

Improving Our Understanding of Informal Childcare in the UK

An Interim Report of Daycare Trust
Research into Informal Childcare

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About our research project

Since the late 1990s formal childcare has become more both more available and more affordable across the UK as a consequence of initiatives such as free early education for three and four year olds, the roll out of children's centres and subsidies for childcare costs through the Tax Credit system. Despite these changes, the numbers of parents using informal childcare remains high. While many families use this type of childcare, little is known about this practice. To fill this knowledge gap Daycare Trust is undertaking a major research project on informal care, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. In 2011 we published a literature review on informal childcare and *Listening to Grandparents*, a report about the most important group of informal carers. *Improving Our Understanding of Informal Childcare in the UK* is the third published report from this project. The report outlines and discusses the findings from the main phase of our fieldwork. This report will be followed by two further research papers and a book in late 2012.

About the authors

Jill Rutter is the research manager at Daycare Trust. She has led this research on informal childcare and in 2012 will be leading a project on the early years built environment. Previously, Jill was a Senior Research Fellow in Migration at ippr, where she undertook work on migrant integration and public service responses to migration. Jill has been a lecturer in education at London Metropolitan University. From 1988-2001 she was a Policy Advisor on Children at the Refugee Council, London. She has also worked as a secondary school teacher and on development projects in India. Her publications include *Refugee Children in the UK* (Open University Press, 2006).

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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We would like to thank Ipsos MORI who undertook our two surveys. Analysis of them was undertaken by Daycare Trust and Ipsos MORI bears no responsibility for the interpretation of the data cited in this report. Material from the Labour Force Survey is Crown Copyright and has been made available by National Statistics through the Economic and Social Data Service and has been used with permission. Neither National Statistics nor the Economic and Social Data Service bear any responsibility for the analysis or interpretations of the data reported here.

Executive summary

Introduction

Since the late 1990s formal childcare has become both more available and more affordable across the UK as a consequence of initiatives such as free entitlement to part-time early education for all three and four year olds, the development of children's centres and subsidies for childcare costs through Working Tax Credits. Despite this recent investment in formal childcare, the number of parents using informal childcare provided by friends and relations remains high, with surveys suggesting that between a third and a half of UK families use informal childcare.

While informal childcare is important in the lives of many families, we still know very little about this practice. To fill this knowledge gap Daycare Trust undertook a major research project on informal care, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The project examined the use of informal childcare in the UK, as well as its impacts on children, families and wider society. Specifically, the research was concerned with answering the following questions:

1. Who uses informal childcare, to what extent, and for what purpose?
2. What factors are most strongly associated with the use of informal childcare?
3. Who are the carers, how much time do they provide and are they happy doing it?
4. How do parents select which type of childcare, and which informal carer? Who do they consult? Who is influential? What issues impact on parents' choice of informal childcare?
5. Why is informal childcare used in preference to formal childcare in some families and not in others?

6. What is the impact of informal childcare on children, on carers and wider society?
7. If other high quality, affordable options were available, would parents still use informal childcare?

In order to answer these questions Daycare Trust undertook 10 focus groups with parents who used informal childcare, 40 semi-structured interviews with carers, a survey of 1,413 parents of children under 16 years and a survey of 857 adults and children over 16 who provided informal care. Both surveys were delivered at over 180 different sampling points in England, Scotland and Wales.

Defining informal childcare

Childcare can be characterised as formal, informal or parental. There is no single agreed definition of 'informal childcare' and research and policy literature often uses different definitions. For the purposes of this research we defined informal childcare as:

Childcare that is largely unregistered by the state for quality control, child protection and/or taxation purposes.

Using our definition above, informal childcare comprises childcare offered by:

- ▶ Grandparents
- ▶ Other relations
- ▶ Older brothers and sisters of the child
- ▶ Neighbours and friends of the child's parents, including members of babysitting circles
- ▶ Babysitters who provide short term home-based childcare for financial reward, and
- ▶ Unregistered nannies and au pairs.

We also included unregistered childminding and unregistered private foster care in our definition of informal childcare, although the provision of both forms of childcare is illegal.

Some informal childcare is offered freely, but informal childcare can also involve financial transactions – babysitters, au pairs or unregistered nannies are usually paid for their services. Informal childcare can also be provided on a reciprocal or bartered basis. It is important to note, too, that informal carers are a diverse group of people in relation to their age, hours of care provided, the regularity of care arrangements and carers' relationships with the families for whom they provide childcare. The diversity of informal childcare care arrangements is a reason for disaggregating informal carers in any analysis of this group, including in local authority childcare sufficiency reviews¹.

Parents' use of informal childcare

Daycare Trust's Parents' Survey showed that nearly half (47 per cent) of parents in Britain used informal childcare for their oldest or youngest child. This was more than the 31 per cent of parents who use formal childcare for their youngest and oldest children.

Grandparents are most likely to provide informal childcare, with over a third of parents (35 per cent) who used childcare using grandparents as their main form of childcare. An estimated 6 per cent of parents used friends to provide informal childcare, but friends were usually used for shorter periods of time than for grandparent childcare.

The median number of hours of informal care provided by carers every week was estimated at four hours, but there is a considerable variation in the hours of care provided. Generally, grandparents offer the most hours of care.

Parents mostly use informal childcare to help them work, often at times outside normal office hours, when there is little formal childcare available. Some 56 per cent of parents in our survey used informal care to help them work and 13 per cent of parents stated that informal childcare helped them work outside normal office hours.

Our research showed that parents tended to use informal childcare in six different ways:

- ▶ It is often used as the main type of care for babies and toddlers.
- ▶ Parents also use informal childcare in combination with nursery care to ensure an affordable childcare package for child under five years old.
- ▶ Informal childcare is used as regular after-school and holiday childcare for school-age children
- ▶ Informal childcare may be used in an emergency or when a child is ill.
- ▶ Informal childcare is used as short term childcare for parents who are studying, looking or undertaking chores because short-term formal childcare can be difficult to find.
- ▶ Parents who work outside normal office hours – in the evenings, overnight or at the weekends – may use informal childcare as their main form of childcare.

Factors associated with the use of informal childcare

Almost all previous research on the use of informal childcare has highlighted significant differences in families' use of informal childcare. Our research enabled us to analyse the factors that were most strongly associated with the use of informal childcare. To enable us to disentangle many different and inter-related factors influencing informal childcare use, we undertook logistic regression analysis. This suggested that geographic proximity to the carers was the factor most strongly associated with the likelihood of using informal childcare. Families whose nearest adult relative lives within five miles were 5 times more likely to have used informal childcare than those whose nearest adult relative lived between 30 and 150 miles away. While proximity to carer usually determines the likelihood of using informal childcare, some families go against this trend and set up long distance childcare arrangements, within the UK or spanning international borders. Daycare Trust's Parents

1. The Childcare Act 2006 obliges local authorities to map childcare supply and demand for childcare, ensuring that is sufficient childcare for working parents and those studying with the intention of returning to work.

Survey suggested that in a typical week seven per cent of parents used relatives who normally live outside the UK to provide informal childcare for their youngest child and five per cent had used it as their main form of childcare over the last six months. There was no difference in the likelihood of using overseas-domiciled relatives to provide childcare between parents of white British ethnicity and those from minority ethnic groups.

Other factors associated with an increased likelihood of using informal childcare include household composition and work status. Couple households where both parents work and working single parent households were more likely to use informal childcare. Households where both parents work atypical hours are also more likely to use informal childcare provided by family members. Family size is also associated with informal childcare use: families with just one child are more likely to use informal childcare than larger families.

Daycare Trust's surveys and qualitative research shows that the likelihood of using grandparents and friends to provide informal childcare decreases down the social grades. This may be partly due to different patterns of atypical hours work across the social grades. (Parents in professional and managerial occupations are most likely to have atypical work patterns, involving work outside normal office hours when formal childcare is not usually available). The finding that there is a lesser use of informal childcare among families in the lower social grades challenges the findings of some previous research, as well as a number of local authority Childcare Sufficiency Assessments, that suggests that less prosperous families depend more on informal childcare. It is important, therefore, that policy makers do not over-estimate less prosperous families' access to informal childcare support networks.

Interestingly, our research showed that income in itself is not a significant predictor of informal

childcare use. Our research suggests that it is the type of job that parents do, rather than income in itself, that is associated with the likelihood of using informal childcare.

Our qualitative research also showed differences across the social grades in the way that families use informal childcare from friends. Working class families tended to use friends in emergency situations, but in middle class families childcare from friends was often planned in advance through 'playdates' and reciprocal childcare arrangements. That the most economically disadvantaged parents have less access to mutual support and emergency childcare is relevant to public policy. We believe that all children's centres should see it as a key mission to facilitate mutual support networks among parents.

Previous research about the use of informal childcare in families with disabled children has been inconclusive, with some studies suggesting that these families use more informal childcare and other research contradicting this. Daycare Trust's research suggests that the likelihood of using grandparents to provide childcare appeared to be similar in families with and without disabled children, but many parents of disabled children indicated that they very rarely used friends and were sometimes reluctant to use relatives other than grandparents.

Crucially, too, our research has shown that there are major regional differences in the use of grandparent childcare by across the UK, with parents in Scotland most likely to use grandparent childcare and those in London the least likely. The lesser use of grandparent care in London may be a consequence of international and internal migration to the capital, processes which often sever childcare support networks. Central and local government needs to acknowledge that London parents have less access to informal childcare and ensure that parents in the capital have sufficient access to affordable formal childcare, at the times of day that they need it.

The childcare decision-making process

There has been limited previous research about the childcare decision-making process in the UK and the relative importance of factors such as affordability, proximity, parents' trust in carers and preference for different types of childcare. Investigating the childcare decision-making process was a key aim of the research. Most parents rely on word-of-mouth information from friends and relatives to help them make decisions about childcare. Our research shows that childcare decision-making is a gendered process, with most initial decisions about childcare are taken by women.

We examined the factors that influence childcare decision-making. Our research shows that for mothers' decisions about work are taken alongside decisions about childcare. Structural constraints such as childcare affordability, the timing of formal childcare and the proximity of that care to the home or the workplace appear to be the pre-eminent factors in childcare decision-making. Subjective factors such as trust for the carer and views about childrearing tend to be invoked after a decision has been made about childcare, often as a means of self-justification for these arrangements. We believe that values and attitudes about bringing up children and childcare are determined, or at least significantly mediated, by the economic circumstances in which parents find themselves.

Our research also showed that parents looked to informal carers to provide different things from formal childcare. Parents expected informal carers to provide a nurturing, home-based type of childcare and to formal childcare to help develop a child's cognitive and social skills. We have concluded that there is little evidence to show that informal childcare displaces the free early education offer in nurseries, but there is some evidence to show that parents use informal childcare instead of after-school and holiday clubs.

The background and experiences of those who provide informal childcare

Although there has been a limited amount of qualitative and quantitative research on informal childcare in the UK, few studies have attempted to build a profile of those who provide it. We undertook a survey of those who provide informal childcare which has enabled us to understand the make up of this group and know more about their experiences.

Our survey data suggests that an estimated 14 per cent of the over-16 population of Britain was providing informal childcare – sized up this would be about 6,900,000 people across Britain. Nearly half of informal carers (49 per cent) were looking after their grandchildren, although about 4 per cent of our sample were looking after children in a professional capacity, as nannies, au pairs or babysitters. Informal carers provided a median of four hours of care every week, with grandparents providing the most hours of care.

Our research suggests that nearly 3.5 million adults in Britain provide childcare for their grandchildren. Grandfathers play an important role in caring for their grandchildren, with our survey showing that 40 per cent of grandparent carers were male. We calculated that the majority of grandparent carers are under retirement age and the average (mean) age of grandparent carers was 62.5 years. Some 35 per cent of grandparent carers in our survey were still working. Moreover, younger grandparents were providing more hours of care – those aged 45 - 54 years offered an average of 11.6 hours of care per typical week, compared with those aged 65 years and over undertook 8.3 hours of care per week.

Young carers who babysit or look after siblings, nieces and nephews are another significant group of informal carers. Nearly one in six (13 per cent) of 15-24 year olds in Daycare Trust's Survey provided informal childcare.

Most informal care arrangements arise after parents ask a carer to help them look after their child, but more than two in five carers (42 per cent) offer to care for a child. Both our Parents Survey and Carers' Survey suggested that reciprocal childcare arrangements were less frequent in social grades D and E². Regular informal childcare offered by friends is more likely to involve parents and carers from higher social grades.

Daycare Trust's Carers' Survey indicated that almost everyone who provided informal care was satisfied with this arrangement, even though 25 per cent of carers had spent more time caring than they first anticipated. Three quarters of carers enjoyed spending time with the children for whom they cared. Very few carers felt that the duty to provide informal care had a negative impact on their lives and there is little evidence to show that large numbers of older women are being forced out of the labour market because of informal childcare obligations.

Previous research by Daycare Trust suggests there is little appetite among grandparents for registration as childminders and their payment for childcare services. We have concluded that grandparents who are willing to register as childminders and care for non-related children as well as their own grandchildren should not be barred from doing so. Our research with careers also suggests that relatives and friends who provide regular informal childcare want more support from children's centres and the opportunity for flexible working.

Impacts of informal childcare on children

Both the quantitative and qualitative parts of our research enabled some exploration of the impacts of informal childcare on children themselves. We asked questions about carers' contact with the children's school, nursery or playgroup, as well as the activities that they undertook with children for whom they care. Our research also probed unregistered childminding and other practices that have the potential to be unsafe.

Our research showed that most informal carers, particularly grandparents, do provide a nurturing and stimulating environment for the children for whom they care. Nearly half of the informal carers in the Daycare Trust Carers' Survey read with the children for whom they cared, or supervised homework. While reading and the supervision of homework are not associated with the social grade of the carer, the survey showed that the likelihood of undertaking painting, cooking and going on local walks and outings declines down the social grades.

Both our qualitative and quantitative research supported the view that there are significant numbers of unregistered childminders working in the UK. Our Parents' Survey suggested that three per cent of parents knew of unregistered childminders in their locality and our qualitative research suggested a higher incidence of unregistered childminding, with some parents using unregistered childminders to provide care, particularly outside normal office hours. In addressing this problem we believe it is important that local authorities understand the reasons that parents use unregistered childminders, which is that they provide a flexible and affordable form of childcare.

In most families, the provision of informal childcare is a voluntary activity that benefits the carer, parents and children. For most parents being able to turn to relatives and friends to provide informal childcare is a positive condition, enabling them to work. For them, informal childcare has no detrimental effects as long as three and four year olds use some high quality early childhood education. We do not need interventions to substitute informal childcare with formal provision, as long as their informal childcare arrangements are safe, stable, reliable and meet parents' needs. However, our research showed that a small number of families use multiple, unstable and unreliable forms of informal childcare with children passed between friends, relatives and babysitters. This informal childcare was chaotic, disorientating for the child, as well as having the potential to be unsafe. Some parents used very young babysitters and unregistered childminders. We were also concerned that some parents on welfare-to-work programmes were forced to use multiple forms of childcare while undertaking training and job search.

2. The social grade variables that were used in the survey were derived from the Nation Readership Survey. This is a slightly different variable to the old Registrar General's social class variables, as it enables all members of a household to be classified according to the occupation of the chief income earner.

The broader impacts of informal childcare

Informal childcare offered by grandparents is a cross-generational exchange of services. Our research showed that the provision of informal childcare strengthens relationships within the family and helps with inter-generational understandings and communications. While it impacts on relationships between the young and old at a household level, the provision of informal childcare has had very little impact on dominant national debates about older people, focusing on the burden of financing and providing care for the frail elderly.

Our research also suggests broader impacts of informal childcare: on parents and other household members, on carers and on wider society. We believe that informal childcare may have positive impacts on families with disabled children, providing a respite for parents, enabling them to spend time as a couple, with their other children, or to undertake work, thus enabling better coping.

There was no significant evidence to show that the obligation to provide informal childcare forces large numbers of older women out of the labour market as many informal childcare arrangements are initiated by the carer offering to look after the child.

Although difficult to quantify, the provision of informal childcare has major economic impacts. Most importantly, our research shows that it enables parents to work and make a positive contribution to the exchequer through taxation.

Policy recommendations

Daycare Trust's research has led us to develop a series of policy recommendations, for central government, local government, third sector organisations and families themselves:

Changing the debate about informal childcare

All levels of government, as well as broader society, need to value and support informal childcare to a much greater extent than at present. The contribution of older carers needs to be recognised much more than it is today. The focus of public policy on informal childcare should

be to maximise its benefits, while at the same time extending formal provision to those families without access to any good quality childcare, whether formal or informal. Informal childcare should not be viewed as an inadequate alternative to formal childcare; rather it should be seen as something that complements formal childcare.

Understanding childcare supply and demand

Both formal and informal care are part of the mixed economy of childcare. The use of informal has the capacity to affect demand for formal childcare and vice versa. However, many local authorities do not understand families' use of informal childcare and are often not aware of parents who do not have access to informal childcare. As a consequence of this omission significant numbers of parents are prevented from working, looking for work or studying. We recommend:

- ▶ Future guidance to local authorities on childcare sufficiency exercises must ensure that these reviews (and their equivalents in Scotland) give much more attention to informal childcare use, as well as the impact of raising the retirement age on the supply of informal childcare.
- ▶ Local authorities must ensure that families without access to informal childcare can find affordable formal provision at times of the day when they need it. Sufficient affordable childcare for student parents, those looking for work and parents who work irregular or a typical hours is essential.
- ▶ Local authorities should develop a strategy for sessional and emergency childcare in their areas, incorporated within their childcare sufficiency exercises. Such a strategy might include advice on financial sustainability. Vacant places in day nurseries should be offered to parents who need emergency and short-term forms of childcare.
- ▶ As parents of disabled children may find it difficult to find suitable formal or informal childcare, Statements of Special Educational Need, and the planned Health, Education and Social Care Plans should include reference to after-school childcare and enrichment activities.

Ensuring all parents have childcare support networks

Our research showed that the most economically disadvantaged parents used less informal childcare and appeared to have less access to the mutual support and emergency childcare that informal carers can offer. We recommend:

- All children's centres should see it as a key mission to facilitate mutual support networks among parents.

Meeting the childcare needs of parents with 'atypical' work patterns

Our research showed that parents who work outside standard office hours or whose work patterns are irregular are particularly reliant on informal childcare to be able to work. While informal childcare helps these parents stay in work, its absence often prevents parents from working. Local authorities need to fulfil their Childcare Act 2006 obligations that relate to ensuring sufficient childcare for working parents and make certain that there is appropriate formal provision for parents without informal childcare networks. These local authorities should consider a registered at-home childcare services for parents who work outside normal office hours. Under this model an agency or local authority brokers childcare that is provided in the family home by carers registered with Ofsted. (At home childcare services also usually provide emergency childcare). Improvements are also needed in the operation of Working Tax Credit support for childcare for parents in the peripheral labour market who move in and out of work regularly. We recommend:

- Local authorities should improve the ways that they research the demand for childcare outside normal office hours.

- Local authorities and groups of local authorities should set up at-home childcare services for parents who work outside normal office hours, and publicise these service alongside information about Working Tax Credit support to parents who may need such services.

- Local authorities should encourage nurseries and holiday childcare to open between 7am and 7pm where there is a demand from parents identified through the childcare sufficiency exercises.

- Central Government should ensure that the new Universal Credit system works better for families with fluctuating employment patterns. This could include longer run-ons when finishing work to avoid having to start a new claim when they find another job.

Managing poor quality forms of informal childcare

Some parents in our research – mostly those undertaking welfare-to-work programmes - were using multiple and short term forms of childcare which were often disorientating for their children. Our research also highlighted a small number of informal childcare arrangements that were chaotic, unreliable and sometimes unsafe and included unregistered childminders and very young babysitters. While there are arguments for the better regulation of nanny and babysitting agencies to ensure the best recruitment processes, as well as better enforcement action against unregistered childminders, parents who use unregistered childminders or very young babysitters are often from low income groups and unlikely to use childcare provided by an agency. Arguably, we need to understand better the demand for unregistered childminding and babysitting and ensure that there is enough flexible and affordable formal childcare available at times of the day when parents need it. Improved Personal, Health and Social Education courses in schools could also cover babysitting and first aid, to ensure that young babysitters are better equipped to deal with emergencies. We recommend:

- ▶ The Department for Work and Pensions should issue better guidance to welfare-to-work providers to ensure that childcare for parents on the Work Programme ensures better continuity for children.
- ▶ The Department for Education should commission a small-scale ethnographic research project to ensure a better understanding of families' use of unregistered childminding and how this could be prevented. This research needs to be disseminated within local authorities to ensure a better understanding of the drivers of unregistered childminding.
- ▶ Ofsted should investigate why so few complaints about unregistered childminding result in enforcement.
- ▶ Childminders should be required to place their registration number on any public advertisements for their services, including websites, and local authority Family Information Services should be resourced to check up on childminder advertisements to ensure compliance with registration.
- ▶ The review of the National Curriculum in England should be used as an opportunity to rethink Personal, Health and Social Education for young people. Parenting education in schools should also include babysitting, basing this input on the British Red Cross babysitting courses.
- ▶ There should be greater flexibility about the use of parental leave, enabling grandparents to use parental leave entitlements.
- ▶ Local authorities and third sector providers of children's centres should support the greater involvement of informal carers in the activities of Sure Start children's centres and ensure that informal carers are always made to feel welcome.
- ▶ Training material that accompanies the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory guidance needs to promote good practice in communicating with informal carers who collect children from formal childcare provision. Central government guidance on home-school partnership should also encourage good practice in communicating with informal carers.

"I was working part-time and then I decided to go back full-time but instead of paying a childminder the full fees my grandmother used to travel from Pimlico to King's Cross to bring her home and look after her until I got home from work. She did that for about two, three years. As soon as the holidays came, I couldn't pay a childminder, so she [daughter] used to go to my grandmother's – rather than my mum because my mum was at work too."

(Mother, London).

Supporting informal carers

Our research suggests that there is much room for improvement in the way that we support informal carers. We recommend:

- ▶ Building on the commitments of the Modern Workplaces consultation, central government should extend the right to request flexible working to grandparents and other relatives who provide regular informal childcare as soon as possible.

Daycare Trust is the national childcare charity. We campaign for quality, accessible and affordable childcare for all.

We lead the national childcare campaign by developing credible policy recommendations based on high quality research.

Our advice and information on childcare assists parents and carers, providers, employers, trade unions and policy makers.

Daycare Trust has recently merged with National Association of Family Information Services (NAFIS) and now works to support families through local Family Information Services.

Daycare Trust offers a range of services, including:

- ▶ Consultancy and research
- ▶ In-house training
- ▶ Membership
- ▶ Support for Family Information Services

Parents wanting information on childcare issues can contact us at: info@daycaretrust.org.uk

Parents can also contact their local Family Information Service to get more detailed information about childcare available in your area.

To find out more about our work visit **www.daycaretrust.org.uk**

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