



Childcare and early years survey of parents 2010

Patten Smith, Nicholas Gilby, Sarah Dobie, Sylvie Hobden, Louise Sullivan and Matthew Williams with Mandy Littlewood, John D'Souza, and Giulio Flore

Ipsos MORI/ Mandy Littlewood Social Research and Consulting Ltd.

Introduction

The Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents Series provides salient, up-to-date information on parents' use of childcare and early years provision, and their views and experiences. The survey aims to provide information to help monitor the progress of policies in the area of childcare and early years provision. The 2010 survey findings reported here continue a time series that began in 2004, although changes to the survey over recent years mean that most comparisons in this report examine changes between 2009 and 2010.

The Coalition Government has introduced a number of changes in early years policy since coming to office in May 2010. It plans to extend free early education to 40 per cent of two-year-olds (with a focus on the most disadvantaged) by 2014, increase the flexibility of free early education for three- and four-year-olds, and promote quality and diversity across the childcare and early education sector. It has also consulted on a new purpose for the national network of Sure Start Children's Centres. Other relevant policy changes include a reduction in the proportion of childcare costs that can be claimed via means-tested Working Tax Credit from April 2011, the announcement of the Nutbrown Review to consider how best to strengthen qualifications and training for staff in early years settings, and a revised framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage to apply from September 2012.

Key findings

- In 2010 nearly four-fifths (78%) of all families in England with children aged under 15 had used some form of childcare; this equated to 4,154,000 families or 5,725,000 children. Sixty-three per cent had used formal childcare and/or early years provision and 38 per cent had used informal childcare.
- An increase in the use of formal childcare was recorded between 2009 and 2010 (55% to 63%), however, this was largely attributed to alterations to the 2010 questionnaire that were made to capture use of breakfast and after-school clubs/activities separately; in 2009 they were conflated. No change in the level of formal childcare use is shown between 2009 and 2010 when excluding the use of breakfast and after-school clubs/activities from analyses.
- There was a small but significant decrease in use of informal childcare (41% to 38%). No significant change in level of use occurred for any other informal or formal provider type.
- Significant differences in levels of formal childcare use were found when looking at certain characteristics (and remained significant when analysed alongside a range of other factors in regression analysis):

- Age: receipt of formal childcare was most common among three- and four-year-olds (84%) and receipt of informal care was most common among those aged two years or under (33%)
 - Family circumstances: children in couple families, working families and higher income families were all more likely to receive formal childcare than lone parents, workless families or low-income families.
- Take-up of formal childcare also differed significantly by other characteristics (ethnicity, region, deprivation, and rurality) but these were not significant when analysed alongside other factors in regression analysis.
 - Children with special educational needs and disabilities were as likely to receive formal and informal childcare as those without.
 - Reported take-up of free early education for three- and four-year-olds (85%) did not significantly change between 2009 and 2010. Statistics from DfE censuses of providers show that receipt of 'some free early education' as higher (95% for both 2009 and 2010).
 - The vast majority (93%) of parents using the entitlement were fairly or very satisfied with the number of free hours they received.
 - Median amounts paid for formal childcare varied by provider type (£20 per week overall). Parents paid the most in London (£31 per week) and the least in the North East and South West (both £15 per week). Overall parents living in the most deprived areas paid significantly less.
 - A considerable minority (25%) said it was difficult or very difficult to pay for childcare (mainly lone mothers and workless families) but just over half thought it was easy or very easy to pay (51%).
 - Information about formal childcare was mostly accessed via friends and relatives (46%) followed by school (36%). Relatively few parents accessed government, local government or other local sources of information (for example 7% accessed information from Families Information Services).
 - Parents' perceptions of childcare availability were mixed with 44 per cent saying that there were the right amount of places and 32 per cent saying there were not enough (no change from 2009).
 - Perceptions of childcare quality were positive (61% saying 'fairly good' or 'very good') (no change from 2009).
 - Less than half (40%) of parents with disabled children thought that local childcare providers could cater for their child's illness or disability.
 - Three-quarters (75%) of parents with children aged two to five years old had heard of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and over half of parents knew something about it (56%); one-quarter of parents were not aware of it.
 - Eighty-six per cent of parents with children aged two to five years looked at books or read stories with their children 'every day or most days'.
 - The proportion of families using school holiday childcare reduced between 2009 and 2010 (51% to 45%), mainly because of a reduction in use of informal childcare (37% to 30%). Overall, around one in five (21%) found it difficult or very difficult to arrange childcare during school holidays.
 - Just over half of non-working mothers said that they would prefer to work if they could arrange reliable, convenient, affordable, and good quality childcare.

Methodology

The survey was carried out face-to-face in parents' homes between September 2010 and April 2011. Just over 6,700 parents in England with children aged under 15 took part. The sample of parents was ultimately derived using Child Benefit Records. The survey was designed to be comparable with previous surveys in the series. The survey over-sampled two- to four-year-olds to ensure adequate numbers for the analysis. The response rate to the survey was 57 per cent.

As in previous surveys in the series, a very inclusive definition of childcare and early years provision was used. Parents were asked to include any time that children were not with a resident parent, resident parent's current partner, or at school. All reported findings have been tested for significance using complex samples formulae.

Childcare use and early years provision

Children who received childcare spent an average (median) of 8.3 hours there per week, significantly lower than in 2009 (10.8 hours). Pre-school children spent much longer in childcare than school-age children, reflecting the fact that school-age children spent most of their day at school whereas early years education is counted here as formal childcare provision. Children spent much longer at some providers than others. For example children in reception class spent on average 31.3 hours there (the longest average time for any provider), while children attending after-school clubs did so for an average of 2.2 hours per week (the shortest average time for any provider). Turning to informal provision, children looked after by their non-resident parent spent 15.0 hours with them per week, those looked after by their grandparent(s) spent 5.7 hours with them, while children spent on average 3.0 hours being looked after by an older sibling, or by a friend or neighbour.

From September 2010 parents were allowed to access their 15 free hours of early education over three days, rather than five days. The median amount of free hours received was 15 hours for three- and four-year-olds, suggesting parents taking up the free entitlement did use the additional 2.5 free hours per week on offer (12.5 hours was the maximum before September 2010). Most commonly parents used their free hours over five days per week (43%), but over a quarter did so over three days (27%).

Among non-users of the free entitlement, 38 per cent were not aware of the scheme, around the same proportion as 2009. Take-up was lower in London and among South Asian parents. A mixture of constraints (cost, no extra sessions) and choice (unnecessary, child too young) were given as reasons for not taking up all the free hours on offer.

Childcare and early years provision for pre-school children

Three packages of childcare were most commonly used by parents of pre-school children: formal centre-based care only (30%) (e.g. nursery classes, day nurseries), a combination of formal centre-based and informal care (18%); or informal care only (13%).

Use of centre-based provision was much more common among three- to four-year-olds than among nought- to two-year-olds, reflecting the high take-up of their entitlement to free early education.

Pre-school children receiving a combination of formal centre-based care and informal care received the most hours of childcare per week and per day, and attended on a greater number of days per week. Their parents tended to be heavy users of childcare because they needed to cover their working hours.

Childcare for school-age children

Three packages of childcare were most commonly used by parents of school-age children: formal out-of-school care only (24%), informal care only (14%) and a combination of out-of-school and informal care (13%).

Five- to seven-year-olds used a wider range of childcare packages than older school-age children (attributable at least in part to their greater use of reception classes and childminders).

Those in informal care only and those in a combination of out-of-school and informal care received most childcare (6.0 and 7.0 hours per week respectively). The latter group tended to attend some childcare on a greater number of days of the week, and were the most likely to be attending a provider for economic reasons, indicating that, even once children start full-time school, a package of care could still be required to cover parents' working hours.

The cost of childcare

Overall, 57 per cent of families who used childcare reported that they had paid for some or all of that care. More families paid formal providers (63%) than informal providers (6%). There were wide variations in costs between families in different circumstances and using different providers. These are most likely accounted for by the ages of the children and different patterns of childcare use.

There were some significant increases among some provider types in the mean weekly amounts families paid them between 2008 and 2010. Over this period there were significant increases in the mean weekly payment for nursery schools (£43 to £70), playgroups (£14 to £28), childminders (£59 to £79), and babysitters (£21 to £39).

Families receiving Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit received a median of £117 per week; those receiving Child Tax Credit received a median of £41 per week. The change in the proportion of childcare costs that parents can claim (from 80% to 70%) through the means-tested childcare element of Working Tax Credit did not occur until after fieldwork ended and its impact cannot be evaluated using this survey.

The survey shows that family annual income was independently associated with the number of formal hours of childcare families used. Working couples and working lone parents had the highest childcare costs. Nineteen per cent of working couples were in receipt of both Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit, compared to 73 per cent of working lone parents.

Parents' decisions about childcare

The utilisation of particular information sources was significantly influenced by the type of childcare provider parents used. Groups with lower rates of formal childcare usage were less likely to access information about childcare. Low income families were more likely to access information from Sure Start/Children's Centres and the Jobcentre Plus than higher income families.

For the 22 per cent of parents who did not use childcare, the main reason for this was because they preferred to look after their children themselves (75%). Data suggests not using childcare was predominantly down to choice rather than a particular constraint. Most parents who did not normally use childcare could find alternatives elsewhere when they needed to, at least on an infrequent basis.

Only a minority (22%) reported they had problems finding childcare that was flexible enough to fit their needs. Analysis showed problems finding flexible childcare were most strongly associated with families with both pre-school and school-age children, and families with a child with a SEN.

Parents' views of childcare

There has been no significant change in opinion about the availability, quality and affordability of childcare since 2009. Analysis showed that whether a child had SEN was most strongly associated with parents feeling that there was not the right amount of childcare available in their local area, or that it was not good quality.

Out of the six Early Years Foundation Stage areas the following were the skills parents most often believed were encouraged a great deal at their main formal provider: Personal, social and emotional development (57%) and communication, language and literacy (54%).

The vast majority of parents agreed that their provider helped develop academic skills, for example enjoying books and recognising letters, words, numbers or shapes. Whilst all formal group providers ranked highly, as in 2009, reception classes were considered to be the most likely to develop academic skills. Over three-quarters of parents reported that their main formal provider encouraged social skills such as playing with other children, good behaviour and listening to others and adults. Most parents received feedback about how their child was getting on at least weekly.

The main sources of information about learning and play activities used by parents were friends and relatives (61%) and other parents (44%). Around one in five (21%) used Sure Start/Children's Centres.

Holiday childcare

Holiday clubs and schemes were the most common type of formal childcare in the holidays (8%). Grandparents played an equally important role in providing childcare during school holidays (16% of parents used them) as they did during term-time (15%). This pattern is consistent with the 2009 results.

Use of formal childcare during school holidays varied by several factors. Consistent with 2009, those less likely to receive formal holiday care included: older school-age children, children from Asian and Black African backgrounds, children from non-working families, children in lower income families and children living in deprived areas.

Most parents were paying formal providers for holiday childcare, while few were paying for informal holiday care.

Lack of flexibility and the affordability of available holiday provision caused more difficulties for lone parents than couples. A substantial minority of parents also indicated that the availability and affordability of holiday childcare impacted on their capacity to work more hours. Data suggest that there was a considerable level of unmet demand for holiday provision amongst those families who used formal childcare during term-time but not in the holidays.

Mothers, childcare and work

The level of maternal employment has been broadly stable over the last few years. The most common atypical working pattern among mothers was working after 6pm, with 16 per cent of working mothers reporting that they usually worked evenings, followed by usually working on Saturdays (13%). For a substantial minority of these mothers, working atypical patterns caused difficulties with their childcare arrangements. Just under one third of lone mothers (31%) worked atypical hours usually.

Finding a job that enabled mothers to combine work with childcare remained the most common reason for entering work and a job opportunity or promotion was the factor most likely to have prompted a move from part-time to full-time work.

A range of factors enabled mothers to be in work, with having reliable childcare and the availability of informal care the most commonly reported factors among couples and lone parent families alike. Assistance with childcare costs through tax credits was important for a significant minority of lone mothers (17%).

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>
Further information about this research can be obtained from
Michael Dale Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3BT
Michael.DALE@education.gsi.gov.uk

This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.