

Choosing Quality

Supporting parents to access high quality childcare



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This policy briefing aims to explore how parents make choices about which childcare to use for their children, and the extent to which quality factors play a role in this decision. It looks at the current sources of information available to parents and considers whether improving this information could lead to more informed decision-making, which could help drive up the quality of childcare. It considers the role of local authorities, central government, Ofsted, childcare settings, information providers and parents themselves in improving the quality of childcare.

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Introduction

High quality childcare is essential for improving outcomes for children. Evidence from research studies (for example, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project¹ and the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative²) has shown that to have a lasting impact on children's outcomes, early years services and childcare provision must be of a high quality. This is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, where high quality early years and childcare provision leads to positive cognitive, language and social development. The evaluation of the early education pilot for two-year-old children also illustrated that high quality provision was necessary to produce positive outcomes for children, including significant improvements in vocabulary and improvements in parent-child interactions.³ As a result, the previous Government decreed that providers offering free places to two-year olds must have, or be actively working towards, a good or outstanding rating from Ofsted.

The previous Government's vision, outlined in its *Ten Year Strategy on Childcare*, included the ambition that, in future, early childhood education and care in England would be among the best in the world with:

- a better qualified workforce;
- more workers trained to professional level;
- greater involvement of parents in the planning and delivery of services; and
- reformed regulatory and inspection systems.

To date, the new coalition Government has matched this ambition, with ministers reasserting their commitment to a graduate-led workforce

and continued improvements in quality. A policy statement is expected later in 2011 which will provide greater detail on how the new Government will build on previous developments and make this vision a reality.

Over the last decade there have been great strides made in improving the availability and affordability of childcare, but although the quality of provision is improving, it is still variable. Currently, figures from Ofsted, indicate that nearly 70 per cent of early years and childcare settings are judged good or outstanding,⁴ a figure which has grown in recent years, particularly since the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage in 2008. Just 3 per cent of childcare settings are now judged to be inadequate.

England has adopted a mixed-market approach to childcare, with private, voluntary and independent (PVI) providers operating alongside maintained sector provision. Two-thirds of full daycare provision is privately run, with 22 per cent run by a voluntary organisation.⁵ Local authorities are charged with managing the childcare market under the Childcare Act 2006, and have a statutory responsibility to ensure there is sufficient childcare for working parents. There is no mention of high quality provision within the Childcare Act, despite representations at the time from organisations such as Daycare Trust. It can clearly be argued, however, that in order to be sustainable and to meet the overall objectives of that Act, childcare needs to be of high quality.

High quality provision does have cost implications: Daycare Trust's *Quality costs* project identified that in full daycare and sessional settings, the

cost of provision would need to increase by around 150–200 per cent to reach the high quality model put forward by Daycare Trust.⁶ This would be a huge increase in costs, and would need substantial subsidy so that the additional cost is not passed entirely on to parents. Daycare Trust believes that investment in raising the quality of early childhood education and care is wise as it provides children with the grounding to reach their potential, reduces underachievement which costs society more in the long run, as well as providing an investment in what is still a low-status, low-paid and almost exclusively female workforce. The subsidy suggested by Daycare Trust would leave government expenditure on childcare at around 1 per cent of GDP, which would meet funding levels recommended by the OECD and Unicef. Current expenditure is less than half this level, significantly lower than in many other countries.

Recent Government figures showed that current public spending on childcare is £6.2bn, which includes the childcare element of Working Tax Credit, income tax and national insurance contributions foregone through employer-supported childcare, and local authority spending on free early education and reception classes in England.⁷ This is 0.43 per cent of UK GDP, which was £1,454 billion in December 2010.⁸



Parents and quality

Parents have lots of difficult decisions to make for their children. One of those is which childcare to choose, both in terms of type of childcare setting (ie childminder/group setting) and between different settings in their area. Given the benefits of high quality provision, supporting parents to make the right choice for their family is therefore a key area for public policy.

Despite greater levels of public investment in childcare and universal free nursery places for all three- and four-year-old children, the majority of spending on childcare in the UK comes from parents. Parents are the 'purchasers' in the childcare market and if market mechanisms are to be used to drive up quality, then parents need to be able to choose to 'buy' high quality childcare, which requires them to be informed about what constitutes high quality and to be able to access information about the quality factors in different childcare settings.

The previous Government stated that its ambition was "a universal recognition of the importance of high quality early education, a consistent conception of what high quality looks like, and a shared language for describing it, so that parents can drive quality improvement through exercising choice, and settings can set the highest standards."⁹

This policy paper briefly describes some of the existing mechanisms available for judging quality and policy initiatives aimed at improving quality. It then sets out to identify what factors parents consider important when it comes to childcare quality, how they judge the quality of potential

and current childcare settings, and what further information they feel would be beneficial.

Our starting point is that while initiatives from central and local government are essential for raising the quality of childcare provision, we also need to improve parents' ability to identify and demand high quality if it is to be sustained in all settings. This exercise of parental power to improve quality can come at two points: when choosing a childcare setting in the first place; and through mechanisms for improving quality once a child is part of a setting. This paper will focus more on the first aspect, ie parents' decision about which childcare setting to use. The second aspect must not be forgotten, however, since in many areas parents will face a limited choice of childcare because of a lack of availability or other factors which restrict their choice. Daycare Trust will be conducting more work throughout 2011 on how parents can influence quality from within a setting, whether through getting involved in governance, volunteering or simply knowing which questions to ask about their child's development.

The background information for this paper was researched through academic literature and government documents and statistics, as well as through direct consultation with parents through an online questionnaire and focus groups.

Current quality initiatives

There have been a number of initiatives – some from central Government and some from the sector itself – which have supported the improvement of quality over the last decade.

Reform of the early years and childcare workforce

Work on developing the level of qualifications in the sector has been led by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), the sector skills council for the children's workforce, principally through the development of the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS). To date, over 4000 practitioners have achieved EYPS, which is a graduate level qualification for those working with children under five. The new Government has confirmed its commitment to a highly skilled, graduate-led workforce, but has stated its ambition to move away from a target-driven approach. It therefore remains to be seen whether the target of one graduate in all full daycare settings and two in settings in deprived areas by 2015 will remain.

CWDC also runs the New Leaders programme, a two-year scheme for graduates coming from outside the sector, which is run in partnership with Canterbury Christ Church University in Kent. After completing the course, candidates are awarded EYPS and an Early Years Masters Degree.

CWDC will continue to run EYPS and the New Leaders programme during 2011–12, after which it will cease to be a non-departmental public body and its functions will then be carried out by the Department for Education (DfE).

In addition, the previous Government created the Graduate Leader Fund, recognising that private and voluntary sector childcare providers will find it difficult to pay the increased salary to attract and retain a graduate. The Fund helped nurseries to meet the extra costs of employing a graduate. From April 2011 the Graduate Leader Fund has been absorbed into the new Early Intervention Grant, giving local authorities a choice on how they spend the funding. Unfortunately, the total level of funding through the EIG compared to its predecessor grants has been cut by 10 per cent, so it is likely that local authorities will reduce or remove support in this area.

Regulatory and inspection framework

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was introduced in September 2008 and is a structure for the learning and development of children aged 0 to 5. A review of EYFS was recently conducted by Dame Claire Tickell, Chief Executive of Action for Children, and was published in March 2011.¹⁰ All schools and early years settings need to follow the EYFS unless they obtain a specific exemption. The EYFS also sets the welfare standards for childcare and early years settings, including staff qualifications and staff-to-child ratios. Currently, permissible ratios are 1:3 for children aged under-two, 1:4 for children aged two and 1:8 for children aged three to five (this may be 1:13 for three- and four-year olds in childcare settings that are led by a graduate).

The regulatory framework has been implemented by Ofsted since September 2009 and includes a compulsory and voluntary inspection framework.¹¹ Early years provision is inspected against the EYFS.

Early education places for two-year-olds

The previous Government introduced around 20,000 free early education places (of up to 15 hours per week) for two-year-olds. These were required to be delivered by childcare settings rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted, although some local authorities struggled to find sufficient settings and used satisfactory settings which were improving or which were rated more highly by the local authority itself.

The current Government has pledged to significantly increase the number of places in order to provide free early education to the 20 per cent most disadvantaged two-year-olds in England (around 130,000 children). The places for two-year-olds will become a statutory entitlement in 2013, and the relevant legislation is currently passing through Parliament in the Education Bill. The Government has committed to consulting in late 2011 on the eligibility criteria for the places and on quality issues. The Government has recognised the evidence from the pilots that the quality of the places did have an impact on the outcomes for the family.

Early Years Single Funding Formula

The Early Years Single Funding Formula (EYSFF) is an initiative started by the previous Government to improve the fairness of funding allocation for free early education places for three- and four-year-olds at a local level through the use of transparent hourly rates, alongside the use of supplements for deprivation, quality and other factors. The present Government has confirmed its support for EYSFF and all local authorities were due to implement it by April 2011.

DfE guidance for local authorities recommends including a 'quality supplement' in the formula and

an analysis from the pathfinders who implemented the EYSFF early found that a quality factor was used in around half of local authorities (36 did have a quality factor and 33 didn't).¹² Of those who do have a quality supplement, 22 use qualifications (generally Qualified Teacher or Early Years Professional Status) with a much smaller number (6) using Ofsted ratings only. Typically, quality supplements were expressed as an addition to the hourly rate (for example, an extra 20p per hour) and are often banded, although some used a lump-sum approach instead.

Buddying

Some local authorities received an allocation within their Sure Start, Early Years and Childcare Grant for buddying: to identify models and approaches to buddying and other joint work between practitioners in schools and early years settings. Funding has been used to enable staff in settings (including childminders) and schools to take part in joint activities, for example, coaching and mentoring, shadowing and joint training. This was rolled out through the Making a Big Difference (MABD) programme to all local authorities, with buddying one of the streams within the programme.

National Quality Improvement Network

The National Quality Improvement Network (NQIN) is a national peer support network for quality assurance schemes run by different local authorities or organisations and is co-ordinated by the National Children's Bureau. It has identified a set of good practice principles for quality improvement across the early years and out-of-school sectors.¹³

Current information on quality

There are various sources of information on childcare quality, although not all data collected are in the public domain. The sources also have different purposes, with some existing for quality assurance purposes, whereas others are more focused on quality improvements.

Ofsted

Ofsted reports are the main source of information on the quality of settings, but the information they contain, while useful, is constrained by the regulatory framework and schedule. Nevertheless, the information within them is crucial to many parents' decisions about childcare. Ofsted inspections are carried out every three years for providers on the Early Years Register, in addition to a registration visit when a provider first applies to be on the Register. For childcare providers for children aged five and over, there is limited inspection (only a Criminal Records Bureau check and checks on 10 per cent of providers each year), unless a complaint is made against the provider. Ofsted registration on the Childcare Register is compulsory for children aged 5–8 and voluntary for children aged over 8. Early years and childcare provision run by a maintained or independent school is usually included in the main school inspection, but there are concerns about how effective this is.

Furthermore, Ofsted measures provision against minimum standards: inspection reports can highlight good practice but the judgements are about whether providers meet minimum standards. There is also concern expressed that Ofsted does not have the capacity to follow up on recommendations made, unless a provider is judged inadequate and therefore has a follow-up visit. A further limitation of Ofsted inspections

is that they only take a snapshot of provision on the day of inspection; they are almost immediately out of date. Thus if a provider is judged satisfactory but takes immediate action to improve their provision and put into place any recommendations made by Ofsted and raises their standards to 'good', this will not be reflected in publicly available information for another three years, or longer if it is on the Childcare Register.

The Government has signalled its intention to reform the way that Ofsted inspects, moving to less regular and more 'risk-based' inspection. The new Early Years Foundation Stage profile will also lead to a revised inspection framework.

Local authorities

Local authorities carry out their own visits to supplement the information available from Ofsted inspections and to judge the quality and sustainability of provision and determine what support, if any, the provider requires. This often results in a 'Red/Amber/Green' (RAG) rating, showing if the childcare provider is operating healthily and providing high quality provision or needs further support from the local authority's development officers (often called childcare consultants or equivalent). Information from local authorities in the South East region indicated that these assessments are made at regular intervals, at least yearly and sometimes termly.¹⁴ The information collected is increasingly comprehensive, and many local authorities now use the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Infant and Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) to rate quality. Both scales are observation-based tools used for quality assurance and self-improvement. Progress made by childcare settings is monitored, largely by the achievement of

agreed time-bound objectives, and verified by development officers on subsequent visits.

The role of local authorities is different to Ofsted; they can offer support to settings to improve quality, but do not have the regulatory powers to enforce change, i.e. they can provide the 'carrot' but not the 'stick'. There is anecdotal evidence of local authorities sometimes expressing concern about differences between Ofsted inspections and their own judgements.

The information held by local authorities, while comprehensive, is not publicly available and is only used to inform the level of support or challenge needed. There is also a difference in the level and quality of assessments made by local authorities and the support offered, and it is likely that due to cuts in local authorities' funding, there will be less support offered to providers in future.

Quality assurance/improvement schemes

Some local authorities and/or national membership organisations have developed or adopted quality assurance or improvement schemes, such as the National Day Nursery Association's *Quality Counts*, Pre-school Learning Alliance's *Aiming for Quality* and National Childminding Association's *Children Come First*. There was previously a quality assurance scheme endorsed by the then Department for Education and Skills (now DfE), *Investors in Children*, but has been superseded by the National Quality Improvement Network.

Ofsted reports that around 5 per cent of providers inspected participate in quality assurance schemes, and that those participating

in schemes are much more likely to be good or outstanding: 89 per cent are either good or outstanding, compared with 65 per cent of those who are not members. The difference is particularly marked among childminders.¹⁵

Settings' own self evaluation

Childcare providers delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage are required to carry out a Self Evaluation Form (SEF) as part of the Ofsted process. It is recommended that providers complete the SEF every six months to monitor their progress, and it is used by Ofsted to plan their inspection. The form covers details of the setting, training undertaken, views of children and their parents, as well as self evaluation on the quality of provision, outcomes for children, leadership and management of the setting, and its overall effectiveness.

According to Ofsted's latest annual report, those providers inspected in 2009/10 who submitted an SEF were more likely to achieve a good or outstanding inspection result than those who did not – 85 per cent compared with 61 per cent. It found that around four-fifths of providers who submitted an SEF evaluated themselves the same as, or more harshly than, the inspector. Similarly, the previous year's annual report found that only 23 per cent rated their work more highly than Ofsted. For example, of the 400 providers judged satisfactory by inspection in their overall effectiveness, 77 per cent had evaluated themselves as good or outstanding. Ofsted stated that this indicated a need for more "to be done to build a culture of rigorous self-assessment in a considerable number of providers".¹⁶

Parents' views on quality: a literature review

There is limited research on parents' satisfaction with childcare and what they understand as high quality provision.¹⁷ Most early childcare research assumed parents would be content with childcare that is affordable and reliable. As Leach states, this is over simplistic, but parents' ability to 'vote with their feet' and change childcare provider depending on quality is hampered by the high demand for places.¹⁸ Parents' 'ideal' is not always met in reality – most parents do need to make compromises, sometimes because of money and/or availability. Once using childcare, parents are often grateful for having found suitable provision and do not want to rock the boat by questioning the quality of the setting. Furthermore, we cannot assume that all parents will have similar views on quality; it is possible that parents' own experiences, values and aspirations may shape the factors they view as most important when choosing childcare.

Important quality factors for parents

The Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents, a yearly study commissioned by the Department for Education, found that a majority of parents have positive perceptions of the quality of childcare in their area.¹⁹ In 2009, 64 per cent of parents thought that quality was either very good (21 per cent) or fairly good (43 per cent). A further 7 per cent thought quality was fairly poor and 4 per cent thought it very poor. The study found that parents who used childcare were more positive about the quality of local provision than those who did not use it, and that dual earning couples and higher

income families were more positive than non-working couples, non-working lone parents and lower income families.

Interestingly, a quarter of parents were not sure of their views on childcare quality. This was not just the view from parents who were not using formal childcare – even among those who were using local childcare services, 18 per cent were not sure of their views on its quality. This suggests that a large number of parents lack confidence in their ability to even offer a view on quality.

The same study asked parents why they chose their childcare provider. For pre-school providers, the two biggest factors were related to quality. The provider's reputation was the most-cited factor (62 per cent), followed by concern with the care given ie whether providers were affectionate or well trained (55 per cent). Further important factors were that the child could mix with other children and convenience (both 52 per cent).

Looking in more detail at the quality factors that parents' value when choosing a childcare provider, studies identified for this research found a common understanding that staff characteristics were the most important. This encompasses a variety of factors depending on the survey involved (for example, warm and responsive staff, good communication, trust). Safety also features highly for parents, and diversity of staff is important for parents from black and minority ethnic groups.

In a survey of 1001 American mothers, the most cited reasons for selection of childcare were child safety, caregiver characteristics and the structural characteristics of care (ie fixed, environmental aspects such as facilities, ratios and training).²⁰ Nearly all mothers in the survey reported being satisfied with their childcare, although other research (see below) indicates that parents find it difficult to be critical once their children are in a childcare setting, as it would legitimise sending their child to a poor provider. The authors suggest that the lack of a working knowledge of childcare quality is an obstacle to children being placed in high quality settings.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that the choice of quality of care depends on mothers' age and education, ethnicity, the number of pre-school and young school siblings, and mothers' earnings/family income,²¹ again suggesting that more needs to be done to inform all groups of parents about childcare quality, and that high quality provision needs to be affordable for all.

The Families, Children and Child Care (FCCC) study in England found that the qualities most valued by parents were:

- a loving and caring environment (81 per cent);
- the provision of a safe physical environment (68 per cent);
- trust;
- ease of communication with caregivers; and
- cultural aspects.²²

In Daycare Trust's *Talking About Childcare* project, which involved discussions with 400 parents and children from low-income families, parents identified that childcare needs to reflect the diversity of society (especially important for parents from minority ethnic groups) and that male staff

were important as role models for boys.²³ Parents looked for:

- good communication with staff;
- personal recommendation;
- relevant qualifications;
- staff who get to know the parents; and
- staff who have their own children.

In November 2009, a poll conducted by Bounty on behalf of Daycare Trust among 2,243 mothers found that the important factors in choosing childcare were identified as:

- well qualified/trained/experienced staff (74 per cent);
- a warm and caring atmosphere (59 per cent);
- good Ofsted report (44 per cent);
- cost (36 per cent); and
- proximity (30 per cent).²⁴

Parents' vs researchers' views on childcare quality

One of the barriers to encouraging parents to demand high quality is that much of the language around quality is focused on a professional and academic audience and is based on technical measures of quality rather than parents' more observational and intuitive approach.

Academics point to staff and manager qualifications and training; stability of staff group; high staff-to-child ratios; and sector (maintained sector being a strong predictor of quality) as being consistent factors in high quality provision.²⁵ The EPPE study also identified warm and interactive relationships with children as important. Research also emphasises the importance of parental involvement in children's learning: where parents

take an interest in and support their children's learning, children achieve more.²⁶

Parents' ideas about high quality factors as explored through existing literature are therefore the same as researchers to a large extent, although with less emphasis on staff qualifications (as opposed to staff characteristics more generally) and ratios. However, as Leach explains in *Child Care Today*, parents' judgements are different as they start from the point of view of their child and themselves, rather than the more disconnected and therefore independent view of researchers.²⁷ For example, parents will be influenced by the childcare practicality, flexibility and dynamic factors such as whether provision lives up to what was promised.

It is also likely that parents find it difficult to be critical of settings they are already using, because that would mean that they are choosing to leave their child in a place that they know is less than ideal. Leach points out that sometimes parents support childcare settings that professionals judge as inadequate. The Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative Impact Study found that even where the NNI Childcare Quality and Children's Behaviour Scores were low, parental assessments still tended to be high.²⁸ In the USA research has indicated that parents generally rate the childcare their children use more highly than independent observers.²⁹

The FCCC study found that there was no significant difference between satisfaction with childminder, grandparent or nanny care, and that communication with caregivers was an important quality factor, with highest confidence in that aspect with childminders and lowest with nursery staff.³⁰ These factors may be a result of mothers' level of control over childcare and to what extent they can influence, or feel confident to ask for,

things to be done differently. The authors also suggest that it could be due to adult-to-child ratios and the amount of attention that parents feel their child is receiving. This study also found that mothers with more educational qualifications were more likely to be using their ideal type of childcare – this might be because they have more choice available to them or have more information on quality to make their decision.



Our research with parents

Methods

In order to collate further information to supplement the literature and desk research, we undertook a web survey with parents on what they think about childcare quality, as well as a focus group with five mothers and individual interviews with five mothers in Chatham and Greater Manchester respectively. The questionnaire was sent to Daycare Trust members, added to the Daycare Trust website of and publicised via Netmums. A total of 74 parents participated in the questionnaire, 89 per cent of whom were female and 11 per cent male.

Use of childcare

Among respondents to the questionnaire, although parents reported accessing a range of childcare settings, day nurseries were the most popular, with 63 per cent of respondents using them in the past year. Grandparents and other family members represented the second most utilised form of childcare (48 per cent), followed by childminders (24 per cent).

The mothers we talked to through the qualitative research had a mixture of experiences with regard to childcare. Those that had used childcare had used a variety of settings, three had only used informal care and two had not used any childcare, formal or informal.

Rationale for choice of provider

A combination of instinctive impressions and pragmatism dominated parents' rationales

for selecting childcare. Indeed, 76 per cent of parents stated that a 'convenient location' heavily influenced their decision to use a particular provider, whereas 79 per cent of parents stated that 'friendly and experienced staff' significantly contributed to their choice of childcare setting. Other important factors were the provision of a 'diverse range of activities' and 'reliability', reported by 54 and 44 per cent of parents respectively.

Parents in the focus group and interviews, without prompting, said that personal recommendation, good reputation and friendly staff were important in choosing childcare. Other factors mentioned were trust in the people delivering the childcare, safety and how many children were in the group. Location was also important. Cost was only mentioned spontaneously by a few parents, although when prompted almost all said it would have to be affordable, and one mother with three children said it had become more important now that she had twins in addition to her older daughter. Similarly, cost did not feature highly in the questionnaire responses, with only 6 per cent of parents reporting it as the most important factor.

Interestingly, when asked to choose the most important factor influencing their choice of childcare, respondents to the questionnaire drew a clear distinction between the qualifications of staff and their experience. Indeed, 43 per cent of parents who responded to the questionnaire believed the friendliness and experience of staff to be the most important indicator of a setting's suitability, as opposed to just 6 per cent who believed it to be the level of staff qualification.

In the qualitative research we then asked all participants to rank a list of quality factors in order of priority. Staff factors ranked as most important for almost all parents, although views on whether qualifications, experience or friendliness were most important varied. Most included well qualified staff amongst their top choices, with some ranking it first, but a couple of participants ranked qualifications much lower, saying that anyone could get a qualification if they wanted, or expressed concern that with qualifications came more paperwork than playing with the kids. Some rated friendliness as important, particularly those that were recent migrants, whereas others said they would 'take that for granted' in a childcare worker. Many said that they wanted staff to have experience and be well qualified, or that the two would go hand in hand. Parents clearly do value qualifications, but realise that by themselves they do not make a good childcare worker.

[Qualifications are important] "so you know that it's somebody good that's looking after your kids."

"They have to be qualified, just like a teacher, or a care assistant, or a childminder or whatever – they've all got to be qualified."

Ratios, staff and setting consistency

Quality indicators of ratios and staff consistency did not heavily influence parents' choice of provider according to questionnaire responses, with only 6 per cent and 4.5 per cent of questionnaire respondents stating that a good staff-to-child ratio and Ofsted report were the most important factor for their choice of providers, respectively. It may be argued that staff-to-child ratios did not figure prominently in parents' decision making processes as it is an aspect of childcare provision that is required by the welfare requirements of the EYFS.

Although they may not have been rated as most important in the questionnaires, ratios and staff consistency were important to parents, as exemplified through the focus group and interviews – parents realised that their children needed continuity of care.

"They won't learn anything when they're getting a different teacher every week – it's not doing them any good."

"If there are too many people in or out, they're not going to respect that person, they're not going to be well behaved."

"...because then you know everybody and everybody knows you – they know what's going on; they know if you're having any troubles."

Very few mothers had heard of the EYFS specifically, but liked the concept of a framework for learning and care when it was explained to them. They thought that structure was important for their children as long as it wasn't too rigid.

Mothers thought that the quality of buildings, outdoor space and activities were important as well, but staff and safety were more important.

They also said that they needed settings to be reliable and ideally flexible as well.

“You can have a gorgeous building but the staff can be nasty.”

Information about childcare and its quality

In relation to information about childcare and childcare quality, some parents interviewed through the qualitative research didn't know where they could access information about childcare, and not all had heard of the local Family Information Service. Given that the qualitative research was undertaken at children's centres, unsurprisingly most of the parents listed the children's centre as an important source of information. Two of the mothers also had link workers at the children's centre, which they found particularly helpful. For those that were using childcare, or would be in the near future, settings had often been found through word of mouth or just by walking past a setting near to them.

“It's a bit daunting to think 'would I send my child there?' when you don't know anything about it.”

Some parents interviewed said that they would like more advice and information. They said they would welcome information sessions at parent and toddler groups, stay and play sessions etc. Most said they would value face-to-face advice. The two recent migrant mothers said they would welcome information in their first language (Chinese). Parents mentioned that it was necessary to be in contact with the 'right' people – and really valued input from people at the children's centre, both staff and other parents.

Ofsted

Sixty-one per cent of respondents to the questionnaire whose child attended a registered childcare setting reported that they had consulted the Ofsted report prior to enrolling their child.

Most parents in the focus group/interviews didn't realise that Ofsted undertook early years inspections, although they had heard of Ofsted reports for schools. Even for those that had known that Ofsted undertook early years inspections, only one had consulted it, although again most had for schools. Many parents assumed that they would not be able to understand the Ofsted reports and/or didn't know where to get them from. Those that had read Ofsted reports (for schools) said that they found them helpful and/or reassuring, although they did also say that they wouldn't consider them exclusively. One mother said that they had previously used a school based on reputation, but she didn't like it, so looked at Ofsted reports when deciding to change schools. She was much happier with the one that received a good Ofsted report than the one with a good reputation.

Scope for improvement

When asked to suggest ways in which childcare provision could be improved in the questionnaire, respondents proposed a range of measures associated with practicality and acknowledged quality benchmarks. The most popular measure, proposed by 37 per cent of respondents, was the provision of more flexible hours of care. Similarly, 27 per cent of parents stated that they would like more childcare to be available in their locality. Specifically relating to issues of quality, 27 per cent of respondents also stated that they would like more childcare staff to be 'well qualified, trained and experienced'.

In short, the questionnaire found that parents were significantly more concerned with the wellbeing of their children and the practicality of the arrangement, than they were with the cost of the setting. This was also borne out in the qualitative work with parents.



Discussion

The desk research, literature review and research with parents has underlined the fact that parents are interested in quality, but how they talk about quality factors can be different to the way that professionals describe it. Parents understand the need for high quality staff for a high quality childcare setting, and are rightly concerned with the safety of their children. Parents concur with the major research studies in recognising the importance of staff qualifications and skills, but also have to consider factors such as location, and to a certain extent, cost, particularly for those with more than one child. It is a complicated decision involving a number of factors, but the quality of provision is an important factor that parents do consider.

Research indicates that parents find it difficult to objectively judge childcare settings that they are currently using, because they want to know/believe that their child is in a good setting, although we did find examples of parents who expressed unhappiness with a previous childcare provider, for example, because ratios were exceeded, and acted upon that. Therefore, it is even more important that parents are able to make a decision based on quality factors when they first choose their childcare.

There are a number of different players in the field of childcare quality, and each of these has a role to play in ensuring that parents are able to access and understand information about childcare quality, and therefore choose high quality settings, thus improving the quality of childcare settings across the board.

Central Government has a role in supporting settings to recruit and retain highly qualified staff, through ensuring access to training and providing funding to providers to enable them to employ and retain better qualified staff. The Graduate Leader Fund was an important funding stream which enabled settings, normally operating on very tight margins, to recruit or train graduate staff for Early Years Professional Status and pay them accordingly. This is an important role in the current childcare market and needs to continue if we want to see all settings, particularly those in the private and voluntary sectors, able to recruit and retain highly qualified staff. The development of the 'Home Grown Graduate Initiative' is also very helpful as it offers staff progression and incentive to stay in the field of childcare, and with their current employer, rather than moving on to (potentially higher paid) employment elsewhere.

With the Graduate Leader Fund absorbed into the Early Intervention Grant, there is concern that local authorities will reduce their spending in this area. This would be worrying given that even under the previous ring-fenced scheme there was concern that it did not pay enough to prevent staff moving onto better paid roles within the maintained sector. There remain concerns that Early Years Professional Status does not have equal status with Qualified Teacher Status and is still considered the poorer alternative. This could be because of a lack of guaranteed national pay structures and conditions of work for EYPs, and a less defined career structure. In late 2010, the Government announced that children's centres would no longer be required to employ someone with both EYP and QTS – in future only one is required. The impact

of this change in policy is yet to be seen, but it is likely that over time children's centres will replace teachers with cheaper EYPs.

The Graduate Leader Fund programme is still being evaluated, but it is hoped that as more childcare settings recruit or train graduate-level staff, we should see an improvement in quality across the board, particularly in disadvantaged areas where settings have historically been of lower quality but will be getting the benefit of two graduates. This will therefore enable parents to choose high quality provision where previously it wasn't available.

Central government also has a role to play in directing and setting the quality framework for early years and childcare provision. This has seen substantial development in the past few years, with the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2008 and its subsequent review by Dame Claire Tickell. The EYFS has been open to criticism from some quarters that it is too focused on children's achievements and assessments, for example, in speech, reading and writing, but overall

it has been well received. The Tickell review has recommended a slimmer EYFS, with fewer Early Learning Goals and greater scope for flexibility for certain types of providers. There will be relief from many in the sector that Dame Tickell has not recommended wholesale change to the EYFS, which has received widespread support from providers.

The Tickell review also acknowledges that greater understanding among parents of the EYFS is needed, and that the language must be simplified to allow better engagement from parents with their child's learning and development. Daycare Trust's evidence to the review included the evidence gathered for this paper that parents recognise the importance of a framework or structure for their children. As the new EYFS framework is developed, there should be more parent-facing materials developed (for example, contact books on the EYFS themes) to enhance parents' understanding of the framework and improve its ability to support parents to drive up quality.



There are of course additional issues of how to fund high quality provision across the country, with Daycare Trust's research indicating that high quality provision would require costs to increase by at least 150 per cent in full daycare settings, which would require substantial further investment from government to prevent the full cost being passed on to parents.³¹ The Early Years Single Funding Formula was devised to more fairly distribute the funding available for the early years free entitlement, but it is clear that there needs to be more funding available in the pot to enable high quality provision to be funded effectively.

It is hoped that the Government's policy statement will address how quality is to be raised in an era of public spending restrictions.

Ofsted also has a clearly defined role to play in judging and providing information on the quality of childcare settings, but this could be made more parent-friendly. The parents we spoke to had mainly not heard of Ofsted reports for childcare settings, and where they had, assumed that they would be too difficult to understand, despite Ofsted's efforts to make inspection reports easy to read. In previous years the annual DfE survey of parents has asked if parents consult Ofsted reports and whether it influenced their decision, but this question has not been included since the 2007 survey. The most recent results are therefore from 2007, and indicate that 71 per cent of parents using formal childcare knew that their provider had been inspected, with 63 per cent of those having received the results of the inspection.³² Of those parents who received inspection results, just over half said that the inspection results *had* influenced their decision to use the provider (54 per cent of parents whose children used a group provider and 56 per cent of parents of children who went to childminders).

Therefore, Ofsted and DfE need to further publicise their role in inspecting childcare settings and ensure that reports are easy to access and understand. Family Information Services can help with this through sending out Ofsted reports but Ofsted could also write to the parents in the setting with the outcome of the inspection and with detail on the key good points and recommendations for improvement. This could be based upon the short letters that Ofsted draft for school pupils/students to give feedback on school inspections, and therefore need not be overly burdensome for inspectors.

Local authorities have an important role to play in supporting and challenging childcare providers in order to achieve quality improvement. Local authorities often feel more able to offer incentives to settings to improve, rather than being able to force providers to improve. Local authorities typically have the most up-to-date and accurate information on a setting's quality, thanks to their support and assessment. Their assessments of childcare settings are not made public, as they may conflict with Ofsted and do not have any legal basis, but they do contain much useful information that could be made more widely available in some form. For example, local authorities could maintain a list of providers that show good practice in different areas or who have attended training on various subjects. This could then be made available through the Family Information Service, giving parents another source of information that they could consult when deciding which childcare setting to use. Local authorities could also promote buddying opportunities further, perhaps by making it a requirement that all settings have a 'setting improvement partner', like the school improvement partners.

The information from Ofsted indicates that satisfactory settings, in particular childminders, find it difficult to rate themselves and often think they are operating at a higher quality level than is the reality. Encouraging buddying and/or childminding groups and networks would be a good way for childminders to see others' provision and improve their own. This could even be made a requirement for local authority grants and support. Again, this will improve quality across the board and enable parents to have a real choice about high quality settings.

The other role that local authorities have is in determining sufficient provision in their local area, and setting the **Early Years Single Funding Formula (EYSFF)**. Local authorities should consider quality as a key part of their market management role, and in securing sufficiency, and should therefore take the quality of settings into account when undertaking their sufficiency assessment, particularly as higher quality care can enhance sustainability.³³ The sufficiency assessment could include links to the Ofsted reports so that parents could find more information as they require it. The Early Years Single Funding Formula guidance from DfE recommends a quality supplement be applied to the formula, to reward settings that are operating at a high quality level. In 2010 the then Children, Schools and Families Select Committee undertook an investigation into the EYSFF and concluded *"it is unacceptable for a local authority not to try and stimulate the quality of early years education and care...Every local authority should include a quality supplement in its single funding formula and the level of that supplement should be credible and not minimal."*³⁴ In its response to the Committee's report, the Government agreed that the EYSFF should form part of local authorities' strategies for driving up quality. This

will require sufficient funding to be put into the formulae, which may require further investment from the local authority and/or lobbying of central government to secure further funding for the free entitlement.

Families Information Services (FIS) are the main parent-facing information source from local authorities. They do vital work in informing families about the childcare options in their area. The inclusion of Ofsted gradings on the Family Information Directory (which, since April, has been disbanded as a national directory) was useful, but could have been made even more useful by including links to the Ofsted reports, rather than parents having to separately go to the Ofsted website to download the relevant report. FIS could also support parents by offering to send out Ofsted reports for those settings that parents are interested in, and talking through the reports with parents if they wish.

Childcare settings have a role to play themselves in informing parents and prospective parents about the quality factors in their setting and also involving parents in the setting, which in itself has been shown to improve the quality of childcare settings. All childcare settings need to inform parents of the training that staff undertake, and also of the role of the EYFS. This could possibly include structuring contact books/termly feedback along the lines of the categories and activities outlined in the EYFS. All group childcare settings should have a parent user group, with opportunities to feed into the setting and ask questions about quality improvement. Settings could also undertake an annual survey with parents, to enable them to have a say about what they and their children appreciate most about the setting and suggest areas for improvement. This could be a really useful feedback tool for both the childcare setting

and the parents, as although parents are often (explicitly or not) able in theory to give feedback to the childcare setting, it is difficult to do so without a specific channel, as parents may be reticent to raise issues (or indeed say what they have really enjoyed) because of not wanting to seem to criticise the professionals. Given that quality assurance schemes have been shown to have a positive impact on quality, all settings should join a recognised quality assurance scheme and advertise their membership to parents.

Other **information providers and campaigning organisations in the childcare and parenting sectors**, including Daycare Trust and online forums such as Netmums, Mumsnet and Bounty, need to redouble their efforts to improve the availability of information materials which promote the concept of high quality childcare and support parents to choose it. This might involve practical tools which demonstrate what high quality childcare looks like, checklists for identifying quality and practical information about how to influence practices within a setting.

Lastly, **parents** themselves have an important role to play. As stated above, parents need a channel in which they can input into the quality of their childcare setting, either through a parent user group (or equivalent) or through responding to a parent survey. Parent champions is also a useful model for getting parents involved in promoting childcare, including understanding the importance of quality and being able to explain that to others. Parents need to feel empowered and better informed about the issues surrounding childcare quality in order to fulfill this role effectively, so better parent-focused information is essential.

Daycare Trust is currently engaged in a year-long project with the University of Oxford and A+

Education looking at how different measures of quality are understood and used by parents (and also childcare providers and local authorities). As part of the research, focus groups with parents will be conducted to ascertain how useful the various measurement tools are as a way of communicating with parents about quality of settings. From this we will make recommendations on whether the measures need to be reformed and ways in which they could be better promoted among parents. Furthermore, based on the findings of the research, we will produce a parent's guide to identify high quality childcare. The report and guide is due to be published at the end of 2011/early 2012.



Conclusion and recommendations

Research evidence is clear that in order for children to get the greatest benefit from childcare and early years education, it needs to be of high quality. And given that we have a childcare market in Britain, parents have to make a choice about which childcare provider to use, with part of that decision being based on the quality of the childcare available. As stated by Van Horn et al, the lack of a working knowledge of childcare quality can be an obstacle to children being placed in high quality settings.³⁵ IFS also suggests that choice of quality of care depends, amongst other things, on the mother's age, education and earnings/family income.

Parents do make judgements about the quality of childcare settings, and often those judgements are similar to those of researchers. Parents value staff characteristics above all – they want staff to be experienced, kind and friendly, and many value staff qualifications as well. Practical considerations, such as location and reliability, are also important, whereas cost features less highly. Once in childcare, research evidence suggests that parents find it difficult to objectively evaluate the provision their child is using, and for many parents there are limited opportunities where they feel empowered to make recommendations or suggestions. Therefore, the initial decision about which childcare setting to use becomes even more important. Parents need to be supported when making decisions about childcare so that they are able to make an informed decision. They need face-to-face

advice, opportunities to learn from other parents, and support in accessing Ofsted reports.

The following recommendations explore how parents can be better informed about the quality of provision and empowered to make quality judgements and recommendations for improving the childcare their children use.

Recommendations

The **Department for Education** should:

- Continue the drive towards higher quality across the sector with a specific, ring-fenced funding stream for settings to employ graduate staff.
- Support the provision of information to parents which includes easy-to-understand information about quality. Daycare Trust supports the retention of a national database such as the Family Information Directory. Each web page should include information about the setting's quality, and there should be generic information for parents about childcare quality and what questions to ask a childcare provider, for example, before they search for providers in their area.
- Provide tailored information on EYFS directly for parents so that they recognise the EYFS themes. This could involve developing parent contact books and feedback sheets around the EYFS themes. (This is already good practice in



many childcare settings but should be available across the board.)

- Extend the buddying programme to all childcare and early years settings, including childminders, and consider making it a requirement for settings delivering the free entitlement. This will ensure that settings can experience and identify quality provision, and will have something to compare themselves to when self-evaluating their own quality.
- Consider running a media campaign to highlight good practice examples of childcare provision to balance the negative portrayal often found in the media.

Ofsted should:

- Involve parents more in inspections so that they understand the process and can contribute. Existing parent groups are an ideal opportunity for parents to feed into an inspection, as they could put together feedback and

recommendations on an annual basis which could be included in evidence to Ofsted.

- Give parents feedback on inspection visits – this will help to raise the profile of Ofsted inspections for childcare provision – and make the reports more accessible to parents. This could be along the same lines as letters sent from Ofsted inspectors to pupils/students in schools, and give examples of good practice in the setting and recommendations on how the setting could improve.

Local authorities should:

- Ensure that Families Information Services offer to send out relevant Ofsted reports to parents as part of their information duty.
- Provide a link to Ofsted reports from childcare providers' information on local databases.
- Increase membership of quality improvement schemes.

- Instigate parent champion schemes, training parents to be advocates for childcare, with a focus on the importance of high quality provision.
- Make the information obtained through local authority assessments more publicly available in some way, or maintain a list of providers involved in good practice across the local authority.
- Include a significant quality supplement in their Early Years Single Funding Formula.

Childcare settings should:

- Participate in buddying schemes and networks so that there is a wider experience of provision and appreciation of quality – both in their own setting and in others. This will also help to develop self-evaluation, particularly among childminders.
- Participate in quality improvement schemes, as this has been shown to substantially increase the quality of provision.
- Establish parent groups so that parents have a legitimate route for making comments and recommendations about provision.
- Conduct an annual parental questionnaire so that all parents can contribute. For childminders, this could be done across a local authority childminding network so that responses are more anonymous.
- Ensure that children in group childcare settings have a key person and that the operation of the key person scheme works well so that parents have good communication with the setting.
- Produce parent information on the EYFS specific to the setting and ensure that parents are given regular opportunities to see their child's assessment record book.

Organisations advising parents and providing information should:

- Ensure that practical tools and materials are available to support parents to identify high quality childcare and empower them to secure change within their setting.

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