



EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE COALITION

For children, for parents, for the economy

Shifting the conversation: How to talk about early education and childcare

INTRODUCTION

Currently, there is a disconnect in the way parents and politicians talk about early education and childcare.

Research conducted by the Early Education and Childcare Coalition shows that while there is agreement that, we, as a society, need to invest in early education and early years, the motivation for that investment is coming from two different places.

Politicians frame announcements in terms of the economy and work, with early education and childcare positioned as a route to parents being able to work more. Parents, on the other hand, talk about their children first and work second. This means they find the conversation jarring, and while they welcome reform efforts, they distrust the Government's motives.

Our previous research into wider public attitudes to early education and childcare showed that those who are most likely to prioritise the issue at the next election are those with children who are still using some form of childcare. As the people who are using and paying for early years services, and as the target of early education and childcare policies aimed at boosting economic activity, parents have a major stake in the debate. They are also the people who act as advocates for their children.

So it's essential that we understand them and their concerns, and bring their voices into the discussion. This guide is focused on parents' attitudes, but also, importantly, on how the debate can include the needs of children themselves.

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As we show, in order to engage parents, the conversation needs to reflect the reality of their lives. For parents to be able to work, and to make it worthwhile financially, they need access to reliable, quality early education and childcare that they can afford. That means consistent staff, and a safe and clean environment where they know their children will be happy, nurtured and well looked after. They know the value of the first five years of a child's life, and if they can't be with them, they want to know the people looking after them will do all they can to support their development.

Parents are acutely aware of the rising costs of childcare and early education, and support a policy that looks to change things, but they don't quite understand how it will work.

They feel confused about the economics and want to know where their money goes – especially as they are hearing that early years professionals are underpaid, while they see nurseries starting to look 'shabby'. This increases their worry that provision will be less reliable in future, and that quality will suffer.

If parents don't feel they can go to work knowing their children are safe, healthy and happy, economic arguments about increasing workforce participation will fall flat.

We have an opportunity to build on public support for reform at the next general election but we must show that access and cost can be addressed without compromising safety or quality. Success lies in having a shared voice on the key issues, meeting people where they are and creating a mainstream public discourse that marries the needs of the child, the parent and the economy.

WHAT IS THIS GUIDE AND WHO IS IT FOR?

The Early Education and Childcare Coalition unites the voices of all those with a stake in the future of early education and childcare – children, parents, providers, the early education workforce and the business community.

This guide shares insights from the Early Education and Childcare Coalition's research with coalition member organisations and parents, exploring their experience of the sector and what matters to them.

It is underpinned by and builds upon the [Common Outcomes Framework for Children](#) developed by Kindred Squared and For Baby's Sake. The framework aims to provide a consistent, shared, and holistic vision for a safe, healthy, happy and engaged childhood, in which children are able to explore and develop their own talents and interests. The framing in this guide was developed by exploring and testing parents' attitudes towards this framework, as we wanted to understand how they believe early education and childcare, at its best, can support these outcomes.

FRAMING THE ISSUE

Our research suggests that to make the argument for reform and investment in affordable, quality and safe early education and childcare provision, the key is to acknowledge the reality of what it is to be a parent today. It means building a narrative that can engage parents, by engaging with their priorities and concerns.

The happiness of the child is paramount – and parents feel an enormous responsibility to ensure their children are happy, safe and secure when they are not with them. This means a stable routine, and a consistent and safe childcare and early education system where their children are happy and nurtured. This is what enables parents to work – not only logistically, but also by reducing the stress and pressure they feel.

Parents don't feel early education and childcare enables them to work sufficient hours to necessarily have a better lifestyle. They feel they lack choice and talk of a 'catch-22' situation where they have to work more simply to pay for childcare so they can go to work and pay for the essentials.

People are struggling to make ends meet and the cost of early education and childcare is high, so they welcome efforts to make it more affordable. When explained in tangible terms, they understand and share the sector's concerns about planned expansion.

But there is a fine line to walk. The parents we spoke to recognised the importance of the first five years of their children's lives and the role that early years practitioners play in developing their child's curiosity, interests and laying the building blocks for the future. However they rejected suggestions that these professionals can solve issues within the home or the family and they are understandably wary of judgement – of them, their parenting or of other parents.

They are also wary in other ways – of where the money will come from to pay for planned expansion of free hours, of the reality of how government promises will affect their lives, of being forced back into work. This means any policy recommendation must show how it can be funded and how it will work in practice.

1. Framing the problem – the cost of early education and childcare

What we learned

Early education and childcare is a huge expense, and many parents are struggling to make ends meet.

They are supportive of efforts to reform the system, but they don't understand how the Government's policy will work – and they are concerned about being 'forced' to go back to work too early, when their children are too young. They welcome government plans to expand 'free' childcare hours but are sceptical that it's more about getting parents into work than supporting children.

People don't see that the sector is 'in crisis' – in part because many public services, such as the NHS, are viewed as being in crisis. Parents are confused about what their fees pay for – but they've noticed extra costs creeping in, like charges for meals or nappies.

Parents understand that the workforce feels underpaid and undervalued. When asked to consider the impact of plans to expand 'free' childcare hours, they share concerns about professionals leaving the sector. They worry that if the workforce is reduced, this will impact their children, who form emotional attachments to the professionals looking after them. And they worry that if access to quality, reliable and affordable provision is reduced, this will impact their ability to be reliable employees.

Parents relate the cost of early education and childcare to the quality of the physical space and the impact on their child, rather than staff pay and conditions. They worry that expansion will mean a stretched workforce, and that this could impact the safety and the happiness of their child.

How to frame the conversation

- Be clear that everyone wants the best for children – so they can be happy, safe, healthy, feel part of a community and develop their own interests and talents.
- Frame the impact in terms of the quality of the child's experience – as this is the priority for parents.
- When discussing risk of decline – remember that parents have a limited window into what happens within settings. They describe how they notice a decline in quality through tangible, real-world examples e.g. staff leaving or noticing the quality of the toys and the building.
- Demystify the costs by explaining them clearly. Showing the breakdown of the costs to run an early years setting or to be a childminder – e.g. building maintenance, insurance, bills, salaries and play equipment – would help parents understand where their money goes.
- Use examples to show the reality of the access challenge – for example, projections about the number of professionals likely to leave the sector, with a clear explanation of how this will affect children and their parents.
- When talking about policy changes, explain:
 - What they will cost.
 - How they will be funded.
 - What return on investment they will bring. (For example, ***for every £1 spent on quality early education and childcare we can achieve/save...***)

Watchouts

- Don't make the problems feel insurmountable. Phrases like 'the system is broken' can make people feel it can't be fixed. Where possible, show examples of where problems are being tackled and positive momentum.
- A focus on the workforce being underpaid and undervalued may not elicit support. In our research, parents themselves felt underpaid, overworked and undervalued, and had little sympathy for others. When issues of pay were raised, parents quickly moved to confusion about where their money was going. Instead, show how people leaving the sector affects their children and their ability to parent.

Talk their language: #shabby #extras #squeeze more out of less #expensive #capacity #safety compromised

“This government is trying to push people to that point where you condense the time (children) spend with their parents even further so even the parents aren’t looking after their own children”

“Nine months is just too young”

2. Meeting our audience where they are

What we learned

For parents, their children are the primary focus. For most families, work is about financial security. It pays for childcare or early education, which in turn means they can earn enough to cover bills, housing costs, food, clothes and all the other essentials. They rely on early education and childcare to be reliable themselves.

They’re frustrated by suggestions that they can choose whether to work, or that work is more important than being present for their child. They’re concerned that the Government’s new offer on childcare and early education will pressurise parents to go back to work too soon.

Parents sometimes talk about using early years provision to ‘take a break’ from parenting. But when probed, it’s clear they really mean finding time for never-ending chores like shopping, cooking and cleaning. They’re not putting their feet up.

How to frame the conversation

- Parents value being able to choose how they bring up their children and balance home, work and other responsibilities. But early education and childcare shouldn’t be portrayed as a ‘choice’ that parents make to maintain or further their careers. They don’t view it as a choice, but as a necessity that allows them to work.
- Acknowledge that every family is unique, and include everyone. Show parents that we’re all on the same side, and be careful not to judge parents for their choices.
- Talk about the varied reasons parents use childcare and early education, and talk their language to show you understand the non-stop reality of their lives. Parents don’t talk about ‘everyday activities’, but specifics:
 - Household jobs like cooking, cleaning, washing and shopping for food.
 - Study, – so they can improve their work situation and better provide for their children.
 - Getting tasks done with less stress – so they can be better parents when their children are home.
- Reflect the different types of family unit in the conversation. Couples might work as a ‘tag team’ to juggle the demands placed on them – other parents might not have anyone who can help. Acknowledge the complications that come with having more than one child.

Watchouts

- Avoid talking about work as a choice, and early education and childcare as a luxury – many don't have a choice, and everyone's experience is different.

Talk their language: #pay the rent #afford #catch22 #shopping #cooking #cleaning #tag team #running out of energy #getting time back #learning #sharing #friends

“Childcare is essential for work, we can't afford for one person to stay at home. We can barely pay the rent.”

“Getting time back for food shopping, cooking and head space is becoming more important”

“Having childcare means I have time to be a better parent”

3. The relationship between parents and Government is mutually beneficial

What we learned

There's a disconnect between the way parents and the wider public view early years education and childcare.

The public tends to focus on how it enables parents to work, and the knock-on benefits for the economy. But parents feel they lack choice about how much they work, and some are concerned about being 'forced' to work more.

Parents accept that they should pay towards early education and childcare – but they, and the wider public, believe government and parents should share the cost, with support targeted to those in work and most in need.

How to frame the conversation

- Position the relationship between parents and government as a two-way street. When parents work, they help the Government achieve its economic goals. In return, they expect quality, affordable early education and childcare to be available from the end of paid parental leave until their child turns five. That's the deal.
- Focus on the need for the Government to reduce the cost to parents while driving up quality – because the early years of a child's life are so important.

Watchouts

- Don't focus on whether early education and childcare providers are publicly or privately owned. For parents, the business model isn't important.

- Be aware that conversations about who should be entitled to support can get sidetracked – either into arguments about means testing for higher earners or benefits/getting people back to work – detracting from the core issues.

“Will the Government be able to fund it? Is it plausible. We’ll have to work harder and longer hours – taxpayers will pay for this.”

4. Children come first and their needs are central

What we learned

For parents, their first priority is their children. They respond well to messages that focus on giving a child the best start in life, but they push back on the idea that the only way to achieve it is through early education and childcare, rather than more time with their parents.

They know the first five years before school are precious, and see them as an opportunity to lay the building blocks for their child’s future and prepare them to ‘take the next step’. But the benefits for children here and now are just as important to parents.

They want to be able to go to work secure in the knowledge that their child is safe, healthy and happy. Since they can’t be with their children during the day, they want to know that staff have the bandwidth and training to support their child well.

How to frame the conversation

- Talk about the child’s experience first. Reflect their need for a system that ensures their children are safe, healthy, happy, engaged and supported to learn.
- Acknowledge that parents make the most important contribution to their child’s life. They are the centre of their child’s world.
- Position early education and childcare as playing a supporting role to parents. It provides some of the building blocks for children’s futures by adding different – not better – opportunities to learn, develop and play.

Watchouts

- Be careful not to suggest that early education and childcare can replace or improve parenting.
- Be careful not to judge parents who don’t use early education or childcare.

Talk their language: #building blocks #building relationships #kids #next stage of life #child at the heart #children are sponges #happy #healthy #happiness #good for child development #wellbeing #confidence #social skills #interaction with other children #transition to school

“You can tell if they’re not centred on the children. It needs to be all about development and care, and about learning through play.”

5. Celebrate the role of the parent

What we learned

Parents have a lot to cope with, but it's also an enjoyable role. While they know their struggle to afford early education and childcare is understood, they feel frustrated that their experience of being a parent is often overlooked. Parents are the centre of the child's world, and want to spend time with them. Anything that misses this point feels jarring to them.

Parents want to be there for the special moments, especially when their children are very small. They take joy from looking after their children and creating a comfortable, secure family home for them.

They feel early education and childcare supports them to be good parents in two ways. First, by giving them time to manage all the things they need to do to run the family home, and the money to pay for the essentials. And second, by giving their children opportunities to play and learn with others.

How to frame the conversation

- Keep the role of parents in the frame, and try not to talk about parents and their children as completely separate entities.
- To engage government in discussions about what early education and childcare providers need, show clearly how this will deliver for parents and children.
- Show how early education and childcare helps people be good parents – allowing them to provide for their child, and supporting their child to play and learn.

Watchouts

- Try not to suggest that people who work in early education and childcare play the role of parent or are an extension of the family.
- Be aware that when parents talk about using childcare and early education for 'time off', it's about providing the headspace that enables them to be a good parent.
- Avoid portraying parents' lives negatively – it may be tough but parents react negatively to being told that their lives are hard.

Talk their language: *#Calm and stable home #consistent #regularly commit to work #reliability #peace of mind*

"For a stress-free work-life reliability is important"

"Reliability and consistency are most important, so you don't have to worry"

6. Talking 'quality'

What we learned

For parents, a quality early education and childcare setting means a safe, healthy and happy child.

For parents – who only get a five minute window to judge the quality of a setting when they are dropping off or collecting their child – it's markers like cleanliness, hygiene, the quality of the space and the state of toys and equipment that they use to assess quality. They want to know that their child is being nurtured and encouraged to use their imagination, curiosity and develop their interests; and that staff are qualified, have the right documents in place, and good safety protocols.

For children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), parents look for inclusive settings with calm, sensory environments and a 'can do' attitude.

But many have noticed a decline in the physical environment – and they're concerned that relaxed staff-to-child ratios could reduce quality and safety.

How to frame the conversation

- Parents are clear on what they view quality to mean. Using their language to talk about the importance of the early years will help cut through and connect to their experiences.
- Be specific about the features of quality that parents themselves value for their child:
 - Clean, hygienic and spacious settings with lots of space indoors and outdoors, new carpets, equipment and toys.
 - Uncluttered, calm sensory spaces for children with SEND .
 - A place that nurtures and cares for children, which is genuinely interested in them and has a range of creative, fun, imaginative activities going on, e.g. messy play.
 - Staff who listen to parents, support them and keep them updated.
 - A setting that is safe and secure, with all the right documents in place.
 - A setting that delivers a safe and happy child at the end of each day.
- Talk about preparing for future educational attainment in the here and now – e.g. 'taking the next step'.
- Include families whose children have special educational needs in the discussion. Acknowledge that it can benefit them to be with other children in mainstream settings.
- Acknowledge the needs of different families – e.g. parents of multiples will have different challenges around access and affordability.

Watchouts

Parents may use Ofsted as a guide, but tend to use their own definition of quality to assess early education and childcare settings.

Talk their language: #safe #secure #documentation #happy #hygienic #clean #calm #nurturing #caring #interested #reliable.

“Childcare is about more than watching them – it’s working with them, helping them.”

“When the general quality of nursery staff is high, you can tell the difference. They’re not children’s entertainers.”

7. The workforce is valued

What we learned

Early education and childcare professionals are seen as the link that means parents can be reliable employees, provide financial security and create a well-run family home. Parents know their child benefits from being with others their age and learning from qualified professionals. They question how the Government will make more hours available if professionals leave the sector.

They know that early years professionals have a tough job, and understand that the workforce is often undervalued and underpaid. They know that good staff are experts – not children’s entertainers – who can support their child’s development and nurture them. They judge the quality of the setting by their interactions with its staff.

The relationship between an early years professional and the child is personal, and parents value consistency – they see how staff turnover can create turmoil for their child. They understand the importance of the role these professionals play in their child’s life. But they are sensitive about any suggestion of them taking over their role as parent.

How to frame the conversation

- Talk about the importance of experienced, qualified staff as an enabler of quality within settings. This means children are happy and have a consistent, enriched experience.
- Show that it’s crucial for early education and childcare professionals to feel valued so they stay in their roles.
- Emphasise how early education and childcare professionals complete a ‘virtuous circle’ – as the link that allows parents to work, manage their household and be better parents.

Watchouts

- Don’t compare early education and childcare work to other roles or overstate professionals’ contributions to the economy. Participants felt strongly that lots of people contribute and one group should not be singled out as more important than others.
- While parents understand that early years professionals feel underpaid and undervalued, be aware that they feel the same.
- Talk about a ‘shortage’ of professionals rather than a ‘crisis’. Phrases like ‘broken system’ can make people feel that it can’t be fixed.

Talk their language: #nurturing #attachment #turmoil #virtuous circle #not paid enough

“It creates turmoil if childcare workers change – children need routine and consistency”

Be wary of overclaims

Our research highlighted some strong feelings among parents that could lead to some messages landing awkwardly, or being viewed as an overclaim.

- **Early education and childcare is a service that you buy.**
Many parents view early education and childcare as transactional. Positioning early years professionals as part of their community (for parents who were not in receipt of Universal Credit), or as an extension to family life, was seen as far-fetched.
- **Early educational and childcare professionals and other workers should be valued equally.**
Comparisons between early education and childcare professionals and other workers, with a hierarchy in either direction, was seen as judgemental. Describing them as 'key workers' was viewed negatively.
- **Early education and childcare supports children – not the wider family.**
Parents didn't acknowledge the role of early education and childcare practitioners in providing them with emotional support. They also rejected suggestions that having additional support can ease friction in families and relationships. Based on their experiences, they saw these professionals supporting their children, but not the wider family.
- **Early education and childcare enables parents to work – it doesn't tackle poverty.**
Suggestions that early education and childcare could lift children out of poverty were felt to lack credibility, as this didn't chime with people's experiences. With the costs seen as being expensive, and parents struggling to make ends meet, arguments that connected early education and childcare to the parents' ability to work were more likely to gain support.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

The following section provides supporting information to help frame the argument – including statistics from our Pulse Check research into public attitudes to childcare and early education, as well as the stories of parents who are living with the challenges of the current early education and childcare system.

On the Government's March 2023 plans to expand 'free' childcare hours:

- Three in five people (59%) have heard of the Government's plans and more than two-thirds (69%) support investment in the sector. Yet very few people (18%) could explain the detail of the new policy.

On the cost of early education and childcare, and who should pay:

- Most people (69%) see cost as the biggest challenge parents face when arranging early years education and childcare.

- But the majority (73%) think parents should pay for some of the cost. This was strongly backed up in our qualitative groups, where people talked about value for money and stretched government budgets. People wanted to know how much government plans would cost and how they would be funded.

On the benefits of early education and childcare:

- Three in five people (59%) think good early years education and childcare is good for the whole country, not just parents. It is seen as a sensible investment in future generations.

On the retention risk amongst the workforce:

- 57% of nursery staff and 38% of childminders are considering leaving the sector in the next 12 months.

CASE STUDIES

These real-life experiences illustrate some of the themes we found in our research – from the importance of early education and childcare for enabling parents to work and pay for the essentials, to their concerns about government plans and their worries about reduced access.

Fiona, 31, lives with her husband and their daughter, who is two- and-a-half-years-old. With both parents working full-time, their daughter also goes to nursery five days a week. Fiona says:

“My daughter went to nursery from the age of one, which is later than lots of children, but still quite young.

We tried to pick a nursery where she’d have the chance for development. We wanted her to be able to do all the things we’d have liked to do with her if she was at home with us – taking her outdoors, doing messy play, hands-on things.

She really loves it. She’ll tell us about her friends and I certainly see the difference it makes: she’s watching what the other children do, and learning.

It makes me a better parent. I like being able to have my own career. Nursery also means she gets a variety of activities, so we can be flexible with what we do with her at the weekends.

We like that they have low staff turnover – that consistency is important because they know your child day in, day out. They are your eyes because you can’t be there with her all day.

I share a lot of the criticisms about the Government plan to relax staff ratios. The more children they have to look after, the more stretched they will be, and all the activities that are really important would have to be downgraded. If that were to happen, I would consider working less, because my daughter’s wellbeing and development is the priority.”

Laura, 38, is a single mum who lives in Surrey with her two children, who are 11 years and 18 months old.

Laura works at the nursery that her youngest, Benjamin, attends. As a staff member, she receives a discount on his fees and has help from the Government, which allows her to make ends meet. She says:

“When I got pregnant I had to really think about whether I could do this financially. I work full-time hours over three long days, which means I only need three days of childcare for Benjamin.

It’s finely balanced, but it means I can pay my mortgage and bills, and have the confidence to go to work knowing he’s happy and learning. It means we can have a happy life, and my employers have a reliable member of staff.

At nursery he’s stimulated, he’s using his imagination and you can see it through his play when he comes home. You can see the difference – he’s very confident around other people.

I love my job – I get paid to spend time with amazing kids. But we’re not just paid to play. We’re doing observations, safeguarding, first aid, keeping up with guidance.

We’re also people with bills to pay, and so are the nursery owners. They’re not exempt from rising bills, and the Government funding isn’t counterbalancing it.

The Government plans are a great idea in theory, it should help people who are struggling with the cost of living – I’m living it myself. But I can’t see how they’re going to make it work.”

Abi, 30, lives with her husband and their daughter Dolly, who is nearly two. Abi works four days a week, and Dolly spends two of those days with grandparents, and two at nursery.

Earlier this year, Dolly’s nursery closed suddenly when the previous owner went bankrupt. While it’s since reopened under new management, the family faced a three-month gap that Abi describes as “a huge nightmare”. Of the five nurseries that had space, Abi felt only one was suitable. She explains:

“Cleanliness is important. A lot of the nurseries I saw felt dirty, and you can tell if they’re not centred on the children. It should feel as warm and inviting as a home would. It needs to be all about development and care, and about learning through play, feeding their curiosity.”

Dolly is now settled back at her original nursery. Abi says:

“She’s grown so much socially and she actively looks forward to playing with other children. Developmentally, she will say or do things that I know she’s got from nursery. That’s why I like our approach of part-nursery, part-family – she gets different things from everyone. It’s wonderful to see Dolly thrive in other environments.

It feels like the Government views people as numbers, not people, and that’s especially true when it comes to childcare. They keep talking about getting mums back to work, but they need to give us the opportunity to do that by providing decent childcare.

We need more compassion and humanity from the Government. Work is important – but it’s important because it holds up the rest of life.”

FURTHER READING

Pulse Check 2023 – Early Education and Childcare Coalition’s research into the public’s views following the 2023 Spring Budget.

Retention and Return – Early Education and Childcare Coalition’s report on current conditions in the early years workforce, and what is needed for a successful expansion.

Minds Still Matter – Early Years Alliance’s report on the mental health of the early years workforce.

Breaking Point – Results of the Early Years Alliance’s survey on staff recruitment and retention in the sector.

Comprehensive information about the history of government policy on early education and childcare can be found on the [House of Commons Library website](#). This includes insight, research briefings and debate packs.

About the Early Education and Childcare Coalition

The Early Education and Childcare Coalition is an independent group that unites the voices of parents, children, providers, those working in the sector and the wider business community. Our vision is of an early education and childcare sector that provides high-quality, affordable provision for all families in all communities, and with it, good pay, conditions, and funding for those providing that education and care. We use our collective voice and research to build public and political support for early education and childcare.

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About Claremont

Claremont is a behaviour change communications agency. It helps governments, charities and brands to use behavioural science and co-design to solve real world problems. Recent projects have focussed on cancer diagnosis and treatment, violence reduction, sexual violence against children, medical research, nursing standards, gas safety and personal finance and debt. Its clients include Bowel Cancer UK, Sweaty Betty Foundation, Our Future Health, Alzheimer's Research UK, Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit, Clarion and Sussex Police.



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