children the first requirement is good descriptive data on who the children are, where they live and with whom. In Ireland the basic data on children come from a number of sources. Official data are still lacking in some areas (Fitzgerald, 2004). A recent publication by the Office of the Minister for Children (Hanafin et al. 2006) has collated data from many sources to create the first 'State of the Nation's Children' report. The most cited data sources are the Central Statistics Office, the Health Behaviour on School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey (Nic Gabhainn et al. 2007) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey (Eivers et al., 2007). The National Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland will complement these data and provide a much more elaborated picture of the lives of children in Ireland and how they change over time. The design of the study will also enable some policy-driven questions to be addressed about the links of policies to outcomes, and about the outcomes of certain services and programmes. It is hoped that such data will assist the development of programmes, services and supports that can improve the overall well-being of children in Ireland.

GUI data on Childcare in Ireland

The quantitative instruments have collected data on childcare utilisation in Ireland. For both cohorts the primary caregiver is asked a series of questions about childcare utilisation and postal questionnaires are administered to the childminder who provides either home or centre based care for the child. This presentation will illustrate the sections in the GUI questionnaires that have generated data which may be relevant to professionals and stakeholders in the childcare sector.