



Briefing Note: Who uses government-funded early education in England, and what explains the variation in take-up?

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Summary

- The government currently funds access to 15 hours a week of early education for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds in England. However, a substantial minority of children – especially from disadvantaged backgrounds – do not access all of their entitlement.
- Families face a range of barriers to accessing the early education entitlements, particularly for disadvantaged 2-year-olds, including a complicated application process, a lack of available places, and a lack of awareness of their eligibility for support.
- While there is some emerging evidence of potentially promising approaches to support take-up of the early education entitlements, there is a clear need for more robust evidence of what works in this area.

Recommendations

- Rigorous evaluations are needed to assess the effectiveness of promising approaches to supporting take-up of the early education entitlements. This will enable greater evidence-informed action to be taken to support take-up, particularly amongst under-represented groups.
- Enhanced monitoring efforts are needed to understand how the availability and take-up of existing early education entitlements are affected by the extension of entitlements to younger children in working families from April 2024. This will be important before, during and after the roll-out has occurred, particularly for children from disadvantaged families. Action should be taken to address any emerging negative effects.

The Issue

In England, the government currently funds 15 hours a week of early education for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds for 38 weeks of the year. 2-year-olds are entitled to the early education offer if they come from a low-income family, for example if their parents are on Universal Credit with a household income of less than £15,400 per year (in 2023), or if they are looked after by a local authority, have an education, health, and care plan, or receive Disability Living Allowance. 3-4-year-olds in working families are also currently entitled to an additional 15 hours of government-funded ECEC per week, but we do not focus on these additional entitlements here.

In an earlier briefing note, we summarised the evidence on the benefits of high-quality early education, particularly for disadvantaged children (Outhwaite & Crawford, 2023). The early education entitlements were originally introduced with the aim of supporting children's development and reducing inequalities in access to and participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Some success has been achieved in this regard with around a 30-percentage point increase in the use of early education amongst 3-4-year-olds since their introduction (La Valle et al., 1999; DfE, 2023).

However, a substantial minority of children, especially disadvantaged children, miss out on some or all of their 15-hour entitlement (Archer & Oppenheim, 2021). For example, in 2023, just 74% of eligible 2-year-olds took up their place (DfE, 2023), and amongst 2- and 3-year-olds taking up a place, less than 90% were registered to attend for the full 15 hours to which they were entitled each week (DfE, 2023). The percentage of eligible families taking up their entitlement also varies hugely across areas, from less than half to more than 90% (DfE, 2023).

There are also widespread concerns in the early years sector that the forthcoming roll-out of up to 30 hours of government-funded ECEC per week for children aged 9 months to 2 years in working families could further exacerbate inequalities in access to early education. This is because children from non-working, likely lower income, families will not be eligible for these additional hours of funded care, and that the availability and take-up of the existing offer could potentially be harmed by the introduction of these new entitlements.

This raises the question of why not all children take up their 15-hour entitlements, why this varies across areas, and what can be done to maintain or increase take-up amongst disadvantaged families over the coming years, to reduce inequalities in ECEC participation and prevent inequalities in child development from widening further?

This briefing note summarises the current evidence on who is less likely to take-up the 15-hour early education entitlements in England and the associated barriers to take-up for these groups of families. Emerging evidence on potentially promising activities to increase take-up is also discussed.

Who is less likely to take up their Early Education Entitlements?

Disadvantaged children, including those from persistently poor White British households, children from ethnic minority backgrounds and those with English as an additional language, as well as children with special educational needs and disabilities, are significantly less likely to take up their early education entitlements (Campbell et al., 2018; Harding & Hardy, 2016).

There are also geographical differences. Take-up rates are lower in urban areas, including London, compared to rural areas and other

regions (Albakri et al., 2018; Ipsos MORI, 2012), which may be due to higher levels of disadvantage and population mobility (London Councils, 2021).

Furthermore, when families do access their early education entitlement offer, attendance is often inconsistent. For example, analysis of data from three local authorities (Leeds, Stockport, and York) shows that disadvantaged 2-year-olds taking up their funded early entitlement place are twice as likely as other 2-year-olds accessing paid-for care to attend their setting for less than 70% of registered hours (Nesta, 2023).

What are the barriers to take-up of Early Education Entitlements and who is more affected by them?

The evidence points to three broad categories of barriers to take-up of the early education entitlements:

- system-level barriers, such as the challenges posed by the design of the offer;
- service-level barriers, relating to the availability of ECEC provision;
- family-level barriers, including awareness and perceptions of the early education entitlements.

System-level barriers

System-level barriers are those relating to the design of the system, which could potentially be alleviated if the system were designed differently. Such factors were particularly, but not exclusively, apparent in relation to the 2-year-old offer, for which not all families are eligible, and for which families need to apply to access.

Overall, there is a higher awareness among families of the universal early education entitlement for 3-4-year-olds than of the entitlement

for disadvantaged 2-year-olds (Harding & Hardy 2016). Nevertheless, a third of parents of 3-4-year-olds who are eligible for the universal offer but not accessing it report a lack of awareness of their entitlement (Ipsos MORI, 2012), and a survey of 1,000 participants found that nearly half of parents with children aged 0-3 years reported confusion or no awareness of their entitlement to support with the costs of childcare more generally, which include, but are not restricted to, the early education entitlements (Gulc & Silversides, 2016).

Focusing on the 2-year-old offer more specifically, there is reported confusion among parents over the eligibility criteria (Albakri et al., 2018; Chadwick et al., 2017). Moreover, evidence suggests that the targeting of the 2-year-old offer to disadvantaged families creates a stigma, which affects families' willingness to take up their early education entitlements (Kazimirski et al., 2008; Pascal et al., 2022). The application for the 2-year-old entitlement is also reported to be particularly challenging for parents with low digital literacy and English as an additional language (Kazimirski et al., 2008; Albakri et al., 2018; Speight et al., 2010).

Service-level barriers

Service-level barriers relate to the ease with which families are able to take up their entitlement, including the availability of suitable places. The proportion of funded places for 3-4-year-olds in the maintained and voluntary sectors is decreasing, while the proportion in private ECEC settings is increasing (Stewart & Reader, 2020). This may have consequences for the quality of provision and a child's experience, as private settings are less likely to be led by a graduate (Bonetti & Blanden, 2020). This may in turn influence families' views on whether it is likely to be beneficial for their child to take up a funded place.

Moreover, evidence shows that families – low-income families in particular – experience more difficulties securing funded places for their child in areas where there are pockets of deprivation next to more affluent areas because providers are reported to be typically more responsive to the needs of more affluent parents who pay for their provision (Albakri et al., 2018; Teager & McBride, 2018). Local areas with a higher share of private provision have also been found to have greater inequalities in take-up (i.e., larger gaps between the take-up rates of those from more and less disadvantaged families and/or lower take-up rates amongst lower income families), compared to areas with more voluntary or maintained provision (Stewart & Reader, 2020). By contrast, having even a small share of places delivered by Sure Start children’s centres is associated with both higher take-up and lower inequality in take-up (Campbell et al., 2018).

Family-level barriers

Some families may find it more challenging to navigate the system- and/or service-level barriers outlined above or may face other barriers to taking up the early education entitlements. While, as outlined above, awareness and understanding of the early education offer is a barrier for many families, it has been found to be disproportionately lower amongst families in low-income areas and temporary accommodation, as well as ethnic minority, recent migrant, and transitional families (i.e., where parents may work in a different country and the child’s primary caregiver is an extended family member) (Albakri et al., 2018; Dickens et al., 2012; Gibb et al., 2011; Harding & Hardy, 2016; Pascal et al., 2022; Speight et al., 2010).

Perceptions of the quality and availability of early education places also influence take-up

rates. Disadvantaged families are more likely to believe that there are not enough childcare places in their local area and that the quality of provision is poor than advantaged/typical/other families (Dickens et al., 2012; Speight et al., 2010). This could reduce the likelihood of children from these families accessing the early education entitlements. For example, take-up is lower where parents perceive there to be a lack of support for children’s cultural and home language development (Albakri et al., 2018; London Councils, 2021).

For working families, meanwhile, the challenges of accessing the early education entitlements are sometimes reported to outweigh the potential benefits, with perceived issues including the inconvenience of long placement waiting times and the inflexibility of care, alongside the high cost of additional hours (Harding & Hardy, 2016; Murray & Murray, 2021).

Promising practice for increasing take-up of the Early Education Entitlements

The evidence presented so far has highlighted some significant barriers to the take-up of the 15-hour early education entitlements amongst children in England, which are likely to be more challenging for disadvantaged children and families, or for those living in unequal areas or with a high proportion of private ECEC provision.

Local authorities in England have a key role in implementing the early education entitlement policy, with responsibility for ensuring sufficiency of places and informing parents about their entitlements, with a view to enabling all eligible children to take up a place. However, there is relatively limited robust quantitative evidence available on what works to increase take-up to inform their work, with most evidence focused on take-up of the 2-year-old entitlement.

Qualitative insights from a broad range of local authorities across England suggest that outreach to inform parents of the 2-year-old early education entitlements is characterised by three areas of promising practice (Kazimirski et al., 2008):

- Partnership and information sharing between service providers and parents, including regular contact between ECEC settings and referral partners (e.g., health teams);
- Specific training for settings and additional resources to support working with hard-to-reach families, including targeted messaging in community languages;
- One-to-one support with families, including extensive outreach with hard-to-reach families, such as home visits and follow up support.

The impact of targeted messaging has been evaluated in a randomised control trial (RCT) with 4,704 families across six local authorities in England. The study compared take-up rates of the early education entitlement for 2-year-olds amongst families who i) received a 'business as usual' letter informing them of their child's eligibility with the take-up rates of ii) families who received a letter using behavioural insights designed to address barriers to applying (e.g., a 'social norms' message telling them about what other parents in the area were doing, and a next steps checklist). The study did not find evidence that the updated letter led to a significant increase in take-up rates; however, this is likely due, at least in part, to the business-as-usual letter also including elements of best practices of working and communicating with families (Nesta, 2023).

Some local authorities have implemented other initiatives, such as the 'Golden Ticket' ap-

proach. Here, local authorities use information about likely eligibility for the 2-year-old entitlement shared by the Department for Work and Pensions to identify eligible families and approach them directly. Families are given a 'Golden Ticket' indicating their eligibility, which they take directly to their chosen ECEC setting, rather than having to apply to confirm their entitlement. Using data available within the local authority, Dorset County Council reported a 6-percentage point increase in take-up following the introduction of this scheme (Makinson & O'Reilly, 2023). However, while this is important indicative evidence on a promising approach to boost take-up, further robust evidence is needed.

The 'Parent Champions' peer-based programme is another outreach approach used by local authorities to boost take-up. It involves peer-to-peer outreach with parents who are likely to be eligible for the early education entitlements, making them aware of the entitlements and their potential benefits. An initial evaluation of the 'Parent Champions' initiative suggested that 43% of these targeted engagements lead to regular ECEC use (Marden et al., 2014), although it is not known how much of this use of ECEC would have occurred anyway.

Summary and Implications

The government currently funds part-time access to early education for all 3-4-year-olds and disadvantaged 2-year-olds in England. The objective of these entitlements at the time of introduction was to reduce inequalities in access to and participation in early education and hence child development.

While there is evidence that the policy has been successful in increasing the use of early education, there remain important barriers to take-up. These barriers are more evident for

2-year-olds than for 3-4-year-olds, and relate to the design of the policy, the accessibility of the offer, families' awareness of the offer and their eligibility, as well as parents' perceptions of the availability, and cost and benefits of early education. These barriers are higher for families with poorer English skills, and for those living in certain areas, such as where the early years market is more likely to be driven by the needs of working families.

While there is some emerging evidence of potentially promising approaches to increase take-up, there is a clear need for more rigorous evidence of what works in this area. It will also be important to monitor the potential impact on the availability and take-up of these existing entitlements, particularly amongst disadvantaged families, before, during and after the new entitlements for working families have been rolled out.

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