

Parent Champions reference guide



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The background to Parent Champions

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For many families, bringing up children can be like piecing together a jigsaw, using different combinations of support from family and friends, formal childcare (nurseries, childminders) and other early learning services (toddler groups, stay and play sessions). Some parents struggle to find out about these services and the help that is available to them. Without knowing about childcare and early learning activities, parents can often feel very isolated and their children are missing out on activities that are good for their development.

Parent Champions are parents who have positive experiences of using childcare and/or supporting their child's early learning, who act as advocates and peer advisers to other parents in their community.

At every stage of their children's lives, there is one source of information that parents rely on most – other parents. And when it comes to deciding about whether or not to send your child to nursery,

or choosing a childcare place, the direct experience of other parents is a powerful source.

This is the thinking behind Parent Champions, a Family and Childcare Trust initiative that started in 2007. It tested whether parents, with good experiences of childcare, can act as advocates in their communities and help inform the choice of other parents they may not have previously known.

The Parent Champions scheme is based on the idea that parents are the best people to support other parents to find out about childcare and early learning services. You can use your experience of using such services either for your own children or from helping out at a service. By sharing this with other parents, you can build trust and talk to them about childcare and early learning, how they can access it and what is available locally.

“ *It's totally different talking to someone who's been through it, rather than just someone on the phone calling you to use a service in children's centres... They know we are mums and parents ourselves promoting the services and the mums and dads tend to trust us...*

Parent Champion



What are Parent Champions?

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Parent Champions are ordinary parents, just like you, who have experience of using childcare and early learning services. They take on a new role in their local community, speaking to other parents about the benefits of using these services for their children and the wider family. Parent Champions are volunteers who give up some of their spare time in order to engage with other parents and help and support them to find and use services. They are not officials, but work with local services, such as children's centres and Family Information Services, to raise awareness of the childcare and early learning opportunities that families may be missing out on.

Many Parent Champions' schemes focus on early years because it is those parents who are often missing out on information, but the role of a Parent Champion is to guide parents to children's centres and Family Information Services and often families will ask about wider family and older childcare services.

We have been working with Parent Champions schemes for a number of years and the parent volunteers have come from a very diverse range of backgrounds. Some fit their volunteering in alongside work or study or haven't worked for a while, wanting work experience. Other Parent Champions have previously come from a professional background and are taking a career break or want to change the direction of their career path into childcare.

Parents come from ethnically diverse backgrounds, which has been especially helpful when trying to reach specific communities where engagement has been previously been difficult to achieve. We actively encourage participation from as wide a pool of parents as possible, including young parents, lone parents, dads, older parents, parents of disabled children and parents from minority ethnic backgrounds. These are all groups who have been represented through Parent Champions in previous and current projects and are often best placed to reach certain target groups.

“ I had a background in community and voluntary work that was helpful but I had been by myself at home for 10 years so I didn't have the confidence to approach people. I now have something to talk about and do. I talked to someone at an event when I was struggling with domestic violence issues and they referred me to get help. I now have more skills and confidence, am able to talk to people and my job skills are more marketable. I would like to do community outreach work and another qualification to work with children. The training really motivated me.

Parent Champion



Case study: Hasiba, a Parent Champion in Slough

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Hasiba is a Parent Champion in Slough. She moved to England from Pakistan in 2003 with her partner, but has since become a single parent. She lives with her three children, the youngest of which is eight-years-old. All her children have attended local schools.



She was keen to do something that would help other people and completed a local Community Champion course and went on to helping people in her community with form filling and general advice. Realising that so many people were not aware of opportunities that were open to them, she welcomed and applied for the role of Parent Champion. Through being a Parent Champion, she has been in contact with lots of families that do not know about childcare or the activities that are available for them locally. She remarks "school information is often put into school bags and thrown away before parents even look at it!"

Hasiba has found that sometimes people are nervous when dealing with someone from the local authority and won't talk to them – "they worry that they might get into trouble about their benefits or some other matter." She can see the obvious benefits of families being able to speak to someone like her, a Parent Champion, who is not an official and can understand their situation. "As a parent I know that parents are more comfortable talking to other parents."

In Hasiba's area there are mainly Asian people and an Asian culture – where some husbands and in laws may not allow their wife or daughter-in-law to go anywhere apart from taking children to and from school. "I am a familiar face at the school. The people are relaxed and will often talk freely to me."

She feels that her volunteering has allowed her to feel much more relaxed about chatting to people. She enjoys talking to as many people as she can and feels very confident in being able to help people who need support. "In the future I want to continue working with people, and enjoying life."

What do I do as a Parent Champion?

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As a Parent Champion your role is to engage with other parents and talk to them about the benefits of childcare and early learning and the opportunities that are available in your area. You are not expected to know everything there is to know about all the benefits and what's on offer locally, but, after your induction and training, you will be able to signpost parents to the most appropriate organisations for further help, which might be the local children's centre or Family Information Service, for example, who will be able to provide more detailed information of childcare and family services.

Being a Parent Champion could involve:

- talking with individuals/small groups about your positive experience of early learning and childcare;
- answering questions about how you and your child felt about using childcare or going to activities and about how you dealt with any issues you encountered;
- informing parents about where to get advice and information about finding and using childcare and getting involved in their child's early learning;
- accompanying parents to children's centres or other childcare settings;
- explaining what you see the benefits of childcare can be to parents who may not be aware or have a negative view of it; and
- setting up or helping out at information sessions or open days for parents.

A lot of this is simply integrating your Parent Champions role into your normal routine.

How will I volunteer?

Parent Champions usually volunteer for an average of five hours per week for a minimum of six months. This is not set in stone and you may find that you are able to commit more or less than this. Your volunteer hours will depend on when and where you are trying to meet people. It may sometimes be affected by your other commitments, such as family, work or studying, so it is good to let your supervisor know of any significant changes to your situation that might affect your volunteering.

Will I be reimbursed for any money that I spend?

As with most volunteering roles, any expenses that are built up as a result of you being a Parent Champion will be reimbursed to you. As a volunteer, you won't be paid for your work, but if, for example, you spend money on fares to get to an event or you provide refreshments for parents during an information session, the money will be given back to you. You should keep a record of this and provide receipts and tickets wherever possible.

Depending on how your scheme is being managed, you may also be given a mobile phone and top ups in order to carry out your Parent Champion role. There may also be funding to provide childcare for your own children, though this may be in exceptional circumstances, for example, when you need to attend an event or training. Some schemes have chosen to give vouchers or 'thank yous' to Parent Champions. These need to be given very carefully, as they may affect any benefits you might be receiving. For this reason, many schemes tend to offer such incentives as vouchers to spend in high street shops, for example.



Keeping records

Your role as a Parent Champion will include keeping a record of your activity, which could be, for example, how many parents you have come into contact with, where you have engaged with parents, events you have organised or attended and examples of your work that might be interesting to write up as a case study.

Individual schemes will have different ways of asking you to record your engagement work, for example, a journal where you can note down what you have done from week to week and count how many parents you've spoken to. Another way could be providing verbal feedback to your supervisor on a regular basis and them making a record of your activity. This type of record keeping is important as it allows us to see how your work has made a difference to parents and children in your community

and also helps to inform us of how to develop and improve the Parent Champions scheme, knowledge that can be shared with all the different projects that are running across the country.

You can also keep personal notes about your work as a Parent Champion and how it helps you to develop you. This role may increase your confidence, or give you practice in speaking to groups of people, you may gain valuable knowledge that helps to support you into employment or it might give you direction about what you want to do next.

You can discuss your personal and professional experiences as a Parent Champion with your supervisor when you meet. Your experiences may also be shared with Family and Childcare Trust and may be used in evaluation of the project, but this would only be done with your agreement or used anonymously.

What support is available for Parent Champions?

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Volunteering, like anything new, can sometimes make you feel nervous, especially if you haven't tried this type of peer-to-peer support before. Some people find it very easy to just go up to someone they don't know and start up a conversation, but for others it can be more of a challenge. Try not to get put off if it doesn't come naturally to you at first. Your confidence will grow over time and once you have a few conversations with parents under your belt, you should start to feel more comfortable about speaking to people you haven't met before.

Supervision sessions

Individual schemes will provide support for you in different ways. You should have regular meetings with a dedicated member of staff at your scheme and that person should be made known to you before you start to volunteer. Sometimes it might not be possible for you to be supervised by the same person each time, but you should be familiar with all relevant staff from the scheme and be made aware that there is a team available to support you, if relevant. Your supervision sessions might be held on a weekly or monthly basis, they might be individual sessions, with just you and the supervisor, or group sessions, held with the other Parent Champions you are working alongside. If you are offered group sessions, you should also be given the opportunity to speak in confidence, on a one-to-one basis, if you need to.

“ We know who does what better and we do things together...I'll write up the notes and fill in forms and someone else does the talking or questions and then I'll join in with something else... so it works well.. if I am unsure about something then [the other Parent Champion] can step in and help, so you know you've got back up and can feel more confident in yourself.

Parent Champion

“ The first week was very hard, since it was new, and I was not fluent in English, but the second week I felt more comfortable, and then it became very easy.

Parent Champion



Linking up

As a Parent Champion, it is important that you don't feel as though you are working in isolation. It is a good idea to link up and develop relationships with the other Parent Champions working on your scheme. Some of our previous projects have seen a buddying system put in place, where two Parent Champions will work together to cover an area, or will be linked to a specific children's centre. Working in pairs helps to build your confidence, as you have each other for support and you can share and draw on each other's strengths and skills. Many great friendships have also been formed, making volunteers feel more connected to their community.

It's also a good idea to have a good basic knowledge of activities and services that operate for children and parents in the area that you are working. This information will come over time as you establish yourself in the community and meet new people. Although you will receive support from children's centre and Family Information Service staff, getting to know what's running and where can be helpful to both you and the parents you come into contact with. Parent Champions working on previous schemes have found it beneficial to have an induction with children's centre staff, for example, and really get a good understanding of what can and can't be provided at a local centre.

“ *I think we have to go along and meet the children's centres first and get to know a bit about the centre... and to hit the ground running you have to have that bit of background knowledge. And the staff need to know what you're doing – if they can give you links in to different services that you need to get into, then that's a good thing...*

Parent Champion



Parent Champions National Network

As well as keeping in contact with Parent Champions from your own scheme, it may also be possible for you to be in contact with others from schemes across the county. The Family and Childcare Trust run the Parent Champions National Network and through this you may have the opportunity to attend national or regional events, which give you the chance to talk with other parent volunteers. There may also be opportunities to talk about your experience at conferences. This has been something that Parent Champions have really enjoyed in the past and something that has contributed to the personal development of volunteers working on schemes.



Engaging with other parents

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Engaging with parents simply means that you will go out and meet individuals and speak to them about local services. You may build relationships with some and see them more than once, others you may only meet once.

Engaging with other parents

How you work as a Parent Champion will depend on a number of different things. Your scheme may have quite a structured approach to how they want you to engage and will advise you of this. However, your approach to the role is generally a very personal one, as you should work in way that feels comfortable to you. You may already know a lot of parents in your community and have a good knowledge of the services and activities available and be able to easily communicate this to others. Or you may prefer to go out with leaflets and information that you can give to parents so that they can find services for themselves. Different approaches will fit different Parent Champions.

Parent Champions in previous schemes have visited various places within the community (see Where to engage with other parents) in order to find and talk to parents. You may want to try some of these yourself.

Where to engage with other parents

It may sound obvious, but finding and talking to parents works best when you visit places and activities where they would normally be found anyway, and to get a head start you may want begin with places that you are also familiar with.

Below is a list of places that some of our previous Parent Champions have found useful to visit in order to find parents. But these are just suggestions, you may have your own knowledge of where best to find the parents that you need to speak to. Or your scheme may already have identified specific locations within your area in which to target parents that they want to reach.

- Health settings: antenatal clinics, baby clinics, breastfeeding 'cafes'/clinics, GP surgeries, local hospital.
- Community settings: local colleges, mosques and churches and other faith group settings. This could be somewhere you already attend so have good links with.
- Child and parent group settings: local libraries, toy libraries, parent and toddler/stay and play sessions, and children's activities, such as classes/lessons. Parents may be able to talk to whilst their child is busy with an activity.
- Schools: The school gate can be a good place to meet with parents.
- Public places: leisure centres (swimming lessons where the parent leaves the child for the lesson) supermarkets, parks, public transport.

Monique's story

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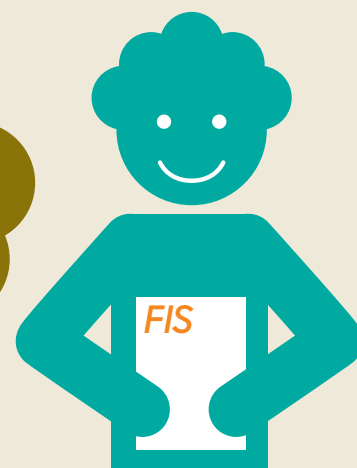
Monique, a Parent Champion in Greenwich, was a bit uncertain at first and thought it would be too difficult to find and talk to parents she did not know. As soon as she got going, she actually found it quite natural to talk to other parents and found it easier when the other parents were with their children and she had her own children with her. She also found talking about early learning activities came naturally.



She went to the breastfeeding clinic with her sister, not in her Parent Champion role, but found herself talking to parents there about the local parent and toddler group and children's centre. "It gets easier, the more you do it... I talk to parents wherever I go, maybe the park, even at my weekly swimming class."



She has also attended drop-in clinics at her local children's centre and doctor's surgery and has given out leaflets on the high street informing parents about their local Family Information Service (FIS).



Monique got support from the outreach worker at the FIS, who was able to provide a list of activities and times that take place, so she always had places to go where she could find parents.



Monique felt more assertive and confident as she developed in her role and to used her initiative more. For example, she decided that it would be a good idea to talk to parents at her swimming class because she had the time to get to know them and what their family's particular needs were.



Monique has been able to help members of her own family through the skills and knowledge she has picked up in her role as a Parent Champion. Her cousin wanted to go to college, but needed to find childcare for her two children. Monique let her cousin know that after-school clubs could provide the care she needed and advised her to talk to the school and also get in touch with the FIS.



How to engage with parents

Below there are some ideas about how you might want to meet and talk to parents, but feel free to add in ideas of your own:

- Approach parents that are already using other services.
- Make contact with community/faith groups to promote childcare in communities where using childcare is not common. For example, previous Parent Champions have built up strong links with the Imam at the local mosque and with his support were able to talk to the parents who attended.
- Work alongside professionals, for example, at children's centres.
- Organise events for local parents, for example, coffee mornings or talks at a children's centre.
- Have informal discussions – some Parent Champions prefer to work in a less structured way and talk to parents as they are getting on with everyday tasks, for example, at the supermarket or at the bus stop.

You might also be able to help to coordinate childcare taster sessions or open days at local childcare settings, so that parents are able to see for themselves what childcare can offer them and their child. You can speak to the manager to organise this.

You will also talk about how to approach parents in your induction training, where methods of how to engage will be explained and you will be able to practice these with other Parent Champions.

Use your time with your supervisor and the other Parent Champions to talk through different options and opportunities of how to reach parents and share ideas about successful outreach work. It is also good to know what the other Parent Champions on your scheme are doing, not only because this might identify group working opportunities, but you can also make sure that you are not all talking to the same group of parents.

Tips on communicating with parents

Communication is a two-way process, which requires both speaking and active listening. When communicating with parents, you should try to keep the following listening tips in mind:

- Recognise the speaker's feelings and viewpoint.
- Look for points to agree with, not disagree with.
- Give brief summaries of what you have heard, to check that you have understood and to mirror the feeling behind what the speaker has said.
- Allowing silence shows patience and allows thinking time.
- Use open-ended questions (questions that are not answered with "yes" or "no") to encourage the other person to speak.
- Try not to interrupt or change the subject.
- Keep focused and avoid letting your mind wander.
- Don't let any prejudices get in the way – don't let your own opinions about something get the way and cloud your judgement.
- Respect the views' of all parents you talk to and be aware that some people might have different attitudes, beliefs and views, sometimes these could be challenging and different to your own.
- Be aware of cultural differences and respectful of these differences. For example, men in some cultures do not feel comfortable talking to women or making eye contact with women when speaking to them.
- Remain as positive as possible.

You will be given the opportunity to practise this during your inductions and training.

Safety when volunteering

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While acting in your volunteering role, it is always important be aware of safety at all times. Not all parents will appreciate you talking to them and some might be quite defensive and feel that you are invading their space and time. If you feel that this is the case when approaching a parent, just walk away and don't get involved in any further conversation if you think the situation could become unsafe.

Make sure that other people know when and where you are working and, if possible, always have a mobile phone with you. Always meet with parents in public places and check that there are other people around.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is the action we take to promote the welfare of children and young people to protect them from harm and it is everyone's responsibility. Everyone who comes into contact with children and families needs to be aware of this and have involvement with ensuring safeguarding action is taken.

Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is described as:

- protecting children from maltreatment;
- preventing impairment of children's health or development;
- ensuring that children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care; and taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes.

Your Parent Champion scheme will be committed to safeguarding children, young people, their families, and their staff, volunteers and carers. Everything possible should be done to promote the safety and wellbeing of the children and young people that you come into contact with.

For safeguarding and good practice to happen, staff, volunteers and carers need to be carefully selected, feel valued and encouraged, and are appropriately trained, managed and supported in their work.

Boundaries

It is important that you are set and keep to defined boundaries when you are working as a Parent Champion and your scheme will support you to keep to these and should have a policy that you can follow. Some simple guidelines for sticking to boundaries while working as a Parent Champion are:

- Don't give out personal details, including contact details, to parents and don't invite them into your home.
- Although it is OK to be friendly and chatty with parents, always remain professional and see the relationship as a working one rather than a friendship.
- Avoid getting involved in a parent's personal situation and do not offer to try and resolve issues for them. It's OK to support parents when they need help to access services or get information, but try not to get drawn into problem situations or conflict.
- Do not accept gifts from parents.

Boundary guidelines are put in place to protect your safety and wellbeing and that of the parents you come into contact with. It's important that parents don't become too dependent on you and expect you to do everything for them. You are supporting parents to make informed decisions for themselves.

Confidentiality

Children and families' rights to privacy and confidentiality need to be respected all times. However, sharing information between professionals is important to providing effective and efficient services for families, and protecting them from harm.

It is important to keep the conversations that you have with parents confidential within your scheme. This means that you will be able to discuss issues with your supervisor or other people working on your scheme, for the purposes of, for example, support and data collection, but you should not discuss it with your friends, relatives or other people you know. The people you come into contact with are trusting you with confidential information. It is important you respect this by not sharing information outside of the project.

You can speak to your supervisor more about the information that you will need to keep confidential and they will have policies around this to help you make these decisions.



Boundaries set the guidelines of what is and is not acceptable behaviour by staff and volunteers in the workplace.



Childcare information

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This section gives you some initial information about different aspects of childcare and early learning. Further information is provided in the factsheets available on the Family and Childcare Trust website, www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/parentinformation

Types of childcare

There are two types of childcare; Ofsted-registered (for example, nurseries, childminders, pre-school/playgroups and out-of-school clubs) and unregistered childcare (for example, family members, friends, babysitters and stay and play groups).

Families may use one or a combination of types of childcare depending on their needs and preferences. Parents should be assured that any type of childcare can be beneficial for their family as long as it is high quality.

For more information about helping parents understand the benefits of high-quality childcare, see section 7.

Help with childcare costs

Help with childcare costs can usually only be paid for childcare that is registered with Ofsted. There are a number of different sources of financial help available that parents may be able to get to support them with the costs of childcare, including:

- Free early years entitlement for two-, three- and four-year-olds.
- Childcare element of Working Tax Credit.
- Employer-supported childcare (for example, childcare vouchers).
- Student support.

The amount parents get depends on their situation, for example, how many children they have and how old they are, whether the parents work or study, what the household income is, and whether anyone has a disability.

Some help with childcare costs (such as the childcare element of Working Tax Credit and student support) is only available for parents who have access to public funds in the UK. Parents who recently arrived in the UK from outside the EU should check on their passports or residence cards to find out if they have 'recourse to public funds'.

Claiming financial help can be complicated, so it is always best to suggest that parents seek advice before they make a claim. Your local Citizens Advice Bureau can provide confidential advice free of charge.

For more information about help with childcare costs, see the factsheets available on the Family and Childcare Trust website, www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/parentinformation

Finding local childcare

There is a lot of information available to help parents find the childcare and early learning services they need. This includes:

- Family Information Services (FIS). Your local Family Information Service holds the details of registered childcare providers in your area, including childminders, nurseries, out-of-school and holiday clubs, pre-school/playgroups and children's leisure activities and registered nannies. To find your local Family Information Services go to: www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/findyourFIS
- Children's centres. Your local children centre may offer childcare places or may be able to advise you about where childcare and early learning is available locally.
- Searching online. You can search for children's centres and family services online at: www.gov.uk
- Talking to other parents/carers. Other parents' experiences of a childcare provider can be invaluable and speaking to and getting recommendations from other parents can be a good source of information. However, remember that what works for one family may not work for another.
- Community noticeboards. You may find details of local childcare providers on noticeboards at local schools, children's centres, libraries, shops and online. Always remember to check references!

For more information about finding childcare, see the factsheets available on the Family and Childcare Trust website, www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/parentinformation

Finding childcare for children with disabilities

Family Information Services can support families with disabled children or children with special needs to find suitable childcare. Some childcare providers may have childcare services especially tailored for children with disabilities and special educational needs. Other providers may have inclusive childcare, for both children with disabilities and other children.

Every local authority has a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) in the Early Years or Children's Services team. When parents contact the Family Information Service, they should also ask to speak to the SENCO who will be able to give advice on early support for disabled children.

For more information about finding childcare, see the factsheets available on the Family and Childcare Trust website, www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/parentinformation

Finding childcare for older children

Whilst Family Information Services can provide information for children of all ages, for older children, your local authority may also have an 'Extended Schools Coordinator'. The coordinator can give information about the services offered to children outside of school hours. Parents should ask their child's school about this.

Five steps to choosing high-quality childcare

Step 1

Find out as much as you can about local childcare

- Contact your Family Information Service, children's centre or search online.
- If you want to get help with childcare costs, make sure you ask for information about Ofsted-registered childcare providers and the Free Early Years places for two- three- and four-year-old places.
- Check the hours each provider is open, hourly/ daily/weekly cost (including during holidays) and if they have places available.
- From this information, make a shortlist of providers that may work for your family.

Step 2

Visit childcare settings

Arrange visits to the childcare settings on your shortlist. For tips about what to ask and look out for see our factsheet, 'Visiting childcare settings' available on the Family and Childcare Trust website, www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/parentinformation. It might help you to take your child and/or a friend along with you.

Step 3

Decide which you like best

Compare the information you collected from your initial visits and decide which childcare seems to be best for you and your family.

Step 4

Ask for references from other parents who have used that childcare

It is always a good idea to take up references from at least two other parents who are using/have used the childcare. Childcare providers should be happy to give names of other parents to speak to about the service they provide.

Step 5

Book your child's place

Ask your childcare provider about arranging a 'settling in period' so that you and your child can get to know the carer.

The benefits of quality childcare

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Evidence shows that high-quality childcare is good for all of us: parents, carers, employers, communities and, most importantly, children. High-quality childcare improves the life chances of all children, especially children from underprivileged or struggling families who don't have the chance to try many new activities. It boosts children's learning and gives them the chance to mix with others from a wide variety of backgrounds while enabling parents to work and increase the family income.

Learning starts long before a child is able to talk and look at books – or even shake their first baby rattle. A child's experiences from the moment of birth, if not before, affect how the brain develops. This affects the child's later outlook on the world, ability to learn, relationships and behaviour. That's why it's so important to make sure that parents choose high-quality childcare for their children from birth.

“ *It's a social sort of thing, isn't it? They interact, learn manners, learn new ideas. And they're away from the TV!*

Parent

What is quality childcare?

Identifying quality childcare (whether this is a nursery, childminder, family member, etc.) is not always a simple task, and there are many things for parents to keep in mind.

Informal childcare (care provided by family, friends and neighbours) that is high quality can bring positive outcomes for children and families, just like a formal childcare setting. Informal childcare is not regulated or inspected so parents are responsible for communicating well with the childcare provider to make sure they are pleased with the care that is provided.

Formal childcare providers (such as nurseries, childminders, children's centres and extended school services) looking after children under the age of eight usually have to be registered with Ofsted. Ofsted visits early years settings and makes sure that standards are being met and that children are safe. Parents can get reassurance from this registration and inspection process and can see published reports on Ofsted's website, www.ofsted.gov.uk

Parents can also ask childcare settings if they subscribe to any additional quality standards. Settings who subscribe to additional standards have shown an extra commitment to making sure that the quality of care they provide is a high standard.



“ *It was a safe environment, good for socialising, because I was isolated at that time. I met people, my daughter met people, and she was able to learn in a safe and fun environment.*

Parent



Benefits of childcare – for children

High-quality childcare gives children a great start in life, both educationally and socially. Children have the opportunity to play, learn and develop alongside other children. They take part in activities such as art, music, messy play, out-door play, cooking, reading and going on outings.

A good-quality pre-school experience can make children more likely to succeed when they start school. This is especially true for children from disadvantaged families, or families that are struggling in other ways. This is because good-quality childcare provides a lot of experiences that children may not otherwise get.

When high-quality childcare is combined with learning at home with parents, the results are even better for the child's social and intellectual development. Parents are the most important people in a child's life so the more they put in to a child's early development, the more both child and parent will get out of the relationship.

Benefits of childcare – for families

Families use childcare for many reasons – to help their child's development, to help parents/carers work, look for jobs, train or study, and to just take time out. By using local childcare, parents are improving their children's development and potentially also their own.

Research into the effects of Sure Start children's centres showed that parents involved felt less isolated, more valued and more confident in their parenting. They also reported feeling a closer bond with their children who, they felt, were happier and easier to relate to, making them better prepared for learning.



“ With all the difficulties of having a child with special needs, my husband and I went through a really bad patch but thanks to this place [nursery] we are all together as a family again.

Parent



Supporting your child's learning and development at home

Supporting your child at home does not have to wait until they start school, and it does not need to involve expensive toys and activities.

Research has found that as early as three years old, children could say and understand more words, think more deeply and were more confident and sociable when their parents had played with them, talked and read stories to them and encouraged them to think, right from birth.

Children who have a strong home learning environment when they were younger, do well at school. As a parent, you are your child's first teacher. You make them feel loved and secure, respond to them and know them better than anyone else. This is why what you do with your baby or young child at home has such a powerful effect on their learning and development.

What you do at home with your child can be developed and supported through a place at a high-quality childcare setting. It's good to talk about the activities you do at home with your child and share them with the childcare setting.

For further information about what activities you can do with your child at home, see the leaflet 'Not just child's play' at the back of this resource.

Getting involved in your child's childcare and early learning

Parent participation and volunteering can give parents the chance to be more involved in their child's childcare; finding out more about what they do during the day and helping to make sure that they get the best service they can. Parents should know that there are opportunities to be involved in their child's childcare, and that their involvement can help improve the benefits of childcare for everyone.

The most basic way to get involved in childcare is for parents to communicate regularly with their childcare provider. There are several other ways parents can participate:

- **Management of childcare** – Parent participation in the management and service planning of childcare and early learning services ensures that services are developed to meet the needs of the children, young people and families they are for. Many nurseries and children's centres have parent committees or representatives. Voluntary sector nurseries and pre-schools often have parents on the management board or as trustees.
- **Volunteering with children** – This could include reading to children in a childcare setting, helping with music, art or sports activities, or helping out with trips. Many parents find that volunteering in a childcare setting is a great way to meet other parents and feel part of the community. Some even move on to paid work in the setting, or decide on a career in childcare.
- **Helping from home** – Many parents are too busy to give time during the day, but there are other things they can do. For example, parents could fundraise, organise social events or help with DIY or publicity.

Frequently asked questions about childcare

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I'd like to start work again, but I'm worried about the cost of childcare.

Childcare costs can be high, but it is important to check prices at different childcare settings nearby as some will be more expensive than others. Parents should also check whether they are eligible for any help with childcare costs.

I don't know what services are available for my child/family.

Your local Family Information Service or children's centre should be able to give you details of local childcare providers other services. If language or disability is a barrier to accessing information, check with local services about access to interpreters, Typetalk, Braille, audio or large print information.

I do shift work and I've looked for childcare to fit my hours of work, but can't find anyone who offers childcare before 8am or after 6pm.

Talk to your Family Information Service to see if they know of any providers who offer longer hours. Childminders are usually the most flexible and you may be able to negotiate the hours of care that you need. The local authority has a duty to ensure that there is childcare to meet the needs of the working families in the area.

I can't find any childcare that is suitable for my disabled child.

Talk to your Family Information Service about the childcare providers in your area who are experienced in looking after disabled children.

My child has never been to a childcare setting before; I'm worried about whether s/he will be safe and happy.

It's only natural for parents to worry about their child's wellbeing when they are with someone else. As a Parent Champion, you can discuss your/your child's experience of starting to use childcare. The Early Years Foundation Stage sets standards for all childcare settings for under 5s and focuses on each child as an individual, so that providers work with each child at their own level.

I am worried that religious/cultural needs will not be respected by a childcare setting.

As a Parent Champion, you can discuss your/your child's experience of starting to use childcare. Parents should make sure that they ask questions about how the childcare setting will accommodate religious/cultural needs when they go to visit settings. The Early Years Foundation Stage promotes inclusive practice and valuing diversity at childcare settings.

I don't want my child to go to a nursery; I want to look after him/her at home.

Using 'formal' childcare is not compulsory. Each parent/family makes their own choice about how their child is looked after. There are lots of resources to help parents to support their child's early learning and children's centre, libraries, community and leisure centres often offer stay and play/activity sessions where you could meet other families.

Useful organisations

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Childcare and early learning/ parenting/family organisations

Family and Childcare Trust
www.familyandchildcaretrust.org

Family Lives
www.familylives.org.uk
0808 800 2222

Gingerbread
www.gingerbread.org.uk
0808 802 0925

Disabled Parents Network
www.disabledparentsnetwork.org.uk
0300 3300639

Contact a Family
www.cafamily.org.uk
0808 808 3555

Maternity Action
www.maternityaction.org.uk
0845 600 8533

Working Families
www.workingfamilies.org.uk
0300 0120312

Benefits and tax credits

HMRC
www.hmrc.gov.uk/taxcredits
Tax Credit Helpline: 0345 300 3900

Turn2us
www.turn2us.org.uk

Gov.uk Benefits adviser
www.gov.uk/benefits-adviser

Students

Student Finance
www.gov.uk/student-finance
0845 300 5090

National Careers Service
<https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk>
0800 100 900

Educational Grants Search
www.family-action.org.uk



The Family and Childcare Trust is the charity created from a merger of the Family and Parenting Institute and the Daycare Trust.

Together we bring over 40 years of experience in campaigning and research into family life and childcare.

The Family and Childcare Trust works to make the UK a better place for families. Our vision is of a society where government, business and communities do all they can to support every family to thrive. Through our research, campaigning and practical support we are creating a more family friendly UK.

Want to find out more?

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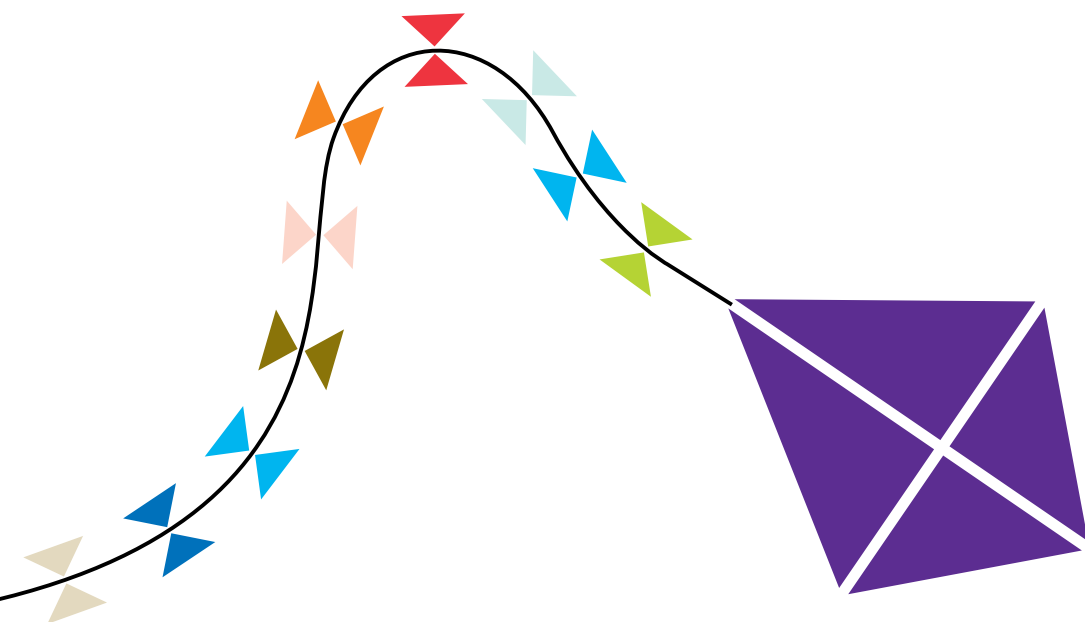
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