

FAMILY EDUCATION TRUST

RESPONSE TO THE CHILDCARE BILL CONSULTATION: Implementing the Ten Year Strategy for Childcare

For the past thirty years, Family Education Trust has been conducting research into the causes and consequences of family breakdown. By means of its publications, videos and conferences, and through its media profile, the Trust seeks to stimulate informed public debate on matters affecting the family and the welfare of children and young people, based on reputable research findings.

Consultation Question 1

Does the primary aim of ensuring the availability of childcare to enable parents to work, along with a particular focus on lower-income families and those with disabled children, form an appropriate basis for defining scope and judging sufficiency?

The main focus of this response relates to the government's primary aim of ensuring availability of childcare to enable parents to work. We are concerned that the vision to 'enshrine in law parents' legitimate expectation of accessible high quality childcare and early years provision as part of the modern 21st century welfare state' fails to recognise that the primary responsibility for children's care rests with the family, and not with the state. To describe parents as 'informed consumers' undermines their role as the principal carers and protectors of their children.

In her recent survey of 1,200 children in north London and Oxford, Penelope Leach found that parental care in the early years has the best outcomes for children.¹ However, the government's current proposals attach more value to paid care than to parental care. In the judgment of Shirley Dex:

This is unfortunate, and far from ideal since it reinforces the low value placed on unpaid work and care. Even childminders who are paid to care expressed that this low valuation affected them and their morale.

There is also an overlapping implication; that paid childcare is better than parental care. However, unpaid childcare is preferred by many parents. It helps to create a sense of community and is more flexible and cheaper, for parents and the public purse. Policy should try to avoid destructive effects on parents' sense of community.²

In our view, the proposals in the Childcare Bill Consultation:

- **do not take sufficient account of parents' wishes;**
- **would place an unwarranted burden upon the public purse;**
- **do not have regard to the realities of child development**

¹ As reported by Bale, Joanna, 'Mother's care is best for first three years', *The Times* (03 Oct. 2005).; Giannangeli, Marco, 'Mother knows best, claims report on childcare', *Daily Telegraph* (03 Oct. 2005).; Ward, Lucy, 'Free nursery scheme could be bad for young children, says study', *The Guardian* (04 Oct. 2005).

² Dex, S. (2003) *Families and work in the twenty-first century*, Bristol: The Policy Press/Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Family and Work series*.

The Wishes of Parents

The government's proposals are based on the assumption that most mothers wish to work outside the home and are only prevented from doing so because of a lack of affordable, high quality childcare.

1. Work

However, not all mothers wish to work full-time or even to work at all. The Repeat Study of Parents' Demand for Childcare, cited in the ten year strategy document, found that 63 per cent of mothers currently in employment wanted to work fewer hours, and 44 per cent of working mothers would prefer to give up work and stay at home with their children if they could afford to do so.³ A number of other surveys and studies have similarly indicated that a large percentage of mothers currently working would prefer to spend more time at home with their children, rather than use childcare.

It is simply not possible to sweep the wishes of mothers into one single category, as these wishes are not homogeneous. Catherine Hakim, in examining women's preferences, argues that the majority of women are either focused exclusively on the home or are focused on ways to adapt their careers to suit their family life, leaving only 20 per cent who are solely focused on their careers.⁴ She warns that:

[r]esearch analyses that treat women as a single homogeneous group are now unlikely to produce meaningful or worthwhile results, given the enormous and increasing heterogeneity of the female population and the female workforce.⁵

Elsewhere, Hakim notes that:

[i]n practice, the focus of social and family policy has swung *so* far toward the working mother that there is now a systematic policy bias against nonworking mothers in most modern societies—most obviously in relation to single mothers.⁶

Responses to news of Leach's recent study indicate this heterogeneity. Some mothers work for financial reasons:

It is blindingly obvious that a mother is, ideally, the best person to look after her child: we don't need a seven-year survey to tell us that. . . The vast majority of mothers go to work because they have to.⁷

Some do not work because they wish to keep family life less stressful:

The decision not to return to work after my third child was not an issue of dogmatic principle, but a gradual dawning that family life would be much happier if I stayed at home. . . . They don't want to live with a drill sergeant — and nor do I.⁸

³ *Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare*, HM Treasury, December 2004, para.2.53

⁴ Hakim, Catherine, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory*. (Oxford, 2000).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Hakim, Catherine, 'A New Approach to Explaining Fertility Patterns: Preference Theory', *Population and Development Review*, 29/3 (2003), 349-374.

⁷ Wark, Penny, 'Mother of all debates', *The Times* (04 Oct. 2005).

Other mothers opt for the flexibility of part-time work based at home:

I gave up my job as a solicitor ten years ago, when my first child turned 2. I don't regret it. . . . I'm much happier sitting here in my jeans at my PC, because writing is a flexible job.⁹

Still more mothers work because they enjoy it, not because of financial constraints:

And that, I suppose, (apart from the money, of course) is the reason we do it. I am lucky enough to have a job I enjoy. Without it I'd feel lost; but I might also feel depressed and resentful.¹⁰

Government policy cannot hope to address such varied situations in a completely evenhanded manner.

Shirley Dex, in her recent study on families and work, found that the government's proposals worked against the preferences of the majority of women who would prefer to work less rather than more while their children are young'.¹¹ Dex's study reveals that:

- Over three-quarters of mothers who worked over 40 hours per week would prefer to work shorter hours.
- Eighty per cent of mothers whose partner worked 49–59 hours per week wanted them to work shorter hours, and 85 per cent wanted shorter hours for their partner where the partner worked over 60 hours per week.
- When a baby was 12 months old, mothers who were both full and part-time employees displayed higher levels of distress than those who were not employed.

Dex comments:

It is indicators like these that suggest, although families are appearing to cope with the pressures of having two employees, that the strain on mothers of this life-style is high.¹²

Dex also cites other studies in which the majority of employed mothers expressed preferences for shorter working hours, or even no work at all, because they had an overwhelming interest in more family time.¹³

An earlier study by Leach, in which she interviewed a large number of childcare professionals about their own choices in childcare, discovered that responses mainly indicated a preference for maternal care in the early years. She finds that:

[t]he majority of respondents endorsed [maternal care] as the best for infants up to 3 months of age (94 per cent); 6 months (89 per cent); 9 months (87 per cent); and 12

⁸ Gorman, Fiona, 'There was a gradual dawning that family life would be happier if I stayed at home', *The Times* (04 Oct. 2005).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Dex, *Families and Work*, *op .cit.* p.73.

¹² *Ibid.* p.49.

¹³ *Ibid.*

months (77 per cent). Even for infants up to the age of 2 years, care principally by mother was endorsed by over 50 per cent of respondents.¹⁴

In focussing exclusively on the preferences of work-centred mothers, the government's policy is failing to take account of the preferences and needs of the majority of mothers.

2. Childcare

We note that the government's proposals place a strong emphasis on childcare in children's centers and recall that the 'Ten Year Strategy included a commitment to have integrated early years services available through children's centres for all under fives and their families (target of 3500 centres) by 2010'.¹⁵ We also note that the proposals seek 'a new power giving statutory status to guidance on the children's centre delivery model'.¹⁶

However, these proposals focus on a form of childcare that is not preferred by parents. The form of non-maternal childcare that is preferred is familial care. An evaluation of childcare, early education and work by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that:

- Working mothers tend to use informal childcare rather than formal childcare. A minority of working mothers do not use any form of childcare.
- The most common type of childcare used by families with working mothers is close relatives, followed by centre-based care and other relatives and friends.¹⁷

While there is a perception among some that daycare centers and nurseries, whether funded and administered by governments or charities, communities or workplaces, or run as private businesses for profit, offer a superior standard of care, the professionals interviewed by Penelope Leach showed a distinct preference for individual care:

The endorsements of these respondents run in the opposite direction. As long as any type of (high-quality) individual care is available, very few respondents considered that babies or toddlers were likely to benefit from group attendance.¹⁸

The proposals state a commitment to ensuring high quality childcare, but we believe that the government's definition of high quality childcare may differ from that of parents. The government relies on Quality Assurance schemes to determine high quality childcare, but parents measure quality differently, as Leach notes in her study:

Even with 'high quality' as a given, respondents in this study did not hold day care in a caregiver's home in high regard, mostly preferring any form of family care. However, respondents certainly did not regard these kinds of care as second best to group care. On the contrary, if an infant or toddler had to be in non-familial day care at all, most respondents considered high-quality individual care preferable to high-quality group care through almost the whole of the third year.¹⁹

¹⁴ Leach, Penelope, 'Infant Care from Infants' Viewpoint: The Views of Some Professionals', *Early Development and Parenting*, 6/2(1997), pp.47-58.

¹⁵ Department for Education and Skills, *Childcare Bill Consultation*, p.10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp.11-12.

¹⁷ Brewer, Mike, Crawford, Claire and Dearden, Lorraine (2003). *Helping families: childcare, early education and the work-life balance*, London: Institute for Fiscal Studies, *Election Briefing Notes BN61*.

¹⁸ Leach, 'Infant Care', *op. cit.*, p.56.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.57.

High quality childcare, as defined by parents, appears to include a strong relational attachment to the child.

Jennifer Glass and Lisa Riley's study of the childcare practices of employed mothers in the U.S. indicates that while parents may be using formal childcare, this use does not reflect their preferences.

We found that mothers overwhelmingly reported a preference for father care or care by relatives and similarly preferred that care be provided in the infant's own home. Achievement of preferences was quite difficult for most households, however.²⁰

First, more than 83 per cent of employed mothers of newborns prefer some type of familial childcare. Of those who wanted some type of familial care, only 53.1 per cent were using any type of familial care and usually not the type originally desired. Third, and somewhat surprisingly, the form of care with the highest 'success rate' (ability to translate preference into reality) was father care, with a success rate of 32 per cent.²¹

Although the views of U.S. employed mothers may not coincide exactly with those of U.K. mothers, we suggest that these findings, when placed alongside those of Leach and the Institute of Fiscal Studies, express preferences about childcare which the government does not appear to have taken on board.

The Cost to the Public Purse

We are concerned that the proposal to enshrine the provision of accessible high quality childcare and early years provision in law involves misplaced priorities and would place an unwarranted burden upon the public purse.

1. The Cost to the Taxpayer

We note that it is proposed to make £1.65 billion available to local authorities for integrated early years services. However, these funds cannot hope to secure for children an equivalent standard of care to that provided by their parents at home. Along with a number of researchers who have considered this issue, we are not persuaded that the government's proposals are realistic.

For example, research undertaken by Patricia Morgan concludes that affordable, high-quality care is a mirage:

The singular difficulties and cost of providing good quality care, with its highly involved and trained staff, small group size, caregiver stability, and low infant to caregiver ratios, should surely demonstrate how 'affordable, universally available, good-quality, easily accessible, childcare' . . . is a chimaera, unrealisable in the real world. Affordable care is *low-quality* care. Universally available high-quality care is achievable nowhere on earth.²²

²⁰ Glass, Jennifer and Riley, Lisa, 'You Can't Always Get What You Want: Infant Care Preferences and Use Among Employed Mothers', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64/1(2002), pp.2-15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.14.

²² Morgan, Patricia. *Who Needs Parents? The Effects of Childcare and Early Education on Children in Britain and the USA*. (London, 1996), p.109.

Dex's study similarly argues that, when considering the childcare preferences of parents, the government's aims of implementing nationwide, state-monitored childcare are unrealistic. She comments that:

[t]he strong preference for informal care suggests that setting the target at being able to provide places for all children (in the age group) in all areas is likely to be far too high, leading to excess supply – even if it were possible to generate all the places.²³

Furthermore, it is difficult to predict prior to its implementation how much a new policy will end up costing in practice. The survey of childcare, early education and work by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) notes that the cost of the tax credit programme rose considerably over a relatively short period of time:

When working tax credits and child tax credits were introduced in April 2003, the childcare tax credit was replaced by the childcare element of the working tax credit. The cost of this programme has increased dramatically since 1997: it cost £45.6 million in 1997 and around £735 million in 2003–04, and it is likely to cost around £880 million in 2004–05.²⁴

The IFS has also expressed some doubts as to the accuracy of the proposed budget for the Ten Year Strategy for Childcare:

In December 2004, the government launched Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children: A Ten Year Strategy for Childcare alongside its Pre-Budget Report. . . . The government claims that its public spending forecasts are consistent with implementing all aspects of the strategy. But it is hard to verify this statement, both because the government has not said how much some elements of the strategy would cost and because it has not yet set out detailed spending plans beyond 2008–09.²⁵

2. The Social Costs

In addition to the financial costs, concerns have also been expressed about the 'hidden costs' of childcare. As we shall show in the final section of this response, research demonstrates that childcare can have a damaging effect on a child's physical health, socio-emotional development and educational achievement. The expansion of childcare could therefore contribute to an increase in social problems, which would in their turn impose further financial burdens on the taxpayer.

Peter Cook states that:

the long-term costs of incurring the emotional risks of early childcare are not easy to estimate, but the costs of dysfunction and breakdown in family relationships, and the related social pathologies are very great.²⁶

We share the government's concern for the plight of lower-income families. However, in seeking to assist lower-income families by expanding childcare provision, the government's proposals represent misplaced priorities. The government suggests, by proposing special assessment of lower-income areas to reduce

²³ Dex, *Families and Work*, *op .cit.* p.75.

²⁴ Brewer, Crawford and Dearden, *Helping Families*, *op .cit.* p.13.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p.15.

²⁶ Cook, Peter, *Early Child Care: Infants and Nations at Risk*. (Melbourne, 1997), p.158.

‘inequalities in children’s communication, social and emotional development’,²⁷ that these areas represent higher social risks to children.

However, a non-parental care environment will not assist children to counter these risks. Cook refers to one study which found that ‘non-maternal care increases the risk for insecure attachment by 66 per cent’.²⁸ Another study found that:

[S]ecure attachment in childhood is a determining factor in the development of healthy, happy, and productive adolescents and adults [I]nsecure bonding to parents prior to the age of 10 years is a direct cause of emotional and behavioural problems in adolescence, including youth crime.²⁹

With reference to a major U.S. study, Cook concludes that

[t]he children who are already most disadvantaged in society are the ones most at risk to be further disadvantaged by early day care. Moreover, day care carries most risk of insecurity for boys and girls having a mother who is in the lowest income-to-needs ratio.³⁰

Other researchers who explore the negative effects of childcare on children’s development warn that these effects could be greater when combined with further social problems. In their study of the effects of childcare on children’s cognitive development, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Wen-Jui Han and Jane Waldfogel found that the negative effects were fairly small, but could be distressing when accumulated:

Nonetheless, if for some children these effects occur in addition to those associated with other risk factors, such as poverty or a non-employed father, the cumulative effects may be of concern.³¹

Another study found that non-maternal childcare, as a result of early maternal employment, was not beneficial to lower-income families. Lisa Youngblade states that:

[t]here was also some evidence that aggressive behaviour was more pronounced in working-class families in which the mother had been employed during the child’s first year.³²

We would suggest that the government should explore other ways of assisting lower-income families which would not represent such risks.

²⁷ *Childcare Consultation Bill*, p.12.

²⁸ Russell, Clare and Violato, Claudio, *Effects of nonmaternal care on child development: a meta-analysis of published research*, 1994. Presented at the 55th Annual Convention of the Canadian Psychological Association. Cited in Cook, *Early Child Care*, *op. cit.* p.91.

²⁹ Genius, Mark. *Presentation to the Standing Committee on Finance*, The National Foundation for Family Research and Education. 1995. Cited in Cook, *Early Child Care*, *op. cit.* p.93.

³⁰ NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, *Infant child care and attachment security: The NICHD Study of Early Child Care*, 1996. Presented at the meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development, Quebec City, Canada. Cited in Cook, *Early Child Care*, *op. cit.* p.99.

³¹ Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne, Han, Wen-Jui and Waldfogel, Jane, ‘The Effects of Early Maternal Employment on Later Cognitive and Behavioral Outcomes’, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63/1 (2001), 336–354.

³² Youngblade, Lisa, ‘Peer and teacher ratings of third- and fourth-grade children’s social behavior as a function of early maternal employment’, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 44/4 (2003), 477–488.

3. The Benefits of Full-Time Parenthood

A homecaring parent in a family is of considerable benefit to the state. Peter Cook lists the advantages to the state of encouraging homecaring parents (whether mothers or fathers):

- Homecaring parents are not occupying a recognised paid job in the work force, which is therefore available to someone else. This saves the government (that is, the community) the costs of the unemployment of this other person, both financially and in the consequences of long term unemployment.
- Homecaring parents are not collecting any unemployment or social security benefit, unless they are provided with this as sole parents.
- They are not costing society to establish and run childcare centres or provide fee-relief subsidies, or childcare income-tax deductions.
- They do not take sick leave to look after their children.³³

We would suggest that the government's resources might be better spent in making it a more realistic option for families to enable one parent at home to care for their children during the early years.

The Realities of Child Development

The Consultation Paper claims that research supports non-parental childcare as being beneficial for children's development and important in helping them to achieve high educational outcomes. In fact, this is not the case: what the data shows is that the effects of non-parental childcare on individual development are mixed, at best.

Daycare and other forms of non-parental care compares adversely with parental care on a range of measures. Parental care provides wide-ranging benefits (strong emotional support and security, care based on intimate knowledge of the child and of the individual family structure, and personal investment in the child's development) to children that cannot be replicated in other contexts. By contrast, daycare places children at increased risk of infection, hinders their emotional development and stalls their social development.

1. Infections

Several researchers note that group daycare can increase the risk of children catching a number of infections. Cook cites several such infections including increased risk of upper respiratory and middle ear infections, pneumonia, gastroenteritis and Haemophilus influenzae type b.³⁴

A specialised overview found a positive association between daycare and an inflammation of the middle ear which was consistent across various study populations and designs.³⁵

³³ Cook, *op. cit.*, p.43.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.102.

³⁵ Rovers, M.M. et al., 'Day-care and otitis media in young children:a critical overview', *European Journal of Pediatrics*, 158/1(1999), 1-6.

A study focussing on diarrhoeal illnesses and respiratory infections found persuasive evidence of higher risk of acquiring common infectious diseases in day care settings compared with children cared for at home.³⁶

2. Emotional Development

Researchers also note that day care can hinder emotional development, increasing a feeling of insecurity in children.

Stable attachments, particularly attachments to the mother, are very important to children. John Bowlby notes that:

[i]ntimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person's life revolves, not only when he is an infant or a toddler or a schoolchild but throughout his adolescence and his years of maturity as well, and on into old age.³⁷

Leach agrees:

Every baby needs at least one special person to attach herself to. It is through that first love relationship that she will learn about herself, and other people and the world.³⁸

Referring to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (NICHD SECC-YD) in the U.S., Jay Belsky argues that day care interferes with these attachments:

Perhaps most notably, the NICHD-SECC found at 15 and at 36 months of age that more than just 10 hours of non-maternal care initiated in the first year of life increased the risk of insecure infant-mother attachment relationships under certain conditions (i.e., when mothers were insensitive in their mothering), and indicated further that low quality of care and more than one caregiving arrangement in the first year of life also play a role in the development of insecure attachments.³⁹

We are concerned that the government, by encouraging the expansion of non-parental childcare, is pursuing a policy that risks hindering the emotional development of children.

3. Social Development

Research also indicates that daycare affects children's social development and ability to function socially. Cook cites a Swedish test in which:

after seven weeks of day-care attendance, day care infants showed a significant drop in speech development [and] after about 5 months of centre attendance the daycare infants showed significantly lower scores on the Personal-Social Scale as well as on the Hearing and Speech Scale.⁴⁰

³⁶ Lu, N et al, 'Child day care risks of common infectious diseases revisited', *Child: Care, Health & Development*, 30(4), (2004) 361–368.

³⁷ Bowlby, John, *Attachment and Loss. Vol.3: Loss, sadness and depression*, (Harmondsworth, 1981). In Cook, 38.

³⁸ Leach, Penelope, *Children first: what society must do-and is not doing-for children today*, (London, 1994). Cited in Cook, *Early Child Care, op. cit.* p.48.

³⁹ Belsky, Jay, 'Emmanuel Miller Lecture: Developmental Risks (Still) Associated with Early Child Care', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 42/7(2001), 845-859.

⁴⁰ Cited in Cook, *Early Child Care, op. cit.* p.105.

The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network conducted a study measuring how well children functioned socially in the first school year, comparing those who had experienced day care with those who had experienced family care. Results showed that the daycare children had difficulty functioning socially:

[G]reater hours in care predicted more teacher-perceived problem behaviour, lower levels of social skills, and more relational conflict as reported by teachers. In addition, time in childcare centres independently predicted teacher reports of externalizing behaviour. It is important that these results were obtained after controlling not only for all family factors . . . but for childcare quality as well.⁴¹

We question the wisdom of pursuing policies that will stall children's social development, especially in view of the fact that these policies place children's physical health and emotional development at risk as well.

4. Educational Outcomes

While the childcare strategy aims to deliver higher educational outcomes, several studies indicate that non-maternal care as a result of early maternal employment has an adverse effect on a child's intellectual development, and can result in lower intellectual outcomes in primary and higher education.

Brooks-Gunn et al. found that exposure to non-maternal childcare at an early age is associated with later problems in language vocabulary, reading recognition and mathematic achievement.⁴²

Belsky also notes that children who are in extensive non-maternal care can experience problems in school:

Even though childcare experience in the first year of life did not predict behavioural adjustment when child-care experience in the second through fifth year was controlled, extensive care in the first year, coupled with extensive care thereafter, was associated with increased problematic functioning in the first year of school (i.e., kindergarten). Once again, such findings highlight the combination of lots of care across multiple years beginning in the first year of life as posing developmental risk, rather than care in the first year per se.⁴³

A study of siblings who received differing types of care undertaken by the Institute for Social and Economic Research found that non-maternal childcare in the first five years can damage children's educational outcomes:

[T]he mother tended to work full-time less when the sibling with the higher education was aged 0-5 than she did when the sibling with lower education was aged 0-5. This is what we would expect if more full-time employment by the mother reduced the amount of her time allocated to her children's human capital investment when they were of pre-school age.⁴⁴

⁴¹ NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 'Social Functioning in First Grade', *Child Development*, 74/6 (2003), 1639-1662.

⁴² Brooks-Gunn et al., 'The Effects of Early Maternal Employment', *op. cit.*

⁴³ Belsky, 'Developmental Risks', *op. cit.* p.852

⁴⁴ Ermich, John and Francesconi, Marco, *The Effect of Parents' Employment on Children's Educational Attainment*, ISER Working Papers 2002-21. 2002
<http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/pubs/workpaps/pdf/2002-21.pdf>

The authors record that ‘the effect is statistically significant, and its point estimate ranges between a 7 and 9 percentage point lower probability for each additional year of full-time employment’.⁴⁵

Conclusion

We wish to express our reservations concerning the proposals contained in the Childcare Bill Consultation document. We are concerned that they do not take account of the increasing heterogeneity of the female population and workforce, fail to reflect the wishes and needs of parents, and place an unwarranted burden upon the public purse.

In view of the adverse outcomes associated with non-parental childcare in the early years, we are also not convinced that the expansion of daycare facilities will serve the best interests of children and fear that in the longer term it would contribute to a range of health and social problems.

Rather than persist with a policy that runs contrary to the maternal instincts of most women, and denies the fundamental needs of young children, we would urge the government to consider ways of giving mothers a genuine choice as to whether they work outside the home or stay at home to care for their children.

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⁴⁵ *Ibid.*