

Received: 03/03/2025

Accepted: 04/05/2025

Keywords:

Family, wellbeing,
early childhood
education,
integration, Scotland

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.0092781>

Original Research Article

Early childhood education and family wellbeing – A call for Scotland to reconsider policy and practice

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Abstract:

In 2012, Scotland's Early Years Collaborative committed to making Scotland 'the best place in the world to grow up'. The Scottish Government has acknowledged the importance of early support for children and families to reduce inequalities, deprivation, and health consequences throughout the lifespan. Research highlights the interconnected relationship of parental wellbeing and child wellbeing, and how this relationship can be improved through whole-family support in early childhood education and care (ECEC). This study examines cases around the world where holistic family support has been included in ECEC to improve family wellbeing. The aim of the study is to analyse how centres provide this support, and its impact on families, to identify how Scotland could promote family wellbeing in its ECEC settings. A thematic analysis was conducted, and it was found that families' wellbeing improved through ECEC provisions that were flexible, responsive, accessible, and welcoming. Parents and practitioners equally identified collaborative partnerships with each other as one of the most important aspects of an effective ECEC program. Integration of support beyond childcare and education helped increase families' attendance, agency, and overall wellbeing. Effective ECEC programs included support for the entire community in their philosophy of care. This community-focused philosophy of ECEC programs was found to create culturally-safe environments with a strengths-based approach to care. This study identifies three main recommendations for Scotland to promote family wellbeing in ECEC: an integration of education, health, and social services to provide holistic support for families; a pedagogical leadership structure between parents and practitioners; and ensuring programs are accessible, flexible, and responsive for families, which requires secure, long-term funding.



Introduction and context

In 2022, the Scottish Government published their Whole Family Wellbeing Funding (WFWF) plan which promotes wellbeing for families in Scotland through a more holistic, integrated, and early-intervention approach to services before families reach crisis (Scottish Government, 2022). While the outcomes of this plan include 'improved family wellbeing', there is no specific definition in the plan as to what this terminology entails.

International research indicates that family wellbeing encompasses physical, spiritual, economic, social, and mental aspects of wellbeing, as well as relationships between family members and the quality of those relationships (Samsudi, 2022; Wollny et al., 2010; Wong et al., 2022). Quantitative indicators of family wellbeing include education level, household income, health, and safety (Noor et al., 2014). Rountree and Smith (2016) highlight that these indicators are based on a deficit-based model and suggest additional strengths-based indicators such as community connections and cultural practices. These strengths-based indicators of family wellbeing reflect social capital, a term used to describe the interconnected relationships in a community which are mutually beneficial for society (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000).

A Scottish Household Survey was conducted in 2022 and explored strengths-based indicators of wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2024a). Overall, 57% of adults rated their neighbourhood as a 'very good' place to live, but only 29% of adults living in deprived areas rated their neighbourhoods in this way, highlighting a link between household income and community wellbeing. Those living in deprived areas were nearly twice as likely to identify experiences of loneliness (30%) compared to those living in the least deprived areas (16%), which highlights a link between household income and mental wellbeing. Within the most deprived areas, 68% of adults agreed with the statement 'this is a neighbourhood where people from different backgrounds get on well together', with 79% of adults agreeing in the least deprived areas. This indicates the ubiquitous benefit of cultural inclusion for community connections.

Family wellbeing can also be quantified through children's wellbeing and safety. Scotland's Children's Social Work Statistics identify that 2,094 children were listed on the Child Protection Register (CPR) halfway through 2023 which is an increase of 4% on the previous year (Scottish Government, 2024b). Of those children on the CPR, 47% were under the age of five. The top four concerns identified for children on the CPR were: domestic abuse (42%), neglect (40%), parental mental health problems (39%), and parental substance misuse (38%). This highlights the link between parental wellbeing and child wellbeing, which was also found in the Growing up in Scotland study (Parkes et al., 2016). Data from the study identifies a statistically significant relationship between maternal distress, dysfunctional parenting, and child subjective wellbeing (Parkes et al.,



2016). The impact on child wellbeing by age seven was additionally impacted by family poverty and area deprivation, two evidence-based quantitative indicators of wellbeing.

Improved family wellbeing 'provides a foundation for positive parenting and child wellbeing' (Newland, 2015, p. 3), two key commitments of the National Parenting Strategy (2012). Key partnerships involved in the Strategy include 'universal services, health, education and social work [who] provide crucial support to children and their families from preconception, throughout childhood and into adulthood' (Scottish Government, 2012). In Scotland, social work has the statutory responsibility for child protection per the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968. Early-intervention support before a child is listed on the CPR by age five requires a preventative model of care as opposed to a reactive one. However, Stalker and Moscardini (2012) highlight that many families end up receiving support only at times of crisis due to pressures on resources in the public sector. Addressing family wellbeing through integrated family support in ECEC is one way to provide preventative and early-intervention support, which positively impacts children throughout the entire lifespan (García et al., 2016).

A focus on family support is not a new concept in the political context of Scotland. This is exemplified by numerous pieces of guidance across both education and social services, including: The Early Years Framework (2008), Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) (2008), The Early Years Collaborative (EYC) (2014), The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, Building the Ambition (2014), The Promise (2020), and the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2023). While there has historically been a call for more support with respect to child and family wellbeing, this is not reflected in practice across Scotland. One of the difficulties in providing universal services is that each of the 32 local authorities in Scotland have different policies, funding, and resources. These are barriers to providing holistic family support in ECEC.

There is a need for more resources from social services across Scotland to provide this family support in ECEC. Without additional resources families may feel uncomfortable speaking with ECEC practitioners about sensitive family circumstances, ECEC practitioners may not feel comfortable taking on a 'lead professional' role, and ECEC centres alone may not have the means to provide necessary support (Jopling & Vincent, 2020). A collaborative relationship between social work and education, either through shared resources and training for ECEC practitioners or inclusion of social workers in ECEC settings, is one way to provide holistic family support in the earliest years of a child's life. In Scotland, social workers have the training, resources, and experience supporting vulnerable individuals that ECEC practitioners may not have, and can therefore bridge this gap in support. While GIRFEC and The Promise highlighted the need for this integrated, preventative family support in Scotland, Rose (2015) argues



that more consistent implementation of this family support across Scotland is needed to 'demonstrate that the programme has actually had an impact on individual children's well-being in both the short and the long term' (Rose, 2015, as cited in Jopling & Vincent, 2020, p. 8).

Other ways to improve family wellbeing in ECEC centres are rooted in the structure, environment, and collaboration within the centre. These methods are identified in the current study through families' voices regarding their child's ECEC centre.

Methodology

Study design

The current study examines qualitative data to identify how the outcome of improved family wellbeing can be achieved in ECEC settings. Eight articles were chosen for analysis in this study.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p. 2) state that 'there is no single right way to analyse qualitative data; equally, it is essential to find ways of using the data to think with'. In the data analysis for this study, it was important to empower the voices and experiences of families, as opposed to generalising their experiences. Thematic analysis felt the most appropriate method of data analysis because it aims to identify patterns in the literature and 'can emphasise the social, cultural, and structural contexts that influence individual experiences' (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p. 847). Furthermore, thematic analysis helps to 'understand a set of experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a data set' (Braun & Clarke, 2012, as cited in Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p. 847), which suits the research aim of this study as it involves investigating families' experiences to inform policy and practice.

The inclusion criteria for this study were: (1) a setting of ECEC or related terminology for the cultural context of the research, (2) written in English, (3) peer-reviewed sources, (4) research from all dates; this choice was due to a lack of relevant literature on the topic.

The exclusion criteria for this study were: (1) sources that analysed only children's wellbeing; although it is related to overall family wellbeing it did not directly address the research aim, (2) reviews of relevant policies; while these sources were useful for supplemental information about the topic they were not as relevant for direct analysis of specific examples in the context of this study, (3) sources that analysed families with children older than six years old; the focus of this study was on early childhood which was defined as 0-6 years old to reflect national guidance.



Data analysis

Originally, the intention was to conduct a more narrative model of data analysis, as it felt disconnected to analyse the selected articles all together considering they focus on a few different perspectives (parents', practitioners', and researchers' views) and utilise different types of data (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods). However, it became clear that several topics were emergent as themes regardless of the perspective or type of data. This finding justifies the use of thematic analysis and highlights the further significance of the themes and codes to support family wellbeing in ECEC as they are prominent across all data collection methods.

Although most codes are interconnected, it was a choice to include them separately because there are unique qualities to each one which was identified through the data.

Figure 1 displays the themes and codes which were identified in the thematic analysis used in this study. **Figure 2** displays the interconnected nature of the identified codes.

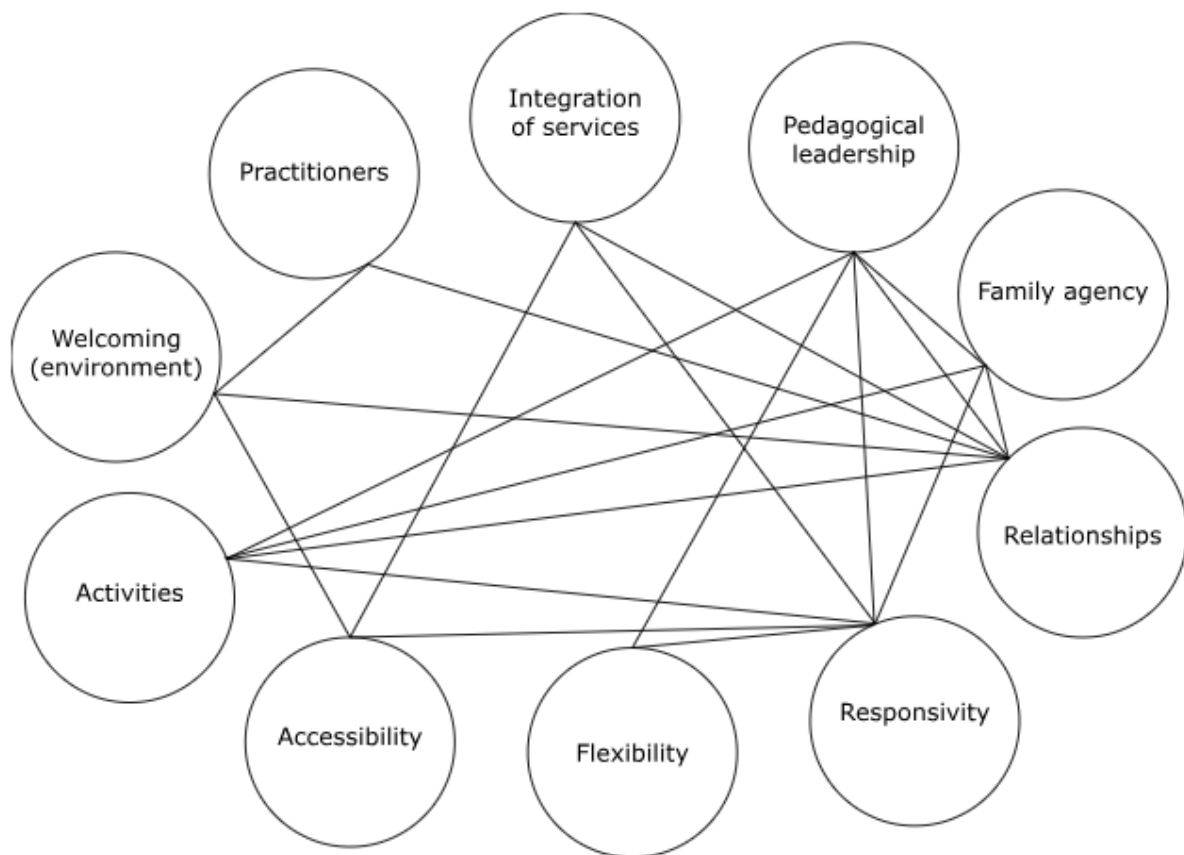


Figure 1: Themes and codes

Themes	Codes	Details
Collaboration	Integration of services	Integrated or access to services including education, family support, social services, health, etc. available through the ECEC setting
	Pedagogical leadership	Giving parents shared responsibility for shaping the program, environment, and structure of the ECEC setting along with practitioners (flat organisation vs. hierarchical organisation)
	Family agency	Parents and carers having expertise in their lives and about their children, practitioner respect for family values, family-centred approach
	Relationships	Bi-directional between practitioners and parents, peer support, children's social support, trust
Structure	Responsivity	To families' needs, children's needs, families' circumstances
	Flexibility	Attendance, parental involvement, structure
	Accessibility	Location, financially feasible, culturally appropriate
	Activities	For parents and children (both one-to-one and groups), home visits
Environment	Welcoming	The ECEC setting should feel relaxing, comfortable, organic
	Practitioners	Practitioners need to be skilled at supporting families and children, have welcoming attitudes, and contribute to a safe environment



Figure 2: Interconnected codes



Research findings

Integration of services

The facilitator has more of a holistic view of what the children are like both inside and outside the classroom, so that is really useful. I think the facilitator role is like a bridge. (Parent interview in Leitão & Shumba, 2024, p. 7)

The need for integrated social supports was discussed in six of the articles as an important component for family attendance in ECEC (Hale et al., 2020; Kaiser et al., 2022; Kirk, 2003; Leitão & Shumba, 2024; Leske et al., 2015; Skattebol et al., 2014). Integrated support included home visits, connections with community services, and professional support. In the report conducted by Skattebol et al. (2014), researchers found that families being less involved in ECEC was due not to a lack of interest in early childhood education but rather the need to prioritise family stability and safety. It was found that 'families from disadvantaged contexts were able to thrive when supported to articulate their priorities and find resources to meet their basic everyday needs' (Skattebol et al., 2014, p. 5). By offering opportunities for professional support in ECEC settings, accessibility is increased for families and 'vulnerable and resilient families [can participate] together' (Kirk, 2003, p. 95). This promotes an inclusive approach that benefits the wellbeing of children and families. There is a reduction of stigma for vulnerable families when they are included in a collective community of support which highlights how 'early years' centres can help to provide a foundation for future resilience' (Kirk, 2003, p. 96).

While not all ECEC settings assume responsibility for holistic family support, sometimes limited by funding regulations, Leske et al. (2015) found that ECEC settings that included this holistic support in their philosophy had more success. One ECEC centre in Ireland structured their program to include a facilitator role which acted as a main family support contact for families, separate to the teachers within the centre. Parents indicated the support from the facilitator reduced their stress and increased wellbeing, as exemplified by one parent's response that the facilitator helped them '[learn] more about myself and how I am only one human' (Leitão & Shumba, 2024, p. 9).

Pedagogical leadership

Parents experience the staff more as partners in their children's everyday lives and their upbringing, rather than just as the staff of a child care unit of a municipal ECEC department. (Parent interview, in Purola & Kuusisto, 2021, p. 8)

Collaboration between families and practitioners instils an environment of connectedness and shared responsibility (Purola & Kuusisto, 2021). The ECEC



service Te Aroha Noa in New Zealand follows the traditional Maori principle *ako*, which means everyone is a learner and a teacher in a collective process (Munford et al., 2007). Practitioners at Te Aroha Noa found that children's wellbeing improved when parents were more involved in the centre and participated more in their children's lives.

Parents want to be involved and have a say in the ECEC setting their children attend (Skattebol et al., 2014). The data highlighted examples of when this joint collaboration has been successful in ECEC settings. At Te Aroha Noa, parents helped shape the program structure from a playgroup in the 1990s to a collaborative ECEC model that employed parents as joint educators alongside facilitators of the program (Munford et al., 2007). At the Open Kindergarten in Mayfield, Scotland, practitioners brought in sleep specialists and members from the local social work team to meet with parents after families discussed a need for these supports in the program (Hale et al., 2020). At an ECEC centre in Finland, parents helped to organise events and activities throughout the year, such as flea markets, parties, and soup nights (Purola & Kuusisto, 2021). Parents reported that this engagement with the program built trust between parents and practitioners and positively impacted the wellbeing of families.

Family agency

A sense of security is created: I am being heard and appreciated as a human being, so surely my child is also being heard and appreciated as his/her own person. (Parent interview in Purola & Kuusisto, 2021, p. 9)

Related to pedagogical leadership is the agency a family has over their experience in ECEC settings. Family agency can be described as how instrumental families can be in the ECEC setting as a result of practitioners showing an interest in parents' points of view and those views being taken seriously (Kaiser et al., 2022). Leske et al. (2015) found that family agency was directly related to attendance at ECEC programs where attendance was not mandatory. In the report by Skattebol et al. (2014), researchers found that families wanted their knowledge about their children respected and incorporated into the programs. When this does not occur, parents can feel deficient (Munford et al., 2007). Such was the case for one parent interviewed who felt she was 'seen as "complaining" rather than respected as a mother engaged in her children's learning' (Skattebol et al., 2014, p. 7). In facilitating family agency in ECEC programs, parents have the opportunity to 'become powerful advocates for their children' (Munford et al., 2007, p. 82). With an increase in family agency, parents feel more valued in the ECEC community and more confident in their own knowledge and abilities (Munford et al., 2007; Purola & Kuusisto, 2021).

At Te Aroha Noa, parents' expertise is recognised and valued by practitioners, which has resulted in some parents gaining confidence to pursue further



educational opportunities in their own lives (Munford et al., 2007). In the Open Kindergarten models piloted in Scotland, there was a focus on parent-led models of ECEC which promoted a person-centred approach. Hale et al. (2020, p. 51) described the importance of family agency in Open Kindergartens by stating, 'a model reliant on the "expert" input potentially de-skills parents and carers by undermining their sense of parenting competence independent of the expert'.

Relationships

We have become a larger group, a part of a larger village, a family; we have people to whom we can turn, with whom we can speak in confidence about anything, gain friendship, genuine caring, and growth for the whole family. (Parent interview in Purola & Kuusisto, 2021, p. 7)

Relationships are critical to families' positive experiences in ECEC, as parents and practitioners overwhelmingly reported in all eight articles considered in this study. Parent/practitioner, parent/parent, practitioner/child, and child/child relationships were all identified as influential in an effective ECEC program. Parents reported an increased feeling of community and connectedness through positive relationships at ECEC settings which improved their children's development and wellbeing (Hale et al., 2020; Kirk, 2003; Purola & Kuusisto, 2021; Skattebol et al., 2014). In the parent surveys for Open Kindergarten models in Scotland, $\frac{2}{3}$ of parents in one program reported the reason for attending was related to interactions with others for both the parents and their children, with $\frac{1}{3}$ of parents in another program reporting a similar motivation (Hale et al., 2020). In the study analysing parents' participation in a Finnish ECEC centre, 'there were 211 mentions of being or doing together in the community, which represents the largest number of mentions in this study' (Purola & Kuusisto, 2021, p. 6).

Relationships in ECEC improve family wellbeing by forming a network of social support which improves parents' confidence in their abilities (Hale et al., 2020; Purola & Kuusisto, 2021) and 'empower[s] families as collaborative educators' (Leske et al., 2015, p. 117). Purola & Kuusisto (2021, p. 3) identified through parents' responses the recurring theme that 'continuous, open, and bi-directional communications between parents and ECEC teachers were a way to improve the collaboration, contributing towards supporting the child's development'. Munford et al. (2007, p. 81) describe the collaborative model at their centre as 'a strong foundation that parents can draw on throughout the life course as they face other challenges [...] [with] the potential for spill-over benefits to other families/whanau in the wider community'. Kirk (2003) found that supportive relationships between families and ECEC settings contributed to parental support, which promoted resilience across the family.



Responsivity

The facilitator went beyond what was needed to do [...] the facilitator is very aware of people's needs [...] [they] had gone to the trouble of finding this source which could help me, and my child was delighted. (Parent interview in Leitão & Shumba, 2024, p. 6)

Responsivity of a program can be described as practitioners' adaptability and commitment to meeting families' needs and interests. Responsive programs promote family agency, which supports pedagogical relationships between practitioners and parents. Parents reported that ECEC services responsive to their needs benefited both the child and family wellbeing (Hale et al., 2020; Leitão & Shumba, 2024; Leske et al., 2015; Munford et al., 2007; Skattebol et al., 2014). Leske et al. (2015) describe an example of an ECEC centre that provided food for families who were unable to pack snacks for their children, when practitioners noticed attendance was impacted by the 'shame factor' associated with this circumstance. At an ECEC centre in Ireland, families described the 'tailored support' they received from facilitators which supported their family's specific needs through home visits, assessments, and joint activities (Leitão & Shumba, 2024). By creating a responsive program, ECEC services adopt a holistic approach to care that caters to both the children and the parents.

Responsivity is particularly important for vulnerable families and children who have additional or complex needs. Munford et al. (2007, p. 84) describe the belief at Te Aroha Noa that 'vulnerable children stand to gain from early interventions and support that address both their education/developmental needs and provide support and education for their parents'. Skattebol et al. (2014, p. 7) echo this belief as their data highlights parents' wish for accessible ECEC that includes 'additional services and supports for families in disadvantaged circumstances'. One parent at an Open Kindergarten centre in Scotland described the responsive nature of practitioners: 'they're more supportive to some of the other mums, which I think is nice. I think that's important' (Hale et al., 2020, p. 60).

Flexibility

Building up those relationships, they don't necessarily get to do it when they're in a group that's really structured. (Mayfield practitioner interview in Hale et al., 2020, p. 50)

A component of effective ECEC identified in the data was flexibility in attendance and structure. Parents and practitioners reflected on the positive impact that flexible attendance had on family wellbeing (Hale et al., 2020; Leske et al., 2015; Skattebol et al., 2014). In the report which looked at the ECEC



experiences of low-income families in Australia, parents described a common experience of unstable work impacting their access to ECEC services (Skattebol et al., 2014). It was 'valued' when families could continue participating in an ECEC centre despite this instability (Skattebol et al., 2014). This flexibility as an acknowledgment of family circumstances was found to be present in non-licensed ECEC services in Australia which adopt a philosophy of family learning as opposed to a focus on only the child (Leske et al., 2015). Hale et al. (2020) found that parents who participated in the Open Kindergarten pilots in Scotland appreciated the flexible attendance policy because it took pressure off them and created a relaxed environment. Many parents reported poor mental health at the onset of the Open Kindergarten pilots and that the flexible structure positively impacted their wellbeing. One parent's description of the flexible Open Kindergarten program was, 'this is a lifeline. It gets me out of the house' (Hale et al., 2020, p. 47). A more structured ECEC program could pressure families experiencing poor mental health to attend regular hours which could lead to disengagement from services.

Flexibility in program structure was present in effective ECEC programs as well, including unstructured parent groups. Mayfield practitioners at the Open Kindergarten in Scotland highlighted the value of natural, unstructured discussions for parents, which help them to feel relaxed and unjudged (Hale et al., 2020). This organic and 'family feel' structure was compared to traditional parenting classes which were described as more judgmental (Hale et al., 2020). Leske et al. (2015) found that the flexibility of non-licensed programs allowed greater responsiveness to family needs and a focus on whole-family support.

Accessibility

If it wasnae free I wouldnae be here because I wouldn't be able to afford it. (Mayfield parent interview in Hale et al., 2020, p. 44)

Barriers to accessible ECEC services include the location (Hale et al., 2020; Kaiser et al., 2022; Leitão & Shumba, 2024; Leske et al., 2015), costs to attend (Hale et al., 2020; Leske et al., 2015; Skattebol et al., 2014), and cultural inclusivity (Hale et al., 2020; Leske et al., 2015; Munford et al., 2007). Location of ECEC services can impact transportation needs and community connectedness for families. The Mount Isla centre in Australia identified the lack of transport in indigenous communities as a main barrier to effective support for families (Leske et al., 2015). Similarly, costs for transportation prevented families from attending the Mayfield Open Kindergarten, which prompted the centre to provide a free bus service to address this need (Hale et al., 2020). Prioritising an accessible location for families increases attendance and allows opportunity for more connectedness across the community, inside and outside the walls of the ECEC centre (Hale et al., 2020; Leske et al., 2015; Munford et al., 2007; Purola & Kuusisto, 2021; Skattebol et al., 2014).



Parents reported that cost-free programs were vital for their families (Hale et al., 2020; Leske et al., 2015; Skattebol et al., 2014). Free or low-cost ECEC services are essential for low-income families because they prevent vulnerable families from being excluded from receiving the benefits of high-quality ECEC. One parent described his experience applying for childcare subsidies to afford ECEC as a long process of many referrals. Until the subsidies were processed, the parent had to use over half his income paying for ECEC and described that time by saying, 'I'm so scared every single day' (Skattebol et al., 2014, p. 6). Kirk (2003, p. 96) highlighted the positive impact of including the entire community in ECEC: 'child and family well-being and the strengthening of communities can be enhanced when all types of early years' provision adopts an open, inclusive approach.'

Cultural inclusivity emerged as another important element of accessibility for effective ECEC services (Hale et al., 2020; Leske et al., 2015; Munford et al., 2007). A main component in promoting cultural inclusivity is the presence of diverse ECEC practitioners, with one parent reflecting that '[the indigenous practitioners] have such a huge role in making families feel safe and encouraging them to come' (Leske et al., 2015, p. 114). Overcoming cultural barriers proved to be a priority in non-licensed programs which adopted a holistic philosophy of care (Leske et al., 2015). Hale et al. (2020, p. 54) describe Open Kindergarten as having 'the potential to enable children to develop a sense of inclusivity if there is a range of cultural backgrounds represented'. By creating a place where families of all cultural backgrounds feel welcomed and respected, the ECEC program demonstrates its 'culturally and socially responsive management practices' which contribute to the success of programs like Te Aroha Noa (Munford et al., 2007, p. 83).

Activities

[The activity] gives you the opportunity to see and maybe meet other parents [...] it was great to be social and see familiar faces.
(Parent interview in Leitão & Shumba, 2024, p. 9)

Activities are a central method to promote social connections, parental involvement, and opportunities for joint collaboration in the development of ECEC services. Parents described various activities offered at ECEC programs which improved their experiences, including one-to-one activities involving parents and practitioners, peer group activities for parents, and group activities for the entire ECEC community (Hale et al., 2020; Kirk, 2003; Leitão & Shumba, 2024; Munford et al., 2007; Purola & Kuusisto, 2021). In the survey conducted by Purola and Kuusisto (2021), parents (N = 93) gave all activities high ratings, with 59% of parents highly rating even the lowest-rated activity, which suggests that the type of activity did not matter as much as the general opportunity to engage in them. Conversely, Leitão & Shumba (2024) found that parents preferred activities which reflected particular needs, as identified by families.



These findings highlight the importance of ECEC programs incorporating families' views in the facilitation of activities and adopting a responsive model. One parent described their experience with positive ECEC activities, stating 'it gives a whole new dimension to the children's world' (Purola & Kuusisto, 2021, p. 7). Group activities in the ECEC community provide opportunities for community development and social interaction between families (Leitão & Shumba, 2024). One-to-one activities between parents and practitioners provide opportunities for wellbeing support and building trusting ECEC-parent relationships (Hale et al., 2020).

Welcoming

That's why we get a lot of people off the street who come through the door – because they feel comfortable. (Non-licensed practitioner interview in Leske et al., 2015, p. 114)

Four articles mentioned the ECEC setting as a welcoming environment that contributes to family attendance and/or wellbeing (Hale et al., 2020; Leske et al., 2015; Munford et al., 2007; Purola & Kuusisto, 2021). In Finland, families reflected that feelings of connectedness were directly related to the atmosphere cultivated by the ECEC centre (Purola & Kuusisto, 2021). Parents in Open Kindergartens in Scotland described the environments as making them feel 'comfortable and safe', 'relaxed', and 'like being at home' (Hale et al., 2020). Attributes of the environment which promoted feelings of comfort include: an open-door policy, a relaxed and flexible structure, simple greetings every day, and a non-judgmental approach (Hale et al., 2020; Leske et al., 2015; Purola & Kuusisto, 2021).

A safe, welcoming environment is particularly necessary in ECEC settings which provide holistic support to families, due to the nature of topics that may be discussed – such as child development and parenting (Kaiser et al., 2022; Leitão & Shumba, 2024; Munford et al., 2007) – and the mental health challenges that families may be facing (Hale et al., 2020; Kirk, 2003; Leitão & Shumba, 2024; Skattebol et al., 2014). Parents involved in Open Kindergartens in Scotland viewed the program as 'a source of relief from [feelings] of being trapped, stuck, or overwhelmed' (Hale et al., 2020, p. 50). With such powerful potential to support families in a variety of ways, it is essential that ECEC settings are non-judgmental, comfortable environments and venues (Leske et al., 2015).

Practitioners

They [practitioners] just make you feel like you're at home basically when you come in, which just makes you feel relaxed the minute you walk in the first door. (Mayfield parent interview in Hale et al., 2020, p. 56)



Practitioners' personalities and attitudes contributed to the development of a welcoming atmosphere, improved communication with families, and increased attendance at ECEC centres (Hale et al., 2020; Leitão & Shumba, 2024; Leske et al., 2015). Parents reported that positive interactions with practitioners improved both theirs and their children's wellbeing (Leitão & Shumba, 2024). It was important to parents to receive a welcome from practitioners upon arrival to ECEC centres (Hale et al., 2020; Purola & Kuusisto, 2021), and parents involved in Open Kindergartens in Scotland described this welcome as directly influencing their decision about whether to return to the program (Hale et al., 2020). In addition to the frequency of positive interactions with practitioners, parents reported the need for 'the right person' to be in these roles (Leitão & Shumba, 2024). It was appreciated when practitioners were approachable, visibly happy to see families, and good communicators (Hale et al., 2020; Leitão & Shumba, 2024; Skattebol et al., 2014).

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight aspects of ECEC settings' structure, environment, and the collaboration within the setting which promote family wellbeing.

The majority of articles included in this study highlighted the need for integrated social supports (Hale et al., 2020; Kaiser et al., 2022; Kirk, 2003; Leitão & Shumba, 2024; Leske et al., 2015; Skattebol et al., 2014). In studies conducted by Kirk (2003) and Leske et al. (2015), it was found that there was a link between parental welfare and child development which was supported by integration. This increased opportunities for families to access support beyond childcare and education for their child. Kirk (2003, p. 95) summarises this finding by stating, 'the integrated nature of child development, parent-child relationships, resilience and well-being emphasises the importance of ensuring that outcomes for parents as well as children are included in the planning, delivery and evaluation of early years' provision'.

In being offered integrated services in accessible ECEC settings, families receive the opportunity to seek support for needs beyond childcare and education which may otherwise require specialist services and interventions that are tagged with stigma both publicly and internally. Access to these resources through ECEC settings could reduce stigma and promote human agency by de-individualising disadvantage through collaboration with other services, thus increasing accessibility for all families.

Pedagogical leadership was identified as a way to improve family wellbeing. It relies on trusting, bi-directional relationships between parents and practitioners (Purola & Kuusisto, 2021), which were highlighted in every article included in this study as an important factor for improved wellbeing. The collaborative relationship between parents and practitioners respects the expertise of both



parties to achieve a joint goal: supporting the best development and interests of children (Sadownik & Visnjić Jevtić, 2023).

This leadership approach promotes family agency, which describes an acknowledgement of families as experts in their lives. There is consideration for how to promote agency for disadvantaged groups within social and political contexts, with Booth (2019) asserting that a culture has been created in the UK whereby there are biases and prejudices around how disadvantage occurs. This culture negatively impacts opportunities for agency in the lives of disadvantaged groups. 'This is tangible in the (re)conceptualisation of the term "service user" which has become increasingly synonymous with the idea that some individuals are overly dependent on the state, and not worthy of the support that "hard-working families" deserve' (Booth, 2019, p. 283).

In the current study, whole-family support improved parent and child agency through parent responses such as '[the facilitator's support] was re-affirming for the parents as much as it was for the kids' (Leitão & Shumba, 2024, p. 8) and 'the children, as well, have this person they can come to, and the Facilitator is also involved in their care' (Leitão & Shumba, 2024, p. 8).

Accessibility in ECEC, as defined by the OECD, includes location, affordability, flexibility, and availability for all children's needs and age groups (OECD, 2001). Vandenbroeck (2015, p. 175) adds to this definition by stating, 'as families living in poverty are often less mobile than more affluent families, it is crucial that high quality services are located where poor families and ethnic minority families reside'. This crucial consideration of accessibility was highlighted in the current study as families reported transportation to and from ECEC sometimes prohibited their attendance altogether (Hale et al., 2020; Leske et al., 2015). Several locally based ECEC settings in the current study increased feelings of community for everyone when accessibility was made a priority (Hale et al., 2020; Leitão & Shumba, 2024; Leske et al., 2015; Munford et al., 2007). Duncan (2012, p. 81) describes ideal ECEC services as optimal community hubs which promote stronger, healthier communities, asserting that 'strong communities and networks support strong families' which are more resilient. It is with a recognition of the strengths of all children and families that ECEC centres can support resilient communities (Bove & Sharmahd, 2020). Benson et al. (1998, p. 138) highlight the interconnected relationships between families and communities by stating, 'families do not exist in isolation [...] family capacity is strengthened when partnerships of mutual support and trust unite around shared goals'.

Relevant to accessible ECEC locations is the financial accessibility for families. The current study highlighted costs as a barrier to participation in ECEC (Hale et al., 2020; Leske et al., 2015; Skattebol et al., 2014), as well as a need for stable, long-term funding for ECEC centres (Hale et al., 2020; Leske et al., 2015; Munford et al., 2007; Skattebol et al., 2014). Skattebol et al. (2023, p. 1)



note that 'families with young children who face economic and related adversities are the most likely group to miss out on the advantages of regular sustained participation in high quality early childhood education and care'. Secure, long-term funding for free or low-cost ECEC supports increased opportunities for long-term relationship-building, which increases social networks (Munford et al., 2007), with centres able to offer more responsive, flexible programs, which are vital, particularly for families experiencing economic adversity (Munford et al., 2007; Leske et al., 2015; Skattebol et al., 2014).

Accessible locations and costs for ECEC could have an intersectional impact in the case of Scotland, as the 2020-2023 national census identified that 43% of children in a minority ethnic household were in relative poverty and 38% were in absolute poverty – the highest proportions of children across all priority groups, including single-parent households and households with three or more children (Scottish Government, 2024a). An inclusive approach to care is particularly important as ECEC centres may be the first opportunity for immigrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking families to build a new community, a population which has increased in Scotland since 2015 (Scottish Government, 2023b). Bove and Sharmahd (2020, p. 7) argue that if systems fail to develop culturally sensitive services, 'too many children and their families will remain or become invisible in our societies, an extremely grave risk that we, as the early childhood community, cannot accept'.

Limitations and ethics

One limitation of this study is that six of the eight studies mentioned all or majority female participants. This is a major limitation to understanding family functioning and family wellbeing, as it skews data to a female perspective. A consideration for future research should be the inclusion of more male responses, as family wellbeing could look very different from a male perspective.

Another limitation is the lack of a definition of 'family' and whether families included in the research were nuclear, single-parent, or extended. This limitation may impact an understanding of family wellbeing with looked-after children through kinship, foster, or residential care. A consideration for future research is that it should include experiences from a variety of types of families.

There exists a limitation in this study of researcher bias through use of data that has already been interpreted. Given that the literature analysed in this study underwent its own data analysis by researchers before being included in my thematic analysis, it is unknown whether the same themes would have arisen had my analysis been conducted with the raw data. This limitation is inherent in literature reviewing but is an important consideration for the present research findings and study conclusions.



There are ethical considerations around the use of language, both as a limitation in seeking out relevant literature and in understanding of the literature. As one of the inclusion criteria was articles written in English, there is a limitation of excluding research in other languages that may have been relevant to include. Similarly, there is a limitation to analysing data which has been translated from the original language, such as in the article written by Purola & Kuusisto (2021), which was conducted in Finnish and translated to English.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore ways of promoting family wellbeing in ECEC settings to inform the Scottish context. In the findings, themes of collaboration, program structure, and program environment emerged. Many families expressed a positive experience with ECEC that provided both formal and informal support. There emerged a need for integrated services that supported families outside of ECEC to improve their attendance and experiences within ECEC. It was found across all studies that family agency is built through collaborative relationships between parents and practitioners, parent participation in activities, and flexible, responsive ECEC programs. Free or low-cost ECEC programs need to be accessible for all families in the community to promote social capital, community resilience, and cultural inclusion.

To achieve improved family wellbeing as an outcome of the recent WFWF plan set out by the Scottish Government, adaptations of The Universal Health Visitor's Pathway (UHVP) could be made in ECEC settings. The integrated, whole-family approach of the UHVP has already been a success, and a similar approach in ECEC would support children and families further (Doi et al., 2022). Compared to the guaranteed 11 home visits through the UHVP, ECEC could provide similar holistic support every day for years in a central, community-based setting. More support could be dedicated to parental mental health, and practitioners could provide more intense support due to the smaller number of families in ECEC settings. This support could provide opportunities for more sustained relationships and social networks for parents. Scotland would benefit from this approach to ECEC, to improve family wellbeing and abide by its commitment to make Scotland 'the best place in the world to grow up' (Scottish Government, 2014a).

Recommendations for practice

From these findings, there are three key elements of ECEC that could promote family wellbeing in Scotland:

1. The integration of education, health, and social services to provide whole-family support beyond child care and education.



2. A pedagogical leadership structure between practitioners and parents which promotes family agency and collaborative, bi-directional relationships.
3. Accessible programs that are flexible and responsive to include all members of the community, supported by secure and long-term funding.

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