



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

# Parent beliefs, behaviours and barriers: childcare and early education (summary)

A qualitative study exploring why parents of 3 and 4 year olds are not accessing the Childcare Offer and the universal offer of Foundation Phase Nursery.

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# 1. Introduction

Welsh Government commissioned IAITH to provide an in-depth understanding of why some parents or carers choose not to take up government funded early education or childcare entitlements. This work is part of a wider research programme to inform early childhood education and care policy for three to four year olds. The research focused specifically on Foundation Phase Nursery (non statutory education) for children age 3 onwards, and the Childcare Offer which is available for working parents of 3 and 4 year olds that meet specific eligibility criteria.

A qualitative study was designed to explore the beliefs, behaviours and other factors that affect parents' decisions. A total of 53 families were engaged, across nine areas in Wales.

Given the small scale of this study, and the limited amount of time spent with families, findings provide an insight only. They indicate areas for further exploration.

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## 2. Findings

### Parent awareness

The majority of parents who participated in the research were aware of government funded care for their child. However, some parents said that despite being aware, they were unaware of the process of how to access it. More parents knew about education entitlements for children at age 3 and how to access this.

### Practical barriers to access

Limited contact with childcare providers may have led to lack of parental awareness of government funded care for working parents. In some research areas, parents reported that the lack of childcare provision in their area restricted their employment options.

Some families were not accessing their child's early education entitlement because it was not available in their language of choice locally or was considered to be too far away to be practical.

Some families were not accessing early education due to practical difficulties getting them there from childcare provision, or were not accessing government funded care because of challenges of moving their child between settings (including cost).

Lack of flexibility in the availability of government funded early education and care was especially difficult for parents who worked shifts and irregular hours.

### Administrative barriers

Several parents reported they were unable to claim government funded care for working parents due to difficulties with their employment status, for instance, working inconsistent hours or not having payslips due to self-employment.

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Completing the application form was also reported to be a barrier. Reported difficulties included a lack of confidence by parents to complete the application form and a perception that the application process was complicated.

Other families perceived that the information required to complete the application form was invasive into family life and they were unwilling to provide the amount of information required to register for government funded care for working parents.

A substantive barrier to take up was the lack of funded childcare for children under the age of three which created issues of affordability for parents with multiple children age three to four and younger.

## **Beliefs and behaviours that encouraged engagement**

Being able to use government funded early education and childcare to help re-enter the labour market or work was important for a number of parents.

Believing in the importance of a child's early socialisation outside the family and with the child's peer group were given as reasons for accessing the government funded childcare by some parents.

Many parents felt that early education was beneficial for children for social and educational reasons. Some parents expressed their views about the importance of developing early learning skills, language development, and being 'school ready'.

## **Beliefs and behaviours that limit engagement**

One of the most frequent reasons for not using the Offer was a belief that keeping childcare within the family was important. Some parents did not want to take their child to formal childcare provision because they preferred that their child received care provided by a family member, or family members were eager to provide care.

Some parents believed that children were too young to start school at three

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years of age even if early education involves learning through play and also expressed a preference for delaying the age for full-time education.

Some parents who accessed part-time early education for their child had strong beliefs that children should not, in addition, be placed in childcare provision and that any additional childcare was best provided by family members.

## **Language issues and their impact on parents' choices**

There was a perceived lack of adequate Welsh-medium childcare provision in some areas.

For some parents, Welsh-medium early education was important for several reasons including integrating within the local community and gaining work. It was not an important consideration for other families, although most were content for their children to learn some Welsh.

Parents referred to factors that would encourage them to make use of Welsh-medium or bilingual education and childcare if they are unable to do so at present. These included provision of wraparound care in the nearest Welsh-medium primary school, improving transport to Welsh-medium schools, more choice and longer opening hours in Welsh-medium settings.

## **Issues regarding accessing for specific groups**

Some parents who were on a low income said that their circumstances restricted them from being able to work more hours to claim the government funded childcare offer for working parents.

Parents who participated in this study reported a variety of children's medical conditions and additional learning needs. In all cases, the child's additional needs made accessing suitable Foundation Phase Nursery (FPN) and childcare provision more challenging. Nevertheless, the children's additional needs had not prevented parents from making some use of FPN and childcare provision but, in some cases, due to lack of appropriate wraparound care, contributed to

their not accessing the Offer in full,

Parents from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic families mentioned their educational experiences being very different, and explained their keenness to replicate some of their own upbringing.

Families in rural areas reported that problems stemmed from lack of availability of childcare provision.

Issues raised by lone parents included fear of losing other benefits if they applied for the government funded childcare offer for working parents. Confidence and time to apply was also reported as a barrier.

Families who lived and worked in different local authority areas, or lived close to local authority borders, reported difficulties and uncertainties about how and where to access childcare.

### 3. Recommendations

The findings from this study suggest the following recommendations may help to improve access and take up of government funded early childhood education and care by those who are eligible, or at least to ensure parents are able to make an informed choice to do so if they wish.

- Improved communications to parents appear to be needed to better explain the differences between government funded early education and childcare, as this is not well understood.
- Marketing and communication strategies should fully consider how to reach parents who have limited or no contact with childcare providers in particular.
- Increased diversity in the communication channels and formats the government uses to share information may help improve accessibility.
- The wide range of benefits to a child from attending early childhood education and care could be highlighted in marketing and communication materials, to improve recognition of its value among parents.
- Opportunities (if any) to streamline application forms and ensure they are as user-friendly as possible should be taken by those administering government

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funded early education and childcare. More support could be needed to help those that may need more assistance to complete the application process.

- Eligibility evidence for those in more precarious employment situations (e.g. zero hour contracts, self-employed with ad hoc income) in particular may warrant more consideration, to avoid excluding eligible disadvantaged families
- To increase take up of age targeted government funded early education and childcare in some families, the government may want to consider the feasibility of extending entitlements to siblings.
- Further consideration of childcare sufficiency nationally and locally may be required to inform targeted support for sustainability and growth of the sector in rural areas and in Welsh medium provision.

## 4. Contact details

Full Research Report: Hughes, Buddug and Jones, Kathryn (2021). Qualitative study of beliefs, behaviours and barriers affecting parental decisions regarding childcare and early education. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 3/2021.

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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