

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

AN EYE VIEW SERIES REPORT

20
23



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VIEW



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The work has been kindly sponsored for Children's Alliance by Babbu.

INTRODUCTION: The important role of families in the early years

Sue Atkins, an internationally recognised parenting expert, author and broadcaster, offers practical guidance on enabling children's happiness, confidence and resilience from early to teenage years

Families play a critical role in the early years of a child's life; a time when they are experiencing rapid growth and development in all areas including physical, cognitive, social and emotional development.

The family is the primary source of a child's support during this time and it is essential for parents and caregivers to provide a nurturing, safe and stable environment that fosters growth and development.

Parents and caregivers can support children's physical development by ensuring that they receive good nutrition, adequate sleep and opportunities for regular physical activity. They can also help children to develop their cognitive skills by providing for exploration, play and learning. This can include reading to children, engaging in age-appropriate activities and encouraging a rich learning environment.

In addition to supporting physical and cognitive development, families also play a critical role in children's social and emotional development. By giving love, support and guidance, parents and caregivers help children to develop positive relationships with others, build self esteem and learn to regulate their emotions.

Research has shown that children who have supportive families during their early years are more likely to progress academically and socially at later stages in their lives. Conversely, children who experience neglect or abuse during this time are more likely to struggle with physical, cognitive and mental health and social and emotional issues.

Currently, support for families is very fragmented across the UK and often fails to reach the very families most in need of it. Therefore, it is crucial to offer practical, non-judgemental advice, support and guidance to parents in the early years of their child's life.

To conclude, families play an essential role in the earliest years of children's lives. With love, support and guidance, parents and caregivers can help them to develop physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally. If families are enabled to prioritise their children's wellbeing during this critical period, they will provide a strong foundation for their later happiness, healthiness and achievement.

I am thrilled to introduce this groundbreaking report; highlighting the essential significance of the family in a child's early educational development.

The Needs of the Family

Chapter 1



Chapter One: The Needs of the Family

'Where parents and carers are actively encouraged to participate confidently in their children's learning and healthy development, the outcomes for children will be at their best.'

Tickell C, 2011, *'The Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health and Learning'*
London: Crown

Children's earliest home environment experiences reflect interaction with parents or carers and they derive benefit most when it is supportive, Tickell as above. Research demonstrates a correlation between socioeconomic background, parent level of education and children's outcomes; parents with higher levels of education and income themselves are likelier to engage their children in beneficial activities and provide a stimulating home background, Gutman LM and Feinstein L, 2007, *'Parenting Behaviours and Children's Development from Infancy to Early Childhood: changes, continuities and contributions'*, London: Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning.

Parenting is one of the most important roles that is taken on by any adult but also one in which there is no formal training. Ensuring that families are offered emotional and practical support via an integrated approach from professionals to the parent/carer as the first 'educator' will be of benefit not only to the child but to the family as a whole.

Pedagogical engagement for children cannot be 'turned on' like a light switch, but entails long and embedded home nurturing. Yet not every key 'home adult' is anywhere near being in a viable position to enhance a child's educational readiness for their lives as learners. The scope for parents, guardians and carers to play optimised roles in their children's educational identities may appear to be rich, but at present and in practice, it is limited.

High quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) plays an important role in serving the needs of the family. The new Government initiative, gov.uk, 2023, *'How we are growing our 30 hours free childcare offer'*:

<https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/03/17/how-we-are-growing-our-30-hours-free-childcare-offer/>

was launched during a cost-of-living crisis but failed to guarantee high quality childcare for all; disadvantaging the very families most in need of it. Government funding does not enable providers to meet their basic overheads and has led to the decimation of maintained nurseries and an increase in private provision, Solvason C et al, 2020, 'Evidencing the effects of maintained nursery schools' roles in Early Years sector improvements':

<https://tactyc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/MNS-Research-Report.pdf>

During the Covid 19 pandemic, family structures became strained and family income depleted.

Childcare costs rose steeply in the aftermath; exacerbated by the unique combination of global financial and energy crises to the extent that many parents could no longer afford childcare and so relinquished their own employment. In the maintained sector there is always great demand for 'wrap-around' care and providers who would usually support this via earlier opening and later closing times could no longer fund such essential services.

The high-quality childcare-led activities provided by these settings enabled children with few play facilities at home to explore their own interests as well as developing resilience and independence and their loss rebounded inevitably to the detriment of children from less affluent home backgrounds (*Jackson-Reece 2023 Extra Government funding to increase supply of wrap-around care 'will do nothing to support a sector already in crisis,' Nursery World 16th March 2023*). The ongoing difficulties besetting the sector combined with a relentless reduction of public services over the past 10 years have created swamps of deprivation in some areas to the detriment of families' needs:

<https://southyorkshireviolencereductionunit.com/insight/deprivation-what-does-it-mean-to-live-in-a-deprived-area/#:~:text=A%20deprived%20area%20is%20one,years%20is%20a%20good520example>

In order to remain financially viable, settings have not only been forced to increase charges to parents but also to cut costs, Jarvie M et al, 2003, 'Coram Children and Families Annual Childcare Survey 2023':

<file:///C:/Users/vikiv/Downloads/CFC%20Childcare%20Survey%202023%20Section%203%20Current%20pressures.pdf> accessed:27/3/23

One of the ways in which this has been achieved is through cutting the wage bill – in effect, employing staff with lower levels of qualification. England has one of the least qualified ECEC workforces in the developed world while many countries require those who work with young children to be educated to masters level, Christie et al, 2019, 'Early Childhood Education and Care: Workforce Trends and Associated Factors':

<https://www.christie.com/news-resources/publications/early-childhood-education-care-workforce-trends-associated-factors>

The effect of the Covid pandemic on families was particularly severe for those whose members included a child or children with special educational needs and

disabilities (SEND). Support for them simply ceased and early years children were confined to their own home environments where some families were unable to take them out – thus depriving young children of the outdoor play needed in order for them to thrive and be healthy, ‘*SEND: old issues, new issues, next steps 2021*’: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-old-issues-new-issues-next-steps>

Early Years providers work closely in partnership with families to identify and meet the needs of individual children; signposting towards support services as appropriate. However, the lack of funding for SEND aligned with a lack of staff equipped with sufficient specialist expertise means that currently 28% of settings are unable to offer places to children who require additional support, Early Years Alliance, 2022, ‘*Too little, too late*’: <https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/too-little-too-late-report>

As a consequence, those families most in need of help to meet and manage their child’s needs are all too often missing out.

Chronic under funding has created a system which is failing to satisfy the requirements of families; particularly those in areas of economic and social deprivation and those with children who have additional needs. Investment in ECEC as infrastructure to children and their families is essential. In the current market-based system of provision, parents are seen as ‘customers’ who have ‘choice’ over their children’s education. However, such choice is often constrained by where they live, the ages and number of children in the family, parental income and working hours. The entrenched disparity of circumstance means that the more affluent the parent, the more costly (and probably better quality) the care.

The Government has earmarked investment of £300 million across 75 local authorities for the development of Family Hubs – reminiscent of the Sure Start Centres introduced in 1998 across 250 local authorities as ‘one-stop shops’ enabling families at that time to access services and improve life chances, Eisenstadt N, 2011, ‘*Providing a Sure Start: How government discovered early childhood*’, Bristol, Policy Press. However, funding for family services and early intervention has dwindled along with the disbanding of most Sure Start Centres since 2010 and although the Government’s strategy is to incorporate Family Hubs into existing Children’s Centres precisely how this will be done remains unclear.

There is also concern that many councils will be unable to access appropriate support through the funding being offered over the next three years – and that a high number of children and families will fail to receive the help that they need following the challenges of Covid 19, Harle E, 2023, ‘*Family Hubs Roll-Out A ‘Missed Opportunity Social Care and Early Years Leaders Say*’, Children and Young People Now:

<https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/family-hubs-roll-out-a-missed-opportunity-social-care-and-early-years-leaders-say>

Organisations which work with children and families are clear that more childhood investment is urgently required if early years education and care is to continue to support young children’s learning and development.

Children need to have consistency within the family structure to allow their learning to become embedded. The NHS has support for families (starting with the midwife

and health visitor) and can signpost parents to organisations and make referrals to outside agencies who can offer help:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/support-and-services/services-and-support-for-parents>

A 'family' may be that of a single parent family and according to the organisation Gingerbread:

<https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/single-parents-in-2023/>

'88% of single parents are worried they can't pay for household essentials.'

One in five is using credit to afford basic items to support their children; thus 76% of single parent families have debts of over £2,000. Gingerbread estimates that 88% now have mental health issues due to the rise in the cost of living. Children require a stable household in order to be ready to learn and the outcomes are therefore not propitious.

'What parents do is more important than who they are for children's early development – ie, home-learning activities undertaken by parents is more important for children's intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income.'

Sylva K et al, 2004, *'Effective Pre-School Education'*
Final Report. DfES London: Institute of Education

An interactive and stimulating home environment will have a positive impact on a child's development and this is strongest when parent and carers are supported by settings, Evangelou M et al, 2009, *'Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review'*, London: DCSF. For this to be most effective there is a need for:

- Values shared by all
- Children placed at the centre of all activity
- Practice shared by all
- A venue shared by all.

Blandford S and Knowles C, 2016, *'Developing Professional Practice 0-7'*, 2nd edition London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis:

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315686967>

A number of the Early Years Teacher Standards reflect the importance of parent and carer involvement, National College for Teaching and Leadership, 2013, *'Teacher Standards: Early Years'*, London: Crown:

- 4.3: Promote a love of learning and stimulate children's intellectual curiosity
- 6.2: Engage effectively with parents and/or carers and other professionals in the ongoing assessment and provision for each child
- 6.3: Give regular feedback to children and parents and/or carers to help children progress towards their goals.

Developing relationships with parents and carers and enabling them to become creative partners in their children's learning can often be a challenge for a variety of reasons including a parent's negative experiences of their own schooling as well as issues of confidence and time constraint.

In practice, settings should institute a general policy for how they welcome and involve parents and carers which is capable of adaptation to suit individual needs as they arise. Parental engagement is:

*'Not about engaging with the school, but with the learning of the child.....'
and where
'engagement implies that parents are an essential part of the learning process, an
extended part of the pedagogic process.'*

Harris A and Goodall J, 2007, *'Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement. Do Parents Know They Matter?'*, Department for Children, Schools and Families

Anxiety over their own ability to enable children's learning can detract from the efforts of key parents or carers at home to support their child's educational progress. This could be mitigated by bespoke training and through access to a formal and/or informal network which harnesses the mutual development of children with their parent/carer's capability to create a consistent foundation for generating early learner competence, autonomy and task orientation.

The established PACE philosophy stands for Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy and can be used to support key home adults in nurturing their child's educational growth by making the connections between the child and their own perceptions of learning and its centrality within the home as well as within the setting: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ752832.pdf>

A parental approach characterised by a lack of guidance with little guideline setting or understanding of how to engage with a child's learning process leads children to lose confidence in themselves with agency over their future lives, Bronstein P et al, 2005, *'Parental predictors of motivational orientation in early adolescence; A longitudinal study'*, Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 34,559-575. doi: 10.1007/s10964-005-8946-0.

For children to thrive as learners from the outset, services, settings and above all, policymakers, should give renewed attention to what is happening 'at home.' The effects of a child losing out on the energising impact of an educationally invested, confident and capacitated parent or carer will be life long and inevitably, have repercussions for their family – and the many other families which together, form our society.

Action points

- 1.1 Sustained and universal increased financial investment in ECEC (seen as infrastructure for supporting children and families) in whatever ECEC choices are made. This must ensure that an individual family's socioeconomic circumstances do not impact the quality of what is offered to the child and that maintained as well as private providers**

can offer a full range of services

- 1.2 Review of the terms and conditions of the ECEC workforce including wage structure and training to make this an attractive and prestige profession in line with the practice of other countries**
- 1.3 A more targeted approach to the parent/carer as the key initial and ongoing enabler of a child's learning with bespoke training to be offered at all stages from health visitor/midwife through to ECEC setting professionals with the aim of fostering partnership and boosting confidence and autonomy within the home.**

The Needs of the Child

Chapter 2



Chapter Two: The Needs of the Child

The United Convention of the Rights of the Child requires governments to support families, meet children's basic needs and help them to realise their full potential. The pivotal acknowledgement is that every child has fundamental rights including the right to:

- Life, survival and development
- Protection from violence, abuse or neglect
- An education that enables children to fulfil their potential
- Be raised by, or have a relationship with, their parents
- Express their opinions and be listened to.

https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10UNCR_summary-1_1.pdf

During the early and formative years, a nurturing, caring environment and sustainable relationship building are crucial components in the development of children's long term social, mental and physical health:

'Children can be understood to be experts on their own lives' and 'have important things to say.'

Lundqvist et al, 2019, *'Values and Needs of Children With and Without Special Educational Needs in Early School Years; A Study of Young Children's Views on What Matters to Them'*,

Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 63(6) 951-967:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2018.1466360>

Of equal importance is support for parents and carers so that they are enabled to establish an enriching home environment for children in the early years:

‘Healthy brain architecture depends on a sturdy foundation built by appropriate input from a child’s senses and stable, responsive relationships with caring adults. If an adult’s responses to a child are unreliable, inappropriate, or simply absent, the developing architecture of the brain may be disrupted, and subsequent physical, mental and emotional health may be impaired.’:

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/>

From the child’s perspective, a one-to-one consistent relationship with their parent or carer is fundamental to physical and emotional development; building resilience and social skills. Interaction with other children known to them also enables their social skills and interpersonal relationships, forming a strong foundation for later life (<https://theconversation.com/toddlers-can-engage-in-complex-games-as-they-get-to-know-each-other-over-time-203825>).

Indoor and outdoor play enables children to learn, develop life-skills and lay down the foundation for their future education. Unstructured outdoor free play is especially important here (Jane Waters ,PhD, Angie Rekers, PhD, Student University of Wales Trinity Saint David , May 2019 <https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/outdoor-play/according-experts/young-childrens-outdoor-play-based-learning>).

In 2019, the Children’s Commissioner for England identified 400,000 children living in home situations that aroused concern for their safety. In the most extreme cases the children displayed indicators of the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) termed ‘the toxic trio’; domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse and mental health issues/learning needs in their parents, Children’s Commissioner, 2019, ‘*Estimating the prevalence of the ‘toxic trio’*’:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Vulnerability-Technical-Report-2-Estimating-the-prevalence-of-the-toxic-trio.pdf>

Parents and carers living with children in such circumstances may require considerable community and professional support in order to develop their parenting skills. They may encounter difficulty in encouraging learning and lack confidence in their own ability to introduce stimulating play and adapt to the ever-changing needs of a growing child.

Early years education should be a bedrock of support in such circumstances and The Sutton Trust suggest that:

‘For some children attending nursery for longer hours provides them with greater security, with more opportunities for their needs to be met and their protection to be secured.’

The Sutton Trust, 2023 ‘*A Fair Start; Equalising access to early education*’

A well qualified, professional early years sector has the potential to transform young lives; especially those of children coming from disadvantaged home backgrounds - yet recent changes in UK Government policy are exacerbating the strain on quality across the sector rather than alleviating the problems of parents and children most in need of help:

<https://post.parliament.uk/the-impact-of-early-childhood-education-and-care-on-childrens-outcomes>

The effects of Covid-19 intensified a fatal mix of chronically under-funded early childhood care and education and crisis in staff recruitment and retention, Bonnetti S, 2020, *'Early years workforce development in England – Key ingredients and missed opportunities'*, London; Education Policy institute:

<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/early-years-workforce-development/>

Haux T et al, 2022, *'The early years workforce; recruitment, retention and business planning'*, London: Department for Education; Oppenheim C & Archer N, 2022, *'The role of early childhood education and care in shaping life chances'*, London: Nuffield Foundation. However, the relaxation of existing ratios between professionals and children in early years settings (announced in the 2023 budget) added to the existing crisis and became an immediate source of new dissent and anxiety.

Rather than, as the Government hoped, welcoming a way in which settings might reduce their soaring financial burden, the resultant 'pay back' in terms of quality, safety and consistency of provision (particularly for the most disadvantaged children) was met with opprobrium across the sector:

<https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/spring-budget-2023-government-confirms-controversial-relaxation-of-childcare-ratios>

An Early Years Alliance survey found that:

- 87% of nurseries and pre-schools, accounting for around three-quarters of respondents, are opposed to relaxing ratios with 80% describing themselves as 'strongly opposed'
- 89% of nurseries and pre-school respondents thought that operating to looser ratios would have a negative impact on staff and/or their own mental health wellbeing
- 75% would be likely to leave their current setting if ratios were relaxed there.

In addition, the 2023 budget announcement of an expansion of free childcare hours is widely expected to heap yet more pressure on struggling settings due to the unprecedented staffing and economic challenges. Once again, the most disadvantaged children are mentioned as most likely to be the major losers in what is widely accepted to be an inevitable downturn in quality of provision, Grenier J, 2023, *'Expanding childcare without driving up quality leaves disadvantaged children behind'*, London; Joseph Rowntree Foundation:

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/expanding-childcare-without-quality-leaves-disadvantaged-children-behind>

Sector workers consider that steamrolling expansion without addressing the funding chasm in current provision would be disastrous. The proposed 'free' access can only occur if the settings pursue a course of cross-subsidies and top-ups which are inevitably passed on to parents or carers. A consequent hike to provision costs will force many families to be ruthlessly 'priced out' of the market.

The funding crisis occurs at a time when workforce morale has never been lower.

A highly skilled and motivated workforce is considered to be crucial in supporting children's learning, wellbeing and life chances but the current workforce feels underpaid, de-motivated and undervalued, The Sutton Trust, 2020, *'Early Years Workforce Review. Revisiting the Nutbrown Review - Policy and Impact'*:

<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/early-years-workforce-review>

According to one of the National Education Union's (NEU) many members in the sector:

'The most important resource in any early years setting is its educators. In many of the settings I have visited and the one I ran, I have met many amazing early years educators who give their children high quality education. However, I have also seen unmotivated, poorly-trained and exhausted educators who understandably feel undervalued and underpaid for extremely hard work that we know is so important for children's development.'

Reception/KS1 Teacher & Nursery Chair of Governors

The profession is in the relentless grip of a recruitment crisis; particularly of qualified staff, Early Years Alliance, 2021, *'Breaking Point: The impact of recruitment and retention challenges on the early years sector in England'*:

<https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/breaking-point-impact-recruitment-and-retention-challenges-early-years-sector-england>

and the Government's Social Mobility Commission has highlighted continued low pay, long hours and lack of status as among key barriers to a stable early years workforce:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stability-of-the-early-years-workforce-in-england>

In the words of the National Day Nurseries Association:

'Highly quality early years education is crucial to give all children, especially the most disadvantaged, the best start in life. We can't over emphasise the importance of a happy, recognised and rewarded workforce on outcomes and meeting the needs of children.'

<https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/early-years-workforce-forgotten-key-workers-driven-out-by-low-pay-in-increasingly-volatile-sector>

Practitioners must work closely with children and their families to understand their learning needs; particularly those of young children. Strong evidence suggests that their language and communication skills have suffered due to the conditions driven by Covid, yet educators continue to struggle with ever-mounting workloads, Hall R, 2022, *'Pandemic has delayed social skills of young children, says Ofsted Chief'*, The Guardian:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/apr/04/pandemic-has-delayed-social-skills-of-young-children-says-ofsted-chief>

The Ofsted report, 2022, *'Best Start in Life Part 1 – Setting the Scene'*:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-start-in-life-a-research-review-for-early-years>

demonstrates commitment to an ‘outcome-driven’ approach that is unduly formulaic. NEU members have commented that the introduction of ‘knowledge-rich’ curricula in early and primary learning has led to play being replaced by formal teaching and learning – at odds with the essentially non-linear nature of learning and development.

‘I believe that it is essential that children have access to safe, unpolluted outdoor green areas to play and run and climb. Children need access to dirt and be allowed to play creatively’

Reception/KS1 Teacher & Nursery Chair of Governors

‘The {Early Years} Profile judgements are inherently unfair....Assessment is the tail that wags the dog. We can only have a great curriculum if staff aren’t under ridiculous and unfair pressure to head for early learning goals that bear no relation to their needs and aptitudes.’

Former Head of Early Years at a county council and Maintained Nursery Schools Governor.

Currently, childcare provision in England is predominantly the preserve of the private sector (courtesy in the main of multinational companies) itself in receipt of approximately £3.9 billion Government subsidies. This will increase as a consequence of the Government’s planned expansion. Ofsted know very little about the finances of the companies and the sums charged to families for childcare and are only required to inspect them every six years. Many of these challenges and difficulties will remain unless childcare provision is properly regulated, Simon A et al, 2021, ‘*Acquisitions, Mergers and Debt: the new language of childcare – Main Report*’, London: UCL Social Research Institute, University College, London.

Children who are unwell or have chronic health conditions often need extra help to fulfil their right to learn – and to play, Tonkin A et al, 2023, ‘*Fulfilling Children’s Right to Play in the Hospital Setting: A Scoping Review of the Literature*’, Social Sciences, 12 (1):34-46. doi: 10.11648/j.ss.20231201.15. Despite a growing evidence base pointing to the benefits of play for children and young people within a hospital context, there has been a marked reduction in funding, leading to an under-resourcing of hospital play services, Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2022, ‘*Play in Hospital Report 2022*’, London. A good example of where these needs are actively met is Great Ormond Street Hospital and their charity GOSH:

<https://www.gosh.org/what-we-do/child-and-family-support/>

Play in hospital serves as a fundamental support system for children and their families and in addition to obvious pleasure, affords children a sense of control in decisions affecting their health, Whitaker J and Matsudaria C. 2022, ‘*The evolution of hospital play in the UK and repercussions for Japan; A socio-historical perspective*’, Studies in Social Sciences Research, 3(4): 178-195. doi:10.22158/sssr.v3n4p178. In addition, play-based pedagogies are known to be of great benefit to children’s development and children who are unwell should not be forced to forgo this basic right, Froebel Trust, 2023, ‘*The Power of Play*’:

<https://www.froebel.org.uk/about-us/the-power-of-play/play-and-inclusion>

Whether in domestic or external setting surroundings, parents have an important role to play in their children's education in the early years. The parent-child interaction is fundamental to a child's need to develop, grow and learn. Rather than placing a smart phone or tablet into their hands, parents should be supported in encouraging their child's own learning process through play, from high dependency towards independence and self discovery. The child's greatest need is to have a parent/carer empowered with the confidence to encourage this essential learning process.

Action points

- 2.1 Government to address the recruitment of Early Years Teachers (EYTs) ensuring parity with teachers holding Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and parity of pay and improvement of working conditions for qualified teachers working in the non-maintained sector**
- 2.2 Review and restructuring of the regulation of childcare**
- 2.3 Review and revision of the Early Years Education Curriculum so that learning content is child-centred rather than propelled by formulaic assessment**
- 2.4 Training for EY professionals should include an understanding of the mental health of parents/carers and potential impact on parenting/caring capacity; also preparing practitioners to support children in care, children with SEND and their families and to recognise the importance of closing the gap in learning, development and school readiness between the most and least economically secure children**
- 2.5 Policy makers and professionals to be aware of the impact of geographical, ethnic, economic and disability variability in early years care and education. These nuances are vital to ensure appropriate care and interventions for those families who need support, in the right way and at the time of need**
- 2.6 All children in hospital settings to have access to stimulating play opportunities; suitable to their individual situation.**

Case Studies

Chapter 3



Chapter Three: Case Studies

Parents and carers often find that they need support in a variety of ways as they try to guide the early learning and development of their children. The case studies below are examples of some of the sources of help currently available to them.

The Sleep Charity:

<https://thesleepcharity.org.uk>

Adequate, good quality sleep is vitally important to support physical and mental health and cognition. A child's learning capacity will be lessened by poor sleep and several studies have highlighted the importance of sleep for language development, Dearing E et al, '*Parental reports of children's sleep and wakefulness: Longitudinal associations with cognitive and language outcomes*', *Infant Behaviour and Development* 24(2): 151-70. doi: 10.1016/S0163-6383(01)00074-1.

A child with entrenched sleep disturbance can have an adverse effect on the whole family with parents and carers experiencing stress and sometime poor general and mental health themselves, Martin J et al, 2007, '*Adverse associations of infant and child sleep problems and parent health; an Australian population study*', *Paediatrics* 119(5): 947-55. doi: 10.1542/peds.20006-2.

Children who are sleep-deprived can be emotionally and behaviourally challenging with the outcome that empathetic parenting may become withdrawn or even hostile.

It can be difficult for parents to implement sleep routines and their inability to access services to help them with this may impact upon the child's attendance at early years settings. Behavioural intervention can enable both the child and parent/carer to attain their full potential but in the absence of a National Strategy, sleep support remains largely subject to a postcode lottery. The Sleep Charity, operating across five regions in England has devised 'Sleep Tight', a community-based behavioural intervention programme aimed to empower parents with sleep education over a five-week period.

The Sleep Tight programme encourages positive sleep hygiene by means of peer support with a workshop system of delivery. Independent evaluation found that

children gained on average an additional 2.5 hours sleep per night following the intervention and positive changes were also reported around the child; their daytime behaviour and overall family life improved in quality, Turner K et al, 2016, '*Sleep Tight: an evaluation of a community-based intervention on the sleep behaviour of young children*', Journal of Health Visiting, 4(11) doi: 10. 12968/johv.2016.4.11.572.

Research has suggested that an increase of 2.5 hours sleep per night could have a significant effect on the attainment and behaviour of children in educational settings, Afek et al, 2004, '*The association between failure of 6 year old children to qualify for first grade and sleep disturbance*', J Sleep Res 13 (Suppl 1): 1-832, yet there is a marked lack of training for professionals in this area. A survey by the Institute of Health Visiting and Netmums in 2012 found that only 4% of Health Visitors felt 'expert' in offering families sleep advice. Almost half (46%) had received no training at all on the management of sleep difficulties.

There remains a huge gap in the provision of sleep support despite the severity of a public health issue that impacts early years education and children's ability to meet their full potential. Policymakers should address it as a priority in the interests of reducing inequalities and supporting learning and the family in the early years.

Dorset Parent infant partnership (DoPiP)

The Dorset-based charity's mission is to help families flourish through attachment-led therapeutic services and workforce development in the region.

It has created opportunities for families to be immersed in their children's early years education from birth and one of the ways of doing this is by facilitating online groups for fathers to reflect on their experience as a new parent, counselling, infant massage groups and peer support groups. The various groups offer a space for a baby's early socialisation by showing them how to be with others and how to learn to build relationships. The groups also give parents an opportunity to meet those in similar situations; exploring a variety of different topics each week in relaxed and congenial circumstances. The emphasis for parents and their babies is on how to achieve optimum health, wellbeing and achievement over the life course:

<https://www.dorpip.org.uk/group-support>

The Infant Massage groups are led by facilitators trained by the International Association of Infant Massage (IAIM). The International Group's central ethos is that of nurturing touch, ensuring that babies 'lead' the groups and parents take their cues from them. The aim is to create a relationship of respect, preparing the infants to develop agency of voice. The sessions offer an opportunity for parents to learn how to communicate with their baby through nurturing touch and massage in a relaxed and accepting environment.

The work aligns to DoPiP's ethos in supporting families from the beginning as central to their babies' education:

<https://www.iaim.org.uk/>

Group objectives are to help parents and primary carers to develop a more secure attachment with their children through psychotherapeutic interventions, infant massage classes and parent support groups. Through such developing 'grass roots'

initiatives and projects run by charities, there is a growing awareness of the various ways in which partners can emotionally support each other and together, support the educational and emotional development of their children in the first 1001 days.

Music Relief Foundation: London Borough of Croydon

The Music Relief Foundation (MRF) is based in Thornton Heath, north of the borough of Croydon and has worked with young people and families for over twelve years. Music is its core service, but MRF also runs various holiday clubs and youth leadership programmes in secondary schools. Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Magdalene Adenaike says:

‘Over time, we have seen changes in the dynamics of what may have been classed as a ‘conventional’ family...We now see families with different components and dynamics such as single parents, grandparents raising their grandchildren, same-sex families etc...Some families come from deprived areas...The needs of these families will differ from those of families from more affluent areas. The understanding that the needs of families are different and the appreciation that everyone needs to be treated equally is paramount.’

Croydon’s population of 342,000 people contains within it, the largest population of children (90,000) of any London authority. It is an area of diversity with a significant mix of affluence and disadvantage across neighbourhoods including some areas classed as within the 10% most deprived in England. MRF works with families who home-school their children as well as with those who send their children to school and is sensitive to the differences and similarities in their needs.

The music school is the centre of activities and MRF tailors its user-friendly activities around the needs and timings of the families. All families registered with MRF want their child’s learning to be infused with rich cultural experiences:

‘Coming to MRF music lessons has given my son a lot more confidence. It’s given him an avenue to explore himself and his personality and taught him to learn more transferable skills and benefit other areas of his life.’

Parent A

‘We learned about MRF from friends a day before they started their music school and immediately registered my daughter. We did this because of several things; financial, as we found their fees financially reasonable, as they are part of our local community and close to our home.’

Parent B

MRF works within a highly-deprived community and in addition to its core service, staff ‘find themselves’ supporting families with a myriad of different issues; marital, domestic abuse/violence, functioning as an advice drop-in centre and helping children into the orbit of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in order to obtain a diagnosis for their condition. As a community hub, MRF supports families across the socio economic divide, encouraging them to prioritise education as essential to life just as adequate housing and food on the table are rightly considered to be necessities.

'The opportunity to be enriched and access other things such as music lessons, opportunities to travel and explore the world and different cultures and gainful employment that will reduce the cycle of poverty, is something that is every human right, and vitally fundamental to the early years' education of any child.'

Magdalene Adenaike

Babbu; an online learning platform

'Early help can offer children the support needed to reach their full potential. It can improve the quality of a child's home and family life, enable them to perform better at school and support their mental health. It's important that early help services are holistic, looking at the wider needs of the family and how to provide appropriate services.'

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/early-help-early-intervention#:~:text=Early%20help%20can%20offer%20children,protect%20children%20from%20harm>

The online learning platform Babbu; designed to support, reassure and empower parents, was developed during the pandemic with the help of early years specialists, parents and clinical psychologists. Babbu evolved from origins as a fully functional 'pay-as-you-go' (PAYG) nursery and aims to promote healthy development in 0-5 year old children whilst simultaneously supporting their parents' emotional and physical wellbeing.

Babbu were the first app globally to be endorsed by the Montessori Group <https://montessori.com> in recognition of their high-quality early years content, in addition to being approved by Orcha Health (<https://orchahealth.com>) digital assessment for the NHS.

Babbu's tailored weekly resources are structured around the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) incorporating a range of pedagogical approaches including Montessori, Forest School and Mindfulness. The platform aims to empower parents in the early years educative experience; affording all children the best start. Responding to parents' desire to broaden their knowledge of parenting and participate in their child's play based education, Babbu's educational experts run a series of virtual workshops; one of which was attended by Shakira Anderson, a black single mother who lives in South London.

Shakira's baby was born six weeks prematurely; a month before the first pandemic lockdown in February 2020. Prior to the birth she was a Teaching Assistant in a Special Educational Needs school and was working towards qualification as a teacher of Key stages 1 and 2. Shakira had experienced a number of challenges including social isolation as a new parent during the Covid-19 pandemic's enforced closure of parent/baby groups; the death of her mother and separating from her daughter's father; various intense housing and affordable childcare crises as well as difficulties in obtaining a formal assessment for her daughter's learning difficulties (specifically a diagnosis of autism).

This is not an unusual history. 1 in 4 parents is a single parent, Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2019, '*Families and households*':

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/familiesandhouseholds/familiesandhouseholds>

and 1 in 100 children have autism according to the National Autistic Society, 'What is Autism':

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism#:~:text=Autism%20is%20a%20lifelong%20developmental,and%20children%20in%20the%20UK>

Following the experience of pandemic lockdown, one 1 in 7m children has speech and language delays, Speech and Language, 2022:

<https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/17-million-young-futures/>

and 2,835 children are currently awaiting an NHS autism diagnosis, Jayanetti C, 'Autistic children wait up to five years for an NHS appointment':

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/apr/02/children-with-autism-wait-up-to-five-years-for-an-nhs-appointment>

an increase of 40% of people waiting in just one year (*National Autistic Society as above*).

Shakira found Babbu and its workshops on Neurodiversity and Makaton (a communication tool using signs and symbols) to be extremely valuable and said that she had discovered some of the different ways in which neurodivergent children learn and communicate as well as new strategies to adopt when managing her child's 'meltdowns'. She had felt isolated and overwhelmed at the time of discovering Babbu and now felt relieved just to *'get some advice and hear from another perspective.'*

Shakira also appreciated the opportunity via the Babbu platform, to link up with other mothers with similar experiences and therefore as a single and isolated parent herself, she felt less alone. Using Babbu and the online workshops boosted her confidence and provided reassurance that she was not *doing something wrong*; it was fine to take some time out as a break for herself, to ensure that she was looking after her own mental health.

Shakira thought that she would benefit from the Government making childcare *'more affordable'* and wanted policymakers to *'speed up the process in getting children supported and diagnosed [with autism] but to also provide support to parents whilst they are waiting'*.

The case study involving Shakira and her daughter shows that bringing parents and experts together in an inclusive and accessible way has had a positive effect upon her mental health whilst boosting her self esteem and renewing personal confidence in her parenting skills. As an online learning platform and community, Babbu was able to fill a gap that could not be supplied by public sector services due to the pandemic and budgetary constraints.

In the case of Shakira – and indeed, as all the above case studies demonstrate, no 'one size fits all' and every child is unique as is their family. Different parents and carers will need different provision at different times to ensure that they can support their child to develop, thrive and learn in the ways that are best for them.

The role of the Government is to enable them to do so.

Action points

- 3.1 Government to introduce a National Strategy to address the value and role of sleep so that sleep issues are tackled at the earliest opportunity. This would include providing evidence-based sleep support within communities delivered by appropriately trained practitioners**
- 3.2 Sleep education to be offered to families as a routine part of NHS service by GPs, Midwives and Health Visitors**
- 3.3 Sleep to be introduced to the early years curriculum, supported by specialist training so that practitioners can deliver it with confidence**
- 3.4 New parents to be signposted to sources of help and assistance (including online) that will involve male parents as equal recipients of early socialisation and attachment groups for parents and babies**
- 3.5 GPs to include referral to community hubs as part of the social prescribing model; dependent on the individual needs of families**
- 3.6 Government to provide funding for all regions and areas to have access to high quality digital initiatives as part of the wider support package available to parents. This will enable them to encourage the learning of their early years child at home as well as within, and in addition to, the context of an external setting.**

The Way Forward

Chapter 4



Chapter Four: The Way Forward

Times are challenging for everybody.

The 21st century world is one without certainties; communities are diverse and organisations must work together; aligning their interests to support children and families in the best way. New alliances are needed between local authorities, government and outside agencies to produce the interventions that can surmount disadvantage and help families and children to build a future that is both fair and fulfilling.

Practical help for new parents should be woven into routine patterns of care rather than as part of 'emergency' or 'crisis' provision. This requires appropriate signposting for families who are struggling with stress, emotional or mental health issues or domestic and substance abuse issues at the perinatal stage by means of initial health visits. The present system of accessing relevant support (or even knowing that it exists and is available to everybody) is time-consuming and confusing.

Successful initiatives provided by outside agencies should not be available only to those in more affluent socio-economic circumstances but should be capable of access as part of a post care package of support supplied to all new parents. Such provision (previously available through the largely discontinued Children's Centres or Sure Start settings) would facilitate post-birth 'communities' for new families in order to share experiences and create a mutually empowering and supportive network.

More investment is required in supporting local organisations and initiatives designed to assist parents and caregivers at the start of a child's life with an emphasis on working from a preventative rather than a crisis perspective.

In Scotland, the New Infant Pledge:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/voice-infant-best-practice-guidelines-infant-pledge/pages/14/>

recognises the needs of the child, sets out what infants should expect from those around them; is:

'a reminder it is everyone's responsibility to listen to the voice of infants'
and
'encourages mindful commitment to facilitate infants to express their feelings, and to consider their views, uphold their rights and take action accordingly.'

It enshrines a first learning principle; services need to provide a safe and appropriate environment to support babies as they let their care givers know about their perspectives and experience and have their voices heard. This requires a 'co-production' approach; working alongside service users, valuing everyone's input equally with a responsibility to feed back to those whose view have been sought.

Children and families are faced with increasing pressures to adapt and prepare for the future at an earlier age. Despite evidence demonstrating that play enhances learning readiness, learning behaviours and problem-solving skills, play continues to fight for its place in society, Ginsburg KR, 2007, *'The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds'*, Pediatrics, 119 (1) 182-191; DOI:

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17200287/>

Children in the UK are introduced to an education system at a very early age with a narrow focus on attainment and formal learning. The approach in Scandinavian countries by contrast is less restrictive and the play component is integral:

'Instead of solely prioritising academic achievements, the Nordic model champions a holistic approach to learning with the student at its core. Nordic schools don't adopt arbitrary learning standards or assessments (in fact, most schools in Scandinavia don't have centralised exams until age 16!) and instead focus on development in a broader sense. This holistic view of education promotes values such as autonomy, collaboration and play as apart of learning.'

<https://canopylab.com/what-are-the-benefits-of-the-nordic-approach-to-learning/#:~:text=Nordic%20schools%20don't%20adopt,as%20a%20part%20of%20learning>

When engaging in play with children, parents/carers are enabled to communicate with them more effectively and policies should encourage increased access for parents to participate in unstructured outdoor play with their children – to include the development of Forest School early years settings where parent can be involved in their child's learning.

In an increasingly hybrid world, it makes sense for some family support that is offered to be digital as part of a menu of services available to all parents **as well rather than instead** of physical nursery provision. Covid-19 made external access difficult for everybody across the income divide and digital platforms are not subject to lockdown or reliant upon geographical proximity.

Digital support is often more cost effective – but should not be promoted as a 'cost-cutting' exercise – still less as a service for those who 'cannot afford' traditional early years settings provision. Rather, policymakers should enable digital access to be part of a thoroughly comprehensive (and long-term, cost-effective) service available

to new parent/carers alongside other types of provision enshrining the key principles of:

- Individually tailored support with the pace and content of learning adapted to the needs of a particular family
- Building a sense of community; unrestricted by geography and enabling parents in different parts of the country to connect and communicate based on similar experiences and the needs of their children
- Guidance and support for parents over their and their child's use of technology; showing the advantage of parental contact over time spent using technology.

In the changing world of the 21st century, parents and carers wherever they live and whatever their domestic and economic circumstances should be able to rely on the fact that the Government regards accessibility to support for them to be a top priority.

This should span across the perinatal and postnatal phase with groups of 1:1 support offered during pregnancy in preparation for parenting and caregiving as well as ensuring that emotional and physical needs are being met. Post birth, access to 1:1 or group support that parents /carers and their child can attend together physically and digitally is needed. The focus should be upon supporting parent/child involvement through play in the learning process and enabling the sharing of important developmental information whilst offering emotional and practical support through a community that is appropriate to particular parents and carers.

'It takes a village to raise a child' is an Igbo and Yoruba proverb that exists in many different African languages. The proverb is so widely used in Africa that it has an equivalent in most African languages, including *'one hand does not nurse a child'* in Swahili and *'one knee does not bring up a child'* in Sukuma. In African communities, it is usual for children to be raised by the extended family; in many cases, spending periods of time living with grandparents, aunts and uncles. The wider community sometimes gets involved as well and children are seen as a blessing from God.

The UK today is largely unrecognisable from its post-1945 iteration complete with nuclear families; a largely homogenous population; men predominantly in work and women mainly remaining in the home sphere. Families now as then need support to enable their children to learn and thrive but in the 21st century, Government policy should reflect the fact that one size 'no longer fits all' and encourage the fact that today **it takes a community to raise a child, whatever in each case, that community might be.**

Action points

- 4.1 Government policy in support of children and families should prioritise early intervention as more economically and socially effective in the long term than repairing the mental and emotional health issues that may present later throughout childhood and into adulthood**

- 4.2 The role of carer and secondary carer such as grandparent, father or extended family caregiver should be recognised as part of the parenting process so that pressure is not borne solely by the primary caregiver. Education into the role of other caregiver should be included in routine antenatal care and as part of the family unit**
- 4.3 Establish a government-accredited and approved register (subject to annual review) of digital early learning platforms that support parents and children in the first five years in order to signpost parents and carers to them as part of antenatal and postnatal provision. This will necessitate digital service inclusion in appropriate initial training (IT) and continuous professional development (CPD) for health and education professionals including GPs**
- 4.4 Government to establish a formal review of early years provision, tackling inequalities, gaps and anachronisms in the sector that impact upon children, families and providers**
- 4.5 Childcare and early education provision to be under continuous scrutiny in relation to inflation and rising costs with an obligation for it to be addressed in all budget statements so that outcomes for children may be achieved and value placed upon the workforce.**

