



Young Babysitters in Britain

Informal Childcare Research Paper Two

Jill Rutter and Ben Evans



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About our research

Since the late 1990s the uptake of formal childcare – in nurseries and from registered childminders – has increased in the UK and initiatives such as the roll out of children’s centres and subsidies for childcare costs through the tax credit system has increased the availability and affordability of formal childcare. Despite these changes, the numbers of parents using informal childcare remains high. Daycare Trust defines informal childcare as *childcare that is largely unregistered by the state for quality control, child protection and/or taxation purposes*. In the UK many families use informal childcare provided by relatives, friends, paid babysitters and unregistered nannies, yet research on this issue is very limited. To fill this knowledge gap Daycare Trust is undertaking a major research project on informal care, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Young Babysitters in Britain is the second research paper which focuses on a particular issue in relation to informal childcare, with a previous report focusing on grandparents.

About the authors

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Ben Evans is a Research Officer at Daycare Trust, specialising in quantitative research methodologies. He holds a BA in Sociology and MA with distinction in Social Research Methodology both from the University of Liverpool. Since joining Daycare Trust in January 2010, Ben has worked on a number of research projects including the Childcare costs and sufficiency survey series and the London childcare providers network survey.

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Key findings and recommendations

Daycare Trust's research on informal childcare suggests that nearly half of parents in Britain use informal childcare provided by grandparents, other relatives, friends, neighbours, babysitters and unregistered nannies. In a survey of 1,413 parents undertaken by Daycare Trust, 47 per cent of them had used informal childcare for their oldest or youngest child over the last six months. While most informal childcare is provided by grandparents, a significant amount of childcare is provided by young relatives and young family friends. Yet there is very little known about the age group of young people who provide informal childcare to their younger siblings, nieces, nephews or unrelated children as babysitters. As a consequence of this research gap, Daycare Trust decided to look at the provision of informal childcare by young people, as part of a larger research project that has examined informal childcare in the UK.

We refer to this type of informal childcare as babysitting, although babysitting encompasses a range of activities which include situations where young people care for their younger siblings, nieces or nephews (often in an unpaid capacity), or where young people care for unrelated children, usually as paid babysitters.

This research shows:

- A significant minority of parents rely on young babysitters to provide childcare. Eight per cent of all parents had used a carer aged between 15 and 24-years-old in the last 6 months to look after their youngest or oldest child. Of parents who used some form of childcare, 13 per cent used an older sibling to provide this childcare.
- While more (49 per cent) 15- to 24-year-olds provided childcare to enable parents to undertake leisure activities, one third (33 per cent) of this age group were providing informal childcare to help parents to work.
- Nearly one in six (13 per cent) of 15- to 24-year-olds in Daycare Trust's survey were providing informal childcare to relatives, family friends, or as paid babysitters to unrelated contacts.

- Among 15- to 24-year-olds who provided informal childcare about a third (37 per cent) of them looked after a younger sibling, with nearly as many (33 per cent) looking after nieces and nephews or the children of family friends (34 per cent).
- Young babysitters provide a significant number of hours of childcare every week, often on a regular basis. For example, Daycare Trust survey data showed that sibling carers provided an average of 5.7 hours of childcare every week, compared with an average of 4 hours for all informal carers.
- Survey data and interviews with young babysitters suggested that many of them were providing informal childcare to both relatives – usually in an unpaid capacity – as well as in a paid capacity, usually to unrelated families.
- The majority of babysitters are satisfied providing informal childcare and regard it as a rewarding and useful learning experience for when they have children themselves. But these positive views are balanced by negative experiences, which mostly focus on 'near miss' accidents or difficulties with discipline. For some young people the obligation to provide informal childcare impacted on their ability to complete homework or their time socializing with friends.



- All of the young babysitters we interviewed stated that they had started looking after children when they were between the ages of 13- and 15-years-old. In some cases they had been left to look after very young babies. Our interviews with babysitters, as well as with parents suggest that a significant number of under 16-year-olds are left to care for babies and toddlers in the UK, an issue that requires further research.

- Decisions about childcare ultimately lie with parents, but we found evidence that some disadvantaged parents rely on inexperienced, very young or unsuitable babysitters to look after their children, particularly when formal childcare was unavailable or unaffordable.

The above findings have led us to make a number of policy recommendations:

- There needs to be an expansion in the supply of affordable forms of childcare for those parents who presently turn to friends, relatives and neighbours to look after their children, particularly outside normal office hours. Local authorities need to fulfil their obligations under the Childcare Act 2006 and ensure that working parents, including those who work outside normal office hours, have sufficient childcare.

- There is a need for more registered childminders and nurseries who are able to work outside normal office hours. A greater amount of sessional childcare that can be booked at short notice is also needed. Another model we support is that of registered 'at home' childcare services, where trained carers can look after children in their own homes, with registration enabling parents to claim Working Tax Credit support.

- The review of the National Curriculum in England should make first aid training universal for all secondary school students.

- Personal, Health and Social Education in schools could be used as an opportunity to discuss informal childcare obligations and ensure that teenagers are better able to understand and negotiate safe babysitting practices. Greater numbers of schools could enrol their students on British Red Cross babysitting courses.

- Health visitors and others working with parents of young children need to consider ways to reinforce message about safe babysitting practices.



1. Introduction

Until the late 1990s childcare was seen as a private matter in the UK, with limited government investment or intervention and with patchy access to formal nursery provision or after school clubs. In many parts of the UK, the absence of formal childcare meant that working parents relied on their family and friends to provide informal childcare. Since 1998 formal childcare has become both more affordable and more available across the UK as a consequence of initiatives such as free entitlement to part-time early education for all three and four-year-olds, and subsidies for childcare costs through the tax credit system. Despite this recent investment in formal childcare, the number of parents using informal childcare provided by friends and relatives remains high. Recent research by Daycare Trust suggested that nearly half (47 per cent) of Parents' Surveyed had used informal childcare for their oldest or youngest child over the last six months (Rutter and Evans, 2012). This was more than the 31 per cent of parents who had used formal childcare for their youngest and oldest children. The widespread use of informal childcare among families in Britain was also highlighted in the most recent Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents from the Department for Education where 38 per cent of parents in the survey had used informal childcare in the one reference week of the survey (Department for Education, 2012).

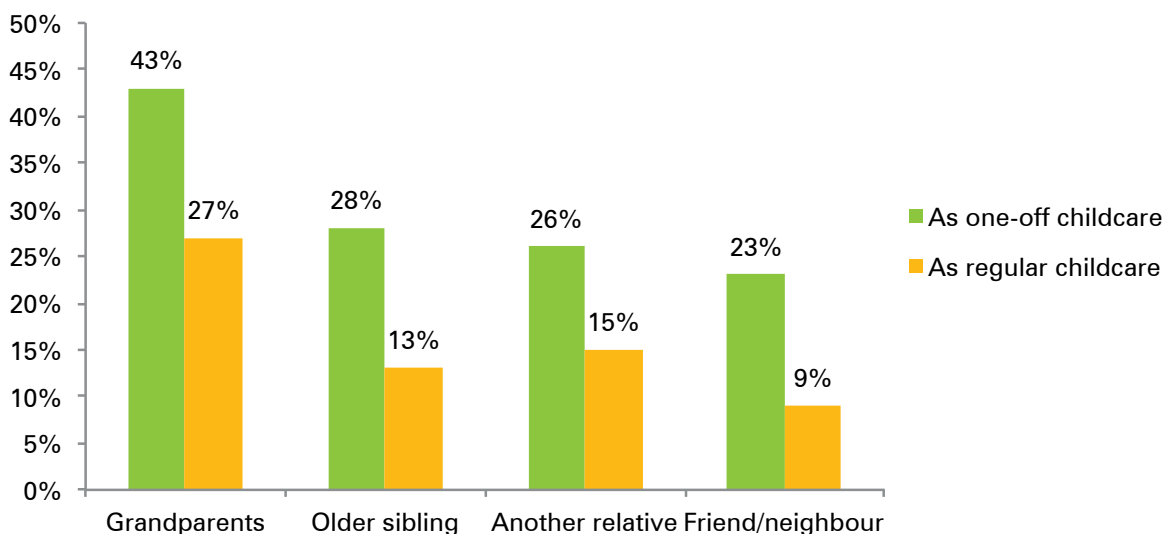
Over the last two years, Daycare Trust has undertaken a major research project that has examined the use of

informal childcare in the UK. The study defines informal childcare as:

childcare that is largely unregistered by the state for quality control, child protection and/or taxation purposes (Rutter and Evans, 2011).

Using this definition, informal childcare is provided by a range of different people: grandparents, siblings, other relatives, friends, neighbours, au pairs and unregistered nannies. Daycare Trust's research on informal childcare showed that grandparents were the group most likely to provide informal childcare, as well as being the group who provided the greatest number of hours. Over a third (35 per cent) of parents who used non-parental childcare used grandparent childcare as their main form of childcare. Unsurprisingly, much of the literature on informal childcare focuses on grandparents (Dench and Ogg, 2002; Gray, 2005; Rutter and Evans, 2011, Wellard, 2011; Wheelock and Jones, 2002). Yet Daycare Trust research shows that significant numbers of parents use their older children to provide childcare to younger siblings, nieces or nephews. In the Department for Education's Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents for 2009, 28 per cent of parents had used a child's older sibling to provide informal childcare on a one-off basis and 13 per cent of parents used a child's older sibling to provide regular childcare (Figure 1). This suggests that siblings provide more childcare in Britain than do

Figure 1: Providers of informal childcare to families with children, 2009



Source: Department for Education Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents, 2009

babysitters, friends or neighbours. However, there is limited research literature on this group of carers, apart from research that looks at the lives of young people who have broader caring obligations due to the illness or disability of a parent or other family member (for example, Becker et al, 1998). There are also small number of studies that examines sibling childcare from the perspective of children's household duties or the division of labour within the family (Blair, 1992; Bonke, 2010; Peters and Haldeman, 1987; Weisner and Gallimore, 1977). Overall, however, there is little significant research on informal childcare provided by young people.

As a consequence of this research gap, Daycare Trust decided to look at the provision of informal childcare by young carers aged 15 to 24, as part of a larger research project that has examined informal childcare in the UK. We hope that our research findings will help fill a knowledge gap and contribute to a more informed policy debate in relation to childcare, family policy and child protection.

Research methodology

This report on young people who provide informal childcare forms part of a larger study that looked at informal childcare in the UK. In this report we use the term babysitting to refer to informal childcare where young people care for their younger siblings, nieces or nephews, or where young people care for unrelated children, usually as paid babysitters.

In relation to young babysitters we were interested in the following research questions:

- How much informal childcare do young babysitters (aged 25 years and under) provide?
- What do we know about young babysitters in relation to their age, gender, education and employment status? What kind of profile do they have?
- What are the experiences of young babysitters? Are there beneficial or negative effects on them?
- What is the impact on the recipients of informal childcare? Can the provision of informal childcare from a young babysitter compromise the safety of children?

In order to answer these questions, the research has drawn on:

- A representative survey of 1,413 parents undertaken in 2011;

- A representative survey of 857 informal carers aged 15 and over, with the survey undertaken in 2010 and 2011;
- Ten focus groups held with parents who use informal childcare; and
- Two focus groups held with young people who provide informal childcare.

Daycare Trust interviewed 1,413 parents who used informal childcare through an omnibus survey conducted by IPSOS Mori in 2011. We also interviewed 857 carers who provide informal childcare through an omnibus survey conducted by IPSOS Mori in 2010 and 2011, during different weeks to the Parents' Survey. Two screening questions were used to identify respondents who provided informal childcare to family and friends, or who had worked as an unregistered nanny, au pair or babysitter during the last six months. From these 2 screening questions we identified 857 survey respondents, of which 129 were aged between 15- and 24-years-old.

Both surveys used a quota sampling method to recruit a representative sample of about 6,000 adults and young people over 15-years-old. It was conducted face-to-face and in the homes of respondents who were selected from 180 different sampling points in England, Scotland and Wales. (The survey was not undertaken in Northern Ireland.) It is important to note that the survey of informal carers is not comparable with the survey of parents. They were two separate groups of people and no relationship should be assumed between them.

We undertook ten focus groups with parents at different locations in Britain and with different social characteristics. The focus groups explored the research questions that are central to the project: the use of different types of childcare, parents' decision-making processes and their perceptions about the advantages and disadvantages of informal childcare. (Further details about the parent interviews are given in Rutter and Evans, 2012.)

We also undertook two focus groups specifically with young people aged 16 to 18 years who provided informal childcare, interviewing 18 young people in total. Both focus groups were run in a town in the east Midlands. A recruiter visited a number of sites frequented by young people and asked screening questions to recruit those who were providing childcare.

2. Patterns of use of informal care provided by young babysitters

Daycare Trust’s Parents’ Survey indicated that 8 per cent of all parents had used an informal carer aged between 15- and 24-years-old. In a typical week over the last six months five per cent of all parents (including those who did not use any childcare) had used a child’s older sibling to provide childcare and eight per cent of parents had used it as their main form of childcare. This proportion was not significantly different in relation to school holiday childcare. Of parents who used some form of childcare – formal or informal – 13 per cent used an older sibling to provide this childcare.

Other parents had used young nieces and nephews, or younger cousins to provide informal childcare. (This group is included as ‘other relatives’ in Figure 2). When we asked the babysitters about their relationship with the children for whom they were caring, nearly as many were caring for nieces and nephews (33 per cent) as were caring for young brothers and sisters (37 per cent) (Figure 3). Among the young people we interviewed, about half were providing informal childcare to nieces, nephews or younger cousins.

Both our surveys and interviews also suggested that a significant number of babysitters were caring for more than one child. Daycare Trust’s Carers’ Survey suggested that 61 per cent of informal carers aged between 15 and 24 years were caring for more than one child (Figure 4). Among the young babysitters we interviewed, just one person cared for a single child.

Interviews also suggested that many babysitters were providing informal childcare to both relatives – usually in an unpaid capacity – as well as babysitting in a paid capacity.

I look after six or seven children. I’ve looked after my brothers and sisters, relatives, friends of the family, their children and other children that you get to know through them (Female, aged 17).

Figure 2: Percentage of parents using different types of informal childcare over last six months for youngest child

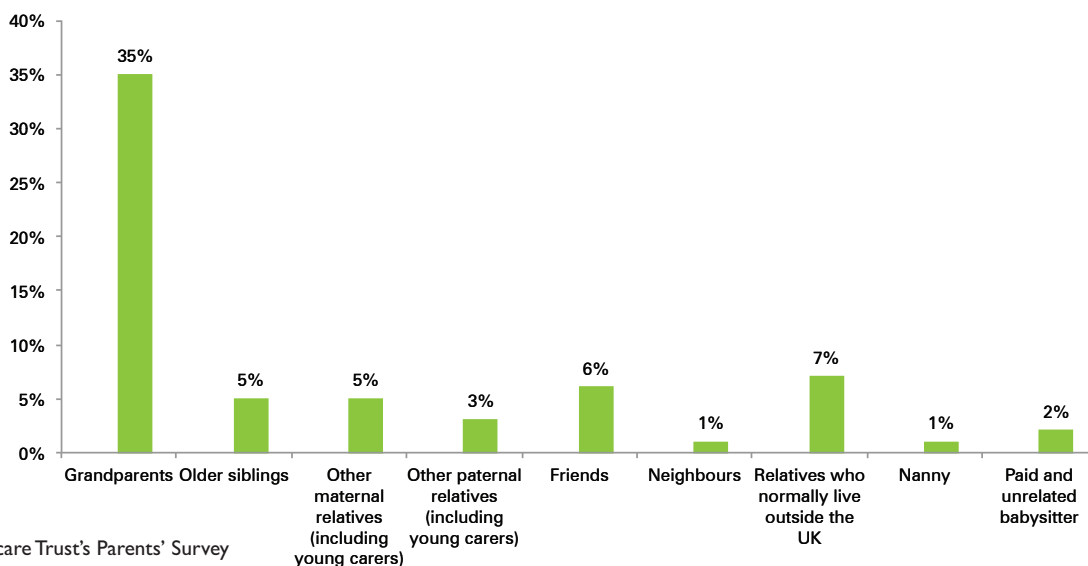
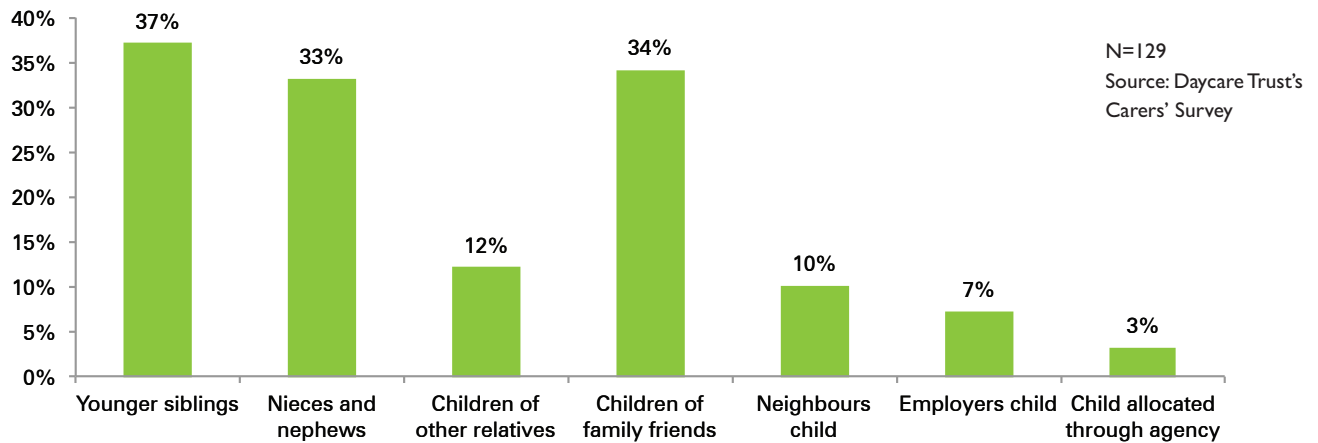


Figure 3: Relationship between informal carer and child cared for



Daycare Trust's Carers' Survey broke down informal childcare into that provided on a 'voluntary' basis for their relatives and those who gave care in a paid 'professional' capacity and received payment for it. But we need to be cautious about terming this type of paid childcare as 'professional' as most informal carers who are paid for their services appear to offer care as a babysitter or unregistered childminder, rather than as a nanny who has been formally recruited by a family or an employment agency. Table 5 gives a breakdown of the type of care they were offering, indicating that most informal childcare given by those in the 15–24 age bracket is of a 'voluntary' nature. However, significant numbers of young people are undertaking both paid and voluntary childcare.

All these findings suggest that among young carers it is common to look after the children of relatives as well as offering paid care in the role of a babysitter to unrelated children.

Figure 4: Number of children looked after by informal carers aged 15-24 years

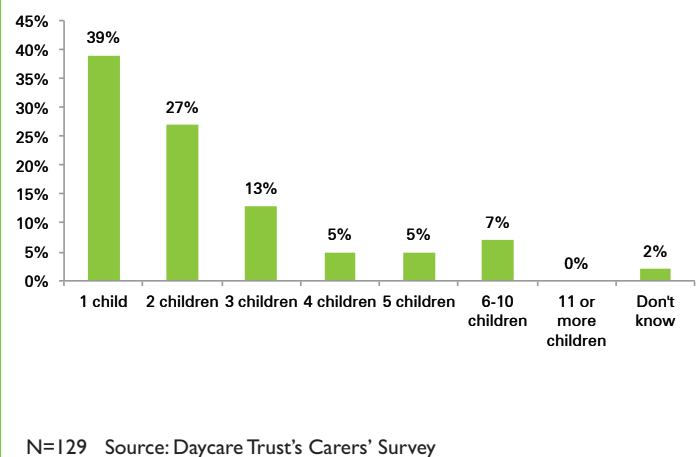
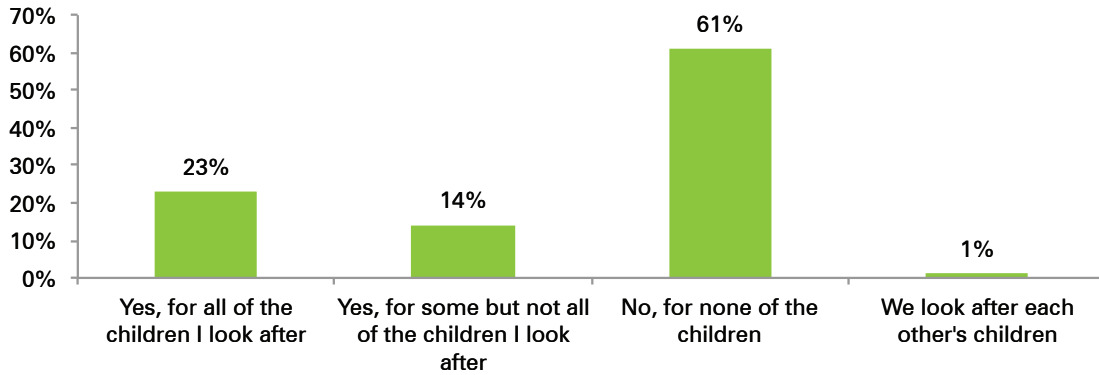


Figure 5: Voluntary and paid informal childcare for carers aged 15-24

	Percentage of age cohort providing paid informal childcare as babysitter, unregistered nanny or au pair	Percentage of age cohort providing voluntary informal care to child/children of friend or relative	Percentage of age cohort providing both paid and voluntary informal childcare	Percentage of age cohort not providing any informal childcare
% of 15- to 24-year-olds who undertook this type of informal care in last 6 months	3.4%	6.1%	3.8%	86.7%

Figure 6: Payment of 15-24 year olds for informal childcare



N=129 Source: Daycare Trust's Carers' Survey



Time commitment

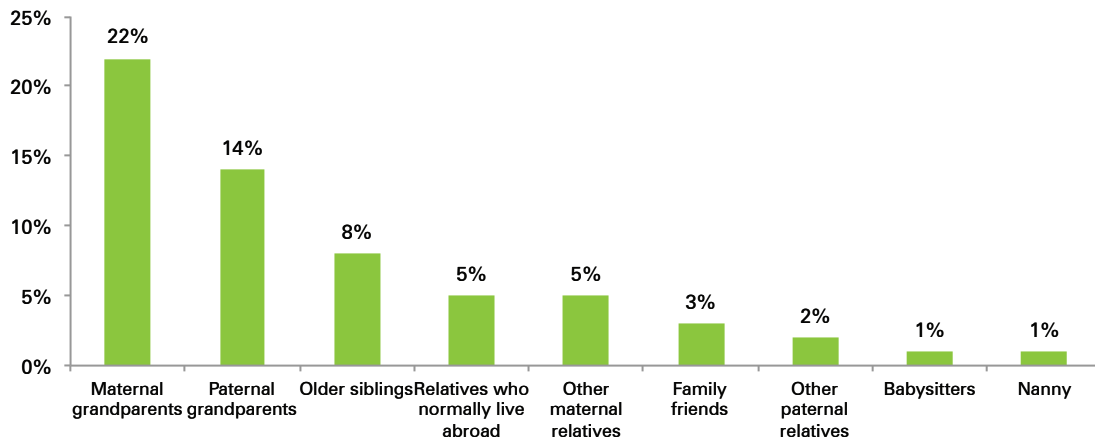
Daycare Trust's Parents' Survey also showed a significant time commitment by many babysitters. Some eight per cent of parents used an older sibling as their main form of childcare for their youngest child (Figure 7). In a typical week all young carers in the 15-24 age band – including those working as nannies – provided an average of 7.6 hours of childcare. Sibling carers provided an average of 5.7 hours of childcare every week (Figure 8). This significant time commitment was supported by the findings of our qualitative research where almost all of the babysitters who were interviewed were providing many hours of care on a regular basis.

I do Wednesday, Fridays and Saturdays, from about eight o'clock onwards. On Fridays it's usually until about two in the morning because they go to Manchester. Then I do Saturdays during the day, but I have to work on Saturday night. So I am quite tired on a Saturday (Male, aged 18 who provides sibling care and babysitting).

If you have a few families that you babysit for, you could end up babysitting most days. Usually it's a couple of times a week with different families (Male, aged 17 who provides sibling care and babysitting).

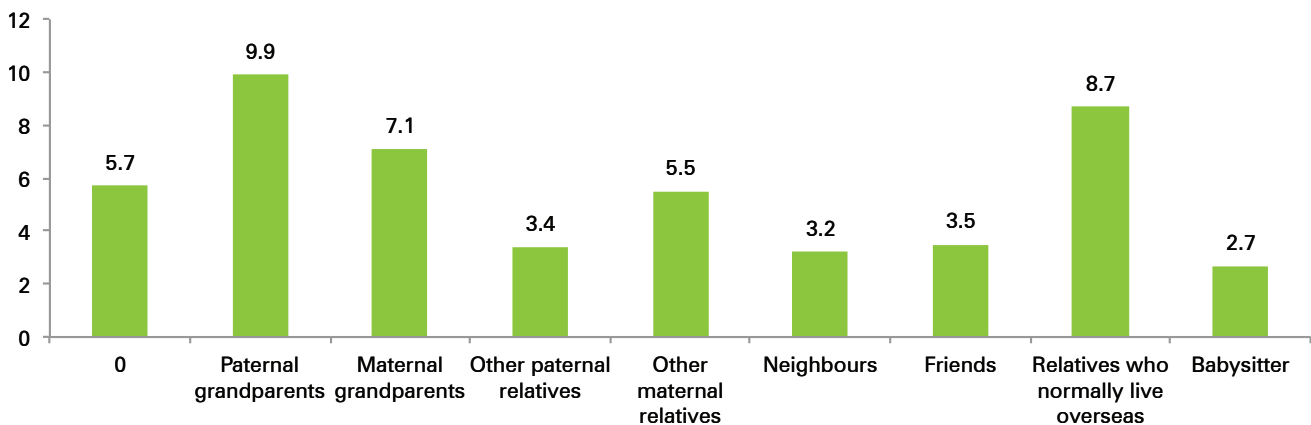
Interview data suggested that for some babysitters the obligation to provide informal childcare impacted on their ability to complete homework or their time socialising with friends.

Figure 7: Main form of informal childcare used during a typical week for youngest child



N=1,413 Source: Daycare Trust's Carers' Survey

Figure 8: Mean hours of childcare given by different types of informal carer



N=857 Source: Daycare Trust's Carers' Survey

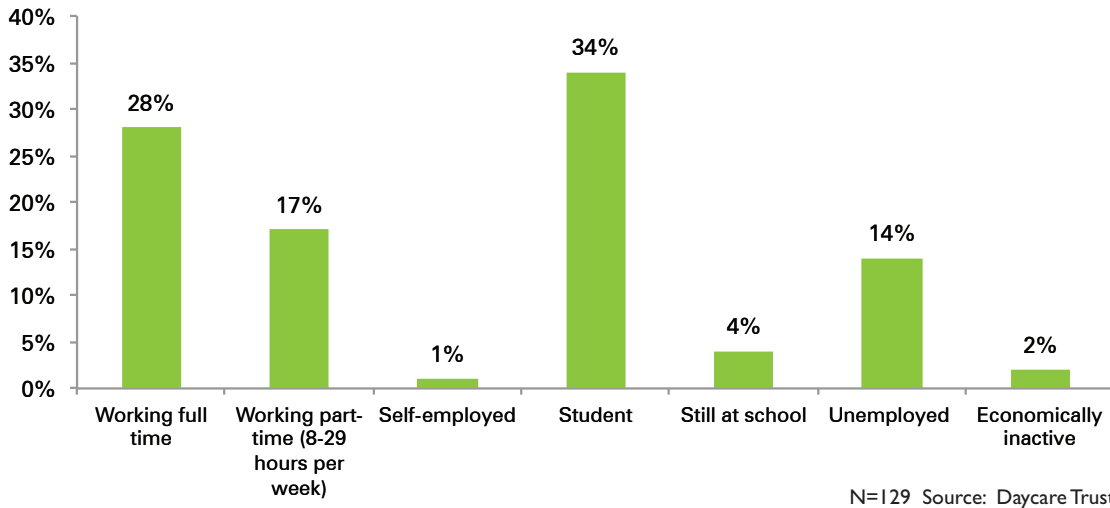
Reasons for informal childcare use

Parents need childcare for a number of reasons – for work, to enable them to study, undertake chores, or to have leisure time. Almost all previous research has suggested that most informal childcare is used to help parents work. Indeed Daycare Trust's Parents' Survey indicated that 56 per cent of informal childcare was used to help parents work normal office hours and a further 13 per cent was used to help parents work outside normal office hours (Rutter and Evans, 2012). However, many people have an image of babysitters largely providing childcare in the evening or at weekends, to enable parents to go out. This view was not fully supported by our research, which showed that despite their role to cover leisure time, many young babysitters also provided informal childcare to help their

parents, relatives and others to work. Daycare Trust's Carers' Survey showed that of all young babysitters, one third (33 per cent) were providing informal childcare to help parents to work, compared with 49 per cent who were providing informal childcare 'to give parents time for themselves'. Our interviews with the babysitters supported the view that some of them were providing childcare to help parents work.

I pick him up in the day when he finishes pre-school and have him till his mum finishes work. Normally it's from 12 till about 8 in the evening. I have to make his tea. (Female college student, aged 17 who looks after a cousin for two or three days every week).

Figure 9: Economic activity of informal carers aged 15-24



Profiling babysitters

Daycare Trust's Carers Survey interviewed 129 15- to 24-year-olds who were providing informal childcare, who represented 13 per cent of their age cohort. Some 33 per cent of 15- to 24-year-olds who were providing informal childcare were male, a proportion that was greater than we expected. This finding was supported by focus group research, with some parents using young, male babysitters. We also found it easy to recruit male babysitters for the two focus groups that we held.

As we have previously noted, Daycare Trusts' Carers' Survey showed that babysitters in the 15-24 age band are most likely to look after siblings, nieces and nephews and the children of friends. As might be expected young carers look after a different group of children – namely siblings – compared with older people who undertake informal childcare.

Daycare Trust's Carers Survey also enables us to look at economic activity among young babysitters. The largest group of babysitters in the 15-24 age bracket (38 per cent) are still in the education system, as students in further and higher education (34 per cent of carers) or as school students (4 per cent of carers) (Figure 9).

Figure 9 indicates that young people providing informal childcare have a similar profile in relation to economic activity as the overall population of that age group. Labour market statistics for March to May 2012 indicated that 50 per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds were in work, 14 per cent were unemployed and 36 per cent were economically inactive, mostly because they were students.

Babysitters' experiences of providing childcare

Both Daycare Trust's Carers' Survey and our interviews enabled us to look at the everyday experiences of providing childcare. We have already noted that some of this childcare is unpaid – usually where babysitters are looking after siblings. However, babysitters who looked after brothers, sisters and other relatives often had gifts bought for them.

My sister will sometimes give me the money or when we go out and I've seen something she will buy it if she's got the money on her (Female aged 16).

For those receiving payment for babysitting, rates of between £5–7 per hour seemed standard, or £20–30 for an evening. Rates were generally lower where care was provided for family members or friends.

Daycare Trust's Carers' Survey, as well as interviews with the babysitters also indicated how active many young people were in entertaining the children in their care. Of all ages of informal carers those in the 15 to 24 age bracket were most likely to do homework with the children for whom the cared (Figure 10). Some 64 per cent of babysitters in this age bracket also stated that they read with the children for whom they cared. Interview data also supported the view that most young babysitters took time to play with the children for whom they cared.

I make cakes with them or take them to the park (Female, aged 17).

When they are older you have to make sure that they do their homework before you start playing games with them (Female, aged 16).

My nephew likes going on trains, so I always take him on the trains to Buxton to feed the ducks (Male, aged 18).

Interview data also highlighted the strategies that young babysitters used to maintain discipline. It is important to note that problems with the behaviour of the children in their care was an issue experienced by all the young people that we interviewed.

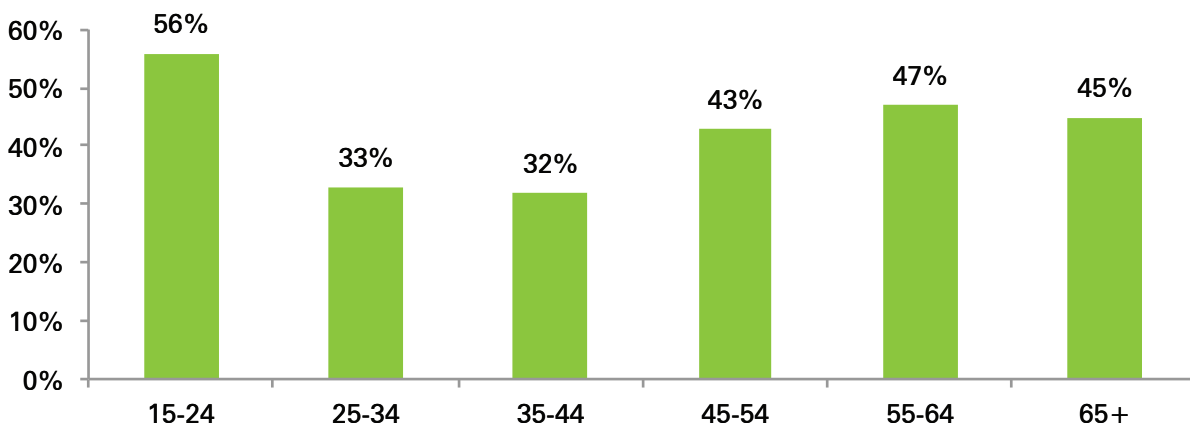
I just threaten them by pretending I'm on the phone to their mum, then they calm down a bit. With my cousin I just turn his Xbox off (Female, aged 17).

I'd like to know how to get them to behave without giving them biscuits (Male, aged 18).

Satisfaction with care arrangements

Our research also examined young babysitters' rates of satisfaction in relation to the provision of informal childcare. Daycare Trust's Carers' Survey indicated that almost all (96 per cent) of the 15- to 24-year-olds who provided informal childcare was satisfied with this arrangement. However, it should be acknowledged that these results will be skewed by virtue of the fact that those who have significant negative experiences of providing informal childcare may try not to undertake these duties – if they have sufficient free choice in this matter.

Figure 10: Percentage of informal carers supervising homework, by age of carer





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Interview data provided a more nuanced understanding of babysitters' experiences. All of the babysitters we interviewed talked about the positive aspects of providing informal childcare. But these positive views were balanced by negative experiences, and in some cases conflicting demands on a young person's time.

The babysitters that we interviewed all viewed the childcare as a useful learning experience that would enable them to better to look after their own children.

It gives you confidence and it's a good experience. If you have to babysit someone else's kids, in the future you know what to do with them, when you have kids of your own (Female, aged 16).

It makes other people realise that you are a responsible adult (Male, aged 16).

I think it brings me closer to my brother and sister and because I look after a baby, I think it is going to help me because I'll know what to do if I have a baby of my own; I'll know what to do from the start (Female aged 18).

Some babysitters also found informal childcare rewarding because it brought them closer to the children for whom they cared.

I find it rewarding, because they are always saying 'can I come round to Auntie Melissa's for tea' (Female, aged 17).

Negative experiences of providing informal childcare mostly focussed on 'near miss' incidents or difficulties with discipline.

My brother was eating his dinner and he was messing about, swinging on a chair. I'd turned around, I think I was feeding the cat, and he fell off the chair. His head went on to something on the CD player and my mum wasn't answering the phone, so I didn't know whether to ring an ambulance or not. His head was gushing with blood. I was nearly crying. I didn't know what to do. There was blood all over the cream carpet (Female, aged 17).

I babysit triplets and when they're together they just go at each other, they don't get on at all, there's a lot of sibling rivalry between them. They

are all six at the moment. I've had to phone their parents a few times because they've been running around the house and climbing out of the windows. They are a bit of a handful, really (Female, aged 18).

For other young babysitters, negative perceptions about informal childcare focussed on competing time commitments. Among the babysitters who were providing informal childcare on a regular basis, or a significant number of hours every week, these duties sometimes make homework difficult to complete. Other interviewees simply wanted more time to spend with their friends, but felt trapped by obligations to provide childcare.

If I'm doing coursework when you have to look after them, you have to spend time with them while you're trying to do your work, you don't have time to do your coursework (Female, aged 17).

Sometimes when you're just alone, so you've got nothing to do, you've just got the television and it can get a bit boring, especially if they're asleep. Sometimes you just want them [the parents] to come home, so that you can go to bed and be ready for college tomorrow (Female, aged 16).

I enjoy it, but I would rather be out with my mates to be honest (Male, aged 18 who is obliged to look after younger siblings).



Photofusion Pictures/Bob Watkins

Child safety and babysitting

There are regular stories in the media about children being injured or sometimes killed by babysitters. We were interested to understand the extent to which informal childcare provided by young people might present a potential hazard. As we have previously noted, there is very little research about young people who provide childcare, including any welfare or safety risks to the children in their care. However, there has been some North American research that has examined the safety risks posed by babysitters. One US study has concluded that unrelated babysitters are responsible for a relatively small proportion of reported criminal offences against children, much less than strangers and significantly less than family members (Finkelhor and Ormrod, 2001). North American research has also looked at whether pre-teen babysitters can deal with emergency situations. In one study 96 per cent of pre-teen (11- to 13-year-old) babysitters knew who to contact if a child was sick or injured and 51 per cent had undertaken some first aid training. However, in the same study some 40 per cent of pre-teen babysitters had left children unattended while babysitting (Hackman, 2010). Another study suggests that young children took more risks and behaved more dangerously when they were supervised by an older sibling. This research also showed that mothers were better at removing hazards and stopping dangerous behaviour than an older sibling (Morrongiello et al, 2010).

A number of welfare issues emerge from North American literature on babysitting. First, babysitters recruited locally (not through an agency) are often very young - Finkelhor and Ormrod (2001) cite babysitters who are as young as nine. Pre-teen babysitters may not have the skills to deal with emergency situations. This issue has concerned policy makers in the United States where some states have passed laws to try and prevent very young babysitters being left alone with children. In the UK there is no legal minimum age for babysitting, but both RoSPA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents) and the NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) recommend that no persons under 16 look after a baby or a toddler. The British Red Cross, which runs a babysitting course¹, recommends that participants need to have reached their 14th birthday by the final session. It is also worth noting that under English law parents themselves can be charged with neglect if they leave their children in the care of someone who is not sufficiently competent to look after children.

1. The British Red Cross Course is delivered over at least 15 hours and covers expectations, rights and the law, accident prevention and fire safety, first aid and dealing with challenging babysitting situations.



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Second, North American research suggests that disadvantaged parents are the ones most likely to use babysitters who are potentially unsafe. Knox et al (2003) highlight the dangerous nature of some informal childcare in a study that looked at childcare usage in a number of deprived areas in the United States. This research showed some families using multiple forms of informal childcare, with children being looked after by a range of very young relatives, friends, babysitters and unregistered childminders. As well as issues raised by their young age, some of these informal carers also presented a hazard to children, through their problem use of drugs or alcohol. While parents were often aware of the danger posed by informal carers, often they did not have the money to pay for safer forms of childcare.

In order to examine these welfare issues we asked the young babysitters that we interviewed about the age at which they started to undertake childcare, as well as the ages of the youngest children in their care. We also probed whether or not they felt confident to deal with accidents and medical emergencies and the extent to which they or their friends had difficult babysitting experiences. From a parental perspective we looked at their awareness of potential hazards, as well as the nature of instructions and contact details left for young babysitters.

Babysitters' age and child welfare

All of the interviewees had stated that they had started looking after children between the ages of 13 and 15 years. In some cases, teenagers were informed by adults that they were old enough to babysit or look after their siblings and other relatives. We were concerned that while all the young babysitters we interviewed appeared to be responsible, caring and familiar with the needs of babies and toddlers, in some cases they had been left to look after very young children, including a tiny baby', 'a newborn' and a baby of five-months-old. This trend was supported in two of our focus groups with parents, where they had sometimes left babies in the care of young relatives or babysitters.

I think as soon as I turned 14 my mum said, 'Oh, you can babysit now' (Female, aged 17).

I was 13, I just got told 'You're old enough to babysit now' (Female, aged 16).

Both the interviews with the babysitters, as well as the parental interviews suggest that a significant number of under 16-year-olds are left to care for babies and toddlers in the UK. We note that this conclusion is based on a small sample and it may be worthwhile undertaking a larger survey to test these conclusions.

While we believe that all the babysitters we interviewed were capable, all of them were able to recount 'near miss' accidents or emergencies with the children for whom they cared, or tell of potential hazards. In some cases, greater maturity would have enabled a young person better to deal with an emergency.

I get panicky towards tea time because my niece hasn't learned to chew before she swallows food. She'll just chew it twice then swallow it. We've had to save her a lot of times from choking and it worries me sometimes because she only eats finger food, so you have to give her things like chips and carrots, but she doesn't think she'll have to chew. It happened once before, but her mum was walking out of the door and we had to get a finger down her throat and pull it out. I wouldn't want to do that if I was babysitting on my own (Female, aged 18).

Most babysitters said that they felt that first aid courses would have helped them to deal better with the emergency situations that all of them had experienced. While a few of them had received first aid courses at school, many of them had not.

I think all schools should teach first aid because you might need it one day, it helps when you're babysitting kids as well because you know what you are doing, it would help everyone if anything happened (Male, aged 17).

Additionally, all of the young babysitters were able to recount stories of their friends who had not acted responsibly while looking after children. Here a lack of maturity appeared to play a part in the behaviour.

I wouldn't trust some of the people that I babysit with to look after my kids or any of my family. Well, I've been there when one of my friends was having problems with her boyfriend and if I wasn't there she would have left the house to go and have an argument with her boyfriend. So if I hadn't been there, a newborn and a one- and two-year-old would have been left upstairs on their own (Female, aged 18).

Parental responsibility and babysitting

Decisions about childcare ultimately lie with parents. We also looked for evidence of parents using unsafe forms of informal childcare, in both our interviews with parents, as well as in the interviews with the babysitters. Our interviews with both parents and babysitters suggested that most parents do leave contact details and instructions for babysitters. However, as noted above, the babysitters we interviewed were able to tell of children being left in potentially unsafe forms of childcare. This finding was supported in two of the focus groups with parents.

At the weekend or if I am going out with my boyfriend then a babysitter's cheaper for me because a formal person would charge me like £7 an hour or something and it's too expensive whereas the girl across the road who's 16 charges me a tenner. However, the downside of that is she's not as experienced and I have to keep reminding her about things. At first when she started she didn't change the nappy, I had to say to her 'You know you must change the nappy.' She will help herself to food, drink whatever as much as she'd like, she'd open things that are not open and she'd feed the baby and leave the plate with the bit on the floor. She went on a website on the internet there's some sex things as well and when I came home I thought well ok, she's 16 and I was scared to say anything because I was thinking I don't want to offend her (Mother, London).

Our qualitative research suggested that it was the most disadvantaged parents who had these potentially unsafe childcare arrangements. They were often single parents with a greater need for childcare. Generally they were unemployed or had poorly paid jobs, so did not have the money to pay for formal childcare.

Discussion and recommendations

This is the first time that British research on informal childcare has highlighted concerns about child welfare and safety associated with informal childcare. We note that our findings are based on a relatively small sample of young people. More research with a larger sample of babysitters would enable a more detailed examination of the issues raised in this report.

Daycare Trust's findings raise a number of policy issues, including crucially, how those concerned with children's welfare should minimise parents' use of unsafe forms of informal childcare, such as the use of very young or unsuitable babysitters. At present some local authorities place advice material about choosing a babysitter on their websites. Organisations such as the RoSPA have published guidance on using young babysitters and sibling carers. This stresses good practice for both babysitters and, importantly, for families where sibling care takes place. Important as this guidance is, it is unlikely to reach many of the families who are most likely to use unsafe forms of informal childcare. We need to consider ways to reach the most disadvantaged families with messages about child safety and babysitting. We also need to ensure that willingness of young people to provide childcare is not exploited by adults. Potentially there is an important role for health visitors and others working with parents of young children to reinforce good practice messages about babysitting.

The young people that we interviewed felt that first aid courses would have better helped them deal with emergency situations that all of them had faced as babysitters. Ensuring that all school students received good quality first aid training would be beneficial for many reasons. We believe that the review of the National Curriculum in England could be used as an opportunity to make first aid training universal for all secondary school students through Personal, Health and Social Education programmes. Greater numbers of schools could enroll their students on British Red Cross babysitting courses. Personal, Health and Social Education in schools could be used as an opportunity to discuss informal childcare obligations and ensure that teenagers are better able to understand and negotiate safe babysitting practices.

Finally, we also need to understand why many parents turn to young relatives and babysitters to provide childcare. It was a particularly significant finding that one third of babysitters were providing childcare to help parents to work. Local authorities need to fulfill their obligations under the Childcare Act 2006 and ensure that working parents, including those who work outside normal office hours, have sufficient childcare. Arguably, we need more affordable and flexible childcare for working parents who presently turn to young babysitters to look after their children. We need more sessional childcare that can be booked at short notice. We need nurseries, wrap-around childcare for school children and holiday childcare that is open between 7am and 7pm. We need more registered childminders and nurseries that open outside normal office hours. And we need more registered childcare 'at home' services, where trained carers can look after children in their own homes, with registration enabling parents to claim tax credit support.



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