# Psychology Kindergarten at Stirling University pioneers research into optimal school starting age through play



Nestled within Stirling University, Psychology Kindergarten stands out as a unique educational facility, devoted not only to early childhood development but also to academic research. This nursery offers a playful environment for children, such as five-year-old Hannah Lyle and her friend Nathanael Burke, while simultaneously serving as a critical setting for students and researchers to observe and study various aspects of child behaviour and cognition.

Established to support educational initiatives, Psychology Kindergarten functions similarly to any standard nursery, featuring a reading corner, a water table, a construction area, and a den. However, what differentiates it is the two-way mirror that conceals a dedicated observation suite, allowing academic staff to monitor the children's interactions without their awareness, thus ensuring a natural play atmosphere.

As reported, data collected from the nursery’s activities is currently being utilised in research addressing critical issues such as the optimal age for starting school. This focus on the school starting age is gaining traction amid wider discussions in Scotland regarding education policy. Dr Eva Rafetseder, an associate professor in psychology who teaches at Stirling University, stated, "Scotland is one of the only countries that has a school starting age of five. In mainland Europe, children start at six or even seven." With over five years' worth of data now in analysis, this research could potentially contribute to legislative discussions in the Scottish Parliament.

The playful environment allows children to engage in activities that appear to them as mere play. Danielle Ramsay, the nursery manager, emphasised that the games are designed to be enjoyable for the children. “It’s fun for them, it’s not anything difficult or tasking. We will ask them if they want to play a game with whichever student it is. Most of them will say yes because they enjoy playing the game,” she explained.

Participation in these activities is voluntary. Parents are informed about the study's nature and retain the right to opt out. Crucially, children themselves have the autonomy to decide whether to engage. “We let the children know when anybody is in here [behind the mirror],” Ramsay noted. “That goes for parents as well. They are always aware of what’s going on.”

Parents, like Claire Lyle, appreciate the educational benefits their children gain from participating. Claire described Hannah as “really happy” at the nursery and highlighted the play-based nature of the activities. “It’s all play-based,” she stated. “So they don’t realise they are going through an experiment. I love it. We like to be involved and able to help. It’s so beneficial for the students.”

The nursery's innovative research approach also contributes to the training of psychology students. Ellie Tucknott, a master's student and research assistant involved in a project on human rational thought, expressed enthusiasm about her experience. “Working with the children in the Psychology Kindergarten has been a brilliant experience. It was actually one of the key reasons I chose to study at the University of Stirling five years ago,” she explained. At the university's Lifespan Research Lab, Ellie’s current work involves tracking children's eye movements through sophisticated equipment while they engage with animations.

The lab is equipped with advanced technology to monitor physiological responses, such as heart rate and sweat levels, which assists in understanding children's emotional states. This includes EEG caps for examining brain activity while children partake in play, an important aspect for those who might struggle to articulate their feelings.

Dr Line Caes, also an associate professor, confirmed the significance of this research facility, observing that it employs high-level equipment to gather valuable data on children's thoughts and behaviours, especially beneficial for young ones with limited verbal skills. “We have high-level, state-of-the-art equipment that can measure feelings, behaviours and thought processes non-verbally,” she noted.

The collaborative effort between students and children within this state-of-the-art setting not only enriches academic understanding but fosters an engaging environment for the young participants. Dr Rafetseder pointed out that structured observation enables students to gather detailed data on their subjects, which offers them real-world research experience. “Many students say this was the best element of the course so far,” she remarked.

The continued operation of Psychology Kindergarten underlines its value both as a nursery and as a pioneering research environment within Scotland, allowing young children to contribute to significant academic studies while learning and having fun through play.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/psychology-kindergarten/about-us/> - This page provides an overview of the Psychology Kindergarten at the University of Stirling, detailing its unique role in supporting both early childhood development and academic research.
2. <https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/psychology-kindergarten/research/> - This section explains how the kindergarten supports research through various methods, including observational studies and free-play paradigms, involving children aged 2 years 9 months to 5 years.
3. <https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/psychology-kindergarten/childcare-facilities/> - This page describes the kindergarten's facilities, including the main playroom and outdoor classroom, emphasizing the environment designed to ignite children's curiosity and imagination.
4. <https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/psychology-kindergarten/reviews/> - This section features testimonials from parents and guardians, highlighting the positive experiences and educational benefits their children gain from participating in the kindergarten's activities.
5. <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/content/features/research-nurseries-a-visit-to-the-university-of-stirlings-psychology-kindergarten> - This article provides an in-depth look at the Psychology Kindergarten, detailing how it functions as a research lab within the university's psychology department, with observations conducted discreetly behind one-way mirrors.
6. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02568543.2018.1495671> - This study examines how teachers support kindergarten children's social and emotional development, emphasizing the importance of environments, play, and relationships, which aligns with the kindergarten's approach to fostering a playful and engaging environment for children.
7. <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/education/schools/5232858/psychology-kindergarten-stirling-university/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data