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Childcare in England: parental motivations for use, decision-making and perceptions of quality - A qualitative study

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Glossary

15 hours free childcare: All 3 to 4-year-olds in England can get 570 free hours of childcare per year. It can be taken either as 15 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year, or as fewer hours over more weeks. Two year olds in England can also get 15 hours free childcare per week if their parent(s) are claiming any qualifying benefits, including Universal Credit, or are looked after by the local authority, have an education, health and care (EHC) plan, get Disability Living Allowance.

30 hours free childcare: Three to four year olds in England whose parent their parent(s) are in work, on sick leave or annual leave, or shared parental, maternity, paternity or adoption leave are entitled to 30 hours free childcare per week for 38 weeks of the year (during school term time). This can also be spread over 52 weeks.

Childminder: A childminder is a person providing care for one or more children aged between birth and 18, to whom they are not related, for reward, in their own home for more than two hours a day.

Out-of-school settings: A group, club or activity for children and young people, such as sports, scouts, arts, or other group activities, where children attend without their parents' or carers' supervision.

SEND: Children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Tax Free Childcare: Parent(s) can receive up to £500 every 3 months (up to £2,000 a year) for each of their children (aged up to 11) to help with the costs of childcare. This goes up to £1,000 every 3 months if a child is disabled (up to £4,000 a year).

Universal Credit Childcare Costs Support: Working parents claiming Universal Credit can also receive help with childcare costs. Universal Credit Childcare Costs Support pays up to 85% of their childcare costs to a maximum of £646 a month for one child or £1108 a month for two or more children. This can be used for any OFSTED registered childcare including nurseries, pre-schools, holiday clubs, after-school clubs and breakfast clubs.

Wraparound childcare: Wraparound childcare is childcare that schools provide outside of normal school hours, such as breakfast clubs or after school childcare.

Executive summary

The Department of Education commissioned Ipsos to carry out research with parents of children aged 14 and under. Ipsos conducted interviews with parents of children aged 14 and under to understand their decision-making around childcare, perceptions of quality for Early Years' settings, attitudes and motivations towards childcare and awareness and perceptions of Family Hubs.

From 8 June to 4 July 2022, 55 interviews of 45-60 minutes in length were conducted with parents. The sample was drawn from Wave 11 of the Parent's Childcare Poll. Quotas were used to ensure a diverse range of family types and economic backgrounds.

Motivations for using childcare

Among parents of pre-school and school age children, the primary reason parents used formal and informal childcare was to enable them to work. Formal childcare was also perceived as an enabler of children's education and socialisation, especially among the pre-school age children.

Parents not using any childcare said this was mainly due to perceptions that the child was too young, or it was unnecessary for the family.

Perceptions of different types of childcare

Parents' perceptions of different types and providers of childcare were influenced by a combination of rational and emotional factors. Parents assessed settings through word-of-mouth reviews from friends and relatives and visits.

Among parents of pre-school age children, nurseries were the default form of childcare which came to mind and which they were most familiar with. In our sample, parents were typically less aware of or knowledgeable about childminders, compared to nurseries. This was mostly due to a lack of awareness of or experience using childminders. Parents who were currently or had used childminders in the past were positive about them. Perceptions of childminders were distinct amongst those who had never considered using a childminder, those who had considered it but decided not to and those who were using or had used a childminder.

Parents of school age children using breakfast and / or after-school clubs, or childminders after school, tended to view wraparound childcare as a way of extending their working day. Out of School Setting clubs and activities were seen as enrichment for their children, rather than childcare.

Holiday childcare was seen to have both childcare and enrichment qualities. It supported parents with their working days, but the activities were more focused on the child's interests.

Perceptions of quality

Perceptions of good quality childcare came from a combination of rational and emotional factors. Parents had high confidence in the regulations for childcare settings and their appropriateness in ensuring their child(ren)'s safety and supporting their development. As such, they had not looked into the detail, beyond believing that they would be in place and would be overseen by Ofsted. This high confidence gave parents the ability to make more emotional assessments of the quality of a childcare setting.

Parents using formal childcare assessed quality by visiting the setting. They used this visit to assess the security, cleanliness, number of staff, staff engagement with the children and general atmosphere of the setting. These factors were used to form a judgement of the quality of childcare on offer.

Staff ratios and retention were seen as important signals of quality. A suitable number of people caring for the children was seen as meaning staff had sufficient time and capacity to care for the children properly. This in turn was seen as a sign that the children would get high quality care and support with their development. Staff retention was seen as meaning the setting was a good place to work, which was interpreted as meaning it would be a positive environment for children. Staff retention was also seen as offering children and opportunity to bond with the staff, which meant they were happier to go into the setting in the morning.

Childcare funding and the cost of living

As part of the research, we asked parents using multiple types of government childcare funding whether they had any challenges managing these. These parents were comfortable using more than one type of funding and did not raise any issues across our sample.

The impact of increases in the cost of living on use of formal childcare depended on its purpose. Parents who depended on formal childcare to work reported having no flexibility in its use, as the hours were fixed around their working hours. This was the case for both pre-school and school age children. Parents of pre-school children using formal and informal childcare said that if they experienced financial constraints they would try to increase their use of informal childcare and reduce their use of formal childcare to save money. In contrast, OOSS activities were seen as more expendable if finances were tight because they were focused on the child(ren)'s enrichment rather than being a necessity. Such a scenario was usually treated as worst-case however, and parents using these activities said they would prioritise them as far as possible.

Family Hubs

Parents in our sample demonstrated little awareness of Family Hubs. When prompted with a description of Family Hubs, parents were positive and receptive. Parents assumed

the service would be open to all, although there was a tendency amongst parents from higher income households to assume the service was aimed specifically at lower income households.

In terms of branding, parents felt that joint branding for Family Hubs was most appropriate, combining the Local Authority, Department for Education (DfE) and Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) or Start for Life.

Introduction

The Department for Education commissioned Ipsos to conduct qualitative research with parents of children aged 0-14 years old to explore their use and perceptions of different forms of childcare.

The research explored the following themes:

- How parents decide to use a specific type of childcare provider
- For Early Years settings:
 - What good quality childcare looks like
 - What parents know about regulation of Early Years childcare settings
 - What the awareness and understanding of staff to child ratios in Early Years settings is and the role that this plays in choosing a childcare provider
 - What parents think about staff retention in Early Years settings and how important this is in terms of choosing a childcare provider
- Perceptions of and attitudes towards childminders and how these compare to other types of formal childcare
- Parents perceptions and use of school aged childcare and specifically the role that out-of-school settings (OOSS) activities play
- Interaction between multiple forms of government help or childcare costs
- What impact the rising cost of living is likely to have on parents' use of childcare
- Awareness and perception of Family Hubs

Method

Sample

The sample was drawn from Wave 11 of the Parent's Childcare Poll¹ conducted by Ipsos in July 2022 on behalf of the Department for Education, from respondents who agreed to

¹ [Childcare use for families of 0-4 year-olds, 5-11 year olds and 12-14 year-olds, awareness and use of free entitlements, and perceptions of the rising cost of living | Ipsos.](#)

be contacted for follow-up qualitative research. The sample included parents who used all types of childcare; formal, informal, both formal and informal; and no childcare.

Thirty-three interviews were conducted with parents of pre-school age children (0-4) and 22 with school age children (aged 5– 14). Quotas were set to ensure a range of parents based on the above characteristics around childcare use (formal, informal, none), as well as age of child, region, work status and income. For full details regarding the quotas and achieved sample, please see the Appendix.

Recruitment

A specialist recruiter contacted parents in the sample to invite them to take part in the research interviews. A screening questionnaire was used to confirm the demographic details of the participant and whether their childcare arrangements had changed since completing the survey.

Data collection and analysis

Fieldwork was conducted by qualitative researchers from Ipsos UK Public Affairs between June and July 2022, either online or over the phone. Each of the 55 interviews lasted around 45 minutes.

A discussion guide was used to structure the interviews. This guide was designed to address the research themes and objectives for the research and was tailored to the parents' personal circumstances and context.

Throughout the fieldwork period, structured and detailed notes were produced, supplemented by digital recordings of the interviews. Regular team analysis sessions were held to discuss the emerging findings and themes in more detail. Analysis was an iterative process, and this final report presents detailed findings from the systematic approach to analysis.

Interpreting the findings

This is a qualitative study which is intended to be illustrative, providing insight into the family context, childcare arrangements and perceptions of a small selection of parents. It is not designed to be statistically representative and the findings presented in this report reflect only the perspectives of those interviewed and cannot be generalised to a wider sample of parents. Findings have been anonymised throughout to protect the identity of participants. Where quotes are included, these have been attributed by work status, age of child and household type to preserve anonymity.

Use and perceptions of childcare

This chapter sets out why parents used childcare, to give context to their perceptions of the different types of childcare available and decision-making about which providers to use.

Purpose of childcare

Parents' decisions about which type of childcare to use were driven by their motivations for using childcare.

The main motivation for using formal or informal childcare was to enable parents to work. This was consistent amongst parents of both pre-school and school age children. Formal childcare also enabled child socialisation, which was seen as an important secondary benefit. Amongst those using informal childcare, it was used both regularly and as and when needed. Informal childcare was used both as the sole form of childcare and to supplement formal childcare, helping reduce childcare costs.

Parents in our sample who were not using any childcare said that this was because they felt their child(ren) was too young, or it was unnecessary for the family. Parents of child(ren) under 1 who were on parental leave were particularly likely to see their child as being too young for childcare. Parents of children under two years old who were not using formal childcare felt that, as well as helping with the cost of formal childcare, the 15-hour free childcare scheme for two-year olds indicates that the government believes children should start using formal childcare at this age. As such, they were waiting for their child(ren) to be eligible for this funding before enrolling them in formal childcare.

Amongst families who were not using any childcare, it was usual for at least one parent not to be working. Reasons families gave for this were that this parent preferred to be at home with their child(ren) or because working was not seen as financially viable. After the costs of childcare had been paid, they felt they would either be worse off financially, or not sufficiently better off to benefit from working.

Perceptions of different types of childcare

In the interviews, parents were asked to describe what they associated with the different types of childcare.

Nurseries

For parents of pre-school age children, nurseries were the default mode of childcare which came to mind and which they were most familiar with.

Nurseries were seen as offering formal, structured childcare. They were seen as offering a wide range of activities and having a formative approach, with a focus on school

preparation at the appropriate ages. Parents perceived nurseries to have several adults and a number of children, meaning they offered clear socialisation opportunities for the children.

“It’s the pre-stage before school, the first steps of education and preparation for school. It’s where they start to learn.... It’s where they start to concentrate.”

Mother, working part-time, two-year-old child, couple

Practically, most working parents using nurseries reported that the opening hours fitted around their working hours. There was strong awareness that nurseries had to be Ofsted registered, and trust in the regulations that applied. However, nurseries were seen as being expensive, particularly relative to informal childcare which would be free and childminders, which parents believed would be less expensive.

Childminders

Parents who were not using childminders admitted having little knowledge about them and had typically not even considered using them. For this reason, their perceptions of childminders were described in contrast to nurseries.

Childminders were assumed to be one adult working with children in their home. As such, there was seen to be a lack of input or supervision from other adults. These parents lacked awareness of the regulations for childminders and believed that these were less stringent than nurseries. For example, parents who knew little about childminders were unclear about how many children they could care for at one time. Assumptions about the adult to child ratios for childminders varied. Some parents thought they could have the same number of children per adult as in a nursery, some thought there were more children per adult and some thought less.

Parents with little knowledge of childminders expressed the belief that a childminder would not be as beneficial for the child or the parent. Childminders were seen to offer a less structured environment than nurseries which was less educational and therefore less able to prepare children for school. For parents, there were concerns about availability, particularly during the childminder’s holidays or if they were unwell which meant the setting would be closed.

“A home from home experience. It will be more informal [than nursery], as there will be a living room and a kitchen...while maybe nursery will be more classrooms with play areas.”

Mother, working part-time, three-year-old child, couple

Amongst parents who had considered or used childminders, they were seen as offering a homely environment. Parents who used childminders for unplanned care appreciated

their flexibility. They were able to put their child with a childminder infrequently or at short notice, rather than committing to a monthly schedule as they might with a nursery.

Parents who had considered but not used a childminder reported they were harder to find than nurseries. This could be due to a lack of immediate visibility, as childminding takes place in a home rather than an identifiable location. The small number of parents who had considered but did not pursue childminding reported that this was, in part, because of a lack of local childminders with availability.

Childminders were seen as being cheaper than nurseries. However, for parents who knew little about them, this was not enough of a draw to overcome some of the negative perceptions of them which acted as barriers to use. For parents who were open to using a childminder, lower fees presented an additional benefit. However, parents of pre-school age children using formal childcare were clear that whilst formal childcare was seen as being expensive, being happy with the setting was the most important factor in decision making, rather than cost.

Findings on childminders are covered in more detail in the chapter on Childminders.

School-age children

Out-of-school activities for school age children were seen as fun, recreational activities which focused on the child(ren)'s enjoyment and enrichment. They were recognised as offering important and beneficial experiences for the child(ren) and parents using these activities saw them as enrichment, not childcare. Parents reported that they were involved in the activity, taking the child to and from it and as such it did not extend their working day, but potentially disrupted it. These activities were also seen as being expensive.

“[Out-of-school activities] is where parents have to take their children to a club and can either drop off or stay and watch...it can also be attached to the school, like the football club my daughter goes to after school at her school.”

Mother, working part-time, 13 year old child, lone parent

Wraparound childcare was seen as being more functional. Parents who worked longer hours than their child spent at school saw breakfast clubs and after school clubs as essential to enabling them to work. Parents acknowledged that the activities were not always particularly enriching for the child(ren), citing disparate age ranges and lack of organised activities. However, enrichment was less of a priority for parents here.

Holiday childcare was also used by parents who needed a place for their child whilst they were working during the school holidays. Parents reported needing to find a balance between availability, affordability and enrichment. They felt it was important for the child to do something they enjoyed and it also needed to fit around their working day.

Early years childcare

This chapter addresses what parents perceive as good quality childcare for pre-school age children (0-4) to be as well as their views on staff to child ratios and staff retention.

Quality

This research found that all parents using formal childcare had high confidence in the regulations for childcare providers. This meant that they did not feel they had to check these, allowing them to rely on more informal assessments of quality. Parents' assessment of quality continued after their child(ren) had started at the setting.

Parents using formal childcare saw visiting the setting as the most important way in which they could assess quality. This visit was used to assess the physical and social environment. The physical environment comprised the nursery building and interior, outside space, toys and activities on offer for children and the security of the premises. The social environment was determined by assessing how many staff there were to each child and how staff engaged with the children.

Informal and formal recommendations were important factors in determining perceptions of quality amongst those using formal childcare. Informal recommendations came from other parents with experience of a setting. Parents who personally knew someone working in with a particular setting reported choosing this setting for their children to attend. Ofsted reports were used to source formal information about a childcare provider and to cross-check existing perceptions and informal recommendations.

Parents' decisions about formal childcare were shaped by their previous experiences. Those who had used a setting for another child and been happy with the care provided were likely to use it again, without considering other settings. If they had enrolled a child in a certain type of provider (or had themselves attended as a child) and had a positive or negative experience, it directly affected how willing they were to use that type of provider in the future. For example, one parent had a negative experience of attending a childminder as a child, so would not consider using one for her own child.

Parents using formal childcare reported that their assessment of quality was ongoing. These parents felt it was important that their child enjoyed attending nursery, which was demonstrated by them being happy to go in each morning. The child's developmental progress was also an indicator of a good quality setting. This was informally assessed through considering the child's social skills, independence, language, willingness to try new foods and potty training. While parents did not view the childcare provider as solely responsible for their child's development, they did expect them to support this. Progress was seen as being reflective of receiving this support.

Socialisation and the development of social skills was seen as being a key benefit of attending formal childcare. As such, progress in this area was most important. This was seen as being demonstrated through the child's willingness and ability to form social bonds outside of their own family. This emphasis on social bonding meant that parents using formal childcare sought providers in which they felt that the staff cared about their child and had the capacity to engage with them as an individual.

How the setting communicated with parents was also an important factor. Parents wanted to understand what activities their child was doing each day, their behaviour and how they were developing.

"I want him to feel safe and happy. I want him to want to go there. I like that my son wants to go in on a Saturday. It shows that he likes it and he wants to be there. That he's getting the stimulation he needs."

Mother, working part-time, three year old child, couple

"When Covid hit and she had to stay at home, we saw the dramatic change. She became more of a recluse...she'd run away from other adults because she was scared...we increased her hours in nursery when we could and she's come leaps and bounds...it was a way of giving her a social life...At first it was a necessity, a functional thing, but now its more for her."

Mother, working part-time, three year old child, couple

Ratios

As set out above, the number of staff to each child, and staff engagement with the children were important factors in of assessments of quality amongst parents using formal childcare. These parents assumed that the government set ratios for the maximum number of children one adult in a childcare setting could care for and that each setting would comply with this. This belief gave parents using formal childcare the freedom to make a more informal, intuitive and emotional assessment of the setting: They did not have to check or ask about the numbers of staff because they believed this would be at the legal requirement. They also had high confidence that the ratios would be appropriate to ensure the safety and support the development of the children.

When asked about child to adult ratios in childcare settings, parents either knew or could make a fairly accurate guess as to what they were, based on their experiences. They also usually assumed that these ratios would change and allow more children per adult as children got older.

Staff ratios were important to parents who used formal childcare. They believed a higher number of staff would mean that staff had sufficient time to give to each child and that

their child(ren) would therefore get better care and attention. Particularly, parents wanted staff members to have the capacity to build personal rapport, trust, and understanding of their child(ren). They felt that having a strong relationship with the adults caring for them would mean the child(ren) had a better experience of childcare.

Staff retention

Staff retention was seen by parents using nurseries as an indication of the quality of a provider. For these parents, it was seen as meaning that the setting therefore offered a positive working environment and the staff enjoyed working there. A good working environment for staff was seen as translating to a positive environment for the children being cared for by them.

Parents using nurseries saw staff retention as ensuring that their child(ren) were likely to see the same people every day, something which they strongly preferred. This was seen as enabling the children to form strong bonds with carers and therefore being happier, and not crying, when dropped off for the day. A strong and consistent relationship between the key-worker and child was also seen as meaning someone was aware of their progression over time, fulfilling parents' desire for a childcare environment that supports their child's social and personal development. Staff retention was seen as less relevant for childminders, as the child was assumed to have a strong relationship with the childminder.

“It’s important that he has that bond [with the carer] and feeling comfortable with members of staff, if he’s upset or hurt or feeling unwell that he feels comfortable to go to them...as a parent, you want to know the people who are looking after your children. You don’t want a new face every time thinking ‘who is this that’s looking after my child’.”

Mother, working part-time, one and four-year-old children, couple

Staff qualifications and experience were less visible than their attitudes towards and engagement with the children. Parents assumed that people working in a childcare setting would have the appropriate qualifications, giving them the freedom to consider how staff engaged with the children, which was seen as being the most important factor and a strong determinant of quality. Additionally, participants using nurseries accepted caregivers with less experience, so long as they were enthusiastic and engaged with their child's development.

Perceptions of childminders

Perceptions of childminders were distinct amongst those who had never considered using a childminder, those who had considered it but decided not to and those who were using a childminder.

Had not considered using a childminder²

Parents who had not considered using a childminder acknowledged that they knew little about them and had done little to no research on them. This was because they either; had not planned to use any formal childcare at all; planned to use a different childcare provider that they were already familiar with; or had strongly negative perceptions of childminders.

Parents who were not planning to use childcare at all said this was because it was too expensive and / or did not want or need to. These parents had not considered any childcare options, including childminders.

Parents in our sample who had used a nursery for an older child and were happy with it, went on to use the same one for any subsequent children, meaning they had not considered a childminder.

Amongst the parents with negative perceptions of childminders, these related to concerns about safety; belief that the setting was less beneficial for children and being over reliant on one individual.

Concerns about safety stemmed from there being only one person looking after multiple children, in their home. Parents with this concern worried that a sole childminder would not be able to care for the children equally if one needed extra attention for any reason, such as hurting themselves. Parents with negative perceptions of childminders were less likely to trust a solo childminder than they were to trust a group of staff members at a nursery. They worried that if the childminder was not looking after the child(ren) properly there would be no-one to check or report this. These parents also expressed concerns about the safety of a home setting, with a perception that people, unknown to the parents, could come and go. They were not comfortable with this and worried it could put their child(ren) at risk.

² Wave 11 of the DfE Parent's Childcare Poll found that of parents who had not considered using a childminder, 45% felt childminders would be too expensive, 44% didn't want to leave their child with a stranger and 28% wanted their child to socialise with larger groups of children.

“I really don't like the idea of my children being looked after in someone's house. They could fall down the stairs and the childminder could hide it...my son and daughter can't speak for themselves. So they could easily hide what happened.”

Mother, working part-time, three-year-old and one-year-old children, couple

“I just would not know where to find a childminder...or find the right sort of childminder for your child...it worries me a little, they are strangers working in a closed setting with your child and there are no other adults around.”

Mother, working part-time, two-year-old child, couple

Parents who felt that a childminder was less beneficial for children than other settings believed that nurseries were more highly regulated than childminders and had more of an educational focus. They had little knowledge of childminder regulation and the requirement for them to follow the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework. Parents in our sample assumed that childminders were subject to Ofsted regulations but lacked awareness of the specifics of these. As such, they worried that children would not be engaged in age-appropriate learning activities and / or helped to prepare for school. Parents who were not using a childminder and knew little about them also expressed concerns that fewer children and only one adult carer would mean less socialisation opportunities for children. Concerns expressed on this theme also included concerns about the age of the other children at the setting and a preference for children to be with others their own age.

Parents who were not using childminders were also concerned about being reliant on one individual for childcare and the implications for them if the childminder was on holiday or ill. Parents understood that in these scenarios they would not have childcare for that time and would have to take time off work themselves or make alternative arrangements. In the case of illness, this was also seen as meaning the childminder could be unavailable at short notice. Parents using formal childcare felt that nurseries carried less risk of not being available at short notice.

What if the childminder is ill!! We wouldn't have childcare... And supervision: how are they being supervised? Do they have colleagues they can work with?”

Mother, working full-time, four-month-old child, couple

Given the importance of reviews and recommendations of childcare settings to parents using formal childcare, parents who did not know anyone else who used a childminder also reported that this was a deterrent. Not knowing anyone who used a childminder meant that these parents could not benefit from positive feedback which could help to

address their concerns about using a childminder. This was felt particularly strongly by parents who received a positive recommendation for a nursery

Considered using a childminder but did not

Parents who had considered using a childminder but decided not to, experienced practical barriers to doing so: lack of local availability, cost and inability to meet childcare needs. These barriers are discussed in turn below.

Parents who had wanted to use a childminder but could not find one cited **lack of local availability**. One parent reported that she felt a lot of childminders had left the profession recently. Linked to this, parents wanted their childcare to be as local as possible, to minimise the time taken to drop off and pick their child(ren) up. If there was no local childminder available, parents would not use one.

“There just weren't many childminders around when I looked.”

Mother, not working, 10-year-old child, couple

Not all parents got to the point of checking the **costs** of childminders, because of their wider barriers to using one. Amongst parents who assumed or knew that a childminder would be cheaper than a nursery but had wider barriers to using one, the lower price was not enough to encourage them to find out more or consider using a childminder. Price was not the sole determiner of whether or not parents used a particular setting. Perceptions of quality and meeting their needs for childcare were the key determinants. One parent who did explore the costs of a childminder reported that it was more expensive than a nursery. In this context, and given wider concerns about using a childminder, they opted to go for the nursery which was seen as a better offer overall.

Finally, parents of school-age children who were not using a childminder felt that they did **not fully meet their needs**. They felt that using an after-school club was easier (as the children stayed at school) and cheaper. Parents who were now working from home reported that school-age children could come home after school instead of using any after-school childcare.

Parents who were using childminders

Amongst parents who were using childminders they were seen as offering effective and flexible care; being highly personalised; appropriate for young children; cheaper than alternatives and / or had been recommended.

A small number of parents reported using a childminder to provide unplanned after-school or holiday care. These parents felt that their childminders offered effective and flexible care and appreciated the convenience and flexibility offered.

“It's really convenient. It's literally when I haven't got any other option. I just need someone to pick up from school this one night and give my son his tea...because I'm really looking for quality and convenience I don't really factor affordability into it. It's whatever fits in with what I need.”

Mother, working full-time, seven-year-old child, single

Some parents using a childminder felt that they offered more financial flexibility than a nursery because they were able to pay for specific sessions, rather than having to commit to using a certain amount of hours over a month.

Parents who used childminders regularly for pre-school age children felt that the smaller setting meant their child and the carer would have a stronger bond and closer relationship. They also felt that a childminder was more likely to offer activities and trips away from the setting than a nursery.

Childminding was also seen as more suitable for very young children due to its homely setting and a closer relationship with one key adult. A small number of parents of children under two years old who had found that nearby nurseries only accepted children aged two and above reported that a childminder was their only option.

Parents who reported that a childminder was cheaper than a nursery felt that this was a benefit. However, while cost was an important factor in making using a childminder a viable option it was not reported amongst these parents as being the most important reason. Parents in this sample felt that getting the right setting was most important and would not prioritise cost if they felt an environment was unsuitable.

Finally, parents using formal childcare reported that personal recommendations carry a lot of weight when choosing a childcare provider and this was also the case for childminders. Parents who received a positive recommendation for a local childminder or knew one personally had explored the option of using that specific childminder. These recommendations or positive perceptions were seen as being specific to the individual childminder and so tended to not influence a participant's opinion on childminders more widely. When the childminder was not a stranger to a parent, these concerns were not present. These examples illustrate the important role that personal familiarity and trust play in shaping parents' impressions of childcare providers and particularly childminders.

Use of childcare for school aged children

Participants in this study were using three types of childcare for school age children: Wraparound childcare, Out-of-school Settings (OOSS) and holiday childcare.

Wraparound childcare refers to childcare immediately before / after a standard school day. Examples were breakfast clubs, afterschool clubs and homework clubs.

**“Lot of activities [which are] self-sufficient for the children.
Drawing, writing, and playing a game [for example].”**

Father, working full-time, eleven-year-old child, couple

OOSS refers to activities that children do before and after school or at the weekend, for example: sports clubs (football, swimming, athletics, karate), Brownies, Scouts, drama, music and language classes.

Finally, **holiday childcare** refers to the childcare parents used during school holiday periods, in the absence of school, for example, sport camps.

The main distinction between wraparound and holiday childcare, and OOSS was the role each played in supporting parents in employment with their work.

No childcare

Parents who were not using childcare for school-aged children either were not working, were working from home or organised ‘care clubs’ with other parents to share after-school childcare. Parents using this type of arrangement were informally caring for another child after school once or twice a week until their parent(s) could pick them up. Their child, in turn, would go to the other child’s house after school.

Wraparound childcare

Wraparound childcare was used by working parents to extend their children’s school days and in turn, their own working days. Parents using wraparound childcare reported that the activities offered were of secondary importance to the necessity of additional childcare after school, convenience and affordability. This was because parents in this sample using wraparound childcare reflected that the activities on offer through wraparound childcare were not, in their opinion, enrichment focused. Parents reported booking wraparound childcare directly with the school through smartphone apps or email.

Out of school settings Activities

OOSS activities were rarely conceived as childcare by parents, and much more as activities for the child’s own benefit and enrichment. For OOSS, parents were often present and / or involved with their child(ren). For example, parents spoke of picking up children from school, driving them to their OOSS and waiting for the activity to end. This suggests that these types of activities do not provide parents with extra time for work but that parents are involved in the activity. As such, parents seldom tended to perceive OOSS as childcare.

“The after-school club is something that allows me to continue working full-time and to fulfil me professionally. The clubs that my

children do, like gymnastics, piano, swimming, scouts, they do loads... these are there for their [the children's] own personal development. They are not for me. They are for them to develop as social human beings. They don't provide any extra care. They provide an opportunity for them to grow and learn."

Mother, working full-time, nine-year-old child, couple

Some parents were also using 'care club' arrangements to facilitate use of OOSS. In this case, when multiple children from different families were attending the same activities, the parents would take it in turns to take them / pick them up. For example, parents would take turns to take the children to the activity, so they did the drop off/pick up once in a month (for example). If the children were attending multiple activities together, each set of parents was responsible for transporting the children to one activity. For instance, one set of parents would take the children to their activity on a Monday and the other would take them to an activity on a Tuesday.

Parents also perceived that OOSS activities had a role in improving children's social skills. Parents were keen for children to attend these activities as they would be able to develop their social skills with other children and adults outside of the home and school context.

The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting lockdowns and restrictions on school attendance, on children's social skills was mentioned by some parents too. This is because families and friendships groups were not able to interact as usual during the lockdowns, and parents noticed negative impacts on their children's wellbeing. Parents were aware of the importance of children socialising with people (young and old) outside of the home environment for their development. This was true for children of all ages. Overall, parents were conscious about the lack of socialisation for their child(ren) during the periods of social distancing and keen to make up for this. Therefore, OOSS activities played an important role to counter these experiences. In contrast, there were also parents whose children had stopped their OOSS activities during the pandemic and not restarted them. This was due to financial reasons and also because this family felt life was more relaxed not taking the children to multiple activities each week.

"My daughter did not socialise with other children during the pandemic. So, ballet was a good way of expanding her friendship group outside school and starting a future interest."

Mother, not working, five year old child, couple

Finally, there was a group of parents who appreciated OOSS for their functional and practical purposes. Families living in more suburban environments, whose children started to go out (to and from school, for example) on their own, valued OOSS like karate clubs as important formative experiences.

“Self-defence really, he was going to secondary school and taking bus on his own, so we wanted him learn some self-defence.”

Mother, working full-time, 12 year old child, couple

Holiday childcare

Working parents of school-age children were using holiday childcare to enable them to work during school holidays, particularly the summer. As such, holiday childcare was seen primarily as an extension of the wraparound childcare these parents used during the school term. However, it provided some of the enrichment benefits that parents attributed to OOSS. The type of activities that children would do were more akin to those done in an OOSS, sports and outdoors activities being the most common. Parents using holiday childcare also reported that the child’s preference was influential in determining the type of holiday childcare used.

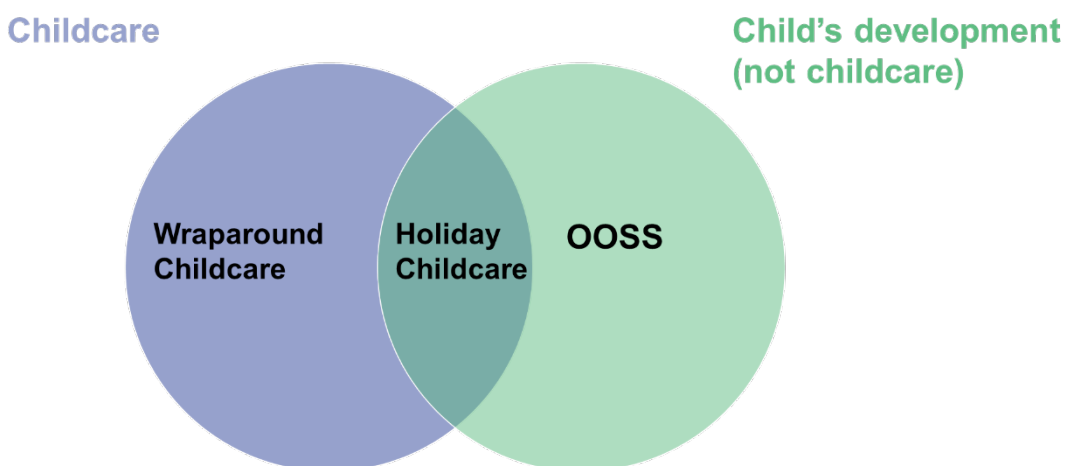


Figure 1.1: Parental perceptions of different types of childcare / activities

In summary, wraparound childcare was seen as being mostly beneficial to parents, whilst OOSS activities were more for the children’s benefit. Holiday childcare was mostly valued for its childcare provision, but it was also seen as providing enrichment benefits.

Decision making about childcare

Decision making depended on the type of childcare and, for parents of school-age children, was different depending on whether parents were discussing wraparound or OOSS. Convenience was a common theme for wraparound and holiday childcare.

Parents using wraparound childcare (childcare immediately before / after a standard school day) reported opting for the most convenient and practical solution. This was typically wraparound care provided by the school. However, not all schools offer wraparound childcare, which meant parents had to look elsewhere, such as a

childminder³. Although not common across our sample, there were parents living in rural areas who reported using childminders to provide after-school care. Finally, the cost and affordability of wraparound childcare played a role in decision making too. Parental priorities when choosing wraparound care included quality of activities on offer, affordability, and convenience. As noted above, availability was also a key determiner of use.

“[The childminder is] really convenient. It is literally when I haven't got any other option. I just need someone to pick [my child] up from school this one night and give [him] his tea. Because I'm really looking for quality and convenience, I don't really factor affordability into it. It's whatever fits in with what I need.”

Mother, working full-time, 7-year-old child, lone parent

For OOSS activities (activities that children do after school or at the weekend), children's preferences were more at the forefront of decision making, as these were perceived more as enrichment than childcare. As such, the child's preference, and perceived enrichment benefits, were reported as being more important than convenience, cost, or being able to use government childcare costs funding schemes to pay for the activities. Parents did not always know whether or not they could use childcare funding schemes for their child(ren)'s OOSS activities.

“I don't see this as childcare, it's based on my daughter's interest and it's enrichment...I don't even know if it's Ofsted [registered]...but it is arranged by the school and the PE teacher runs it.”

Mother, not working, ten-year-old child, couple

“[Being able to use the] Childcare voucher was not the deciding factor, the fact that my child is happy somewhere is more important.”

Mother, working part-time, thirteen-year-old child, lone parent

Decision making for holiday childcare involved a combination of practical and child preference factors. This reflected the hybrid view that parents had of this type of childcare, seeing it as a combination of enrichment and childcare. Holiday childcare remained primarily a way for parents to continue working, and as such, it had to meet their needs for accessibility, availability and affordability. However, parents also engaged their child(ren) to find out which activities they would prefer. For example, one family who lived in a flat without a garden sent their child to a holiday childcare setting that provided camping opportunities. This was to provide their child with the opportunity to spend more

³ 2% of school-age children use a childminder (*Child and Early Years Survey of Parents, 2021*)

time outdoors during the holiday period, which was something they viewed as important yet lacking throughout the school year.

Paying for school age childcare

When probed about their awareness and use of government funding, parents who were aware of the different offers were using them.

Tax Free Childcare (TFC), Universal Credit (UC) Childcare Costs Support and Childcare vouchers were cited as ways of paying for wraparound childcare and holiday childcare when possible. Parents who knew that they could use TFC or UC Childcare Costs Support for wraparound childcare did so. Parents who were using wraparound childcare provided by the school their child(ren) attended usually commented on how affordable they perceived this to be.

These methods were used by some parents for OOSS activities too, if they were accepted. Parents did not always know whether this was possible. Parents who knew about the government childcare funding options but were not using them to pay for OOSS assumed that the provider would tell them if they could accept payment through these methods. Parents did not raise issues about paying for OOSS directly.

“For wraparound and after-school childcare it’s always been vouchers. I never pay with cash. For the clubs and holiday camps I will also use vouchers, if I am allowed to do so. That’s my preferred way of paying. But if not, I will just pay with cash yes.”

Mother, working full time, 9-year-old child, couple

Reasons for not using school age childcare

Parents’ working conditions and child(ren)’s age were the primary factors for parents not using childcare for their school age children.

Parents who did not work at all, who worked solely during school hours or who could have the children at home with them after school did not need extra, formal childcare outside of school hours. This was particularly true for wraparound childcare. For those who were not working, the affordability of wraparound childcare and lack of need were reasons for not using them.

Children aged 11 and over were typically judged to be more independent and capable of being by themselves, if necessary, after school. Parents of these older children were more comfortable letting their children walk home from school unaccompanied. Parents with children this age also commented that after school and holiday activities were less common for secondary-school age children

Parents of children with special education needs or disability (SEND) expressed concerns that not all wraparound childcare providers cater for children with these needs. This reduced the availability of this type of childcare for these families and was a reason for not using it.

Parents' ideal after-school childcare offer combined the flexibility, cost and ease of wraparound childcare based at the school (to allow them to continue working), with the enjoyment of OOSS activities focused on the child(ren)'s enjoyment and development. At present, for working parents, wraparound childcare was seen as primarily extending their working day but not necessarily providing the child(ren) with an enriching experience. Parents felt that if they could have a wraparound childcare option which enabled them to keep working and provided enrichment benefits for their child(ren), this would be the best of both worlds. For example, one parent referred to being envious of children at private schools where the after-school activities were focused on skills development and enrichment.

Regulation and safeguarding in out-of-school settings (OOSS)

Parents using OOSS felt confident that they were regulated, although they typically did not know who by. Parents in our sample had not experienced any need to raise or escalate concerns about an OOSS but felt that they would know who to contact in case of an emergency or concern.

This confidence stemmed from parents having been asked to read and complete forms concerning the safety, regulations and insurance policy of the activities they used. For example, one parent sending their daughter to Brownies, had been provided with safeguarding forms ahead of overnight trips.

Parents uniformly felt that the first point of call would be the staff working at the club, then for any escalation, the club manager, owner or provider. Parents thought that the school would be responsible for activities held on the school premises, as these were assumed to be associated with the school. For activities held outside of school, parents believed the local authority would have overall responsibility.

“I would initially report [an issue] to the [OOSS] staff, and see how they respond. I would then escalate it to my local authority, if necessary.”

Mother, not working, twelve-year-old child, lone parent

Some parents who were not using OOSS activities did express some minor concerns about the security and safety of certain settings that the parent was more sceptical about. These parents felt it was harder to know who worked with their children during these activities, making it harder to have a full picture of the safety of their children. However,

overall, parents using OOSS did not express reservations or barriers to doing so, and as noted, had high levels of trust in the providers.

Childcare funding and the cost of living⁴

Parents of pre-school aged children using formal childcare had the highest childcare costs, particularly those who did not have any informal childcare support. There were examples of parents in our sample who were using multiple types of government funding offers who said that without these they would not be able to afford childcare. The 30 hours free childcare offer for three- and four-year-olds was seen as being particularly beneficial.

Parents using more than one type of government childcare funding offer did not report any specific difficulties in managing these together. They tended to be very aware of the amount of funding and the mechanics for receiving it. For example, parents using UC childcare costs support knew the day of the month they would receive the funding. These parents spoke of using calendars and agendas to keep track of when the money would arrive and did not raise any issues in the management of these schedules.

Those using the 15 or 30 hours free childcare offers spoke positively of the involvement of their local authorities in supporting childcare funding. Parents using these offers found that doing so required very little of them, past the initial set up.

Parents using Tax Free Childcare were similarly comfortable with its technicalities and reported no issues managing this. Parents of school-age children who were using Tax Free Childcare to pay for wraparound childcare reported finding this beneficial. However, their childcare costs were substantially lower than those using childcare for pre-school children. As such, the saving was seen as being less impactful.

Parents also expressed good understanding of what was required of them to continue to receive their funding. For example, one parent receiving the 30 funded hours knew exactly when they had to reconfirm their eligibility.

Concerns about increases to the cost of living were expressed. Those who had access to informal childcare reported that, if they needed to, they would try to save money by increasing their informal childcare use and reducing their use of formal childcare. However, those using solely formal childcare for pre-school children had little to no flexibility in the amount of childcare they used, as they needed it to work. These parents reported that increases in the cost of living would cause them to cut back in other areas but that their childcare use would remain consistent. Parents whose children were about to become eligible for the 30 hours free childcare for three-year-olds reported that this would have a strongly positive impact on the affordability of their childcare. Parents of school age children were likely to say as recognised that as they were using less formal childcare, they did not have to balance childcare costs against increases in the cost of

⁴ Wave 11 of the DfE Parent's Childcare Poll showed that, when asked what change to childcare provision would be most helpful for them, 32% of parents identified more affordable childcare.

living. They acknowledged that this balance would be more difficult for parents with pre-school age children. Parents using OOSS activities for their children said that these may be reduced if their living costs increased.

Family Hubs

Parents in our sample demonstrated little awareness of Family Hubs. Amongst parents who had younger children or were familiar with these services, they were assumed to be similar to Sure Start or Children's Centres. Parents thought they would offer support to families with young children, such as baby weighing and stay and play sessions for parents and children. There was some association with them being aimed at lower income families.

Parents with older children were pleasantly surprised to hear that they would offer services and support for families with older children as well and for those who had special educational needs and / or disability (SEND).

Parents were open and receptive to using Family Hubs as long as they were available and accessible to them. For this reason, an online service was seen as beneficial and appropriate for information-based services. However, parents expressed preferences for in-person options for some services, such as children's play activities, meeting other parents and for more in-depth or personalised advice.

Branding considerations

Parents felt that joint branding for Family Hubs was most appropriate, combining the Local Authority, Department for Education (DfE) and Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) or Start for Life.

Parents felt it was important that the branding demonstrated that the service was local and therefore relevant to them and their local area. Including the Local Authority in the branding was seen to show this.

However, it was also important that the service was widely recognised, so that if families moved to a new area, they would be able to recognise the service and what it offered. A nationally recognised Government Department or service, such as the DfE, DHSC or Start for Life helped to convey this.

For a Government branding, DfE and DHSC were seen as the Departments with most relevance for the services on offer and which were most well-known and recognised.

Conclusions

Use and perceptions of childcare

Parents of children of all ages demonstrated a high degree of confidence in the regulations in place for childcare for pre-school and school age children. This meant that they were able to make a more emotional or intuitive assessment of settings, because they trusted that the setting was complying with the relevant regulations and that these were appropriate.

For parents of pre-school age children, staff numbers, staff retention and the physical security of the childcare setting were all key factors which they considered when assessing quality. Parents assessed settings in a holistic way, and staff numbers and how they engaged with the children were central to this.

Staff retention was also an important quality indicator. It was seen as suggesting that the setting was well run. Staff retention also enabled the children to form a strong emotional bond with their carers, which was also seen as beneficial for children and parents.

Recommendations were central to parental perceptions of quality of childcare settings. Positive recommendations from other parents, friends or family were most influential and Ofsted reports were used to verify these informal recommendations.

Perceptions of childminders

Parents who were not using childminders and had not considered doing so knew little about them. They perceived childminders to be one adult caring for multiple children in their own home. This was seen as risky, as parents wondered what would happen if one child was ill or needed more attention and who would look after the other children. This model was also seen as offering less availability for parents, as there would not be anyone to look after their child if the childminder was ill or on holiday. Finally, there was a lack of awareness of the regulations for childminders and a belief that these were less stringent than for nurseries and that they were less able to prepare children for school.

Parents who were using childminders spoke positively of their flexibility, ability to accommodate requests and the strong relationship between the child and the childminder. The homely setting was seen as particularly appropriate for younger children, such as those under two.

Childcare for school age children

Parents were using wraparound childcare (before and after-school clubs and childminders) and school holiday clubs for the same reason that parents of pre-school age children did: to enable them to work. These types of childcare were seen as essential to extending the school day so that parents could finish their working day. Ease

of use was important and so school-based wraparound care was preferred. This was also seen as being affordably priced.

Out-of-school setting activities (OOSS) were not seen as childcare. They were seen as enrichment activities for the benefit of the child. The main reason for this was that they required the parent to stop working, take the child to the activity and bring them home afterwards. These types of activities were determined by the child's interests.

Cost of living and childcare use

In response to increases in the cost of living, parents who were using informal childcare and needed to save money hoped to reduce their use of formal childcare use and increase use of informal childcare. However, parents have little flexibility in the childcare they use as it is determined by their working hours. Extra-curricular activities were more likely to be reduced to save money, if needed.

Family Hubs

There was low awareness of Family Hubs. Parents felt they sounded similar to children's centres and expected the offer to be similar. Emphasis would need to be placed on the wider service offer of Family Hubs to ensure that families identify the service as relevant to them.

Parents felt that Family Hubs would benefit from having national and local branding, to demonstrate it was a locally tailored, national service. Appropriate organisations included the Local Authority, DfE and Start for Life. The latter two organisations were seen as appropriate because they are aimed at supporting families and children.

Appendix

Achieved sample

In total, 55 parents were interviewed. The table below shows a breakdown of the achieved sample of parents and quotas.

	Up to 1 year olds	1 to 2 year olds	3 to 4 year olds	4- to 11-year olds	12 to 14 year olds	Total
Formal childcare including after school and holiday clubs	0	3	6	3	2	14
Informal childcare only	2	3	1	2	2	10
Both formal and informal childcare	1	6	3	3	2	15
No childcare	4	2	2	3	5	16
Total per age group	7	14	12	11	11	55



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