



# EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE COALITION

For children, for parents, for the economy

## What's missing from the debate?

# Building support for early education and childcare reform – a guide for MPs, their staff and policymakers

## 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, the public and parents are coming from different places when they talk about the issue.

Political announcements are often framed in terms of the economy and productivity. But parents focus on their children first and work second, with work seen as a necessity to make ends meet. When the public debate focuses too much on the economy, it feels jarring to parents – the very people we need to support policies aimed at reforming early years provision.

Our research into wider public attitudes to early education and childcare has shown that those who are most likely to prioritise the issue at the next election are those with children who are using childcare. As the people who are using and paying for early years service and the target of early education and childcare policies aimed at boosting economic activity, parents have a major stake in the debate. They are also, importantly, best placed to advocate for the needs of their children.

But parents feel they don't currently 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. If parents don't feel their children will be safe, happy and healthy, economic arguments about increasing workforce participation fall flat.

This communication gap leaves parents feeling misunderstood, and seen as workers first and parents second. It means that, while they broadly welcome efforts to increase 'free' childcare hours, they feel distrustful of the Government's motives.

But we have an opportunity to build on existing public support for more investment in early education and childcare. By shifting the conversation and showing that people's priorities are understood, we can engage everyone – parents and the wider public – in the debate about what the system needs to deliver for children, parents and the economy.

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

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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 years workforce and the business community.

This guide shares the learning from the coalition's research amongst coalition member organisations and parents. It offers insights into what matters most, the questions they want to see answered, and aims to support you to frame the discussion in a way that engages parents, for maximum impact.

As a basis for our 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.

## CORE FRAMING PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING SUPPORT

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Our research suggests that to build support 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 speak to parents, by engaging with their priorities and concerns:

- 1. Many parents are struggling to make ends meet.** They're experiencing high costs for childcare and early education, but are confused about where their fees go, and want to understand how the costs are broken down.
- 2. Children are the first priority for parents.** They want them to have the best start in life, but don't see early education and childcare as the only way to achieve this. Many would prefer to spend more time with their children, and for most parents, work is a necessity for financial security – not a choice.

When parents go out to work and contribute to the economy, they expect quality, affordable early education and childcare to be available as part of the deal. They rely on it to be able to take care of the non-stop tasks they're juggling to keep the family home running, and to be reliable employees. But they need to know they can go to work secure in the knowledge that their children are safe, healthy and happy – and when the debate misses this point, they disengage.

- 3. Parents place quality above all else**, and they are clear on what a quality childcare or early education setting looks like. They look for a clean, well-maintained physical space where their children are nurtured and encouraged to use their imagination and curiosity, with qualified staff and good safety protocols. But they've noticed a drop in quality, and they're concerned that relaxed staff-to-child ratios will mean a more stretched workforce. They worry about the impact on their children, as well as their ability to go to work.

They see the workforce as professionals who are essential enablers of quality – and they are key to making early education and childcare policies work. They know the workforce feels undervalued, and worry about the impact of people leaving the sector on their children, as well as the reliability of childcare which they depend upon.

## WHAT PEOPLE TOLD US

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### 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 the 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 offer on 'free' childcare hours is more about getting parents into work than supporting children. Many feel the expansion of coverage to 9 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 from this age.
- Parents accept they should pay towards the cost, but think the 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.
- Children are the centre of their parents' world, and vice versa. Parents enjoy parenting, and when this point is missed, it jars.

## Work is a necessity, and parents feel they lack choice

The political debate tends 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 the Government as a two-way street: when they go out to work, they help the Government achieve its economic goals. In return, they expect quality, safe, affordable early education and childcare to be available from the time their paid parental leave ends 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're juggling a non-stop list of tasks like shopping, cooking and cleaning, and rely on early education and childcare to be able to take care of running the home, as well as to 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.
- They worry that relaxing staff-to-child ratios will 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 who 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

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### 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 reflected 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 information about this research or the work of the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, contact [info@earlyeducationchildcare.org](mailto:info@earlyeducationchildcare.org)



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