

Bringing up the next generation: from research to policy

Overview and summary

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 class¹ – 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:**² 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.

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 poverty³ 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.

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>

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.⁴ 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's⁵ 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.**

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.**

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

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.

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.

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.⁶ 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.

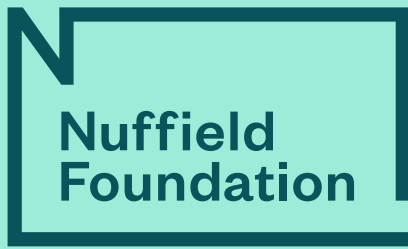
6 [Oppenheim and Milton \(2021\)](#).

This report is authored by Carey Oppenheim, with Richard Batcheler and Jordan Rehill. The full report is available to download from: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/bringing-up-the-next-generation

Footnote references underlined in green are those funded by the Nuffield Foundation. A complete list of references can be found in the full report.

We value input and feedback on the *Changing face of early childhood* series, which you provide at: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/contact/feedback-changing-face-of-early-childhood-series

Follow us on Twitter **@NuffieldFound**



100 St John Street,
London, EC1M 4EH

Registered charity: 206601

T: + 44 (0) 20 7631 0566

E: info@nuffieldfoundation.org

Follow us on Twitter [@NuffieldFound](https://twitter.com/NuffieldFound)

nuffieldfoundation.org

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.

© Nuffield Foundation 2022