

Keeping mum: childcare as a vote winning issue

Daycare Trust, together with Bounty Parenting Club, undertook an online opinion survey of mothers. The survey asked how their voting choices would be affected by political parties' policies on childcare. It also asked what factors were important to mothers when deciding on childcare, their views on the benefits of childcare, whether they were aware of the free early education entitlement for all three and four year olds and covered issues about the affordability of childcare and returning to work.



This briefing provides an analysis of the survey results, and discusses the implications for the 2010 General Election and future policy developments on childcare and support for families.

It was published in March 2010 alongside Daycare Trust's Childcare Charter which sets out the policies that we would like to see implemented by the next Government. You can add your voice to our campaign by signing up on our website at www.daycaretrust.org.uk.

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Impact of childcare policies on voting intention

It has been suggested that women, and mothers in particular, are key to electoral success in the upcoming General Election. Leaders from the three main political parties have been keen to consult with women on issues such as the economy and climate change, as well as on the support they want for their families. Through our Childcare Charter, Daycare Trust is calling on all political parties to keep early childhood education and care (ECEC) high on the political agenda and make it a priority in the next Parliament. ECEC plays a crucial role in family life; it enables women to work and families to balance their work and childcare responsibilities, helps tackle child poverty and there is strong evidence to suggest that good-quality ECEC plays a fundamental role in overcoming intergenerational poverty and disadvantage for young children.

The results of our survey suggest that mothers will be strongly influenced by how the three main political parties address childcare issues. Our

survey panel was asked how likely it was that they would vote for a party that proposed to remove or limit funding on a number of family or childcare initiatives – see figure 1. The three issues most likely to make women **less** likely to vote for a political party were a removal or reduction of the 12.5 hours of free childcare for all 3 and 4 year olds (69%), a removal or reduction of tax credits (67%), and a limit or reduction of childcare vouchers (60%). These were closely followed by a further two issues they did not wish to see limited or removed - namely the Child Trust Fund (57%) and Sure Start Children's Centres (54%).

When we looked at the impact on the voting intentions of women before and after they have children, pregnant women were less likely to be swayed by whether a political party proposes to remove or limit childcare funding. Women who were already mothers, who would be more immediately affected by any changes, were more likely to be swayed by the removal or funding limitations of childcare provision.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who are less likely to vote for a political party if they proposed to remove or limit funding of the following policies

Base: All respondents (2,423)



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Factors related to the qualifications of the workforce and the implementation of the Early Years Framework were the least likely to negatively affect how mothers voted. However, when they were asked what factors they considered when choosing childcare (see next section), 74 per cent said that it was important that the ‘staff are well qualified, well trained or experienced’, the highest of all chosen priorities. This might suggest that parents do not view workforce issues as politically contested territory, or do not believe that the Government of the day has much control over the level of qualifications in the sector. In reality, the overall level of funding the sector receives, and the extent of the political support for higher qualifications, will make a huge difference in determining future improvements in the qualifications and quality of the workforce.

Priorities when choosing childcare

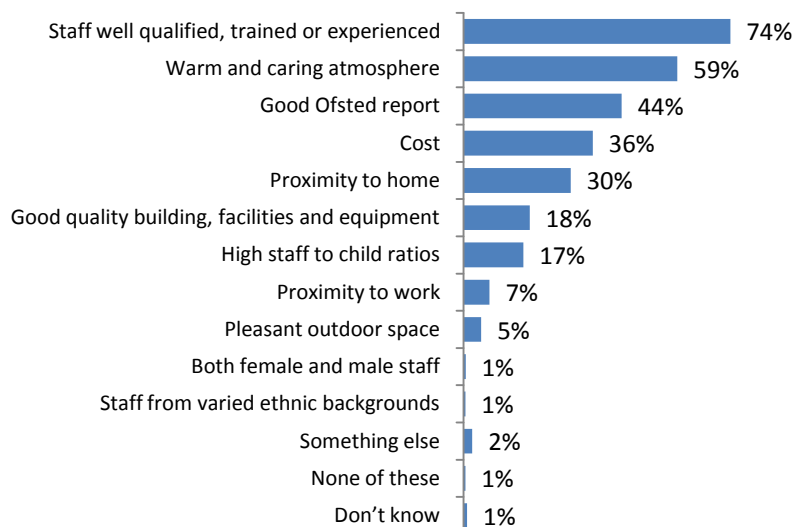
The three most important factors identified by

mothers when choosing childcare all concerned the quality of childcare – see figure 2. They were most concerned with the qualifications, training and experience of the staff (74 per cent), followed by wanting a ‘warm and caring atmosphere’ (59 per cent), and, thirdly, that there is a good report from Ofsted’s quality inspection (44 per cent). Other quality associated issues such as ‘good quality building, facilities and equipment’ and ‘high staff to child ratios’ were less of a deciding factor for mothers, scoring 18 per cent and 17 per cent respectively. Affordability was an important factor for just over a third of mothers (36 per cent). A larger proportion would prefer that their choice of childcare is close to their home (30 per cent) rather than to work (7 per cent).

These figures show that although a significant proportion of mothers were concerned about the cost of childcare, many more were concerned about the quality of provision.

Figure 2: Importance of factors when choosing childcare provision (%)

Base: All respondents (2, 423)



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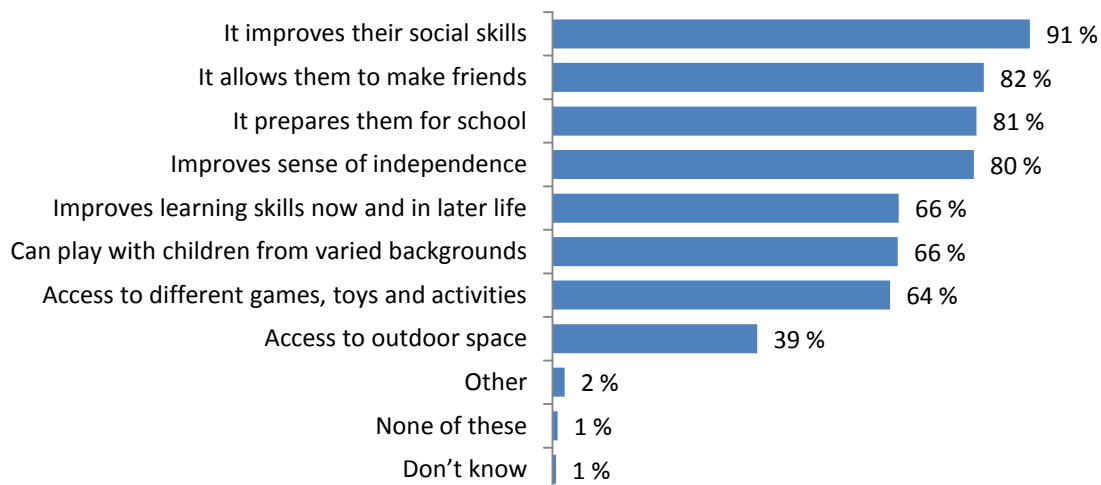
Benefits of childcare

Our survey suggests that the main perceived benefits of formal childcare for children are concerned with sociability, followed by ‘school readiness’. Ninety-one per cent of mothers cited that ‘it improves their social skills’ as the main perceived benefit for their child attending formal childcare. A further 82 per cent of mothers thought

that ‘it allows them to make friends’ and 81 per cent thought that it ‘prepares them for school’. Not surprisingly, a high percentage of mothers indicated that the benefits of childcare are long-term; 66 per cent said that it ‘improves skills now and later in life’.

Figure 3: Perceived main benefits of childcare (%)

Base: All respondents (2,423)



Types of childcare used in the past 12 months

Mothers with a child aged 0–1 were the most likely not to have used childcare (16 per cent); a likely explanation is that many women are still on maternity leave. Formal childcare was most used by children aged 2–3 years old with 32 per cent attending a day nursery and 35 per cent attending a playgroup. Grandparents or other family members were widely used for childcare by all age groups, but the number of hours they provided was not

covered. However, other evidence suggests that it is usually used alongside formal childcare as part of a package of care.¹ Those with a child aged 2–3 years old were more likely to use a day nursery than the other age groups. Playgroups/pre-school and nursery schools/classes were more commonly used for children over the age of one.

¹ Daycare Trust (2010) *Listening to Grandparents*, London: Daycare Trust, forthcoming.

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Figure 4: Types of childcare used the last 12 months (%)	Child aged 0-1	Child aged 2-3	Child aged 4-5
Day nursery	25	32	23
Nursery School or nursery class	14	25	29
Breakfast/after school club	5	5	16
Holiday club/scheme	3	3	8
Childminder	10	11	12
Specialist day nursery or unit for children with disabilities/SEN	0	0	1
Playgroup or pre-school	19	35	32
Nanny	2	2	1
Friend	21	24	25
Grandparent or other family member	62	62	56
Other	2	2	3
I have not used any form of childcare	16	6	11

The cost of childcare

Parents in Britain pay most of the costs of childcare themselves, and recent Daycare Trust research found that the cost of formal childcare had increased at a rate above inflation since last year.² Parents in London and the South East experience the highest childcare costs, facing charges of up to £11,000 per year for a part-time nursery place. Results from our survey (see figure 5 overleaf) show that just over one-third of mothers said that they have difficulties meeting childcare costs (36 per cent). This is despite the fact that survey

respondents were drawn from all social groups. Current policy largely targets financial support for childcare at lower earners through tax credits, but this finding shows that support for those further up the income scale – such as employer-supported childcare vouchers – are also much needed.

Of those that did not report difficulty it may be because they do not use formal childcare, or because they adjusted the amount of childcare they use to an affordable level. As well as finding it

² Daycare Trust (2010) *Childcare cost survey*, London: Daycare Trust

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difficult to pay for childcare on an ongoing basis, previous research by Daycare Trust has found that parents also have difficulty meeting the upfront costs of childcare when returning to work, with most problems being reported by those with an income of £12,000 - £18,000 and £31,000 – £40, 000.³

Recent welfare reforms have been introduced to increase the number of lone parents in employment. And yet the affordability of childcare is still a tangible barrier to work for both lone and couple mothers. Over two-thirds of mothers say that childcare costs led them to consider not returning to work at all, or on a part-time basis – see figure 6.

Figure 5: Do you sometimes have difficulty meeting childcare costs?

Base: All post natal mums (2,231)

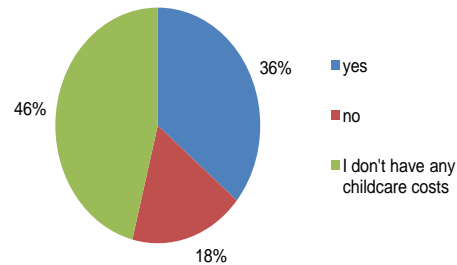
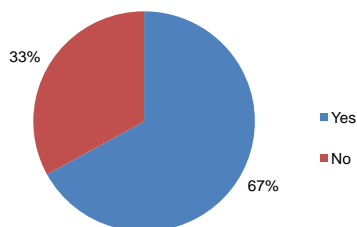


Figure 6: Have childcare costs led you to consider not returning to work at all or on a part time basis?

Base: All respondents (2,423)



This shows that the cost of childcare remains a barrier to the Government's target of 70 per cent of lone parents being in employment, and an 80 per cent employment target overall, as well as being a factor that may limit the take up of opportunities by parents as the economy grows after the recession.

³ Bartholomeou, P. Dorkings, P. Egan, K & Hampson, R (2009) *Childcare Advance: scoping the need for help with up-front costs*, London: Daycare Trust

Use and awareness of the free entitlement to early years education for all three and four year olds

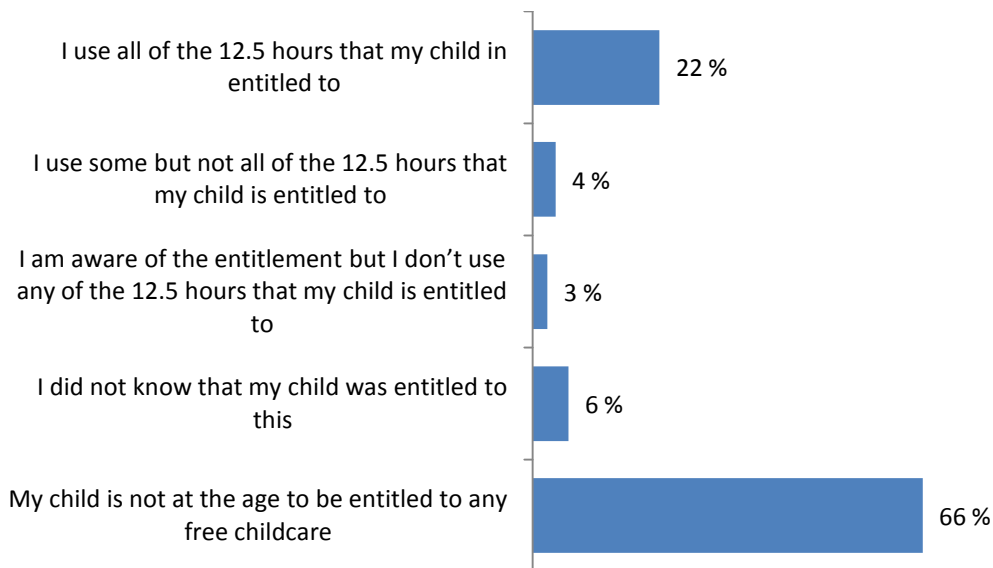
Previous research has shown that take-up of the free entitlement to 12.5 hours per week of formal childcare for all three and four year olds is high.⁴ However, this survey found that many mothers were not aware of this entitlement. Others were aware of it, but not using the full 12.5 hours. In both cases, it is a matter of concern that children may be missing out on free childcare which they are entitled to, with the many benefits that this brings.

Of the survey respondents, two-thirds had a child that was not eligible for the 12.5 hours of free

childcare, i.e they were not in the right age range. Of the remaining third that were eligible, two-thirds were using their full allocation while the other third were either not using it all or only some of it, or were unaware of the entitlement. For some, this was clearly a choice because they wished to look after their child themselves, but for others the lack of flexibility meant that they were unable to use their full entitlement. One stay at home mother had no perceived need of the free childcare entitlement, saying, “I think my child is better off at home.” Others felt that fewer sessions were enough and some struggled to fit the sessions around their working hours, saying, “It doesn’t fit in with my work too easily” or “Unable to drop/collect with my

Figure 7: Usage of free entitlement to early years for all three and four year olds (%)

Base: All post natal mums (2,231)



⁴ DCSF’s Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents 2008 shows that 78% of eligible three years old and 91% of eligible four year olds were reported as receiving the free hours or attending school

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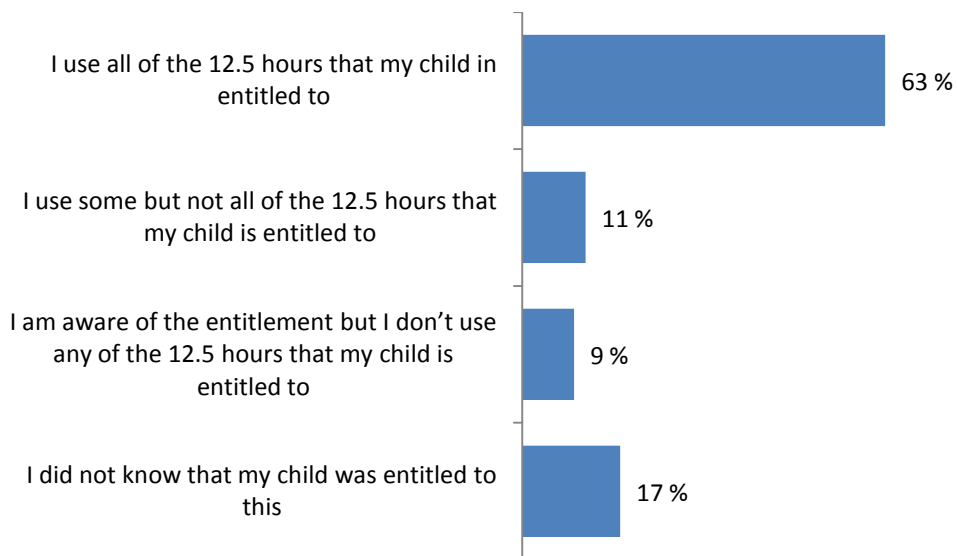
working hours”. Shift workers found it particularly difficult to access the free entitlement and many could not find suitable places or did not know it was available. Some thought that the free entitlement was not available in the private and voluntary sector.

When looking at mothers with children aged three and four, we found that not all mothers were aware of the free entitlement that their child is entitled to. Worryingly, 17 per cent of mothers were not aware of the free entitlement, and a further 20 per cent either used some or none of the free childcare entitlement – see figure 8. This shows the

continued importance of publicising the free entitlement to parents, and the need to make the entitlement as flexible as possible so that parents are able to take up all the hours their child is entitled to. From September 2010 the free entitlement will increase to 15 hours and should be delivered flexibly to meet parents’ needs. Daycare Trust has welcomed this development and we believe that allowing the hours to be used in fewer days will help more parents move into work or training. This should include shorter periods, for example, taking the entitlement over two days.

Figure 8: Usage of free entitlement to early years for all three and four year olds (%)

Base: All mothers with children eligible for the free childcare entitlement (781) – calculated by Daycare Trust from Bounty figures



Conclusions

This survey provides clear evidence that the political parties' policies on childcare will influence how mothers vote in the forthcoming election. It also provides useful evidence about the way that parents choose childcare, and how the cost of childcare remains a barrier to mothers returning to work. It also shows, contrary to some official perceptions, that parents are concerned about the quality of childcare provision and the level of staff qualifications.

Alongside this briefing, Daycare Trust is publishing its Childcare Charter setting out the policies that we would like to see in party manifestos, and which we will be campaigning for during the election campaign and beyond. We believe that if the political parties truly wish to support parents and invest in children's futures, then childcare should be a top priority. You can find out more about the Childcare Charter and add your support at www.daycaretrust.org.uk.

Methods and demographics

The survey was conducted via a Mums' Opinion panel, managed by Research Now on behalf of Bounty⁵. Research Now sent an email to Mums Opinion panellists on behalf of Bounty with an invitation to click on a link and participate in our survey. The survey was conducted in November 2009 and we received 2,423 responses.

Seventy-five per cent of respondents had a child aged 0–1, 39 per cent had a child aged 2–3 and 19 per cent had a child aged 4–5. Four in ten (41 per cent) worked full-time or part-time, 33 per cent were stay-at-home mums, and 23 per cent were on maternity leave. Two-thirds of respondents (67 per cent) were aged 25–34, with 23 per cent aged 35–44 and 9 per cent aged 16–24. They were spread

throughout the UK, with the largest single group from the South East of England (17 per cent) and the West Midlands (11 per cent). Respondents came from all social groups. Seven percent of respondents were from social group A, along with 28 per cent from B and 27 per cent from C1. A further 18 per cent identified themselves as being from group C2 with seven per cent each from groups D and E.⁶ Eighty-five per cent of respondents identified their ethnic origin as white British, with seven per cent white (other), four per cent Indian and Pakistani, two per cent African or afro-Caribbean and three per cent from other groups.

⁵ Bounty is in touch with every mother soon after they have a baby and so this sample is drawn from the widest possible cross-section of the UK.

⁶ Social group A typically describes higher managerial and professional, B intermediate managerial and professional, C1 supervisory and junior managerial, C2 skilled manual workers, D semi-skilled and un-skilled manual workers, apprentices and trainees and Group E casual workers and those living on state benefits.

Daycare Trust is the national childcare charity. Established in 1986, we lead the national childcare campaign by producing high quality research and information, developing credible policy recommendations. We campaign for quality, accessible, affordable childcare for all and raising the voices of children, parents and carers.

Our advice and information on childcare issues assists parents and carers, providers, employers, trade unions and policymakers.

Daycare Trust offers a range of services which include:

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1pm and 2pm – 5pm
Wednesday 2pm – 5pm**
- **Professional consultancy service**
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