

EU-funded researchers put toddler's well-being in spotlight [Date: 2011-01-28]



Researchers have long recognised the benefits of early childhood education - both for children and their parents. Improving the lives of young tots helps them become productive members of society. EU-funded researchers led by the University of Stavanger in Norway are targeting improved well-being for toddlers across Europe. The TODDLER ('Toddler opportunities for disadvantaged and diverse learners on the early-childhood road') project is supported with EUR 300,000 under the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme.

Pre-primary education is one of the most important aims of the EU, as outlined in the EU's 2010 priorities. While scores of people realise that education and care play a crucial role in the early development of a child, not enough has been done in terms of performing research in this area. This major, cross-European study is targeting how to give toddlers the finest start in life.

Participating in the project are two experts at Kingston University in the UK. They will conduct research in nurseries, playgroups and children's centres across England to determine the approaches that will give toddlers (aged 18-36 months) the best opportunities to ensure life satisfaction in their adult years. The researchers say their findings will also benefit toddlers from migrant or low-income families.

The findings of Helen Sutherland and Jan Styman will be collated with data obtained by their peers in seven other countries, and will be used to produce recommendations on improving early years education.

The researchers will generate training courses and teaching materials, such as online packages, to support both educators and carers in their quest to improve toddlers' well-being. The team will spotlight specific areas that need improvement in the various countries. Special emphasis will be placed on giving well-being and language skills a major boost.

'We hope the project will give professionals a better understanding of toddlers and how they can reach their full potential,' says Ms Sutherland, who has more than two decades worth of experience in early childhood education. 'We will be looking at the factors that help toddlers to achieve emotional well-being including their environment, the kind of support they receive from professionals and parents and how they learn to talk.'

Ms Sutherland points out that in the UK, there is no legal requirement to teach children before the age of five, and so there has historically been relatively little focus on education for younger children, although the government does fund nurseries for three and four year olds,

'The years between nought and five are formative ones which can give children lifelong skills which allow them to learn and develop,' Ms Sutherland says. 'We hope this project will help give toddlers the kind of opportunities that will help them get the best out of life as well as raising the standing and understanding of early years practitioners.'

Experts from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Portugal and Romania are making major contributions to this study.

For more information, please visit:
Kingston University:

<http://www.kingston.ac.uk>

EU's Lifelong Learning Programme:

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc78_en.htm