

Continuing childcare challenges: emerging from the coronavirus crisis.

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Parents face a massive childcare crisis. The coronavirus crisis is hitting most nurseries, pre-schools and childminders hard. A quarter of providers are “unlikely” to be operating in a year’s time. This would mean the loss of many tens of thousands of early childhood education and care places for young children and would have a devastating impact of the parents and families who rely on these places in order to work, the staff they employ and the economy as a whole.

Between the 22nd and 28th May 2020, Childcare Champions spoke to more than 200 parents about their experiences of childcare during the coronavirus lockdown and as the lockdown restrictions begin to be eased.

Parents have told us that we are a long way from being anywhere near back to ‘normal’.

Managing working, and childcare & home learning during lockdown

Our parents

- ❖ Almost 40 per cent (38.2%) of parents had tried to work full time and care for children during the lockdown period.
- ❖ Almost a fifth (18.2%) of parents had tried to work part time and care for children
- ❖ Almost a quarter (18.2%) of families had one parent working while the other parent cared for children.
- ❖ A little over 10 per cent (12.3%) of families had parents who had lost their jobs or had been furloughed from their jobs and were able to care for their children and support their home learning.
- ❖ Just under 10 (7.7%) per cent of families had parents who were key workers and their children had been cared for by a childcare provider or at school during the lockdown period.

Their children

- ❖ Almost half our parents had children aged between 3 and 5 years of age (49.1%)
- ❖ Just over a fifth (21.4%) had a child aged between 12 and 24 months and just under a fifth (17.7%) had children under 2.
- ❖ Almost a third (30%) had children aged between 5 and 7 years of age and just over a quarter (26.4%) had children aged between 8 and 11 years.

Their usual childcare arrangements

- ❖ Just over 80 per cent of our respondents usually paid for childcare.
- ❖ Almost two thirds (61%) paid a nursery to care for their children.
- ❖ A little over a third (34.9%) paid a breakfast or afterschool club to care for their children
- ❖ Just over ten per cent paid a childminder (11.8%) or a nanny or au pair (13.4%) to care for their children.
- ❖ Just under 10 per cent (8.1%) paid a friend/neighbour or grandparent to care for their children.

“I’m finding it impossible to be a good employee, parent, teacher wife, cleaner & cook and I’m worried about the impact on our kids who we’ve all but ignored during working hours.”

Keyworkers

Almost 10 per cent of our parents (7.7%) were in key worker families. During the lockdown period:

- ❖ Almost 40 per cent (39.6%) had been able to use their normal childcare providers.
- ❖ 10 per cent had not been able to use their normal childcare provider but had found an alternative childcare provider.
- ❖ A little over 10 per cent (12.2%) had continued to be able to rely on a live-in arrangement for their childcare.
- ❖ Almost 40 per cent of our key worker parents (38 per cent) had not been able to work during the lockdown period as they had not been able to access suitable childcare.

Of those key worker parents who had managed to access childcare during the lockdown period, only a third (33%) had been able to access additional childcare hours during the lockdown period.

- ❖ Two-thirds of our key worker parents had been unable to take on more work during the lockdown period, as they had not been able to access additional hours of childcare.

“My husband and I are both keyworkers. Our youngest son has had to go to an alternative nursery during lockdown as his usual one is closed.”

Parents with children with Special Educational Needs

There was concern from those parents who had children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP).

Some noted that while in theory, their children have been able to attend childcare provision and school throughout the lockdown period, many haven't had the staff to be able to accommodate all the children and their needs. The early indications that parents have received from childcare providers and schools is that these challenges aren't likely to be resolved soon. These parents also noted that the providers that they rely on for respite care are mainly charities and that the future of those services are also highly vulnerable.

Paying for childcare during the coronavirus lockdown

While some childcare providers and schools remained open for vulnerable children, those with SEN or EHCP's and for those whose parents were key workers, for everyone else schools and childcare providers closed their doors at the end of the day on Friday 20th March 2020.

During the lockdown period almost two thirds of our parents (64.6%) have been required to pay nothing to their childcare providers. However,

- ❖ 13.8% had been required to pay between 75 and 100 per cent of their normal childcare costs.
- ❖ 15% had been required to pay between 10 and 40 per cent of their normal childcare costs.
- ❖ 6.1% had been required to pay between 40 per cent and 75 per cent of their normal childcare costs.

Emerging from the coronavirus lockdown

As the pandemic lockdown restrictions ease in England, many nurseries and schools will begin opening from the 1st June 2020.

When the government restrictions lifted, compared to the amount of childcare that they had needed prior to the lockdown period

- ❖ Three quarters of our parents expected to need the same amount of childcare
- ❖ Almost 15 per cent (14.8%) of our parents expected to need less childcare; and
- ❖ Not quite 10 per cent (9.8%) expected to need more childcare.

Just over half of our parents (52.2%) were concerned that their childcare providers or schools are not going to

be able to care for their children when restrictions are lifted.

- ❖ More than 40 per cent were concerned that while the childcare provision or school was re-opening, due to the government guidance relating to social distancing that are currently in place, there will not be the capacity in the school or nursery to offer their children a place.
- ❖ A quarter of our parents relied on grandparents to support them with their childcare and restrictions in relation to lockdown have not yet been eased in such a way that allows them to do this.
- ❖ Approximately 10 per cent of our parents reported that the coronavirus crisis had resulted in changes to the way that they worked and that the childcare provider was not able to provide the childcare that they now required.
- ❖ Almost 10 per cent of our parents reported that their childcare provider had either confirmed that they had closed and weren't re-opening or had not been able to confirm when they would be re-opening.

“The restrictions on family members, especially grandparents being allowed to care for children, is having a huge impact on our childcare arrangements.”

Just over a third of our parents (36%) reported that a school or childcare

provider not being able to provide a place for one or more of their children would prevent them from returning to work.

- ❖ More than 40 per cent (42%) of our parents needed schools and full childcare provision in place in order to fully return to work.
- ❖ Just under a quarter (21.5%) of our parents had already had to make alternative childcare arrangements in order to work.

What concerns our parents?

Almost two thirds (63%) of our parents harboured some concerns about their children returning to their childcare provision as lock down restrictions are eased.

Parents' concerns clustered around:

- ❖ What we know about coronavirus is still in its infancy and that in re-opening childcare provision and schools too early will contribute to a second wave of virus transmissions.
- ❖ That the government strategy to reopen childcare provision and schools to the youngest children is not embedded in a cohesive and comprehensive scientific evidence base. Some of our parents spoke of their children being used 'to test' the government's theory for a wider easing of the lockdown restrictions.
- ❖ The risks to adults - both teachers and carers and

parents that re-opening childcare provision and schools will increase the likelihood of catching coronavirus coupled with the absence of a proven and established 'testing and tracing' system in place in advance to help counter it.

- ❖ The impact that the social distancing requirements that are outlined in the government guidance will have on the learning environment and effect that it will have on the emotional health and mental well being of children.

"I have been appalled at the lack of a coherent plan, proper guidance for parents, providers and schools and track, test and isolate procedures, and ultimately the apparent lack of concern for our youngest children."

Childcare challenges

During the lockdown period, many of our parents faced the following challenges.

- ❖ Expectations from their employers that they would continue to work as they had before the lockdown commenced and a lack of

support and acknowledgement that this just wasn't possible.

- ❖ Trying to provide 'quality care' for their children, including supporting their home learning while also being expected to work. Parents spoke of 'guilt' and a sense of hopelessness of not being able to do any of it 'adequately'.
- ❖ That the caring responsibilities fell disproportionately on those who worked part time or who were the secondary income earner in the household and that in most cases, this was a mother.
- ❖ The frustration of having to relinquish their childcare arrangements as their lack of or reduction in income has meant that they couldn't pay the required retainers that were being demanded and the subsequent challenges that creates in getting back to work.

"Our children, have had what we feel is very low quality care from us ... we have had to use more television than normal, to both be able to field work calls at the same time ... they crave better attention from us."

As lockdown is eased, our parents continue to face the following challenges.

Many of our parents noted that the chaotic and often contradictory nature of the government guidance

that has shaped the way that the lockdown restrictions have been eased were a significant problem. This had led to

- ❖ Some childcare providers re-opening while others are not.
- ❖ Childcare providers and schools that are re-opening are only able to do so at partial capacity. Not all children have places to return to and some children are only able to access places on a restricted basis as that is the only way that schools have been able to comply with the government guidance that is in place.
- ❖ The majority of before and after school clubs attached to schools are not opening and therefore even those parents with children returning to school are not yet able to access the wrap around care that they accessed before the lockdown.
- ❖ Gaps in the patchwork of provision that many parents rely on for childcare. This includes childcare that is provided by friends, family and secondary 'paid for' providers that can't currently be accessed.

Our parents also spoke of the expectations of employers that now lockdown is easing, employees with parenting responsibilities will be able to 'snap back' into normal working

arrangements. Our parents are already concerned that

- ❖ Those who have noted some 'goodwill' from their employers are seeing it rapidly come to an end.
- ❖ They will be discriminated against in the event of redundancies or coming off any furlough schemes because they continue to have childcare challenges.

“Even when my children can return to school, there is unlikely to be any before or after school care ... it will not be possible to return to my usual hours. This means that I can't do all my job and that I cannot compete professionally with colleagues who do not have children and childcare issues.”

As we emerge from this pandemic, the current government guidance means that schools and childcare providers can't re-open as they were pre-lockdown, parents can't access the institutions and individuals that previously supported their working lives, employers are increasingly taking the view that 'it's not our problem' and the government simply says 'it's time we all went back to work'. The realities of families' lives are

the issues facing many parents are being ignored.

Many still have children who are not yet returning to school or for whom there is no childcare place available, while others have real concerns about the environments that the government is asking their children to be cared for and educated in. The situation is particularly difficult for parents with more than one young child, those whose children have special needs and those who rely on a patchwork of childcare support to enable them to work.

This crisis has brought into sharp focus, that our childcare and early education system in the UK is broken and beyond repair. Tinkering at the edges in the hope that it can be fixed is no longer an option.

The massive changes that this crisis has brought to working life as we know it, provides us with an opportunity to build a new system that meets the needs of children, parents, employers, our society and economy.

Social justice and our economic recovery depend on it.