



Department  
for Education

# **Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE)**

## **Strand 3: Parenting Services in Children's Centres**

### **Research Brief**

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## Introduction

This is the sixth report from the Evaluation of Children’s Centres in England (ECCE) project, which is a six-year study commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) and undertaken by NatCen Social Research, the University of Oxford and Frontier Economics. ECCE aims to provide an in-depth understanding of children’s centre services, including their effectiveness for children and families and an assessment of their economic cost in relation to different types of services.

The DfE describes the core purpose of children’s centres as:

*“The core purpose of children’s centres is to improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers in:*

- *child development and school readiness;*
- *parenting aspirations and parenting skills; and*
- *child and family health and life chances.”*

Sure Start Children’s Centres Statutory Guidance (2013:7)

The ECCE evaluation is producing a very detailed picture of the first two phases of children’s centres in England – those which are aimed at the most disadvantaged areas. It aims to describe how effective centres are in terms of using different managerial approaches, and the delivery of services and activities to families. ECCE also considers the cost of delivering different types of services, and it will establish estimates of the impact of children’s centres upon a range of child, parent, and family outcomes.

It was deemed important to capture not only the views of the members of staff, but also of the parents who were attending the centres to obtain a broader picture of centre provision.

Specifically, this study of parenting services aimed to collect information on:

- the provision for parenting and services for parents across the sample;
- staff perceptions on family needs;
- the range of parenting programmes delivered by a named children’s centre and any associated centres within their cluster;
- how children’s centres manage their services;
- staff perceptions of the benefits of services for parents and children; and
- parental views of children’s centre services.

## Methodology

The fieldwork report presents one element of a multi-component longitudinal evaluation, which utilises a nested design, with a sample of children’s centres participating in five different strands of work. Fieldwork took place in 117 children’s centres across England during 2013 and aimed to capture the diversity and range of provision available to parents. The study used a mixed methods design including staff self-report questionnaires and face-to-face interviews with both staff and parents.

The first wave of fieldwork in 2012 had shown that a wide variety of services were being delivered as part of children’s centres provision, many of which could be categorised into ‘four areas of parental need’ (*Personal Needs of the Parent; Parent and Child; Parent and Family; and Parent and Community*). This model has been drawn upon throughout the current report (Figure i). These broad categorisations represent the needs of parents in relation to those who are close to them (i.e. children and family/partners) and to them as individuals (in terms of their own personal needs and their engagement with the community).

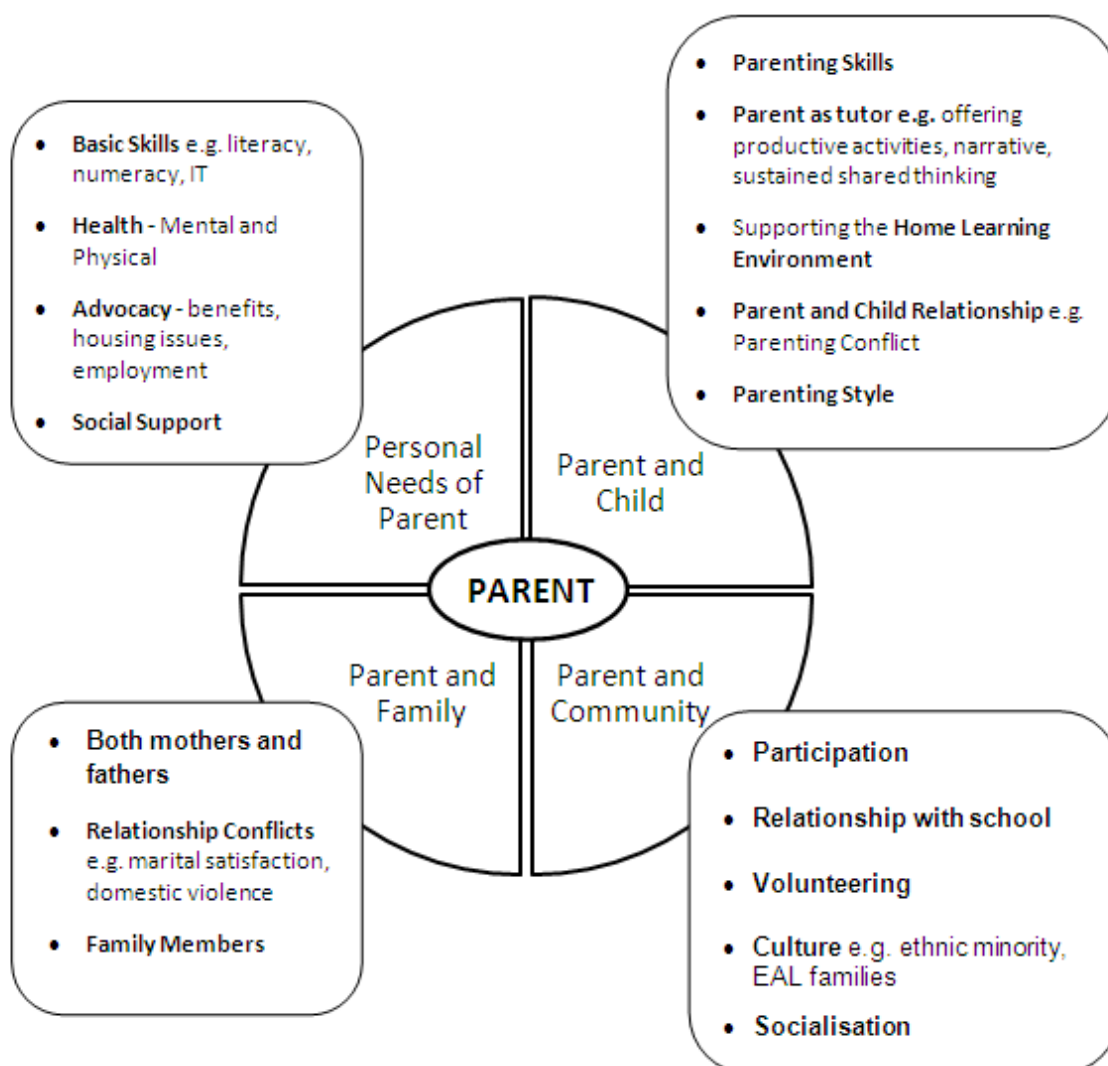


Figure i. Possible needs of parents that may be targeted by children’s centres

## Delivery of Parenting Services

### What Parenting Services Do Children's Centres Offer?

**Certain induction procedures were commonly reported across the children's centres.** The most frequently reported procedures included: the distribution of timetabled activities, the requirement of registration documents, and the recording of a family's cultural background.

**Staff reported variations in the type of support offered for particular services.** Such services were more likely to be run via a centre session (for example crèche) or were offered via personalised support (for example, parental isolation and mental health).

**Few centres offered services off-site.** Up to 21% of centres offered services off-site which could include any type of support.

**Staff reported the offer of service provision for parents' *personal needs* to be variable.** Staff rated their centre's offer of service provision for helping parents to *access childcare* and improving *parental health and lifestyles* as the highest, and *accessing housing* as the lowest. **Staff rated their offer of service provision for *family needs* as consistently higher than that for *parents' personal needs*.**

**Half of the centres encouraged parents to get involved in the running of their centres.** Parents were encouraged to participate "a great deal" across 51% of centres, using strategies such as crèche provision and advertising consultation sessions. Popular roles included volunteering as a play worker or at community events, attending parent forums or advisory board/governing bodies, and helping staff to choose which sessions are on offer.

### Managing the Delivery of Services

**Resources (both time and money) were reported to be mostly spent on targeting parents and on work with younger age children.**

**The most popular strategy for encouraging and sustaining parents' attendance was developing relationships with parents.** This strategy was reported by 99% of centres.

**A strong focus of services was to improve parenting behaviours.** Staff responses included working with parents to: demonstrate modelling behaviours (100%), how to praise their children (97%), how to increase interactions between adults and children (97%) and develop an increased parental interest in their children's lives (97%).

## Evidence-Based Practice

### Changes in Programmes, Strategies or Interventions that were offered between 2012 and 2013

**There was a consistency in the number of programmes that centres offered in 2012 and 2013.** Each centre was implementing an average of five programmes in both years, of which only one was likely to have featured on the early years list of Evidence-Based Programmes by Allen (2011).

**There was a consistency in the most commonly used programmes offered in 2012 and 2013.** The three most commonly used well-evidenced programmes were: *'Family Nurse Partnerships'*, *'Incredible Years'*, and *'Triple P'*. The five most commonly used programmes which were not included on Allen's (2011) list of Evidence-Based Programmes were: *'Every Child A Talker' (ECAT)*, *'Freedom Programme'*, *'Infant/Baby Massage'*, *'Family Links Nurturing Programme'*, and the *'Solihull Approach'*.

**Only two programmes showed a change in use across the two years; the *Solihull Approach* (which increased) and *Family Links Nurturing Programme* (which decreased).** The implementation of *'Family Links'* was reduced (by 5 centres, a reduction of 4.5%), although many were still "in a position to implement". The implementation of the *'Solihull Approach'* was increased (by 13 centres, an increase of 11.6%). **Well-evidenced programmes showed little change in implementation across 2012 and 2013.**

## Aims for Families and Parenting Services

### The Characteristics of Families Attending Children's Centres and their Needs

**Staff were most likely to emphasise factors and needs of the whole family when describing centre users, followed by parent factors/needs.** Staff most frequently referred to types of family structure (e.g. lone and young parent families) and the variety of family needs. References were made to both the vulnerability (e.g. involvement of Social Care) and the variety of socio-demographic characteristics of the participating families.

**Definitions of the 'most disadvantaged' families were more likely to emphasise parent factors or needs, followed by the needs of the family.** Staff reported factors such as the parents' personal situation, poverty, inadequate housing and lack of socialisation; or factors relating to their personal life skills.

**Staff acknowledged three potential barriers which could pose a challenge to working with the families: 1) parental relationships with staff, 2) staffing, including time allotted to families, and 3) centre administration, resources, and finance.**

## The Aims for Parenting Services in Children's Centres

Centre staff most commonly described aims for meeting the needs of the *Parent-Child*, followed by the parents' *Personal Needs*. Frequently reported aims included improving parenting skills (73% of centres) and furthering parent knowledge about good parenting and child development (40%), as well as improved child outcomes (58%) and experiences (45%).

## The Benefits of 'Play and Learning' Activities for Families

Staff reported a number of benefits consistent with the EYFS areas of children's development as a result of attending 'Play and Learning' activities, including 'Personal, Social and Emotional Development', 'Physical Development', and 'Understanding of the World' (91%, 65% and 59% of centres respectively). School readiness was also listed as an important benefit across 52% of centres, as well as providing an opportunity for children to interact with others (32%).

Staff reported a number of benefits for adults which matched the commonly listed aims for parenting services. The greatest benefits were reported for improving *Parent-Child* needs, followed by the parents' *Personal Needs* (95% and 87% respectively). Frequently reported benefits included *improved parenting skills*, *greater knowledge of child development*, and *increased confidence in parenting*.

Other benefits highlighted by staff included the supportive environment of the centre and furthering parents' knowledge through provision of advice and information (65% and 31% respectively). It was interesting to note that, even when asked about benefits for adults, staff reported benefits that addressed the Parent-Child relationship.

## Strategies and Progression into the Future

### Strategies for Working with Children:

Staff reported using a number of strategies with children such as the provision of *Opportunities* and *Interactions* (92% and 45% of centres respectively: strategies resembling the 'Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Model' framework known as ORIM [Hannon 1995]). Other strategies described as being used with children included the development of *school readiness* (47%), *meeting individual needs* (34%), and creating a *supportive environment* (33%).

### Strategies for Working with Parents:

Strategies used with parents could also be aligned with the ORIM framework, including the provision of *Opportunities*, followed by *Modelling*, *Interactions* and *Recognition* (90%, 88%, 87% and 34% of centres respectively). In addition to this, staff reported a number of other strategies, including *encouragement and empowerment* (90%

of centres), *meeting individual needs* (85%), and *providing information and knowledge* (83%). Across the sample, all but one of the aforementioned strategies were used to support *parent-child* needs (98%).

## Centre Strategies:

Staff also referred more generally to the importance of providing a multi-agency response, a variety of service types, and promoting centre services (66%, 62% and 39% respectively).

## Hopes and Plans for the Future:

The majority of staff reported that services and provision should be the key focus for future working, particularly keeping the centre open and sustaining the current level of services on offer, as well as providing additional services, and commenting on the focus of groups and services that will be offered in the future (across 94% of the centres). Other areas of focus for the future (in order of prevalence) included *family involvement and engagement with the centre* (65%), *organisation and management practices* (64%), *staffing* (63%), *family needs* (50%), and *facilities and resources* (44%).

## Parental Views and Experiences

### Parental Use of Children's Centres

On average, parents visit their children's centre "at least once or twice a week".

On average parents attend more than one children's centre, as it allows them to access a wider variety of services. Parents indicated that the top three reasons to attend other children's centres were: to attend a variety of sessions, to allow their children to play within a variety of children's groups and to attend a specific session.

Most parents have been attending their children's centre for less than three years (78%). The majority of these parents have been attending their centre for one or two years.

### Reasons Parents Attend Children's Centres

Parents predominantly attended children's centres for the benefit of their child.

The most frequently reported reasons for attending children's centres were as follows: allowing children to meet and play with other children (97% of parents); giving children access to a variety of activities (95%); children's enjoyment of centre sessions (93%); parents' enjoyment of attending with their children (92%); parents wanting to help their children learn (84%); and to help prepare children for nursery or school (78%).



## Parental impressions of the Children's Centres

The vast majority of parents indicated that they were “very happy” with the services provided to them by children's centres (92% of parents). No parents indicated that they were “very unhappy” with any of the services offered.

**Parents referred to a number of benefits for their children** including improved personal, social, and emotional development, as well as improved physical development as a result of attending centres.

## Conclusions

This report detailed the delivery of parenting services across children's centres. Centre respondents' concerns for the future reflect centres' needs to respond to shifts in policy direction, as well as financial reductions, workload, staffing pressures and managerial restructuring. The shift from universal to more targeted provision (as observed in 2012 fieldwork) has had, and will continue to have, direct implications on the engagement of families using children's centres.

A large element of children's centre work appears to be catered towards working with the parent and child together as a unit, and specifically the development of parenting skills. However, staff also showed a dedicated focus on improving outcomes and experiences for children (when they were referring to parenting). It was interesting to note an alignment between the benefits of attending children's centres, as reported by staff members and parents, with both identifying benefits for the *parent and child* as a unit in terms of *greater knowledge of child development* and *increased confidence in parenting*.

This research has shown that children's centres are continuing to offer a varied range of provision, targeting all areas of parental and family needs. Children's centre staff should be credited for creating a welcoming and supporting environment for both parents and children (as reflected in the findings of this parenting report) despite the many internal and external pressures that were driving the evolution of centre services.



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This research report was commissioned before the current 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.

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