

POLICY BRIEF (ISSUE 10)

Do Young Children Learn at Different Pace During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Singapore?

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Background

During COVID-19, children and families experienced disruptions in schools, childcare services, workplaces and everyday family life. Children from families with fewer resources often faced greater difficulties with home learning. These early differences matter because literacy and mathematics skills build over time. Children who fall behind in the early years may find it harder to catch up later. Understanding how and why a global health crisis affects the progress of children from diverse family background can help policymakers develop more effective and targeted interventions.

A recent study based on SG-LEADS published in *Early Education and Development* by Chen and Yeung (2026) examines whether progress in children's English literacy and mathematics skills differed by family socioeconomic status (SES) during the pandemic, and what helped explain these differences.

Method

Data: The Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG-LEADS), a national study of young children and their families.

Sample: 2,592 children who were 3–6 years old in 2018–2019. The same children were followed in 2021.

Measures: Children completed direct tests of English literacy and mathematics skills. Caregivers reported on financial hardship, their mental distress, learning resources, shared activities, household rules and children's screen time.

Analysis: Used latent change score models to examine the link between family SES before pandemic, change in family dynamics and growth in children's literacy and mathematics scores during the pandemic.

Major Findings

- **Children in the lowest SES quartile made smaller gains during the COVID-19 pandemic.**
- Compared with children in the highest quarter, their gains were 0.10 SD smaller in English literacy test (about 9 W-score points) and 0.11 SD smaller in mathematics test (about 7 W-score points).
- **Financial hardship** increased more among the disadvantaged families.
- Lower-SES families showed smaller increases in **learning materials** such as books, educational expenditures.
- Time spent on **learning activities** with children fell more among lower-SES families.
- **Rules** for children's daily activities and technology use increased less in lower-SES families, while **unsupervised screen time** increased more.
- **Changes in financial hardship, learning materials, parent-child learning activities and rules were linked to changes in children's achievement.**

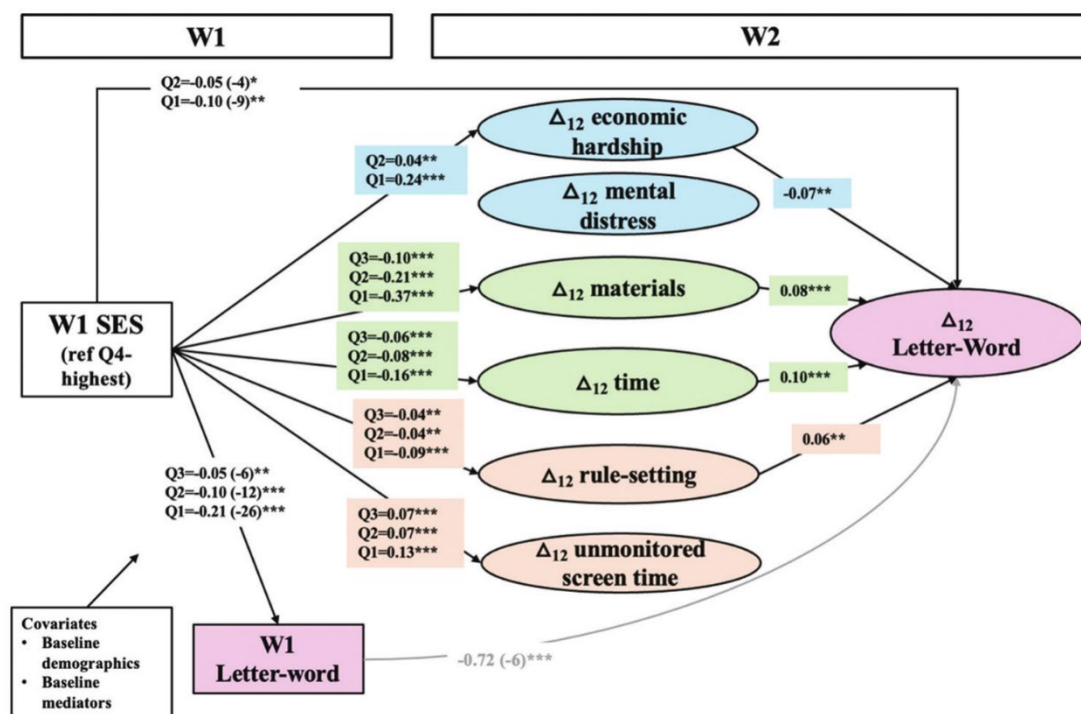


Figure 1. Pathways linking family SES to changes in Letter-Word Identification scores.

W1 = 2018–2019; W2 = 2021; Q1 = lowest SES quarter; Q4 = highest SES quarter.

Source: Chen and Yeung (2026), Figure 2.

(How to read the Figure: Compared with the highest-SES families, lower-SES families generally experienced greater increases in financial hardship and smaller improvements in learning resources, parent-child learning activities, and rule-setting. These differences were associated with smaller gains in children's early literacy skills. The numbers are statistical estimates. The main message is the direction of the relationships shown by the arrows.)

Policy Implications

- **Direct additional support towards disadvantaged children.**
Provide additional support to children who begin with fewer resources, have lower initial achievement, or show slower learning progress.
- **Strengthen home-based learning**
Provide books, learning materials, and free educational programmes, together with guidance for parents on home learning, shared activities and setting rules, especially for disadvantaged families.
- **Reduce economic hardship**
Provide food assistance and subsidies for disadvantaged families.
- **Support parents' well-being and employment**
Offer job-search assistance, skills training, and counselling to reduce financial and emotional stress for low-SES families.
- **Track whether children catch up**
Measure children's progress, not only whether services were offered. Check whether the children with the greatest needs benefit.

Bottom Line

Children's achievement gaps will not automatically close in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemics. Academic help is important, but children also need stable home routines and adults who have the time and resources to support learning. Singapore can strengthen children's recovery by combining early academic support with practical help that improves the learning environment at home. The greatest attention should go to children who began with fewer resources and made the slowest progress.

References

Chen, X., & Yeung, W.-J. J. (2026). Learning Gap During the COVID-19 Pandemic Among Young Children in Singapore. *Early Education and Development*, 1–20.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2026.2720152>

For [a full list of SG-LEADS publications](#) and policy briefs, see [SG-LEADS website](#)

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