



**END**  
CHILDHOOD  
**CRISIS**

**Beyond reach:**  
barriers to accessing early years  
services for children



## Safe and happy childhood

Action for Children protects and supports children and young people, providing practical and emotional care and support, ensuring their voices are heard, and campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

Beyond reach: barriers to accessing early years services for children

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# Executive summary

## Early years services are important

The earliest years of a child's life are crucial to their development. Parents need support that goes beyond childcare, to help give their children the best start in life.

Action for Children has been supporting children for 150 years. We know how important early years services are to families. In 2020/21, we supported more than 64,000 people through our children's centres and family hubs, of whom almost 29,000 were aged 0 to 5.<sup>i</sup> The most common targeted interventions we provided to 0 to 5s and their parents during this time were parenting and family support, and parenting programmes. These services have a range of positive impacts, from supporting children's development, to helping to keep families safe.

Despite their vital role, non-childcare early years services are too often overlooked by policymakers. To better understand the support parents need, we surveyed just over 2,000 parents of 0 to 5s in England, to find out about their experience of using early years services.

## Parents need a wide range of early years services

The vast majority of parents of young children have relied on non-childcare early years services. We found:

- Nearly 3 in 5 parents (59%) said they had used more than 5 services.

- More than a third of parents (38%) had used more than 10 services.

We were particularly interested in the types of services which parents might want to access in their local area in addition to universal health services. Apart from health visiting and midwifery, the most in demand services were:

- Education and development services, which 77% of parents used or tried to use. These include programmes such as messy play, reading sessions, and speech and language support.
- Programmes to help support parent-child relationships, which 69% of parents used or tried to use. These include services such as parent and baby groups.
- General parenting information, advice and guidance, which 58% of parents accessed or tried to access.

## Too many parents struggle to access the help they need

Concerningly, large numbers of parents struggle to access the early years services they need to give their children the best start in life. We found:

- Two-thirds (67%) of parents were unable to access an essential early years service – equivalent to 3.5 million parents in England.<sup>ii</sup>
- 7 in 10 (71%) said they had found it difficult to access a service that they did use.

<sup>i</sup> 29,000 is an estimate based on a sample from our outcomes recording system data.

<sup>ii</sup> Calculations of equivalent number of parents in the population are based on the fact that in Opinium's nationally representative survey of 2,006 UK adults from 16-19 July 2021, 198 lived in England and were parents of children aged 5 and under. The ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates from June 2020 list 52,890,044 adults in the UK.  $198 / 2,006 \times 52,890,044 = 5,220,453$  parents of 0 to 5s in England.

- 82% said they had either been unable, or struggled, to access a service – equivalent to 4.3 million parents.
- Nearly 3 in 10 (27%) said they had been unable to access more than five essential early years services. That is equivalent to 1.4 million parents.

The pandemic has exacerbated the difficulties that parents of young children face. Since the onset of the pandemic, a greater proportion of parents said they have faced difficulties accessing the most in demand services.

Parents struggle to use services for a range of reasons, but the most common was that services are unavailable.

- More than a third (35%) of parents who struggled to access services reported unavailability of service as a barrier.

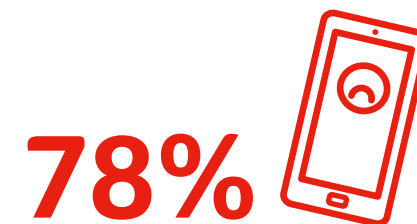
## Parents are worried about the impact of being unable to access the help they need

Parents know how important accessing help in their child's earliest years is.

- Overall, more than three-quarters (78%) of parents who had been unable to access a service said they were worried about the impact of that on them or their child.
- This rose to 85% of parents who had not been able to access more than five services.
- The most common worries were children's social, emotional and personal development, and parental mental health and emotional wellbeing.



of parents were unable to access an essential early years service – equivalent to 3.5 million parents in England.



of parents who had been unable to access a service said they were worried about the impact of that on them or their child.



of parents said they wanted greater access to support of some kind.

### **The government has an opportunity to put children at the heart of building back better**

Parents should not be left to struggle alone, and all children should get the benefit of the right support in the early years. The government has committed to family hubs, and to implementing the recommendations of the Early Years Healthy Development Review. This means it has an invaluable opportunity to ensure all parents and young children get the support they need to thrive.

We know parents want that support:

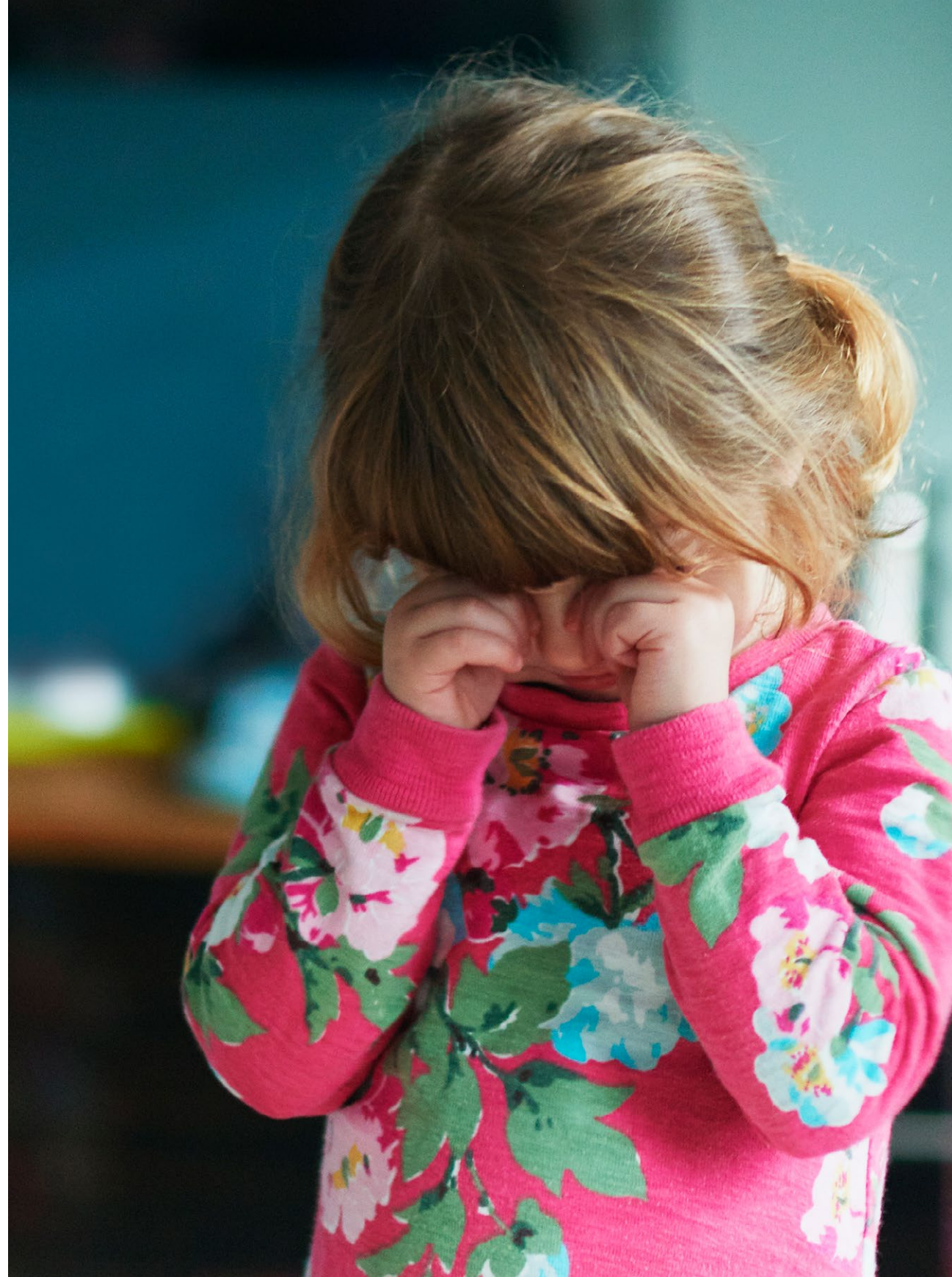
- Nearly 4 in 5 (79%) parents said they wanted greater access to support of some kind.
- 69% of parents of 0 to 5s feel that government should spend more on services for 0 to 5s and their parents.<sup>iii</sup>

### **The government should use its existing policy commitments to establish a minimum service guarantee of the early years services parents should be able to access in their local area**

This should include a universal offer encompassing programmes supporting child development, the parent-child relationship, and parenting skills, as well as health services.

To enable those changes to be implemented effectively, the government will need to make sure key building blocks are in place. These include:

- Investment through the upcoming Spending Review.
- Clear information and outreach.
- A consistent outcomes framework for 0 to 5 services, supported by inspection and regulation.



<sup>iii</sup> From a question added to Opinium's omnibus survey of 2,006 adults across the UK, rather than our targeted survey to parents in England. The omnibus reached 221 parents of 0 to 5s.

# Part one:

## The importance of early years services

Action for Children has been delivering services for children for over 150 years.

In 2020/21, we supported more than 64,000 people through our children’s centres and family hubs, of whom almost 29,000 were aged 0 to 5.<sup>iv</sup> Through that frontline experience, we know how vital children’s earliest years are: to their educational outcomes, to their health and wellbeing, and to their chances later in life.

This is supported by wider research. The government’s recent *Early Years Healthy Development Review* report highlighted that the first 1,001 days (from conception to age two) are ‘the peak period of brain development.’<sup>1</sup> Research from the Royal Foundation last year showed that 83% of parents of 0 to 5s feel it is important to understand the development of their children’s brains.<sup>2</sup> To give children the best start in life, it is essential that families are well supported during the early years, and have access to high quality services in their local area.

### a. Parents and young children need a wide range of support

We know from delivering a range of services for children and parents that the support young children need goes well beyond childcare. The chart adjacent shows the range of targeted interventions we provided to 0 to 5-year-olds and their parents through our children’s centres and family hubs last year.

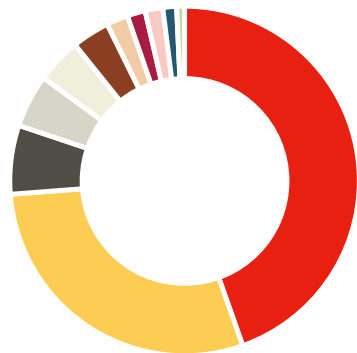
As the chart shows, the most common targeted interventions we provided were parenting and family support, and parenting programmes.

- Parenting and family support includes one-to-one parenting or family support,

practical support in the home, and the coordination of multi-agency services.

- Parenting programmes include those which support parents to manage children’s behaviour, support parent-child attachment, and offer antenatal support.

**Chart 1 – Proportions of recorded targeted interventions delivered to 0 to 5s and their parents in our centres and hubs, 2020/21**



- Parenting and family support = **44.5%**
- Parenting programme = **29.2%**
- Digital support = **6.4%**
- Education and employment = **4.9%**
- Health and wellbeing = **4.2%**
- Housing support = **3.5%**
- Emotional and mental health = **2%**
- Domestic abuse programme = **1.7%**
- Need for protection = **1.6%**
- Disabled children’s support = **1.3%**
- Other = **0.7%**

<sup>iv</sup> 29,000 is an estimate based on a sample from our outcomes recording system data.

### Parent Talk

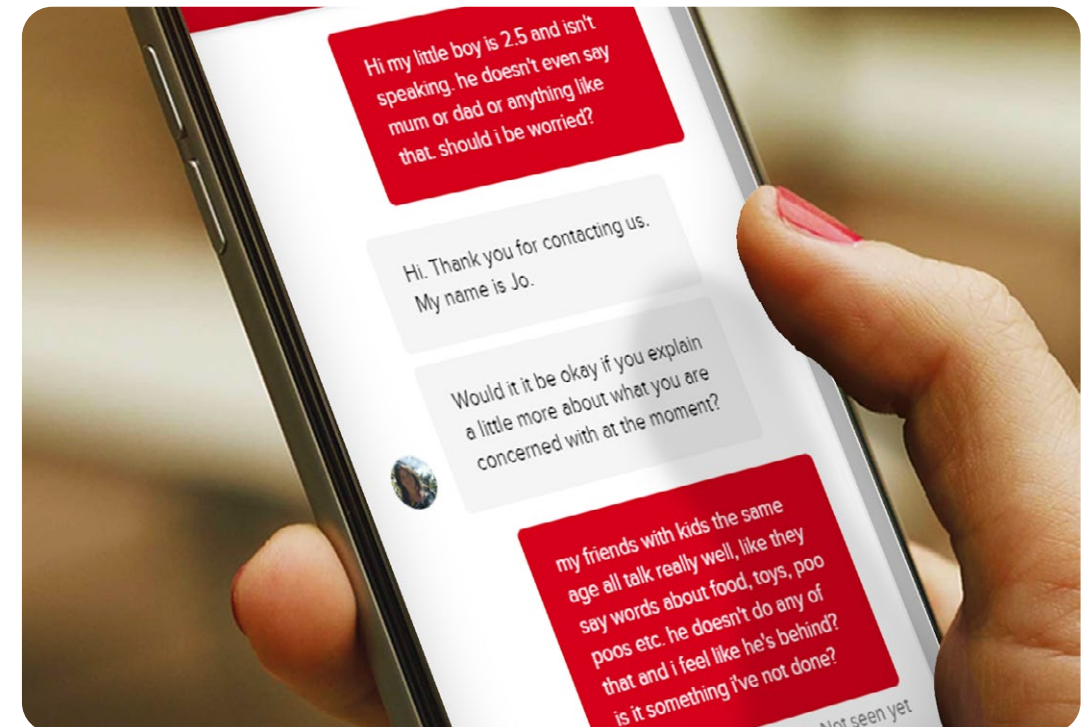
As well as our physical services, Action for Children offers a range of digital support. This includes our online parenting advice and live chat service, Parent Talk. Parent Talk expanded rapidly to meet the needs of families during the pandemic. In 2020/21, the total reach of Parent Talk was **361,043**.

Parent Talk is open to all parents, offering reliable information and guidance on parenting. It is designed to complement physical service offers. It can stand alone as an online service, or be offered to families before or after face-to-face

programmes. The confidential, one-to-one live chat is delivered by experienced parenting coaches, who are trained family support workers. In 2020/21, the chats reached 10,640 parents.

Parents of 0 to 5s represent a significant proportion of those supported by Parent Talk. In the six-month period to March 2021, 32.8% of one-to-one chats were with parents of 0 to 5s.

Below is an example of what a one-to-one chat with a parenting coach might look like, based on real chats with parents (but adapted to ensure anonymity).



**b. We know these services help**

Recording outcomes demonstrates the difference our services make to parents and children. Targeted work with children aged 0 to 5 and their parents at our 0 to 5+ children’s centres in 2020/21, for instance, helped children to:

- ‘Achieve developmental milestones’ in **77%** of cases.
- Build a ‘warm, supportive relationship with parent/carer’ in **74%** of cases.<sup>v</sup>

Our services also improve emotional and mental health for children and parents, as well as safety outcomes, including protection from domestic violence. Our practitioners support parents in practical areas too, including financial management, benefit eligibility checks, and employment skills.

These figures are supported by wider research. Our analysis in 2019 found an early association between increased children’s centre use and a decreasing gap in outcomes between disadvantaged children and their peers.<sup>3</sup>

**c. Children are being held back by a lack of early years services**

Despite their vital role in supporting families, too many children are held back by gaps in the provision of early years services. The challenge of accessing this support has been exacerbated by recent reductions in spending. While we don’t have accurate national data on the level of access to crucial early years services, we know that the reach of children’s centres – where many of these services have been offered – has fallen.

- Our recent research with other children’s charities found that local authority **spending on children’s centres has fallen by 68% between 2010/11 and 2019/20.**<sup>4</sup>
- The Sutton Trust’s 2018 report *Stop Start* found that **55% of local authorities reported a reduction in the level of services provided by children’s centres** in recent years. It found that local authorities focused more on targeted services at the expense of open-access services.<sup>5</sup>
- Our research found that **between 2014/15 and 2017/18, the number of children using children’s centres across England fell by 18%.** Worryingly, **the most deprived local authorities saw the biggest fall in use: 22%, compared to 12%** in the least deprived.<sup>6</sup>

**d. The pandemic has caused new challenges for parents of young children**

**Access to services has changed**

At the start of the pandemic, many children’s centres and family hubs, as well as childcare providers, had to close their physical sites. Many professionals working with families were only able to conduct work online or over the phone rather than face-to-face. The *Babies in Lockdown* report found that only 11% of parents of under-twos had seen a health visitor face-to-face during the first lockdown.<sup>vi 7</sup>

**The pandemic has made support even more important**

On top of the difficulties families faced accessing services, the pandemic has had a range of potential impacts on families.

<sup>v</sup> Of cases where the outcome was selected.

<sup>vi</sup> We know that service and professionals did their best to support families during this time. Our briefing from earlier this year on the digital provision of services details how we were able to keep supporting families in 2020.

- **Wellbeing:** The Royal Foundation found that over a third of parents fear that the pandemic will have a long-term negative impact on their mental health. It also found a dramatic increase in parental loneliness, rising from 38% before the pandemic to 63% since.<sup>8</sup>
- **Child development:** In 2018/19, only 57% of children from poorer backgrounds were ready for school at age five, compared to 74% of their better-off peers.<sup>9</sup> Many fear that the impact of the pandemic could widen this gap in the long-term, due to issues such as differences in the home learning environment. An Institute for Fiscal Studies report found that children from better-off families were spending more time on, and had access to more resources for, home learning.<sup>10</sup> Our *Childhood During Coronavirus* report found that resources for children’s learning and play was the second most requested category of item in families’ applications to our Coronavirus Emergency Fund.<sup>11</sup>

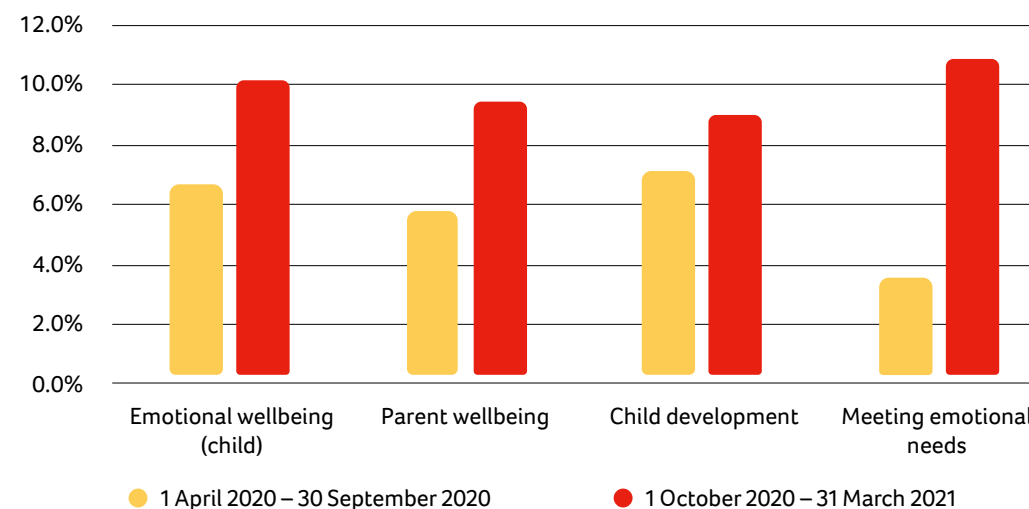
**Severe consequences from missing out on early years support have become more common**

With professionals less able to see families face-to-face, concerns about safety and the prevention of issues like abuse and neglect have also been significant. A survey of health visitors in summer 2020 found that 96% were concerned about children in households at risk of domestic abuse.<sup>12</sup> In November 2020, Ofsted reported that the first lockdown saw a shocking 20% rise in the number of babies being harmed or killed.<sup>13</sup>

**Our service data shows the concerns of parents of young children**

Data from one-to-one chats on Parent Talk highlight the kinds of challenges parents of young children are facing. The chart below shows the increasing proportions of chats about 0 to 5s which have focused on issues relating to wellbeing and child development as the pandemic has continued.

**Chart 2 – Percentage of Parent Talk conversations relating to 0 to 5s**



**e. There is an opportunity for the government to build back better**

The provision of these early years services, and the difficulties parents have in accessing the help they need, is too often overlooked by policymakers. But the government's family hubs policy

commitment, and its commitment to implement the recommendations from the *Early Years Healthy Development Review* report, means there is now a huge opportunity to improve the support given to parents and young children. This report looks at parents of young children's experiences of accessing the services they need.

**The Early Years Healthy Development Review**

The publication of the *Early Years Healthy Development Review* report earlier this year marked a significant turning point in the government's direction on the early years. Chaired by Andrea Leadsom, the review set out a new vision for support for families in the first 1,001 days. It concluded that there are six key action areas that central and local government

should focus on: joined-up offers of support; family hubs; information; workforce; outcomes and inspection; and leadership. At Action for Children, we welcomed the review, and are keen to see the government fully commit to its implementation by providing the necessary investment.

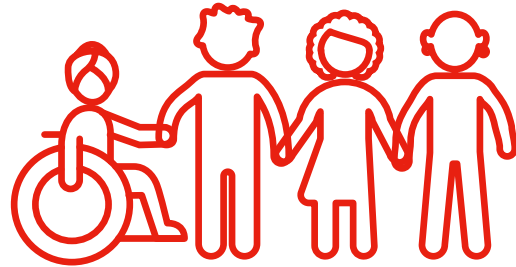


## Part two: What we did

We wanted to find out what types of early years services parents want, and their experiences of accessing them.

To do this, we ran a targeted survey for just over 2,000 parents of 0 to 5-year-olds in England. We asked them about the types of services they had tried to access, their experience accessing them, any barriers they faced, and any concerns they had about not being able to access services.

We also added some questions to Opinium's omnibus survey of 2,000 adults across the UK. This included 1,204 parents, and 221 parents of 0 to 5s.<sup>vii</sup>



<sup>vii</sup> We've highlighted where findings result from these questions rather than from our targeted survey.

## Part three: How do parents use early years services?

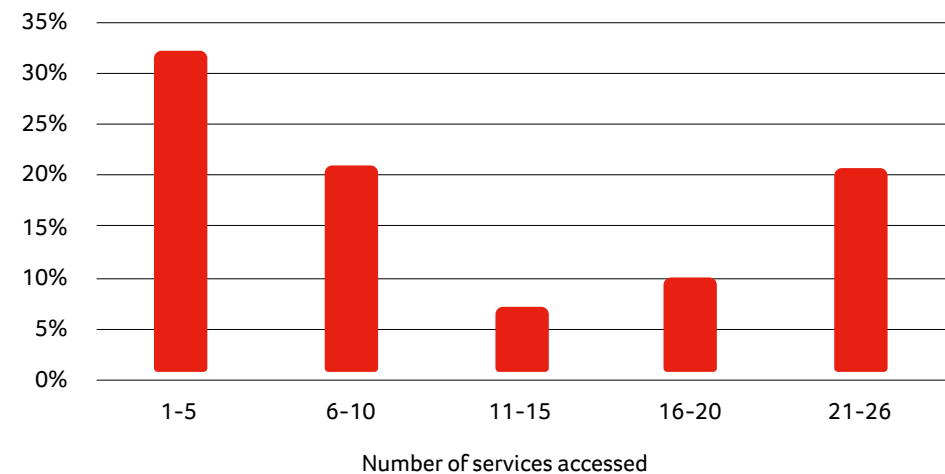
Services for young children and their parents are essential, and it's clear from our research that parents of young children rely on a wide range of support to ensure young children get the best start in life.

The vast majority of parents rely on some form of support to give their child the best start in life. In total, 9 in 10 parents of 0 to 5s said they had used at least one early years service.

Lots of parents said they had used services far more. As shown by the chart below, nearly 3 in 5 parents (59%) said they had used more than 5 services, and 38% had used more than 10.



Chart 3 – Proportion of parents using services





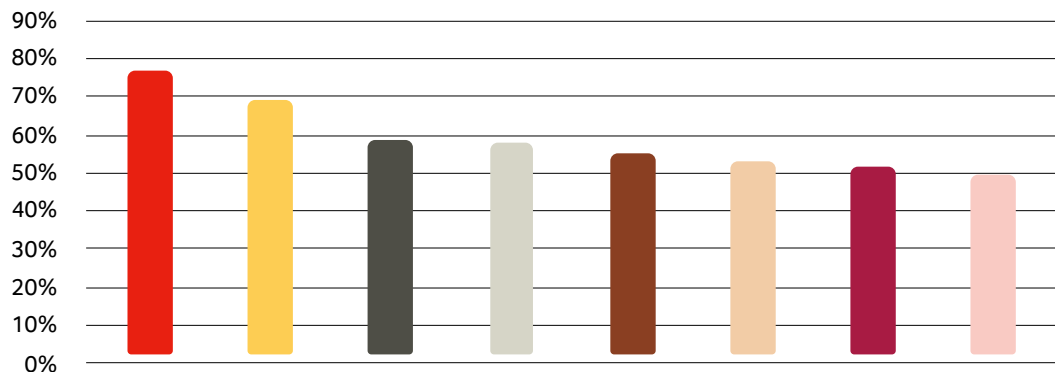
**a. What services are most in demand?**

We asked parents about a range of early years services. We were particularly interested in the types of services which parents might want to access in addition to universal health services. These might include programmes held in community settings in their local area, advice from trusted community professionals on issues such as

child development, or extra support for parent or child mental health.

We found that these types of support are in high demand from parents. The chart below shows the top eight most in-demand services (services which the highest proportion of parents have tried to use), not including health visiting and midwifery.<sup>viii</sup>

**Chart 4 – Most in-demand services**



- Education and development
- Parent-child relationship
- General parenting advice
- Antenatal and postnatal
- Parental mental health
- Home environment
- Parenting skills
- Support for children with additional needs

<sup>viii</sup> 77% and 68% of parents reported that they had used or tried to use health visiting and midwifery services respectively. We have kept these services distinct from the others here as we feel that parents would not seek out these types of support in the same way as other services we have asked about: in theory, parents should receive these health services without having to request them. We'd conjecture that this is also the reason why the use figures for health visiting and midwifery seem fairly low: the option in our survey for not using a service was 'I have not tried to use it', so parents may have selected that option where they had used either health visiting or midwifery without having to request it.

There has also been research recently showing that due to falling health visitor numbers and capacity, health visiting has not been operating as universally as it is mandated to. A 2020 report from the Children's Commissioner for England showed that 20% of children overall were not receiving the two-and-a-half year health visitor check. Our findings demonstrate that this is an area which requires further research.

**What do those services look like for parents and children?**

We asked parents about a range of early years services. As well as health services, we wanted to know about parents' access to programmes which are specifically designed to support child development, parent-child attachment, and parenting skills. These services are likely to be delivered in a local community venue, and parents might be referred to them by health visitors.

**Child education and development programmes**

Examples we gave parents of this type of service included messy play, movement and music groups, story and rhyme sessions, reading sessions, and speech and language support.

Our children's centres and hubs offer many services of this type, including speech and language therapy, Play Talk Read, and Stay and Play sessions.

Play Talk Read sessions are offered on both a universal and targeted basis, to improve language development and parents' understanding of supporting children's early learning.

Stay and Play sessions encourage stimulating play, as well as supporting attachment between parent and child. They help reduce social isolation by enabling parents to meet up and socialise, and to share issues and solutions. Practitioners report that it is particularly beneficial when these sessions are open-access, as a way of introducing parents to centres and hubs.

**Parent and child relationship support programmes**

We gave parents examples of parent and baby groups such as baby massage. Action for Children frontline staff stress the importance of these

types of service being delivered by experienced early years practitioners, who are well placed to help parents with attachment.

Action for Children offers services including baby massage, Mellow Parenting, and Here's Looking At You Baby. These help to promote communication and bonding between parents and babies, help parents respond to their baby's cues, and give them a better understanding of their baby's emotions and development.

Many of the service types listed under the 'child education and development' and 'parenting skills' categories also aim to support parent and child attachment and bonding.

**Parenting skills programmes**

Programmes in this category can help parents with skills such as managing children's behaviour. Action for Children offers programmes including:

- The Solihull Approach parenting programme: one of the most common targeted interventions offered at our centres and hubs. It is based around models of reciprocity and containment.
- Incredible Years programmes for toddlers and pre-school age children, including the home coaching and ASD programmes. Incredible Years is designed to help parents understand and deal with children's behaviour.
- Triple P, which gives parents the strategies and skills to prevent problems developing and build stronger relationships.



**b. Who uses early years services?**

When looking at which parents are more likely to have used multiple services, some groups of parents clearly rely on – and use – support more intensively.

**Young parents are more likely to have used multiple services**

Young parents were more likely to have used at least one service and more likely to have used multiple services. 96% of 18 to 27-year-olds said they had used a service compared to 87% of 38 to 47-year-old parents. Similarly, more than half (58%) of 18 to 27-year-old parents said they had used more than 10 early years services compared to 37% of 18 to 27-year-olds and 25% of 38 to 47-year-old parents.

**People in the North West, South East, and South West were less likely to have used early years services**

There were some significant regional differences in how many parents said they had used early

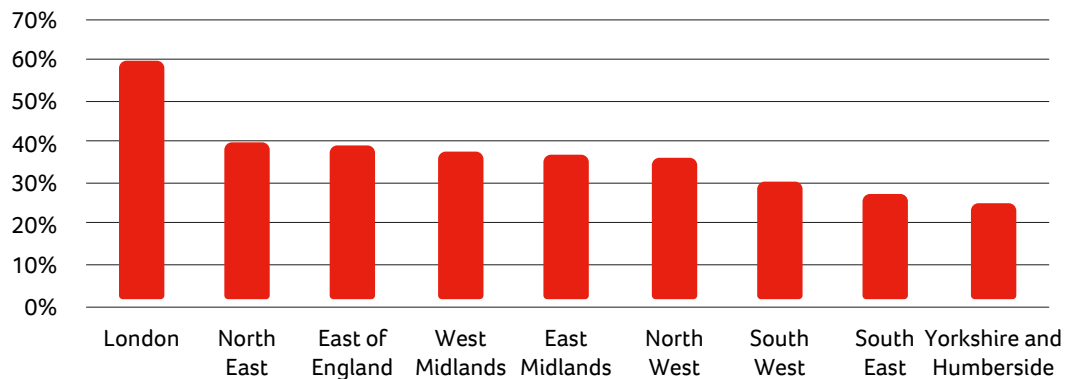
years services. In particular, parents in London were far more likely to have used more than 10 early years services (60%) than the national average (38%). Parents in Yorkshire and Humberside, the South East, and South West were less than half as likely to have used more than 10 services as parents in London.

**White parents are least likely to use multiple services**

White parents were the least likely group to say they had used more than 10 services (36%). Parents with mixed or multiple ethnicities (56%) were the most likely to have used more than 10 services, compared to Asian (45%) and Black (43%) parents.



**Chart 5 – Proportion of parents who have used more than 10 early years services**

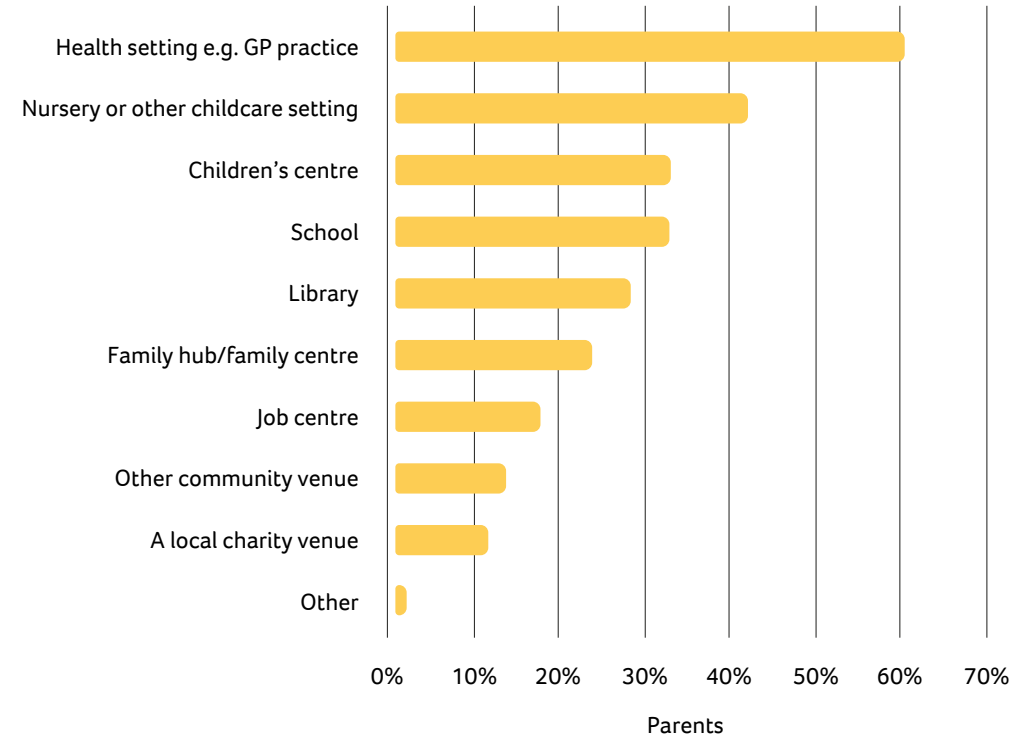


**c. Where do parents use services?**

We asked parents to select all the locations where they had accessed the support mentioned. Most commonly, parents said they accessed services in health settings such as GP practices

(61%), followed by childcare settings at 42%, and children’s centres at 33%. Crucially, as shown by the chart below, parents used services in a wide range of local settings, including nurseries, schools, and libraries.

**Chart 6 – Where parents accessed services**



## Part four:

### Parents struggle to get the support they need

Despite the widespread demand for early years services, our research also found that many parents faced challenges in accessing them.

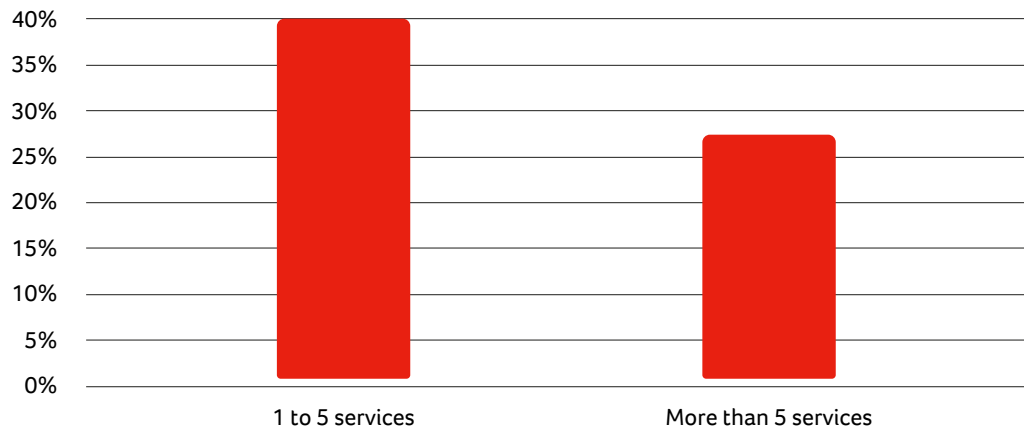
The majority of parents of young children told us they had been unable to access an early years service.

- In total, two-thirds (67%) of parents told us they were unable to access an essential early years service.
- And 7 in 10 (71%) said they had found it difficult to access a service that they did use.

- 82% said they had either been unable, or struggled, to access a service.

**Within the two-thirds of parents who told us they had been unable to access an early years service, some parents were more severely affected. Nearly a third (27%) of all parents said they had been unable to access more than five services.**

**Chart 7 – Proportion of all parents who reported being unable to access early years services**



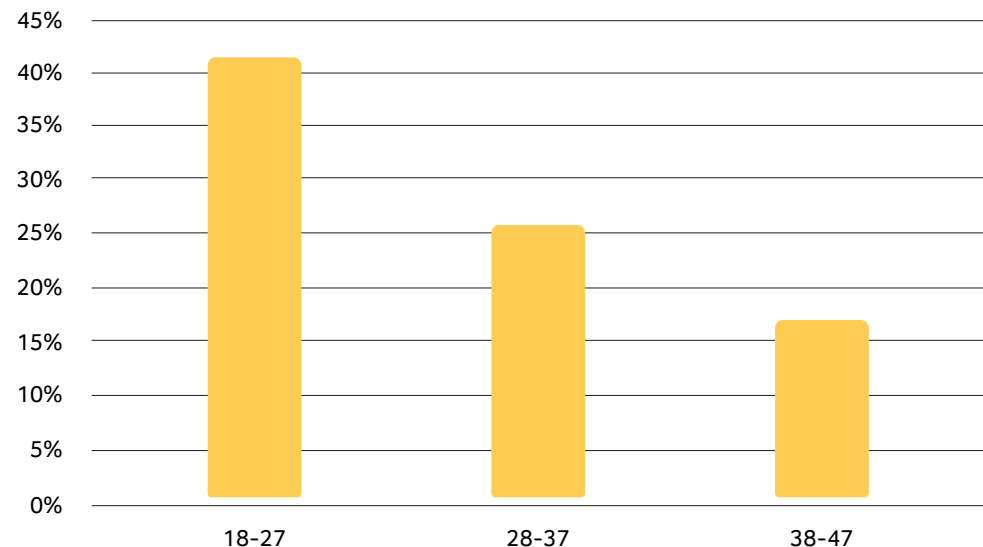
#### **a. Who has struggled to access early years services?**

Within the 27% of parents who were severely limited in their access to early years support (those parents who were unable to access more than five services), some were more likely to have missed out on early years services.

#### **Young parents struggled more than older parents**

Of all age groups, young parents were most likely to have severely limited access to early years services. As shown by chart 8, parents between the ages of 18 and 27 were more than twice as likely (42%) to say they had been unable to access more than five services compared to 38 to 47-year-old parents (17%).

**Chart 8 – Proportion of parents unable to access more than five early years services by age**



#### **Asian parents struggled more than other groups**

Another group of parents who were more likely to have been unable to access more than five early years services were parents with Asian heritage. Around 2 in 5 (38%) Asian parents had severely limited access to early years services compared to just over 25% of white parents, 26% of black parents, and 29% of parents with mixed or multiple ethnicities.

27% of parents nationally). Parents in the South West (23%) and South East (21%) were the least likely to say they had been unable to access more than five early years services.

#### **Parents in London and the East Midlands were more likely than the national average to have been unable to use more than five services**

Parents in London (31%) and the East Midlands (38%) were most likely to say they had struggled to access more than five services (compared to



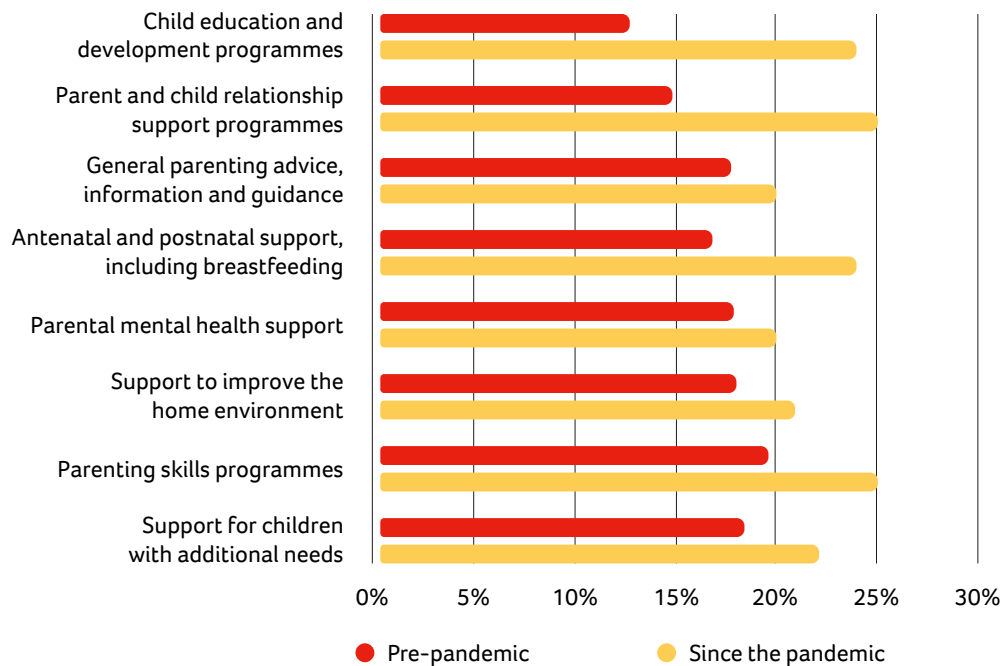
**b. The impact of the pandemic on access to services**

Just over half (53%) of parents said they'd tried but had not been able to access a service at any time before coronavirus hit. That figure rose to 57% following the onset of the pandemic.

**The most in demand services have become more difficult to access**

The chart below compares the proportion of parents who tried, but were unable, to access the top eight most in demand services – before and since the pandemic.<sup>ix</sup> Worryingly, there have been increases in the proportion of parents who tried but were unable to access every one of them since the pandemic.

**Chart 9 – Proportion of parents who tried to access services and were unable to**



<sup>ix</sup> Again, we have separated health visiting and midwifery from these, for reasons outlined above. Both of these health services followed the pattern of other services in the chart: the proportion of parents who tried to access support from health visitors and midwives, but were unable to, has risen since the pandemic began. This is particularly surprising given that health visiting and midwifery should be available to all parents. However, it does chime with recent research. A report from the Children's Commissioner's Office found that even before the pandemic, 20% of children were not receiving the mandated two-and-a-half year health visiting check. This rose to 65% in some areas.<sup>9</sup> NHS workforce statistics show that the number of health visitors fell from 10,309 in October 2015 to 6,480 in April 2021.<sup>9</sup> And the profession has only come under increased pressure since the pandemic, due to redeployment and the challenges of virtual contact.<sup>9</sup>

**Antenatal and postnatal support**

Before the pandemic, 17% of parents who tried to access antenatal and postnatal support, including help with breastfeeding, were not able to. Nearly a third of parents who tried to access it faced difficulties.

Since the pandemic, the situation has become even more stark. Nearly a quarter of parents who tried to access this type of support were unable to, and over a third faced difficulties.

Antenatal and postnatal support, and particularly infant feeding help, is a key focus of the government's Early Years Healthy Development Review. It sees infant feeding advice, including specialist breastfeeding support, as part of the universal offers which should be available in every local area. Our figures show that this renewed focus on infant feeding is absolutely necessary.

**Parenting and child development**

Despite being in demand, child education and development programmes proved similarly difficult to access. Before the pandemic, 13% of parents who tried to access this type of support were unable to, and nearly a quarter faced difficulties. Since the pandemic, this has risen to 24% being unable to access, and 30% facing difficulties.

Parent and child relationship support programmes saw one of the biggest increases in proportion of parents who tried to access them and were unable to: from 15% pre-pandemic to 25% since the pandemic. Parenting skills programmes saw a rise from 20% to 25%. This is particularly concerning given the worries parents have had about being able to effectively support their children during the pandemic. A survey as part of the Co-SPACE study between April and May 2020 found that parent and/or carer mental health was poorer when they were concerned about not doing enough for their preschool-aged child.<sup>14</sup>

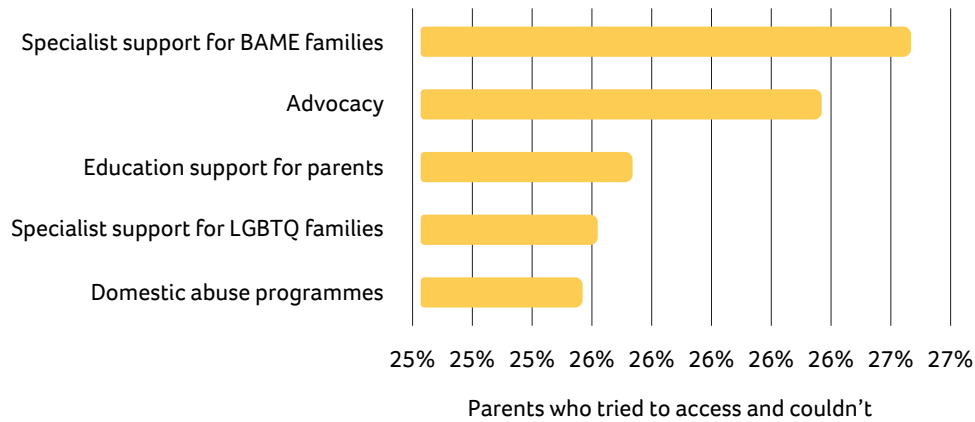


**c. Specialist services are even harder to access**

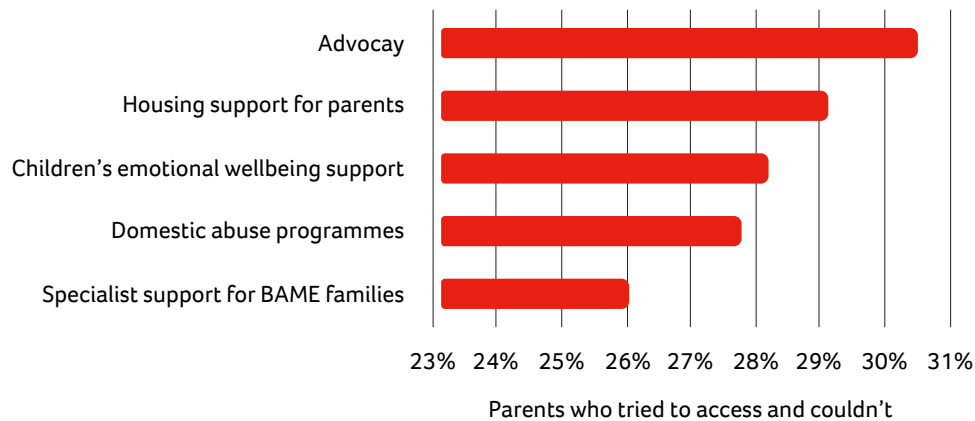
Outside of the most widely used services, parents are struggling to access other services to an even greater degree.

The charts below show the services that parents were most likely to have tried, but been unable to, access. Both before and since the pandemic, specialist support for BAME families, advocacy, and domestic abuse programmes, were all particularly difficult to access.

**Chart 10A – Services which parents were most likely to be unable to access – pre-pandemic**



**Chart 10B – Services which parents were most likely to be unable to access – since the pandemic**



## Part five:

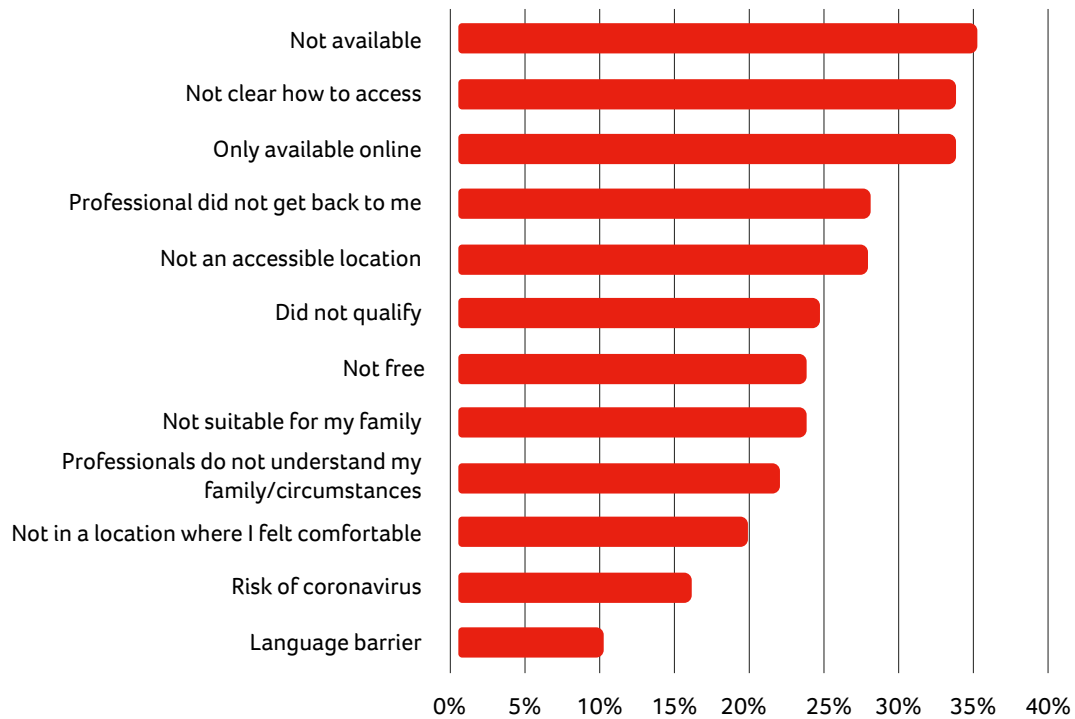
# Why do parents struggle to access early years services?

Many parents told us that they had struggled to access, or been unable to access, services. There are a range of reasons for this.

The chart below shows the proportion of parents who couldn't access – or faced challenges accessing – an early years service, and said they faced a particular barrier at any point.

The most common barriers were services not being available, it being unclear how to access services, or services only being available online.

Chart 11 – Barriers to accessing services <sup>x</sup>



<sup>x</sup> The answer option relating to fear of catching coronavirus was only included in the question about access to services since the pandemic.

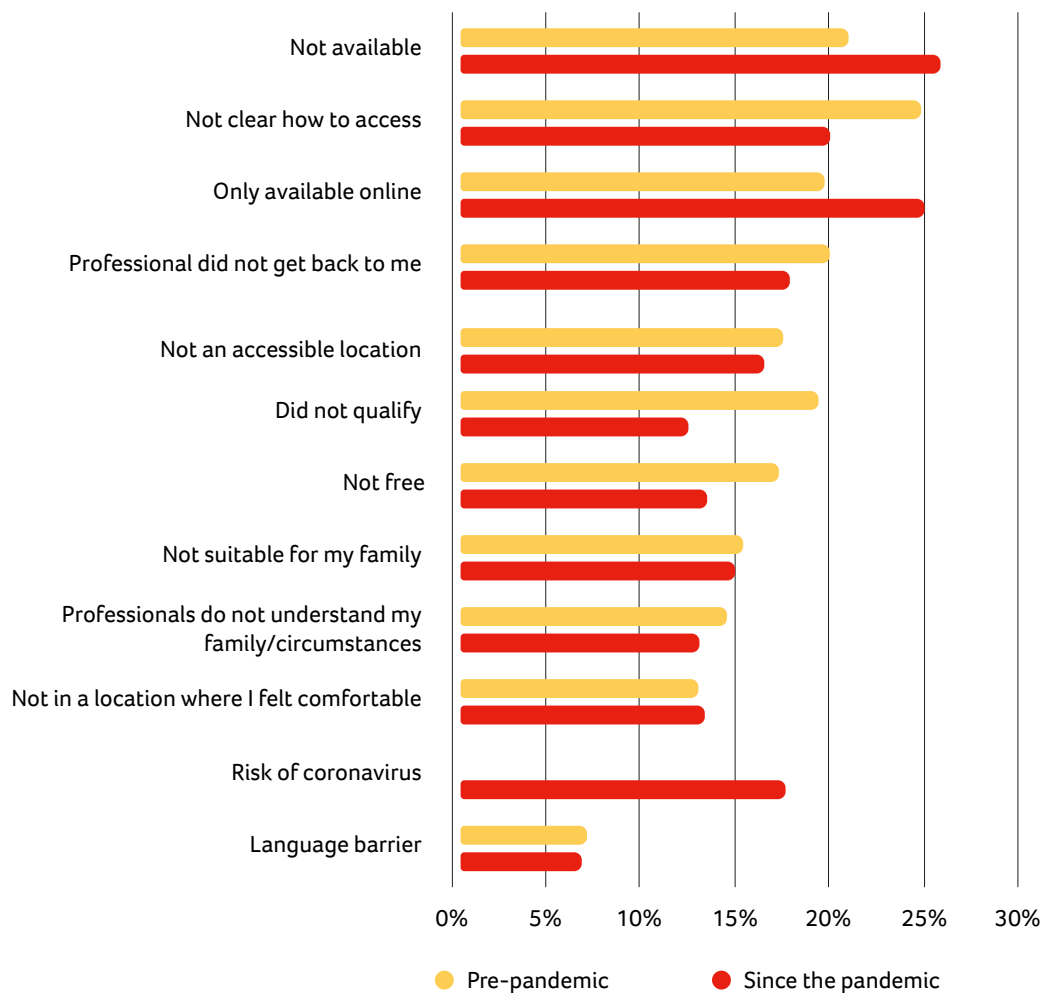
### Impact of the pandemic

As the chart on the next page shows, the barriers parents experienced have varied since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. Before the pandemic, parents were most likely to say that the barrier they faced to using a service was that it wasn't clear how to access it. Large groups of parents also experienced hard barriers such as a service not being available at all or not qualifying for a service.

The biggest changes since the onset of the pandemic were big increases in parents saying a service was only online, or was not available at all. Since the pandemic began, the fear of catching coronavirus was the fifth most commonly selected barrier. This demonstrates that even during the pandemic, lack of service availability, lack of clarity about how to access services, and services not getting back in touch with parents, were all still more common barriers than concern about the virus itself.



**Chart 12 – Parents are struggling to access the support they need**



**Wider evidence suggests parents are struggling to access the support they need**

Our research is supported by a range of other evidence.

**Clarity about access**

Before the pandemic, the most common barrier to using services was that it was not clear how to access them. The Early Years Healthy Development

Review pledges to ensure that ‘parents and carers will be told exactly what support they can expect to access’, encouraging local authorities to publish their 0 to 2 offers on their websites and clearly display them in community venues.<sup>15</sup> It will be important to ensure that this information is clear to all, including those families less commonly reached by professionals and services.

**Availability of services**

Clearly, as well as services being transparently advertised, there is work to be done to ensure that the services parents want are available. As mentioned, we know that spending on children’s centres fell by 68% between 2010/11 and 2019/20.<sup>16</sup> This has had a direct and tangible impact on the experiences of families. Our research shows that before the pandemic, a service not being available was the second most common barrier parents faced, with over a fifth (22%) of parents saying this was an issue.

**Parents qualifying for services**

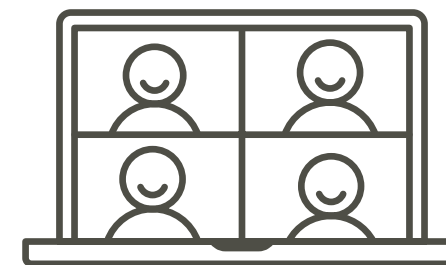
The fall in spending on children’s centres has led to a reduction in universal services, as well as in children’s use of centres. The Sutton Trust’s 2018 report *Stop Start* found that 55% of local authorities reported a reduction in the level of services provided by children’s centres in recent years. It also found that local authorities had a larger focus on targeted services rather than open-access services.<sup>17</sup> Our 2019 report found that between 2014/15 and 2017/18, the number of children using centres across England fell by 18%.<sup>18</sup>

Our research shows that the shortage of universal services remains a significant issue. The third most common barrier to parents’ access to services before the pandemic was that they did not qualify for the support.

**Use of digital services**

As highlighted above, the biggest jump in parents experiencing a barrier to using an early years service since the onset of a pandemic was finding a service was only available online.

Earlier in the year, our briefing on the digital provision of services through the pandemic concluded that, despite the many advantages of digital support, online must not replace face-to-face services for families.<sup>19</sup> Practitioners reported that face-to-face services are often necessary to build trusting relationships, and to identify any issues families might be facing. We suggested that digital provision could play an important role as part of wider service offers, but that families must still have the option of face-to-face services where they want them. Our new findings support this.



## Part six:

### The impact of not having access to services

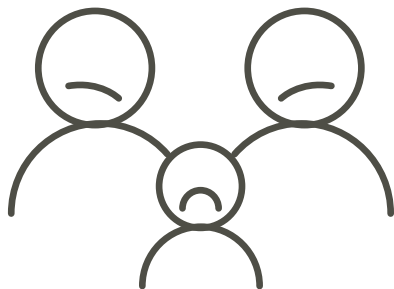
The majority of parents say they have struggled, or been unable, to access key early years services.

This has had a big impact on the families affected. We asked parents who had been unable to access a service if they had any worries about the impact of that on them or their child.

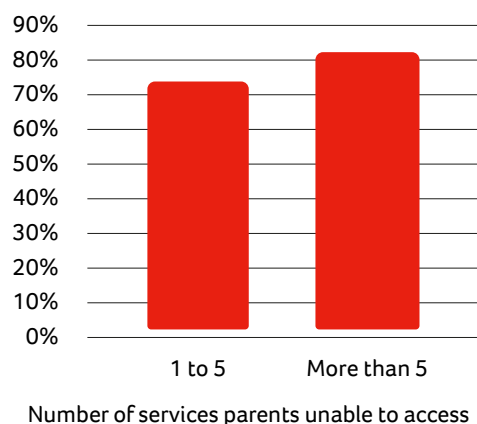
- More than three-quarters (78%) of parents who had been unable to access a service said they were worried about the impact of that on them or their child.

#### **a. Parents who faced severely limited access are more likely to be worried about the impact**

Understandably, parents who had faced greater barriers in accessing the services they needed were more likely to say they were worried about the effect on their child. As shown by the chart to the right, 82% of parents who had not been able to access more than five services said they were worried about the impact of that on them or their child. This compared to 73% of parents who had been unable to use between one and five services.



**Chart 13 – Proportion of parents worried**

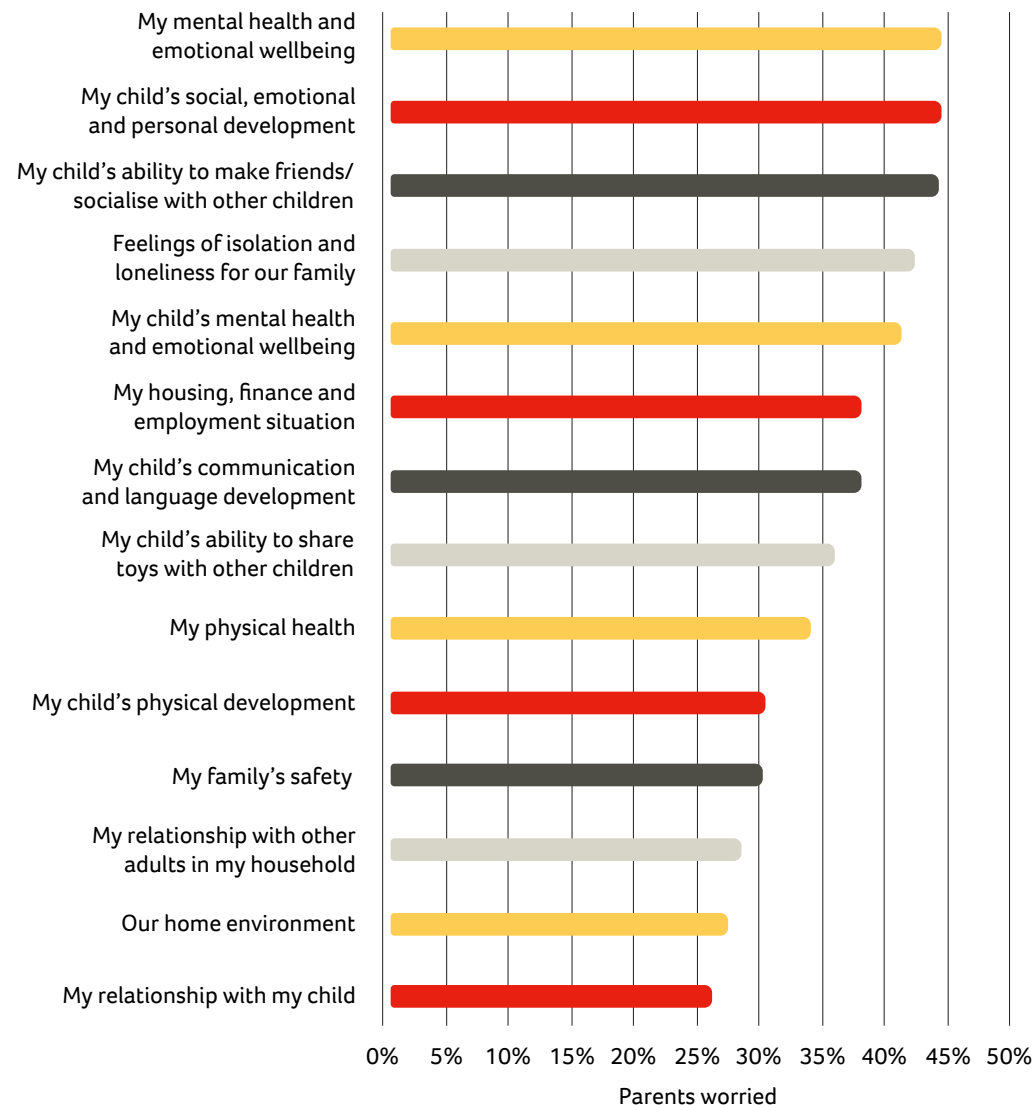


#### **b. Parents who couldn't access services are most worried about impacts on mental health, development and socialising, and loneliness**

The chart on the next page lists the concerns we asked parents about as a result of not being able to access services. What stands out is parents' focus on basic needs: mental health and emotional wellbeing, and social and emotional development.

The range and severity of issues parents worried about is also concerning. Over a third of parents who couldn't access a service were worried about their own physical health, and 41% were worried about feelings of isolation and loneliness. Worryingly, nearly a third of parents who couldn't access a service were concerned about potential impacts on their family's safety.

**Chart 14 – Worries as a result of being unable to access services**





**c. Different groups of parents had different concerns**

Parents' concerns varied based on their characteristics. Two big distinctions stood out in our analysis:

**Men and women had different concerns**

While the total proportion of men and women who had concerns about the impact of being unable to access a service were very similar (78% compared to 77%), the nature of their concerns were different.

- Men were more likely than women to be worried about children's communication and language development (42% compared to 35%), and significantly more likely to be worried about their own relationship with their child (31%

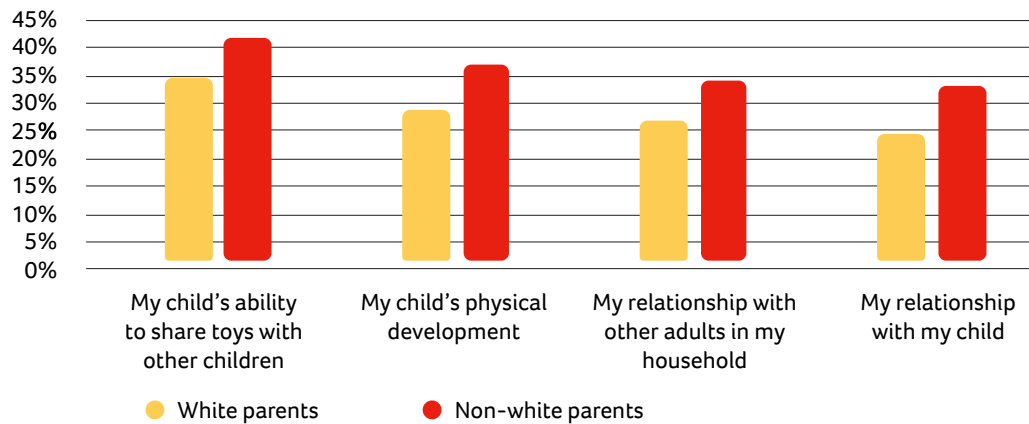
compared to 22% of women). This demonstrates the need to ensure that early years services are accessible to fathers and male carers.

- Men were also significantly more likely to be worried about the family's safety (37% compared to 25%), and their relationship with other adults in the household (34% compared to 24%).

**Non-white parents were more likely to be worried about the impact of not being able to access services**

In all areas bar one (parental mental health), non-white parents were more likely to say they were worried about the impact of not being able to access services. The biggest areas of difference are shown in the chart below.

**Chart 15 – Worries as a result of being unable to access services**



# Part seven:

## The government can fix this: recommendations

We know that the earliest years of a child’s life are vitally important: to their health, to their educational attainment, and to their life chances.

The challenges parents face in accessing services, and the knock-on concerns they have about the impact on them and their children, highlight that parents need more support and better access to essential early years services.

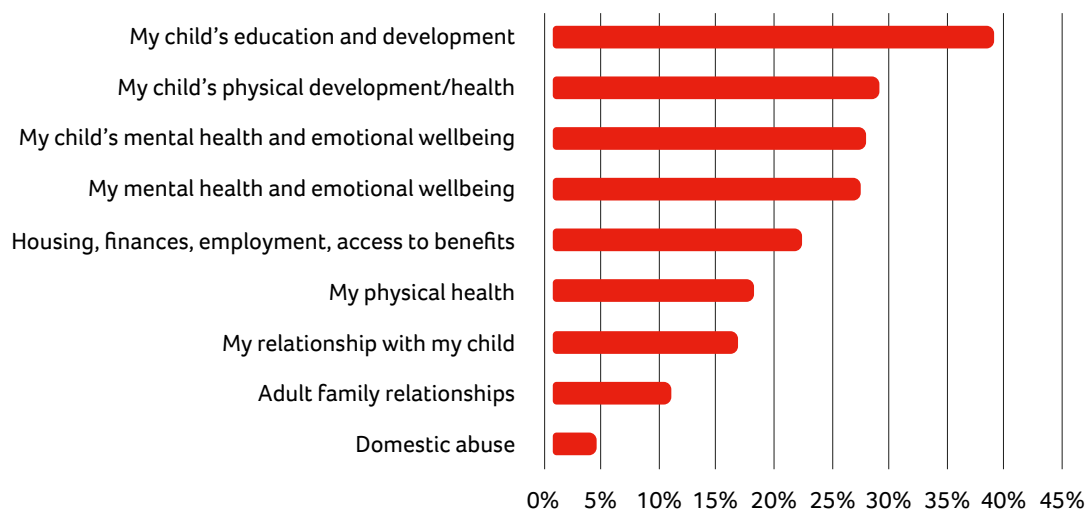
A question in Opinium’s omnibus survey to adults across the UK revealed that 69% of parents of 0 to 5s feel that the government should spend more on services for 0 to 5s and their parents.

### Parents want more support

Almost 4 in 5 (79%) parents said they wanted greater access to support of some kind. By far the most commonly cited area was their child’s education and development: over a third of parents wanted this type of support. This was followed by their child’s physical development and health, and their child’s mental health and emotional wellbeing.



Chart 16 – Areas where parents want more support



### Parents who have been unable to access services are rightly worried about the impact on them and their children

Despite the high level of demand for crucial early years services, many parents face significant barriers to getting the help they need. Two-thirds of parents had not been able to access a service they wanted, and nearly a third had been unable to access nearly 3 in 10 services.

There are many reasons why parents can’t access the help they want. But the two most common are services being unavailable or a lack of clarity about how to access them.

Rightly, parents are incredibly concerned about the impact that not being able to access key services has on them and their children. More than three-quarters of parents who had been unable to access an early years service were worried about the impact that would have.

### The government has an opportunity to build back better

The impact of the pandemic means that early years services offered through centres and hubs will be more important than ever. Their support for child development, community engagement, and parent and child health and wellbeing will be particularly vital; practitioners’ ability to spot any issues facing families will be especially necessary.

The government’s commitment to expanding family hubs and to implementing the Early Years Healthy Development Review means there is now an opportunity to improve access to crucial early years services.<sup>20</sup> The government’s ambition to improve support for families is matched by a wide range of voices calling for improved provision. For instance, the Children’s Commissioner and the Fabian Society and CSJ Early Years Commission have both recently recommended a national network of hubs.<sup>21</sup>

### Our vision for early years services

There is both significant demand for, and undersupply of, a number of key early years services. Too many parents who want support to give their children the best start in life are unable to get the help they need.

### Government should set out a minimum service guarantee of early years services

Government should ensure that every family has access to key early years services in their local area.

There must be a universal offer within this guarantee. As well as health services, the universal element should include programmes supporting child development, the parent-child relationship, and parenting skills.

The government’s commitment to family hubs is a huge opportunity to implement this. Where services are not already delivered, they could be offered through family hubs.

To make those changes, and reach parents and children most in need of support, the government will need to ensure that key building blocks are in place. We’ve identified five:

#### 1. Sufficient funding

To help parents give their children the best start in life, the government should use the upcoming Spending Review to close existing gaps in early years support. That investment should prioritise families’ access to services, rather than buildings themselves. Our research found that families access support in a range of settings. These environments just need to be accessible and comfortable for families.

## 2. Clear information and outreach

Parents also told us that it was not always clear how to access services, or they were not available in accessible locations.

The Early Years Healthy Development Review has encouraged local areas to publish their universal and universal+ offers for 0 to 2-year-olds. The government should extend support to local areas to provide information about their 0 to 5 offers.

Local areas must ensure that every family is able to access the early years support they need. Family hubs could also help improve access by reaching out to all families with young children in the local area. That could be done by offering birth registration in Family hub settings, better joint working with health visitors and midwives, or hubs getting in touch with every family with a new birth.

## 3. A consistent outcomes framework

Our research showed that parents' experience of accessing services depended on region. Parents and children deserve equal access to key services wherever they live in England.

A central, national outcomes framework for services for 0 to 5s, including the programme types we have mentioned, would help with this, while still allowing for necessary local adaptability.

The Early Years Healthy Development Review has recommended an outcomes framework for services for 0 to 2s. The Review team should work closely with the National Centre for Family Hubs, the Department for Education and other relevant departments, as well as the third sector, to develop a single and consistent outcomes framework spanning 0 to 5 services.

## 4. Inspection and regulation

The suspension of Ofsted inspection of children's centres means there isn't currently a national approach to ensuring early years services are high quality. A new approach to inspection should be established, based on the outcomes framework.

Our research showed that parents' experience of accessing services varied depending on family characteristics. Some parents told us that they didn't feel comfortable where services were being offered, that services were not suitable for them, or that professionals did not understand them. Inspection should include a focus on ensuring that services are welcoming and inclusive environments for parents of all backgrounds.

## 5. Digital services that complement face-to-face support

We know from delivering Parent Talk that parents of young children find digital information and advice useful. Online support must not replace face-to-face support, but can complement it as part of a varied service offer. Digital support should be designed with the input of parents, and every family should be able to access the type of support that is right for them.

**Despite the high demand for vital early years support, too many parents face barriers to accessing it. The government has a real opportunity to leave a lasting legacy by transforming the landscape of early years services across England. This will ensure that all parents can give their children the best start in life.**



# Methodology

Through Opinium, we conducted a survey of 2,003 parents of children aged 0 to 5 in England. The survey was undertaken online. Fieldwork took place from 20 June – 2 July 2021. The figures are representative of adults across England.

We also added five questions to Opinium's omnibus survey. This reached 2,006 adults across the UK, of which 1,204 were parents, and 221 were parents of 0 to 5s. The survey was undertaken online. Fieldwork took place from 16 – 19 July 2021.



<sup>1</sup> Department for Health and Social Care (March 2021), The best start for life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-best-start-for-life-a-vision-for-the-1001-critical-days>

<sup>2</sup> The Royal Foundation (November 2020), State of the Nation: Understanding Public Attitudes to the Early Years, available at: <https://royalfoundation.com/early-years/>

<sup>3</sup> Action for Children (June 2019), Closed Doors, available at: <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-work-campaigns-and-research/policy-reports/closed-doors/>

<sup>4</sup> Action for Children, Barnardo's, National Children's Bureau, NSPCC, The Children's Society and Pro Bono Economics (July 2021), Children and young people's services: Spending 2010-11 to 2019-20, available at: <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=fca940e7-7923-4eb3-90d3-be345f067017>

<sup>5</sup> The Sutton Trust (April 2018), Stop Start, available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/sure-start-childrens-centres-england/>

<sup>6</sup> Action for Children (June 2019), Closed Doors, available at: <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-work-campaigns-and-research/policy-reports/closed-doors/>

<sup>7</sup> Best Beginnings, Home-Start and the Parent-Infant Foundation (August 2020), Babies in Lockdown, available at: <https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/our-work/campaigning/babies-in-lockdown/>

<sup>8</sup> The Royal Foundation (November 2020), State of the Nation: Understanding Public Attitudes to the Early Years, available at: <https://royalfoundation.com/early-years/>

<sup>9</sup> Department for Education (October 2019), Early years foundation stage profile results: 2018 to 2019, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results-2018-to-2019>

<sup>10</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies (May 2020), Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning, available at: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848>

<sup>11</sup> Action for Children (October 2020), Childhood during coronavirus: protecting children from the effects of poverty, available at: <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-work-campaigns-and-research/policy-reports/childhood-during-coronavirus-policy-report/>

<sup>12</sup> University College London (July 2020), Vulnerable families at risk as health visitor workloads increase, available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2020/jul/vulnerable-families-risk-health-visitor-workloads-increase>

<sup>13</sup> BBC News (November 2020), 'Toxic lockdown' sees huge rise in babies harmed or killed, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-54827702>

<sup>14</sup> Co-SPACE study (November 2020), Parent mental health during lockdown (Nov 2020), available at: <http://cospaceoxford.org/findings/parent-carer-mental-health-during-lockdown-nov-2020/>

<sup>15</sup> Department for Health and Social Care (March 2021), The best start for life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-best-start-for-life-a-vision-for-the-1001-critical-days>

<sup>16</sup> Action for Children, Barnardo's, National Children's Bureau, NSPCC, The Children's Society and Pro Bono Economics (July 2021), Children and young people's services: Spending 2010-11 to 2019-20, available at: <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=fca940e7-7923-4eb3-90d3-be345f067017>

<sup>17</sup> The Sutton Trust (April 2018), Stop Start, available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/sure-start-childrens-centres-england/>

<sup>18</sup> Action for Children (June 2019), Closed Doors, available at: <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-work-campaigns-and-research/policy-reports/closed-doors/>

<sup>19</sup> Action for Children (January 2021), Adapting to a new world: supporting the youngest children through the pandemic, available at: <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/children-and-families/early-years/supporting-youngest-children-through-pandemic/>

<sup>20</sup> Conservative Party (2019), Conservative Manifesto 2019, available at: <https://www.conservatives.com/our-plan>

<sup>21</sup> Children's Commissioner for England (July 2020), Best Beginnings in the Early Years, available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/best-beginnings-in-the-early-years/>; Fabian Society and CSJ (July 2021), Early Years Commission: a cross-party manifesto, available at: <https://fabians.org.uk/publication/early-years-commission/>





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