



EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE COALITION

For children, for parents, for the economy

What's missing from the early education and childcare debate? A guide for journalists

INTRODUCTION

There is a disconnect in the current debate about early education and childcare. While there's broad agreement that we, as a society, need to invest, politicians and parents are coming from different places when they think about the issue.

Politicians frame announcements in terms of the economy and productivity – but parents focus on their children first and work second, with work seen as a necessity. When the public debate focuses too much on the economy, it feels jarring to parents.

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. But they feel they don't see the reality of their lives or their priorities reflected. They're confused about the economics of early education and childcare and while they support efforts to reform it, they don't understand how government policies will work. They worry that early years provision will be less reliable in future, and that quality will suffer.

New government plans

Currently, working parents in England can claim up to 30 hours of 'free' childcare for children aged three and four. Plans to expand provision are due to be rolled out in stages, with 30 hours extended to parents of children aged nine months and over by September 2025. The plans will also see the rates paid to providers increase, and minimum staff-to-child ratios relaxed (from 1:4 to 1:5).

The early years sector has voiced several criticisms:

- The funding does not cover providers' costs, even at the increased rates.
- Relaxed staff-to-child ratios may compromise safety and quality.
- Recruitment challenges mean many providers will be unable to offer places for more children.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

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

This guide shares the learning from the coalition’s research with coalition member organisations and parents. It offers insights into what matters most and the questions they want to see answered.

As a basis for this research, we used the [Common Outcomes Framework for Children](#), developed by Kindred Squared and For Baby’s Sake. This framework articulates a shared, holistic vision for children to be safe, healthy, happy, engaged with others, and able to learn by exploring and developing their own talents and interests.

WHAT PEOPLE TOLD US

The costs of early education and childcare are unclear

Early education and childcare is a huge expense, and many parents struggle to make ends meet – but they feel confused about where their fees are going.

- They experience high costs and charges for ‘extras’, while hearing that the workforce is underpaid, and that government supports the sector financially. They find it hard to square these facts, and want to understand how the costs are broken down.
- They welcome reform, but are sceptical that the Government’s ‘free’ childcare offer is more about getting parents into work than supporting children. Many feel the expansion of coverage to nine months will force people to go back to work when their children are too young – though they don’t judge others for using early education and childcare at this age.
- Parents accept they should pay towards the cost, but think government should provide support to make it affordable.
- Parents, and the wider public, don’t currently understand how the Government’s new plans will work. They want to know what any new policies will cost and how they will be funded.

Children come first

For parents, their children are their priority. They want them to have the best start in life – but they push back on the idea that early education and childcare is the only way to achieve this.

- Parents disengage when the debate focuses more on work than on the child’s experience. They want to know how policies will ensure their children are safe, healthy, happy, engaged and supported to learn.

- They know the time before school is precious, and an opportunity to lay foundations for the future. But they feel the immediate benefits for children are just as important.
- They see early education and childcare as playing a supporting role: not replacing parents, but providing different – not better – opportunities to learn, develop and play.

Work is a necessity

Politicians tend to focus on how early education and childcare enables parents to work, and the knock-on benefits for the economy. But for most families, work is about financial security. It's a necessity, not a choice, that allows them to pay for the essentials – including childcare and early education.

- Parents see their relationship with government as a two-way street: when they work, they help the Government achieve its economic goals. In return, they expect quality, affordable early education and childcare to be available until their child turns five.
- But parents feel they currently lack choice about how much they work, and are concerned about being 'forced' to work more, or to return to work too early.
- They need reliable, consistent and stress-free childcare and early education provision that enables them to, in turn, be reliable employees.

Quality is of utmost importance

Parents are clear on what a quality setting is: it means a safe, healthy and happy child.

- Parents look at the quality of the physical space – its cleanliness and hygiene, and the state of toys and equipment – and whether children are nurtured and encouraged to use their imagination and curiosity to develop their own interests. They want to know staff are qualified, with the right documents in place and good protocols.
- Parents are noticing a decline in the physical environment of some settings, with carpets getting shabby and toys wearing out. And they worry that relaxed staff-to-child ratios under the Government's plans could reduce quality, safety, consistency and reliability.

The early education and childcare workforce is valued

- The workforce is viewed as an essential enabler of quality – they are the people parents see most often and represent the setting to them.
- They are regarded as professionals, not children's entertainers, and the bond between them and the child is incredibly important.
- Parents know the workforce is underpaid and feels undervalued, and they question how the Government will make more hours available if people leave the sector.

STATISTICS – WHAT OUR POLLING TOLD US

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

- Three in five people (59%) have heard of the Government's March 2023 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.
- The sector's reaction influences public opinion. Once people heard the sector's criticisms of the policy, support for it halved (from 69% in support to 35%).

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 education and childcare.
- But the majority (73%) think parents should pay for some of the cost. This was also seen in our qualitative groups, where people talked about value for money and stretched government budgets.

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: it's 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.

For more statistics, background information, case study requests or to arrange an interview, contact info@earlyeducationchildcare.org



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