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# Bringing up the next generation: from research to policy

## The changing face of early childhood in the UK



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# Bringing up the next generation: from research to policy

## Overview and summary

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### About this review

Early childhood, from birth to the age of five, matters in itself and as a foundational stage of development. A time when many parents experience intense joy and love, but also pressure and stress. A period when inequalities emerge and go on to shape how children fare into adulthood. The early years and the dynamics and pressures of family life are fundamental to considering how we might build a more cohesive society.

**Bringing up the next generation: from research to policy** is the culmination of the Nuffield Foundation's

*Changing face of early childhood* series, comprising six substantive evidence reviews and supporting roundtables, webinars and parent engagement sessions (see Box 2). Drawing on some 90 studies funded by the Foundation over the last eight years and other sources, this report explores key themes that cut across different aspects of young children's lives, provides a holistic account of the experience of contemporary childhood and presents recommendations for policy and practice.

## How has early childhood changed?

Across our series, we have detailed striking changes in the lives of families with young children over the last 20 years, as well as some continuities. In this final report, we highlight four of the most significant changes.

- 1 Changing family forms and parenting experiences:** Family living arrangements in the UK are increasingly varied. While family forms do not determine outcomes for young children, this diversity in family life is an important context for parenting. We don't know whether expectations of parents are growing, but we do have a greater appreciation of the significant mental and emotional impacts of being a parent of a young children, including feeling stressed and judged by others. This evidence points to a need to support quality relationships between those raising children regardless of family form and to promote parental mental health.
- 2 Combining paid work and childcare has become the norm for mothers with young children.** There has been a marked rise in the proportion of mothers with young children who are in paid work (see Figure 5) whereas the proportion of fathers in paid work remains largely unchanged. Striking a balance between work and childcare and the associated pressures – time, financial, emotional – is increasingly important for many families with young children.
- 3 Formal education and childcare: a near-universal experience for young children.** Virtually all young children now experience some form of state-financed formal early childhood

education and care before beginning primary school (see Figure 6). The accessibility, affordability and quality of formal education and childcare has become a key issue for families with young children and for society.

- 4 Rising poverty, inequalities and vulnerability.** There have been increases in relative child poverty rates since 2013/14, particularly in families where the youngest child is under 5, with a concurrent rise in in-work poverty. And while young children's health has improved overall over the last 20 years, trends are marked by stark inequalities, with strong associations between poor health, geographical area, ethnicity and level of deprivation. In combination, rising poverty and deprivation makes it more difficult for early years and childcare, health and other services to mitigate its effects and reduce inequalities between children.

The COVID-19 crisis fundamentally changed the context in which a generation of young children have grown and developed. Lockdowns reduced access to childcare support networks and many families experienced bereavement and increased economic hardship. Parents had to take on greater childcare responsibilities, with these pressures and raised expectations affecting parental mental health and the relationship between parents.

The pandemic exposed fault lines in the system, with vulnerable families and children or those with special educational needs more likely to fall between the cracks, and a growing gap between escalating need and available

responses. While we are beginning to see the immediate impacts on children's early development – with two in five young children not reaching the expected level

of development at the end of reception class<sup>1</sup> – it is not yet clear what the longer-term implications will be.

## Key insights for early childhood policy

Insights from theory and practice enable an increasingly sophisticated understanding of what young children need to flourish. Here, we highlight eight insights into young children's healthy development which underpin our recommendations:

- 1 **Meeting the needs of today's young children:** Policy and practice has not always kept pace with what we know about contemporary early childhood and the myriad changes in the lives of young children and their families, including the shifting social and economic landscape, now worsening, and complexity of family life.
- 2 **Understanding young children's development in the round:** The domains of young children's development are interconnecting (see Figure 1). To illustrate: we cannot support a child's cognitive development without considering their physical health. Policy must take a holistic approach to supporting healthy development through early childhood.
- 3 **The need to support parental capabilities and reduce pressures:**<sup>2</sup> The way in which parents – in all their diverse forms – raise their child has a profound influence on children's well-being and development. Two key areas for parental support are mental health and emotional well-being and the quality of relationships between parents, regardless of family form.
- 4 **The need for society-wide action and consideration of families' broader needs:** The foundations for healthy development are nurturing care and protection from stresses. These are shaped not just by the family but the broader context of community and society, including employment, education and care, and health services (see Figure 2). Services for families with young children need to understand their broader needs – including those overlooked historically, such as the availability of quality and stable housing.
- 5 **Working with families:** Services for families with young children should not be something that is done to them,

1 Tracey, L., Bowyer-Crane, C., Bonetti, S., Nielsen, D., D'Apice, K. and Compton, S. (2022). *The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's socio-emotional wellbeing and attainment during the reception year*. Education Endowment Foundation. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-childrens-socioemotional-well-being-and-attainment-during-the-reception-year>

2 Eisenstadt, N. and Oppenheim, C. (2019). *Parents, poverty and the state: 20 years of evolving family policy*. Policy Press.

but with them. At its core, this requires giving professionals the time to build trusting relationships with families and understand their context and needs in the round. It also emphasises the importance of locality: services that are tailored to local populations, which includes ensuring the voice of parents and young children are central to service development.

- 6 Ensuring timely support and early intervention:** Timely support makes all the difference. Early intervention reduces the likelihood of further difficulties and costs. Transitions in the lives of families with young children – becoming a parent, returning to work, starting nursery, parental separation – are particular points when timely support is vital.
- 7 Prioritising the most vulnerable and tackling poverty:** Because gaps in young children’s outcomes emerge early on, a persistent focus on disadvantage is needed. One

that addresses the intersectionality between different dimensions of inequality, including income, work, housing tenure, place, ethnicity, physical and mental health, and disability. Central to this is tackling poverty in early childhood, which plays a causal role in influencing children’s outcomes and is inextricably linked to other factors that increase the risk of harm.

- 8 Effective use of data and evidence:** It is vital that practitioners have quick and direct access to important information from partners and other services to help them meet the needs of families and young children, giving them a ‘single view’ of a child. To make this happen we need a consistent identifier (such as the Unique Pupil Number) at birth and coordinated action across all services involved in young children’s lives to make the technical changes they need to achieve frictionless data sharing.

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## Next steps for early childhood policy

At a time when two-fifths of children are not reaching the expected levels of development at age five, more than a third of families with a young child are living in relative poverty<sup>3</sup> and all families are grappling with the consequences of the pandemic and sharply rising prices, there is a compelling case for a concerted focus on early childhood. To meet the needs of families with young children, early childhood policy requires a greater clarity

of objectives, sustained investment and a coherent, joined-up approach to services.

Based on the evidence from our reviews as well as wider engagement across the series, we identify four goals for early childhood policy, with underpinning priorities and policy recommendations. Here, we present the goals and priorities; policy recommendations can be found in chapter 6.

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3 Oppenheim, C. and Milton, C. (2021). *Changing patterns of poverty in early childhood*. Nuffield Foundation. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/changing-patterns-of-poverty-in-early-childhood>

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### Goal 1: Services that understand and respond to the needs of all families with young children in the round.

We know that family-focused, joined-up services that take account of the complexity and dynamism of family lives are key; no single service provider can deliver good outcomes alone.<sup>4</sup> These services need to provide a continuum of support for parents, from light-touch universal information and guidance to more intensive, sustained support for those in need of additional help. In the medium-term, the Best Start for Life's<sup>5</sup> vision needs to be extended up to the age of five and to connect across all services for families, including efforts to tackle poverty. While a comprehensive assessment of what needs to change in order to bring about this vision is beyond the scope of this report, our series has identified a number of priorities worth highlighting:

- **Making early childhood education and care a core part of integrated systems of family support.**
- **Joining up data to develop a shared view of the child and their family.**
- **Ensuring development reviews form the basis of timely support for young children and their families.**
- **Better meeting the needs of families that have been underserved historically.**

- **Building the evidence base for lighter-touch and digital forms of family support.**

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### Goal 2: All parents to have a choice about how they care for their young children.

Empowering choices requires parental leave entitlements *and* creating family-friendly workplaces, requiring action from both government and employers. It also requires a step change in enabling both mothers *and* fathers to balance work and care. Priorities for reform include:

- **Extending the scale and reach of work-care policies.**
- **Addressing the cliff-edge of parental leave and employment.**
- **Encouraging employers to pro-actively support and enhance work-care balance for parents of young children.**

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### Goal 3: An early childhood education and care system to support all young children's learning – in the broadest sense – with a focus on tackling disadvantage.

The pandemic has highlighted just how integral to the lives of families with young children early childhood education and

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4 Lewing, B., Gross, J., and Molloy, D. (2022). *Leading and delivering early childhood services: 10 insights from 20 places across England and Wales*. Early Intervention Foundation. [www.eif.org.uk/report/leading-and-delivering-early-childhood-services-10-insights-from-20-places-across-england-and-wales](http://www.eif.org.uk/report/leading-and-delivering-early-childhood-services-10-insights-from-20-places-across-england-and-wales).

5 HM Government (2021). *The Best Start for Life: The Early Years Healthy Development Review Report*. HM Government. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/973085/Early\\_Years\\_Report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/973085/Early_Years_Report.pdf).

care services have become. Given the rapid growth of this sector, its complexity and tensions between its objectives, we conclude that a whole system review is needed. Ensuring sustainable early years provision involves reviewing overall funding and an ambitious medium-term goal for a graduate-led early years workforce. This includes exploring how to bind increases in funding to improved quality. Priorities for reform include:

- **Improving support for disadvantaged children and those with additional needs.**
- **Reducing the financial burden of childcare on families.**
- **Strengthening the early years workforce.**

#### **Goal 4: A societal commitment to tackling the causes and effects of early childhood poverty.**

There is a pressing need for greater recognition of the harm poverty can cause young children, building consensus on the measures and investment required to tackle early childhood poverty.<sup>6</sup> Tackling poverty

in early childhood involves addressing its direct and indirect causes and impacts: quality jobs for parents that enable work-care balance and progression, improving social security benefits to enable work and meet immediate and acute needs, support for parenting and mental health, and a tailored approach that understands and responds to the complex and inter-connected pathways into and out of poverty. Priorities include:

- **Introducing a comprehensive measure of relative income poverty, agreed by government.**
- **Ensuring social security boosts employment and addresses immediate needs.**
- **Tackling poverty as part of joined-up services in early childhood.**

In setting out our vision for early childhood we do not underestimate the dilemmas and challenges. It is a long-term endeavour, but we have strong foundations to build from and a growing evidence base of what works. We believe that getting the fundamentals right in early childhood is part of creating a more just, resilient and productive society for us all.

6 [Oppenheim and Milton \(2021\)](#).



# 1 Introduction

*Bringing up the next generation: from research to policy* is the culmination of the Nuffield Foundation's *Changing face of early childhood* series. It explores key themes that cut across different aspects of young children's lives, in very different circumstances, distils the fragmented data from different studies into a holistic account of the experience of contemporary childhood and the impact of social conditions upon it, and presents recommendations for policy and practice (see Box 1).

The report also aims to generate an informed and urgent debate on early childhood at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis have brought to the fore questions of disadvantage and geographic and other inequalities. Discussion of the long-term effects of these crises on the well-being of families and children has highlighted the inadequacy of policy to address the growing points of stress across our society.

This series reflects the Nuffield Foundation's mission to advance educational

opportunity and social well-being, of which our work in early years has long been a part. We believe that evidence has the power to change lives, and we have drawn on some 90 studies

funded by the Foundation over the last eight years, across our core domains of Education, Justice and Welfare – as well as many other sources of research. Our goal is to ensure that the findings and insights from these Nuffield-funded studies, often siloed, are brought together and set in a wider context. Through connecting these domains more closely and taking a holistic approach to early childhood, we aim to enable practitioners, policymakers and researchers to think afresh across boundaries of professional expertise, departmental divisions and research specialities and disciplines.

In taking this holistic approach to the evidence, we paint a picture of how the lives of young children have changed over the last two decades. Drawing on the research, we set out key goals and recommendations from the individual studies that taken together can inform policy on early childhood. We believe that these insights and conclusions have an urgent bearing on the key challenges faced by families with young children today and in the future.

This final report draws on the series' six substantive evidence reviews, which cover key areas affecting young children under 5 and their parents (see Box 2) and takes account of the varied perspectives and insights provided by the parents,<sup>1</sup>

## Note to the reader:

Footnote references that are underlined are those funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

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1 It is worth noting what we mean when we use the term 'parent' in this review. We recognise the important role that step, adoptive and social parents can play. The parents referred to in this review 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 are not biologically linked to the child; social parents—including co-resident step-parents, foster parents, cohabiting partners, and guardians; and resident step-parents—those who are living with the child full or part-time, are a cohabiting partner or former cohabiting partner of a child's birth/adoptive parent (mother or father).

researchers, policymakers and practitioners who have participated in our roundtables, webinars and parent engagement ThinkIns.<sup>2</sup> The focus in our six evidence

reviews is primarily on England, though we do touch briefly on some differences with Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, utilising UK-wide data where possible.

### **Box 1: A holistic but not comprehensive look at early childhood**

Our *Changing face of early childhood* series aims to provide a holistic account of early childhood. We explore the experiences of young children *and* their families, look across traditional divides in public policy and services, such as health and education, and consider the broader economic and societal context in which young children are raised. But we recognise that the series does not account for the full diversity and complexity of all early childhood experiences.

In producing the series, we have been limited by available research, which is not always fully inclusive (see chapter 7). We have not explored in detail the specialist services available for young children – in particular, those available to children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). While outside the scope of this series, we recognise that understanding the particular experiences of families with a young child with SEND and improving specialist services is an urgent priority for early childhood policy.

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2 We convened three online 'ThinkIns' in partnership with Tortoise Media, in which parents and carers of children under five were invited to share their experiences of parenting and family life. The three ThinkIns were held between 1 and 9 March 2022 and 67 parents and carers participated. While we made efforts to invite parents from a range of different backgrounds and with different parenting experiences, the ThinkIns were not designed to be fully representative, but to complement our research synthesis. As such, we use some anonymised quotes from the ThinkIns in this report in an illustrative capacity only.

## Box 2: The *Changing face of early childhood* series

### Six evidence reviews and a programme of stakeholder engagement

- 1 How are the lives of families with young children changing?** Explores the changing family circumstances in young children's lives over the last 20 years, including changing patterns of family fertility and formation, family context, and employment and care.
- 2 Protecting young children at risk of abuse and neglect** explores changing patterns of abuse and neglect over the last two decades and focuses on the child welfare and protection system and the family justice system.
- 3 Changing patterns of poverty in early childhood** focuses on changing patterns of poverty, with a particular emphasis on income poverty, but also related issues of deprivation and disadvantage.
- 4 The role of early childhood education and care in shaping life chances** looks at the quality, effectiveness and sustainability of early childhood education and care provision.
- 5 Are young children healthier than they were two decades ago?** Explores the significant developments in young children's health over the last 20 years, focusing on seven fundamental indicators.
- 6 Time for parents** explores the changing nature of parenting, which lies at the heart of young children's development and learning and considers changes in both the context in which parents raise young children and the care parents provide.



## 2 Why early childhood?

A child's early years are crucial for their future life-chances. Early childhood, from birth to the age of five, matters in itself and as a foundational stage of development.<sup>3</sup> A period for well-being and well-becoming.<sup>4</sup> A time when many parents experience intense joy and love, but also pressure and stress as they get to know and support their baby, infant and child. The importance of the early years in laying the building blocks for a child's physical development, social and emotional well-being, and cognitive and linguistic capabilities is evidenced by a large, interdisciplinary body of research. As such, early childhood and the dynamics and challenges of family life are fundamental to considering how we might build a more resilient, productive and cohesive society.

The growing understanding of the nature and importance of the early years is reflected in a fundamental shift in public policy in relation to families with young children over the last 25 years. Attention and investment have expanded. A strong reluctance to intervene except where children were at risk of harm has been replaced by a more active role in helping parents balance work and care, the creation of universal early education and care for 3 and 4-year-olds, and plans to link up services from pregnancy to age 2.

The journey has not been smooth and some policies – notably financial support for families with young children in poverty, Sure Start Children's centres and the public health grant – were sharply reduced from 2010 in the wake of the financial crash. But governments of all political persuasions continue to see a legitimate role for the state in supporting all families with young children.

The policies and services at national and local levels provide assets to build on and opportunities to reach and support families with young children. Many early years services – such as education and childcare, health and children's social services – are devolved, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland taking distinct approaches. In England, the government's Best Start for Life and Family Hubs are important steps forward but will take time, resources and skilled implementation.

There is also growing recognition in civil society of this important phase of life. The Big Lottery Fund's A Better Start and many other local initiatives, the Royal Foundation's Centre for Early Childhood, the Early Childhood Forum, organisations like Kindred Squared, the Early Years Commission and the Nuffield Foundation's own *Changing face of early childhood* series are representative of an appetite to address

3 Research, policy and services relating to 'early childhood' often includes pregnancy and antenatal care, although most of the research funded by the Nuffield Foundation relates to children from birth onwards.

4 Phoenix, A. (2020). Childhood, wellbeing, and transnational migrant families: conceptual and methodological issues. In Tiilikainen, M., Al-Sharmani, M., and Mustasaari, S. (eds). *Wellbeing of Transnational Muslim Families: Marriage, Law and Gender* (pp.164–182). Routledge.

problems current policy has not.<sup>5</sup> Public policy continues to place less weight on the early years than children over 5. This is reflected in the stark difference in public funding per child for early years education compared to those of school age and the value we place on the care provided by parents and the early years workforce.<sup>6</sup>

The needs and interests of babies and young children are less visible than older children in research, public policy and the wider public conversation. Young children cannot as readily speak for themselves and they are nested in the private domestic world, where, not surprisingly, there is greater ambivalence about state intervention. Many parents themselves and wider society have limited knowledge about this important phase of life.<sup>7</sup>

To make progress in supporting young children and their families, we need a better shared understanding and appreciation of just how important this period is – but also the significant shifts in, and complexity of, early childhood and family life.

There have been striking changes in the lives of families with young children over the last 20 years, as well as some continuities. A changing economy, employment patterns, demographic shifts with a diversity of family forms, circumstances and education levels, the digital revolution, and shifting norms have shaped the experiences and life-chances of young children today. Family life has

become more complex as parents navigate the balance between work, home and care, with nearly all young children experiencing some form of formal childcare and early education before school age. While there remain stubborn inequalities between how mothers and fathers divide work and care for young children, there are some signs of change.

All families have experienced this changing social and economic landscape, but there are marked inequalities between their experiences. These inequalities are often evident early in a baby or young child's life and go on to shape, but not determine, how they fare as children and adults – including how they raise their own children. Many trends have been exacerbated and complicated by COVID-19. The evidence is stark: teachers report that only half of their students who arrived to start reception in 2021 were 'school-ready'.<sup>8</sup> It is not yet clear how long these changes will last or what their medium and longer-term impact will be.

Inequalities often take the form of a gradient rather than a binary division between advantage and disadvantage. But we also see increases in the persistence of childhood poverty and the prevalence of complex need. These inequalities intersect, with differences by socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, geography and disability interacting with one another. Analysis of these multi-faceted inequalities in early childhood is starting to grow, but is not

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5 The Centre for Social Justice and Fabian Society (2021). *Early Years Commission. A cross-party manifesto*. <https://fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Early-Years-Commission-Cross-Party-Manifesto.pdf>

6 Farquharson, C., Sibieta, L., Tahir, I. and Waltmann, B. (2021). *2021 annual report on education spending in England*. Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS). <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15858>

7 Ipsos MORI. (2020). *State of the nation: Understanding public attitudes to the early years*. [https://royalfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ipsos-MORI-SON\\_report\\_FINAL\\_V2.4.pdf](https://royalfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ipsos-MORI-SON_report_FINAL_V2.4.pdf)

8 YouGov and Kindred<sup>2</sup>. (2022). *School readiness: qualitative and quantitative research with teaching professionals*. [www.kindredsquare.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/YouGov-Kindred-Squared-School-Readiness-Report-2022.pdf](http://www.kindredsquare.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/YouGov-Kindred-Squared-School-Readiness-Report-2022.pdf)

yet informing policy, which needs to be tailored to this complexity of need.<sup>9</sup>

Understanding the changing face of early childhood, assessing what we have learnt and identifying priorities and next steps is a pressing task. Yet research, policy and practice are still playing catch up with this shifting landscape. This final report of the series seeks to fully grasp these changes and consider how to create systems of support that empower and meet the evolving needs of families with young children today and into the

future. There are lessons we can draw upon from the response to the pandemic: the rapid expansion of digital channels of communication, collaboration between services and practitioners to meet urgent need and the unleashing of community action are all important pointers for the future. It is also an opportune moment, as the pandemic has created new needs that cannot be met through existing systems and policies. It has also created new opportunities for support and services to connect and respond better.

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9 [Cattan, S., Fitzsimons, E., Goodman, A., Phimister, A., Ploubidis, G. B., and Wertz, J. \(2022\). \*Early childhood inequalities\*. IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities. IFS.](#)

# 3 What do young children need to flourish?

When a parent holds their 2-year-old child to share a bedtime story, this simple act bestows many gifts: it is an expression of affection and warmth, it supports language learning and understanding, it establishes a routine and stability, and helps the child go to sleep to restore their body and mind. These four domains of development: physical, socioemotional, cognitive and general learning are closely intertwined and interact with each other (see Figure 1). This insight is important not only for parents and carers, but also for those who work in early years services and policymakers.

Some capabilities and temperaments are particularly associated with children's thriving in early childhood and through into adulthood.<sup>10</sup> These include the importance of self-control (being able to manage emotions and behaviour), mental skills (including working memory, flexible thinking and paying attention) and language and communication skills.<sup>11</sup>

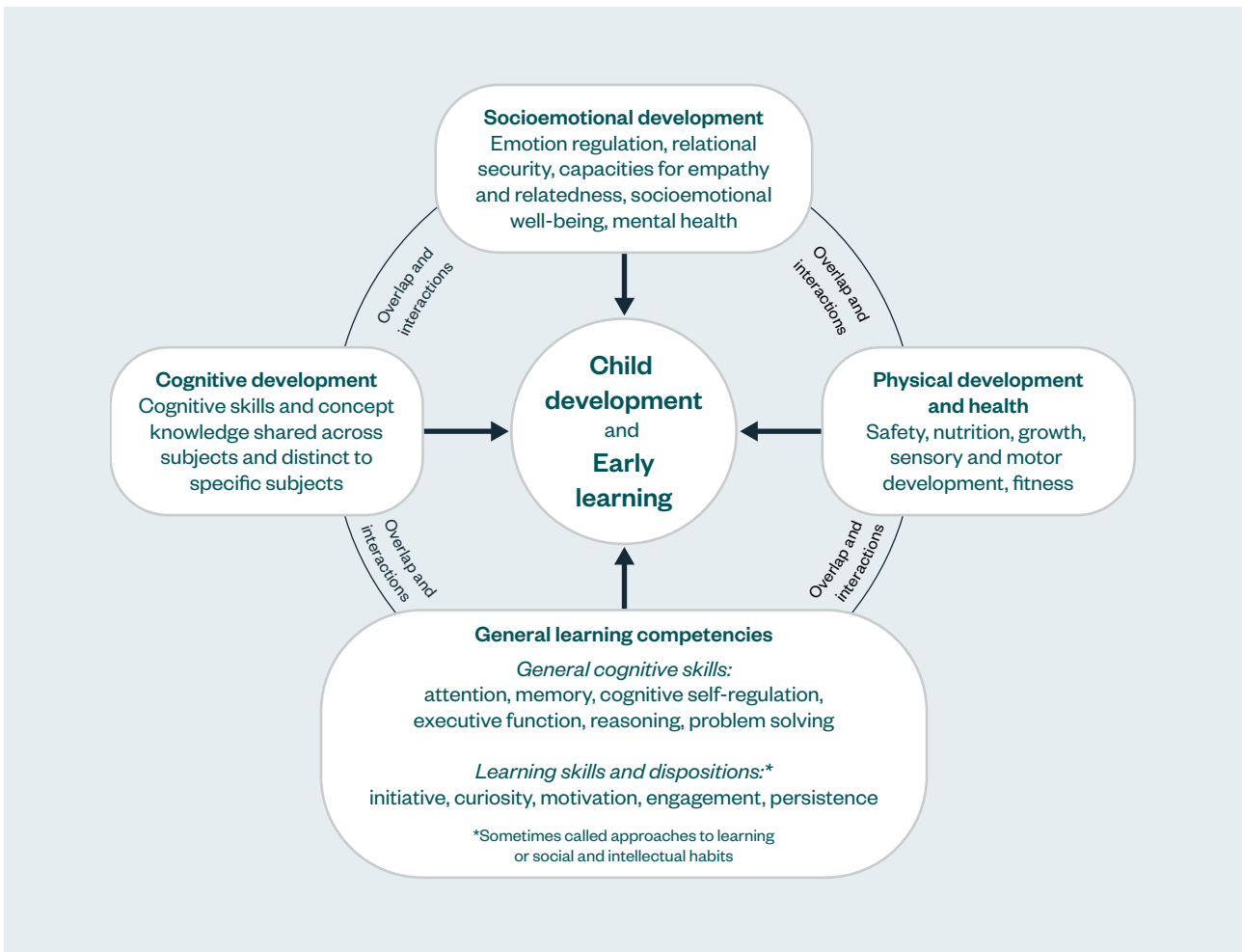
Dana Suskind identifies two crucial things children need to build a healthy foundation for their development – nurturing care and protection from stresses, requiring action by both parents and wider society.<sup>12</sup>

While young children's development is shaped by a variety of factors, the way in which parents – in all their diverse forms – 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 highly dependent and spend most of their time with their primary caregivers.

'Parenting' encompasses a broad range of behaviours, styles, values and parent-child relationships aimed at promoting children's development.<sup>13</sup> Parents are an enabling and protective factor in most children's lives. Importantly, the relationship between parents and young children is two-way, interactive and dynamic, with the

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- 10 Moffitt, T.E., Arseneault, L., Belsky, D., Dickson, N., Hancox, R.J., Harrington, H.L., Houts, R., Poulton, R., Roberts, B., Ross, S., Sears, M., Thomson, M. and Caspi, A. (2011). A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 108(7), pp.2693–2698. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1010076108>; Belsky, J., Caspi, A., Moffitt, T. E. and Poulton, R. (2020). *The origins of you: How childhood shapes later life*. Harvard University Press.
- 11 Goodman, A., Joshi, H., Nasim, B. Tyler, C. (2015). *Social and emotional skills in childhood and their long-term effects on adult life*. A review for the Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/social-and-emotional-skills-in-childhood-and-their-long-term-effects-on-adult-life>
- 12 Oster, E. (2022, 18 April). How society fails parents. *ParentData*. <https://emilyoster.substack.com/p/how-society-fails-parents?s=r>
- 13 Cooper, K. (2017). *Poverty and parenting in the UK*. PhD thesis, London School of Economics. <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3633>

**Figure 1:** Domains and subdomains key to children’s development.<sup>14</sup>



child’s own disposition also shaping how parents respond.<sup>15</sup> Parental sensitivity and responsiveness, appropriate discipline and limit-setting, and a positive home

learning environment are all associated with better outcomes for children when they start school.<sup>16,17</sup>

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- 14 Asmussen, K., Law, J., Charlton, J., Acquah, D., Brims, L., Pote, I. and McBride, T. (2018). Key competencies in early cognitive development: Things, people, numbers and words. Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/key-competencies-in-early-cognitive-development-things-people-numbers-and-words>. Diagram reproduced from US National Research Council (2015). Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8.
- 15 Belsky et al. 2020.
- 16 Melhuish, E. C. and Gardiner, J. (2020). *Study of early education and development (SEED): Impact study on early education use and child outcomes up to age five years*. Department for Education (DfE). [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/867140/SEED\\_AGE\\_5\\_REPORT\\_FEB.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/867140/SEED_AGE_5_REPORT_FEB.pdf)
- 17 The Early Years Foundation Stage, which sets statutory standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5 years old in England.



**Figure 2:** The ‘ecological systems’ impacting child development.<sup>18</sup>



But young children’s development and parenting do not exist in isolation. They are shaped by the broader context of the child, family, community and society – including the range of early education and care and health services that can support their development (see Figure 2).

How a parent looks after their child is shaped by different kinds of resources: economic, time, educational, psychological and social. Lack of economic resources has a direct impact on children’s day-to-day welfare – whether that is having enough food to eat, space to live in or

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18 Adapted from: Eisenstadt, N. and Oppenheim, C. (2019). *Parents, poverty and the state: 20 years of evolving family policy*. Policy Press. Original source: Asmussen, K. (2011). *The Evidence-based Parenting Practitioner’s Handbook*. Routledge.

access to services. It also has indirect impacts. Lack of income and economic pressure can lead to psychological distress, lack of control and choice, and the experience of stigma.<sup>19,20</sup> While parents' mental health and emotional well-being affect the care they provide,<sup>21</sup> public policy has tended to pay less attention to the emotional resources that parents need than the educational and material ones. Similarly, 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.<sup>22</sup>

Poverty, debt and local deprivation are key influences on parenting. Research by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion suggests that poverty plays a causal role in influencing children's outcomes.<sup>23</sup> Deep and persistent poverty are more damaging for children's safety and development than a low income or temporary difficulties. Insecurity and unpredictability of income, housing and employment, sometimes the result of benefits administration practices or a lack

of social security, employment or tenancy rights, compound the problems of parenting on an inadequate income.

Poverty affects every aspect of family life and places relationships within families under considerable stress over time. It is also implicated in other factors that increase the risk of harm, including domestic violence, poor mental health and substance use.<sup>24</sup> Early experience of these risks and harms is highly damaging for young children's welfare and difficult to rectify. We also know that poverty interacts with ethnicity, health, disability and place in influencing children's life chances.

Similarly, the physical environment in which young children grow up can affect parent and child well-being and child development. Features of low-quality housing – such as overcrowding, damp and heating problems – may have detrimental effects, with housing tenure and overcrowding a particularly important aspect of living standards associated with early childhood inequalities.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, when families are living in an area with high levels of deprivation, they are more

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- 19 The family stress model highlights how poverty is experienced not only materially and socially, but also emotionally (see Acquah et al. 2017, cited in Eisenstadt and Oppenheim (2019)).
- 20 Mohamed, H. (2020). *People like us. What it takes to make it in modern Britain*. Profile Books; Lister, R. (2016). 'To count for nothing': Poverty beyond the statistics. *Journal of the British Academy* 3, pp. 139–165. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5871/bacad/9780197265987.003.0005>
- 21 For example, maternal psychological distress has a significant effect on levels of conflict and closeness in the parent-child relationship (Cattan et al. 2022). Note comparable data is not available for fathers.
- 22 Harold, G., Leve, L., Elam, K., Thapar, A., Neiderhiser, J., Natsuaki, M. and Reiss. (2013). The nature of nurture: disentangling passive genotype– environment correlation from family relationship influences on children's externalizing problems. *Journal of Family Psychology* 27 (1), pp. 12–21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0031190>; Garriga, A. and Kiernan, K. E. (2014). *Parents' relationship quality, mother-child relations and children's behaviour problems: evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study*. Working paper. University of York. <https://www.york.ac.uk/media/spsw/documents/research-and-publications/Garriga-Kiernan-tables-graphsWP2014.pdf>
- 23 Cooper, K. and Stewart, K. (2017). *Does money affect children's outcomes? An update*. Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE), London School of Economics. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103494/1/casepaper203.pdf>
- 24 Bywaters, P., Skinner, G., Cooper, A., Kennedy, E. and Malik, A. (2022). *The relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect: New evidence*. University of Huddersfield and Nuffield Foundation. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Full-report-relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect.pdf>
- 25 Cattan et al. (2022).

likely to be living in areas with worse job prospects or higher levels of crime. A lack of supportive local services can also add to the material hardship that families in poverty face and exacerbate stresses on family life.

Yet it is worth emphasising that most families who are living in poverty do a good job of bringing up their children. Poor parenting, maltreatment, abuse, neglect and harm can and does occur in families that are not living in poverty. It should not be assumed that there is something essentially different about the attitudes or behaviours of parents living in poverty or in areas with high deprivation.

The implications of the different contexts children are raised in, and the different care they receive, are evident at an early stage in a child's life. For example, gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged families in how children use language and communicate – a critical skill for all aspects of development – are evident at 11 months. By the age of 3, inequalities by socioeconomic group are marked and over-lapping,<sup>26</sup> affecting both

cognitive and social and emotional skills, compounding the advantage for children in the highest fifth and the disadvantage for those in the poorest fifth of the income distribution.<sup>27</sup>

These wide early inequalities are tough to shift and can go on to influence children's later life chances. However, economic disadvantage at an early age does not inevitably lead to poor long-term outcomes for children. A study by Kiernan and Mensah (2011) found that 58% of children who experienced persistent poverty and strong parenting skills had good child outcomes at age 5.<sup>28</sup>

It is also important to state that while early childhood is a foundational stage, other periods of children's development, notably adolescence, are also vital for how children grow up and fare in adulthood.<sup>29</sup>

The challenge is how to reach young children, parents and carers early with the right combination of measures to reduce pressures, support capabilities and protect the most vulnerable.<sup>30</sup>

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26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Kiernan, K. and Mensah, F. (2011). Poverty, family resources and children's early educational attainment: The mediating role of parenting. *British Educational Research Journal* 37 (2), pp. 317–336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411921003596911>

29 Belsky et al. (2020).

30 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.

# 4 How is early childhood changing?

Being a young child or their parent is a strikingly different experience today from that of a generation ago. How young children are looked after, how parents combine work and care, the form that care takes, and a child's living arrangements have all changed. In this chapter we discuss four of the most impactful changes prior to the pandemic, as identified and explored in the preceding six evidence reviews in our *Changing face of early childhood* series.<sup>31</sup> In Chapter 6 we return to these issues to examine the policy response to these changes.

*"In the last 20 years I've seen this huge change in the amount of interest around young children. When I was a child of working-class parents you just got on with things. I think it's just a good thing that we're having this conversation."*

Mother of a 3-year-old, Nuffield Foundation and Tortoise ThinkIn, 9 March 2022.

## 4.1 Changing family forms and parenting experiences

### Our understanding of what is meant by 'family' in early childhood is changing

Family living arrangements in the UK are increasingly varied with the growth of cohabitation, re-partnering, blended and same-sex parent families.<sup>32</sup> This diversity in family life is an important context for parenting. It can shape factors such as how parents relate to each other, interactions between parents and children, sibling relationships, the wider family, where children are looked after, and access to financial and other resources.

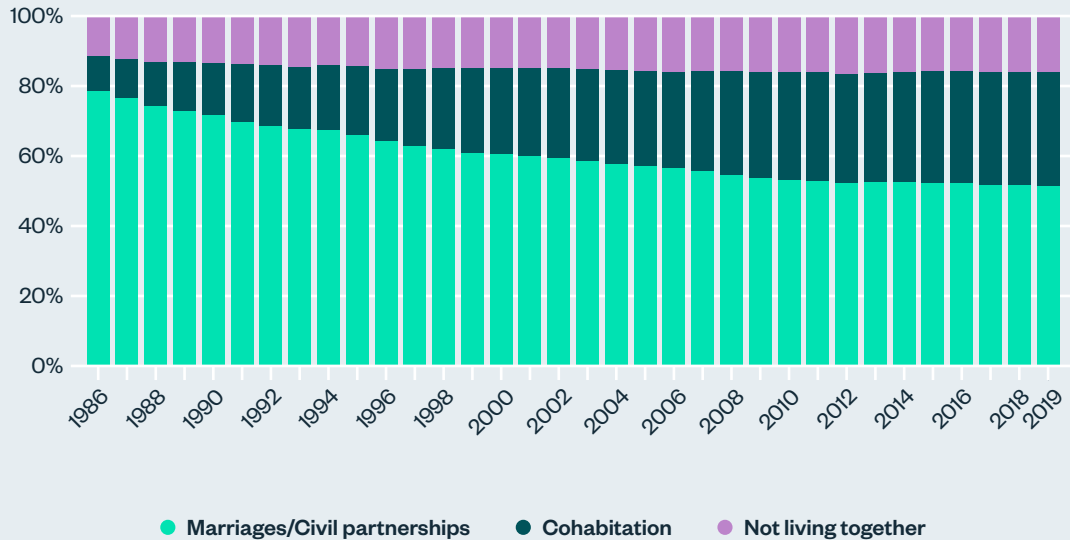
Figure 3 shows that while most births are still to married couples (or civil partnerships), they now account for a declining share, with an increase in births to cohabitating couples and a relatively consistent (but comparatively high by international standards) proportion of children born to parents who are not living together.<sup>33</sup> While family forms do not determine children's outcomes, there are associations between different family forms and the resources available

31 See <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/series/changing-face-of-early-childhood-in-britain>

32 Centre for Longitudinal Studies, UCL. (2014, 28 November). *Family instability affects four in ten children of the millennium generation*. <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/family-instability-affects-four-in-ten-children-of-the-millennium-generation>

33 Kiernan, K., Crossman, S., and Phimister, A. (2022). *Families and inequalities*. IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities. IFS.

**Figure 3:** Percentage of live births, by registration type, 1986–2019 (England and Wales).<sup>34</sup>



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'.

to them. Married couples typically have more resources than cohabiting couples, and lone parents the least, which in turn influences child development and well-being.<sup>35</sup> Babies born to parents who are not living together are concentrated in areas of high deprivation, particularly in regions that have lost major industries.<sup>36</sup>

Cohabitation is associated with greater instability, though this largely reflects differences in the characteristics and

socioeconomic circumstances of cohabiting couples. However, as cohabitation becomes more widespread, including a greater range of families, this association with instability and fewer resources is likely to become less pronounced.

Parental separation has a legacy that can affect the social, emotional and cognitive development of a sizeable number of children (3.6 million of all ages).<sup>37</sup> While much of this legacy's effect

34 [Ibid.](#)

35 [Ibid.](#)

36 [Ibid.](#)

37 Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). (2022). *Separated families statistics: April 2014 to March 2021 (experimental)*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/separated-families-statistics-april-2014-to-march-2021-experimental/separated-families-statistics-april-2014-to-march-2021-experimental>

is explained by pre-existing personal, social and economic circumstances, there remains an independent though modest impact of separation on children's later attainment and social and emotional outcomes. This has implications for how policy can help to mitigate the impact of separation on children's well-being.

Our understanding of how family relationships and parenting practices are changing is limited by the current measurement and categorisations of 'families' in quantitative data. For example, the data does not capture involved but non-resident parents, or the role of other family members in parenting. Nor does the structure of a family necessarily tell us about the quality of the relationship between parents.

### The expectations of parents when raising a young child

We know very little about how the way parents raise their children is changing. One visible, striking and positive long-term change is large increases in what is called 'developmental childcare' – time parents spend reading, interacting and playing with their child. Worryingly, these increases are marked by a growing social gradient, with parents with low educational qualifications spending less time on developmental childcare than those with higher educational qualifications. This trend has been magnified by the impact of COVID-19 (see Chapter 5).

Some research suggests parents are experiencing greater judgement and stress than previous generations with increased expectations about how to be a good parent through an 'intensification' of parenting. 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.<sup>38</sup>

*"We all feel the expectation, either real or fake, that we put on ourselves to be the perfect parent with the fear of ruining our child. We are now very aware of how what we do now will affect our children's personality and developing. Am I harming my child by sending them to nursery or childminder?"*

Mother of 1-year-old, Nuffield Foundation and Tortoise ThinkIn, 1 March 2022.

Regardless of whether expectations are increasing, we have a greater understanding and appreciation of the mental and emotional impacts of being a parent of a young child. Recent research has found that over 70% of parents of young children report that being a parent is stressful and that they feel judged by others.<sup>39</sup>

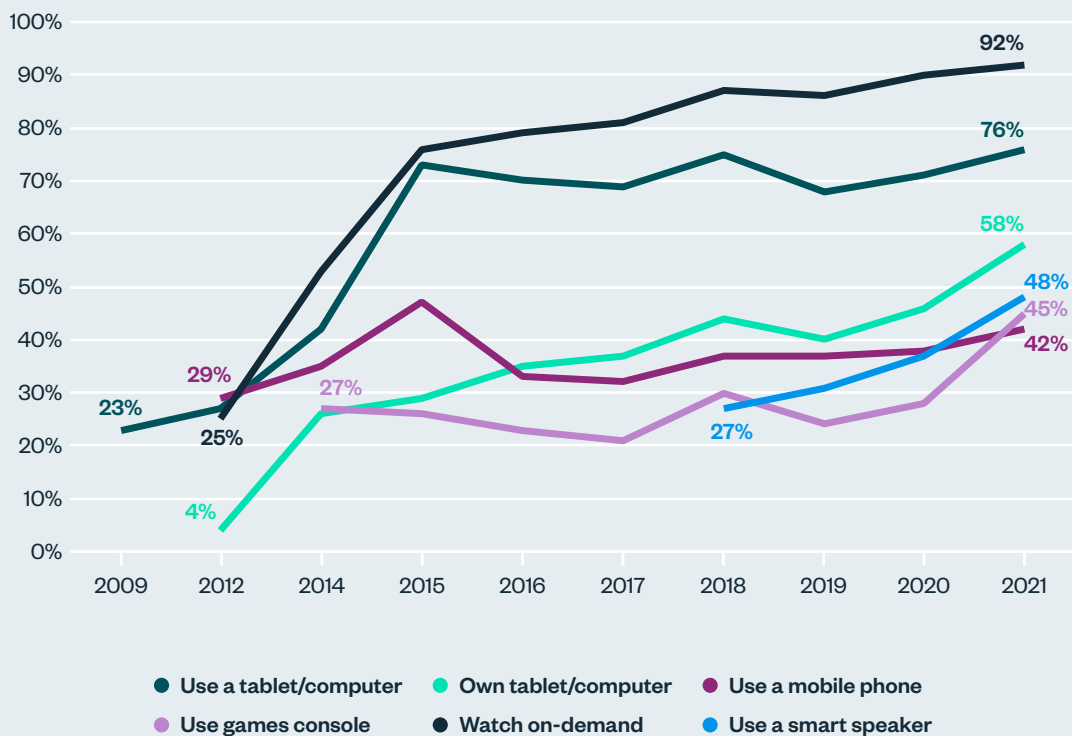
The evidence of increasing time spent on developmental childcare, combined with paid work, and the mental and emotional impacts of parenting, raise questions about the difficulties that parents of young children are facing and how public policy should respond.

### A rapid expansion in digital use

Technology has always been a part of this generation of toddlers' lives. And while we know that many children experience digital exclusion (between October 2020 and January 2021, one in five children who had been home schooled did not have access to an appropriate device for their online home-learning needs all of the time), the majority of young children have

38 For discussion of the 'intensification' of parenting, see: Lee, E., Bristow, J., Faircloth, C. and Macvarish J. (2014). *Parenting culture studies*. Palgrave Macmillan.

39 Ipsos MORI. (2020).



Note: Based on a yearly panel survey of between 1,000–1,200 parents of children between six months and four years old. Each year the sample was created to represent the UK population by meeting quotas according to parent gender, age, gender of the child and socioeconomic group. Data is weighted to ensure equal distribution among the subgroups and to allow comparability with data from previous years.

access to both a digital device and strong internet connection.<sup>41</sup>

In 2009, 23% of 0–4 year-olds had access to a PC at home. Fast forward 12 years, and 83% of under-5s are using a tablet, laptop, computer or mobile phone (see Figure 4). These fundamental changes

affect how parents and young children experience their home lives and bring to the fore questions around how the use of digital devices affects their relationships. While online access can provide vital links to support networks and information for parents, there is some initial evidence to

40 CHILDWISE (2021). *The Monitor Preschool Report 2021: Key behaviour patterns among 0–4-year-olds*. CHILDWISE.

41 Ofcom. (2021). *Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report 2020/21*. [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/217825/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/217825/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21.pdf)

show that parents' use of digital devices may also be distracting them from their children.<sup>42</sup> Given limited research, it is too early to be able to assess the implications – positive and negative – of this rapid expansion in digital use by both young children and their parents.

*“Technology acts as a punctuation that I don’t always want, interrupting the flow of our play, but at the same time I am beholden to having it there because it’s a way I can entertain him or help him discover the world.”*

Mother of 2-year-old, Nuffield Foundation and Tortoise ThinkIn, 9 March 2022.

The subject of changing family forms and parenting practices is explored in more detail in reviews 1 and 6 from our series: *How are the lives of families with young children changing?* and *Time for parents*.

#### 4.2 Combining paid work and childcare has become the norm for mothers of young children

The majority of mothers with young children under 5 are now in paid work, with the steepest rises among mothers with a child aged 1–2. Significantly, the proportion of under-5s who are

in households where all adults work full-time has increased.<sup>43</sup> The rise in mothers' paid work is part of the long-term changes in women's lives, including marked rises in women's educational attainment and participation in higher education over the last 25 years,<sup>44</sup> as well as a response to governments' active labour market policies (see Figure 5). It also reflects financial challenges for parents as, increasingly, both couples and lone parents need to be in paid work to maintain living standards and have a greater chance of escaping poverty.

The combination of paid work and childcare may account for the time pressures and stresses that many parents of young children report. The increasing proportion of mothers in paid work, shift from part to full-time working for parents of young children, and increasing use of formal education and childcare has not resulted in parents significantly reducing the amount of time they report spending on childcare. Between 2000 and 2015, there was a small reduction in the overall amount of childcare provided by mothers and a slight increase by fathers.<sup>45</sup> There are indications that fathers' roles are undergoing some change with greater involvement in young children's lives than in earlier decades. However, the gender divide remains stubborn: mothers still undertake two-thirds of the childcare for the under-5s.<sup>46</sup>

42 Kushlev, K. and Dunn E. W. (2018). Smartphones distract parents from cultivating feelings of connection when spending time with their children. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 36 (6), pp. 1619–1639. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0265407518769387>

43 Office for National Statistics (ONS). (2019a). *Families and the labour market, UK: 2019*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2019>

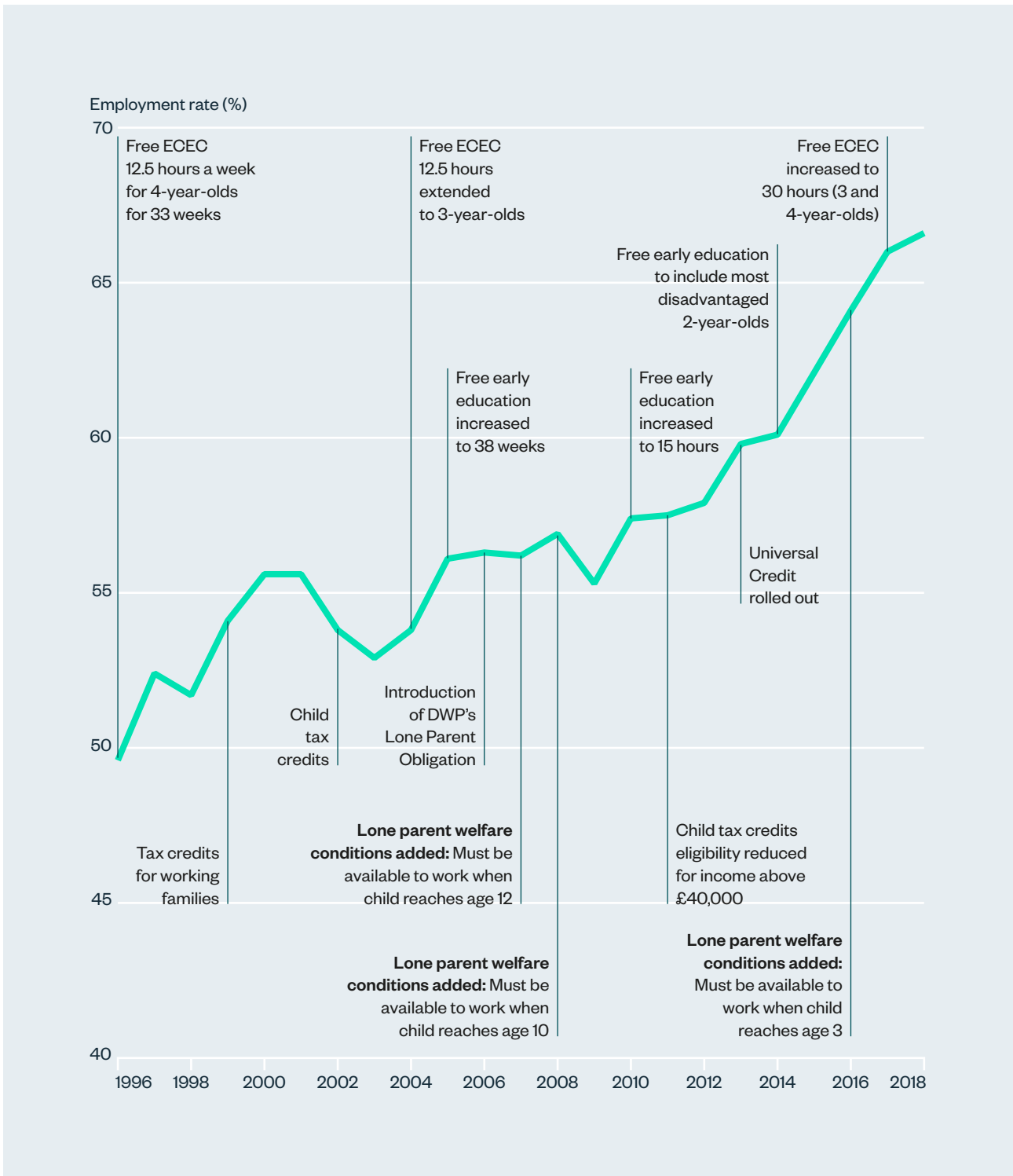
44 Andrew, A., Bandiera, O., Costa-Dias, M. and Landais, C. (2021). Women and men at work. *IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/women-and-men-at-work>

45 ONS. (2016). *Changes in the value and division of unpaid care work in the UK: 2000 to 2015*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/changesinthevalueanddivisionofunpaidcareworkintheuk2000to2015>

46 Ibid.



**Figure 5:** Employment rates for mothers of young children (under 4) in England, 1996–2018.<sup>47</sup>



47 Based on Conboye, J. and Romei, V. (2018, 9 October). *The rise of working mothers*. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/c3bd628a-6f2e-11e8-92d3-6c13e5c92914> [used under licence from the Financial Times. All Rights Reserved]; and ONS. (2019b). *Employment in the UK: December 2019*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/employmentintheuk/december2019>

*“I do think there’s quite a lot of pressure and you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t go back to work [...]. Everyone’s got a view on what you should do with your children. It’s a juggle with childcare, work and maintaining a relationship.”*

Mother of a 7-year-old and 2-year-old, Nuffield Foundation and Tortoise ThinkIn, 1 March 2022.

In our discussions with parents, many emphasised the importance of the relationship between grandparents and other relatives and young children, bringing mutual joy and enrichment. They talked about how central grandparents and other relatives were to squaring the circle of time, money and childcare costs. But grandparents themselves are having to juggle care and work as an increasing number of older people are working longer. It is important to recognise that not everyone has these forms of support immediately available to them, particularly in a more mobile society with greater migration within and beyond the UK. Close to one-fifth of parents say they have two or fewer people they can turn to locally for help.<sup>48</sup>

*“It’s amazing when families are lucky enough to have grandparents around to help. Because of the cost of childcare we use grandparents for more informal care, but it can sometimes change the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren because the grandparents*

*have to ‘parent’ the grandchild rather than be a doting figure with sweets.”*

Mother of 1-year-old and 3-year-old. Nuffield Foundation and Tortoise ThinkIn, 1 March 2022.

Changes in the combination of paid work and childcare are explored in more detail in reviews 1 and 6 from our series: *How are the lives of families with young children changing?* and *Time for parents*.

#### 4.3 Formal education and childcare: a near-universal experience for young children

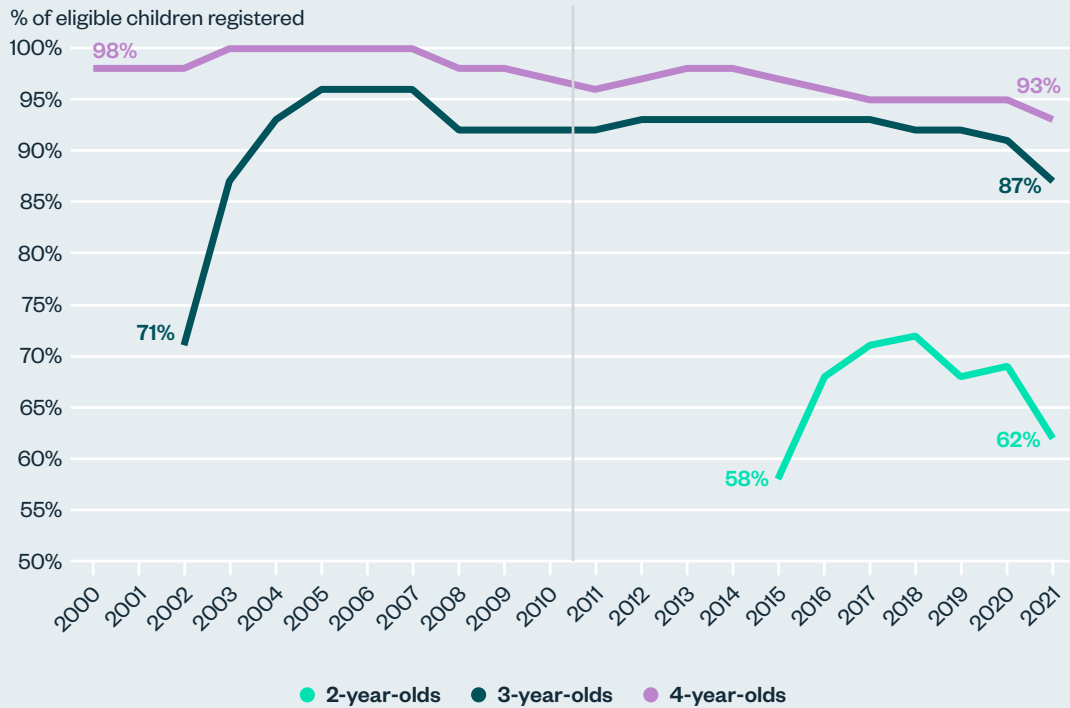
Virtually all young children now experience some form of state-financed formal early childhood education and care before beginning primary school.<sup>49</sup> Driven both by the changes in women’s working patterns and the recognition of the importance of early education for children’s development, the last two decades have witnessed the creation of a new mixed model of providing and funding vastly expanded early years and childcare services (see Figure 6).

At its best, early years provision can be transformative for both children and their parents. It provides opportunities for skilled professionals to nurture young children’s educational, emotional, social and physical development, to engage with parents to build mutual understanding of the child and how to support them, and to

48 Ipsos MORI (2020).

49 DfE. (2021a). *Education provision: Children under 5 years of age*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5>

**Figure 6:** Proportion of eligible children taking up their funded early education places (England).<sup>50</sup>



Note: The vertical grey line represents a change in the way data was collected. Pre 2011 data included all settings attended. Post 2011 data records only the setting attended the most.

link with other services to meet additional needs. It also helps parents take up employment, which can help them access resources as well as support their mental health, well-being and sense of agency, with knock-on benefits for parenting.<sup>51</sup>

For young children to fully realise the benefits of formal education and

childcare, provision needs to be accessible, affordable and of good quality. This is particularly important for those children that spend a higher proportion of time in formal childcare (in nurseries or with childminders) and from an earlier age. It also matters for young children who are disadvantaged, as early childhood

50 West, A. and Noden, P. (2016). *Public funding of early years education in England: An historical perspective*. Clare Market Papers, 21. LSE. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/46172863.pdf>; and DfE 2021a.

51 Harkness S. and Skipp, A. (2013). *Lone mothers, work and depression*. Nuffield Foundation. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Lone-mothers-work-and-depression.pdf>

education and care could help close the gap with others.<sup>52</sup>

Access to early education is not yet universal. While more than 90% of children aged 3 and 4 take up their free early education places, not all will access the number of hours available to them and the most disadvantaged families are least likely to access places. Take-up of the 2-year-old entitlement is low, with less than two-thirds of children accessing it, and sharp falls since the pandemic (see Figure 6). Take-up is also lower among children from some ethnic minority backgrounds, children with special educational needs, and those who are in the child protection system.

Take-up varies for a number of reasons, such as: the complexity of the system for supporting parents with childcare costs; not having the right staff or resources to support special needs or vulnerabilities; parents' work patterns; or their not needing or valuing what's on offer. At present, the system is not working effectively for the young children and families who are most likely to benefit from good quality early education and care.

The affordability of early childhood education and care is a key issue for some families with young children, especially for those with children under 2. England

has some of the highest average childcare costs among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states before any public subsidy, and costs for a part-time nursery place for a child under 2 have grown sharply over the last decade.<sup>53</sup> There is wide variation in the cost of childcare paid by families, depending on their income, where they live, and whether they are taking up their full free entitlements and help with childcare costs.

Children are attending a wider range of early years settings, with the majority provided through the private, voluntary and independent sector (PVI). Quality of provision is vital for all children. This involves structural considerations (workforce qualifications, staff-child ratios and group size) as well as pedagogy and practice. Previous research has shown considerable variation in quality – with higher quality in the maintained than the PVI sector in deprived areas.<sup>54</sup> However, overall, the quality of provision of the free entitlement, as measured by Ofsted judgements, has been improving,<sup>55</sup> though there is still room for improvement in the PVI sector, particularly for the 2-year-old offer.<sup>56</sup>

Early childhood education and care is explored in more detail in review 4 of our series: *The role of early childhood education and care in shaping life chances*.

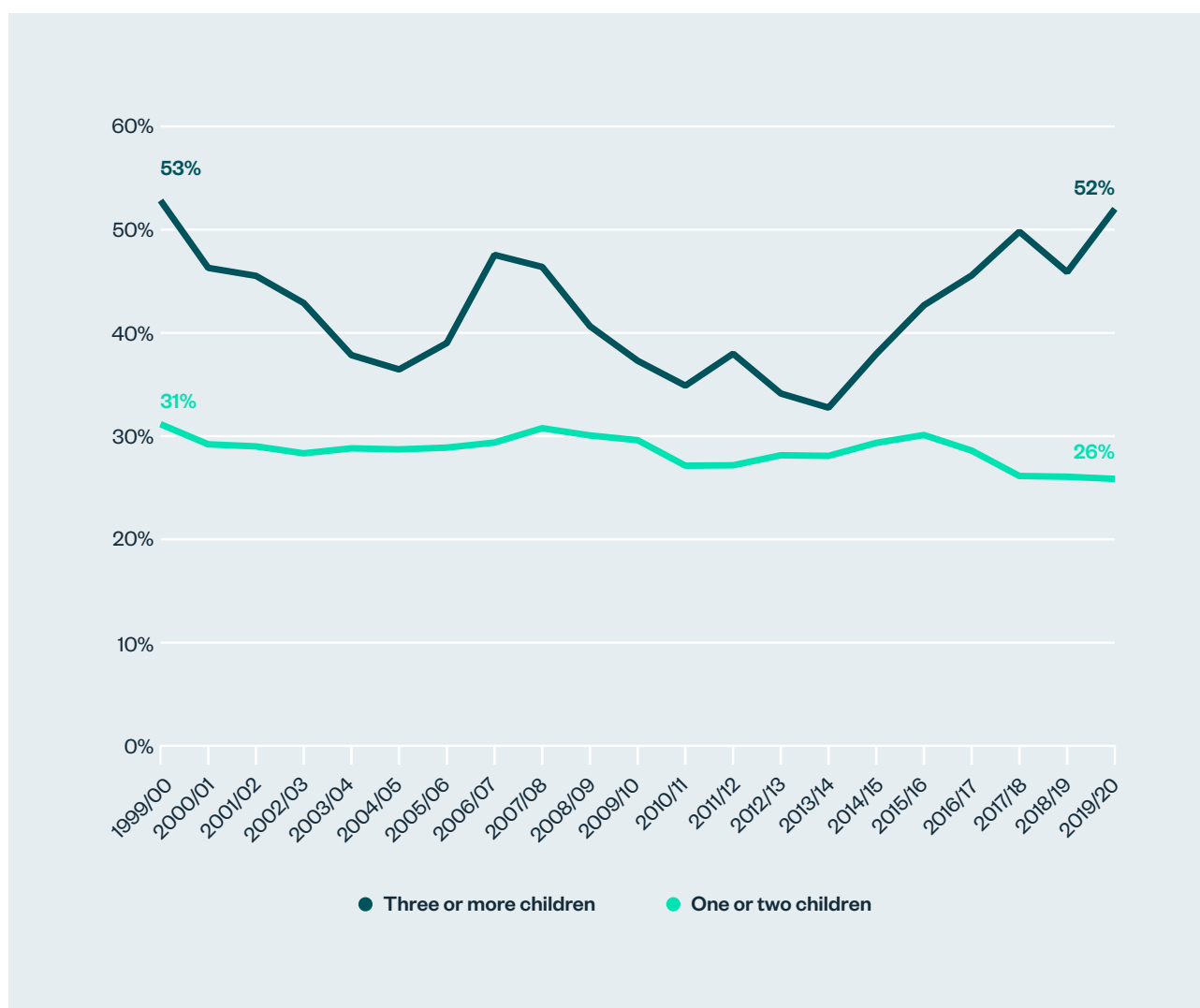
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- 52 Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammon, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2004). *Technical Paper 12. The Final Report: Effective Pre-School Education*. UCL Institute of Education. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10005308>
- 53 Farquharson, C. and Olorenshaw, H. (2022). *The changing cost of childcare*. IFS. <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/16060>
- 54 Mathers, S. and Smees, R. (2014). *Quality and inequality: Do three- and four-year-olds in deprived areas experience lower quality early years provision?* [https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Quality\\_inequality\\_childcare\\_mathers\\_29\\_05\\_14.pdf](https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf)
- 55 Stewart, K. and Reader, M. (2021). *The Conservative governments' record on early childhood: Policies, spending and outcomes from May 2015 to pre-COVID 2020*. CASE, LSE. [https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/CASE/\\_NEW/PUBLICATIONS/abstract/?index=7717](https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/CASE/_NEW/PUBLICATIONS/abstract/?index=7717)
- 56 Melhuish, E. C. and Gardiner, J. (2018). *Study of early education and development (SEED): Study of Quality of Early Years Provision in England (Revised)*. DfE. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/723736/Study\\_of\\_quality\\_of\\_early\\_years\\_provision\\_in\\_England.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/723736/Study_of_quality_of_early_years_provision_in_England.pdf)

#### 4.4 Rising poverty, inequalities and vulnerability

The younger you are, the more likely you are to be in poverty. This reflects the fact that younger children are more likely to be in larger families with higher needs and parents working fewer hours. Over the

past 20 years, relative child poverty rates have fluctuated significantly, falling overall between 1999/2000 and 2019/20, but rising since 2013/14,<sup>57</sup> particularly in families where the youngest child is under 5.<sup>58</sup> There is a particular pinch point in families where children are under 3.<sup>59</sup> These changes in poverty are driven by a changing labour

**Figure 7:** Rates of relative poverty for families with 3 or more children where youngest is under 5.<sup>60</sup>



57 DWP. (2021). *Households below average income: FYE 1995 to*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2020>

58 Stewart and Reader (2021).

59 Parker, S. (2021). *It takes a village – how to make all childhoods matter*. Little Village. <https://littlevillagehq.org/news/little-village-releases-report-it-takes-a-village-how-to-make-all-childhoods-matter>

60 DWP (2021).

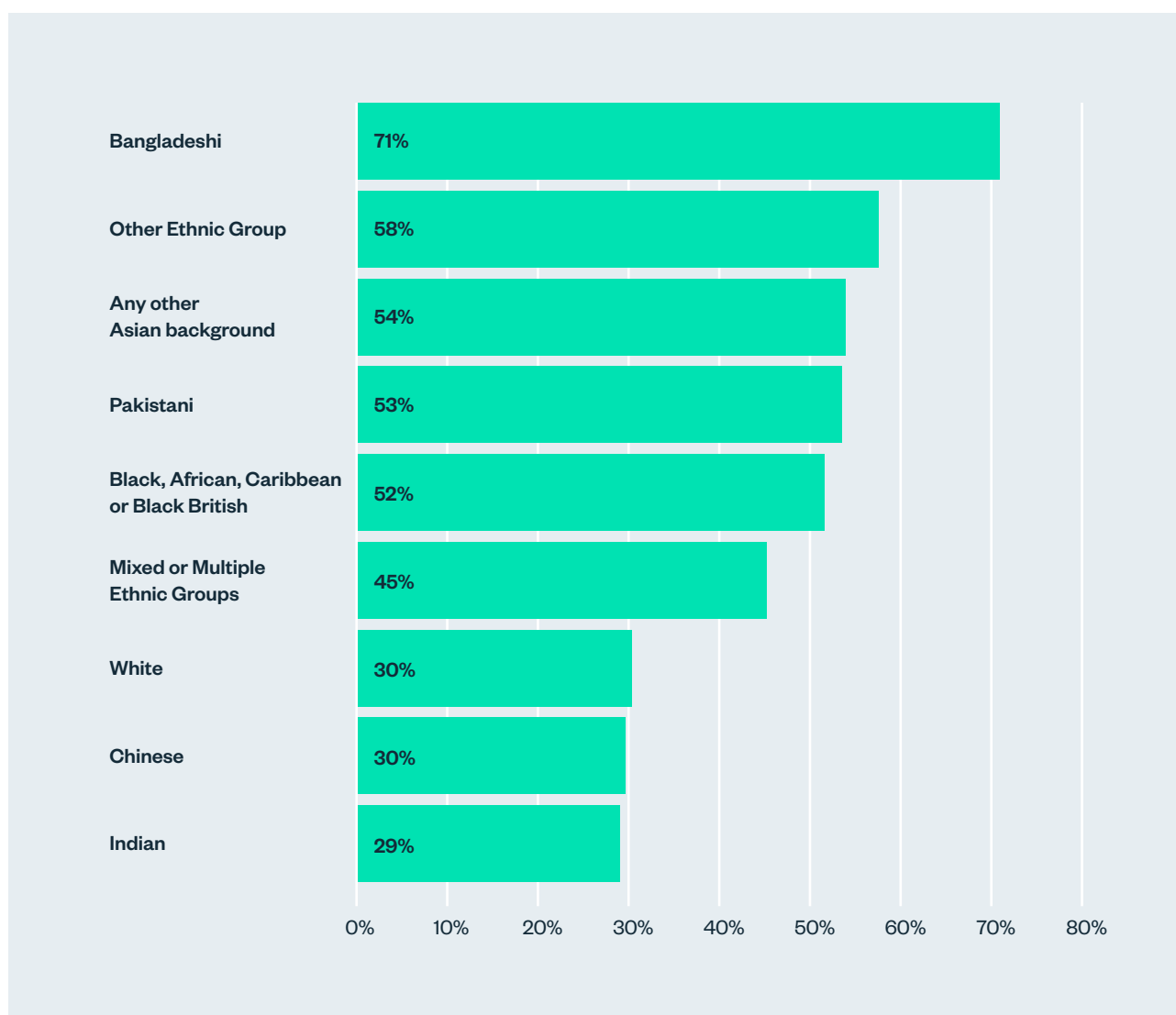
market, rising housing and childcare costs and benefit policy.

Over half of children in families with a young child in poverty are living in large families (with three or more children) (see Figure 7). There has also been a rise in in-work poverty, reflecting a marked growth of self-employment, insecure working and atypical jobs, leaving a significant group

without the protection of many employee entitlements, and few opportunities to progress.<sup>61</sup> However, our understanding of the way in which economic insecurity specifically impacts parenting, access to childcare provision and children's experiences and outcomes, is at an early stage.

Some groups of children face shockingly high rates of poverty – for

**Figure 8:** Risk of relative poverty for households where the youngest child is under 4, by ethnicity, 2017/18–2019/20 (three-year average).<sup>62</sup>



61 Howell, D. and Kalleberg, A. (2022). *Labour market inequality: A comparative political economy perspective*. IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities. IFS. <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/labour-market-inequality-a-comparative-political-economy-perspective>

62 DWP (2021). Note: ethnicity categories and groupings are as defined by DWP.

example, over 70% of families with a young child of Bangladeshi origin are in poverty. In many other minority ethnic groups, over half of families with a young child are in poverty (see Figure 8). Where a parent or a child has a disability, poverty rates are much higher, so too for lone parents families, nine out of ten of whom are headed by a woman. There are marked regional and local differences. But we still have relatively limited analysis of how different risks of poverty for families with young children combine.

Given poverty's association with a greater risk of other difficulties – insecure housing, poor physical and mental health, domestic violence and child abuse and neglect – rising rates of poverty are likely to have considerable effects on young children's lives. For example, drawing more young children into the child protection system and creating greater pressure on those services as families struggle to manage. Similarly, small increases in the prevalence of mental health difficulties 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, with implications for how services can provide better and more timely support.<sup>63</sup>

Young children's health has improved overall over the last 20 years, but progress has stalled in recent years,

particularly in terms of infant mortality rates, birth weight and obesity.<sup>64</sup> Trends in young children's health are marked by stark inequalities, with strong associations between poor health, geographical area, ethnicity and level of deprivation. For example, rates of overweight and obesity in Scotland comprise growing inequalities (see Figure 9). Health inequalities reflect social inequalities.<sup>65</sup> While it is difficult to disentangle trends in needs from better diagnosis and recognition, there are signs that complex/multiple need, special educational need and disability, and vulnerability in early childhood have grown over the last three or four years, having previously declined.<sup>66</sup> This poses challenges for parents and for early years support services.

Less discussed is the rise in the proportion of families with children living in the private rented sector who are more likely to experience higher costs, poorer quality housing, overcrowding and greater insecurity. This has knock-on effects – with greater likelihood of children having to move nurseries or schools and disrupted family and social networks.

In combination, rising poverty and deprivation in early childhood makes it more difficult for early years and childcare, health and other services to mitigate its effects and reduce inequalities between children. These issues are explored in more detail in reviews 2, 3 and 5 in our series: *Protecting young children from*

63 Abel, K.M., Hope, H., Swift, E., Parisi, R., Ashcroft, D. M., Kosidou, K. et al. (2019). Prevalence of maternal mental illness among children and adolescents in the UK between 2005 and 2017: A national retrospective cohort analysis. *The Lancet* 4(6), pp. 291–300. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(19\)30059-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(19)30059-3)

64 Stewart and Reader (2021).

65 Marmot, M., Allen, J., Goldblatt, P., Boyce, T., McNeish, D., Grady, M. and Geddes, I. (2010). *Fair society, healthy lives. The Marmot review*. <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report-pdf.pdf>

66 DfE. (2021b). *Special education needs and disability: an analysis and summary of data sources*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sen-analysis-and-summary-of-data-sources>

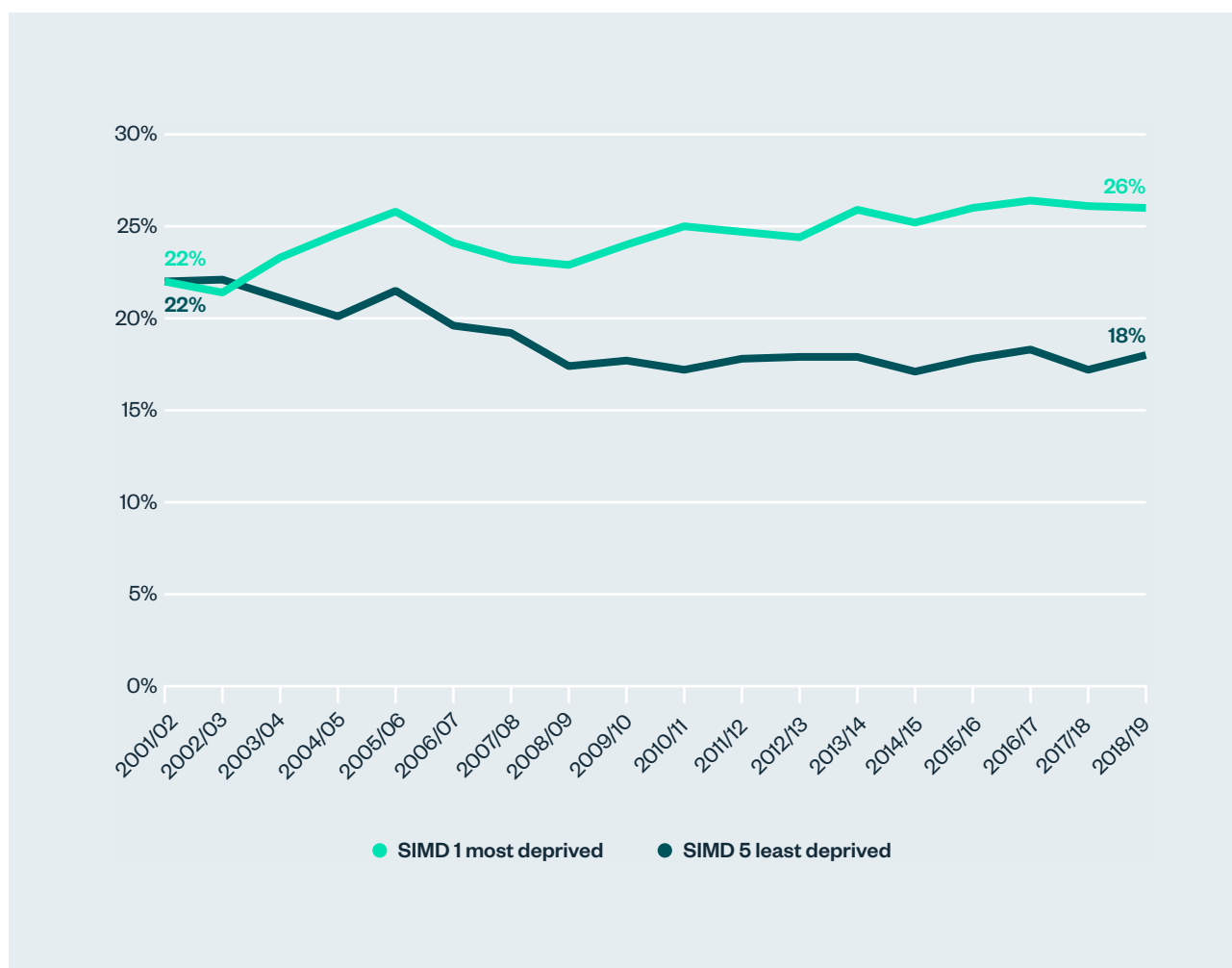
at risk of abuse and neglect; Changing patterns of poverty in early childhood; and Are young children healthier than they were two decades ago?

**In conclusion**

Taken together, the myriad changes in the lives of young children and their families – including the increasing time spent by parents on developmental childcare, the rise in formal childcare and the spread of

technology – provide new opportunities to support young children's learning and well-being. Yet there is also clear evidence of significant – and in many areas growing – pressures on families: financial, time, emotional and mental, with an increasing polarisation between the advantaged and disadvantaged. Responding effectively to these changes, harnessing the opportunities and reducing pressures, is an urgent task (and the subject of Chapter 6).

**Figure 9:** Percentage of children in Scotland at risk of being overweight and obese combined in Primary 1, by Scottish index of multiple deprivation (SIMD) quintile.<sup>67</sup>



67 Information Services Division Scotland (2019). *Body Mass Index of Primary 1 Children in Scotland, School Year 2018/19*. NHS National Services Scotland. <https://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Child-Health/Publications/2019-12-10/2019-12-10-P1-BMI-Statistics-Publication-Report.pdf?>



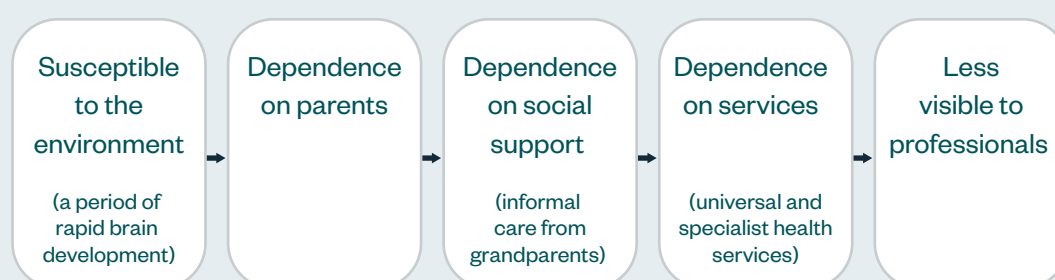
# 5 The COVID-19 pandemic and early childhood

The COVID-19 crisis fundamentally changed the context in which a generation of young children have grown and developed. Lockdowns reduced access to formal and informal childcare support networks and many families experienced bereavement and increased economic hardship. Meanwhile, parents have had to take on greater childcare responsibilities, including for their children's education,

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 relationship between parents.

Figure 10 shows the characteristics and needs of babies and young children that make them particularly vulnerable to the effects of lockdown, whether lower-level developmental harms or more serious safeguarding risks.<sup>68</sup>

**Figure 10:** Vulnerability characteristics and needs of babies and young children.<sup>69</sup>



68 Reed, J. (2021). *Working for babies: Lockdown lessons from local systems*. First 1001 Days Movement and Isos Partnership. [https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/210121-F1001D\\_Working\\_for\\_Babies\\_v1.2-FINAL-compressed\\_2.pdf](https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/210121-F1001D_Working_for_Babies_v1.2-FINAL-compressed_2.pdf)

69 Ibid.

## 5.1 Family and parenting experiences

Parents' mental health was considerably affected by the pandemic.<sup>70</sup> A number of studies have found a considerable deterioration in parents' mental health due to high stress levels, particularly among those with children under 10, lone parent households, parents in low-income families and parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities.<sup>71</sup> Mothers also reportedly experienced increased anxiety and stress around the birth of a child, with potential to impact pre-birth development and posing risks to nurturing, responsive caregiving.<sup>72</sup> There is also evidence that the pandemic has affected the relationship between parents. In a survey of local authorities during lockdown, 74% reported an increase in parental conflict during the pandemic.<sup>73</sup>

Other research has shown the challenges of parenting alone during the pandemic. For example, a parent survey found that, during the first lockdown, 65%

of lone mothers experienced problems going to the shops.<sup>74</sup> There were also considerable negative impacts on lone parents in employment and, when employers did not offer much flexibility in how parents organised their work, working at home while caring for children was reported to be extremely challenging.<sup>75</sup>

Supporting home learning was more challenging for some parents, with the 'digital divide' a key factor for low-income, ethnic minority and lone-parent families engaging with digital tools to aid with play and learning. This divide not only refers to the presence of digital devices and internet access in the home, but also to foundational digital skills.<sup>76</sup>

## 5.2 Work and care in the pandemic and beyond

While placing strains on family life, the pandemic also opened new ways of organising time, care, work and learning, which may offer pointers for future policy.

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- 70 La Valle I., Lewis J., Crawford C., Paull G., Lloyd E., Ott E., Mann G., Drayton E., Cattoretti G., Hall A., and Willis E. (2022). *Implications of COVID for Early Childhood Education and Care in England*. Centre for Evidence and Implementation.
- 71 Dawes, J., May, T., McKinlay, A., Fancourt, D., and Burton, A. (2021). Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of parents with young children: a qualitative interview study. *BMC Psychology* 9:194. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-021-00701-8>; McElroy, E., Patalay, P., Moltrecht, B., Shevlin, M., Shum, A., Creswell, C. and Waite, P. (2020). Demographic and health factors associated with pandemic anxiety in the context of COVID-19. *British Journal of Health Psychology* 25 (4), pp.934–944. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12470>
- 72 Reed (2021).
- 73 Ghiara, V., Pote, I., Sorgenfrei, M. and Stanford, M. (2020). *Reducing parental conflict in the context of Covid-19: Adapting to virtual and digital provision of support*. Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/reducing-parental-conflict-in-the-context-of-covid-19-adapting-to-virtual-and-digital-provision-of-support>
- 74 Women's Budget Group. (2020). *Parenting and Covid-19 – Research evidence*. <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Coronavirus-the-impact-on-parents-20.08.2020.pdf>
- 75 Clery, E., Dewar, L. and Papoutsaki, D. (2021). *Caring without sharing: Single parents' journeys through the COVID-19 pandemic*. <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/caring-without-sharing-final-report>
- 76 Laxton, D., Cooper, L. and Younie, S. (2021). Translational research in action: The use of technology to disseminate information to parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. *British Journal of Educational Technology* 52 (4), pp.1538–1553. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13100>

The way that parents have divided paid work and household responsibilities during this crisis could have an effect that lasts long after the ‘end’ of the pandemic.<sup>77</sup>

There were marked increases in the amount of time fathers dedicated to childcare during the pandemic – doubling the number of hours they spent on childcare compared with 2014/15.<sup>78</sup> One study highlighted that 85% of partnered fathers who were at home in the UK during the spring 2020 lockdown reported spending more time with their children and 73% reported a better relationship with their children following the lockdown.<sup>79</sup> However, there are still large gender differences in the way time is divided in the home, with mothers still doing the bulk of childcare and housework.<sup>80</sup>

*“I was there for everything instead of being in an office. I was able to do less work than I should have and spend more time with him.”*

Father of one-year-old. Nuffield Foundation and Tortoise ThinkIn, 1 March 2022.

It is also worth noting that many parents were not in jobs that allowed them to work from their homes, even during the height of the pandemic. For those who could not stay at home, balancing work and childcare and supporting their child’s learning were made that much more difficult.

Research has explored the consequences for working lone mothers

who were not defined as key workers. Compared to other family types, these lone mothers were twice as likely to be on zero hours contracts, adding to their job insecurity. Where they had significant childcare responsibilities, most of the lone parents changed their pattern of working.<sup>81</sup>

### 5.3 Young children in formal education and childcare

The pandemic impacted the early childhood education and care sector in a number of ways, including temporary and permanent nursery closures, reduced demand for early years and childcare places, and workforce challenges. Together, these have implications for the financial sustainability of the sector.

Attendance rates in formal childcare varied during the pandemic. In May 2021, attendance rates were on average 28% of 0–4-year-olds across England. However, rates varied from 10% to 45% among local authorities and were highest in areas that were less deprived, had higher rates of development among 2 and 5-year-olds, had higher rates of female economic activity and lower unemployment rates – suggesting a relationship between parents’ availability to look after their children and formal childcare use.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the reopening of nurseries, attendance in early years settings has still not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

77 Hobbs, A. and Bernard, R. (2021, 27 October). *Impact of COVID-19 on early childhood education and care*. <https://post.parliament.uk/impact-of-covid-19-on-early-childhood-education-care>

78 Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A. and Sevilla, A. (2020a). *How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN290-Mothers-and-fathers-balancing-work-and-life-under-lockdown.pdf>

79 Burgess, A. and Goldman, R. (2021). *Lockdown fathers: The untold story*. Fatherhood Institute. <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Lockdown-Fathers-Executive-Summary.pdf>

80 Ibid.

81 Clery et al. (2021).

82 La Valle et al. (2022).

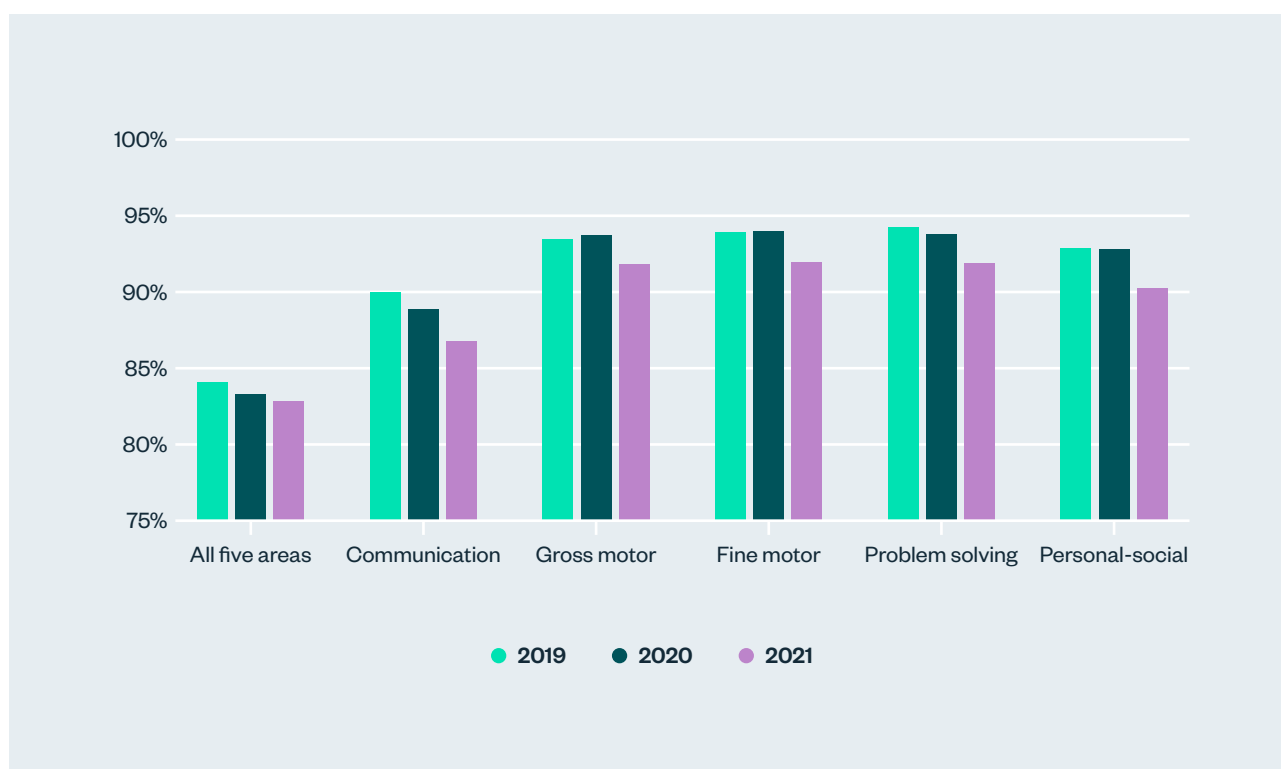
The pandemic has made access more difficult, with increased rates of closures in more deprived areas and some large nursery chains targeting their operations in wealthier areas. Parents have reduced the hours their children attend because they are working from home more regularly during the pandemic, with the overall number of parents accessing funded childcare and education declining.<sup>83</sup>

Many early years providers reported in early 2022 that delays to babies' and children's speech and language development remained evident, with some young children struggling to respond to basic facial expressions, which may be due

to reduced contact and interaction (due to both mask wearing and social distancing) during the pandemic.<sup>84</sup>

Evidence from the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3), completed at 2–2½ years in England, shows that a smaller proportion of children are achieving an expected level of development across all 5 areas of measurement (see Figure 11).<sup>85</sup> We are also beginning to understand the impact of the pandemic on 4 and 5-year-olds. The proportion of children at the end of reception class who reached the expected levels of development in all areas has dropped from 72% for the 2019 cohort to just 59% in 2021.

**Figure 11:** Proportion of children at or above the expected level of development aged 2–2.5.<sup>86</sup>



83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2021). *Child development outcomes at 2 to 2 and a half years: Annual data*. [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/child-development-outcomes-at-2-to-2-and-a-half-years-annual-data](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/child-development-outcomes-at-2-to-2-and-a-half-years-annual-data)

86 Ibid.

This difference is equivalent to, on average, three more children in every classroom not reaching the expected levels by the end of the school year.<sup>87</sup>

*“It’s hard to pinpoint whether it’s different personalities or development stages but we noticed that our five-year-old who is very confident and bowls into social situations and our 2-year-old is not like that at all. Much more tentative – felt like his development of dexterity and speech was a bit slowed [after lockdown].”*

Father of 5- and 2-year-old,  
Nuffield Foundation and Tortoise ThinkIn,  
1 March 2022.

Lockdown measures also reduced the opportunities for parents and early years staff to seek and give advice. We know that some settings used innovative methods and social media to support families.<sup>88</sup> However, it is clear that many parents of young children continue to be without vital advice and support from their local nursery.

## 5.4 Poverty and vulnerability

The measures introduced by the government in the wake of the pandemic – in particular the temporary rise in universal

credit, other benefit changes and the furlough scheme – protected many families from the worst of the immediate economic fallout of the pandemic.<sup>89</sup> Despite these measures, COVID-19 has had a particularly detrimental impact for some disadvantaged and vulnerable young children. Some families that were already financially challenged and persistently disadvantaged have become more so, while many families have been tipped into poverty due to job losses or reduced income. Inequality has deepened, with young children in ethnic minority families and in areas where poverty was already rife more greatly affected.<sup>90</sup> The way children learn and develop has shifted, with digital and internet-connected devices now seen as ‘essentials’, exacerbating the impact of the digital divide between advantaged and disadvantaged families.

As hunger and food insecurity increased and physical activity declined during the pandemic,<sup>91</sup> obesity levels rose dramatically among reception-age children – with the gap between the most and least deprived areas, and the gap between ethnic groups increasing still further (see Figure 12).

The pandemic has exposed fault lines in the system with vulnerable families and children or those with special educational needs more likely to fall between the

87 Tracey et al. (2022).

88 Hobbs and Bernard (2021).

89 Waters, T. and Wernham, T. (2021, 15 July). *The expiry of the universal credit uplift: Impacts and policy options*. IFS. <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15528>

90 Platt, L. (2021). COVID-19 and ethnic inequalities in England. *LSE Public Policy Review* 1 (4), p.4. <https://ppr.lse.ac.uk/articles/10.31389/lseppr.33>

91 Stanford, M., Davie, P. and Mulcahy, J. (2021). *Growing up in the Covid-19 pandemic: An evidence review of the impact of pandemic life on physical development in the early years*. Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/growing-up-in-the-covid-19-pandemic-an-evidence-review-of-the-impact-of-pandemic-life-on-physical-development-in-the-early-years>

**Figure 12:** Prevalence of obese, severely obese, and obese or overweight children in reception class.<sup>92</sup>



cracks – with less interaction with key professionals, fewer health visitor checks, fewer referrals to children’s social care, and a growing gap between escalating need and available responses. But the pandemic also highlighted remarkable examples of where local services adapted rapidly to provide digital support, co-location, better referral systems for new parents and greater collaboration.<sup>93</sup>

**In conclusion**

We are beginning to see the immediate impacts on children’s early development, but it is not yet clear what the longer-term implications will be. For those whose earliest experiences may be of lockdown, the pandemic is not over. The case for long-term policy responses to the vulnerabilities that may affect a generation are pressing.

92 NHS Digital. (2021). *National child measurement programme England 2020/21 school year*. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2020-21-school-year/age#top>

93 Reed (2021).

# 6 Public policy and early childhood: What next?

Young children's lives and those of their families have changed markedly over the last two decades and more dramatically over the period of the pandemic. In Chapter 4, we set out four themes that bring together these principal changes: changing family forms and parenting experiences; combining paid work and care; early education and childcare; and rising poverty, inequalities and vulnerability. We now turn to the policy challenges arising from these themes and identify specific issues that need to be addressed in young children's lives. The priorities we identify here are informed by the evidence reviewed across the preceding six parts of this series and insights from our accompanying programme of stakeholder engagement.<sup>94</sup>

## 6.1 The case for change

At a time when two-fifths of children are not reaching the expected levels of development at age five,<sup>95</sup> more than a third of families with a young child are living in relative poverty<sup>96</sup> and all families are grappling with the consequences of

the pandemic and sharply rising prices, there is a compelling case for a concerted focus on early childhood. To meet the needs of families with young children, early childhood policy requires a greater clarity of objectives, sustained investment and a coherent, joined-up approach to services.

A shift in public policy has occurred over the last 25 years, marked by an increasing willingness to intervene in the lives of young children and their families. Services have built up over years as successive governments have sought to address different objectives, all desirable in themselves, including improving child outcomes, reducing childhood poverty (and its impacts), increasing parental employment and addressing disadvantage and narrowing attainment gaps. The result is a wide range of supporting services for families with young children (see Figure 13).

However, in seeking to address a variety of challenges facing parents and children in different ways, tensions have emerged. These tensions include: striking an effective balance between universal and targeted services; the balance between work and care; the relative emphasis

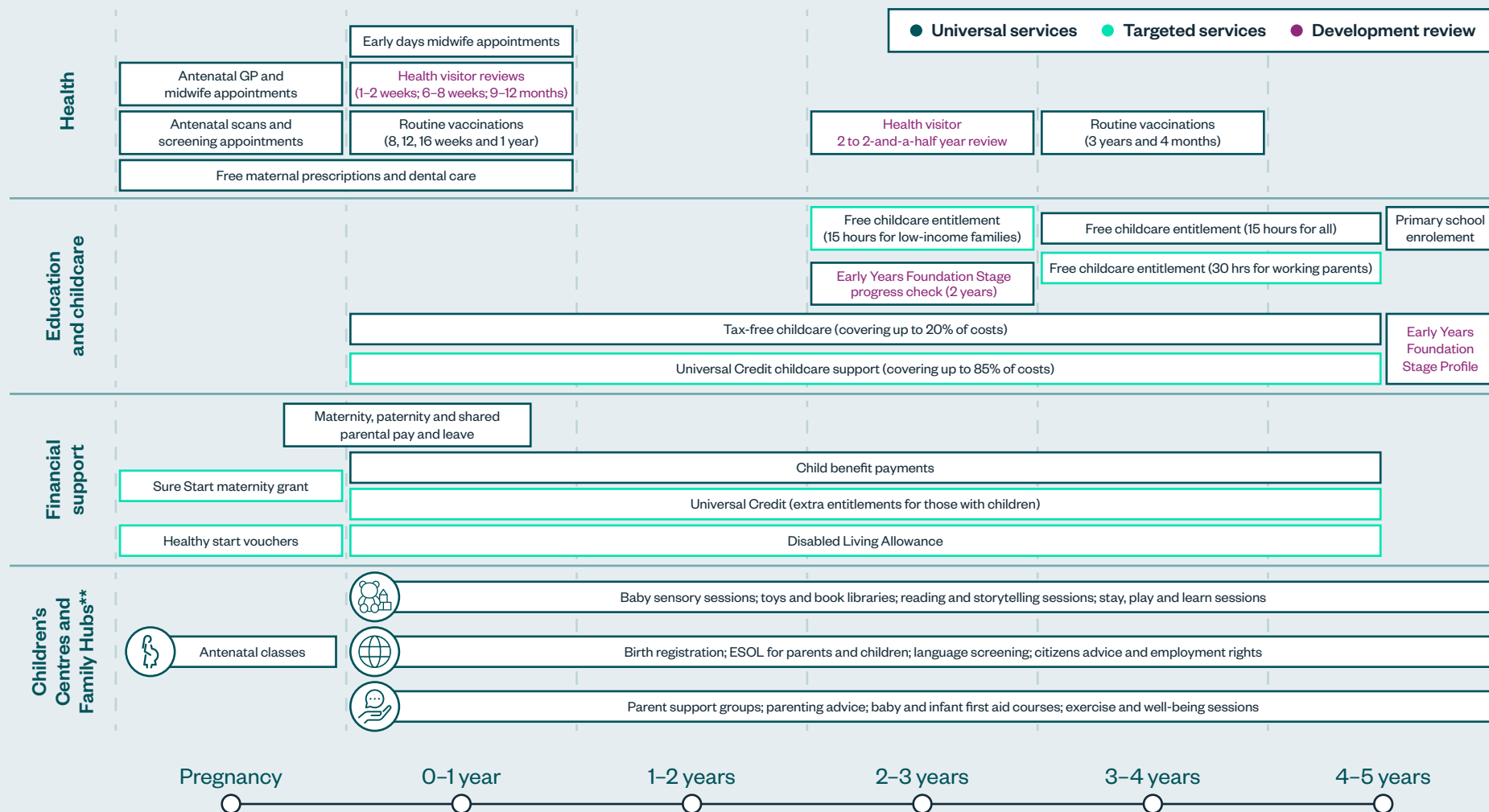
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94 See <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/series/changing-face-of-early-childhood-in-britain>

95 Tracey et al. (2022).

96 [Oppenheim and Milton \(2021\)](#).

Figure 13: Universal and targeted early childhood services in England.<sup>97</sup>



\*\*Services highlighted here are for illustrative purposes.

97 NHS. (2022b). *Your antenatal appointments*. <https://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/your-pregnancy-care/your-antenatal-appointments>; NHS. (2022c). *Your baby's health and development reviews*. [www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/babys-development/height-weight-and-reviews/baby-reviews](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/babys-development/height-weight-and-reviews/baby-reviews); NHS. (2022a). *NHS vaccinations and when to have them*. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/nhs-vaccinations-and-when-to-have-them>; GOV.UK. (2022a). *Claim child benefit*. <https://www.gov.uk/child-benefit>; GOV.UK. (2022b). *Universal Credit*. <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/what-youll-get>



on early education and childcare or the home learning environment; and between the level of intervention and families' preparedness to accept it. These tensions are, in part, a consequence of not having an overarching Early Years Strategy that seeks to bring these things together and achieve a greater level of coherence. Early childhood policy has also been subject to considerable budgetary constraints, with major additional investment unlikely at present.

These tensions and constraints have resulted in disparities in the availability and access to, eligibility for and use of services among families with young children (see Box 3). In terms of services offered, the most notable disparity relates to the age of the child, with a significant gap between paid parental leave entitlements and public health support during the first year of a child's life and when universal childcare entitlements begin at the age of 3. Take-up of services also varies, with lower-income families and families from some ethnic groups, for example, less likely to access services – requiring specific strategies to encourage take-up among groups that stand to benefit most from services.

At a time when additional resources and public spending are likely to be heavily constrained, the most effective policy responses might lie in identifying opportunities for coherence and consistency in delivering support.<sup>98</sup> This would require setting overall objectives in early childhood policy; combining clear goals for all

young children with a persistent focus on disadvantage. A core component of this is ensuring timely support – underpinned by early intervention<sup>99</sup> – to improve children's well-being and strengthen their capabilities, reducing the likelihood of further difficulties and costs.

For services to be coherent, they must also be joined-up. The inter-connected domains of children's development and the inter-connected nature of the factors that promote nurturing interaction and protection require policy to take a holistic view of a family's circumstances and needs. While calls for the integration of services are not new, policies and strategies to support young children's development continue to overlook aspects of individual circumstances, such as the material resources of the family. The quality of housing lived in by families with young children has, for example, received very little policy attention.

While recognising ongoing budgetary pressures on government spending, there is a strong case for additional investment in the early years. We are still living with the legacy of major reductions in public spending on financial support for young children and preventative local services since 2010. In addition, the composition of spending on early childhood has changed, with a shift away from targeted spending on families living on low incomes to universal approaches in childcare funding, and away from younger children because of the sharp reduction in funding for Sure Start centres.<sup>100</sup>

98 The Centre for Social Justice and Fabian Society have developed a coherent policy approach to the early years, with both short- and long-term solutions for the challenges families with young children face, including specific recommendations to better integrate services for young children, address the work-childcare balance and strengthen early childhood education and care. See: The Centre for Social Justice and Fabian Society (2021).

99 Early Intervention Foundation (EIF). (2018). *Realising the potential for early intervention*. EIF. <https://www.ief.org.uk/report/realising-the-potential-of-early-intervention>

100 Britton, J., Farquharson, C., and Sibieta, L. (2019). *2019 annual report on education spending in England*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/uploads/R162-Education-spending-in-England-2019.pdf>

### Box 3: Differences in eligibility and take-up across socio-demographic factors

#### Household income

##### (and employment status):

- Eligibility for most forms of financial support is contingent on household income.
- Support towards childcare and eligibility for free childcare are determined both by household income and parental working status.
- Parents eligible for Universal Credit may receive extra amounts for 1 or 2 children.

#### Location:

- Services differ depending on location, for example, children's centres and family hubs.
- Services vary across nations. For example, in Scotland, all families have access to 30 hours free childcare per week in term-time, which is not the case in England.

#### Family size:

- The 'two-child' limit restricts the child element of benefits to the first two children (for children born after 6 April 2017).

#### Age of the child:

- Services change as young children grow up.
- Most midwifery and health visitor support is focused on pregnancy and the first year of a child's life: between the age of 1 and beginning school, the only health visitor review occurs at 2 to 2.5 years of age.
- Universal entitlements for free childcare only begin at the age of 3.

#### Ethnicity:

- Take-up of certain entitlements, such as for free childcare, varies significantly among ethnic groups.

#### Special educational needs and disability (SEND):

- Children with SEND are less likely to take up their free entitlement to childcare, largely due to limited capacity in local areas to accommodate particular needs, poor communication to parents about available services, and inadequate funding to cover the actual costs of offering specialist care.<sup>101</sup>

#### Gender of the parent:

- There are disparities between maternal and paternal leave entitlements, including pay.
- Many services, such as those provided by some children's centres, target mothers and not fathers.

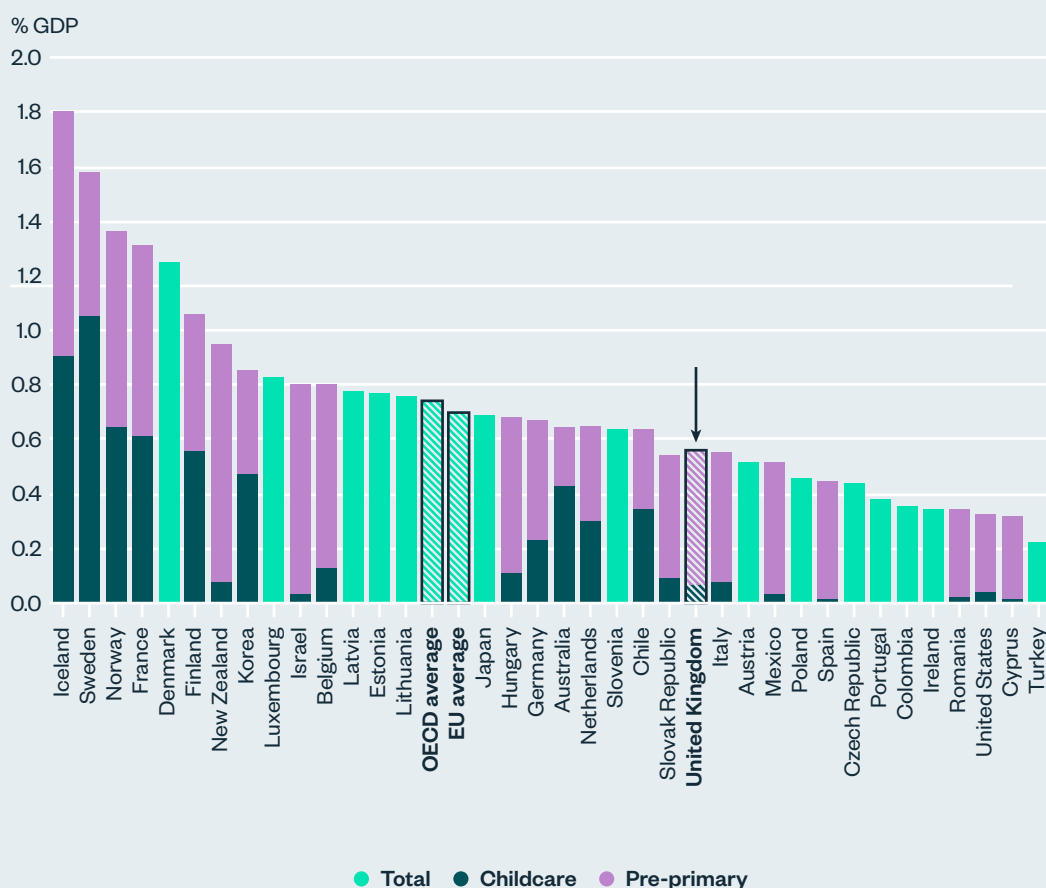
#### Age of the parent:

- Younger parents are often eligible for additional support, including specific programmes of support such as Family Nurse Partnership.

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101 Griggs, J. and Bussard, L. (2017). *Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Meeting the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities in the early years*. DfE. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/586240/SEED\\_Meeting\\_the\\_needs\\_of\\_children\\_with\\_SEND\\_in\\_the\\_early\\_years\\_-\\_RR554.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/586240/SEED_Meeting_the_needs_of_children_with_SEND_in_the_early_years_-_RR554.pdf)

**Figure 14:** Public expenditure on childcare and pre-primary education and total public expenditure on early childhood education and care, as a % of GDP, 2017 or latest available.<sup>102</sup>



Note: Countries for which only a total proportion is included are those for which data cannot be disaggregated by educational level. Data may not fully capture all local government expenditure data in all countries. The EU average includes UK data.

In the UK, investment in early education and childcare as a proportion of GDP falls well below the average for OECD countries (see Figure 14).<sup>103</sup> Given that

lifelong inequalities have their roots in early childhood, this would be investment in social and individual well-being over the long term.

102 OECD (2021). *Public spending on childcare and early education*. [https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF3\\_1\\_Public\\_spending\\_on\\_childcare\\_and\\_early\\_education.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF3_1_Public_spending_on_childcare_and_early_education.pdf)

103 Ibid.

## 6.2 Support for parents and family relationships: addressing priority needs and joining up services.

In April 2022, the government announced £300 million of funding for 75 upper-tier local authorities to create new Family Hubs and early help services over the next three years, jointly overseen by the Department for Health and Social Care and the Department for Education (see Box 4).<sup>104</sup> Other recent initiatives to support families include: the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' Supporting Families programme, backed by £165 million in funding for 2021 and 2022;<sup>105</sup> the Department for Work and Pension's Reducing Parental Conflict programme, with £33 million committed from 2022–25;<sup>106</sup> and the Department

for Education's additional funding of over £24 million for home learning environment recovery programmes.<sup>107</sup>

This investment is welcome, reflecting many of the priorities that we know are crucial for promoting nurturing care and protecting children from stresses, including mental health support, addressing inter-parental conflict and promoting positive parenting behaviours. In addition to the direct benefit to potentially hundreds of thousands of families, the investment is also an opportunity to trial new ways of working and build the case for further investment in the early years.

As with any policy announcement, there are questions of scale and reach. The investment in Family Hubs follows years of funding reductions for children's centres and will benefit just half of England's local

### Box 4: Family Hubs and Start for Life programme funding announcement, April 2022

- £100 million for bespoke parent-infant relationship and perinatal mental health support.
- £82 million to create a network of Family Hubs, improving access to a wide range of integrated support services for families with children aged 0–19.
- £50 million to establish breastfeeding support services.
- £50 million to fund evidence-based parenting programmes.
- £10 million to support local authorities to publish a clear 'Start for Life offer'.
- £10 million to trial innovative start for life workforce models.

104 DfE, Department for Health and Social Care and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. (2022, 2 April). *Infants, children and families to benefit from boost in support*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/infants-children-and-families-to-benefit-from-boost-in-support>.

105 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. (2021, 26 March). *Next phase of £165 million programme for vulnerable families launched*. [www.gov.uk/government/news/next-phase-of-165-million-programme-for-vulnerable-families-launched](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/next-phase-of-165-million-programme-for-vulnerable-families-launched)

106 DWP. (2021, 12 April). *Families supported by £33 million to drive down parental conflict*. [www.gov.uk/government/news/families-supported-by-33-million-to-drive-down-parental-conflict](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/families-supported-by-33-million-to-drive-down-parental-conflict)

107 Quince, W. (2022, 1 June). Answer to Parliamentary question UIN 8208. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-05-24/8202>

authorities. Initiatives such as the Reducing Parental Conflict programme are small in scale and targeted on parents without work; yet we know that the demand for counselling and relationship support for families in difficulties far outstrips demand, particularly following the pandemic. Likewise, accessing services for those struggling with lower levels of depression and anxiety can be difficult.

The limited scale and geographical reach of initiatives raises questions of how services are best targeted and how best to support those with less acute need. The evidence base for parenting programmes is strongest for programmes that run over many weeks with highly-trained practitioners, but these approaches are also more expensive and so fewer families benefit. They also demand a high level of commitment that may be unrealistic for some families, especially for those whose time is already pressed. While it is right that programmes such as Supporting Families focus on the most vulnerable and invest in dedicated keyworkers to work with families, there is also a need to develop the evidence base for lighter-touch support for those who do not meet service thresholds. Similarly, understanding the relative merits and limitations of digital means of support, which proliferated during the pandemic, is an urgent priority.

Effective targeting of services requires engaging parents and families who would benefit most from them, such as isolated parents and families with fewer existing relationships with service providers. Civil society organisations provide

opportunities for outreach. There is also evidence that peer-led programmes can be effective in supporting parents who have been underserved historically.<sup>108</sup> Service providers also need to recognise and respond to the fact that, in some families, it may be a grandparent or other family member providing care to children who would most benefit from support.

Aside from specific parenting programmes, there is often limited understanding and knowledge among (prospective) parents about why the early years is a particularly important phase of development. For example, some parents may not have a clear idea about what being ready for school means in practice.<sup>109,110</sup>

Development reviews, both those led by health visitors and those by early years practitioners (see Figure 13), provide invaluable opportunities to build partnerships between professionals and families and to assess – in a timely fashion – needs, including identifying those in need of additional or specialist support. There have been calls for further reviews, such as an additional two health visitor reviews at 18 months of age and when a child is between 3 and 3.5 years old.<sup>111</sup> If new checks are to be introduced, they may provide opportunities for a more integrated approach – bringing together professionals from health and education, for example, to develop a shared view of a child's needs. However, at present, only 9% of early years foundation stage checks for 2-year-olds and health reviews at 2- to 2.5 years are integrated.<sup>112</sup>

108 Day, C., Michelson, D., Thomson, S., Penney, C., and Draper, L. (2012). Evaluation of a peer led parenting intervention for disruptive behaviour problems in children: community based randomised controlled trial. *BMJ* 344 (e1107). <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.e1107>

109 Ipsos MORI (2020).

110 YouGov and Kindred<sup>2</sup> (2022).

111 The Centre for Social Justice and Fabian Society (2021).

112 Children's Commissioner for England. (2020). *Best beginnings in the early years*. Children's Commissioner. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/best-beginnings-in-the-early-years>

### Breaking down silos of support

The fragmented support across services provided to parents and families between education and childcare, health, social care, financial support and housing, and between parents and children, is a constant theme recognised by those who work in each of them. Fragmentation is also visible in relation to administrative data, severely limiting our understanding of families and our ability to provide timely intervention.

The need for better coordinated services has started to be recognised through the Best Start for Life initiative<sup>113</sup> and the expansion of Family Hubs.<sup>114</sup> The inclusion of funding for local authorities to publish their start to life offer is useful in helping parents understand what support is available to them locally. However, the Best Start for Life has a strong health focus, is not linked up with early education and childcare (which many parents are accessing from the earliest stages of a baby's life), children's social care or financial support. And while the focus on the first 1001 days is critical, it needs to connect with policy and services for families after a child turns 2.

The Department of Health and Social Care's Integrated Care Systems offers another opportunity to provide more coordinated and coherent services for young children's health and well-being. A key benefit of this reform is the duty for the NHS and local authorities (who are responsible

for most children's services, early education and public health) to cooperate. Children now feature more strongly in the legislation implementing this major reorganisation; the challenge is to ensure they are given due attention in practice.

There are many lessons to be learnt from Sure Start children's centres, the largest programme of integrated services for young children to date. By 2010, the programme showed impacts on the health and body mass index for children and improvements in the home environment.<sup>115</sup> Positive effects were linked to frequency of use, inter-agency working, and the number of evidence-based programmes used by centres.<sup>116</sup> More recent research has shown that, at its height in terms of funding and reach, Sure Start had longer-term benefits for children's health, with a reduction in hospitalisations throughout childhood and adolescence.<sup>117</sup>

*"Honestly that place [children's centre] was my absolute saving grace. Before, I didn't realise at the time, but I was going through post-natal depression and there was a group for young mums that I was able to join on to and create friendships, and do food groups and so many different groups that I was able to get out to and really involve myself and learn about the services that were there that I didn't know were there. It's something that really progressed my life."<sup>118</sup>*

113 HM Government (2021).

114 DfE and Ford, V. (2021, 19 August). *£20m to provide more early help for vulnerable families*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/20m-to-provide-more-early-help-for-vulnerable-families>

115 Eisenstadt, N. (2011). *Providing a Sure Start, How Government Discovered Early Childhood*. Policy Press.

116 Sammons, P., Halls, J., Smees, R., and Goff, J. (2015). *The impact of children's centres: studying the effect of children's centres in promoting better outcomes for children and their families*. DfE. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/485347/DFE-RB495\\_Evaluation\\_of\\_children\\_s\\_centres\\_in\\_England\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_children\\_s\\_centres\\_brief.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/485347/DFE-RB495_Evaluation_of_children_s_centres_in_England_the_impact_of_children_s_centres_brief.pdf)

117 Cattan, S., Conti, G., Farquharson, C., Ginja, R., and Pecher, M. (2021). *The health effects of universal early childhood interventions: Evidence from Sure Start*. IFS. <https://doi.org/10.1920/wp.ifs.2021.2521>

118 Reed, J., Parish, N. and Baker, S. (2022). *Beyond boundaries: Research on the integration of early years systems and services in London and how to work together better*. London Councils and Isos Partnership.

Common to all services is the importance of giving professionals – be they GP, health visitor, early years educator or family hub worker – the time to build trusting relationships with families, understand their context and needs in the round, and to work with them to ensure immediate and longer-term needs are met.

### What next? Priorities for policy and practice

**Services that understand and respond to the needs of all families with young children in the round.** We know that family-focused, joined-up services that take account of the complexity and dynamism of family lives are key; no single service provider can deliver good outcomes alone.<sup>119</sup> These services need to provide a continuum of support for parents, from light-touch universal information and guidance to more intensive, sustained support for those in need of additional help. There is a strong case for greater support for parents' mental health and with parenting.<sup>120</sup> The Best Start for Life has opened up the possibility of a more ambitious, integrated approach to early childhood. In the medium-term, the Best Start for Life's vision needs to be extended up to the age of five and to connect across all services for families, including efforts to tackle poverty (see 6.5).

The scale and complexity of the challenge should not be underestimated. Sustained leadership and investment and a skilled family support workforce are necessary conditions for success. Recent studies provide invaluable evidence of what works in planning, leading, delivering and evaluating local early childhood services,

including what needs to change at national and local levels.<sup>121</sup> While a comprehensive assessment of what needs to change in order to bring about this vision is beyond the scope of this report, our *Changing face of early childhood* series has identified a number of priorities worth highlighting:

- **Making early childhood education and care a core part of integrated systems of family support.** Nurseries and other providers of formal childcare are now an established infrastructure upon which most families with young children rely. And yet efforts to better integrate services for young children have paid less attention to how nurseries can help support families, such as in helping strengthen the home learning environment or directing parents to other local service providers. The role of formal childcare providers, such as multi-academy trusts, within integrated systems of support needs to be considered.
- **Joining up data to develop a shared view of the child and their family.** Identifying the right mix of support to meet the needs of families requires the timely sharing of data across agencies, without creating large additional costs and burdens. Barriers to sharing information need to be addressed if agencies are to understand the needs of families in the round.<sup>122</sup>
- **Ensuring development reviews form the basis of timely support for young children and their families.** At a minimum, we need to ensure that all children receive the currently

119 Lewing et al. (2022).

120 Cattani et al. (2022).

121 Lewing et al. (2022); Reed (2021).

122 Lewing et al. (2022).

mandated development checks, backed-up by timely intervention for those in need of additional support. Encouraging integration of the early years foundation stage checks for 2-year-olds and health checks at 2- to 2.5 years provides opportunities for professionals to develop a shared view of the child and to work together with families to meet the child's needs. Beyond integration, a more radical proposal would be the introduction of an integrated check that looks beyond the development of the child and considers the needs of families

in the round - for example, a family's employment and housing needs, connecting families with the full range of support available locally.

- **Better meeting the needs of families that have been underserved historically.** We know that some families in need of help are underserved by services that are intended to support them.<sup>123</sup> Better meeting the needs of these families requires not just effective outreach, but working with families to develop joint approaches, co-created materials and peer-led forms of support.

### Box 5: Work-care balance policies

- **Statutory Maternity Leave:** all employees are entitled to up to 52 weeks of maternity leave on giving birth to a baby.
- **Statutory Maternity Pay:** for eligible employees, this can be paid for up to 39 weeks, usually as 90% of average weekly earnings for the first 6 weeks, then £155.66 or 90% of average weekly earnings for the remaining 33 weeks (whichever is lower).
- **Maternity Allowance:** some people not eligible for Statutory Maternity Pay, such as the self-employed, are eligible for Maternity Allowance of 39 weeks of £155.66 per week or 90% of average weekly earnings (whichever is lower).
- **Adoption leave and pay:** one employee per couple is eligible for Statutory Adoption Leave and Statutory Adoption Pay (in line with Statutory Maternity Leave and Pay). The other partner is potentially eligible for paternity leave.
- **Paternity Leave:** employees may be eligible for 1 or 2 weeks of paid paternity leave, paid at £155.66 per week or 90% of average weekly earnings (whichever is lower).
- **Shared Parental Leave and Statutory Shared Parental Pay:** allows sharing of up to 50 weeks of maternity or adoption leave and up to 37 weeks of maternity or adoption pay between partners.
- **Unpaid parental leave:** employees are entitled to up to 18 weeks' leave for each child (up to four weeks per year) up to their 18th birthday.
- **Flexible working:** employees have the right to request flexible working, such as flexible start and finish times or working from home.

123 Batcheler, R., Ireland, E., Oppenheim, C., Rehill, J. (2022). *Time for parents*. Nuffield Foundation. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/time-for-parents>



In tandem, the evidence base for what works needs to be strengthened.

- **Building the evidence base for lighter-touch and digital forms of family support.** The pandemic, budget constraints and a desire to provide less intensive forms of support for families with less acute needs have precipitated heightened interest in and use of lighter-touch and digital forms of family support. Building the evidence base for when these forms of support work best and for whom is an urgent priority.

### 6.3 Work-care balance: lingering pressures and empowering choices

Balancing care and paid work is a key concern of many parents with young children. Public policy over the last two decades has recognised the need to support parents to manage this balance, as demonstrated by the expansion of parental leave entitlements and the introduction of new employee rights (see Box 5). Supporting parents is, however, not just a matter for government, but also a responsibility for employers, who can go beyond statutory entitlements to ensure quality jobs that are flexible to meeting the needs of parents.<sup>124</sup> Many organisations, especially public and large private sector companies, provide enhanced benefits for parents and other employees. Near to three-quarters of UK employers offer

some form of enhanced maternity pay, for example.<sup>125</sup> Some are experimenting with four-day weeks;<sup>126</sup> others with offering grandparent leave.<sup>127</sup>

These policies help reduce pressures and provide many parents with time – particularly during the first year of a child’s life – to focus on providing attentive, nurturing care for their children. However, the lingering legacy of undervaluing the time parents spend caring for young children remains. Most notably, there remains a significant gap in state support for parents to balance work and care between the end of post-birth/adoption paid leave after 9 months and the beginning of free childcare entitlements at age 2 or 3. Policy has also been less effective at addressing the disproportionate effects of work-care tensions on mothers, enabling fathers to care for young children, and supporting parents with fewer financial resources to draw on.

*“My son is in childcare three days a week, but I’ve not got family help when he’s not in childcare, so the pressure is on me when I’m not working to do all the childcare. As a society in general we’ve stepped away from having those support structures who can help a few hours here and there. My son is 15 months. I have no time to do anything when he’s in childcare other than my work. Would love to have a bit more time for him and for myself.”*

Mother, Nuffield Foundation and Tortoise ThinkIn, 1 March 2022.

124 Global Institute for Women’s Leadership, King’s College London, Working Families and University of East Anglia. (2021). *Working parents, flexibility and job quality: What are the trade-offs?* King’s College London and Working Families. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/assets/working-parents-flexibility-and-job-quality-what-are-the-trade-offs.pdf>

125 Pregnant then screwed. (2022, 31 March). *Advice: Enhanced Maternity Pay*. <https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/enhanced-maternity-pay>

126 For example, 70 UK companies are trialling a four-day working week from June to December 2022: 4 Day Week (n.d). *4 Day Week UK Pilot Programme*. <https://www.4dayweek.co.uk/pilot-programme>

127 For example: Garner, M. (2021, 9 December). *Saga announces grandparent leave policy*. Working Wise. <https://www.workingwise.co.uk/saga-announced-grandparent-leave-policy>

We know that family-friendly policies can play a vital role in helping parents strike an effective work-care balance. Cross-national research shows that family-friendly policies, defined as paid maternity leave, availability of flexible working, holiday and sick leave, can eliminate differences in levels of reported happiness between parents and non-parents, as well as increasing happiness across the general population.<sup>128</sup>

While the UK scores well on the duration of paid maternity/parental leave in comparison to other OECD countries, it scores poorly on the level of paid leave,<sup>129</sup> with some evidence that some mothers are returning to work earlier than they would like for financial reasons.<sup>130</sup>

*“If somehow the state can fund childcare from an earlier age, it really would make such a difference. I was lucky to have a year maternity leave but now I’ve got no financial support with childcare until my child is three.”*

Mother of 2-year-old, Nuffield Foundation and Tortoise ThinkIn, 1 March 2022.

At up to two weeks, paternity leave remains limited in its ability to ease the care burden on mothers and allow fathers to play a greater role in their young children’s lives. And while the introduction of shared parental leave is a welcome step toward giving more families choice over who

takes leave and when, analysis of HMRC data by Maternity Action last year showed take-up of shared parental leave has yet to reach 3% of eligible fathers.<sup>131</sup> This is in part a reflection of the gender pay gap, culture, choice and the complexity of making shared leave arrangements. Fathers are much less likely to know about their flexible working entitlements than mothers, and for those that do, are less likely to be granted them.<sup>132</sup>

A further policy gap exists in that most of the leave and pay entitlements available to parents are for employees only, excluding the self-employed, who make up a growing proportion of the working population, are disproportionately male and include many low paid “gig economy” workers.

In addition to legal entitlements, resolving work-care tensions requires addressing inequalities in the workplace that span pay, quality, flexibility and progression. In a survey of parents in the UK,<sup>133</sup> both mothers and fathers emphasised particular aspects of job quality: security, control, management support and, critically, flexibility. Currently, working parents, especially mothers, sometimes sacrifice pay and progression in order to have flexible working arrangements. Workplace discrimination is another barrier to work-care balance that needs to be addressed.

Around one in nine mothers report that they

128 Glass, J., Simon, R.W. and Andersson, M. (2016). Parenthood and Happiness: Effects of Work-Family Reconciliation Policies in 22 OECD Countries. *AJS*, 122(3), pp. 886-929. <https://doi.org/10.1086/688892>

129 Chzhen, Y., Gromada, A. and Rees, G. (2019). *Are the world’s richest countries family friendly?* Unicef. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/family-friendly>

130 Dunston, R. (2022, 26 March). *‘I couldn’t afford to heat the baby’s room’: Maternity Action calls for rise in state maternity pay.* Maternity Action. <https://maternityaction.org.uk/2022/03/i-couldnt-afford-to-heat-the-babys-room-maternity-action-calls-for-rise-in-maternity-pay>

131 Dunstan, R. (2021, 4 November). *Reform of shared parental leave: are we nearly there yet?* Maternity Action. <https://maternityaction.org.uk/2021/11/reform-of-shared-parental-leave-are-we-nearly-there-yet>

132 Understanding Society (2020, 11 November). *Fathers are less likely to take advantage of flexible working.* <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/2020/11/11/fathers-are-less-likely-to-take-advantage-of-flexible-working>

133 Global Institute for Women’s Leadership, King’s College London et al. 2021.

were either dismissed, made compulsorily redundant or treated so poorly they felt they had to leave their job. One in five mothers report experiencing harassment or negative comments related to pregnancy or flexible working from their employer or colleagues.<sup>134</sup>

COVID-19 catalysed a rapid expansion in home working supported by new technology, with some employees having much greater flexibility, saving travel time and making it easier to combine care and work. However, access to home-working varies by occupation, age, gender, class, ethnicity and location.<sup>135</sup> It also hinges on having good internet access and therefore addressing digital divides.

### What next? Priorities for policy and practice

**All parents should have a choice about how they care for their young children.** Empowering choices requires parental leave entitlements *and* creating family-friendly workplaces, requiring action from both government and employers. It also requires a step change in enabling both mothers *and* fathers to balance work and care. **Addressing the gender inequality in policy, culture and practice has the potential to make the day-to-day life of work and care more manageable and to support the relationship between parents as well as young children's development.** Priorities for reform include:

#### *Extending the scale and reach of work-care policies*

- Raising the level of maternity pay in the first 6 months so that mothers are less likely to return to work early for financial reasons.
- Empowering more fathers to care for young children through encouraging use of existing entitlements *and* increasing entitlements such as paid paternity leave. Given the low take-up of entitlements by fathers, trial a 'use it or lose it' approach where a certain proportion of paid parental leave is allocated to fathers and cannot be taken by the mother, in order to kick-start change.<sup>136</sup>
- Developing a more inclusive policy that enables the growing number of people working in insecure jobs and the self-employed to access family-friendly entitlements.

#### *Addressing the cliff-edge of parental leave and employment*

- Enabling greater flexibility to combine paid parental leave with part-time working when returning to work, without the cliff-edge of losing paid leave once keep-in-touch days are exceeded.
- Improving the offer for parents of babies and infants from 6 months to 2 years of age to enable more choice about the balance between childcare and parental care. Options might include

134 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2016). *Pregnancy and Maternity-Related Discrimination and Disadvantage: Summary of key findings*. HM Government. [www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/file/10521](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/file/10521)

135 Bouskill, K.E., and Harold, S.W. (2021, 14 May). *Inequality in Opportunity to Work from Home an Underlying Condition Likely Aggravated by the Pandemic*. RAND. [www.rand.org/blog/2021/05/inequality-in-opportunity-to-work-from-home-an-underlying.html](http://www.rand.org/blog/2021/05/inequality-in-opportunity-to-work-from-home-an-underlying.html)

136 Janta, B. and Stewart, K. (2019, 4 March). *Use It or Lose It – Why Taking Parental Leave Is So Important for Fathers*. RAND. [www.rand.org/blog/2019/03/use-it-or-lose-it-why-taking-parental-leave-is-so-important.html](http://www.rand.org/blog/2019/03/use-it-or-lose-it-why-taking-parental-leave-is-so-important.html)

changes to the structure and availability of paid parental leave, using child benefit more flexibly, as well as improved early education and care (see 6.4).

*Encouraging employers to pro-actively support and enhance work-care balance for parents of young children*

- Raising awareness of the parental leave and flexible working entitlements for both mothers and fathers at all levels of the organisation.
- Making high quality jobs more flexible, by enabling part-time working and job-sharing at all levels within an organisation or company.
- Promoting greater parity between part-time and full-time jobs when it comes to pay and opportunities to progress.
- Encouraging more employers to offer enhanced parental leave and pay entitlements, including extending entitlements to other carers, such as grandparents.

## Box 6: Early childhood education and care policies

### Free childcare entitlements

- **2–3-year-olds:** 15 hours free childcare for low-income families (38 weeks a year).
- **3–4-year-olds:** 15 hours free childcare for all, increasing to 30 hours for parents working at least 16 hours a week (38 weeks a year) and up to an income cap of £100,000.

### Financial support for childcare

- **Tax-Free Childcare:** up to 20% of costs (maximum of £2,000 a year per child).
- **Universal Credit childcare support:** up to 85% of costs (up to £646 for one child or £1108 for 2 or more children each month).

### Targeted funding for providers

- **Early years pupil premium:** up to £302 per year for 3–4-year-olds from families living on low incomes.
- **Disability access fund:** up to £615 per year for 3–4-year-olds who receive disability living allowance.

### Early years recovery package

- **£180 million of recovery support in the early years sector.** Includes workforce investment comprising: universally accessible online training, mentoring, support for innovation, review of level 3 qualifications, expansion in early years initial teacher training places, and training for practitioners to support home learning. It also includes a total of £17 million for the roll out of the [Nuffield Early Language Intervention](#), which has been shown to boost the early language skills of children aged 4–5.<sup>137</sup>

137 [Pearson, H. \(2022, 25 May\). COVID derailed learning for 1.6 billion students. Here's how schools can help them catch up. Nature. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-01387-7>](#)

- Ensuring shift workers receive advance notice of shifts and employers take into account caring responsibilities.<sup>138</sup>
- Tackling workplace discrimination, including through extending the limit pregnant women and new mothers have on raising a tribunal claim.<sup>139</sup>

#### 6.4 Early childhood education and care: the challenge of increasing quality, reducing costs and tackling disadvantage

Public policy towards early childhood education and care comprises increasing entitlements to free childcare, new forms of financial support and additional targeted funding (see Box 6). These policies have come hand-in-hand with the now near-universal experience of formal education and childcare for young children, with some evidence that these policies have increased maternal employment.<sup>140</sup> The expansion of formal education and care is associated with a marked increase in the proportion of children achieving a good level of development, rising from 52% in 2013 to 72% in 2019, as measured by the Early Years Foundation Stage profile,<sup>141</sup> although this increase slowed in recent years prior to the pandemic. Since the pandemic, analysis by the Education Endowment Foundation suggests this has fallen to 58%.<sup>142</sup>

However, the tensions between the objectives of early childhood policy are clearly evident. Expanding the quantity of places and hours in childcare as a means of boosting parental employment has arguably come at the expense of enhancing quality and addressing disadvantage – witness the additional 15 hours free childcare for working parents – taking it to 30 hours (see Box 6). Two in five young children do not reach the expected level of development at the end of reception class. And the costs of childcare continue to be a significant burden for many families with young children.

Successive governments have struggled to resolve the trade-off between quantity and quality of education and care. Central to raising standards within the sector is the quality of care and educational experience within early years provision – delivered by a well-skilled and supported workforce. And yet the average wage for early years professionals is £7.42 per hour – slightly higher than the average wage in the retail sector (£7.09) and much lower than pay across the female workforce (£11.37) with few progression opportunities, leading to high staff turnover.<sup>143</sup> There is a welcome Early Years Recovery Package<sup>144</sup> (see Box 6) to support the development of the early years workforce, as well as the introduction of an Early Years Leadership qualification. Over the medium term, the

138 Global Institute for Women's Leadership, King's College London et al. (2021).

139 Pregnant then screwed. (n.d.) Campaigns: *Extending the three month tribunal time limit*. <https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/extending-the-three-month-tribunal-time-limit>

140 Stewart and Reader (2021).

141 DfE. (2019). *Early years foundation stage profile results: 2018 to 2019*. DfE. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results-2018-to-2019>

142 Tracey et al. (2022).

143 Social Mobility Commission (2020). *The stability of the early years workforce in England*. Social Mobility Commission. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stability-of-the-early-years-workforce-in-england>

144 DfE. (2021). *Factsheet: Early Years Recovery Package*. <https://foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Early-Years-Education-Recovery-Programme-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

success of some of these initiatives will rest on improving the status, pay, conditions and career opportunities for this workforce (see the Sutton Trust's Early Years Workforce Review).<sup>145</sup>

Many parents continue to struggle to pay for childcare, despite increases in entitlements and financial support. This is especially true for those with a child of 2 years or under or who don't qualify for free childcare. Costs are high for a number of reasons:

- Low take-up of the financial support available to help with childcare costs because the system is highly complex.
- Universal Credit doesn't cover the average full-time childcare costs for 0–2 year-olds.<sup>146</sup>
- Free entitlements don't cover the holidays.
- Many providers are charging top-up fees because the government is not meeting the full costs of providing the free entitlements.
- Staff to child ratios are quite low in comparison with some European countries, but these low ratios are one key aspect of quality.

There is also a question of fairness in relation to childcare costs, with the introduction of the 30 hours of free childcare having doubled the free entitlement for children in middle to high-earning families compared to those in lower income/disadvantaged families.

*"I've applied for so many jobs that I haven't been able to take because of childcare. I am the only one who is here when my husband is away on his night shift. I can only take part-time jobs for 3–4 hours a day. I work*

*as a healthcare assistant, and I have a few other side jobs but it's not enough. I've just got another job with the NHS so I'm hoping that will be better. It's a struggle to be able to provide everything. My children are 10 months and 3. We've had no time since I've had my son. We have not enough money, so we have to make choices with what we have."*

Mother, Nuffield Foundation and Tortoise ThinkIn, 1 March 2022.

There remains a substantial gap in development between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers. While disadvantaged children stand to benefit from formal education and care, especially when provision is accessed from 2 years of age and for a sustained period, a third of disadvantaged 2-year-olds are missing out on their entitlement – and even higher numbers since the pandemic. Narrowing the gap is not just about attendance but about quality education and care. The two well-known US programmes – Perry Pre-School High Scope and Abecadarian – were highly targeted on disadvantaged young children providing high quality pre-school early education and care support with long term impacts on their life-chances well into adulthood.<sup>147</sup> We explore options for addressing this below.

### What next? Priorities for policy and practice

#### An early childhood education and care system to support all young children's

145 Pascal, C., Bertram, T. and Cole-Albäck, A. (2020). *Early Years Workforce Review*. Sutton Trust. [https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Early\\_Years\\_Workforce\\_Review\\_.pdf](https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Early_Years_Workforce_Review_.pdf)

146 Jarvie, M., Shorto, S., and Parlett, H. (2021). *Childcare Survey 2021*. Coram Family and Childcare. <https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/childcare-survey-2021-0>

147 Eisenstadt and Oppenheim (2019).

**learning – in the broadest sense – with a focus on tackling disadvantage.** The pandemic has highlighted just how integral to the lives of families with young children early childhood education and care services have become. **Given the rapid growth of this sector, its complexity and tensions between its objectives, we conclude that a whole system review is needed.** One which learns from what has and has not worked over the last two decades and articulates a clarity of purpose (see Annex for some of the key questions that such a review should address). Ensuring sustainable early years provision involves reviewing overall funding and an ambitious medium-term goal for a graduate-led early years workforce. This includes exploring how to bind increases in funding to improved quality.

The fourth evidence review in this series explores the early childhood education and care system in some depth<sup>148</sup> and identified some shorter-term priorities for reform, which we have developed further following discussion with stakeholders. These include:

#### *Improving support for disadvantaged children and those with additional needs*

- Develop initiatives to increase access and take-up of early years and childcare among underserved groups, particularly for children with SEND and looked after children. For example, using Family Hubs and children's centres to connect families to early years and education services.

- Focusing on 2-year olds – where the free entitlement of 15 hours is already targeted at disadvantaged groups – with a concerted effort to work directly with families to increase take-up, support the home learning environment and trial ways of providing high-quality, high-impact education and care.
- Providing incentives for additional graduate early years leaders to work in disadvantaged areas.
- Increasing the early years pupil premium to the level of the primary school pupil premium, channelling more resources to disadvantaged children.
- Reforming the 30 hours free entitlement to address the inequality in access for disadvantaged children.<sup>149</sup>

#### *Reducing the financial burden of childcare on families*

- Immediate steps to boost the take-up of tax-free childcare and increasing entitlements under Universal Credit.
- Simplification of the current complex systems for supporting parents with the costs of childcare.

#### *Strengthening the early years workforce*

- Improving the system for accessing Continuing Professional Development through a central online hub for accessing quality-assured resources and courses as part of a single one-stop shop for career development in the sector.
- Additional training for urgent needs which have become more apparent during the

148 Archer, N. and Oppenheim, C. (2021). *The role of early childhood education and care in shaping life chances*. Nuffield Foundation. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/early-childhood-education-care-shaping-life-chances>

149 The Sutton Trust explored a number of options including extending the 30 hours to disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds, moving to a universal entitlement, and recouping costs through removing eligibility from higher earning families amongst others. See: The Sutton Trust. (2021). *A Fair Start? Equalising access to early education*. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/A-Fair-Start-1.pdf>

pandemic – in particular, young children’s mental health difficulties, which can go unrecognised, and children with special education needs and disabilities.

## 6.5 Addressing family poverty and deprivation is a core part of transforming the life-chances of young children

Experiencing poverty at the start of life can be highly damaging in itself and pose major risks for children’s learning, social and emotional and physical development throughout their childhood and later life.<sup>150</sup> Despite this, poverty reduction strategies rarely feature as part of an integrated approach to the early years.

Three features of early childhood poverty are neglected in policy and practice:

- 1 The implications of precarious work and in-work poverty on access to childcare and on parent-child relationships.
- 2 The importance of housing in providing an adequate and safe living space and security to create a home and anchor for young children.
- 3 The intersectionality between different dimensions of poverty and inequality for families with a young child – income, work, housing tenure, place, ethnicity, physical and mental health and disability – and how they may compound difficulties, or act as

protective factors. Young children with disabilities exemplify the intersectional effects of poverty – they are more likely to be living in a lone parent family with the mother having sole care, more at risk of poverty and less likely to be able to access early years education and care as well as other services.<sup>151</sup>

The growth of insecurity in relation to income, costs, and housing – now compounded by the cost of living crisis – has intensified difficulties for many families with young children who are already struggling. While the rise of childhood poverty since 2013/14 has been driven by a number of factors, including a changing labour market and rising costs, changes to the benefit system have also contributed to the rise. For example, the 2-child benefit limit which aimed to discourage the growth of large families is having a particularly detrimental effect on poverty rates, with a very limited impact on reducing fertility rates.<sup>152</sup> Children aged 0–3 have higher rates of poverty,<sup>153</sup> reflecting the fact that they tend to be in larger families with higher needs and lower levels of employment.<sup>154</sup>

Changing social security benefits can make an immediate difference to poverty rates. The government’s response to COVID-19 through the £20 weekly uplift in Universal Credit and other benefit changes protected hundreds and thousands of families from poverty.<sup>155</sup> Its withdrawal, in part

150 Oppenheim and Milton (2021).

151 Blackburn, C.M., Spencer, N.J. and Read, J.M. (2010). Prevalence of childhood disability and the characteristics and circumstances of disabled children in the UK: secondary analysis of the Family Resources Survey. *BMC Pediatr* 10 (21). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2431-10-21>

152 Reader, M., Portes, J., and Patrick, R. (2022). *Does cutting benefits reduce fertility in larger families? Evidence from the UK’s two-child limit*. IZA Institute of Labour Economics. <https://docs.iza.org/dp15203.pdf>

153 Oppenheim and Milton (2021).

154 Stewart and Reader (2021).

155 Legatum Institute (2020). *Poverty during the COVID-19 Crisis*. <https://li.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Legatum-Institute-briefing-on-poverty-during-the-Covid-crisis.pdf>



mitigated by reducing the rate at which Universal Credit is reduced as earnings increase, hit the poorest families hardest with three-quarters of claimants losing out.<sup>156</sup> The May 2022 cost of living support package provides substantial protection for 8 million families on means-tested benefits against rising costs and through discounted energy bills for all households.<sup>157</sup> Benefits will be uprated in line with inflation next year. This package of support is well-targeted for most groups, but larger families with three or more children will still face difficulties because of their higher energy costs.<sup>158</sup> The measures are also temporary and the flat-rate payment means there is no acknowledgment of how household needs differ.<sup>159</sup>

Children's social care services have been under severe pressure, with rising levels of both child poverty and vulnerability.<sup>160</sup> The Independent Review of Children's Social Care has recommended introducing "Family Help" to replace "targeted early help" and "child in need" work, providing families with much higher levels of meaningful support. This new service would be delivered by multidisciplinary teams, based in community settings such as schools and family hubs, and made up of professionals such as family support workers, domestic abuse workers

and mental health practitioners, alongside social workers. This new "Family Help" offer would help those working in children's services to respond to deprivation through benefit and debt advice, as well as devolving budgets to social workers to support families, and signposting to other support in community.<sup>161</sup>

### What next? Priorities for policy and practice

**A societal commitment to tackling the causes and effects of early childhood poverty.** There is a pressing need for greater recognition of the harm poverty can cause young children, building consensus across political divides and at a societal level on the measures and investment required to tackle early childhood poverty.<sup>162</sup> We need a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of how poverty intersects with other needs and the routes into and out of poverty, including local factors. Without understanding this intersectionality, policy and practice responses to early childhood poverty are likely to falter.

Tackling poverty in early childhood involves addressing its direct and indirect causes and impacts: quality jobs for parents that enable work-care balance and progression (see 6.3), improving social security benefits to enable work and meet

156 Brewer, M., Handscomb, K., and Try, L. (2021). *Taper cut: analysis of the Autumn Budget changes to Universal Credit*. Resolution Foundation. <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2021/11/Taper-cut.pdf>

157 HM Treasury. (2022). *Millions of most vulnerable households will receive £1,200 of help with cost of living*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/millions-of-most-vulnerable-households-will-receive-1200-of-help-with-cost-of-living>

158 Bell, T., Brewer, M., Handscomb, K., Marshall, J., and Try, L. (2022). *Back on target: Analysis of the Government's additional cost of living support*. Resolution Foundation. <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2022/05/Back-on-target.pdf>

159 Patrick, R., Stewart, K., Warnock, R. (2022, 1 June). *The cost of living budget: why it's time to focus more squarely on need*. LSE. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/cost-of-living-budget>

160 Bywaters et al. (2022).

161 MacAlister, J. (2022). *The independent review of children's social care: Final report*. The independent review of children's social care. <https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report>

162 Oppenheim and Milton (2021).

immediate and acute needs, support for parenting and mental health, and a tailored approach that understands and responds to the complex and inter-connected pathways into and out of poverty. Identifying the most effective mix of approaches will help inform future policy making.<sup>163</sup>

#### *Introducing a comprehensive measure of relative income poverty*

- An agreed, comprehensive measure of relative income poverty within government is needed to ensure accountability. This could be based on the Social Metrics Commission's approach, including a focus on early childhood and enabling "an early intervention approach that shields families from the destructive impact of poverty."<sup>164</sup>

#### *Ensuring social security boosts employment and addresses immediate needs*

- Improving access to work through greater support for childcare costs in Universal Credit and not requiring payment for those costs upfront, which acts as a barrier to work.
- Increasing social security benefits can make an immediate difference to poverty rates, responding to immediate need and acting as a preventative measure, providing families with a buffer against adversity. Two priorities in relation to early childhood stand out:

removing the two-child limit and targeted benefit improvements for babies and infants aged 0–3.

- Enabling wider access to employment, social security and parental leave rights for the self-employed and those in insecure work (see 6.3).
- Trialling new forms of cash support for parents on low incomes with a new-born child, drawing on initial US evidence of the impact of cash benefits on infant brain development.<sup>165</sup>

#### *Tackling poverty as part of joined-up services in early childhood*

- Deep and persistent poverty in early childhood requires a multi-agency approach. The joined-up approaches (discussed in 6.2) need to encompass poverty reduction. Our discussions highlighted two overlooked aspects of addressing poverty in early childhood:
  - The housing needs of families with a young child, in particular in the private rented sector to ensure safety, quality and security for this growing group.
  - To engage with families' material deprivation and poverty as a key element in child protection, alongside addressing issues of parental mental health, domestic violence and addiction; this has been recognised in the Family Help offer proposed in the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

163 Cattan et al. (2022).

164 Stroud, P. (2021). The importance of Government understanding child poverty. In *Child Poverty: the crisis we can't keep ignoring* (pp.9–10). Children's Commissioner. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/cco-child-poverty.pdf>

165 Renfree-Troller, S.V., Costanzo, M.A., Duncan, G.J., Magnuson, K., Gennetian, L.A., Yoshikawa, H., Halpern-Meekin, S., Fox, N.A., and Noble, K.G. (2022). The impact of a poverty reduction intervention on infant brain activity. *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 119(5). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.211564911>

### **In conclusion**

Evaluating policy responses to the changing needs of young children and their families, across our four thematic areas, reveals unmet need and priorities for reform. Drawing on the wide and deep body of evidence reviewed across our series, the measures we identify have the potential to make a difference to young children's lives. These measures are not about four

individual plans; but are inter-locking.

They underpin a more coherent, joined-up and effective approach to early childhood policy and practice that recognises the needs of young children and their families in the round. One which could help to reduce the inequalities between children, by supporting them early on in life, and establishing deep roots from which they can grow and flourish.

# 7 What don't we know or understand?

There is a large, longstanding body of research on early childhood that spans different disciplines including developmental psychology, paediatrics and public health, neuroscience, genetics, epidemiology, economics, sociology and social policy. This series has set out to help researchers, policymakers and practitioners navigate the extensive body of social science research funded by the Nuffield Foundation on early childhood across a number of these disciplines, as well as other key studies.

Over the course of our six evidence reviews and wider engagement, we have identified a series of gaps in the research that prevent comprehensive analysis across key domains of young children's lives. In some areas, there has been some research focussed on children of all ages, but on not the under-fives.<sup>166</sup> While in others, we have a rough idea of national trends, but further investigation is needed to understand more about the experiences of particular communities and groups. Box 7 offers a broad picture of some of the identified priorities for research.<sup>167</sup>

Many of the gaps in evidence reflect the fact that some national, official and longitudinal surveys have not been designed to collect data about certain groups. In the UK, for example, we still do not accurately collect data on separating families or re-partnering – limiting analysis of trends. More generally, we also tend to collect and analyse much less information about fathers and their role in the first five years of a child's life than mothers. This suggests that our principal sources of data no longer reflect the realities of modern family life in the UK.<sup>168</sup>

Other gaps will be difficult – if not impossible – to fill without greater linkage between the data collected on parents and that collected on young children (see Chapter 6). Without linking this data we are hindered in what we can learn about effective services and the impact of interventions on *both* parent and child outcomes.

Currently, children are provided with a Unique Pupil Number when they join a state funded school – whether that is when they join Reception at age 4 or 5 or in early education and care at age 2, or if

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166 For more detailed discussion and reflections on research gaps and priorities see our six evidence reviews published as part of the *Changing face of early childhood* series. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/series/changing-face-of-early-childhood-in-britain>

167 These gaps do not necessarily fall within or reflect the Nuffield Foundation's current funding priorities.

168 The Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study (ELC-FS), a new project led by the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies, aims to test the feasibility of a new UK-wide birth cohort study and may go some way in filling some of these evidence gaps. The study design focuses on maximising participation of traditionally 'less often heard' populations. It will also engage fathers into the study, including those living in their own households.

they join subsequently. It is also generated for children who have an Education and Health Care Plan. Allocating this number at birth and linking this with other sources of information – such as demographic, health and social security data – would enable us to answer pressing questions about early childhood experiences and later educational outcomes.

It is worth noting – as we have done in the introduction to this report – that this series has not explored in detail the specialist services available for young children – in particular, the specialist services for young children with SEND. Research has, however, begun to provide more evidence on how early years practitioners can better understand the support each child with SEND requires

to access the curriculum and make progress towards key milestones in the early years.<sup>169,170</sup> Yet the wide range of experiences of children with SEND, as well as the diversity of early childhood education and care services, make it difficult to draw broad conclusions on strategies or best practice for inclusive early childhood education.

Some of these research gaps cannot be answered solely through the collection and analysis of administrative data. Understanding and drawing on the experiences and perspectives of parents, carers and children – for example, through co-design, qualitative research, or evaluation evidence – is vital if we are to design policy and services to best meet the needs of young children and their families.<sup>171</sup>

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169 Griggs and Bussard (2017).

170 Standards and Testing Agency. (2016). *The Rochford Review: final report*. Standards and Testing Agency. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rochford-review-final-report>

171 The Nuffield Foundation is funding a major, three-year programme led by Professor Leon Feinstein – provisionally entitled *Data and Voice to Improve Children's Lives* – that is exploring how to combine data and children and parents' perspectives and experiences to make a difference to children's outcomes locally and nationally. See: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/data-and-voice-to-improve-childrens-lives>

## Box 7: Key research gaps

### 1 How we can best support parents

- The changing nature of 'parenting', including how play and learning time is spent with young children among different social classes, ethnic groups, family forms and the intersectionality therein.
- The implications of conflict between work and care for parental mental health.
- The role of fathers, non-resident parents, grandparents, siblings, and the wider family on young children's development.
- The impact of parents' and young children's access to digital technology and screen use on young children's learning and play experiences, parent-child interaction and outcomes.
- How support for parents can be better designed so that parents know where to turn when they want help, and they are offered accessible and effective help at the times in their families' lives when they need it the most.

### 2 Early childhood education and care

- The barriers to access and take-up by children's ethnicity, children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those supported by the child welfare system.
- The role of formal childcare in supporting parenting and the home learning environment.

- Parental perspectives on, and understanding of, quality in formal childcare and school readiness.

### 3 Poverty, deprivation, and vulnerability

- Understanding dimensions of poverty and deprivation for the under-fives, in particular digital poverty, and food insecurity.<sup>172</sup>
- The role of housing conditions and tenure security on young children's development.
- Specific issues and stresses parents of young children may face in relation to in-work poverty, such as managing low pay, low quality work, intermittent insecure work, and time pressures within the family.

### 4 Health

- Conceptualising the emotional needs and mental health issues of young children in a way that goes beyond diagnosable mental health disorders to understand (and respond to) those with 'milder' needs.
- The associations between young children's health and area, ethnicity, and level of deprivation.
- Further understanding of complex health and social needs among young children.

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172 The Food Foundation is conducting an in-depth study on early years food and nutrition to investigate how the food system and food policy is contributing to the high levels of overweight and obesity in early childhood. See: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/early-years>

# 8 Reflections and conclusions

While young children need many things to flourish, the essential elements are not disputed: love, nurture and protection. This is a shared endeavour – not only for parents but for wider society. One which takes account of the major changes in family lives over the last two decades, as well as the pressures and uncertainties of the present.

Parents of young children speak about facing increasing challenges as they try to balance finances, jobs, time, the costs of childcare and housing, and being a good parent. These challenges reflect increases in insecurity among families with young children – greater self-employment and zero-hours contracts; greater fluidity in family living arrangements and forms; less secure forms of housing, and; increasing early childhood poverty and inequalities. In the wake of the pandemic and sharply rising living costs, this insecurity risks becoming pervasive. Meanwhile, young children fall behind across the full range of their developmental milestones and inequalities increase.

While policy focus on early childhood has ebbed and flowed over the last 20 years, we have seen major positive long-lasting developments. The growth of early years and childcare services now provides an anchor in the lives of many families with young children. The pandemic has catalysed innovative practice, including the use of technology to work with families in new ways. Central government's recent

renewed focus on early childhood is promising. Yet there remains substantial unmet need. Policy and practice will need to be more ambitious to make a sustained difference to young children's lives and opportunities.

Crafting early childhood policy inevitably means navigating difficult dilemmas; it touches on people's values and their home lives. It raises questions about how we care for young children, the balance between work and home, the roles of mothers and fathers, the needs of young children and their parents, among many others. Judgements abound. While these dilemmas do not have easy answers, public policy can support young children's development and address inequality, give parents greater choice, reduce pressures, and support the capabilities of parents.

There is a strong case for an ambitious early childhood strategy. A national, overarching strategy underpinned by a greater clarity of objectives, sustained investment, joined-up services and the principle of early intervention. An approach that puts the young child at the centre while understanding the role of other factors, from the immediate family to the local community and wider society. One that responds to the shockingly high levels of maternity-related discrimination in the workplace and low rates of pay for the early years workforce, giving long-overdue recognition to those who care for young children, whether they are mothers, fathers, carers or early years educators.

Our vision for the early years is one in which:

- The needs of young children and their families are understood and responded to in the round.
- All parents have a choice about how they care for their young children.
- Early education and care supports all children's learning – in the broadest sense – with a focus on tackling disadvantage.

- As a society, we commit to tackling the causes and effects of early childhood poverty.

This is a long-term endeavour, with no silver bullet that will meet the needs of all. But we have strong foundations to build from and a growing evidence base of what works in supporting young children and their families. Working together to get the fundamentals right in early childhood is part of creating a more resilient, productive and just society for us all.



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# Annex: A whole-system review of early years and childcare

## A whole-system review of early years education and childcare should consider the following:

- Given the complexity of a mixed market of early childhood education and care provision – is there a case for more structured standardisation akin to schools, or are there advantages in a plurality of provision?
- Should public policy and investment be prioritising the early childhood education of disadvantaged children over the childcare needs of the wider population, and if so, what are the implications for the funding and structure of early education and care provision?
- What type of funding model would increase quality as well as affordability for parents and sustainability of provision?
- What action can be taken to improve take-up of funded places by children who are most likely to benefit from early childhood education and care provision?
- How might a long-term strategy, including a review of the funding model, improve the low pay and low status of the early childhood education and care workforce?
- Can quality in early childhood education and care be effectively but efficiently measured, and if so, who should be doing it?
- How can early childhood education and care settings further engage and support parents and carers to enhance the learning and development of young children at home?
- How should public policy encourage and support affordable early years and childcare for 0–2 which reflects this particular stage of babies and infants' development?
- How can multiple services for babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers be better integrated and coordinated, starting from the places and services that children already access?
- In addition to these questions, a review of early childhood services needs to address other areas, such as the development of curriculum and listening to the voices of children and parents about their needs.



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## About the Nuffield Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance educational opportunity and social well-being.

We fund research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare and Justice. We also provide opportunities for young people to develop skills and confidence in science and research.

We are the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory and the Ada Lovelace Institute.

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