

Early-Life Developmental Risk in South Korea: Childcare Entry Timing, Home Interaction, and Family–Policy Contexts

This study examined how childcare entry timing, home interaction, family socioeconomic and psychosocial resources, and policy-support use predicted cumulative developmental risk among Korean infants. Drawing on human capital theory and cumulative advantage perspectives, the study conceptualised early developmental risk as an early marker of social stratification in the context of South Korea's rapidly expanding early childhood education and care system. Data came from the Korean ECEC Panel Study, a longitudinal birth-cohort study of children born in 2022. Analyses used 20 multiply imputed datasets and included an average of 2,596 children. The outcome was Wave 3 cumulative developmental risk, measured as the number of Korean Developmental Screening Test for Infants and Children domains classified as at risk.

Results showed significant continuity in developmental risk: both Wave 1 and Wave 2 cumulative risk predicted higher Wave 3 risk. Compared with infants who had not entered center-based care, middle and late childcare entry were associated with lower cumulative developmental risk, whereas early entry was not significant. Parent–child verbal interaction was consistently protective, while play interaction was not independently significant. Maternal depression predicted higher developmental risk, Wave 2 social support predicted lower risk, and multicultural family status was associated with higher risk. However, social support did not moderate the effects of maternal depression or parenting stress, and neither household income nor childcare entry timing significantly moderated key associations. Policy-support indicators and parent time-use variables showed limited additional explanatory power.

Findings suggest that Korea's expansion of ECEC is associated with lower later cumulative risk for some entry groups, but language-rich home interaction and accessible family support remain essential for addressing early developmental inequality.