
CHILDCARE AND EARLY YEARS SURVEY 2007: PARENTS' USE, VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

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Introduction

Comprehensive data on parents' take-up, views and experiences of childcare has been collected in England since the late 1990s to monitor the effectiveness of the 1998 National Childcare Strategy and to inform policy developments in this area. The 2007 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents is the most recent wave in the series which has produced these data, and provides up-to-date information to assess the impact of the Ten Year Childcare Strategy and some important policy initiatives introduced since the last survey was carried out in 2004.

Key Findings

- The 2007 survey found that 84% of families had used some form of childcare or early years provision - be it regular or ad hoc - **in the last year**. Over that period, a greater proportion of families had used informal care (65%) than formal provision (54%).
- When looking at the **last week**, the study found that 63% of families had used childcare or early years provision. Take-up of formal and informal childcare was very similar (40% and 39% respectively).
- The rise in take-up of early years education and other formal childcare identified in the 2004 survey has not continued. Take-up of childcare services has not increased since then, even in relation to out-of-school provision, where there has been an increase in supply following the introduction of Extended Schools.
- Take-up of formal childcare and early years education varied according to children's age; take-up was highest among 3 and 4 year olds (85%), followed by children under 3 (38%). However, take-up of childcare and early years education remained lower than average among low income families, lone parents and ethnic minority groups.
- The average childcare cost to parents varied widely between different provider types and regions. Nannies and day nurseries were the most expensive providers and parents in London and the South East reported the highest hourly costs.
- As it was found in 2004, cost of childcare was a barrier to take-up for some parents, particularly low income families and lone parents. Significant minorities also mentioned as barriers an inadequate number of childcare places and insufficient services during school holidays, or outside standard hours (i.e. before 8am or after 6pm) and days (i.e. at the weekend).
- Views on the affordability and availability of local childcare have improved slightly between 2004 and 2007. The proportion of parents who thought that childcare affordability in their local area was very good or fairly good rose from 35% to 38% and the proportion who thought that there were the right number of childcare places locally increased from 40% to 44%.
- A lack of information might have hindered take-up of childcare. Over a third of parents would like more information about childcare services. There was a great deal of reliance on 'word of mouth' for childcare information and low use of official information sources, namely Children's Information Services and ChildcareLink.
- There was a high level of parental satisfaction with both the quality of the provider they used, and more generally with childcare and early years services in their area.

Methodology

Data for the 2007 survey was collected from just under 7,200 parents with children aged 14 or under in England. The parents, who were randomly selected from Child Benefit records, were interviewed between January 2007 and early April 2007. The study used a very inclusive definition of 'childcare and early years provision', which included any time a child was not with the resident parents (or their current partner) or at school. Hence this covered informal care, such as grandparents, as well as formal care. The survey obtained a broad picture of take-up of childcare and early years provision in the last year for all children in the family. More detailed questions about the nature of childcare used, views on providers and unmet demand focused on a randomly selected child and the care she or he received in the last week

Main findings

Who uses childcare and early years provision?

84% of families had used some form of childcare or early years provision - be it regular or ad hoc - ***in the last year***. Over that period, a greater proportion of families had used informal care (65%) than formal provision (54%). There has been a slight drop in the use of formal childcare in the last year, in 2004 this was reported by 57% of parents.

The three most commonly used childcare providers in the last year were all informal. Just under half of families (47%) had used grandparents, around a fifth had used other relatives (19%) and friends or neighbours (19%). Among the formal providers used in the last year families were most likely to report using a breakfast or after school club (17%); this figure has not changed since 2004.

When looking at the ***last week***, we found that 63% of families had used childcare or early years provision. 40% of parents had used formal provision, a very similar figure to that found in 2004, while use of informal care dropped slightly, this was reported by 39% in 2007, compared with 42% in 2004.

Take-up of formal childcare and early years education varied according to children's age:

- Take-up was highest among 3 and 4 year olds (85%), followed by children under 3 (38%).
- Primary school children were considerably more likely to have attended a formal setting (34% of 5-7 year olds and 22% of 8-11 year olds) than secondary school children (7% of 12-14 year olds).

Overall couples and lone parents were equally likely to have used childcare. However, couples were more likely than lone parents to have used formal care (43% and 34% respectively), while lone parents were more likely than couples to have used informal care (45% and 37% respectively).

When looking at working hours, we found that:

- Among dual-earning families where one parent was working full-time, the more hours the other parent worked, the more likely they were to use informal care.
- Lone parents working 16 or more hours a week were the most likely to use formal care, two-fifths had used formal childcare, compared with one-fifth of lone parents working fewer than 16 hours.
- Atypical working hours (before 8am or past 6pm on a weekday, or any time at the weekend) were associated with higher than average use of informal care.

Why do parents use childcare and early years provision?

The survey explored take-up of childcare for economic reasons (i.e. so that parents could work, look for a job or study) and for reasons related to children's educational development:

- A higher proportion of families had used some form of childcare for economic reasons (36%) than had done so for reasons connected with their child's educational development (25%).
- A higher proportion of parents reported using informal provision for economic reasons (23%) than reported using formal provision for these reasons (20%). Grandparents were the provider most likely to be used for economic reasons.

The proportion of families using childcare who reported doing so for economic reasons varied according to family characteristics:

- Among working families, lone parents were the most likely to have used childcare for economic reasons; 85% reported this, compared with 75% of dual-earning couples.
- Use of childcare for economic reasons was also associated with higher income parents and families living in less deprived areas, all groups who were more likely to be in work.

The proportion of families using formal childcare for educational reasons also varied by socio-demographic characteristics:

- Children aged 3 or 4 were the most likely to have used childcare for educational reasons (78%).
- Low income families were more likely to give educational reasons for using childcare than higher income families (47% and 40% respectively).

Patterns of use of childcare and early years provision

The survey explored patterns of use of childcare and early years provision, in terms of the number of providers used, as well as the number of days and the timing of sessions. The patterns emerging in 2007 were very similar to those found in 2004.

Use of multiple carers was common, with 42% of children being looked after by more than one provider in the last week.

When looking at the number of days a week children received some provision we found that;

- 28% of children had received childcare on 5 days of the week, 17% on 2 days and 17% on one day only.
- Early years services were most likely to be used on 5 days of the week, while informal care was most likely to be used on just one day of the week, reflecting its more ad-hoc nature.

The results on use of childcare at different times show that:

- Weekday daytime (9am to 3.29pm) and weekday late afternoon (3.30pm to 5.59pm) were the most common times for the use of childcare, with just under two-thirds of children

who had used childcare in the last week having used it during those periods.

- Similar levels of use were reported for weekday evening (6pm to 9.59pm) (33%), weekday early morning (6am to 8.59am) (32%) and at the weekend (29%).
- Predictably, the least likely time to be using childcare was at night (10pm to 5.59am) (12%).

The timing of sessions does of course vary hugely by provider type. Reflecting the greater flexibility of informal care, children were considerably more likely to have received informal care than formal provision at the weekend and from late afternoon onwards during the week.

The cost of childcare and early years provision

Just over half of families (55%) who had used childcare in the last week had made a payment to at least one of their providers, a similar proportion to 2004 (53%).

Looking at how much parents paid for childcare (inclusive of subsidies, such as money paid by an employer or the local authority):

- The median weekly spend on childcare by families was £27, the median hourly cost was £1.71 and the mean hourly cost was £2.42¹.
- Costs varied considerably by provider types, parents paid the highest hourly rate to nannies (a median of £4.68 and a mean of £5.33), day nurseries (median £3.75, mean 4.22) and childminders (median £3.40, mean £4.03).
- Costs also varied by region, with the highest hourly cost found in London (a mean of £3.50) and the South East (a mean of £3.03).

Higher costs were associated with a number of family characteristics, partly reflecting the use of different types of providers. Working parents paid more for childcare than non-working parents and families in the top income band also spent more on childcare than families in the bottom income group.

¹ The median cost is less influenced by extreme, outlying values than the mean, however mean figures are necessary to allow for any differences between sub-groups to be tested for statistical significance.

When looking at financial help to pay for childcare, we found that:

- Take-up of the childcare element among those receiving the Working Tax Credit (WTC) was low, as in 2004, this was claimed by only 1 in 10 families receiving WTC.
- 18% of families who had paid for childcare had received other types of financial help, this represents a slight increase since 2004, when this was reported by 15% of families.
- The most common source of financial help was the Local Education Authority, reported by 61% of parents who had received financial help.
- 19% of parents received help from their employer, this represents a substantial increase since 2004, when the equivalent figure was 7%. This is likely to reflect the effect of the 2005 reforms of the tax and National Insurance exemptions for employer supported childcare, which have made it more attractive for employers to offer financial help with childcare costs.

Barriers to using childcare and early years provision

The survey explored parents' views on the affordability, availability and quality of childcare in their area, and to what extent cost and the lack of places might constitute barriers to the use of childcare and to work. The results show that:

- Views on the affordability and availability of local childcare have improved slightly between 2004 and 2007. However, a substantial minority of parents still thought that affordability was fairly or very poor (36%) and that there were not enough childcare places in their local area (37%).
- Views on the quality of childcare were more positive, with 63% of parents rating the quality of local childcare services as very or fairly good.
- For a significant minority a lack of affordable childcare was cited as a reason for not using it (13% of those not using childcare said this was a reason) and for not working (17% said they could not find childcare that would make working worthwhile).

In terms of the extent to which lack of provision was a barrier to parents using childcare or to working, the evidence is mixed. It was not often cited unprompted as a reason for not using childcare or not working. However, when asked whether they would work if they could arrange 'good quality childcare which was convenient, reliable and affordable', 51% of non-working parents said that they would.

There appeared to be significant levels of unmet demand for formal childcare services during less traditional times:

- 42% of parents whose main provider did not open in the school holidays said they would like it to; there has been no statistically significant change since 2004.
- A substantial minority of parents who worked atypical hours reported problems with their childcare arrangements at these times, and lone parents were particularly likely to report difficulties.

A lack of information may be a barrier to parents' use of childcare and early years provision. When asked directly, 35% of parents felt that they would like more information about childcare services in their local area. What is particularly interesting is the reliance on 'word of mouth' for obtaining information about all kinds of childcare and early years provision (36% cited this source), coupled with low use of two of the key government-led information sources, namely Children's Information Services and ChildcareLink (only 7% and 2% respectively had used these sources in the previous year).

Parents' views on their childcare and early years providers

Parents of *pre-school age children* were asked their views about improvements to different aspects of their provider, from buildings and premises to staff qualifications:

- 60% of parents using an early years group setting and 89% using a childminder stated that no improvements were needed at their provider.
- The most frequently cited aspects in need of improvement were buildings and premises, and outdoor play and activities.

According to parental reports the majority of formal providers used by pre-school children were encouraging the development of a range of skills identified in the Foundation Stage curriculum:

- 93% of parents using group settings and 80% of those using childminders reported that their provider was encouraging children to recognise letters, words, numbers or shapes.
- 95% of parents who used group providers and 80% who used childminders said the providers were trying to get children interested in books.
- 87% of those using group settings and 78% of those using childminders reported that the providers were encouraging children to find out about animals and plants.

Most parents of **school age children** were also largely content with their settings; 86% of these parents using childminders, 72% using out-of-school clubs and 59% using reception classes could suggest no improvements.

Given the government's drive to integrate family services at single sites through initiatives such as Children's Centres and Extended Schools the survey explored the availability of additional family services at childcare settings. Among parents with **pre-school children**, we found that:

- 62% said there were no additional services (e.g. health services, parenting classes) available at their provider, the figure is almost identical to that reported in 2004.
- When these services were not available at the setting a substantial number of parents said they would like to see them available, with health services being most likely to be mentioned (25%), followed by advice and support for parents, and courses or training (each mentioned by 16%).

The findings on additional family services available at settings used by **school age children** show that:

- These were considerably less likely to be available at out-of-school clubs; 77% of parents using out-of-school clubs said additional family services were not available; the equivalent figure for parents using a reception class was 47%.
- When services were available, take-up for most was higher among parents using reception classes than those using out-of-school clubs.

Conclusions

A key message from this study is that the rise in the use of formal care identified in the 2004 survey has not continued; in 2007 the same proportion of families had used formal care in the last week.

A continuing concern is the concentration of 'non-users' of childcare in the lowest income groups, given that a key focus of the Ten Year Childcare Strategy is increasing the use of formal care amongst disadvantaged families, with the ultimate aim of facilitating parents' move into work and hence alleviating poverty. Disadvantaged families are more likely to cite affordability as a barrier and awareness is also an issue, as their lower use of sources of information like ChildcareLink and Children's Information Services indicate.

When looking at the take-up of the free entitlement to early years education among 3 and 4 year olds we found that this was high (86% of eligible 3 and 4 year olds), but it was lower than average among the children most likely to benefit from this, including those from low income families and Asian children.

The use of out-of-school clubs has not changed since 2004. This is despite the roll out of the Extended Schools programme, which has led to an increase in supply of out-of-school provision.

Despite a small improvement in parents' views on the affordability of childcare, cost remains an important barrier to the use of childcare for some parents, especially large families and those with younger children. The affordability of childcare continues to be a barrier to work among a substantial minority of non-working parents.

The proportion of families receiving financial help has increased and this is largely due to the increase in financial help from employers. This reflects the improvements from 2005 in the tax and National Insurance advantages for employers offering support with childcare, and the subsequent increase in employers offering support. However, the higher income groups are the ones benefiting most here, as higher rate tax payers are more likely to receive employer supported childcare.

Although the number of childcare places and vacancies has been increasing in recent years, a substantial minority of parents think there are not enough places in their area. This may be because the cost of the places available, as well as their

accessibility, has an impact on parents' views of availability, and parents are identifying gaps in provision in terms of suitable and affordable care.

A particular area for concern remains availability of provision during holidays and atypical hours. Despite the growth of Extended Schools, there was no change in the proportion of parents who reported that their main provider was open during school holidays and need for holiday opening remains high. In addition, many parents, particularly lone parents, working atypical hours continue to report difficulties in arranging childcare at these times.

Finally, it is worth highlighting again the important role that informal care has, particularly the continued reliance on grandparents for (largely unpaid) childcare.

The evidence suggests overall that the Ten Year Childcare Strategy has not had as much impact as intended, particularly in relation to the most disadvantaged children. Nevertheless, policy plans such as the extension of the free entitlement and the roll out of the Extended Schools programme might contribute to a higher take-up of childcare by families. This report only provides an initial update on parents' views and experiences of childcare and early years provision, the 2008 wave of the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents will provide further evidence.

Additional information

Copies of the full report (DCSF-RR025) priced at £4.95 are available by phoning the DCSF Orderline on 0845 60 222 60.

Copies of this Research Brief (DCSF-RB025) are available free of charge by contacting the above telephone number.

The full report and research brief can be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Anna Upson, FL4-ARD,DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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