

Thrive by Five Index 2024: Summary: Key Findings for Enrolled Children

September 2025



Snapshot of Key Findings

By the time a child turns five, the foundations for lifelong learning, health, and well-being are already in place.

The *Thrive by Five Index 2024* offers the most comprehensive picture yet of how well South Africa's 4-year-olds are developing. These are the children who will enter formal schooling in the next year or two, and their readiness is a strong predictor of future school performance.

The 2024 findings offer a clear and urgent message: only **42% of children are On Track for early learning**. Girls are ahead (48% On Track vs 37% of boys), while children in Higher Fee ELPs are twice as likely to be On Track as those in the poorest ELPs.

The *Index* is based on direct assessments with 5,000+ children aged 50–59 months attending 1,388 Early Learning Programmes (ELPs). It tracks progress in three core areas of development:

- Early learning
- Physical growth (with a focus on stunting)
- Social-emotional functioning

This is the second round of the *Thrive by Five Index*, following the inaugural *2021 Index*.

The *2024 Index* offers a data-driven, nationally representative picture of how South African children are developing before formal schooling begins, and highlights the structural barriers that shape children's early opportunities.

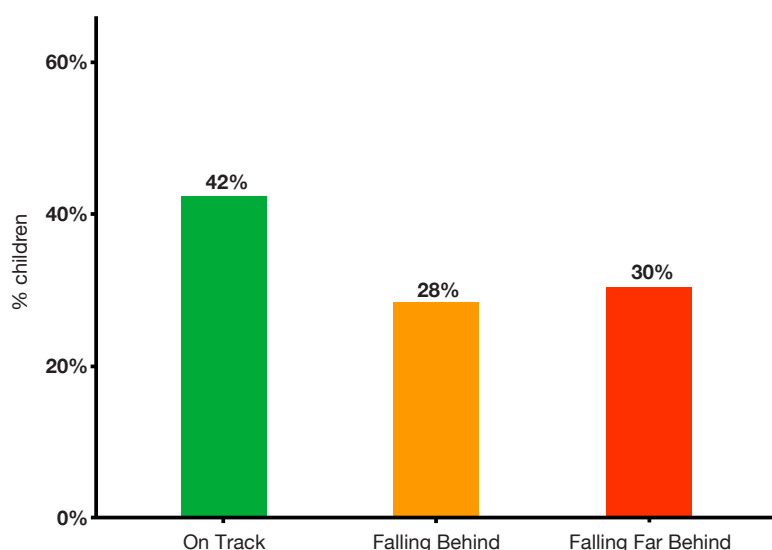
The findings also highlight opportunity: **progress is possible**, especially when we create the right environments to support children's development. While socio-economic status sets the stage, it's children's ability to stay engaged, focus on tasks, and regulate their emotions that often determine how well they perform. These skills can and should be developed, and doing so offers a powerful way to improve early learning outcomes, especially for children in less advantaged settings.

What the Data Show

Most Children are Not On Track for Early Learning

Only **42%** of children enrolled in ELPs are developmentally On Track for early learning. This means fewer than half are entering school with the foundational skills they need to succeed.

ELOM 4&5 Total - % On Track, Falling Behind and Falling Far Behind



Source: Weighted estimates based on *Thrive by Five Index 2024* data
Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

The Thrive by Five assessment tool (ELOM 4&5) measures five core areas:

- **Gross Motor Development** - large muscle movements such as running, jumping, balancing, and coordinated physical activity.
- **Fine Motor Coordination & Visual Motor Integration** - hand-eye coordination and the ability to coordinate precise hand movements (such as drawing with a pencil).
- **Emergent Numeracy & Mathematics** - counting, number recognition, basic calculations, and identifying shapes and patterns.
- **Cognition & Executive Functioning** - memory, attention, problem-solving, and self-control.
- **Emergent Literacy & Language** - speaking in full sentences, recognising the initial sounds of words, naming common objects, relaying events and understanding stories.

Within each of these domains, children are classified as **On Track**, **Falling Behind**, or **Falling Far Behind**. A child is On Track if they meet the minimum standard.

Girls are ahead, and poor children are far behind

- **48% of girls** are On Track overall, compared to **37% of boys**.
- **34%** of children in lower-fee ELPs (<R50/month) are On Track, compared with **69%** in higher-fee ELPs (>R1690/month).

These gaps reflect underlying inequalities in home environments, nutrition, stimulation, and classroom quality, and underscore the need for targeted investment in early learning.

A closer look at each domain:

Domain	% On Track	Key Gaps
Gross Motor Development	44%	- Boys are slightly ahead (46% vs 42% of girls). - Children in lower-fee ELPs do better than those in higher-fee programmes.
Fine Motor Coordination & Visual Motor Integration	29% (weakest domain)	43% of boys are Falling Far Behind. - There is a large wealth gap: 50 - 54% of children are On Track in the higher-fee ELPs, vs 23–29% in the poorer ELPs.
Emergent Numeracy & Mathematics	33%	- Boys are more likely to Fall Far Behind (40% vs 31% of girls). - Over 40% of children in the lowest fee ELPs are Falling Far Behind.
Cognition & Executive Functioning	40%	- Girls outperform boys, with 45% of girls On Track compared to only 36% of boys. - There is a strong income gradient, children in the highest-fee ELPs are twice as likely to be On Track for CEF as children in the lowest-fee ELPs.
Emergent Literacy & Language	53% (strongest domain)	- Girls are ahead (57% vs 48% of boys). - The gap by ELP fee widens dramatically at the top: 74% of children are On Track in the highest-fee ELPs.

Social-Emotional Development: Untapped Potential

Social and emotional functioning (SEF) - the ability to manage emotions, build relationships, and adapt to new situations - is a powerful driver of learning.

- **56%** of children Meet the Standard for Emotional Readiness.
- **63%** Meet the Standard for Social Relations.
- Girls, on average, outperform boys in Social Relations with Peers and Adults and Emotional Readiness for School.

Children who can regulate emotions and adapt to new situations tend to perform better in learning tasks. Yet, poorer ELPs often lack the resources and support to fully nurture these skills, while higher-fee ELPs are better positioned to build on and extend children's social-emotional strengths.

Stunting Sets Children Back

- **7%** of children are moderately or severely stunted.
- **25%** show signs of mild stunting.
- By age four, moderately/severely stunted children are **≈5 months behind** their **non-stunted peers in early learning**, and mildly stunted children are **≈2 months behind**.

ELPs appear protective, especially for the most vulnerable children:

- 90% of ELPs provide at least one daily meal, often from limited resources. And Lower Fee ELPs are more likely to provide both breakfast and lunch, crucial for children most at risk of nutritional deprivation.
- 60–65% report visits from the Department of Health for immunisation, deworming, and Vitamin A supplementation. Lower Fee ELPs are more likely to receive this support - showing effective pro-poor targeting.

Drivers of Good Learning Outcomes

Further analysis was conducted to understand *why* some children perform better in early learning and to understand which factors predict differences in performance. Three findings stand out:

- **Attention matters most.** Children who stayed focused, showed curiosity, and worked diligently during the assessment scored higher. In fact, attention was the strongest single predictor of early learning performance.
- **Emotional readiness supports learning.** Emotional functioning - such as the ability to manage emotions, adapt to new situations, and work independently - had a strong direct effect on learning outcomes. It also boosted performance indirectly, by helping children stay engaged during learning tasks.
- **Targeted support can narrow learning gaps linked to poverty.** Poverty affects children's development in many ways, but not all its effects are fixed. Some factors, like household income, are structural. Others - such as children's ability to focus, manage emotions, and engage positively in learning - are skills that can be strengthened. The Thrive by Five Index modelling shows that when these capacities are supported, children can perform better even in low-resource settings. By targeting interventions to build attention and emotional functioning, and by improving access to quality learning materials, we can help narrow the learning gaps linked to poverty.

Where to from here?

The *Thrive by Five Index 2024* paints a picture of both crisis and opportunity. South Africa faces urgent challenges, but the data also shows what works.

- **Early gaps emerge before Grade R** and mirror income and gender divides.
- **Stunting remains widespread**, delaying learning by months.
- **Social-emotional strengths are a hidden asset**, but are not being fully harnessed.
- **Children's attention and emotional readiness are central.** While household poverty creates real disadvantages, capacities - such as task-focused attention and emotional functioning - can be leveraged to offset these effects.

The *Thrive by Five Index* findings give policymakers, funders, and programme designers clear levers for action. These are outlined in the *Thrive by Five Index Recommendations Brief: Evidence to Action*.

For the full *Thrive by Five Index 2024: National Findings* and additional insights, visit www.thrivebyfive.co.za.

