

Time for parents Summary

This summary presents the key learning from a review of the evidence relating to the changing nature of parenting children under five. The review examines the relationship between parenting and children's outcomes and the effectiveness

of interventions designed to support parents and children's development. These themes are considered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented increased pressures

for many parents as regular forms of support became unavailable.

The review's authors are Richard Batcheler, Eleanor Ireland, Carey Oppenheim and Jordan Rehill. It is the sixth review from our *Changing face of early childhood* series, which explores how young children's lives have been changing over the last two decades. The full review is available to download from: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/time-for-parents.

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

Understanding parents and the home

To understand parenting, we must consider both **the context in which parents raise young children** and **the care parents provide**. This review explores five aspects of parents and the home and considers why each is important, how they shape parents' care and young children's development and how they have changed over the last two decades.¹

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



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

Parental care

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

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

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

Parental mental health and emotional well-being

Why it matters: Parents' mental health and emotional well-being shape the care they provide. In analysing the socioeconomic and demographic factors that may affect levels of conflict and

closeness in the parent-child relationship, the greatest differences are observed by maternal psychological distress ([Cattan et al. forthcoming](#)).

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

The relationship between parents

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

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

While family forms do not determine children's outcomes, there are important associations between different family forms and the resources available to families. Married couples typically

have more resources than cohabiting couples and lone parents the least, which in turn influences children's cognitive development and emotional well-being (Kiernan et al. forthcoming).

Housing and the home

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

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

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

Family income and poverty

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

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

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

What do we know about supporting parents?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What we do not yet know

Research is needed in the following areas:

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

Points for discussion

Pressures on parents and parenting

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

Support for parents

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