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6 Time for parents The changing face of early childhood in the UK



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The changing face of early childhood series

The changing face of early childhood is a series of short reviews, events and engagement that seeks to generate an informed debate on early childhood based on the collective evidence. The series draws on an extensive body of research—including some 80 studies funded by the Nuffield Foundation—undertaken by researchers in universities, research institutes, think tanks and other organisations. The research is wide-ranging, reflecting the interests of the research community, as well as the Foundation's priorities.

Our approach is designed to be holistic, bringing together perspectives from different disciplines and vantage points. We want to involve researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to help us explore the issues, develop evidence-informed recommendations and identify gaps in the evidence. The final review will draw on the insights provided by our readers and contributors over the course of the series.

This review, the sixth in the series, explores the changing nature of parenting, which lies at the heart of young children's

development and learning. It examines the relationship between parenting and young children's outcomes and the effectiveness of interventions designed to support parents and children's development.

- **Review 1** – How are the lives of families with young children changing?
- **Review 2** – Protecting young children from abuse and neglect
- **Review 3** – Changing patterns of poverty in early childhood
- **Review 4** – The role of early education and childcare provision in shaping life chances
- **Review 5** – Are young children healthier than they were two decades ago?
- **Review 6 – Time for parents**
- **Conclusion** – Bringing up the next generation: priorities and next steps

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Time for parents

Overview and summary

Parents—in all their diverse forms (see Box 1)—have a profound influence on their children’s well-being and early development. While young children’s development is shaped by a variety of factors, parenting acts as an enabling and protective factor in many children’s lives.

In recent decades the term *parenting* has emerged—a verb that carries expectations of how parents should raise their children (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim 2019). Parenting refers to a broad range of behaviours, styles, values and parent-child relationships aimed at promoting physical

health and social, emotional and cognitive development (Cooper 2017).

The importance of parents, parenting and the home was brought into stark relief by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Regular forms of support for parents and young children became unavailable and, in many cases, parents became the sole carers of young children, and homes the sole place of learning. As a result, greater attention has been given to parents’ experiences and the pressures they face. This review seeks to take the opportunity offered by the pandemic to reflect on the changing nature of modern parenthood and consider how best to support parents’ needs.

Note to the reader: Inline references that are underlined are those funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Understanding parents and the home

The relationship between parents, the home and young children’s development is complex and is influenced by many complementary factors. To understand parenting, we must consider both **the context in which parents raise young children** and **the care parents provide**.

This review explores five aspects of parents and the home and considers why each is important, how they shape parents’ care and young children’s development and how they have changed over the last two decades.¹

1 These trends and patterns, and those outlined in the sections below, vary between and across groups, shaped by differences in education level, employment, income, ethnicity, and locality. We have only partial evidence for some of these trends.

The areas of focus within this review do not diminish the importance of other factors. For example, genes can have important impacts on both a child's characteristics and their development, as well as on the care parents provide.

Parental care

Why it matters: Parental sensitivity and responsiveness, appropriate discipline and limit-setting, and a positive home learning environment are all associated with better outcomes for children on virtually all the Early Years Foundation Stage measures (Melhuish and Gardiner 2020).

How is it changing? We do not know whether the quality of the care parents provide has changed over time. We do know that mothers of children under five continue to provide around two thirds of total childcare, though fathers of children under five were marginally increasing their share between 2000 and 2015. And while both parents have increased the overall time spent on childcare during the pandemic, with fathers providing a greater share of childcare than prior to March 2020, traditional models of male breadwinner and female caregiver have largely persisted.

Both mothers and fathers of children under five are spending more time on development childcare (which includes reading and playing)—a 250% increase between 1975 and 2015 (Richards et al. 2016). These changes may provide evidence that young children are benefitting from a strengthened home learning environment.

Parental mental health and emotional well-being

Why it matters: Parents' mental health and emotional well-being shape the care they provide. In analysing the socioeconomic and demographic factors that may affect levels of conflict and closeness in the parent-child relationship, the greatest differences are observed by maternal psychological distress (Cattan et al. forthcoming).

How is it changing? Small increases in recent years have resulted in one in four children being exposed to maternal mental illness. We do not have comparable data for fathers' mental illness. Depression and anxiety are the most commonly diagnosed illnesses among mothers of young children. Many parents of young children feel pressures as parents. A majority report that being a parent is stressful and that they feel judged as a parent by others.

The relationship between parents

Why it matters: The quality of relationship between parents and the presence of high levels of unresolved and hostile conflict affects child outcomes at an early age and through adolescence (Harold et al. 2013; Garriga and Kiernan 2014).

How is it changing? We do not know how the prevalence of parental conflict has changed over time. While divorce rates have declined, parental separation is a common feature of family life in the UK, with 3.6 million children (of all ages) in separated families. In recent decades, the proportion of children born into married couples has fallen, with a growing proportion of children born to cohabiting

parents and a consistent minority (18%) born to parents who are not living together.

While family forms do not determine children's outcomes, there are important associations between different family forms and the resources available to families. Married couples typically have more resources than cohabiting couples and lone parents the least, which in turn influences children's cognitive development and emotional well-being (Kiernan et al. forthcoming).

Housing and the home

Why it matters: Features of low-quality housing, such as overcrowding, damp and problems with heating may significantly affect parents' and children's lives (Hooper et al. 2007; Cooper 2017) and therefore their outcomes. Housing tenure and conditions contribute to inequalities in young children's cognitive development (Cattan et al. forthcoming).

How is it changing? One in four children now start school in privately rented housing. Privately rented housing is less secure, has the highest rates of non-decent housing and has disproportionately high overcrowding rates.

Within the home, a fundamental change is the digitalisation and the embedding of technology within parents' and young children's lives. Three-quarters of under-fives have access to an internet-connected device—a three-fold increase between 2009 and 2019

(Childwise 2019)—with more than half of three- and four-year-olds online for nearly nine hours a week (Ofcom 2019).

Family income and poverty

Why it matters: The financial resources available to parents have profound impacts on parents and the home. These impacts can be direct, through not having enough money to provide essentials such as food, clothing and warmth, and indirect, through creating parental stress, depression and conflict between parents, which affects the care parents provide.

How is it changing? There has been a sharp increase in relative child poverty rates for families with a young child since 2013/14, representing increased pressures for many parents. In-work poverty is increasingly common, but we do not know the particular pressures and effects it has on parents, the home and young children.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing pressures on parents and created new ones, particularly in relation to time and finances. The pandemic has negatively affected parental mental health and increased inter-parental conflict at a time when parents have less access to support. Despite the reopening of nurseries, attendance in early years settings has still not returned to pre-pandemic levels and parents are reporting difficulties in accessing formal childcare. Emerging evidence demonstrates that the pandemic has had negative effects on young children's development.

What do we know about supporting parents?

- **All parents need help and support from time to time as they raise their children.** Often the type of support parents need is light touch, such as advice or signposting to further support across a wide range of issues. Parents turn most frequently to family and friends for advice.
- **Not all parents receive the support they would like and many face barriers to accessing help.** Close to one fifth (18%) of parents of young children have two or fewer people they can turn to locally for help.
- **Support is particularly important at challenging times in families' lives,** such as when relationships breakdown, parents are struggling with their mental health or children are diagnosed with a special educational need or disability – but many parents do not get the support they need at these crucial points.

Beyond the everyday support parents need, a large range of smaller-scale discrete parenting programmes offer support to parents of young children.² Programmes can support: attachment security, behavioural self-regulation, cognitive development, particularly language and communications skills, and the relationship between parents.

High-quality evidence shows parenting programmes can improve children's and parent's outcomes across different areas of development. However, some programmes

have struggled to translate improved parenting into evidence of improvements in children's outcomes—particularly in the longer-term (Asmussen et al. 2016).

Evidence of impact is strongest for interventions that target children who have already shown signs of particular problems, when compared to universal interventions or those that target children *at risk* of developing difficulties. However, these findings may reflect a need for developing the evidence base for certain types of interventions rather than evidence of ineffectiveness.

Wider integrated support for parents with young children through Sure Start Children's Centres had a positive impact on children's social development and behaviour, reduced negative parenting behaviours, and improved the home learning environment (Melhuish et al. 2008).

Family Hubs, along with Start for Life and increased investment in Supporting Families represent a renewed interest in family and parenting policy and are an opportunity to create a more coherent offer, if backed up by sufficient investment and reform.

Efforts to improve parenting capabilities are more effective when combined with efforts to reduce pressures.³ Time has emerged as an increasing pressure for many (if not all) parents. For many parents, poverty, household finances and the inadequate physical environment of the home represent additional pressures that create inequalities in young children's development.

2 This review does not cover parenting programmes to support children's physical development.

3 The premise that public policy serves three primary roles in supporting families: reducing pressures, increasing capabilities and protecting children from risk was originally articulated by Axel Heitmueller and explored in Eisenstadt and Oppenheim 2019.

What we do not yet know

Research is needed in the following areas:

- **Exploration of the full diversity of parenting forms and practices**— including among different social classes and ethnic groups and intersectionality therein (Phoenix and Husain 2007). Despite the importance of grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles in many children's lives, research to understand their impacts on young children's development is limited.
- **Exploration of the factors that affect parenting and the home.** We know less about the experiences of certain families, including in relation to re-partnering, non-resident parents and blended families. We know little about the specific issues for parents who are employed and still in poverty or about how early years settings can support parents to build their parenting skills. We also have less understanding of young children's needs in relation to the physical home and how the internet and digital devices affect parent-child interaction and young children's development.
- **How best to support parents.** Many parents draw on a combination of private and community support, but we know little about access, cost and take-up. The evidence base for parenting programmes needs further development, including how to sustain positive impacts in the longer-term and the exploration of top-up interventions. We also need a better understanding of how well programmes serve different groups of parents, including the role of peer-led parenting programmes in supporting parents who have been underserved historically. And further exploration of how home-based programmes can support parents, as well as lighter-touch support, including less intensive and digital parenting programmes.

Points for discussion

Pressures on parents and parenting

- Has there been an 'intensification of parenting' and if so, is it a positive or negative development?
- Have we got the right balance between reducing pressures on parents and supporting parenting?
- Does COVID-19 and its effects on parents and the home represent long lasting changes in families' lives?

Support for parents

- How can support for parents be better designed so they know where to turn for help, and are offered support when they need it most?
- How can support be made accessible to all parents who could benefit from it?
- How can support for parents be embedded in the services that parents are already accessing, such as health services, early years education and Family Hubs? And what role do local authorities play in integrating this support across the wider system of family support?

1 Introduction

This review explores the changing nature of parenting, which lies at the heart of young children's development and learning (we define 'young children' as those under five years old). We examine parents and the home in the context of wider changes of the last 20 years—including changing families, economy and technology—which shape how parents and young children engage and interact. We also highlight recent evidence of the support parents need and look at the effectiveness of interventions that seek to meet those needs and support children's development.

We focus on studies published in the UK from 2010 onwards, including both peer-reviewed and grey literature. The review includes 15 studies funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Other important sources include the Early Intervention Foundation What Works centre, which routinely assesses the evidence underpinning parenting interventions with the aim of identifying those that are most effective.

The way in which parents—mothers, fathers and carers in all their diverse forms (see Box 1)—relate to, nurture, engage with and raise their child has a profound influence on children's well-being and development. This is especially true during early childhood—a period when children are most reliant on their primary caregivers. While young children's development is shaped by a variety of factors—including the child's genetic inheritance, disposition and wider factors such as socioeconomic circumstances—there is now 'compelling evidence of the causal influence of parenting' (Belsky et al. 2020, p.92).

Growing evidence of the importance of parents in children's development has coincided with the emergence of the term *parenting*—a verb that carries expectations of how parents should raise their children (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim 2019). Books, media and online fora now offer ever-growing spaces for parents to receive (and give) advice on how to be a 'good' parent.

Parenting is often used to refer to a 'broad range of behaviours as well as styles, values and parent-child relationships' (Cooper 2017, p.51–52). Focusing on children's outcomes, Cooper (2017) conceptualises parenting in terms of parents' behaviours or practices aimed at promoting:

- 1 Physical health: meeting the child's physical needs such as feeding and washing.
- 2 Social and emotional development:
 - a meeting the child's emotional needs such as for warmth, affection and responsiveness.
 - b socialising the child's behaviour through discipline and structure, such as through providing routine, supervision and monitoring.
- 3 Cognitive development: facilitating learning and cognitive stimulation, such as through reading and playing.

These goals, and parental efforts to meet them, are not mutually exclusive. A parent reading with a young child before bed may contribute to the child's physical development through supporting sleep, social and emotional development through showing affection and promoting a routine, and cognitive development through supporting language learning.

Box 1: Who are parents? The inclusive policy and research ‘gap’

Over the last 20 years, there has been growing variation in family living arrangements in the UK (Oppenheim and Rehill 2021) and an increasing recognition of the full diversity of family structures. Step, adoptive and social parents play a central role in many children’s lives. A child’s parents may include: birth parents—whether co-resident or not, and whether in contact with their children or not; adoptive parents—those who have legally adopted a child but who may not be biologically linked to the child; social parents—including co-resident step-parents, foster parents, cohabiting partners, and guardians. There are also families formed through reproductive technologies—egg donation, donor insemination and surrogacy (Golombok 2021). As family structures diversify, the number of children who have more than one home has also increased.

Construed more broadly, individuals such as grandparents, siblings, other family members and close friends may play a central role in raising a child and may be said to be involved in the child’s *parenting*.

This inclusive conception of parents is not always reflected in policy and research. Family policy discussion over the last two decades comprises gendered debates about mothers, women in the workforce and the changing role of fathers. Unless explicitly targeting fathers, it is mothers who most often participate in programmes designed to improve parenting. A critique of the ‘good’ parenting discourse is that white, middle class and heteronormative definitions have typically been favoured (Cooper 2017). Similarly, research into parenting has tended to focus on mothers. Efforts to understand the impact of the home on development have tended to assume children have only one.

While supportive of an inclusive understanding of parents and parenting, this review is limited by available research. A priority for future research is developing a better understanding of the diversity of parents, parenting arrangements, and the contexts in which parenting occurs.

The importance of parents and the home was brought into stark relief by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Regular forms of support for parents and young children became unavailable and, in many cases, parents became the sole carers of young children and homes the sole place of learning. Consequently, parents’ experiences and the pressures they face were brought to the fore, serving

as a reminder that parenthood is not just instrumentally important in promoting children’s development but is also an important time in itself for parents—a time of joy, love and discovery, but also of stress, hard work, isolation and feelings of being judged for many. As such, the pandemic provides an opportunity to reflect on the changing nature of modern parenthood and consider how best to support parents’ needs.

1.1 Understanding parents and the home

There are a number of complementary theoretical frameworks that enable us to understand the complex relationship between parents, the home and young children’s development. To understand parenting, we must consider both **the context in which parents raise young children and the care parents provide.**

Young children and their parents do not exist in a vacuum. **Ecological theory** stresses the importance of the larger context in which parenting takes place. Children’s development is shaped by the social and economic context of the child, family, community and society

(Bronfenbrenner 1989, Figure 1). The relative importance of these factors change as a child grows older and these factors are changeable. For example, families may move into and out of poverty as a child grows up.

In this review, we focus on **five** of the most proximate factors shaping parents and the home:

- 1 Parental care.
- 2 The relationship between parents (inter-parental relationship).
- 3 Parental mental health and well-being.
- 4 Housing and the home.
- 5 Family income and poverty.

Figure 1: The “ecological systems” impacting child development.
Adapted from Eisenstadt and Oppenheim 2019.



Of these, parental care, parental mental health and the quality of the parental relationship are of particular interest as they are factors that parenting programmes—a more intensive form of support for parents—seek to support and strengthen. Parenting programmes are an area of interest for the Nuffield Foundation and we consider the evidence base for such programmes in Section 3.⁴

Our scope

The areas of focus within the scope of this review do not diminish the importance of other factors. For example, a young child's genes can have important impacts on both a child's characteristics, development, and the care parents provide. Insights from **behavioural genetics** research have demonstrated the effects of genes on both parents and young children's behaviours and explored the extent to which both genetic and environmental factors and the interactions between them influence individual differences. This body of research considers the direct impacts of a child's genetic endowment on their development, how a child's genes may elicit different behavioural responses from parents, and how parents' own genes may affect their parenting behaviours (Belsky et al. 2020).

Similarly, evidence suggests that members of the family other than parents, such as siblings and grandparents may have important effects on young children's development (Hunt 2018; Brown and Sen 2014). Despite the obvious importance of grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles in many children's lives, research to understand their impacts on young children's development is limited compared with research on parents.

1. Parental care

Most proximate of the factors affecting young children's development covered in this review is the care provided by the parents. While 'most people have an implicit understanding of good parenting that goes beyond meeting children's physical needs... [to include] love, safety, educational guidance and economic security' (Asmussen 2011, p.xvi), defining 'good' care for young children and identifying specific behaviours and practices for parents, practitioners and policymakers has proven challenging. Furthermore, parents themselves may not be aware of the fundamental influence they have on their children. Around one quarter of parents (24%) do not recognise that what parents do between birth and 18 months has a large impact on their child's future (Ipsos MORI 2020).

Research across a wide range of disciplines has explored the effects of a range of practices, behaviours, parenting styles, values and types of parent-child relationship on young children's development. Several theories explain aspects of the relationship between parenting and children's development (see Box 2) and underpin aspects of the support provided to parents through parenting programmes.

Insights from attachment and parenting styles theories provide evidence of the importance of **parental sensitivity and responsiveness**. Sensitive, warm, supportive and accepting parenting is associated with attachment security (Ainsworth et al. 1978) and with better social and emotional development (O'Connor and Scott 2007; Phoenix and Husain 2007). Higher levels of warmth are

4 Over the past decade, the Nuffield Foundation has funded evaluations of parenting programmes, with a particular focus on programmes supporting children's cognitive development.

associated with better outcomes on all Early Years Foundation Stage Profile⁵ (EYFSP) measures, better verbal ability and better child outcomes on all socio-emotional measures (Melhuish and Gardiner 2020).

Parenting styles and social learning theories also evidence the importance of parents' **appropriate discipline and limit setting**. The theories seek to address 'coercive' parenting—whereby parents

Box 2: Theories of the relationship between parental care and young children's development

- **Attachment theory** focuses on the emotional bond between a young child and their primary caregiver and the child's development during the early years. Having a 'secure' attachment provides young children with a 'safe haven' in times of distress and a 'secure base' from which to explore the world (Ainsworth et al. 1978; Bowlby 1979, 1988; Feeney and Woodhouse 2016).
- **Parenting styles theory** emphasises two dimensions of parenting: sensitivity—the levels of responsiveness, warmth and support in meeting a child's needs and the fostering of individuality and self-regulation—and control—the levels of supervision, discipline and limit setting, and a willingness to confront a child who disobeys. Authoritative parenting is a child-centred approach combining high levels of sensitivity and control and is characterised by parental warmth and a firm but fair approach to discipline, encouraging discussion and autonomy, high standards and expectations but with adequate parental support (Baumrind 1966, 1991, 2005).
- **Social learning theory** emphasises the importance of day-to-day experiences in shaping children's behaviour, with behaviour shaped by its consequences. If a child receives a reward for their behaviour, such as parental attention or approval, then they are likely to repeat the behaviour. If they are ignored or punished, they will be less likely to do it again (Bandura 1977; O'Connor and Scott 2007).
- **Scaffolding theory** emphasises the social nature of learning and the importance of adult support, often provided by parents, in helping young children to learn. Scaffolding (sometimes referred to as the zone of proximal development) involves adults providing helpful and structured interactions with young children to help them achieve a goal. Scaffolding support may involve simplifying tasks or ideas, motivating the child, and giving models for the child to imitate (Bruner 1978; Vygotsky et al. 1978).

5 Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) is a statutory assessment of children's attainment at the end of the early years foundation stage (known as a summative assessment). It is made up of an assessment of the child's attainment in relation to the 17 early learning goal (ELG) descriptors.

reinforce aggressive child behaviour either by fighting with the child or giving in to their angry demands—and promote ‘appropriate’ responses to children’s negative behaviours (Asmussen 2011). Higher levels of limit setting are associated with better outcomes on all EYFSP measures with few exceptions (Melhuish and Gardiner 2020).

Drawing from scaffolding theory and focusing on the effects of parenting on children’s cognitive development, the **home learning environment** ‘encompasses parental attitudes towards learning, the availability of home learning resources, as well as the quality and quantity of home learning experiences that promote learning’ (Simmons et al. 2020, p.15).

As the concept of the home learning environment has developed, its measurement has become increasingly narrowly defined to focus on a discrete set of activities that provide clear learning opportunities and whose frequency has ‘significant positive effects on unexpected achievements’ (Melhuish et al. 2008, p. 101) (see Box 3). A composite measure of these activities was associated with better outcomes on all EYFSP measures during reception (Melhuish and Gardiner 2020). A positive home learning environment has been found to be a protective factor in moderating the impact of socioeconomic status on children’s outcomes (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Sylva et al. 2004)—that is to say: ‘what parents do with their

children is more important than who parents are’ (Sylva et al. 2004, p.v).

One particularly important dimension of the home learning environment is **play**, with learning through play supporting both acquisition of content and learning-to-learn skills (Department for Education (DfE) 2018). Play also serves as a useful reminder that the home learning environment is not just about the quantity of activities, but also their quality, with learning through play happening through ‘joyful, actively engaging, meaningful, iterative and socially interactive experiences’ (Zosh et al. 2017, p. 3). It is also worth noting the material prerequisites for home learning activities to take place. For example, the parents of 9% of children reported having 10 or fewer children’s books in the international early learning and child well-being study (IELS) (Kettlewell et al. 2020).

2. The relationship between parents

For those involved in raising a child, whether cohabiting or not, primary carer or not, having a shared approach to parenting is important. **Co-parenting theory** emphasises the importance of the inter-parental relationship and parents’ coordination with each other on children’s development (Belsky et al. 1995; Asmussen 2011). Co-parenting is said to consist of four key elements: the childrearing agreement, the division of child-related labour, the extent to which parents support each

Box 3: Example ‘home learning environment’ activities.

Source: Melhuish et al. 2008.

- Being read to
- Playing with /numbers
- Painting or drawing
- Learning activities with the alphabet
- Learning activities with numbers
- Songs, poems and rhymes
- Going to the library

other in their co-parental role and the way parents jointly manage family interactions (Asmussen 2011).

The quality of relationship between parents and the presence of high levels of unresolved and hostile conflict affects child outcomes at an early age and through adolescence (Harold et al. 2013; Garriga and Kiernan 2014). This relationship may undergo particular pressures during transitions, such as a couple's transition to parenthood or when parents separate (Oppenheim and Rehill 2020). Parental separation has been found to lower the well-being of families and reduce the resources available to children (Kiernan et al. forthcoming).

3. Parental mental health and well-being

In recent years, there has been a growing appreciation of the importance of parental mental health in shaping how parents care for their children. For example, in analysing the socioeconomic and demographic factors that may affect levels of conflict and closeness in the parent-child relationship, the greatest differences are observed by maternal psychological distress (comparable data is not available for fathers). Far lower levels of closeness and higher levels of conflict are observed among mothers with high psychological distress (Cattan et al. forthcoming) and young children of parents with poor mental health are three times more likely to have a mental health problem themselves, which can last into later childhood and adulthood (The Royal Foundation 2021).

Similarly, in relation to the home learning environment, 62% of mothers who have no, or very low levels of, psychological distress read with their children every day, compared to 44% of mothers with high levels of distress (Cattan et al. forthcoming). As highlighted by the family stress model (see Figure 2), maternal mental health has been found to entirely

explain the relationship between economic hardship and play activities, discipline and how close the mother feels to the child (Cooper 2022).

4. Housing and the home

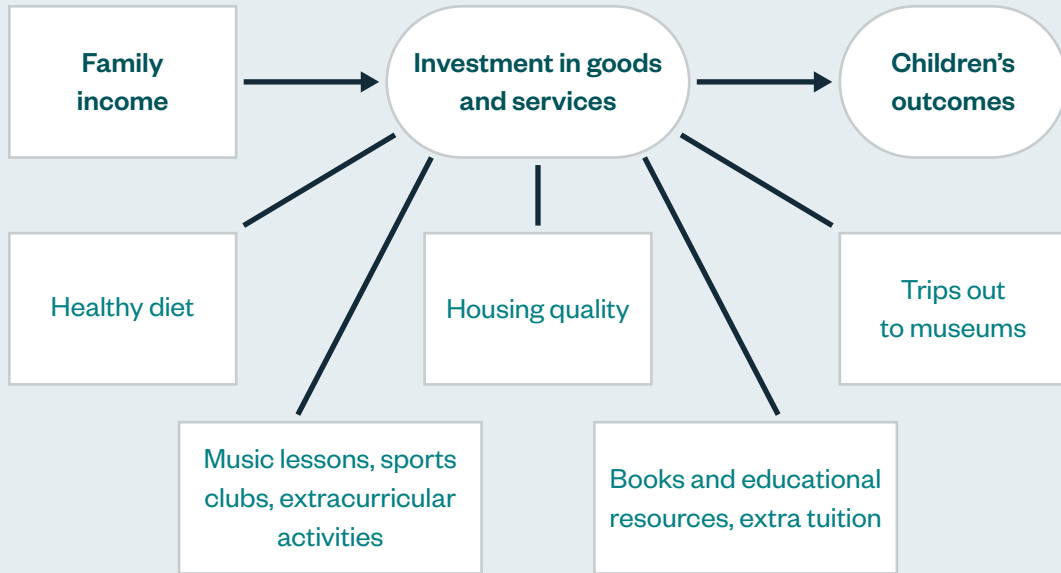
Features of low-quality housing, such as overcrowding, damp and problems with heating may significantly affect parents' and children's lives (Hooper et al. 2007; Cooper 2017) and therefore their outcomes. Housing tenure and conditions are an important factor in contributing to inequalities in young children's cognitive development (Cattan et al. forthcoming). For example, children living in overcrowded housing have poorer cognitive development and more developmental difficulties generally than their peers (Cattan et al. forthcoming). Children need calm and quiet spaces to play and learn, with noisy, 'chaotic' homes associated with poorer social and emotional development outcomes and poorer outcomes on all Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) measures (Melhuish and Gardiner 2020). Homes with learning resources such as books are associated with higher levels of cognitive and social and emotional development (Stanford 2020).

5. Family income and poverty

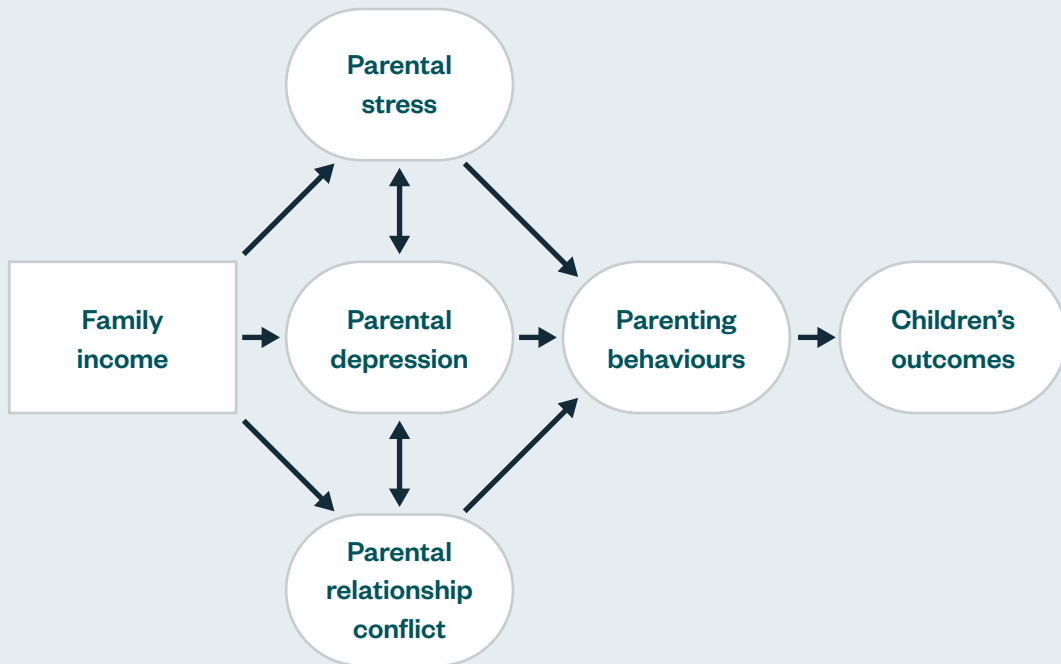
The financial resources available to parents of young children have been shown to have profound impacts on parents and the home, and thus on young children's development. Economic hardship may have direct effects on children's outcomes through constraints on parents' ability to afford certain goods and services, such as good-quality housing (see **Investment Model**, Figure 2) Cooper and Stewart 2013). Economic hardship may also create parental stress, depression and inter-parental conflict, which may impede effective parenting and thus affect child outcomes (see **Family Stress Model**, Figure 2). Evidence shows that experience of persistent poverty

Figure 2: The Investment Model and the Family Stress Model.
 Source: Cooper and Stewart 2013.

The Investment Model



The Family Stress Model



can have particularly strong detrimental effects on children's outcomes and that children in families who had moved out of poverty still experience detrimental effects (Kiernan and Mensah 2011).

Although there are differences in parenting across income groups, negative differences between the parenting of mothers on low incomes compared to mothers on middle incomes are small; the majority of parents report good parenting practices regardless of income (Cooper 2021). Furthermore, there are some positive differences, with mothers on low incomes more likely to play games with their children and more likely to report never smacking their child, for example (Cooper 2021).

There is evidence that children of parents living on low incomes who demonstrate positive parenting behaviours do well, providing evidence of the protective mediating power of parenting (Kiernan and Mensah 2011; [Kiernan et al. forthcoming](#)).

However, the importance of family income and poverty provides clear evidence that efforts to improve parenting capabilities are less likely to succeed if not combined with efforts to reduce pressures on families, such as through improving household incomes. Without parallel efforts, there are risks that gaps in outcomes between children from families on low incomes and those better off may grow (Del Bono et al. 2016).

2 How are parents and the home changing?

In this section we focus on trends in the five areas identified in Section 1: parental care, parent mental health and well-being, the relationship between parents, housing and the home, and family income and poverty.

We also consider the effects of COVID-19 on parents and the home. We are limited by the availability of trend data, particularly in relation to i) new family forms, ii) the qualitative aspects of parenting and family

Box 4: How are parents changing?

Available data provide some insights into changing family life in the UK, including:

- More women reach the age of 30 without having children.** In 1971, 18% of 30-year-old women had no children. In 2020, more than half (50.1%) of women in England and Wales did not have children when they turned 30 (ONS 2022a). Equivalent data is not available for men.
- The average ages of mothers and fathers of all babies has continued to rise.** Between 1999 and 2020, the average age of a fathers of a newborn baby rose from 31.6 to 33.7 years. While the average age of a mother has risen from 28.4 to 30.7 years in the same period (ONS 2022b).
- Both mothers and fathers have higher levels of educational qualifications than 20 years ago.** The proportion of mothers whose highest level of qualification is GCSE or below dropped by 25% (from 52% to 38%) between 2000/01 and 2012/13. The proportion with a university degree or more has increased by 20% (from 33% to 44%) (Cattan et al. forthcoming).
- Teenage pregnancies have halved** in the past two decades and are now at their lowest levels since record-keeping began.
- Families are having fewer birth children.** The number of children a woman is likely to have while of childbearing age has fallen to the lowest level on record (ONS 2019a).
- The proportion of children born to married parents has fallen, with a growing proportion born into cohabiting couples. Lone parenthood has stabilised.** Cohabitation is associated with greater instability; however, this largely reflects differences in the socioeconomic and other characteristics of parents who choose to cohabit.

relationships and iii) the impact of digital technology on parent-child interaction.⁶

When considering how parenting and the home environment have been transformed over the last two decades, we must also consider how the parenting

population itself has changed (their age, relationship status, educational level and working status). Box 4 shows some of the broad demographic changes of parents of young children in the UK.⁷

2.1 Parental care

Headline findings

- **Parental care remains gendered, with mothers still responsible for most childcare. This gap remains despite the fact mothers are now much more likely to be in paid work.**
- **Fathers are providing a slightly greater proportion of childcare than they were in 2000. These patterns have continued during the pandemic.**
- **Increases in parental childcare among parents with young children comprise significant increases in developmental childcare (activities such as reading and playing)—providing some evidence that the home learning environment has been strengthened. This trend continues a longer-term change—the time parents of children under five spend on developmental childcare rose by 250% between 1975 and 2015.**
- **A socioeconomic gap has emerged, with more affluent and highly educated parents spending much more time on developmental childcare.**
- **Some researchers have argued that parents today face increasing expectations with parenting becoming more ‘intense’.**

We do not know whether parents of young children today are more responsive or provide more appropriate discipline than previous generations. Assessing how parents care for their children and how that care has changed over time is challenging. Time use data⁸ provides an important measure of how much time parents spend caring for their children, as well as insights into how they spend that time (Box 5). It does, however, remain a blunt tool and there is significant benefit in research that better conceptualises parental time.⁹

6 The Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study will help to address some of these evidence gaps. See: <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls-studies/early-life-cohort-feasibility-study>.

7 See *How are the lives of families with young children changing?* (Oppenheim and Rehill 2020) for further detail.

8 The United Kingdom Time Use Survey provides data between 1961 and 2015 on how British parents spend their time (Gershuny and Sullivan 2017).

9 The UCL Institute of Education is aiming to better understand how parents spend time with their children through PARENTIME, which will explore the inter-connections between family members and the child's acquisition of skills and establish the long-term effects of parental time investments. For further information see www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/quantitative-social-science/parental-time-investment-and-children-outcomes-parentime.

Box 5: Childcare activities as defined by the UK Time Use Survey

Activity type

- **Primary childcare** (feeding, washing, supervising at the playground).
- **Developmental (or interactive) childcare** (such as reading with the child, talking and playing).
- **Total childcare** which includes all of the above (ONS 2017).

Care type

- **Active care** (feeding or washing a child).
- **Passive care** (may include time when a responsible person is on call if they are needed but perhaps engaged in their own activity (e.g., watching TV or doing the gardening) during that time).

Changes in the division of care

Despite spending marginally less time on total childcare in 2015 than 2000, mothers of children under the age of five continue to provide higher levels of childcare than fathers.¹⁰ In 2015, the most recent data before the pandemic, mothers of young children provided over two thirds of total childcare (ONS 2016). This trend has been observed both historically and internationally (Samman et al. 2016).

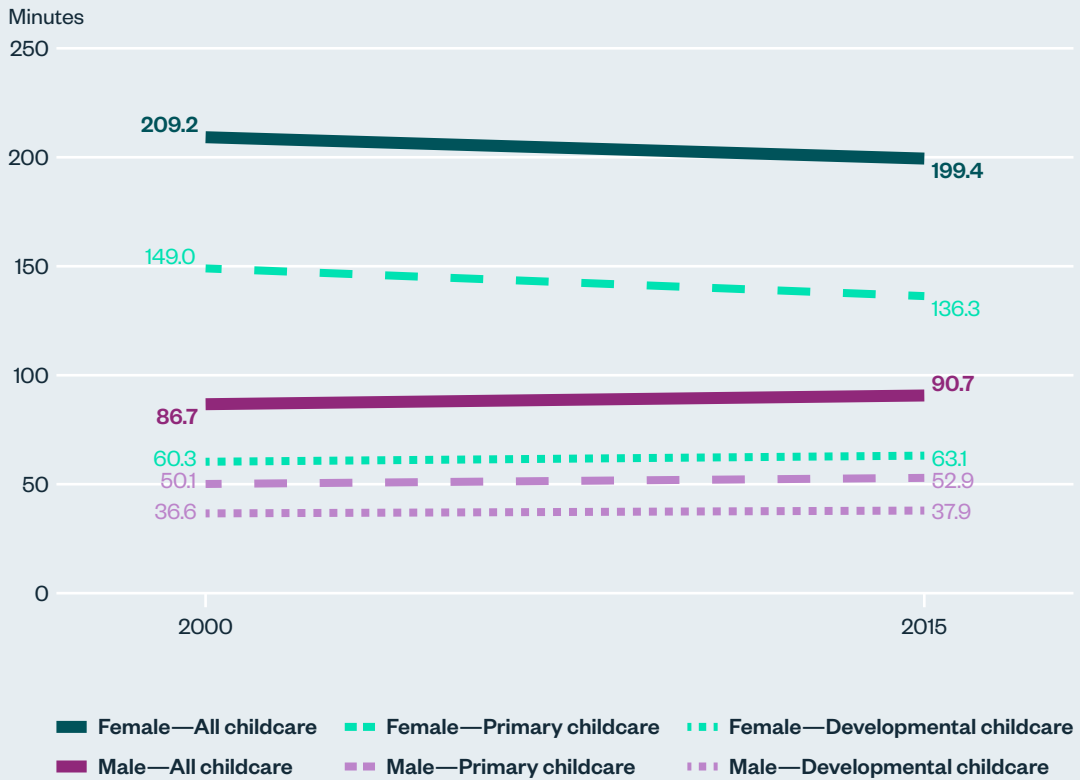
Meanwhile fathers of young children have marginally increased their share of childcare time, rising from 29% in 2000 to 31% in 2015 (ONS 2016). This follows the trend seen more widely by Sevilla (2014) of fathers providing increasing amounts of childcare time. And while both parents have increased the overall time spent on

childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional models of male breadwinner and female caregiver have persisted (see section 2.6.) Time use data also confirms the growing role of grandparents and siblings in providing childcare between 2000 and 2015 (ONS 2016).

Further analysis of the same time use data (Henz 2022) suggests mothers are not just involved in childcare for longer hours than fathers but do so during standard working hours and are more often responsible for managing transitions between parental care and other types of care or supervision. Relatively few fathers are responsible for daytime childcare from Monday to Friday, demonstrating how childcare narrows mothers' availability for paid work to a few hours during the day or to unusual hours.

10 It is worth noting that the ONS estimates of parental childcare focus only on what is termed "active care", as opposed to passively being present which is known as "passive care" (see Box 5). Researchers suggest that ignoring secondary activities underestimates total childcare time and ignores that childcare is often multitasked or involves passively being "on call" (Hook 2006). Due to the way that time use statistics are developed, only active care is recorded and therefore analysed in this report.

Figure 3: Average daily minutes of (pre-school) childcare provided by gender of parent in the UK, 2000 and 2015. *Source: ONS (2016).*



Note: 'Primary childcare' refers to activities such as: feeding, waking, supervising at the playground; looking after a sick child and other unspecified childcare. 'Developmental childcare' refers to activities such as: reading to or playing with children; helping children with homework.

Changes in the type of care

While we do not know how the quality of the home learning environment has changed over time, there is some evidence that both mothers and fathers are spending more time on learning activities. Mothers increased the time they spent on 'developmental childcare' which includes reading and playing by 5% between 2000 and 2015. Over the same period, primary care (e.g., feeding, waking, supervising) has fallen by approximately 8.5%

(Figure 3). This trend continues a longer-term change; time spent on developmental childcare rose from an average of 23 minutes per day in 1975 to 80 minutes in 2015—a 250% increase (Richards et al. 2016).

Changes across different income, employment, and education groups

These trends, however, are not consistent across employment and income groups. Mothers of young children in intermediate

or routine and manual jobs decreased the amount of time they spent on primary childcare between 2000 and 2015—by 22% and 14% respectively. Whereas mothers in higher-income jobs saw the opposite change, increasing the time they dedicated to primary care, rising by 4% (ONS 2016).

Analysis also suggests that parents of children under five with higher levels of educational qualifications (both mothers and fathers), were more likely to provide more childcare per day than parents whose highest level of educational qualification was GCSE or below. Parents with lower levels of educational qualifications also provided less developmental childcare than more highly educated parents at both time points, a gap that has increased over time. In fact, parents with lower levels of educational qualifications with young children actually reduced the amount of time they spent on developmental childcare by 5% between 2000 and 2015 (ONS 2016).

Work/family conflict

Increasingly families need two earners to escape poverty and maintain their living standards (Oppenheim and Milton 2021). Two-thirds of mothers whose youngest child is two years old are now in employment (Oppenheim and Rehill 2020). Greater labour market participation leads to many parents (predominantly mothers) having to reconcile paid work with family work, which has consequences for parents' physical and psychological health (what researchers term 'work-family conflict') (Borgmann et al. 2019).

Some researchers suggest that many parents are experiencing greater judgement and stress than previous generations, driven largely by increased expectations placed on them through an 'intensification' of parenting (see Box 6). Indeed, physical care of young children is labour intensive and demanding, and parents with younger children sleep less than parents with older children

Box 6: The 'intensification' of parenting

An increasing awareness of the importance of parenting is said to have coincided with raised expectations of parents. The term 'intensive' parenting reflects a norm that parenting should be '*child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive*' (Hays 1996, cited in Faircloth 2014, p.8). A parent's personal responsibility to do their best for their children and to take a child-centred approach has, at its core, the suggestion that children should be the centre of parents' attention—suggesting parents must invest more quality time into parenting as well as financial resources (Gauthier et al. 2021; Faircloth 2014). This 'intensification' is

gendered, as expectations to do more for children are said to be more strongly internalised by mothers and mothers are more likely to be expected to do the 'more' (Faircloth 2014).

While not all parents may follow this 'intensive' approach to parenting, 'it remains an important cultural script' (Faircloth 2014, p.31), which has been internalised by many parents and policymakers—providing the basis for greater interventionism within the family (see Section 3).

Most of the research on intensive parenting is qualitative; Guathier et al. (2021) are undertaking research to measure intensive parenting, taking a cross-national perspective.

(Hagen et al. 2013). Employed mothers feel more work–family conflict when children are infants or toddlers than when children are in primary school, in part because mothers with very young children feel less support in the workplace (Nomaguchi and Fetto 2019).

Others suggest that if there is pressure to engage in these intensive childcare activities, it is likely that parents create some of this pressure themselves. Caring for infants and toddlers is related to more life satisfaction (Pollmann-Schult

2014), greater self-esteem, self-efficacy, and less depression (Nomaguchi 2012) than caring for school-age and teenage children.

While we do not know whether expectations have been raised over time, the evidence of increasing time spent on developmental childcare combined with paid work and the mental and emotional impacts of parenting, explored in section 2.2, raise questions of how best to balance the need to reduce these pressures on parents and build their capabilities.

2.2 Parental mental health and well-being

Headline findings

- **Small increases in recent years have resulted in one in four children being exposed to maternal mental illness. Depression and anxiety are the most commonly diagnosed illnesses among mothers of young children.**
- **Many parents of young children feel pressures as parents. A majority report that being a parent is stressful and that they feel judged as a parent by others.**

Time series data to understand how parental mental health and emotional well-being is changing over time is limited and only available for mothers. The prevalence of children (of all ages) exposed to maternal mental illness is estimated to have increased over time—from 22% between 2005 and 2007 to 25% between 2015 and 2017 (Abel et al. 2019). Depression and anxiety constitute the vast majority of diagnosed mental illnesses among mothers of young children (18% and 7% of mothers of children aged 0–4 respectively) (ibid).

Statistics relating to diagnosed maternal mental illness do not capture the day-to-day pressures on parents' mental health and emotional well-being

that many feel. While we do not know how these pressures have changed over time, recent research reveals that nearly three-quarters (73%) of parents of children under five report that being a parent is stressful, including nearly one in five (19%) who say that it is very stressful (Ipsos MORI 2020). A high proportion of parents of young children (70%) also report feelings of being judged by others, with 48% of parents experiencing an emotional toll as a consequence.

Feelings of stress relate to demands on parents' time. The vast majority of parents feel rushed at some time (less than one in ten parents never feels rushed), with three in ten parents always feeling rushed and parents spending 28% of their (non-sleep, non-paid work) time multitasking (Dunatchik et al. 2019). The most frequently mentioned challenges of being a parent of young children are balancing work demands (45%), feeling tired (22%), the demands of domestic chores (22%) and the demands of other children (17%) (Ipsos MORI 2020).

Recent research suggests that parents, especially mothers, who report feeling the strains of managing work and family commitments (work-family conflict) are more likely to report poorer

general health than parents who report lower work-family conflict (Borgmann et al. 2016). International studies have shown family-friendly policies that help parents to

reduce time pressure or financial pressure can moderate the adverse effects of the transition to parenthood on mental health (Hewitt, Strazdins and Martin 2017).

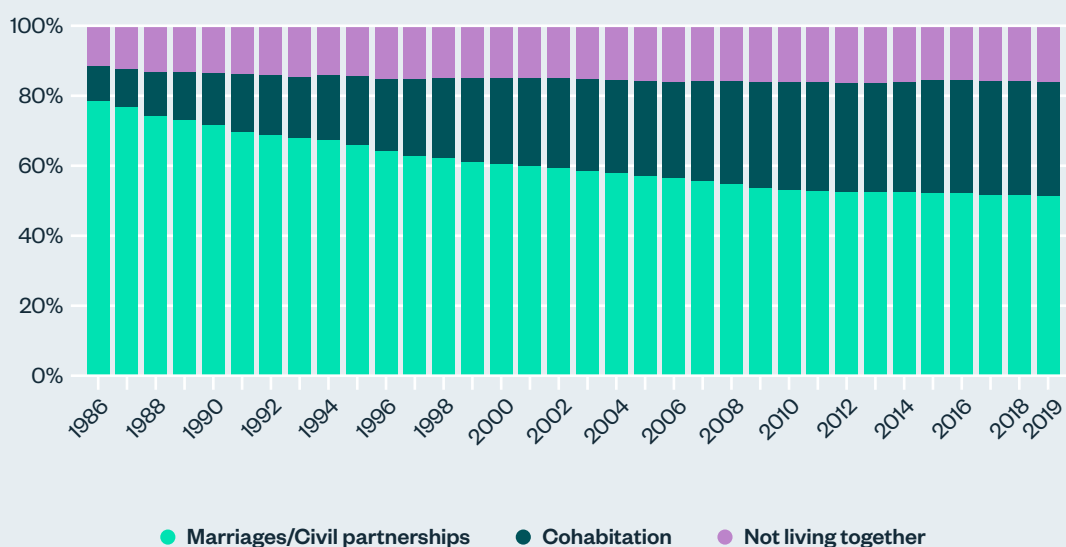
2.3 The relationship between parents

Headline findings

- We do not know how the prevalence of parental conflict has changed over time.
 - Divorce rates have declined, but parental separation is a common feature of family life in the UK, with
- 3.6 million children (of all ages) in separated families.**
- In recent decades, the proportion of children born to married couples has fallen, with a growing proportion of children born to cohabiting parents and a consistent minority (18%) born to parents who are not living together.

Figure 4: Percentage of live births, by registration type, 1986–2019.

Source: [Kiernan et al. forthcoming](#).



Note: 'Cohabitation' is 'Joint registrations at the same address'. 'Not living together' is the sum of 'Joint registrations at different address' and 'Sole registrations by the mother'.

Parental conflict and separation

We do not know whether parents have closer relationships, or are experiencing less conflict, than they did in previous generations. Data collected since 2011 provides one measure of relationship distress and suggests a consistent minority (12%) of couple-parent families have at least one parent reporting relationship distress (DWP 2020).

Parental separation provides a further measure of the inter-parental relationship. There has been a downward trend in the divorce rate since 2003, to 12.7 per 1000 in 2020 (ONS, 2022c). It is, however, difficult to establish the overall number of parents that separate each year. [Williams \(2018\)](#) estimates this as 2% of parents, based on fairly small numbers of separating couples in the first three survey waves of UKHLS (Benson 2013). These surveys indicated that an average of 1.3% of married parents with dependent children under 16 and 5.3% of unmarried cohabiting parents separated each year. The overall rate might vary over time, as patterns of cohabitation, marriage and divorce change. Therefore, we do not know if the number of separating families is actually rising or falling.

Family forms

We know more about how family forms are changing. Available statistics provide insights into the form of parental relationships at birth. As shown by Figure 4, the proportion of children born into married couples has fallen over the past three decades, from 72% of births in 1990 to 52% in 2019. A growing proportion of children are born to cohabiting parents (from 16% in 1990 to 33% in 2019) and a consistent minority of children are born to parents who are not living together (18% in 2019) (Figure 4).

These overall trends mask significant differences among families within the UK. The declining trend in married couple families has been happening at a much slower pace for those in the 'Asian/Asian

British' and 'Chinese/Other' census categories ([Oppenheim and Rehill 2020](#)). Children born to parents who are not living together are concentrated in areas of high deprivation, including former industrial regions ([Kiernan et al. forthcoming](#)).

While family forms do not determine children's outcomes, there are important associations between different family forms and the resources available to families. A 'hierarchy of disadvantage' has been identified, in which married couples typically have more resources than cohabiting couples and lone parents the least, which in turn influences children's cognitive development and emotional well-being ([Kiernan et al. forthcoming](#)).

This insight into changing family forms does not tell us everything we may like to know about how parents' relationships are changing. Our sources of data no longer reflect the reality of modern family life in the UK ([Oppenheim and Rehill 2020](#)). Categories of family (such as married, cohabiting and not living together) remain blunt tools. We have a partial picture of many common yet 'non-traditional' family forms, such as blended families, in which one or both parents have children from a previous relationship.

There are a range of non-traditional families; [Golombok \(2021\)](#) stresses the importance of distinguishing between family breakdown and families that are created with the help of new technologies and changing attitudes. They have different implications for children's development. For example, children growing up with lesbian mothers were no more likely to develop psychological problems than those with heterosexual mothers ([Golombok et al. 1983](#)). Recent research on children born through assisted reproductive technologies in donor and surrogacy families and LGBTQ+ families found that they 'are just as likely, and sometimes more likely, than parents in traditional families to have warm, close and engaged relationships' ([Golombok 2021, p.3](#)).

2.4 Housing and the home

Headline findings

- **One in four children now start school in privately rented housing. Privately rented housing is less secure, has the highest rates of non-decent housing and has disproportionately high overcrowding rates.**
- **The digitalisation of the home is a profound change within young children and their parents' lives, the effects of which we do not yet fully understand.**

There is limited research on how the wider physical environment in which young children are raised has changed over the past 20 years. However, we do know about changing tenure patterns over the past 20 years, in particular the rise in private renting, with one in four children now beginning school in privately rented homes (Bangham et al. 2019). Living space has increased since 1996 for both outright owners and those with a mortgage. But among private tenants, the average space per person in England fell from 34m² in 1996 to 28m² in 2018 (Cosh and Gleeson 2020). Privately rented housing is also over five times more likely to be overcrowded than owner-occupied housing (Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) 2020a) and has the highest rates of non-decent housing compared to other tenure types (21% of privately-rented housing was classified as non-decent in 2020, compared to 13% of social housing (MHCLG 2022). Privately-rented tenure is also less secure, and so children are at increased risk of

needing to move school and away from family and social networks (Oppenheim and Milton 2021).

However, data measuring aspects of the quality of housing does not measure the presence of (young) children in the home. Government data on housing in England provides some evidence of increased quality, with the proportion of non-decent homes¹¹ halving since 2008, falling from 33% to 16% in 2020 (MHCLG 2022). The decent homes standard is, however, a low standard (Communities and Local Government Committee 2010) and does not consider the needs of children. There has also been a notable increase in the proportion of overcrowded homes in England, rising from 2.4% of homes in 2000/01 to 3.5% of homes in 2019/20, with 829,000 overcrowded households (MHCLG 2020a). There are also significant inequalities among ethnic groups in relation to overcrowding. Almost one in four (24%) of Bangladeshi British households are overcrowded, compared to just 2% of White British households (MHCLG 2020b).

Digitalisation and technology

A further fundamental change is digitalisation and the embedding of technology within parents' and young children's lives. Three-quarters of under-fives have access to an internet-connected device—a three-fold increase between 2009 and 2019 (Childwise 2019)—with more than half of three- and four-year-olds online for nearly nine hours a week (Ofcom 2019).

11 A decent home is one that meets all of the following four criteria: a) meets the current statutory minimum standard for housing; b) is in a reasonable state of repair; c) has reasonably modern facilities and services, and; d) provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort.

Research to explore the impact of digital technology on six- and seven-year-olds has demonstrated the integral role technology now plays in many young children's lives, with parents using digital devices for both learning and fun, but also to fill gaps in daily lives when parents were busy (Livingstone et al. 2014). Parents' strategies for managing children's internet use were found to be patchy, with parents welcoming advice on fostering children's online safety (Ibid).

It is beyond the scope of this review to explore the myriad ways in which digital technology is affecting the lives of parents and young children. Preliminary evidence from the US shows that digitalisation can affect the parent-child relationship. Parents who were very distracted by their phones during interactions with their children have reported lower levels of social connection with their children and lower quality of attention (Kushlev

and Dunn 2019). Parents who use their phones frequently during interactions with young children talked and interacted non-verbally with their children less than parents with less frequent phone use (Radesky et al. 2015).

While digital media provide opportunities for parents and children to learn, create, communicate and play there is also evidence of significant inequalities. Parents from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds or with higher levels of education qualifications have greater access to digital devices, are more likely to make use of them, have greater digital skills, are more likely to use online support and more likely to mediate their child's use of digital devices, such as discussing their online activities and using parental controls (Zhang and Livingstone 2019). One in five children (of all ages) from families on lower incomes never or hardly ever uses the internet (Zhang and Livingstone 2019).

2.5 Family income and poverty

Headline findings

- **There has been a sharp increase in relative child poverty rates for families with a child under five since 2013/14, representing increased pressures for many parents.**
- **In-work poverty is increasingly common, but we do not know the particular pressures and effects it has on parents, the home and young children.**

Given the impacts family income and poverty can have on parental care,

parental mental health, the inter-parental relationship and housing (see Family Stress Model), the sharp increase in relative child poverty rates¹² since 2013/14 (DWP 2021) is of great concern. This rise in poverty has been steeper for families where the youngest child is under five, rising to 36% in 2019/20 (Stewart and Reader 2021; DWP 2021, see Figure 5).

Children in working families account for an increasing share of all children in poverty (Francis-Devine 2021), with the risk of poverty for part-time working families with a young child increasing

12 Where rates of poverty are presented, we refer to relative child poverty, defined as those living below 60% of contemporary median income, after housing costs (adjusted for family size).

Figure 5: Relative child poverty rates by age of youngest child in the household. *Source: Stewart and Reader 2021.*



26 percentage points since 2013/14 to a level matching unemployed family (Oppenheim and Milton 2021). We know comparatively little about parents and young children’s experiences of in-work poverty, in which parents have to balance the time pressures and expectations of parenting around work.

With the majority of young children now spending much of their childhoods in some form of early childhood education and care (Archer and Oppenheim 2021), paying for childcare has emerged as a significant financial pressure for many families (Mumsnet HQ 2021).

2.6 COVID-19, parents and the home

COVID-19 and the measures taken to limit its spread have had profound impacts on parents and the home. Lockdowns reduced access to formal and informal childcare support networks and many families have experienced bereavement and increased economic hardship—with as many as 120,000 additional children drawn into poverty (Legatum Institute 2020). Parents

have had to take on greater childcare responsibilities, including for their children’s development, as the home became the sole place of learning for many. These pressures and raised expectations have had implications for parental mental health and the inter-parental relationship. Young children’s development has suffered, with inequalities among children likely growing.

Time pressures

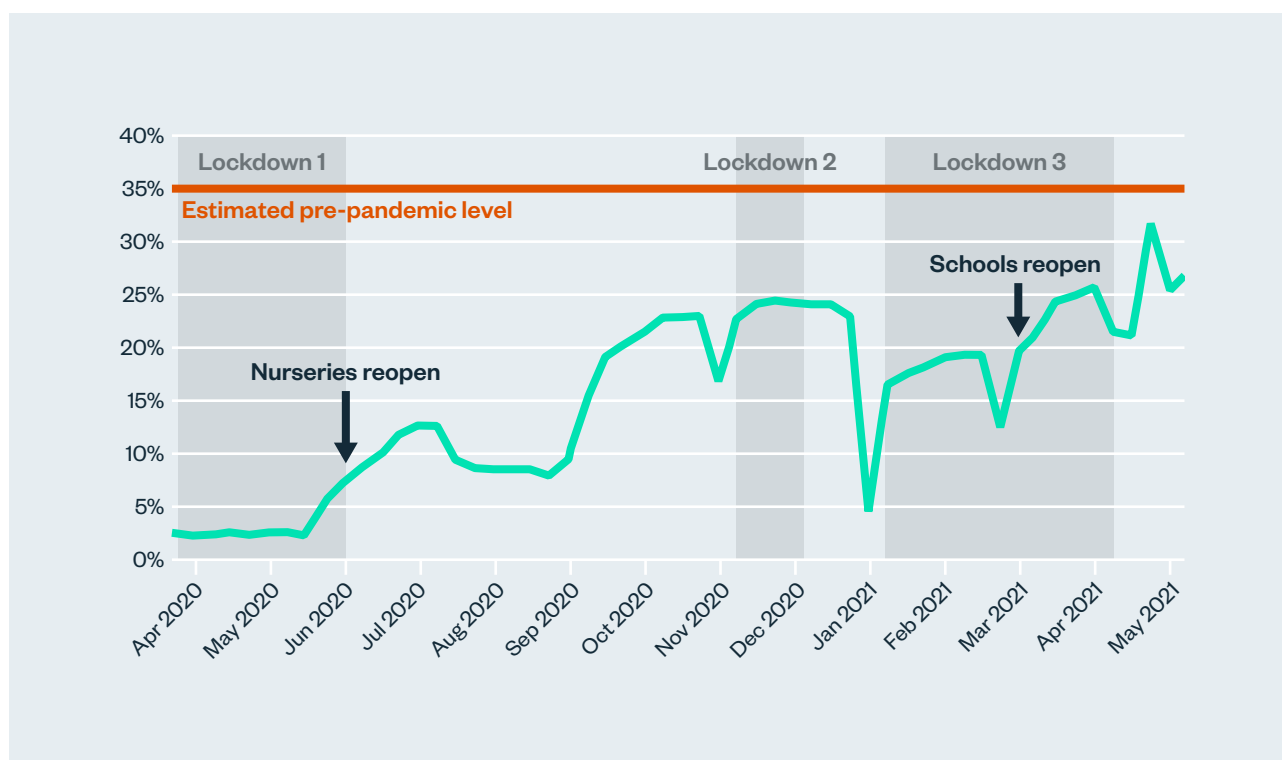
The pandemic has brought about greater time pressures for parents. During the lockdown, both mothers and fathers were doing some childcare during an extra four hours each day.¹³ In 2014, some 70% of parents reported having leisure time at around 7pm, whereas during lockdown only 40% did. This left very little slack in parents' days, which could impair parental well-being and negatively affect children's welfare (Andrew et al. 2020a).

Lockdowns have also provided opportunities for many fathers to spend more time with their children. Compared with 2014/15, the number of hours mothers spend doing some childcare in May 2020

increased by over 50%. For fathers, this increase is even larger, as hours spent doing some childcare have nearly doubled (Andrew et al. 2020a). A further study suggests 85% of partnered fathers who were at home during the Spring 2020 lockdown reported spending more time with their children and 73% reported a better father-child relationship following the Spring 2020 lockdown (Burgess and Goldman 2021).

Despite the marked increases in the amount of time fathers are dedicating to childcare, there are still large gender differences in the time spent on childcare, paid work and housework. Of course, many of these patterns predate lockdown.

Figure 6: Proportion of 0–4-year-olds attending an Early Years setting between April 2020 and May 2021. *Source: Cattan 2021b.*



13 Andrew et al. (2020a) use Time Use surveys to calculate the number of one-hour slots in which mothers and fathers report doing a particular activity.

In 2014/15 fathers were doing two fewer slots of childcare than mothers, a gap that narrowed marginally during lockdown (Andrew et al. 2020a). Likewise, fathers were more likely to have been working, and particularly working full-time, prior to lockdown. What the data collated by Andrew et al. (2020a) shows is that, despite the important disruptions to households' daily lives, the average family's division of time between paid work and domestic work still largely follows the traditional model of a male breadwinner and female caregiver.

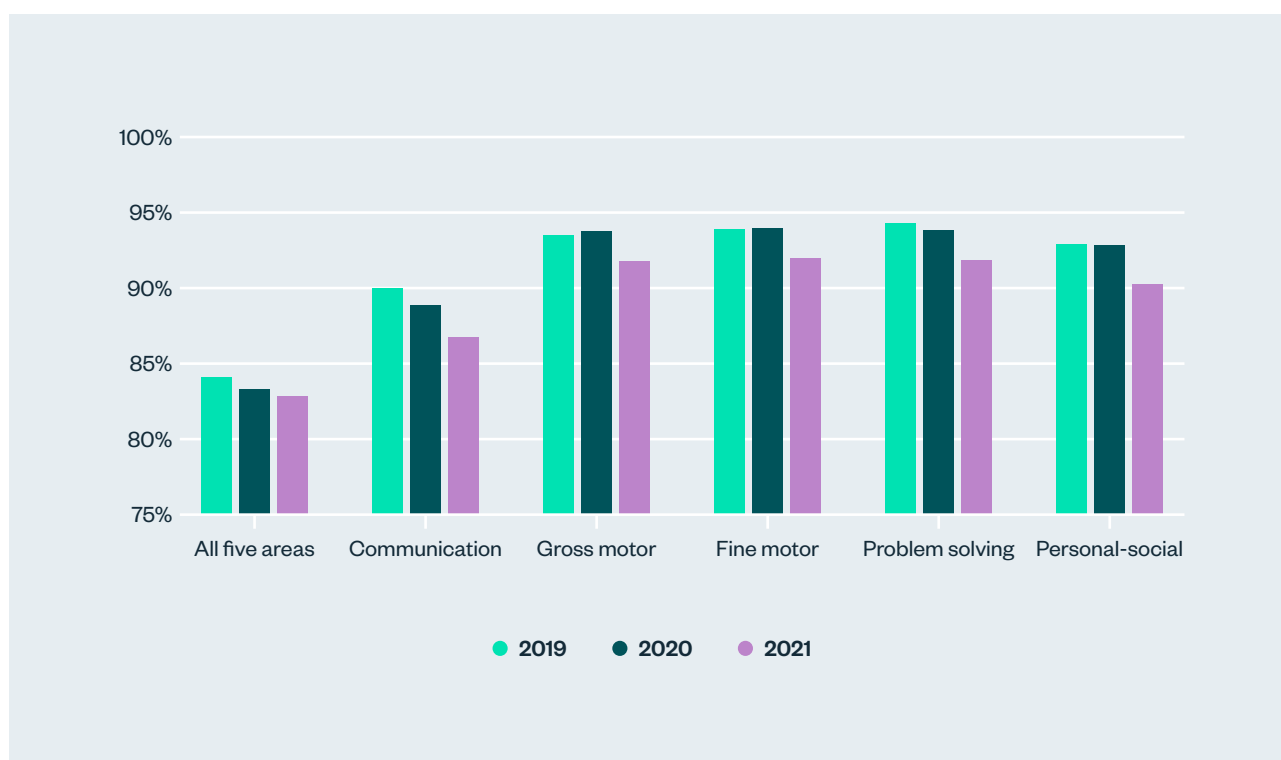
Increasing time pressures on parents did not end with lockdowns. Despite the reopening of nurseries, attendance in early years settings have still not returned to pre-pandemic levels (Figure 6). Parents have continued to report difficulties in accessing formal childcare (Early Years Alliance n.d.) and to say they are finding it harder to juggle

work and childcare commitments (Nursery Management Today 2021).

Parental mental health and the relationship between parents

Increasing pressures and expectations of parents have affected parental mental health and the relationship between parents. Mothers of children under five experienced larger increases in overall mental health difficulties compared to other groups (Banks and Xu 2020). Parental loneliness increased from 38% of parents with young children prior to the spring 2020 lockdown to 63% after (Ipsos MORI 2020), with parents in the most deprived areas more than twice as likely to report feeling lonely as those in the least deprived areas. In a survey of local authorities during lockdown, 74% reported an increase in parental conflict during the pandemic (Ghiara et al. 2020).

Figure 7: Proportion of children at or above the expected level of development 2019–2021. *Source: Office for Health Improvement and Disparities 2021.*



Child development

A majority of parents (56%) of children aged 2–4 are concerned about the impacts of the pandemic on their children’s development—particularly in relation to their social and emotional development, with 52% saying their development has been negatively affected (The Sutton Trust 2021). 25% of parents reported that a lack of space at home had negatively impacted their child’s development (Ibid). There is also evidence that for school-age children, those who were less well-off are more likely to live in homes without access to resources that support learning, including computers and tablets, and dedicated study spaces (Andrew et al. 2020b).

Parental concerns have been echoed by early years providers, who have reported children who have struggled to adapt to the structure and routine of their early childcare setting and children whose behaviour had deteriorated (Ofsted 2020). Providers also reported that children who had become used to longer periods of screen time were struggling to engage in play

and activities (Ofsted 2020). Conversely, those young children who were able to continue attending early years settings during the pandemic showed greater cognitive development—including receptive vocabulary growth and cognitive executive functions (Davies et al. 2021).

Children from less advantaged backgrounds were found to have benefited from a greater positive effect of attending early years settings on receptive vocabulary growth—suggesting that children from less advantaged backgrounds who lost access to settings were disproportionately disadvantaged (Davies et al. 2021). Evidence from the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3) completed at 2–2½ years in England shows a smaller proportion of children are achieving an expected level of development across all five areas of measurement (see Figure 7).

Children in families living on low incomes are more likely to live in homes without access to resources that support learning, including computers and tablets, and dedicated study spaces (Andrew et al. 2020b).

2.7 Implications of the changing patterns of parents and the home

Key dilemmas arising from the changing patterns of parents and the home

- Has there been an ‘intensification of parenting’ and if so, is it a positive or negative development?
- Have we got the right balance between reducing pressures on parents and supporting parenting?
- Has the pandemic entrenched gender disparities in the care of children or enabled fathers to play a greater role in childcare?

- Does COVID-19 and its associated effects on parents and the home represent long lasting changes in families’ lives?

Priority areas for further research into parents and the home

- There is a need to **better conceptualise parental time** to improve understanding of the qualities of childcare provided.
- The role of **digital technology** in parent-child interaction for the under-fives and young children’s development.

- As many as seven in ten of all children living in poverty now live in a family with at least one person working (Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) 2020), but we know little about **the specific issues and stresses parents may face in relation to in-work poverty**, such as managing intermittent, insecure work and time pressures within the family, and what particular support may benefit these parents.
- There is a need to better understand and define the housing and physical spaces young children need for healthy development, to understand how young children themselves think about homes and to understand the effects of moving home, particularly for families for whom moving is not a choice.

3 Supporting parents

All parents require support in raising their young children, whether informally through grandparents and extended family or from formal sources such as health visitors and children's centres, whether light touch advice or a more intensive parenting programme. This section highlights some

of the recent research to understand what support parents want and need and reviews how government support for parents has changed over the past 20 years. We then review the evidence base around one particular form of support: parenting programmes.

3.1 The support parents say they want and need

Headline findings

- **Many parents need help and support and turn most frequently to family and friends for advice.**
- **Not all parents receive the support they would like and many face barriers to accessing help. Close to one fifth (18%) of parents of young children have two or fewer people they can turn to locally for help.**
- **Support is particularly important at challenging times in families' lives, such as when relationships breakdown, parents are struggling with their mental health or children are diagnosed with a special educational need or disability—but many parents don't get the support they need at these crucial points.**

Many parents need help and support from time to time as they raise their children. In a representative survey of 2,000 parents (of children of all ages), 61% of parents reported needing support

with a parenting related issue over the preceding 12 months alone (Lane 2021). Often the type of support parents need is light touch, such as advice or signposting to further support across a wide range of issues. For others, such as parents raising children with a special educational need and disability (SEND), there may be a need for more intensive and prolonged support.

Parents of children under five report needing help most commonly in relation to child health (36% of parents), behaviour (24% of parents) or sleep (20% of parents) (Ipsos MORI 2020). When parents do receive support, 81% say they find it useful or very useful (Lane 2021).

Parents most often turn to family members (57% of parents turn to their own parents, and 52% to the child's other parent) and close friends (47%) for help. But health-related sources, including health visitors (39%), the NHS website (38%), childcare professionals (33%) and children's centres (27%) are important

sources of information for a significant proportion of parents (Ipsos MORI 2020).

While there has been an increase in recent years in online support for parents provided by charities such as Parent Talk, Family Lives, the NSPCC and Family Action; internet searches and parenting blogs or websites were mentioned by smaller numbers of parents (15% and 11% respectively) as trusted sources of support (Ipsos MORI, 2020).

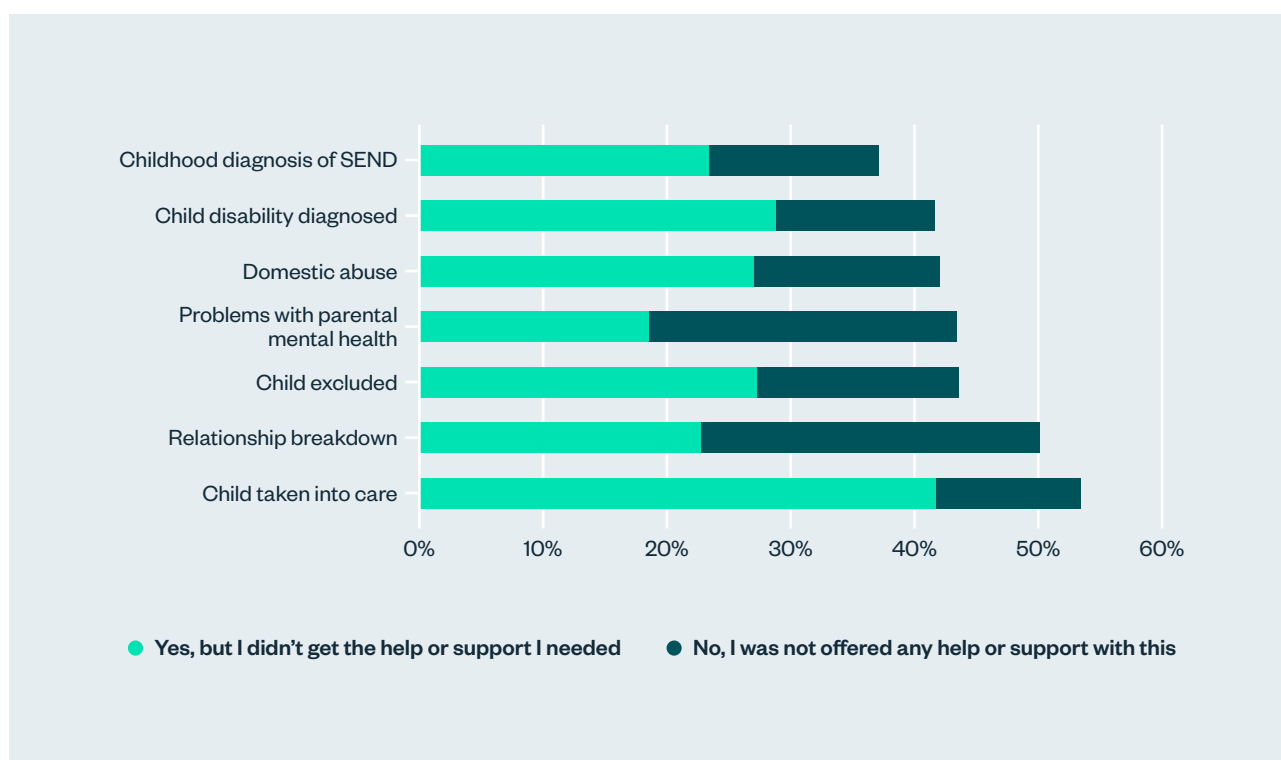
While the majority of parents feel comfortable seeking help, a significant minority report barriers to accessing support, including ongoing stigma in requesting help. The Royal Foundation has identified that just under a fifth of parents (18%) report having two or fewer people they can turn to locally for help (Ipsos MORI 2020). This minority of more isolated parents are also less likely to access formal

support (Ipsos MORI 2020). Parents with lower household incomes report fewer sources of help and are significantly less likely to say they would seek advice from medical professionals (Ipsos MORI 2020).

Particular barriers in accessing formal support exist for parents from some ethnic minority groups. In addition to language barriers, parents report that not all the professionals they come into contact with have an inclusive and sensitive approach to cultural factors, which can create distrust and a reluctance to access services (HM Government 2021). Barriers may also relate to the issue for which parents need support. For example, parents experiencing relationship conflict often view it as a private matter and may well not seek support until they are at a point of crisis (Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) 2018).

Figure 8: Proportion of parents experiencing a major life challenge in the last 12 months who did not get the support they needed.

Source: Lane 2021 (survey data collected in October 2021).



Access to support is particularly important at more challenging times in parents' and young children's lives, such as when a child is diagnosed with a disability or at times of crucial transition, such as becoming a parent for the first time. For example, half of parents either did not get the support they needed or

were not offered any help or support during the breakdown of a relationship (Figure 8). Parents' and children's needs are interconnected, but data about parents and children are not generally linked and services not sufficiently geared to supporting children in their family context.

3.2 Changing government support for parents

Headline findings

- **Since 1997 government policy has shown an increasing interest in supporting parents. Between 2000 and 2010 there was a large increase in intervention and investment in families' lives, including Sure Start Children's Centres, which were found to have positive short- and long-term effects on children's outcomes.**
- **More recently, Family Hubs, Start for Life, Reducing Parental Conflict and Supporting Families initiatives represent a renewed interest in family and parenting policy.**
- **However, policy on parenting remains patchy, with much less emphasis and funding compared to early years education and childcare.**

Public policy in relation to families with young children has changed dramatically over the last two decades. Historically, the state has been reluctant to intervene in parenting except where children were known to be in danger or at risk (Henricson 2003; 2008). However, from 1997, successive governments have demonstrated an increased willingness

to intervene within the family. Interventions have aimed to meet parents' needs, promote young children's development and tackle inequalities therein, and raise awareness of the importance of the early years.

Some public policy helps to **reduce pressures** on families, such as increasing household income or increasing paid parental leave, and others **improve the capabilities** of parents by providing wider support or parenting programmes (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim 2019). Figure 9 shows key developments in parenting policy over the period.¹⁴

One of the most significant policy changes over this period was the introduction of the Sure Start Children's Centre programme which focused on both reducing pressures and improving the capability of parents with young children. In their original incarnation, Sure Start Children's Centres operated as 'one-stop shops' for families, with multi-component multi-agency support across childcare, early education and health, as well as parenting support. The package of support offered by children's centres varied considerably between different local authorities, however there was

14 For a fuller policy timeline, encompassing wider measures to support children see [Oppenheim and Milton 2021](#).

evidence of a range of good practice in the support offered to parents (Barlow et al. 2007).

Evaluations of Sure Start Children's Centres, showed beneficial effects in the short term for the children and parents who had used the centres, (Melhuish et al. 2008) and positive effects were linked to frequency of use, inter-agency working and the number of evidence-based

programmes used by centres (Sammons et al, 2015). More recent research has shown that, at its height, Sure Start has had longer-term benefits for children's health, with a reduction in hospitalisations throughout childhood and adolescence (Cattan et al. 2021a). Sharp declines in local authority funding after 2010 led to a major reduction in the number of Children's Centres and the range of services on offer.

Figure 9: Parenting policy timeline 1998 to present, England.

1998	Sure Start established, comprising multi-component multi-agency support for parents. Parenting Orders introduced, which require parents of 'anti-social' older children to attend parenting programmes.
1999	Maternity leave extended to 18 weeks and introduction of up to three months unpaid parental leave and time off for dependants.
2002	Sure Start Children's Centres launched in deprived areas; expanded to become a universal network of Children's Centres.
2003	Paid paternity leave and the right to request flexible working introduced.
2004	Every Child Matters strategy published.
2005	Bookstart launched, providing free books to all families in England with children at 6–9 months, 18 months and 3 years.
2006	Maternity pay period increased to up to 52 weeks. Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinders, testing different parenting programmes for families of 8–13 year olds at risk of anti-social behaviour. The Parenting Early Intervention Programme extended to all local authorities in England from 2008. Early Learning Partnership testing approaches to how early childhood education and care practitioners can involve parents in their child's learning.
2007	Every Parent Matters strategy launched, including advice that local authorities develop a parenting strategy and requirement they appoint Parenting Commissioners . Family Nurse Partnerships introduced to UK. Pilot family learning course for parents and carers of pre-school children with literacy and numeracy needs. National Academy for Parenting Practitioners established, providing training to over 3,000 practitioners from 2007–2010. Replaced by Children's Workforce Development Council (2010–2012).
2010	Universal early childhood education and care entitlement introduced, providing 15 hours a week of early education to all three- and four-year-olds.

2010	The Equality Act 2010 protects employees against unfair treatment and dismissal because of pregnancy.
2011	CANparent trial launched, entitling 50,000 parents to parent-training sessions as a form of universal parenting support. Early Intervention Grant—ring fenced funding for local authorities on early intervention including parenting programmes. Troubled Families programme announced. Funding for local authorities to support vulnerable families, extended to include younger children in 2015.
2013	Disadvantaged early childhood education and care entitlement introduced, providing 15 hours a week of early education for two-year-olds that meet certain criteria.
2014	Centre for Social Justice proposes Family hub model as a next step in development of children’s centres, with hubs to provide parenting programmes alongside other forms of integrated, preventative support.
2015	Shared parental leave introduced, allowing both parents to share up to 50 weeks leave between them, in the first year after a child is born, or adopted.
2017	Extended early childhood education and care entitlement introduced, providing an additional 15 hours a week for three- and four-year-olds of working parents.
2020	Early Years Healthy Development review published.
2021	DWP’s Reducing Parental Conflict Programme established in 31 local authorities, which includes Incredible Years and Triple P. Supporting families to replace the Troubled Families programme to strengthen multi-agency support for vulnerable families with additional funding. New funding announced for extended Start for Life and Family Help services. This funding comprises £50 million for parenting programmes to help parents and carers build positive relationships with their children offered through Family Hubs and an additional £100m for bespoke mental health support for new and expectant parents.

3.3 The role of parenting programmes in supporting parents

Headline findings

- Parenting programmes have been shown to improve both parenting and children’s outcomes across a range of measures. However, while programmes are often able to support parents to develop their skills, improving children’s outcomes is often more complex and many studies do not monitor longer-term effects.
- Evidence is limited about which programmes can work well for different groups of parents. Some groups of families are underserved by programmes designed to support them.
- There is evidence to support the delivery of parenting programmes through early years and community settings. The evidence of effectiveness around home-visiting programmes is more varied.
- Programmes delivered by professionals have been shown to be effective. There is emerging evidence that peer-led

programmes can be particularly successful in some circumstances.

- **The intensity of programmes varies by the level of need and area of development targeted. Whilst it is generally acknowledged there are no ‘quick fixes’, there is interest in lighter-touch programmes, including those delivered digitally.**

Beyond the everyday support parents receive from their friends and family, health and childcare professionals, and the multicomponent support offered by children’s centres, a large range of smaller-scale discrete parenting programmes offer support to parents of young children. These programmes offer a predefined set of activities delivered by a specific provider that can be purchased by a local authority or other agency (Asmussen et al. 2016). Programmes can be grouped according to four key areas of parenting and children’s development, though many programmes will address more than one area.

- 1 Attachment security
- 2 Behaviour and discipline
- 3 Cognitive development, particularly language and communications skills
- 4 The inter-parental relationship.

The EIF has reviewed programmes operating in the UK that target these key areas for which evaluation evidence is available (Asmussen et al. 2016; Harold

et al. 2016). The authors of both studies called for further research to develop the evidence base for parenting programmes in the UK. Since then, the Nuffield Foundation, Education Endowment Foundation, and central government have invested in research to strengthen this evidence base.¹⁵ However, many programmes remain at an early stage of development with evaluation currently underway.¹⁶ In the following sections we draw on these reviews and other studies to highlight some of the effective interventions, examine what is known about how programmes can support parents with young children and highlight where more research is needed.

It is worth noting that while there is evidence about a range of different programmes for parents of young children, we do not know how widely available these programmes are to parents, nor the demand for this type of support. A decade ago, there was widespread use of evidence-based parenting programmes in Sure Start Children’s Centres (Evangelou, et al. 2014), but it is less clear how many of today’s parents have access to this type of more intensive support.

Parenting and children’s development can be improved through parenting programmes, but demonstrating long-term impacts can be more difficult.

The EIF has identified a range of programmes in the UK that are likely to help parents improve their children’s

15 In 2017, the Nuffield Foundation launched a funding call for development and early evaluation of interventions in the early years, including those working with parents, as part of a strategic partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation. In 2018, the Education Endowment Foundation partnered with the Department for Education and charity SHINE to test five programmes that support parents to help improve their children’s early language and literacy skills.

16 For example, PACT, ParentChild+, REAL, Tips by Text and a book-sharing intervention are all programmes designed to support parents that were under evaluation at the time of writing. The Department for Work and Pensions is also funding evaluation of eight programmes to reduce interparental conflict in 31 local authorities.

Box 7: Incredible Years

- Incredible Years draws on attachment, self-efficacy and social learning theory (see Section 1.1) and aims to treat a range of behavioural problems in children aged between one month and 12 years. The Preschool Basic Programme is aimed at parents of children aged 3–6 years who have concerns about the behaviour of their child.
- The additional Advanced Programme is for families with children aged 4–12 years who have already undertaken the Basic Programme.
- The programmes are delivered by trained facilitators to groups of parents in weekly two-hour sessions. They focus on strengthening parent-child interactions and attachment, reducing harsh discipline, supporting parents' ability to promote children's social, emotional and language development as well as parents' interpersonal issues such as communication and problem-solving, anger and depression management.
- Evaluations of Incredible Years have found improvements in child disruptive and anti-social behaviour and reading ability, as well as improvements in parental warmth, all of which were sustained in the medium and longer-term ([Scott et al. 2014b](#); [Scott et al. 2014a](#); [Morpeth et al. 2017](#); [Menting et al. 2013](#); [Gardner et al. 2017](#)).

Box 8: Parents and Children Together (PACT)

- PACT aims to improve the home learning environment by giving parents the skills, strategies and resources to support their pre-school children's language development.
- The 30-week programme promotes oral language skills through interactive book-reading, talking about new words and story-telling.
- Parents are trained to deliver the programme and are given all the materials they need to carry out daily 20-minute sessions at home with their children.
- An initial randomised controlled trial found that children who took part in the programme saw a greater improvement in their language skills than those who did not and some of these gains were sustained six months later ([Burgoyne et al. 2019](#)). At the time of writing, the programme was undergoing a large-scale randomised controlled trial ([Menzies and Cramman 2021](#)).

outcomes—based on evidence from at least one rigorous evaluation—if carefully commissioned taking into consideration local need and context (see Figure 10).

One effective programme that has been extensively evaluated is Incredible Years, an intervention focused on improving children’s behaviour through breaking negative parent-child interactions cycles and supporting inter-parental relationships (see Box 7).

Two recent studies have identified programmes that appear promising in terms of their impact (at least in the short term) on children’s cognitive outcomes, although

they are at an earlier stage of development than Incredible Years. [Matthews et al. \(2017\)](#) found their early-stage intervention teaching parents about the types of parental talk and interaction with very young children that are associated with language development resulted in short-term improvements in children’s vocabularies. The Parents and Children Together Programme (PACT)—a shared reading intervention for families of three-year-olds—improved children’s oral language and narrative skills and improvements in oral language were at least initially sustained ([Burgoyne et al. 2019](#)). See Box 8.

Figure 10: Effective programmes with parents in the early years.¹⁷

Source: *Asmussen et al. 2016 and EIF Guidebook.*

	Type of programme	Child’s age
Programmes to support attachment		
Family Nurse Partnership ¹⁸	Home visiting	Babies
Family Foundations	Group	Perinatal
Infant-Parent Psychotherapy	Individual therapy	Babies
Child-Parent Psychotherapy	Individual therapy	Preschool
Child First	Home visiting	Babies Toddlers
Programmes to support behaviour self-regulation		
Incredible Years Preschool BASIC Programme	Group	Preschool
Triple P: Group	Group	Preschool
Triple P: Standard	Individual	Preschool
Triple P: Discussion groups	Group	Preschool

17 The EIF also assessed programmes based on the level of need they were addressing: ‘universal’—available for all families, ‘targeted-selective’—families with characteristics that place them at greater risk of experiencing problems; and ‘targeted-indicated’—families where a child or parent has a pre-identified issue requiring additional support.

18 Since the Asmussen et al. review (2016), Family Nurse Partnerships have been found to have a longer-term impact on children’s cognitive outcomes (Robling et al. 2021).

	Type of programme	Child's age
Programmes to support behaviour self-regulation (cont.)		
Empowering Parents/Empowering Communities	Group	Preschool
Family Check-up	Individual	Toddlers
ParentCorps	Group	Preschool
The New Forest Parenting Programme	Group	Preschool
Hitkashrut	Group	Preschool
Helping the non-compliant child	Individual	Preschool
Programmes to support cognitive development and language outcomes		
Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL)	Home visiting and group	Preschool
Let's Play in Tandem	Home visiting and group	Preschool
ParentChild+	Home visiting	Toddlers
Parents as First Teachers	Home visiting	Babies Toddlers
Programmes to support interparental relationships		
Enhanced Triple P	Individual	Toddlers Preschool
Family Check-up for Children	Individual	Toddlers
Family Foundations	Group	Perinatal
e-Family Foundations	Online or app	Antenatal Perinatal Babies
Incredible Years Preschool BASIC + ADVANCE Parent Training Curriculum	Group	Preschool
Schoolchildren and their Families	Group	Preschool
Triple P Family Transitions	Group	Toddlers Preschool

While nearly all parenting programmes in the early years have the ultimate aim of supporting children's development through the effects of improved parenting, some programmes have struggled to translate changes in parenting into improvements in children's outcomes (Barbour et al. 2018). For example, certain interventions that led to improvements in the home learning environment,

parents' confidence and knowledge and the way in which they interacted with their children had somewhat mixed impacts on children's outcomes (Miller et al. 2020; Lord et al. 2021; Gibbard et al. 2021).

Programmes may be less well able to demonstrate effects on children's outcomes for a variety of reasons. In some cases, the outcomes the programme is targeting—particularly children's cognitive

development—may take longer to manifest than the duration of the study (Rennie et al. forthcoming). Other reasons relate to the design of the intervention, for example if it is not sufficiently intense to affect children's outcomes (Lord et al. 2021), or to issues with the implementation of the programme, such as high numbers of families dropping out (Scott et al. 2010; Husain et al. 2018; Gibbard et al. 2021).

Regardless, evaluations provide opportunities to analyse why only limited or partial effects of interventions are sometimes seen and that learning informs the next stages of an intervention's development. Families Connect is an example of a programme which has been refined through different stages

of evaluation and where the most recent study was designed to explore why the programme was able to improve parents' outcomes but did not have an impact on children's potential attainment (see Box 9).

While there is evidence of some programmes' effectiveness in improving children's outcomes in the short term, demonstrating longer-term effects and sustainability of positive effects is more challenging (Asmussen et al. 2016; Barlow et al. 2016; Law et al. 2017). Notable exceptions are Incredible Years (see Box 7) and the Family Nurse Partnerships programme (Box 10), both of which have been found to have a positive impact on children's outcomes in the short and long term.

Box 9: Families Connect

- Families Connect has been developed by Save the Children UK to empower and support families living on low incomes. It aims to help parents strengthen their skills and confidence to support their child's learning in the home, with the ultimate aim of improving children's social and emotional learning, language development and numeracy skills.
- The programme is for families with children aged three to six years and is delivered through schools and nurseries in disadvantaged areas. It involves eight weekly sessions, delivered in small groups.
- Families Connect has been subject to ongoing monitoring and evaluation to assess feasibility, and to improve the content and implementation model (Bradley 2016). A recent efficacy trial found no evidence of a positive impact on children's language development or numeracy skills (Lord, et al. 2021). However, there were improvements in the home learning environment and parents' confidence and skills, and in children's prosocial behaviour.
- Additional analysis of the trial data identified that although the programme was able to influence intermediary outcomes of the home learning environment and parents' skills, it did not result in sufficient changes in parents' behaviour to significantly alter children's language development or numeracy. The evaluators recommended that future versions of the programme strengthen parent-child interaction elements in order to improve children's attainment (Rennie et al. forthcoming).

Box 10: Family Nurse Partnership

- Originally developed in the US, and based on ecological, self-efficacy and attachment theories (see Section 1.1), the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) was adapted for the UK context and introduced by the Department of Health in 2006. It aims to improve outcomes for the health, well-being and social circumstances of young first-time mothers and their children.
- FNP is aimed at first-time teenage mothers and is delivered by specially trained nurses through home visits from pregnancy to the child's second birthday.
- Initial evaluation of the programme focused on health and social care outcomes and did not find a positive impact on the primary health-related outcomes for mothers or children. However, there were positive effects on children's language development at age two (Robling et al. 2016).
- In a longer-term follow-up, positive effects of FNP were found on later educational outcomes including school readiness at age four and reading at age six (Robling et al. 2021). Further research is underway to investigate how the programme has been able to improve children's cognitive outcomes.¹⁹

Which groups of parents can parenting programmes best support?

In '10 Steps for Evaluation Success' Asmussen et al. (2019) argue that the impact of parenting programme on families will be greatest when it is offered to parents and children who are most in need. The authors emphasise the importance of programme developers carefully considering the 'gap' in support available for parents and using evidence to determine which groups of families are most likely to benefit from new programmes. This argument is underpinned by a review of effective programmes for parents in the early years in the UK (Asmussen et al. 2016). The review found that evidence of impact on children's outcomes was indeed strongest for programmes that target children

who were in the most need of support—those showing signs or symptoms of particular problems—compared to programmes that focus on families in groups at risk (such as those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, or parental mental health problems) or universal programmes available to all parents.

Programmes aimed at families within a group at risk are often based on socioeconomic disadvantage rather than other demographic or parental characteristics.²⁰ Some interventions have had positive impacts on children's outcomes (Burgoyne et al. 2019), but others have had mixed effects (Miller et al. 2020; Lord et al. 2021), so it is as yet unclear how effective it is to target programmes at families based on their socioeconomic status.

19 This research is being led by Dr Gabriella Conti at UCL and is funded by the Nuffield Foundation. See www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/family-nurse-partnership-what-works-in-england-and-germany.

20 For example: Lord et al. 2021; Miller et al. 2020; Burgoyne et al. 2019; Armstrong et al. 2019; Dawson and Stokes 2021; Tracey and Torgerson 2021.

There is some evidence that some groups of families are underserved by programmes that are designed to support them, due to barriers they face in participating. Stock et al. (2017) found that families in or at risk of poverty are less likely to take up relationship support and experience significant barriers accessing these services. Several interventions aimed at disadvantaged families from minority ethnic groups, or families where English is an additional language have had lower rates of take-up or attendance than anticipated, with lack of impact attributed to low participation rates (Scott et al. 2010; Husain et al. 2018; Nielsen et al. 2021).

One programme that has been able to overcome barriers to participation is Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities, a parenting support programme for ‘socially disadvantaged families and excluded communities’ (South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust 2020, p. 2). The programme has very good levels of attendance, which is attributed by evaluators to it being delivered by trained local parents rather than professionals, with improvements in children’s behavioural problems observed (Day et al. 2012) (see Box 11).

Once a programme has been shown to have an impact on the group of families it has been designed to support, it can be rolled out in a real-world setting and tested to establish for which groups of parents in which circumstances it is most effective (Asmussen et al. 2019). There is limited evidence available about which programmes are effective for different groups of families, and further research to explore this is needed. One exception is Incredible Years, which has been found to have similarly positive effects on children’s disruptive behaviour regardless of families’ socioeconomic status, ethnicity or parenting style, and irrespective of the age of the children and whether or not

they have ADHD or emotional problems (Gardner et al. 2017). The programme was particularly effective for the most distressed families, with the potential to narrow inequalities caused by parental depression (Gardner et al. 2017).

Delivering programmes to parents

The way in which programmes for parents are delivered varies depending on the needs of families and the outcomes the programmes are trying to achieve.

Where programmes with parents take place

Where interventions take place often depends on the age of the child and whether they are attending an early years setting. Interventions aimed at younger children and babies are more likely to take place at home and interventions with pre-school children are more likely to be delivered in nurseries, schools, children’s centres or community settings. The place of delivery also varies according to the programme’s desired outcomes (Asmussen et al. 2016), with programmes supporting behaviour and cognitive development more likely to be delivered in group-based settings and interventions focusing on attachment more likely to be delivered through home visits.

Evidence of outcomes for home-visiting programmes is often modest and inconsistent (Asmussen et al. 2016). Family Nurse Partnership is a notable exception, with evidence of positive short and longer-term effects on children’s outcomes (Robling et al. 2021) (see Box 10). However, home-visiting programmes may have advantages over those delivered through group-based settings, including helping to overcome barriers that some families face in accessing services, building trust with families and promoting continued engagement (Nielsen et al. 2021; Armstrong et al. 2019; Barbour et al. 2018). While home-visiting programmes can clearly be of value to parents, evaluation is needed to

Box 11: Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities

- Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (EPEC) is a parenting intervention aiming to improve disruptive behaviour in children. It draws on cognitive behavioural, social learning, attachment, structural and relational theories (see Section 1.1) and was designed to support highly stressed, isolated families living in areas of deprivation, who may be in particular need of support, but who would not normally access this type of programme.
- EPEC uses a peer-led approach to address some of the barriers families face in accessing support, such as logistical issues around competing demands and transportation, negative parental expectations about the programme and concerns about the cultural acceptability of this type of support.
- Local parents are trained as peer facilitators to deliver the manualised, group-based parenting programme over eight weeks, in community settings.
- An evaluation of the programme in a deprived area with a high proportion of families from ethnic minority groups, found very high levels of completion of the programme (92%) and improvements in children's behaviour and parents' competencies (Day et al. 2012). The evaluators conclude that the peer-led group model works for delivering evidence-based parenting support to families who may not otherwise engage in mainstream services.
- Between 2017 and 2019 EPEC was rolled out across 15 areas of England, and evaluation found that the peer-delivery model was effective at recruiting and retaining parents from socially disadvantaged communities at scale, and that the courses were popular and valued by local parents (Day et al. 2020).

understand how and when they are most effective (Asmussen et al. 2016).

There is more established evidence of effectiveness in programmes that are delivered through group-based settings such as at nurseries and community settings (for example [Burgoyne et al. 2019](#); Day et al. 2012; [Scott et al. 2014b](#)). And, while good practice in how early years settings might support the home learning environment has been identified (Hunt et al. 2011; Callanan et al. 2017) there is limited evidence on the approaches early years providers can take to support parents in

building their capabilities. This suggests that nurseries and early years providers may be an important route to providing support for parents that is not yet being fully utilised. Stock et al. (2017) argue that, for programmes aimed at reducing interparental conflict, embedding support for parents through mainstream services offers a way to overcome access barriers some families may face. The government is also exploring delivery of parenting programmes through Family Hubs as part of the early years COVID-19 recovery programme (HM Government 2021).

Who delivers programmes to parents?

Evidence of who is best placed to deliver programmes is varied and it is likely to depend on the level and type of need of the families involved, the intensity and location of the programme and the stage of development of the intervention. Programmes are typically delivered by specialists or professionals, trained practitioners, or parents or peer-volunteers, with benefits and disadvantages to the different approaches.

Some researchers argue that parenting interventions can best be delivered by skilled professionals (Scott 2010) and there is evidence that more experienced professionals will be able to provide higher quality support for parents (Barbour et al. 2018) (Schrader-McMillan et al. 2012). However, one advantage to Training practitioners in early years settings to deliver programmes to parents rather than bringing in external professionals, is the potential lasting impact beyond the course of the intervention, where practitioners are able to incorporate the skills they have learned into their regular working practices (Barbour et al 2018).

There is also emerging support for programmes that are delivered by other parents, through parent volunteering and peer-support models. While the evidence of the effects of these ‘parent-powered’ approaches on children’s outcomes is mixed, there is evidence that they can improve parents’ confidence, self-efficacy and well-being, as well as parent-child attachment and parents’ social networks of support, with some of these benefits also felt by the parents involved in delivering the programmes (Bibby et al. 2020). Parent-delivered programmes can also have greater engagement with families that other programmes have not been able to reach and can then connect those families with other services. Such programmes can also be

less costly to deliver relative to programmes delivered by professionals or practitioners. There is however some evidence that parent volunteers are less suitable to deliver more intensive programmes. Armstrong et al. (2019) found that parent volunteers struggled to find time—and sometimes didn’t have the confidence—to deliver a fairly intensive home-visiting programme but were more effective when delivering programmes through Children’s Centres where support from professionals was available.

An example of an effective intervention delivered by parents is Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (see Box 11).

Intensity of interventions

Programmes vary in terms of the number and length of sessions, their duration and whether or not they are delivered one-to-one or as part of a group—all of which affect the cost of delivery. Asmussen et al (2019) explain that the intensity of intervention should vary by the level of need of the families involved—with families with clearly identified needs for additional support requiring the most intensive programmes, and universal programmes targeting all families tending to be lighter-touch.

In their review of parenting programmes, Asmussen et al. (2016) found that the level of intensity of effective programmes varied depending on the desired outcome(s) for the child:

- Effective programmes focusing on attachment were relatively high cost, involving frequent contact with vulnerable families for a year or more.
- Programmes that had an impact on children’s behaviour tended to be relatively low cost and shorter in duration and were often based on group activities.

- Programmes that were effective in improving children’s cognitive development were of medium cost, reflecting that they were delivered individually to parents over a period of a year or more. None of the effective interventions focusing on children’s early learning were low cost, suggesting that while improvements can be achieved, there are no ‘quick fixes’.

There is however, considerable interest in lighter-touch interventions, with some evidence that they can bring about changes in parents’ behaviour and improvements in children’s development—at least in the short term. [Matthews et al. \(2017\)](#) found their low intensity intervention, teaching parents of 11-month-olds about the type of parental talk that is associated with positive language development, did have an impact on infants’ vocabulary development. However, the effects were not sustained a year after the programme was delivered. They argue that given that intensive (and therefore expensive) programmes are unlikely to be funded by government on a large scale, it is worth investigating how lighter-touch programmes could be made more effective. For example, establishing the best timing of delivery to affect key transition points (such as starting school or parental separation) and whether a combination

of a lighter-touch intervention with regular follow-up support could sustain positive outcomes.

Two less intensive interventions that have been found to be effective are Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (see Box 11), and Video-Feedback Intervention to promote Positive Parenting and Sensitive Discipline (see Box 12).

Digital technology provides opportunities not only for the development of lighter-touch interventions, but also for making programmes more accessible to some groups of parents. The development of digital programmes expanded rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic, with providers and developers revising and adapting programmes normally delivered face-to-face so they could be delivered remotely during lockdown (Martin et al. 2020). A review of virtual and digital interventions found only one intervention for parents of young children with robust evidence of effectiveness that was available in the UK—Triple P Online, which aims to support children’s behaviour and self-regulation.²¹ However, there are many digital programmes for parents of young children that are currently under evaluation and evidence-based face-to-face programmes that are being adapted for virtual delivery.²²

21 Early Intervention Foundation Guidebook (2017). *Triple P Online*. <https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/programme/triple-p-online>.

22 Two examples are: Tips by Text—a programme where parents are sent text messages with ideas for activities to improve their child’s language development, which is currently under evaluation (<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/tipsbytext>); and an online adaptation of the Murray and Cooper Shared Picture Book programme (www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/transforming-effective-early-educational-interventions-for-virtual-delivery).

Box 12: Video Feedback to Promote Positive Parenting and Sensitive Discipline (VIPP-SD)

- VIPP-SD aims to prevent behavioural problems developing in one- to three-year-olds 'at risk'. The programme is based on attachment and social learning theories (see Section 1.1).
- It is a relatively brief intervention, involving six home-based sessions of one to two hours every two weeks delivered by a trained health professional.
- During the session the health professional films the parent and child during play, or challenging interactions, then provides focused feedback on the filmed interaction from the previous visit.
- A recent trial found that the programme was effective in reducing symptoms of early behaviour problems when delivered in a routine health service context, both immediately after the intervention and two years later (O'Farrelly et al. 2021a, O'Farrelly et al. 2021b).

3.4 Implications for supporting parents

Implications for supporting parents

- All parents need help sometimes but often don't know where to turn for advice and information beyond their family and friends.
- Sometimes parents need more intensive support, for example in relation to a particular issue with their children's behaviour or development, or at challenging times in their lives, such as when experiencing relationship conflict. Too often, parents don't get the support they want or need.
- Parenting programmes can meet this need for more intensive support. While the evidence base for parenting programmes is still developing, there are a number of programmes that have been shown to improve outcomes for children and parents across a range of different areas of parenting and development.

Key dilemmas

- How can support for parents of young children be better designed so that a) parents know where to turn when they want help, and b) they are offered support when they need it most?
- How can support be made accessible to all parents who could benefit from it?
- How can support for parents—whether lighter-touch information and advice or more intensive programmes—be embedded in the services that parents are already accessing, such as health services, early years education and Family Hubs? And what role might do local authorities play in integrating this support across the wider system of family support?

Priority areas for further research into supporting parents

- **Measuring the longer-term effects of programmes.** Evaluators and research funders should ensure that programmes that are effective in improving children's outcomes in the short term are monitored for longer-term impacts.
- **How best to target parenting programmes.** Further research is needed to establish how to make programmes accessible and attractive to parents who would benefit the most from them.
- **Identifying the most effective times to provide support to parents.** There is some evidence that key transition points (such as pregnancy or children starting early years education) and challenging times (such as relationship breakdown) might be particularly effective points to provide additional support, whether through lighter-touch information and advice or more intensive intervention programmes.
- **Understanding who is best placed to deliver programmes to parents and in what circumstances.** Further work is needed to identify in which situations peer-led programmes can work and where professional delivery is needed.
- **Identifying how lighter-touch interventions can be made more effective.** Research should explore whether and how lighter-touch interventions can be made more effective, possibly through a combination of appropriate targeting and timing and exploring the use of boosters or top-ups.
- **Identifying in which situations support for parents is more effective at home, or in early years and community settings.** Evidence on the impact of home-based interventions is mixed but the positive benefits observed make them worthy of further investigation.
- **Exploring the role of digital delivery.** Digital support can be cost effective and sometimes improve accessibility, but further work is needed to establish how support for parents can be effectively delivered digitally.

4 Conclusion and reflections

Parenting matters, but so do parents in and of themselves, as well as the context in which families live. Parents, and in particular mothers, are now actively encouraged to balance paid employment with providing care for their young children. The challenges presented by this balancing act can have consequences for the physical and psychological health of parents, and these tensions have been brought into even sharper relief during the pandemic.

Yet, despite these challenges, there is evidence that parents of young children continue to carve out time in their increasingly busy days to carry out developmental childcare, which includes reading and playing with their children. Indeed, parents today spend more than three times as much time each day doing this kind of activity with their children than parents in the 1970s. Meanwhile, new and exciting developments in digital technology continue to transform the mediums and tools young children use to play, learn and develop. Three-quarters of under-fives have access to an internet-connected device—a three-fold increase between 2009 and 2019.

Some researchers suggest that many parents are experiencing greater judgement and stress than previous generations, largely driven by increased expectations placed on them through an ‘intensification’ of parenting. Others argue that while there is pressure to engage in these intensive childcare activities, caring

for infants and toddlers is related to more life satisfaction, greater self-esteem, self-efficacy, and less depression than caring for school-age and teenage children.

We know that the experience of parenting young children will be markedly different for individual families. Some young children will be growing up in separated or blended families, which bring their own unique strengths and challenges. Others will be facing increased financial pressures, with rising rates of poverty for families with young children and one in four children now starting school in privately rented housing, which brings increased insecurity and greater risk of overcrowding. For some families, the cumulative impact of these pressures on time, money, and emotional capacity will feel insurmountable without more support.

Evidence shows that parenting programmes can improve parenting, which in turn can enhance young children’s well-being and life-chances and has the potential to reduce socioeconomic inequalities. However, these programmes form only one component of the support parents need, which includes more fundamental support to improve access to mental health services, boost family incomes and improve the physical environment of the homes in which young children are raised. As such, there is no ‘magic bullet’ that will help meet parents’ needs, support children’s development and address inequalities ([Cattan et al. forthcoming](#)).

There remains much we don't know about the pressures parents face and the support from which they would most benefit. This includes developing a better understanding of the particular experiences and needs of some parents and families, such as parents from different minority groups, non-resident parents, and families experiencing in-work poverty. In seeking to meet these diverse needs, and in a context of reduced

budgets, developing the evidence base for lighter-touch and digital interventions to support parents is a particular priority.

We need both to reduce pressures on families and improve capabilities, using universal and targeted support. This is best considered through a holistic lens that considers the needs of young children and their families—and the services that meet those needs. This will be explored in greater detail in our forthcoming final report.

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to our advisory group for helping to ensure the quality and relevance of this series. We would like to thank Catherine Dennison, Tim Gardam, Josh Hillman, Ruth Maisey and colleagues at the Nuffield Foundation for giving their time and expertise to help shape this review. Particular thanks to Dr Nathan Archer for his role in shaping the early stages of this review and to Dr Kirsten Asmussen at the Early Intervention Foundation for her knowledge and guiding us throughout. We are also grateful to our external readers: Dr Kerris Cooper, Professor Ann Phoenix and Professor Terrie Moffitt for their feedback and invaluable insights.

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