

Systematic Review

A Systematic Scoping Review on the Transition of Under-3-Year-Old Children from Home to Early Childhood Education and Care

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Abstract: This systematic scoping review aimed to identify and describe published peer-reviewed research articles on the transition of under-3-year-old children from home to early childhood education and care (ECEC) from 1 January 2013 to 19 August 2024. Both national (Idunn, Libris, Oria) and international (Academic Search Premier, ERIC, PsycInfo, Scopus, Web of Science) databases were systematically searched for relevant studies in English, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish. A total of 20 studies met the inclusion criteria for the systematic review. The results show that the number of publications fluctuated from January 2013 to August 2024. Finland was the most represented country in the different studies, and by continent, most studies were published in Europe. The studies included diverse methodologies, such as descriptive purposes or studies exploring relationships between concepts. Eleven studies used a longitudinal design. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were represented, and data were collected from multiple informants. The studies examined multiple concepts, such as children's adaptive behavior during the transition, the ECEC process and structural quality, child characteristics, stress, and parents' roles and experiences. The results of this review contribute to identifying research gaps and what future research can do to increase knowledge about this topic.

Keywords: transition; home; ECEC; under 3-year-olds; systematic scoping review



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1. Introduction

This systematic scoping review aims to identify and describe published peer-reviewed research articles on the transition of under-3-year-old children from home to early childhood education and care (ECEC). Internationally, an increasing number of children are attending ECEC from an early age (e.g., [Council of the European Union, 2019](#); [Dalli & White, 2017](#); [OECD, 2021](#)). Many of these children experience a change from being at home with their primary caregivers to the ECEC center, where they spend a considerable number of hours with new caregivers and peers ([Council of the European Union, 2019](#); [Fleer & Linke, 2016](#)). In addition, children meet new environments and routines ([Monk & Hall, 2017](#)).

In this review, we define the transition from home to ECEC as the period in which children begin attending an ECEC center for the first time, including the preparatory phase, the initial separation from the parents, and the early adjustment period in ECEC. This process may span several days, weeks, or months, depending on the ECEC practices and the needs of the children ([Brooker, 2008](#); [O'Connor, 2017](#); [OECD, 2017](#)).

Since this transition occurs at an early age for many children, it can have implications for their development. Early childhood is a sensitive period during which brain development accelerates rapidly and experiences within the care environment profoundly affect both cognitive and emotional growth (Blakemore & Frith, 2005; French, 2019; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). Quality caregiving, particularly in nonparental care settings, must be nurturing and responsive to support optimal brain development. Inconsistent or lower-quality care during this stage can lead to negative outcomes, which emphasizes the need for highly trained and sensitive caregivers to promote positive developmental outcomes in young children (French, 2019). A good transition from home to ECEC is important for children's well-being and development. Positive interactions and engagement between children, peers, parents, and professional caregivers support children's sense of belonging, involvement, and well-being during the transition (Brooker, 2008; O'Connor, 2017). A preparatory phase (e.g., attending the ECEC center for a few hours per week before the child officially starts) may help children, parents, and ECEC staff become familiar with one another. In addition, strong parent–staff collaboration and flexibility to individual children's needs are examples of practices that can support a positive transition from home to ECEC (e.g., O'Connor, 2017).

Even though research shows the importance of good transitions and environmental support during the early years, there is limited research on the transition from home to ECEC for children under 3 years of age. Many studies focus on children aged 3 years and older, the period after the transition from home to ECEC, the transition from an intervention or health care system to ECEC (e.g., children at risk or with disabilities), or the transition to primary school (e.g., with a focus on school readiness, which is formalized in policy and embedded in educational systems (e.g., Gath et al., 2024; Hartle et al., 2023; O'Connor, 2017; OECD, 2017; White et al., 2020)).

2. Research Questions

Considering the increasing number of young children in ECEC, the increasing amount of time that young children spend in ECEC, and the potential effects of early transitions on children's well-being and development, this systematic scoping review focuses on the transition of under-3-year-old children from home to ECEC. This study provides an overview of what is known about these children's transition from home to ECEC, identifies knowledge gaps, and provides a basis for further research on this topic.

This study examines the following research questions:

1. How many peer-reviewed research articles have been published on the transition of under-3-year-olds from home to ECEC, and what are the characteristics of these studies in terms of their year of publication, country, continent, and purpose?
2. Which methodologies have been used in peer-reviewed research articles that have been published on the transition of under-3-year-olds from home to ECEC?
3. Which concepts have been examined in peer-reviewed research articles that have been published on the transition of under-3-year-olds from home to ECEC?
4. Which findings and implications do peer-reviewed research articles present on the transition of under-3-year-olds from home to ECEC?

3. Materials and Methods

To address the research questions above, we followed the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2022; Peters et al., 2020; Tricco et al., 2018). In addition, we chose to limit our search to the past 10 full years, based on previous studies indicating that robust evidence can be obtained by restricting the search period to approximately 10 to 15 years (e.g., Furuya-Kanamori et al., 2023). In addition, ECEC policy, practices, and children’s attendance numbers have evolved significantly over the past decade (e.g., Council of the European Union, 2019; Dalli & White, 2017; OECD, 2021), which may render older publications less representative of current practices.

3.1. Inclusion Criteria

During our database search, we used the following inclusion criteria to find relevant studies:

- Topic: The transition from home to ECEC.
- Population: Children under 3 years of age.
- Time of publication: Between 2013 and 2024.
- Publication type: Peer-reviewed research article.
- Publication language: English, Norwegian, Swedish, or Danish.

Following these criteria, sources were not included when they violated at least one criterion. In addition, a source’s full text should be accessible to the authors.

3.2. Literature Search

We used the population–concept–context (PCC; Peters et al., 2020) framework to define our search strings. Although we were interested in the transition from home to ECEC for children under 3 years of age, we did not include “home” in our search strings, as we found many irrelevant hits when doing so (i.e., more than 10,000 irrelevant hits). Table 1 shows the search strings used in English, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish.

Searches were performed in both national (Idunn, Libris, Oria) and international (Academic Search Premier, ERIC, PsycInfo, Scopus, Web of Science) databases. Appendix A presents the full search strategies, filters, and limits used for each database. The final search was conducted independently by three researchers on 19 August 2024. Table 2 shows the hits per database.

Table 1. Search strings applied in the database search.

PCC (Population, Concept, Context)	Search String—English	Search String—Danish	Search String—Norwegian	Search String—Swedish
Children under 3 years	toddler* OR 0–3 OR “children under 3 years old” OR “children under 3” OR “young* child*”	børn* OR småbørn OR vuggestuebørn OR “1–3 år”	småbarn OR “små barn” OR “1–3 åring*” OR “ettåring*” OR “ett-til-treåring*” OR “de yngste barna” OR “de minste barna”	barn* OR “små barn*” OR “yngre barn*”
Transition	transition* OR “transition period” OR “transition phase” OR starting* OR “starting period” OR “starting phase	overgang* OR modtakelse OR innkjøring	“foreldreaktiv tilvenning” OR “start i barnehagen” OR tilvenning OR innkjøring OR oppstart OR overgang OR “sammenheng mellom hjem og barnehage”	inskolning* OR “aktivt föräldraskap” OR uppstart*

Table 1. Cont.

PCC (Population, Concept, Context)	Search String—English	Search String—Danish	Search String—Norwegian	Search String—Swedish
ECEC	ECEC* OR ECE* OR “ECEC center” OR “ECE center” OR “ECEC centre” OR “ECE centre” OR daycare OR “day care” OR “daycare center” OR “daycare centre” OR “day care center” OR “day care centre” OR childcare* OR “child care*” OR “childcare center*” OR “child care center*” OR “childcare centre*” OR “child care centre*” OR “centerbased care” OR “centrebased care” OR “centerbased childcare” OR “centrebased childcare” OR “centerbased child care” OR “centrebased child care” OR “center-based childcare” OR “centre-based childcare” OR “center-based child care” OR “centre-based child care” OR preschool* OR pre-school* OR kindergarten* OR “early childhood education” OR “early childhood education and care” OR crèche* OR creche* OR nurser* OR “day nurser*” OR “nursery school*” OR “infant school*” OR playschool* OR “play school*” OR “pre-primary school*”	børnehave* OR vuggestue* OR dagpleje*	barnehage OR småbarnsavdeling OR småbarnsgruppe	förskolan OR dagis*

Table 2. Overview of databases searched and hits per database.

Source	Date	Hits
Academic Search Premier	19 August 2024	319
ERIC	19 August 2024	359
Idunn—Danish	19 August 2024	10
Idunn—Norwegian	19 August 2024	36
Idunn—Swedish	19 August 2024	1
Libris—Swedish	19 August 2024	1
Oria	19 August 2024	819
PsycInfo	19 August 2024	329
Scopus	19 August 2024	1159
Web of Science	19 August 2024	776
Total		3809

3.3. Screening Process

The aim of the screening process was to exclude studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria. Rayyan ([Ouzzani et al., 2016](#)) software was used during the screening process to code and report on the included and excluded studies. Both the title and abstract screening, as well as the full-text screening, were conducted independently by pairs of authors. As seven authors were involved in the study, the tasks were equally divided into seven portions, ensuring that each was reviewed by two authors working independently of each other. Following the independent (abstract and full text) screenings, any discrepancies or conflicts in the evaluations were discussed and resolved through consensus between the two assigned authors. This approach ensured that all sections of the study received a thorough assessment. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flowchart of the identification, screening, and inclusion of studies.

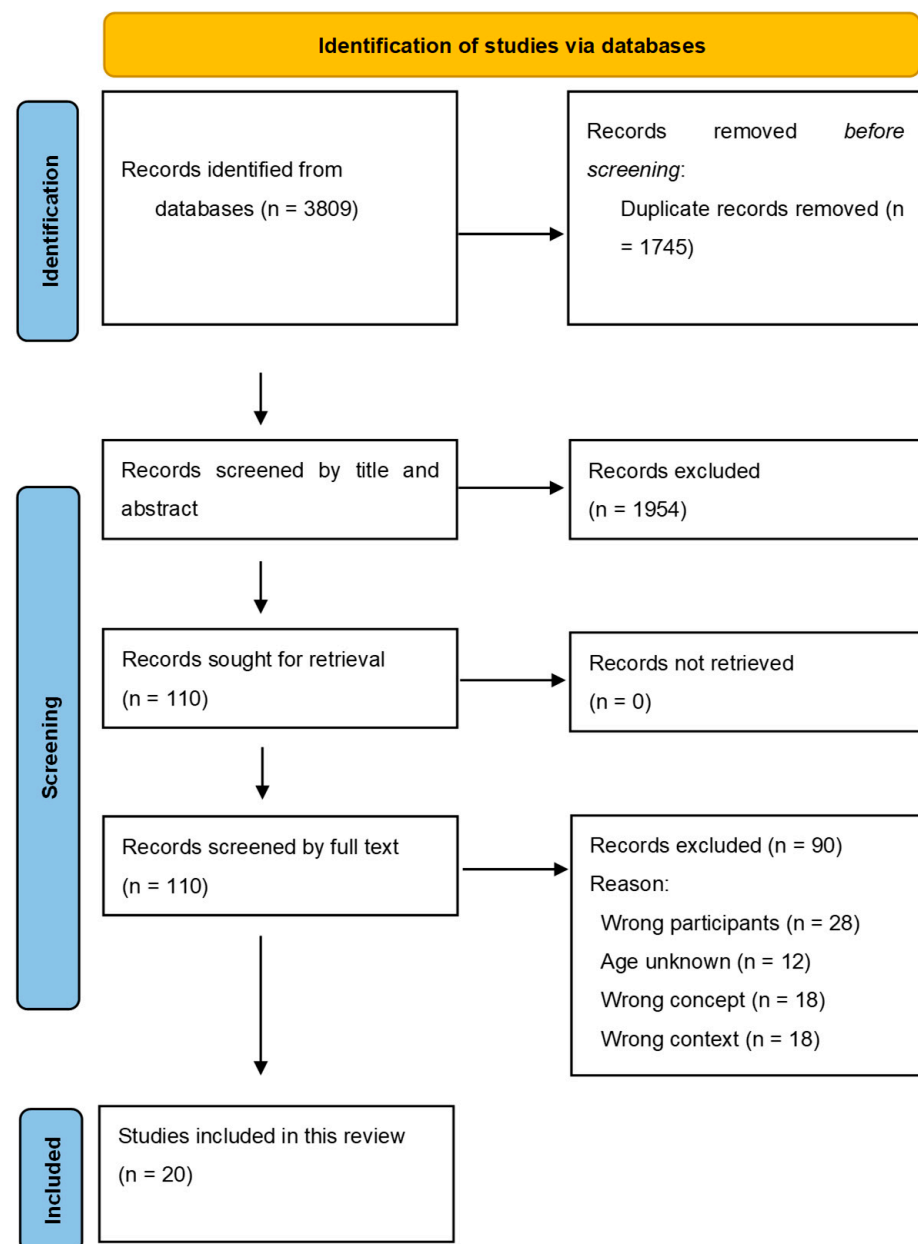


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart presenting the identification, screening, and inclusion of studies.

3.4. Data Extraction

The data extraction for the 20 included studies was performed by the first and second authors. Both authors filled out Appendix B independently. In cases of conflict, the two researchers had a discussion to reach a joint decision. The final data consisted of study characteristics (i.e., year of publication, country, continent, and study purpose), methodological approaches (i.e., research methods, study designs, data collection methods), sample characteristics (i.e., sample of interest, sample size, informants), concepts, findings, and implications. We use the term “concepts” to refer to the key ideas or constructs that were the focus of examination in the included studies: that is, for example, the psychological, social, or developmental phenomena being explored (e.g., ECEC process quality, staff–child attachment). By “concepts”, we do not mean general topics (e.g., transition to ECEC) or emergent themes from qualitative analysis, but rather the specific constructs or variables that studies aimed to define, measure, or explore in depth.

4. Results

After the database search and screening process, we found a total of 20 studies that met all the inclusion criteria. Appendix B provides an overview of the included studies on the transition of under-3-year-old children from home to ECEC in the 2013–2024 period. Note that professional caregivers are referred to differently in some studies listed in Appendix B, such as ECEC teacher or preschool teacher. This is because we aimed to stay as close as possible to the original wording used in each study.

4.1. Characteristics of the Studies

Year of publication: Figure 2 presents the number of studies that were published each year from the 1 January 2013 to 19 August 2024.

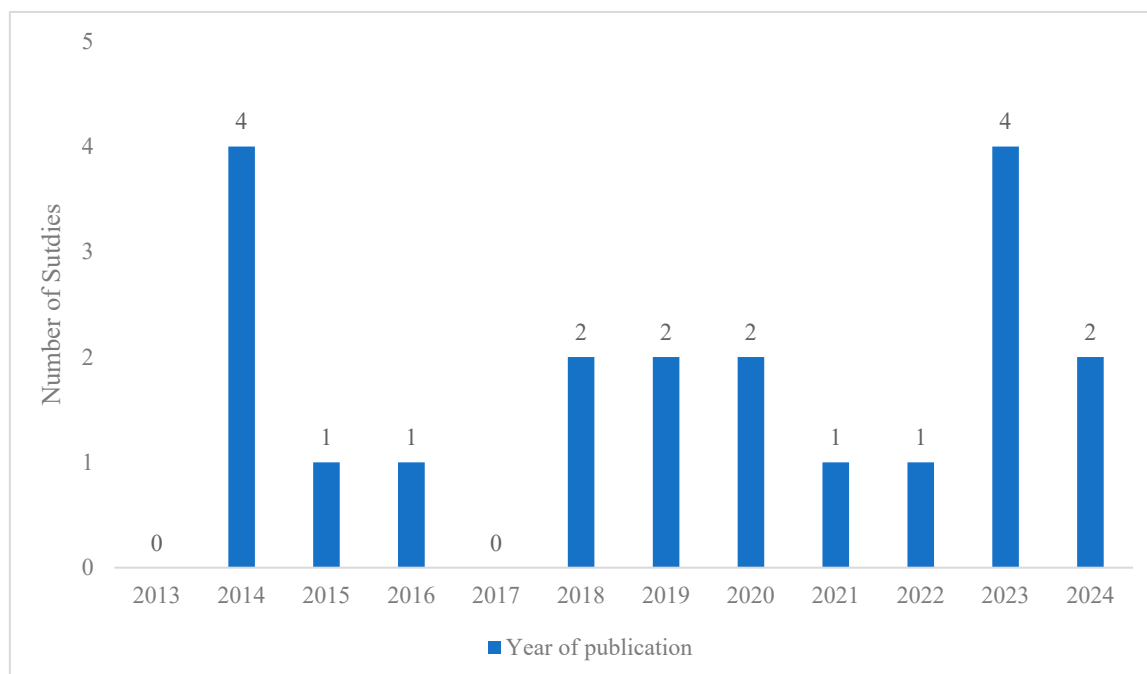


Figure 2. Number of studies addressing the transition of under-3-year-olds from home to ECEC from 1 January 2013 to 19 August 2024 (n = 20).

The number of publications addressing the transition of under-3-year-olds from home to ECEC varied during this period. There was a peak in 2014 and 2023, when 40% of the included articles were published, whereas no articles were published in 2013 and 2017.

Country and continent: Figure 3 shows the number of studies conducted in different countries. By country, Finland was the most represented in the studies considered in this review, accounting for 20% of the included articles. By continent, most studies were conducted in Europe (13 studies, 65%), followed by North America (four studies, 20%), Asia (two studies, 10%), and South America (one study, 5%).

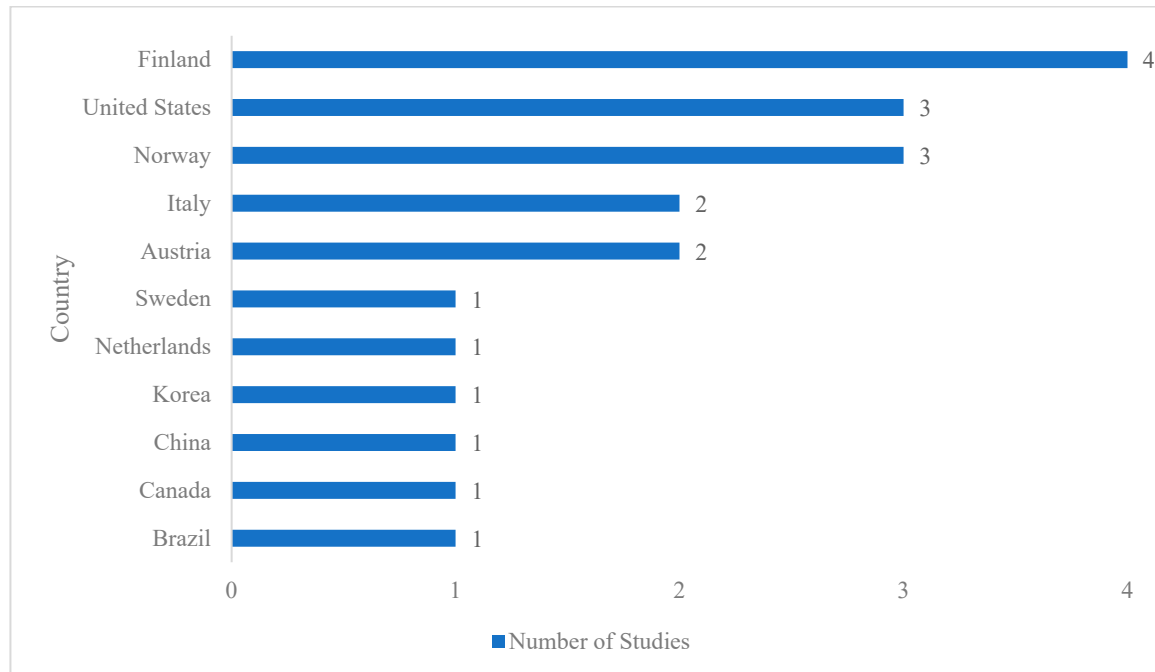


Figure 3. Number of studies conducted in different countries.

Study purpose: Most studies aimed to explore the relationships between different concepts (11 studies, 55%), followed by descriptive studies (seven studies, 35%), and two studies (10%) that aimed to develop a method. Examples of examined relationships between concepts include children’s stress, child characteristics, and childcare quality. Other studies explored how different introduction models (i.e., preparation, child–adult ratios, length, intensity, and flexibility to the needs of child and family) might influence child adjustment and family–staff relationship building. The descriptive studies examined, for example, children’s behavior during the transition, centers’ practices during the transition, professional caregivers’ perspectives, and parents’ coping strategies and experiences. Two studies focused on developing and testing the applicability of a pedagogical documentation tool designed for use during the first months in ECEC.

4.2. Methodological Approaches

Research methods: Eleven studies (55%) were qualitative, seven (35%) were quantitative, and two (10%) used a mixed-methods approach

Study designs: Eleven studies used a longitudinal design, while different studies employed case study designs (four studies) or phenomenological approaches (two studies). All other study designs were represented one time (i.e., view study, observation study, ethnography, cross-sectional, comparative, and mosaic approach). Note that because of the multiple designs that are applied in some studies, the number of studies in this overview was greater than 20.

Data collection methods: The studies used multiple methods to collect their data (16 studies, 80%). Figure 4 shows an overview of the data collection methods used. Most studies used observations (11 studies) and quantitative questionnaires (seven studies),

followed by saliva samples and 1-on-1 interviews (five studies each). Note that because multimethod data collection was applied in most studies, the number of studies in Figure 4 is greater than 20.

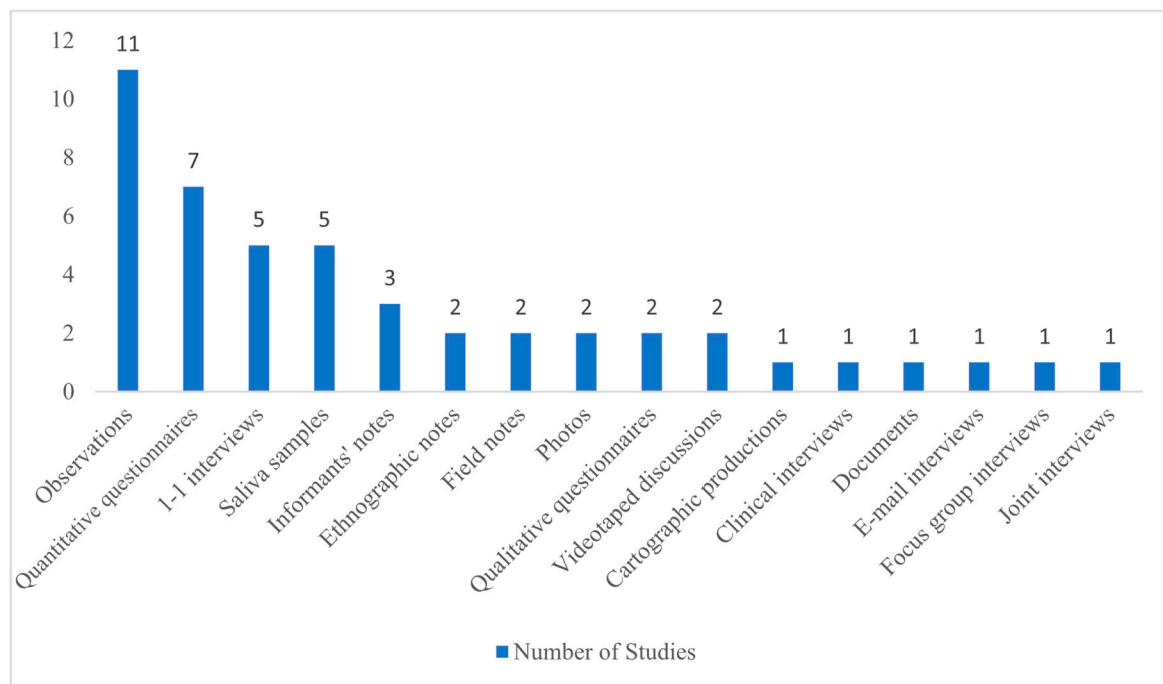


Figure 4. Number of studies by data collection method.

4.3. Sample Characteristics

Sample of interest: In most studies, children were the sample of interest (15 studies, 75%). Professional caregivers were the sample of interest in five studies, followed by parents in three studies. One study included both children and professional caregivers as their sample of interest. One study included parents and professional caregivers, and another study included both children and parents as part of the sample of interest.

Sample size: Studies that had children as the sample of interest had a sample size that varied from 1 to 222 children ($M = 62.3$; $SD = 64.9$). For studies with professional caregivers as the sample of interest, the sample size varied from 4 to 535 professional caregivers ($M = 145.4$; $SD = 222$), whereas for parents, the sample size varied from 21 to 192 ($M = 80.7$; $SD = 96.5$).

Informants: Most studies had multiple informant data (15 studies, 75%). Figure 5 shows an overview of how many studies had a certain type of informant. Professional caregivers were the most represented informants (17 studies), followed by children (14 studies) and parents (i.e., 10 studies with both fathers and mothers represented) or mothers (four studies).

There was an overlap between the informants and the sample of interest. In 14 studies, children were both the sample of interest and informants by participating in observations (nine studies) and giving saliva samples (five studies). Professional caregivers were both the informants and the sample of interest in seven studies. They provided data on how they arrange the ECEC practice (two studies), talked about their own experiences during the transition (two studies), were using a new pedagogical documentation tool (two studies), or were part of an observation (one study). Parents were both the informants and the sample of interest in three studies, where they talked about their coping strategies during the transition (two studies) or if they had former experience of having a child starting in ECEC (one study).

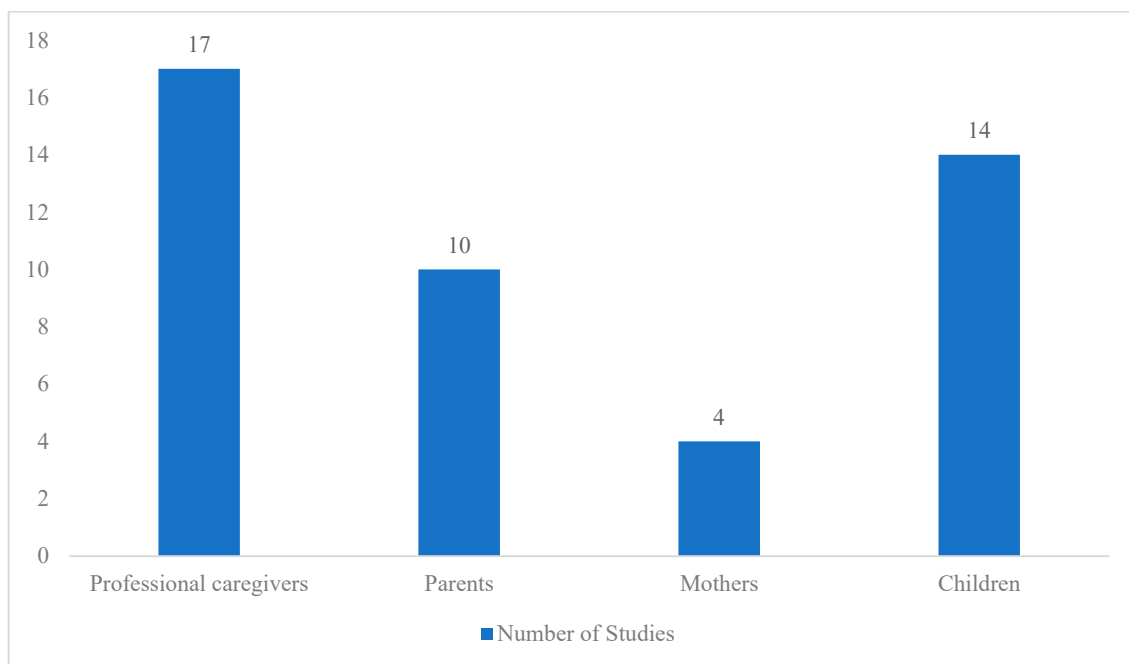


Figure 5. Number of studies by type of informant.

4.4. Concepts

Figure 6 shows an overview of how many studies examined a concept. Note that the number of studies in Figure 6 is greater than 20 because most studies examined multiple concepts. Children's adaptive behavior during the transition and ECEC process quality (e.g., staff–child relationship, interactions between children in the group) were studied the most (seven studies). They were followed by concepts such as child characteristics (e.g., age, gender, temperament), ECEC structural quality (e.g., toys, staff experience), and stress (five studies). Parents' roles and experiences were also mentioned in different studies (e.g., staff–parent relationship, mother–child attachment, maternal worries, parents' coping strategies, family demographics).

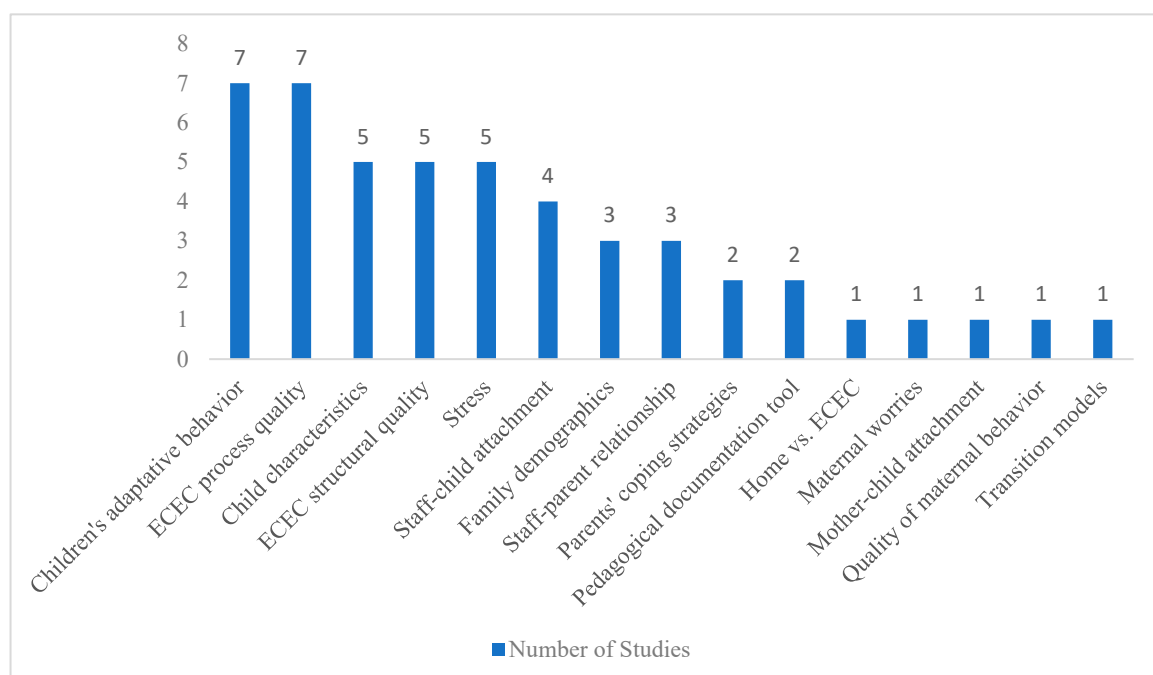


Figure 6. Number of studies that examined concepts.

4.5. Findings and Implications

Appendix B presents the findings and implications of each study. The findings and implications are presented on the basis of the outcome variable of interest in each study, such as children's stress, children's adaptive behavior, ECEC quality, child characteristics, and parents' roles and experiences.

Five longitudinal studies examined children's stress as an outcome variable during the transition from home to ECEC, with a focus on cortisol levels as a physiological indicator of stress (Ahnert et al., 2023; Albers et al., 2016; Bernard et al., 2015; Drugli et al., 2023; Nystad et al., 2021). Despite being conducted across different cultural and educational contexts—Austria, the Netherlands, the United States, and Norway—these studies consistently revealed that the transition to ECEC is a stressful experience for many young children, particularly during the initial period of separation from parents. The findings emphasize the universal nature of the challenges faced by children during this critical transition period as they navigate the emotional and social demands of separating from their parents and the familiar comfort of home (Ahnert et al., 2023; Albers et al., 2016; Bernard et al., 2015; Drugli et al., 2023; Nystad et al., 2021). For example, Ahnert et al. (2023) conducted their study in Austria and identified four distinct cortisol profiles in young children during the transition. The highest stress levels were observed at the start, especially among younger children and those whose mothers stayed for extended periods during entry. The findings highlighted the importance of secure attachment relationships both at home and in ECEC for justifying stress during this transition. Small group sizes and larger age differences within groups were initially beneficial for reducing stress, but as children adjusted, larger groups and smaller age differences facilitated peer interactions and social inclusion, further easing stress. Similarly, Albers et al. (2016), focusing on infants from families with a high socioeconomic status (SES) in the Netherlands, reported that cortisol levels peaked sharply during the first month of ECEC and gradually declined over subsequent months, although they remained consistently higher on ECEC days than on home days. This study revealed that individual differences, such as a child's temperament and maternal caregiving quality, influenced stress responses, with children of sensitive mothers or children with difficult temperaments showing higher cortisol levels. Bernard et al. (2015) conducted their study in the United States with children aged 0–8 years (including data on age groups such as 0–18 months and 18–36 months) and explored how cortisol patterns changed over a 10-week transition period. They reported that cortisol levels consistently rose from midmorning to afternoon on ECEC days, in contrast to the typical diurnal decline observed at home. While midmorning cortisol levels gradually declined over the course of 10 weeks, reflecting some adaptation, the persistence of elevated afternoon cortisol levels suggested that the social and environmental demands of ECEC, including peer interactions and group dynamics, continued to elicit stress responses. In Norway, Drugli et al. (2023) investigated toddlers during their transition to ECEC and reported that cortisol levels peaked during the second week of separation from parents. While stress levels gradually decreased and stabilized by the three-month mark, parents and professional caregivers reported that toddlers exhibited emotional reactivity and tiredness at home during the initial weeks. This study emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts between parents and professional caregivers to support children during this period, including creating a “caring triangle” and offering emotional support both at home and in ECEC. Similarly, Nystad et al. (2021), who also conducted their study in Norway, reported that cortisol levels increased significantly during the separation phase, peaking in the second week of entry into ECEC. Although stress levels declined over time, they remained higher than they did in the accompanied phase even after 4–6 weeks, highlighting the ongoing adaptation challenges faced by toddlers. This study suggested that shorter ECEC

days during the separation phase and providing flexible parental leave could support children's emotional adjustment.

Other studies focused on children's adaptive behavior during the transition from home to ECEC (McDevitt & Recchia, 2022; Picchio & Mayer, 2019; Revilla et al., 2024a, 2024b; Tebet et al., 2020). These studies had qualitative approaches, which, in various ways, emphasize that the transition is not something that happens by drop-off but, rather, is a long process in which children co-create with their peers, parents, and professional caregivers. The structural quality of ECEC centers also plays an important role in this process (McDevitt & Recchia, 2022; Picchio & Mayer, 2019; Revilla et al., 2024a, 2024b; Tebet et al., 2020). Observations of children in ECEC centers in Brazil, the United States, and Finland highlight the complexities of children's lives in ECEC and the abilities that children have to interact from an early age (McDevitt & Recchia, 2022; Revilla et al., 2024a, 2024b; Tebet et al., 2020). However, the preconditions for children's adaptability are influenced by their home settings and their cultural background, that is, whether children's family belongs to a minority group (for instance, being a migrant family) and speaks a language that is different from the language that is spoken in the ECEC center. These children may experience extra challenges when starting in ECEC (Picchio & Mayer, 2019). They have to settle into an ECEC center and into a new language community, which makes the transition a period of challenges, and children can be overwhelmed, to which they might react differently. Professional caregivers' knowledge of and concern for these children are important for supporting these children when they settle into a new peer group (Picchio & Mayer, 2019).

In addition to the importance of ECEC structural quality, multiple studies had ECEC process quality as an outcome of interest, and mainly focused on attachment and relationships between the child(ren), parents, and professional caregivers. The relevance of the amount of time for attachment, gender differences, and individual and group characteristics are presented (Ereky-Stevens et al., 2018; Klette & Killén, 2019; Macagno & Molina, 2020; Schärer, 2018; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014). The role of parents, professional caregivers, and child characteristics in the parent–professional caregiver relationship was examined in a quantitative study conducted in the United States (Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014). This relationship and communication prior to the transition showed that parents viewed care more positively when they knew each other and if the parents were less anxious. Professional caregivers with knowledge of children's development communicated more frequently with parents, and they also communicated more with parents whose children had an easy temperament (Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014). A qualitative study from Norway conducted by Klette and Killén (2019) on daily separations and reunions of children with their mothers in the morning and afternoon revealed that toddlers struggled with separation anxiety in different phases and in different ways after one month in ECEC, especially when few professional caregivers were present. Another qualitative study (Schärer, 2018), conducted in Canada, revealed that professional caregivers are most concerned with their professional roles and that their interpretations of “professionalism” influence not only the elements of the center that are more organizational and structural, such as schedules and shifts, but also professional caregivers' relationships with parents and children. In contrast to what might be considered attachment and relational approaches to caring, professional caregivers were concerned that close attachment relationships are unhealthy and that they might result in overattached children, which can make children dependent on one particular professional caregiver. The challenge of maintaining a balance between being professional and seeking harmony with the individual child and the whole group was also found in this study (Schärer, 2018). A longitudinal study from Austria (Ereky-Stevens et al., 2018) measured attachment security at three points over the course of toddlers' first four months in ECEC.

This study focused on professional caregivers' sensitivity during dyadic interactions, both with the individual child and in group situations. The study also investigated whether attachment security differs between boys and girls. Attachment security with professional caregivers was relatively low in dyadic interactions, and girls were more securely attached to their professional caregivers than boys were. Additionally, children who were in a group with professional caregivers that scored higher on group-related sensitivity showed greater attachment security (Ereky-Stevens et al., 2018).

A qualitative longitudinal study (Macagno & Molina, 2020) conducted in Italy examined the relationship between children and their caregivers using the adapted version of the PAD, Professional Caregiver Attachment Diary (PCAD), as a method. This study revealed that strong child–professional caregiver relationships developed within the ECEC center. After two and four months, the results revealed a significant decrease in children's avoidant and resilient attachment behaviors. While secure attachment behavior did not increase, behaviors such as non-distress showed an upward trend. This finding suggests that children may feel increasingly secure over time (Macagno & Molina, 2020).

Other studies focused more on parents' roles and experiences with their children's transitions. Again, these studies were performed in various contexts and cultural settings; however, the common thread is that parental involvement in the transition period has positive results for the security of the child and for parent–professional caregiver long-term cooperation. A qualitative study from China (Lam, 2014) revealed that parents have three ways of handling children's stress during transition periods: soothing the farewell situation, approaching the underlying reason for their children's distress, and choosing a hard approach, with the expectation that children will learn to cope by themselves. Professional caregivers should be aware of these approaches and encourage parents to deal with the underlying reason for transition stress (Lam, 2014). One example of such a bridge between home and ECEC is provided in a Finnish study that used an artifact-based documentation method that enabled parents to talk and engage concerning their ECEC life and professional caregivers to understand children's home situation (Rintakorpi et al., 2014). A similar implication is suggested in other Nordic studies. That is, professional caregivers should pay attention to parents' experiences with the transition. For example, a Finnish study revealed that professional caregivers benefit from being aware that the transition may also cause stress for parents. Finding ways to understand and acknowledge their experience may enhance the transition experience for all involved (Mellenius et al., 2023). A Swedish study revealed that parent active models may provide a less stressful experience for children, professional caregivers, and parents. In parent active models, both the parent(s) and child attend the ECEC center for a full day over a period of 3 to 5 days. This allows the parent(s) to observe what happens in the ECEC center and get to know the professional caregivers better. These models can also form a better base for parent–professional caregiver cooperation in the long run (Søe et al., 2023).

5. Discussion

This systematic scoping review presents key patterns and gaps in the literature on the transition of under-3-year-old children from home to ECEC. In the following section, we discuss the main findings in relation to study characteristics, methodological trends, conceptual focus, and reported outcomes. This will be discussed in relation to other studies.

5.1. Characteristics of the Studies

Although an increasing number of under-3-year-olds spend a considerable amount of time in ECEC internationally (e.g., [Council of the European Union, 2019](#); [Dalli & White, 2017](#); [OECD, 2021](#)) and given the importance of the environment for children's current and later well-being and development ([Blakemore & Frith, 2005](#); [French, 2019](#); [National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007](#)), the number of published peer-reviewed research articles on the transition of under-3-year-olds from home to ECEC fluctuated from 1 January 2013 to 19 August 2024.

The 20 studies included in this review were conducted in 11 different countries and four different continents. This finding underlines the relevance that these studies have for many countries (e.g., [OECD, 2021](#)). Two of the Finnish studies were written by the same four authors and used data from the same research project ([Revilla et al., 2024a, 2024b](#)). In Norway, three authors contributed to two different studies; however, these were based on separate research projects ([Drugli et al., 2023](#); [Nystad et al., 2021](#)). In Austria, one author was involved in two studies that used data from the same research project ([Ahnert et al., 2023](#); [Ereky-Stevens et al., 2018](#)).

All 20 studies were written in English. This finding might be due to local or national policies, where researchers are encouraged to publish in English (e.g., [Solberg & Wendt, 2021](#)), as well as researchers' own interest in the internationalization of research and the relevance of the topic (e.g., [OECD, 2021](#)).

The study purpose of 11 of the 20 studies was to explore relationships between different concepts of young children's transition from home to ECEC. Other studies were descriptive, with the authors describing concepts of young children's transition from home to ECEC but also focusing on practices and professional caregivers' and parents' perspectives and experiences. Two studies sought to develop a method that can be used when young children start in ECEC. This pattern does not correspond with some national research, such as in Scandinavia from 2018 to 2023, where most studies were descriptive, followed by studies exploring relationships ([Guldbrandsen et al., 2023, 2024, 2025](#)). We argue that there might be a trend where newer research is increasingly focusing on exploring relationships rather than being descriptive.

5.2. Methodological Approaches

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to study the transition of under-3-year-olds from home to ECEC. Only two studies used mixed methods. Slightly more than half of the 20 studies had a longitudinal design (11 studies), and most studies used multiple methods (16 studies) to collect their data. It is a strength that both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. Qualitative research can be used to describe the transition from home to ECEC and how children, parents, or professional caregivers experience this transition (e.g., [Bang, 2014](#); [Lam, 2014](#); [McDevitt & Recchia, 2022](#); [Schärer, 2018](#)). Quantitative research can be used to explore the relationships between different concepts that might impact the transition from home to ECEC and the experiences of those involved (e.g., [Ahnert et al., 2023](#); [Ereky-Stevens et al., 2018](#); [Nystad et al., 2021](#)). Mixed-methods approaches can be used to explore changes in cortisol levels over time while also gathering parents' and professional caregivers' perceptions of the child's adjustment to ECEC (e.g., [Drugli et al., 2023](#)). In addition, combining surveys and interviews can help in examining the types of introduction models used, as well as perceptions of parent-staff relationships and children's adjustment (e.g., [Søe et al., 2023](#)). A longitudinal design is a strength, as such a design can be used to examine and compare potential effects over a longer period. The use of multiple methods is also a strength because it provides more insight into the concepts related to the transition from home to ECEC and the experiences of

those involved (e.g., [McDevitt & Recchia, 2022](#); [Rintakorpi et al., 2014](#)). The most commonly used data collection methods were observations and quantitative questionnaires.

5.3. Sample Characteristics

Most studies (15 studies) had children as their sample of interest, with a mean of 62.3 children who participated in the study. The sample sizes for professional caregivers and parents were larger, with means of 145.4 professional caregivers and 80.7 parents. Although most studies had children as their sample of interest, most studies used data from multiple informants. This is a strength, as these data provide information about children's transition from home to ECEC from multiple perspectives. However, the "voice of children" is lacking in many studies because most studies that use children as informants collect data from them by using observations and saliva samples (e.g., [Ahnert et al., 2023](#); [Nystad et al., 2021](#)). Parents and professional caregivers are used to participate in interviews and complete questionnaires about the child(ren) (e.g., [Bang, 2014](#); [Lam, 2014](#)). The lack of the "voice of children" might be explained by the ethical, technical, and methodological challenges that might be faced when asking for young children's experiences ([Sumsion et al., 2011](#)). However, there are methods, such as the dialogical communications method, that emphasize the child's perspective by trying to obtain knowledge about how the world looks through the child's eyes and that take the "voice of the child" seriously ([Gamst, 2017](#)). Another method can be the use of vignettes, which are short descriptive narratives based on real-life observations, describing children's experiences during transitions. A vignette can, for example, describe how an infant responds emotionally and socially in a situation. These vignettes can be used to start a dialogue between parents and professional caregivers about what happened in that situation. Although this method does not include the "voice of children" literally, it presents the children's experiences, preferences, and feelings when they cannot express themselves verbally yet (e.g., [Herold et al., 2022](#); [White et al., 2022b](#)).

5.4. Concepts

Multiple studies (seven studies) examined children's adaptive behavior during the transition and ECEC process quality. Other concepts that were examined in multiple studies were ECEC structural quality, child characteristics, stress, and parents' roles and experiences. These concepts were often examined together in the same study. For example, [Albers et al. \(2016\)](#) examined how stress levels were influenced not only by child characteristics such as temperament but also by the quality of maternal behavior and ECEC. Other studies ([Ahnert et al., 2023](#); [Bernard et al., 2015](#); [Nystad et al., 2021](#)) also examined the relationships among children's stress levels, child and family characteristics, and ECEC quality. Children's adaptive behavior during the transition was also examined in studies that focused on different introduction models to compare how these models might influence children's adjustment and parents–staff relationship building ([Søe et al., 2023](#)). The study of [Rintakorpi et al. \(2014\)](#) focused on the effectiveness (content and process) of a pedagogical documentation tool for understanding the child during transition. Differently, the study of [Picchio and Mayer \(2019\)](#) focused more on children from migrant families to examine children's adaptive behavior during the transition.

The focus on children's adaptive behavior, the ECEC process and structural quality, child characteristics, stress, and parents' roles and experiences is in line with national and international ECEC policies. This is because there is an increasing focus on children's well-being, development, ECEC quality, and family background (e.g., [European Commission/European Education and Culture Executive Agency/Eurydice, 2019](#); [Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017](#); [OECD, 2017, 2018, 2019](#)). However, few studies have examined the collaboration between parents and ECEC staff during the transi-

tion from home to ECEC over a longer period. The studies on parent–staff collaboration presented in this review collected data at one time point to examine how the parents–staff relationship is influenced by a certain transition model (Søe et al., 2023) or by child, family, and staff characteristics (Schärer, 2018; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014). In addition, few studies have examined professional caregivers' own experiences when working with children and parents during the transition from home to ECEC (Schärer, 2018).

5.5. Findings and Implications

Taken together, the 20 peer-reviewed research articles included in this review highlight the multifaceted responsibilities of parents, professional caregivers, and ECEC systems in supporting children during the critical transition from home to ECEC. Across the studies, emphasis is clearly placed on the need for gradual and well-structured transition routines. Activities such as pre-enrollment visits (i.e., visiting the center in the weeks or months before the child starts in ECEC) and introductions to professional caregivers can help children familiarize themselves with the new environment and may ease their adjustment to ECEC (Drugli et al., 2023; Nystad et al., 2021; Revilla et al., 2024b). Collaborative efforts between parents and professional caregivers are crucial in creating a “caring triangle”, which ensures the continuity of emotional support and care both at home and in the ECEC setting (Drugli et al., 2023; Rintakorpi et al., 2014; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014; Søe et al., 2023).

Caregiver sensitivity and responsiveness are central to reducing children's stress during this period. Observing signs of discomfort and providing appropriate comfort and reassurance for children are essential for fostering security in children (Ahnert et al., 2023). However, quick responses to children's emotions should not be the sole focus. Long-term solutions should also be found, such as determining why the child is crying (Bang, 2014). In addition, smaller group sizes and greater age diversity help children in the transition period and ease their stress by allowing for more individualized attention. As children adapt, larger groups and peer interactions within more homogenous settings can further promote social inclusion and reduce stress (Ahnert et al., 2023). Structured routines, shorter ECEC hours during early weeks, and calm, quiet activities during afternoon hours are also beneficial for supporting children's emotion regulation (Drugli et al., 2023; Klette & Killén, 2019; Nystad et al., 2021). Parents play an equally important role by offering emotional closeness and soothing activities at home to support recovery from ECEC-related stress (Nystad et al., 2021). In addition, both parents and professional caregivers should be empowered in their coping strategies for dealing with children's various transition-related challenges so that they can increase their understanding and better support both children and parents (Lam, 2014; Mellenius et al., 2023; Revilla et al., 2024a, 2024b; Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014).

Individualized care is another key theme, as children's stress responses vary based on their temperament, attachment style, and prior ECEC experiences (Albers et al., 2016; Bernard et al., 2015; Revilla et al., 2024b). Early identification of children who struggle with transitions allows professional caregivers and parents to provide targeted interventions, ensuring that these children receive the support that they need to adjust. Persistent maternal anxiety during the transition period, as noted by Ahnert et al. (2023), can exacerbate children's stress, further emphasizing the importance of supporting parents during this time. In addition, the use of pedagogical documentation as a tool to better understand the child is recommended. Such documentation provides more information about the child during the transition for both the parents and professional caregivers (Rintakorpi et al., 2014).

Future research directions highlight the need for studies with larger and more diverse samples, particularly those including children from low socioeconomic or other cultural

backgrounds, to explore the role of ECEC quality in stress regulation and in dealing with challenges during the transition (Albers et al., 2016; Picchio & Mayer, 2019). Longitudinal studies are also recommended to track cortisol patterns, developmental trajectories, and the effects of ECEC experiences over extended periods (Bernard et al., 2015). Examining specific factors such as professional caregiver–child relationships, peer interactions, and daily routines can provide deeper insights into stress regulation during transitions (Bernard et al., 2015; Drugli et al., 2023; Ereky-Stevens et al., 2018; Schärer, 2018). Measures that can capture the quality of group-related interactions should be developed (Ereky-Stevens et al., 2018). Preferably, a measure should be developed that can distinguish between children’s 1-on-1 interactions with other children and with the professional caregiver, the child’s experiences of the professional caregiver’s interaction with the peer group, and the strategies of the professional caregiver with the peer group, as also suggested by Van Schaik et al. (2014). Additionally, the measurement of how children’s behavior changes in different situations and ECEC quality is of interest for future research (McDevitt & Recchia, 2022; Macagno & Molina, 2020; Revilla et al., 2024b; Søre et al., 2023; Tebet et al., 2020). The collection of additional cortisol samples throughout the day and the observation of children’s behaviors both at home and in ECEC are also critical for a more comprehensive understanding of stress responses (Albers et al., 2016).

Taken together, these findings call for policies and practices that prioritize gradual transitions, caregiver sensitivity, and parent–professional caregiver collaboration to optimize children’s well-being during this sensitive adjustment period. The insights provided by these studies contribute to shaping a more supportive framework for home-to-ECEC transitions, ultimately fostering healthier developmental outcomes for young children.

6. Limitations

Although an extensive systematic search procedure was followed, this study has some limitations. It cannot be guaranteed that all published peer-reviewed research articles on the transition of under-3-year-olds from home to ECEC were identified. The search strings might not cover all potential terms that can describe ECEC, transition, and under-3-year-olds in all four different languages. In addition to the search strings, the inclusion criteria might have caused some studies to be not identified or to have been excluded. For example, only published peer-reviewed research articles were included. We wanted to ensure that all the studies were peer-reviewed, as this is not always clear for all types of publications, such as books and reports. In addition, the full texts of other publication types are often less accessible than those of research articles. This might have caused us to miss relevant peer-reviewed books (e.g., White et al., 2022a). We also excluded studies in which the age of the children was not reported. This might have caused some studies to be excluded even though they reported on the transitions of children under the age of 3 years. Another limitation of this study is the search for studies written in English, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish. It is possible that relevant studies were published in other languages as well, but we had to limit ourselves to our language competencies, allowing us to check for interrater reliability between the different researchers of this study when screening the publications. In addition, we limited our search to the period from 1 January 2013 to 19 August 2024. There might be publications from before 2013 that are still relevant, but since ECEC practice, policy, and attendance numbers are developing quickly, we limited our search to the 2013–2024 period. The last limitation might be that we did not conduct a quality assessment of the studies included, which means that we did not consider whether the studies reported validity, reliability, and transparency or what the level of quality was.

7. Implications

Although this study has some limitations, it provides an overview of what is known about the transition of under-3-year-olds from home to ECEC and what the implications are for further research on this topic. Future research can use more mixed methods because both quantitative and qualitative methods have strengths and limitations. Mixed methods can help in comparing different types of data from the same sample to gain more insight into what is happening and is being experienced by multiple informants during the transition from home to ECEC. In addition, more focus should be placed on “children’s voice”, as most studies use children as informants by conducting observations or collecting saliva samples. Parents and professional caregivers provided answers for children in the studies included. While these adult perspectives are crucial, they may not fully capture the experiences and internal states of the children involved. Given the limitations of direct interviews with young children, future studies should incorporate methods such as interactive conversations to engage children in a manner that is both age-appropriate and conducive to expressing their own views and emotions.

Future research might also conduct intervention studies to compare which introduction models might work best for children, parents, and ECEC staff. New or further developed tools and programs might be tested to determine what can support all stakeholders best. The collaboration between parents and staff can also be studied over a longer period instead of at one time point. In addition, the experiences of professional caregivers might be studied in greater depth in terms of how they cope with the transition period from home to ECEC and how this affects them and their colleagues. Finally, children from migrant families and children with disabilities should be studied more in the future. These children are often absent in samples, are not part of any intervention, or do not receive any extra support. These children may face extra challenges during the transition from home to ECEC; therefore, they should be included more in future research.

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Appendix A. Full Search Strategies, Filters, and Limits per Database

Database	Search String	Number of Results on 19 August 2024
Academic Search Premier	“(toddler* OR 0–3 OR “children under 3 years old” OR “children under 3” OR “young* child*”) AND (ECEC* OR ECE* OR “ECEC center” OR “ECE center” OR “ECEC centre” OR “ECE centre” OR daycare OR “day care” OR “daycare center” OR “daycare centre” OR “day care center” OR “day care centre” OR childcare* OR “child care*” OR “childcare center*” OR “child care center*” OR “childcare centre*” OR “child care centre*” OR “centerbased care” OR “centrebased care” OR “centerbased childcare” OR “centrebased childcare” OR “centerbased child care” OR “centrebased child care” OR “center-based childcare” OR “centre-based childcare” OR “center-based child care” OR “centre-based child care” OR preschool* OR pre-school* OR kindergarten* OR “early childhood education” OR “early childhood education and care” OR crèche* OR creche* OR nurser* OR “day nurser*” OR “nursery school*” OR “infant school*” OR playschool* OR “play school*” OR “pre-primary school*”) AND (transition* OR “transition period” OR “transition phase” OR starting* OR “starting period” OR “starting phase”) Peer Reviewed; Published Date: 1 January 2013–31 December 2024 on 18 August 2024 09:01 AM”	N = 319
Eric	“(toddler* OR 0–3 OR “children under 3 years old” OR “children under 3” OR “young* child*”) AND (ECEC* OR ECE* OR “ECEC center” OR “ECE center” OR “ECEC centre” OR “ECE centre” OR daycare OR “day care” OR “daycare center” OR “daycare centre” OR “day care center” OR “day care centre” OR childcare* OR “child care*” OR “childcare center*” OR “child care center*” OR “childcare centre*” OR “child care centre*” OR “centerbased care” OR “centrebased care” OR “centerbased childcare” OR “centrebased childcare” OR “centerbased child care” OR “centrebased child care” OR “center-based childcare” OR “centre-based childcare” OR “center-based child care” OR “centre-based child care” OR preschool* OR pre-school* OR kindergarten* OR “early childhood education” OR “early childhood education and care” OR crèche* OR creche* OR nurser* OR “day nurser*” OR “nursery school*” OR “infant school*” OR playschool* OR “play school*” OR “pre-primary school*”) AND (transition* OR “transition period” OR “transition phase” OR starting* OR “starting period” OR “starting phase”) Peer Reviewed; Date Published: 1 January 2013–31 December 2024 on 18 August 2024 08:06 AM”	N = 359
Idunn—Danish	[[All: børn*] OR [All: småbørn] OR [All: vuggestuebørn] OR [All: “1–3 år”]] AND [[All: børnehave*] OR [All: vuggestue*] OR [All: dagpleje*]] AND [[All: overgang*] OR [All: modtagelse] OR [All: indkjøring]] AND [Publication Date: (1 January 2013 TO 31 December 2024)]	N = 10

Database	Search String	Number of Results on 19 August 2024
Idunn—Norwegian	[[All: småbarn] OR [All: “små barn”] OR [All: “1–3 åring*”] OR [All: “ettåring*”] OR [All: “ett-til-treåring*”] OR [All: “de yngste barna”] OR [All: “de minste barna”]] AND [[All: barnehage] OR [All: småbarnsavdeling] OR [All: småbarnsgruppe]] AND [[All: “foreldreaktiv tilvenning”] OR [All: “start i barnehagen”] OR [All: tilvenning] OR [All: innkjøring] OR [All: oppstart] OR [All: overgang] OR [All: “sammenheng mellom hjem og barnehage”]] AND [Publication Date: (1 January 2013 TO 31 December 2024)]	N = 36
Idunn—Swedish	[[All: barn*] OR [All: “små barn*”] OR [All: “yngre barn*”]] AND [[All: inskolning*] OR [All: “aktivt föräldraskap”] OR [All: uppstart*]] AND [[All: förskolan] OR [All: dagis*]] AND [Publication Date: (1 January 2013 TO 31 December 2024)]	N = 1
Libris—Swedish	(barn* OR “små barn*” OR “yngre barn*”) AND (inskolning* OR “aktivt föräldraskap” OR uppstart*) AND (förskolan OR dagis*)	N = 1
Oria—University of Stavanger Library— English	Alle felt inneholder toddler* OR 0–3 OR “children under 3 years old” OR “children under 3” OR “young* child*” OG Alle felt inneholder ECEC* OR ECE* OR “ECEC center” OR “ECE center” OR “ECEC centre” OR “ECE centre” OR daycare OR “day care” OR “daycare center” OR “daycare centre” OR “day care center” OR “day care centre” OR childcare* OR “child care*” OR “childcare center*” OR “child care center*” OR “childcare centre*” OR “child care centre*” OR “centerbased care” OR “centrebased care” OR “centerbased childcare” OR “centrebased childcare” OR “centerbased child care” OR “centrebased child care” OR “center-based childcare” OR “centre-based childcare” OR “center-based child care” OR “centre-based child care” OR preschool* OR pre-school* OR kindergarten* OR “early childhood education” OR “early childhood education and care” OR crèche* OR creche* OR nurser* OR “day nurser*” OR “nursery school*” OR “infant school*” OR playschool* OR “play school*” OR “pre-primary school*” OG Alle felt inneholder transition* OR “transition period” OR “transition phase” OR starting* OR “starting period” OR “starting phase” OMFANG: Standard/Biblioteket på UIS Vis kun: Fra fagfellevurderte tidsskrift; Utgivelsesår/Opprettelsesdato: 2013–2024	N = 819

Database	Search String	Number of Results on 19 August 2024
PsycInfo (OVID)	((toddler* or 0–3 or “children under 3 years old” or “children under 3” or “young* child*”) and (ECEC* or ECE* or “ECEC center” or “ECE center” or “ECEC centre” or “ECE centre” or daycare or “day care” or “daycare center” or “daycare centre” or “day care center” or “day care centre” or childcare* or “child care*” or “childcare center*” or “child care center*” or “childcare centre*” or “child care centre*” or “centerbased care” or “centrebased care” or “centerbased childcare” or “centrebased childcare” or “centerbased child care” or “centrebased child care” or “center-based childcare” or “centre-based childcare” or “center-based child care” or “centre-based child care” or preschool* or pre-school* or kindergarten* or “early childhood education” or “early childhood education AND care” or cr#che* or creche* or nurser* or “day nurser*” or “nursery school*” or “infant school*” or playschool* or “play school*” or “pre-primary school*”) and (transition* or “transition period” or “transition phase” or starting* or “starting period” or “starting phase”)).mp. [mp = title, abstract, heading word, table of contents, key concepts, original title, tests & measures, mesh word] limit 1 to (peer reviewed journal and yr = “2013–Current”) ((toddler* or 0–3 or “children under 3 years old” or “children under 3” or “young* child*”) and (ECEC* or ECE* or “ECEC center” or “ECE center” or “ECEC centre” or “ECE centre” or daycare or “day care” or “daycare center” or “daycare centre” or “day care center” or “day care centre” or childcare* or “child care*” or “childcare center*” or “child care center*” or “childcare centre*” or “child care centre*” or “centerbased care” or “centrebased care” or “centerbased childcare” or “centrebased childcare” or “centerbased child care” or “centrebased child care” or “center-based childcare” or “centre-based childcare” or “center-based child care” or “centre-based child care” or preschool* or pre-school* or kindergarten* or “early childhood education” or “early childhood education and care” or cr#che* or creche* or nurser* or “day nurser*” or “nursery school*” or “infant school*” or playschool* or “play school*” or “pre-primary school*”) and (transition* or “transition period” or “transition phase” or starting* or “starting period” or “starting phase”)).mp. [mp=title, abstract, heading word, table of contents, key concepts, original title, tests & measures, mesh word] limit 3 to (peer reviewed journal and yr = “2013–Current”)	N = 329

Database	Search String	Number of Results on 19 August 2024
Scopus	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (toddler* OR 0–3 OR "children under 3 years old" OR "children under 3" OR "young* child*") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (ecec* OR ece* OR "ECEC center" OR "ECE center" OR "ECEC centre" OR "ECE centre" OR daycare OR "day care" OR "daycare center" OR "daycare centre" OR "day care center" OR "day care centre" OR childcare* OR "child care*" OR "childcare center*" OR "child care center*" OR "childcare centre*" OR "child care centre*" OR "centerbased care" OR "centrebased care" OR "centerbased childcare" OR "centrebased childcare" OR "centerbased child care" OR "centrebased child care" OR "center-based childcare" OR "centre-based childcare" OR "center-based child care" OR "centre-based child care" OR preschool* OR pre-school* OR kindergarten* OR "early childhood education" OR "early childhood education AND care" OR cr#che* OR creche* OR nurser* OR "day nurser*" OR "nursery school*" OR "infant school*" OR playschool* OR "play school*" OR "pre-primary school*") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (transition* OR "transition period" OR "transition phase" OR starting* OR "starting period" OR "starting phase")) AND PUBYEAR > 2012	N = 1159
Web of Science	toddler* OR 0–3 OR "children under 3 years old" OR "children under 3" OR "young* child*" (All Fields) and ECEC* OR ECE* OR "ECEC center" OR "ECE center" OR "ECEC centre" OR "ECE centre" OR daycare OR "day care" OR "daycare center" OR "daycare centre" OR "day care center" OR "day care centre" OR childcare* OR "child care*" OR "childcare center*" OR "child care center*" OR "childcare centre*" OR "child care centre*" OR "centerbased care" OR "centrebased care" OR "centerbased childcare" OR "centrebased childcare" OR "centerbased child care" OR "centrebased child care" OR "center-based childcare" OR "centre-based childcare" OR "center-based child care" OR "centre-based child care" OR preschool* OR pre-school* OR kindergarten* OR "early childhood education" OR "early childhood education and care" OR crèche* OR creche* OR nurser* OR "day nurser*" OR "nursery school*" OR "infant school*" OR playschool* OR "play school*" OR "pre-primary school*" (All Fields) and transition* OR "transition period" OR "transition phase" OR starting* OR "starting period" OR "starting phase" (All Fields)	N = 776

Appendix B. Overview of the Included Studies

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Ahnert, L. et al.	2023	Stress during transition from home to public childcare	Austria	Explore relationships	Quantitative	Longitudinal	Multimethod: saliva /cortisol samples, questionnaires, observations	10–35 months (N = 104 children)	Professional caregivers, mothers, children	Stress and how stress levels were influenced by various factors, including mother–child and staff–child attachment, maternal worries, childcare environment characteristics (engagement, work experience), child and family demographics	The study examined cortisol rhythms in young children transitioning from home to public childcare, tracking stress levels over time and key influencing factors. Four cortisol profiles emerged: three showed regular diurnal patterns, while the fourth, the stress profile, displayed consistently low cortisol levels, indicating high stress. This profile was most common at the start of childcare, especially in younger children and those with prolonged maternal accompaniment. Most children (57.4%) maintained regular cortisol patterns over four months, while 15.9% showed the stress profile at least once, and 7.9% experienced persistent stress. Stress peaked early and declined over time, stabilizing into regular patterns. Secure attachment with mothers and caregivers helped ease the transition, reducing stress and supporting healthy cortisol regulation.	Parents and caregivers should intervene if a child is not thriving after two months in childcare. Small groups and large age differences can ease adjustment, while larger groups and smaller age gaps later promote social inclusion and reduce stress. Strong adult–child relationships at home and in childcare support smoother transitions. Future research should involve more national and international collaboration on children’s stress during this period. Persistent maternal anxiety can prolong stress in children, highlighting the importance of supporting parents to aid their child’s adjustment.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Albers, E. M. et al.	2016	Cortisol levels of infants in center care across the first year of life: Links with quality of care and infant temperament	Netherlands	Explore relationships	Quantitative	Longitudinal	Multimethod: saliva/cortisol samples, questionnaires, observations	3–12 months (N = 64 children)	Professional caregivers, mothers, children	Stress and how stress levels were influenced by child temperament, quality of maternal behavior, and childcare process quality	Cortisol levels were consistently higher on childcare days than at home, indicating a stress response in infants. Levels peaked sharply in the first month and gradually declined but remained elevated, suggesting persistent stress. Morning cortisol stayed higher than afternoon levels, reflecting a normal rhythm. Stress responses varied based on temperament and maternal caregiving quality, with infants of more sensitive mothers or those with difficult temperaments showing higher cortisol.	Childcare centers should adopt individualized approaches, considering infants' prior caregiving experiences and temperament. Future research should include larger samples, track children during similar activities, and follow them in the first months of childcare. Studies should also examine cortisol levels in low-SES children, collect more samples throughout the day, and assess behavior and social interactions at home and in childcare. Additionally, research should explore children's developmental trajectories within childcare settings.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Bang, Y.-S.	2014	Teacher-caregivers' perceptions of toddlers' adaptation to a childcare center	Korea	Descriptive	Qualitative	View study	1-on-1 interviews	N = 6 professional caregivers working with children under the age of 2 years	Professional caregivers	Children's adaptation to the childcare center and the centers' practice during the study period (from a professional caregiver perspective)	The study examined how teacher-caregivers perceived the transition to ECEC in Korea. In childcare centers, the teacher-caregivers used adaptation programs, and through 6 interviews, the article found that the teacher-caregivers used the programs differently. Some of the respondents emphasized the teacher-caregiver's role more than the program did, while others found the program to be effective.	The study concludes that the teacher-caregivers' role in transition periods should be sensitive to children's needs. They should allow toddlers to explore the new setting and be patient with children. Teacher-caregivers should learn how to read children's needs and respond sensitively to them. To ensure that the transition is a smooth process, parents play a key role, and teacher-caregivers should actively involve them.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Bernard, K. et al.	2015	Examining change in cortisol patterns during the 10-week transition to a new child-care setting	United States	Explore relationships	Quantitative	Longitudinal	Multimethod: saliva/cortisol samples, questionnaires	Children ranged in age from 1.2 months to 8 years old (M = 3.27 years, SD = 2.09). There were 42 infants between 0 and 18 months (25% of sample) and 34 toddlers between 18 and 36 months	Parents, children	Stress and how stress levels were influenced by developmental and environmental factors	The study tracks cortisol patterns in children over 10 weeks of transitioning to childcare, showing a significant rise from midmorning to afternoon due to a decline in midmorning levels, while afternoon levels stayed stable. Cortisol patterns at home and in childcare remained different—at home, levels declined as expected, but in childcare, they consistently rose from midmorning to afternoon. These findings suggest that the childcare environment continues to trigger a stress response even after weeks of attendance.	The persistence of rising cortisol from midmorning to afternoon over 10 weeks suggests that childcare remains challenging for children. While midmorning cortisol declines indicate gradual adaptation, elevated afternoon levels suggest ongoing stress from factors such as peer interactions. More longitudinal research is needed to track cortisol patterns beyond 10 weeks and their impact on development. The study emphasizes examining individual differences, such as temperament and social behavior, to identify vulnerable children. Future research should also explore the links between cortisol and specific childcare experiences, such as solitary play and peer conflicts.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Drugli, M. B. et al.	2023	Do toddlers' levels of cortisol and the perceptions of parents and professional caregivers tell the same story about transition from home to childcare? A mixed method study	Norway	Explore relationships	Mixed method	Longitudinal	Multimethod: saliva /cortisol samples, informants' notes	Toddlers (M age = 14.6 months, SD = 2.49) (N = 113 children)	Professional caregivers, parents, children	Changes in toddlers' cortisol levels during the transition period (first month in childcare and 3-month follow-up) and parents' and professional caregivers' perceptions of toddlers' settling in during this transition period	Cortisol levels rose significantly during the first two weeks of separation from parents, peaking in the second week before gradually decreasing and stabilizing by three months—returning to levels seen on the second day of childcare. Parent and caregiver notes confirmed these findings. Initially, with parents present, toddlers explored freely or stayed close to them, while key workers fostered a “caring triangle” with families. Many toddlers had visited childcare before starting, making the environment familiar. Parents noticed increased emotional reactivity and fatigue at home, while caregivers observed early separation challenges but noted positive relationships forming by week three. By three months, most toddlers were well adjusted and engaged in childcare.	The results highlight the importance of transition routines, such as pre-entry visits to childcare. Strong collaboration between caregivers and parents is essential to build a “caring triangle”. Children need emotional support both at home and in childcare, including quiet activities at the end of the day and close caregiver interactions. Shorter childcare hours are recommended, and children struggling with the transition should receive early, skilled support. Future research should use observations and interviews to better understand how parents and caregivers can best support children during this period.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Ereky-Stevens, K. et al.	2018	Relationship building between toddlers and new caregivers in out-of-home childcare: Attachment security and caregiver sensitivity	Austria	Explore relationships	Quantitative	Longitudinal	Multimethod: observations (different tools and situations)	10–33 months (N = 104 children)	Professional caregivers, children	The attachment relationship between the child and professional caregivers and how this attachment was influenced by dyadic caregiver sensitivity, 1-on-1 interactions, and interactions with all children in the group	Girls and children with caregivers who scored higher on group sensitivity showed higher attachment security. Toddlers' attachment security was not predicted by dyadic sensitivity.	The findings support the development of attachment/relationship theory in childcare that includes children's experiences in groups and not just 1-on-1 interactions. Measures that capture the quality of group interactions should be developed. Group dynamics and sensitivity are highly relevant to children's experiences in childcare, which has important implications for practice, as the time for individual 1-on-1 interactions is limited.
Klette, T., and Killén, K.	2019	Painful transitions: A study of 1-year-old toddlers' reactions to separation and reunion with their mothers after 1 month in childcare	Norway	Descriptive	Qualitative	Observation study	Observations	13–15 months (N = 12 children)	Professional caregivers, mothers, children	Reactions and behaviors of the child during separation and reunion	The findings show that all toddlers experienced separation anxiety at various stages during the observed transitions. The limited number of staff members available in the early mornings and late afternoons often made the transitions more difficult.	It is essential to address how separation anxiety in toddlers at daycare is managed. It appears to be important to implement longer and more flexible adaptation times, shorter days, and improved staffing, particularly during early mornings and late afternoons. To prevent feelings of despair and detachment among Norwegian children, it is necessary to reconsider the current approach to toddler care in childcare facilities.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Lam, M. S.	2014	Transition to early childhood education: Parents' use of coping strategies in dealing with children's adjustment difficulties in Hong Kong	China	Descriptive	Qualitative	Phenomenological study	Multimethod: 1–1 interviews, focus group interviews	N = 29 parents of 31 children 2–3 years of age	Parents	Parents' strategies of coping with children's adjustment difficulties	The study explores how parents deliver and say goodbye to their children in ECEC in Hong Kong. The results can be summarized as follows: Parents had different strategies for their goodbyes with their children. Some focused on smooth separations, while others attempted to find the reason for the child's reluctance, while a third group chose a hard line, offering the child little support and thinking that this choice would help in the long run.	The study suggests that teachers should be more proactive in supporting parents in terms of separation strategies. Hence, goodbye situations can be smoother for all involved. Parents might benefit from mentalizing the situation ahead of time so that the situation does not overwhelm them in the moment.
Macagno, A., and Molina, P.	2020	The construction of child-caregiver relationship in childcare centre: Adaptation of parent attachment diary for professional caregivers	Italy	Method development	Quantitative	Longitudinal	Observations	4–35 months (N = 222 children) and N = 87 professional caregivers	Professional caregivers, children	Verify the adaptation of the PCAD and children's (attachment) behavior during three specific stressful situations	Children show a significant decrease in avoidant and resistant attachment behavior after 2 and 4 months in childcare. Children's secure behavior does not increase over time, but non-distressed behavior increases. This finding may indicate that children feel more secure after some time.	There is a need for further investigations into how behavior changes in specific situations and settings. In addition, there is a need to validate the PCAD, comparing PCAD scores with those of other validated tools.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
McDevitt S. E., and Recchia, S. L.	2022	How toddlers new to child care become members of a classroom community	United States	Descriptive	Qualitative	Longitudinal	Multimethod: observations, 1–1 interviews, questionnaires	2–2.5 years (N = 3 children)	Professional caregivers, parents, children	Children’s daily experiences, behaviors, movements, and interactions in becoming members of a classroom community	The process of integration into childcare was highly personalized, with each child showing distinct emotional, social, and behavioral adaptations. Some toddlers felt distressed upon arrival, while others engaged independently, progressively gaining confidence in interacting with teachers, peers, and activities at their own speed.	The study reveals how toddlers find well-being and belonging in childcare by forming genuine relationships with teachers and peers and using their agency to feel at home. As more children enter childcare early, they build foundational relationships with nonfamilial adults and peers, often in culturally different settings. A responsive childcare environment helps them maintain their sense of self and integrate into a new community. Peer relationships offer emotional security and learning opportunities, while teacher–child relationships enhance well-being. The study underscores the importance of daily practices in supporting young children’s holistic development.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Mellenius, N. et al.	2023	“I try to think behind my child’s cry”: Preparation for separation experiences in the light of parental mentalization	Finland	Explore relationships	Qualitative	Phenomenographic study	Multimethod: 1-on-1 interviews, clinical interviews, qualitative questionnaire	10–24 months (N = 21 children) and N = 21 parents	Parents	The ways in which parents experience, conceptualize, perceive (parental mentalization), and prepare for the transition of the child from home to ECEC	Preparing for the initial transition phase encourages adaptable and complex thinking in parents, often evoking a range of emotions in advance. During this potentially stressful period, PM indicators primarily reflected a manageable level of uncertainty and thoughtful reflection experienced by parents. This finding highlights key functions of PM, as it supports both self-awareness and flexibility, helping parents navigate their own reactions—as well as their toddler’s—while entering a new stage of life together.	The study suggests that ECEC teachers should be attentive to parents and the parent–child relationship, giving positive feedback to parents to strengthen their ability to mentalize their child. Doing so could enable parents to help their child during the transition phase.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Nystad, K. et al.	2021	Toddlers' stress during transition to childcare	Norway	Explore relationships	Quantitative	Longitudinal	Multimethod: saliva/cortisol samples, questionnaires	10–20 months (N = 119 children)	Professional caregivers, parents, children	Stress across time of day and phase and how stress levels were influenced by age, gender, the number of siblings, and group size in childcare	Children showed elevated afternoon cortisol levels throughout the transition (up to 4–6 weeks), peaking during the separation phase but dropping in the evenings. Cortisol patterns varied by age—children 14 months and older had a slight afternoon cortisol increase on day three but saw a decline between separation and follow-up. In contrast, younger children did not show this decrease and had higher evening cortisol levels throughout, suggesting that they may need more time to adapt to childcare.	The results suggest shorter days and more parental presence in childcare during the separation phase. Parents should provide comfort in the evenings, while caregivers must be attentive to signs of distress. Calm afternoons, familiarization with the environment, and peer play facilitation are recommended. Flexible parental leave should be an option during the transition. Future research should include larger samples, identify children with higher cortisol levels, and examine temperament, attachment style, childcare quality, home–childcare collaboration, primary contact approaches, and parental presence in childcare.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Picchio, M., and Mayer, S.	2019	Transitions in ECEC services: The experience of children from migrant families	Italy	Descriptive	Qualitative	Ethnographic study	Multimethod: observations, informants' notes	18–36 months/19–34 months (2 different ages mentioned in the article; N = 26) and 36–48 months (N = 27)	Professional caregivers, mothers, children	Children from migrant families coping with the transition (challenges, competences (adaptation strategies) and supportive practices)	The study revealed the challenges faced by children from migrant families as they transitioned from home to ECEC services. It also identified the skills that they employed to navigate this new environment. Additionally, the analysis underscored how their experiences evolved throughout the year and highlighted the practices that promoted their well-being, engagement in activities, and interactions with both peers and adults.	The results offer valuable recommendations for enhancing practices in ECEC settings marked by significant diversity. The study emphasizes that ECEC practitioners encounter new challenges and questions in their daily routines. For instance, what strategies can assist children from migrant families in integrating into ECEC services? How is cultural and linguistic diversity accommodated within these services? What implicit and explicit messages do these children receive about their backgrounds and the knowledge that they bring? Addressing these questions is essential for developing an inclusive educational approach that respects diversity and helps children build a positive self-image.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Revilla, Y. L., Raittila, R. et al.	2024a	Newcomer object ownership negotiations when transitioning from home care to early childhood education and care in Finland	Finland	Explore relationships	Qualitative	Longitudinal case study	Multimethod: observations (different tools and methods), field notes	10–18 months (N = 3 children)	Professional caregivers, children	How the institutional space of ECEC is (re)produced within newcomers’ encounters with others during the transition from home to ECEC by studying the negotiations of object ownership in newcomers’ encounters with peers, as mediated by teachers	The findings reveal that newcomers played an active role in shaping the ECEC environment by developing their own interpretations of objects and by practicing their unique ways of interacting with these objects. Additionally, the results highlight that teachers significantly impacted the outcomes of these interactions, thus influencing the collective understanding of objects and ownership within the ECEC setting.	This research enhances our relational understanding of young children’s interactions, transitions, and the ECEC environment, focusing on how space is (re)produced through negotiations. It emphasizes the importance for practitioners to consider and trust children’s perceptions of ‘what is happening’ to teach and promote fairness and to advance practices that support children’s agency. Although accessing and comprehending children’s perspectives can be challenging, the study suggests that their views are valid and reliable and should be acknowledged accordingly.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Revilla, Y. L., Rutanen, N. et al.	2024b	Children under two as co-constructors of their transition from home care to early childhood education and care	Finland	Explore relationships	Qualitative	Longitudinal case study	Multimethod: observations (different tools and methods), field notes	9–18 months (N = 4 children)	Professional caregivers, parents, children	The ways children contribute to the co-construction of their own transition from home to ECEC and how these contributions were constructed by space	The study results indicate that from their very first day, children actively shaped their arrival experiences by taking advantage of and creating opportunities to engage with the ECEC environment. Over time, they established their own arrival routines and became more familiar with the space and its potential, enhancing their creativity and resourcefulness in finding and creating opportunities, such as initiating interactions with peers.	Aligning with contemporary research in childhood studies, this study suggests that observing children’s practices as a form of participation is crucial. Further research should explore children’s prior experiences before starting ECEC, for example, by gathering data from their visits to the center before their first transition day and/or from their homes. Additionally, extending the study by collecting daily data over a longer period would be beneficial. Research on older children’s practices during their transition from home care to ECEC could also provide valuable insights into how they co-construct their transitions, highlighting the influence of age and maturity.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Rintakorpi, K. et al.	2014	Documenting with parents and toddlers: A Finnish case study	Finland	Method development	Qualitative	Longitudinal case study	Multimethod: photos, informants' notes, ethnographical notes, observations, videotaped discussions, e-mail interview	18 months (N = 1 child)	Professional caregivers, parents, children	Effectiveness (content and process) of a pedagogical documentation tool called "the Fan" in understanding a child during the transition	Pedagogical documentation using the Fan not only served as a tool for recording facts but also carried institutional significance. It facilitated the exchange of information about a child's life between home and kindergarten, making the child's interests and emotions more visible. This study follows one child during his first weeks in ECEC and studies how a pedagogical tool with pictures of the child's home environment can function to ease the transition.	The study shows how pedagogical practices can be used to smooth the transition for toddlers.
Schärer, J. H.	2018	How educators define their role: Building "professional" relationships with children and parents during transition to childcare: A case study	Canada	Descriptive	Qualitative	Case study	Multimethod: 1-on-1 interviews, videotaped discussions	N = 4 professional caregivers in an infant/toddler center with 12 children	Professional caregivers	Role of professional caregivers (attitudes and experience) and building relationships with children and parents during the transition	Educators are concerned about their professional roles, which can influence the center's structure, schedules, and relationships with children and parents. They worry that close attachments to children are unhealthy and could lead to children becoming overly dependent on a specific educator.	The findings serve as a foundation for discussing how educators can maintain professionalism while adopting a pedagogical approach that prioritizes relationships.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Swartz, M. I., and Easterbrooks, M. A.	2014	The role of parent, provider, and child characteristics in parent-provider relationships in infant and toddler classrooms	United States	Explore relationships	Quantitative	Cross-sectional study	Questionnaires	N = 192 parents with children 3–39 months old, N = 95 professional caregivers of infant/toddler classrooms	Professional caregivers, parents	The parent–professional caregiver relationship and how it might be influenced by parents’ and professionals’ backgrounds, child characteristics, parent separation anxiety, provider knowledge of child development, and provider job satisfaction	Parents viewed their relationships with providers more positively when they had prior experience working together and felt less anxious about childcare. In contrast, providers with past experience working with parents viewed relationships less favorably when parents were more anxious, although this was not the case in newer relationships. Providers with no prior experience with parents had more positive views when they possessed greater knowledge of child development. Those with more child development knowledge also reported more frequent communication with parents, particularly those with children who had easier temperaments.	This study enhances the understanding of the factors that support strong family partnerships and, in turn, high-quality early childhood education. It also highlights the challenge of balancing professionalism with meeting both individual and group needs.

Author(s)	Year of Publication	Title	Country	Study Purpose	Research Method	Study Design	Data Collection Method(s)	Sample Characteristics	Informants	Concept	Results	Implications
Søe, M. A. et al.	2023	Transition to preschool: Paving the way for preschool teacher and family relationship-building	Sweden	Explore relationships	Mixed method	Comparative study	Multimethod: quantitative and qualitative questionnaires	N = 535 professional caregivers (most children in Sweden enter childcare before the age of 2 years, which is part of the national regulation in Sweden)	Professional caregivers	The organization of the transition process and how different introduction models might influence family–teacher relationship-building and child adjustment	The study examines different approaches to transition to ECEC practices in Sweden. It combines qualitative (interviews of preschool teachers) with quantitative (a survey of preschool teachers) methods. Through these approaches, the study reveals that there are various approaches, although it argues that approaches that involve parents have the benefit of developing valuable relationships between teachers and parents.	Approaches that involve parents develop important relationships with teachers, which are important for children’s well-being in the transition period and for long-term cooperation between the institution and home.
Tebet, G. G. C. et al.	2020	Babies’ transition between family and early childhood education and care: A mosaic of discourses about quality of services	Brazil	Descriptive	Qualitative	Mosaic approach	Multimethod: documents, joint interviews, observations, photos, ethnographical notes, cartographic productions	Babies (age not specified)	Professional caregivers, parents, children	Childcare quality and infants’ and toddlers’ transition to childcare	The findings illustrate how various factors, such as laws, normative documents, family expectations, educational planning and routines, available toys, space, babies, families, and professionals come together to form a complex mosaic of perspectives on what defines quality in early childhood education during babies’ initial days in daycare centers.	To define quality in early childhood education and care services, it is crucial to develop a framework that emphasizes a pedagogy that is capable of challenging and transforming gender and race stereotypes. This approach should also align with the principles outlined in Brazilian documents and laws.

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