

CHILDCARE AND EARLY YEARS SURVEY OF PARENTS 2011

Tom Huskinson, Julia Pye, Kathryn Medien, Sarah Dobie, Chris Ferguson, and Colin Gardner, with Nicholas Gilby, Mandy Littlewood and John D'Souza.

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 2011 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 2010 and 2011.

The Coalition Government has introduced a number of changes since coming to office in May 2010. It has reformed the Early Years Foundation Stage; consulted on a new purpose for the national network of Sure Start Children's Centres; extended free early education for the least advantaged two-year-olds to reach around 20 per cent of the cohort from September 2013, and around 40 per cent from September 2014; revised statutory guidance to increase the flexibility of free early education for three- and four-year-olds; and promoted quality and diversity across the early education and childcare sector. Other relevant policy developments include a reduction in the proportion of childcare costs that can be claimed via means-tested Working Tax Credit from April 2011; and the commissioning of the Nutbrown Review, which reported in June 2012 to consider how best to strengthen qualifications and training for staff in early years settings. A revised framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage came into force in September 2012.

Key findings

- In 2011 **nearly four-fifths (78%) of all families in England with children aged under 15 had used some form of childcare** during the most recent term-time week; this equated to 4,181,000 families or 5,954,000 children. Sixty-three per cent had used formal childcare and early years provision, 39 per cent had used informal childcare, and 26% had used both formal and informal childcare; these proportions were not significantly different from those found in 2010¹.
- Characteristics independently associated with the use of formal childcare included:
 - **Age of child:** parents with children aged three- and four-year-olds were most likely use formal childcare.
 - **Family annual income:** a higher family annual income was associated with a higher likelihood of using formal childcare.

¹ The study used a very inclusive definition of childcare and early years provision. Parents were asked to include any time that the child was not with a resident parent or a resident parent's current partner, or at school. In order to remind parents to include all possible people or organisations that may have looked after their children, they were shown the following list on a showcard: Formal providers: Nursery school; Nursery class attached to a primary or infants' school; Reception class at a primary or infants' school; Special day school or nursery or unit for children with special educational needs; Day nursery; Playgroup or pre-school; Childminder; Nanny or au pair; Baby-sitter who came to home; Breakfast club; After school club/activities; Holiday club/scheme. Informal providers: My ex-husband/wife/partner/the child's other parent who does not live in this household; The child's grandparent(s); The child's older brother/sister; Another relative; A friend or neighbour. Other: Other nursery education provider; Other childcare provider.

- **Family type and work status:** parents who lived in couples in which only one or neither of the partners was in work, and non-working lone parents, were less likely than working couples to use formal childcare.
- While there were significant variations in the use of formal childcare by area deprivation, rurality, and whether the child had special educational need, these were not significant once other factors had been controlled for.
- Reported take-up of the entitlement to free early education for three- and four-year-olds rose significantly from 85 per cent in 2010 to 88 per cent in 2011.
- The great majority (92%) of parents using the entitlement were fairly or very satisfied with the number of free hours they received, not significantly different from 2010 levels (93%).
- Overall families paid a median weekly amount of £20 to childcare providers, although the amount varied widely depending on the provider(s) used (between £9 for nursery classes and £120 for a nanny or au pair). There was no significant change in the overall weekly cost between 2010 and 2011.
- Just over one quarter (26%) of families found it difficult or very difficult to meet their childcare costs, not significantly different from 2010 (25%). Just over half found it easy or very easy (51%), the same proportion as in 2010. Workless families and lone parents were most likely to find it difficult to meet their childcare costs.
- Information about formal childcare was mostly accessed via word of mouth (39%) and from schools (29%). The most common official source of information was Sure Start/Children's Centres (11%).
- The majority of parents (60%) rated the overall quality of local childcare as good, unchanged since 2004. Views on childcare availability were more mixed: 44 per cent felt the number of local childcare places was 'about right'. Thirty-five per cent rated the affordability of local childcare as good, although the proportion rating this as 'very poor' rose significantly from 13 per cent in 2010 to 16 per cent in 2011.
- Parents' views on the flexibility of the available childcare were generally fairly positive: a minority (20%) of parents encountered problems finding childcare that was flexible enough to fit their needs, compared to 44 per cent who did not encounter problems. Parents living in London were more likely to have encountered problems finding sufficiently flexible childcare.
- Less than half (41%) of parents with disabled children thought that local childcare providers could cater for their child's illness or disability.
- Just under three-quarters (73%) of parents had heard of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and over half (56%) of parents knew something about it; over one-quarter (27%) of parents were not aware of it.
- Just under half of families (48%) with school-aged children used childcare during school holidays, unchanged since 2010; however the proportion using informal childcare during school holidays rose significantly from 30% in 2010 to 35% in 2011.
- Just over half (53%) 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 October 2011 and May 2012. Just over 6,350 parents in England with children aged under 15 took part. The sample of parents was 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 58 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 the free entitlement

Children receiving childcare spent an average of 9.0 hours per week there, significantly more than the 8.3 hours recorded in 2010 (8.3 hours). This rise was driven primarily by an increase in the amount of time three- and four-year-olds spent in childcare. Pre-school children spent much longer in formal childcare than school-age children, reflecting the fact that early years education is counted as formal childcare provision. The formal providers used for the most hours per week were reception classes (31.3 hours) and day nurseries (18.0 hours), and those used the least were breakfast-clubs (2.8 hours) and after-school clubs (2.3 hours). The informal provider used for the most hours per week was non-resident parents (17.5 hours); other informal providers cared for children for a much shorter amount of time – between three and six hours per week.

Almost nine in ten (88%) of eligible three- and four-year-olds received free early education entitlement, significantly up from 85 per cent in 2010. Receipt was highest among couple families where both parents were working, among families with higher incomes, and among families with children from White British backgrounds. Sixty-eight per cent of eligible children received at least 15 hours of free hours per week, with the free hours most commonly spread across five days (46%) or three days (26%) per week². Among non-users of the free entitlement, two in five parents (40%) were unaware of the scheme. Of those who did not use all the free hours on offer, a mixture of constraints (cost, no extra sessions available at the setting) and personal choices (did not need any additional hours, child too young) were given as reasons.

Childcare for pre-school children

The most common packages of childcare used by parents for their pre-school children were: formal centre-based childcare only (28%), for example nursery classes and day nurseries, a combination of formal centre-based and informal childcare (18%), and informal childcare only (14%). Twenty-eight per cent used no childcare at all.

Parents of three- and four-year-olds were far more likely to use centre-based provision than parents of younger children, reflecting the high take-up of the entitlement to free early years provision among this age group. Children aged nought- to two-years were far more likely to receive informal care only (22%) than those aged three and four (3%).

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 the most days

² Although a maximum of 15 hours of free early education entitlement was available to three- and four-year-olds per week, some parents, perhaps mistakenly, reported using a higher number of free hours.

per week. They were also most likely to have both parents (or their lone parent) in work and to attend childcare for economic reasons, suggesting this package was commonly used to cover parents' working hours.

Childcare for school-age children

The most common packages of childcare used by parents for their school-age children were: formal out-of-school care only (23%), informal care only (14%) and a combination of out-of-school and informal care (14%). Thirty-five per cent used no childcare at all. Twelve- to fourteen-year-olds were most likely to be receiving informal care only, and five- to seven-year-olds used a wider range of childcare packages than older school-age children, due at least in part to their greater use of reception classes and childminders.

School-age children spent an average of 5.3 hours per week in childcare. School-age children in out-of-school childcare only attended far fewer hours (2.5) of childcare per week than those receiving informal childcare only (7.0) or a combination of out-of school and informal childcare (8.0). The latter group were the most likely to be attending providers for economic reasons, indicating that, even once they start full-time school, a package of care can still be required to cover parents' working hours.

Parents were most likely to use childcare for their school-age children for child-related reasons (60%) such as for their educational or social development, followed by economic reasons (42%) for instance so the parents could work or study. Nineteen per cent of parents used childcare to free up their time, for instance so they could socialise or engage in domestic activities, a significant rise from 15 per cent in 2010.

The cost of childcare

Just over one quarter (26%) of families found it difficult or very difficult to meet their childcare costs, unchanged since 2010. Just over half found it easy or very easy (51%), the same proportion as in 2010.

Almost three in five (57%) families who used childcare reported that they paid for some or all of that care. More families paid formal providers (64%) than informal providers (6%). Parents were most likely to pay for childminders and nannies, and least likely to pay for nursery classes, nursery schools, and playgroups – the providers primarily used by three- and four-year-olds under the free early years provision.

Overall families paid a median weekly amount of £20 to childcare providers, although the amount varied widely depending on the provider(s) used (between £9 for nursery classes and £120 for a nanny or au pair). There was no significant change in the overall weekly cost between 2010 and 2011; however, the amounts paid to day nurseries and to grandparents saw a significant rise.

Sixty-four per cent of families received Child Tax Credit, a significant fall from 69 per cent in 2010. Families receiving Child Tax Credit received a median of £55 per week, a significant increase from 2010. Those receiving Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit received a median of £125 per week.

Parents' decisions about childcare

Sixty-eight per cent of parents accessed at least one source of information about childcare in the last year, the most common sources being word of mouth (39%) and schools (29%). Higher usage of formal childcare was associated with a higher likelihood of accessing information about childcare.

For the 22 per cent of parents not using childcare, most said this was because they preferred to look after their children themselves (74%), with just 12 per cent saying it was because they could not afford it. Most families (71%) not using childcare could find informal childcare at least on an infrequent basis, suggesting that not using childcare was predominantly down to choice rather than specific constraints.

Just one in five parents (20%) reported having problems finding childcare that was flexible enough to meet their needs. While most parents (61%) were happy with the current formal childcare provision available to them, 19 per cent said they would like to use (or make increased use of) after-school clubs, and 14 per cent holiday clubs. Parents were most likely to want childcare provision improved during summer holidays (63%), followed by half-term holidays (34%), the Easter holidays (31%), and weekdays during term-time (31%).

Parents' views of childcare

Since 2004, the proportion of parents saying the number of local childcare places is 'about right' has risen from 40 per cent to 44 per cent. Thirty-five per cent of families rate the affordability of local childcare as 'good', although there has been a significant rise in the proportion saying affordability is 'very poor' since 2010 (from 13% to 16%). Three in five (60%) parents rate the overall quality of local childcare as good, unchanged since 2004.

Out of the six areas of learning and development in the old EYFS, personal, social and emotional development and communication (57%), language and literacy (56%), and physical development (54%) were the skills parents most often felt were encouraged 'a great deal' at their main formal provider. In the new EYFS, these are the three prime areas that must shape educational programmes in early years settings.

The great majority of parents agreed that their provider helped develop academic skills such as enjoying books (92%) and recognising letters, words, numbers or shapes (90%). Reception classes were considered 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 (86%) received feedback about how their child was getting on at their main formal provider, although feedback was more common for pre-school than for school-age children. Those receiving feedback tended to receive it at least once or twice a week (70%).

Parents engaged in a number of home learning activities with their children, the most common being looking at books or reading stories (85% doing this on most days or every day). Around two-thirds of parents (65%) thought they spent about the right amount of time on home learning, while a third of parents (33%) said they would like to do more.

Holiday childcare

Just under half of families (48%) with school-aged children used childcare during school holidays, unchanged since 2010; however the proportion using informal childcare during school holidays saw a significant rise from 30% in 2010, to 35% in 2011. Holiday clubs and after-school clubs were the most frequently used formal providers during holidays (8% each), with grandparents by far the most frequently used informal provider (17%). Of the 52 per cent of families not using any holiday childcare, most reported they did not require it, for instance preferring to look after children themselves (54%) or not needing to be away from their children (20%).

Use of formal childcare during school holidays varied with a number of factors: those more likely to receive formal holiday childcare included younger school age children, those from higher income families, those living in less deprived areas, those from working families, and those from non-Asian backgrounds.

Almost three in ten (29%) families reported that they had difficulty finding holiday childcare they could afford, one in five (20%) that they had problems finding holiday childcare that was sufficiently flexible, and one in seven (14%) were unhappy with the quality of available holiday childcare. The levels of these concerns are unchanged since 2010. These issues are more of a problem for lone parents than for couples.

Mothers, childcare and work

The level of maternal employment, though broadly stable across the survey series, saw a significant fall from 63 per cent in 2010 to 60 per cent in 2011. Almost a third of mothers (32%) were usually working atypical hours, most commonly after 6pm, or on Saturdays. Usually working before 8am was the atypical hours pattern most likely to cause problems with childcare (causing problems for 33%), and working on Sundays least likely (causing problems for 20%).

Finding a job that enabled mothers to combine work with looking after their children remained the most common reason for entering work among those mothers who had entered employment in the past two years, and a job opportunity or promotion was the factor most likely to have prompted a move from part-time to full-time work, followed by a change in their financial situation such as their partner losing their job.

Regarding ideal working arrangements, over half (56%) of working mothers said if they could afford it they would prefer to work fewer hours and spend more time looking after their children. Over a third (36%) agreed that if they could afford it, they would prefer to stay at home and look after their children, compared to half (50%) in disagreement. Just over half (53%) of non-working mothers said that they would prefer to work if they could arrange reliable, convenient, affordable, and good quality childcare.

Conclusions

Overall, take-up of childcare is high, with nearly four in five families in England using childcare, and over three in five using formal childcare. Parents are generally satisfied with the quality of local childcare available to them, however views on the availability, affordability, and flexibility of local childcare are more mixed.

Take up of the entitlement to free early years provision stands at 88% among eligible three- and four-year-olds, a significant rise since 2010 (85%). Satisfaction levels with the number of free hours available are very high (92%).

The amount families are paying for childcare providers has remained broadly stable over the last year. A large minority of families (26%) struggle to meet their childcare costs, however most do not experience difficulties with payment.

Childcare remains an important driver of maternal employment: over half (53%) of non-working mothers say they would prefer to work if they could arrange reliable, convenient, affordable, and good quality childcare. Among working mothers, 56% would prefer to work fewer hours and spend more time looking after their children if they could afford it, and 36% would prefer to stay at home and look after their children if they could afford it.