

# Understanding Attitudes to Childcare and Childcare Language among Low Income Parents

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Low Income Parents*

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## 1. Background and Objectives

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### 1.1 Background

Current 'early years and childcare' parent-facing policy and communications are designed to deliver multiple objectives:

- To meet the Public Service Agreement (PSA) target: *"To reduce the proportion of children living in households where no one is working; by 2008 to increase the number of children in lower income working families using formal childcare by 120,000."*
- To increase the take up of the free entitlement to early education for 3 and 4 year olds, and
- To increase the take up of extended schools provision for school-age children.

Achieving these objectives will help to support delivery of a further PSA target: *"To improve children's communication, social and emotional development so that by 2008, 50% of children reach a good level of development at the end of the Foundation Stage and reduce inequalities between the level of development achieved by children in the 20% most disadvantaged areas and the rest of England."*

In policy terms, early education and extended schools policies are a coherent whole, delivered by the Early Years, Extended Schools and Special Needs Group within the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). However, the Department recognises the need to communicate its policies in a way which is meaningful to parents, given that these different types of provision are targeted at different target groups. As such, the Department sought to revisit its approach from a customer perspective, recognising that one single message was unlikely to address every parent's need.

In addition, DCSF wishes to increase take up of formal childcare among parents earning less than £20,000 p.a. and, within this group, particularly among Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents. The Department wished to understand the language that these parents use around childcare provision, in order to gauge:

- Whether parents' current language is reflected in DCSF communication of childcare policies, and
- Whether a change in the terminology used – around childcare generally and with regard to specific provisions – is likely to make parents better understand the different childcare options on offer to them.

This report contains the findings of a research project undertaken to help DCSF better communicate with low-income parents. The findings will be used to inform DCSF's and its delivery partners' communication activity going forward, to ensure government childcare policies are communicated in language that makes sense to parents.

## 1.2 *Research Objectives*

Thus, the overall objective of the research was to understand the optimal language, from the parental viewpoint, to use when talking about 'childcare'.

And specifically:

- To explore what parents perceive to be the benefits and barriers to specific types of provision and setting, as well as the language used
- To understand the decision-making process parents go through when they consider childcare provision; for example:
  - If/at what stages parents begin to consider childcare
  - What prompts this
  - Current decision making process
  - How this varies by user group

## **2. Research Methodology and Sample**

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### *2.1 Overall Approach*

A qualitative methodology was selected for this research given that the project was essentially exploratory in nature. The research involved three survey elements:

- Focus groups with parents of children aged 9 months – 11 years
- Paired depth interviews with expectant parents
- Discourse analysis

Each of these stages is described in detail below.

### *2.2 Focus Groups*

Seventeen focus groups were conducted with low-income parents, with children aged between 9 months and 11 years old. We defined those on a low income as those with a household income of £20,000 per annum or less, including benefits.

Each group comprised between six and eight participants. The groups were split by age of child, age of parent and by childcare usage to ensure that a mix of parents currently using formal and informal childcare were included in the sample. Six of the focus groups were carried out with English-speaking mothers from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds.

All respondents were free found by Connect, either in-street or by community networking.

All respondents were given a pre-task to complete before attending the group discussions. This involved completing a five day written diary of their childcare routine. We used these to compare and contrast with the information we gathered from the discussions.

The discussions lasted two hours each. Fieldwork was conducted between 11<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> September 2007.

The table overleaf shows the sample structure of the focus groups.

**Sample structure of the focus groups:**

	<b>Childcare Usage</b>	<b>Profile Type</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Child's Age</b>	<b>Urban/Rural Mix</b>	<b>Location</b>
1	Regular Formal	Parents	Mixed	18+	9 mths-2	Rural South	Canterbury
2	Regular Formal	Parents	Mixed	18+	3-5	Urban Midlands	Nottingham
3	Regular Informal	Parents	Mixed	27+	6-11	Urban South	London
4	Regular Informal	Parents	Mixed	18+	9 mths-2	Urban Midlands	Nottingham
5	Irregular Informal	Parents	Mixed	30+	3-5	Rural North	Wirral
6	Irregular Informal	Parents	Mixed	27+	6-11	Urban North	Leeds
7	Regular mix of informal and formal	Parents	Mixed	27+	3-5	Urban South	Crawley
8	Regular Formal	Parents	Mixed	27+	6-11	Urban North	Liverpool
9	No regular childcare	Parents	Mixed	18+	9 mths-2	Rural Midlands	Nottinghamshire
10	No regular childcare	Parents	Mixed	27+	3-5	Urban North	Liverpool
11	Regular mix of informal and formal	Teenage mothers	Female	16-19	9 mths-5	Urban South	London
12	Irregular mix of informal and formal	Pakistani mothers	Female	20-35	9 mths-2	Urban North	Oldham
13	Regular Informal	Pakistani mothers	Female	25-40	3-5	Urban Midlands	Birmingham
14	Regular mix of informal and formal	Pakistani mothers	Female	30-50	6-11	Urban North	Oldham
15	Regular Informal	Bangladeshi mothers	Female	20-35	9 mths-2	Urban South	East London
16	Regular mix of informal and formal	Bangladeshi mothers	Female	25-40	3-5	Urban Midlands	Birmingham
17	No regular childcare	Bangladeshi mothers	Female	30-50	6-11	Urban South	East London

### 2.3 *Paired Depth Interviews*

In addition, six paired depth interviews were conducted with parents expecting their first child. We interviewed a mix of couples and pairs of expectant mothers.

Interviews were conducted in:

- London
- Canterbury
- Birmingham
- Worcestershire
- Liverpool (2)

The aim of these interviews was to understand whether those expecting a child had yet considered their future childcare needs and also to gauge their awareness of and attitudes towards different forms of childcare.

All respondents were free found by Connect, either randomly in-street or by visiting antenatal classes.

The paired interviews lasted 1½ hours each. Fieldwork was conducted between 11<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> September 2007.

### 2.4 *Discourse Analysis*

The qualitative work was supplemented by discourse analysis carried out by Gill Ereaut of Linguistic Landscapes, who specialises in applying discourse analysis to business and marketing issues.

This desk-based approach is of increasing importance in contemporary social science, and involves the systematic analysis of language - of exactly how people choose to talk or write about a particular thing and the implications this has. Using a range of tools and concepts, it helps uncover the taken-for-granted assumptions and world views of various relevant parties and thus can identify issues or barriers to communication existing at a deep level.

Gill and her team looked in detail at written communications and websites related to childcare (government and private sector) and also examined a selection of transcripts from the focus groups and paired depth interviews.

In this case, discourse analysis was used to help explain how low-income parents who receive information given by the DCSF or other bodies interpret it – or perhaps struggle to integrate it into their own cultural worlds. Analysis of information produced by the DCSF and other advisory bodies also gave an insight into how culturally-specific ideas (of ‘childcare’, of ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ provision etc) are unconsciously encoded into public communications. In this way, hidden disconnects were uncovered between the ways in which government literature talks about childcare and the mental picture or world view of such matters held by low-income parents themselves. The findings of the discourse analysis are discussed throughout this report and also specifically in section 6.

### **3. Management Summary**

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The overall objective of this research was to understand the optimal language, from the parental viewpoint, to use when talking about 'childcare'.

And specifically:

- To explore what parents perceive to be the benefits and barriers to specific types of provision and setting, as well as the language used
- To understand the decision-making process parents go through when they consider childcare provision; for example:
  - If/at what stages parents begin to consider childcare
  - What prompts this
  - Current decision making process
  - How this varies by user group

The research involved three survey elements:

- Seventeen focus groups with parents of children aged 9 months-11 years
- Paired depths with expectant mothers (expecting their first child)
- Discourse analysis, based on a review of government literature, various childcare-related websites and a selection of transcripts from the qualitative work

The research was conducted in September 2007.

The findings indicate that low-income parents equate 'childcare' with formal childcare, in that they define it as someone who is not a relative or friend looking after children on a paid basis. They understand the term, but it is not one they use in everyday conversation. Neither do they see 'childcare' as something which is personally relevant to their lives, because they associate it with working parents and those with no family members around to help. Low-income parents, on the other hand, generally have close relationships with their extended family and family care was by far the preferred option across the board.

Childcare was also contrary to the prevailing value system among this group, whereby they prioritised family relationships over work and money. Parents wanted to spend as much time as possible with their children and they tended to see work as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. They were very disapproving of 'career people' who (they perceive) have children and pay someone else to bring them up.

Thus, DCSF will need to shift low-income parents from one value system to another to increase the take-up of formal childcare, which means there may need to be long-term investment in normalising childcare for this audience.

Trust was a key barrier to using formal childcare. Overall, there was most trust in government-run nurseries, schools and school clubs and least trust in childminders (those not known personally to the family). Better communication of the registration process for childminders might help to overcome this; currently many parents are

unsure of the status of childminders and how they become 'approved' to look after other people's children.

The research points to a need to reframe 'childcare' to better engage with low-income parents and to reflect the reality of their experience and values. Currently, government discourse differs from the consumer discourse in several ways, the main ones being:

- Government literature implicitly favours formal care over informal care, while low-income parents strongly prefer and value family care
- 'Childcare' is sometimes constructed as providing a double benefit – *good for them, good for you*. However, the low-income audience sees childcare as a service for parents who put their own needs first. They believe staying home with their children is a positive choice
- Some government materials assume that parents follow a rational process of evaluation and choice when deciding between childcare options, while the qualitative work indicates that this is not the case. It is complex and emotional for parents to make choices of this kind, as they struggle with trust issues and the possible consequences of leaving their child with a 'stranger'. As a result, parents have a number of strategies for reducing the risk of something happening to their child – by, for example, deciding to opt out of formal care altogether or waiting until their child reaches an age where they can talk and report back if there are any problems
- And, the way in which the educational benefits of childcare are expressed in terms of "*goals*", "*stages*" and "*targets*" in government literature is alienating for low-income parents, who prefer to think of pre-schoolers learning at their own pace and in a fun way

We would recommend an approach which starts with where low-income parents are now and leads them to a different way of thinking. We believe the target audience will be more receptive to childcare messages if future government communication:

- Acknowledges the value of children spending time with family members
- Recognises family care as one of the childcare options available
- Empathises with the dilemmas faced by parents making childcare choices
- Leads with the benefits for the child i.e. opportunities to make friends, play, have fun

DCSF should avoid using an academic discourse when promoting the links between formal childcare and early education. Instead, we would suggest using language such as:

- *Learning through play*
- *Varied, fun activities which help your child to learn numbers, colours etc.*
- *Prepare your child for school by getting them used to socialising with other children*

There should be no suggestion that formal care is better for children's progress at school than informal care, as parents are likely to reject this notion.

Given the importance of family care, we feel grandparents should be treated as an additional target audience. Therefore, future communications should address the concerns of mothers and grandmothers, particularly when aimed at Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities.

In addition, any literature targeted at low-income parents should feature people with whom they can identify. Using the everyday language that they use will help. Case studies might work well, as these could demonstrate how real parents make childcare work for them. We would also suggest devising some FAQs which reflect the key questions and concerns raised by parents (for example, those raised in this study surrounding safety/security issues).

We noted that many of the pictures in the leaflets showed children either on their own or with an adult. However, parents spontaneously associate 'childcare' with children painting, laughing, singing and running around together, so we recommend using more pictures of groups of children in active play. These images should include children from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, including South Asian.

Free early education, Children's Centres and extended schools tested well with parents. Early education provision appeals because it is free, government run and targeted at children aged three and four (who are old enough to communicate with childcare staff and feed back to parents). However, many commented that a 2½ hour slot was enough to give mum a little time to herself, but was not practical for those wanting to work. Therefore, we would suggest giving women the option of using the entitlement across two full days (rather than five half days), as this would better suit mothers' working patterns. Communications activity should state that the entitlement can be combined with family care if mum needs to work longer hours. In this way, it could be positioned as giving grandma (or other family members) a break.

'Children's Centres' were better known as 'SureStart'. SureStart appears to be a well-regarded brand, but many parents perceived its target audience to be "*underprivileged*", "*deprived*" and "*problem*" families. Thus, future promotion of the centres should clarify that services are provided to all under fives and their parents.

Feedback on the language used to describe current provision suggests a need to adjust some of the vocabulary used and to focus on the child rather than the parent e.g.

- "*Activities*" rather than "*services*"
- "*Children are entitled*" rather than "*parents can claim*"

Parents also listed a wide range of possible communications channels which the government could use. Key among these were health visitors and GPs. Parents currently feel they are quite dependent on word of mouth.

Finally, it is important to recognise that cost is a genuine practical barrier for parents in this income bracket and that lack of affordable childcare is likely to prevent those who want to work from doing so. We strongly recommend that DCSF puts measures in place to address this issue, bearing in mind that there may need to be specific incentives for those with larger families (i.e. three or more children).

## **4. Low-Income Parents: Lifestyle and Values**

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This section provides an overview of the low-income parents included in the study and of their lifestyle, attitudes to parenting and value systems.

### *4.1 Lifestyle and Attitudes*

Although all of those interviewed were on a low income, respondents were a heterogeneous audience in terms of their circumstances and demographics. The sample included families where both parents were working full time, others where one or either parent was unemployed or working part time and also single parent families. In a small number of cases, respondents had previously worked in clerical or administrative (C1 graded) jobs, but they had given up working due to their own long-term illness or to become a full time carer.

Despite this, a number of similarities emerged in terms of their lifestyles and values and their attitudes towards being a parent were very consistent.

Respondents agreed that raising children is a rewarding experience. They spoke of:

- The unconditional love between parent and child
- The thrill of watching their children grow and develop
- The feeling of achievement which comes from teaching the children new skills
- The joy of spending quality time as a family
- Seeing their children smile
- The fun and enjoyment involved in being a parent
- And the way in which becoming a parent had helped them recapture their own childhood

Conversely, the challenges of parenthood were said to include:

- Dealing with tantrums and tears
- Sleepless nights
- Accepting the burden of responsibility that comes with being a parent in terms of your child's care and well being
- Loss of freedom/spontaneity – for example, no longer being able to go out with friends on the spur of the moment
- Loss of one's identity as an individual
- Lack of 'me time'
- Finding enough quality time to spend with the children
- For those with more than one child, making sure that all the children receive equal time and attention
- Coping with children who are ill or who have behavioural difficulties such as ADHD
- Keeping track of older children
- Coping with the day-to-day practicalities of being a parent such as the school run and supermarket shopping

Across the board, parents reported a hectic daily routine, which tended to be centred on the children's schedules, particularly when school or childcare was involved.

Early mornings and bedtimes were often described using words such as “whirlwind”, “chaos” and “headache”. There was a general lack of ‘me time’.

Examples included:

*‘I drag them out of bed, force them to eat breakfast, tell them to turn the telly off 100 times, force them to get dressed, drag them to school, put them in school, wave while they’re crying, walk away, get in, lucky if you have a cup of tea and then you go back. My kids are only in school for the morning.’*

Mother, child aged 3-5 years, Wirral

*‘Managing their bed time is difficult. The kids don’t want to go to bed. It is a big drama trying to put them to bed.’*

Mother, child aged 6-11 years, Liverpool

The predominance of strong extended family networks was another key theme. It was striking how many were either living in the same house as other members of their family, or who had immediate family living very close by. A number of respondents were living in large households – for example, one young mother in Canterbury lives in a three-bedroom house with five other adults (including her partner) and two children. Several of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers were also living in extended families.

Mothers emerged as the main carers, with the exception of one single father who is raising four children alone. Mothers assumed the main responsibility for looking after the children because they were usually at home more than fathers (many of the fathers in the sample were working shifts involving long and/or antisocial hours). Fathers usually helped when they were at home, but they had more freedom to go out without the children. Also, they felt able to make arrangements to go out without checking with their partner first. Mothers, on the other hand, were expected to source and arrange childcare if they needed to go somewhere without the children. Respondents said that this division of childcare responsibility in the family had just happened; couples had not made a conscious decision to divide things up in this way.

It was interesting to note, however, that the official discourse was almost entirely gender neutral, with very little express reference to mothers or fathers. Literature was mainly targeted at the ‘parent’, with occasional mentions of other ‘carers’ (non-specified adults with caring responsibilities). The exception to this gender neutral discourse was in relation to benefit entitlement which is set out according to gender and type of parent e.g. mums-to-be, mums, adoptive parents, dads etc.<sup>11</sup>

The effect of this discourse is to systematically ignore the bias towards mothers as carers. As a result, the materials do not give voice to mothers’ particular difficulties in juggling childcare with work or study. The discourse focuses instead on childcare as a means of facilitating everyone – including women - to follow traditionally male patterns of working – for example, working full time and maintaining continuity of employment after having a child. Thus, the materials do not address the social and cultural differences within the UK regarding the extent to which women still take on (or are considered to have) primary responsibility for childcare and domestic duties.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Looking for childcare? A SureStart guide to help you make the right choices’ Spring 2007

## 4.2 Low-Income Parents' Value System

Throughout the study, parents' discourse was underpinned by a strong sense of 'traditional' family values, in that their reactions to 'childcare' (see section 5) were underpinned by a value system which prioritises love and family over work and money.

In 'The Cultural Biography of Things' Igor Kopytoff, the eminent anthropologist, talks about "*complex societies which use money as a means of exchange*". Thus, complex societies, such as ours, could be said to favour economic value systems based on the exchange of time and labour for money. However, the low-income parents in this research viewed time as a non-economic commodity. They felt that time should be 'spent' with one's children and on family relationships. There was a general disapproval of "*career people*" who have children and then pay someone else to bring them up. This audience seemed to see work as a means to an end and they were of the view that they would not be able to earn enough money to make full time paid childcare worthwhile or to make up for the time they would lose with their children. They appeared to have little aspiration towards self-improvement or a career. Some also acknowledged that the benefits system provides them with the financial means which allows them to stay home with their children.

*"We all want to get better jobs but I think it's down to me to bring my daughter up. I wanted her. She was very wanted and I want to enjoy that time with her. There's plenty of time for me to go back to work. What's the point in having kids if you're going to palm them off to someone else?"*

Mother, child aged 9 months-2 years, Canterbury

*"A childminder would be for a single parent or for a couple that are both working. They're career people. But then I'm thinking 'well, why have a baby then?'"*

Expectant mother, London

*"Money's not everything is it? As long as a child's got love, I think that's all you really need"*

Expectant mother, Canterbury

*"If my mum wasn't around, then I would have to change my hours so that I could pick up my son. If this wasn't possible, then I would have to reduce the hours I work"*

Mother, child aged 3-5 years, Liverpool

Respondents' views are further illustrated by the fact that many said the government should be encouraging parents to stay home with their children when the children are young.

Thus, when formulating policies in this area, DCSF will need to consider the difficulties inherent in shifting low-income parents from one value system to another. It is likely that such a shift will require long-term investment in normalising childcare for parents in this income bracket.

## 5. Awareness and Understanding of 'Childcare'

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### 5.1 Awareness of the Types of Help Available to Parents

To gauge low-income parents' awareness of formal childcare options, respondents were asked to brainstorm all the places and people which a parent might use or ask to look after their children if they were unavailable for any reason. The results of this exercise showed that low-income parents were generally aware of a range of different childcare provisions and settings – both formal and informal. In addition, most respondents knew that the types of help they had identified during the exercise were available in their local area.

All groups mentioned:

- Family care e.g.
  - Grandparents
  - In-laws
  - Parents' siblings, particularly sisters
  - Other relatives, such as great grandparents, nieces, cousins
- Friends and neighbours
- Nurseries i.e.
  - "Private" or "day"
  - "Pre-school nurseries" or "nurseries attached to schools"
  - "State"
- Breakfast and after school clubs
- Childminders

Most groups also listed:

- Crèches
- Holiday play schemes/holiday clubs/summer clubs/kids clubs
- Play groups/play schemes

Several groups mentioned:

- Schools
- Clubs and classes such as sports clubs or drama classes
- Nannies
- Au pairs
- Paid babysitters
- Sure Start

There were also one or two mentions each of the following:

- Teachers
- Children's Centres
- Mosque (some of the Muslim parents sent their children to Arabic/Quran classes at the local mosque for a couple of hours after school)
- Church/Sunday school
- Pub beer garden (i.e. the children could play there while their parents have a drink)
- Supervised play areas
- Saturday morning cinema
- Play bus

Family care was always mentioned first, and respondents often classified relatives in the 'pecking order' of who they would approach first for baby-sitting duties. Grandmothers were usually the first choice, followed by in-laws and siblings. Friends and neighbours were seen as the next best thing to relatives.

Nurseries and extended schools provision were most top of mind in terms of formal childcare, closely followed by childminders.

## 5.2 Associations with 'Childcare'

Once the term 'childcare' was introduced into the discussions, it became clear that it was widely understood and recognised. Indeed, a few respondents used it spontaneously early on in the sessions when they were discussing putting their child into a nursery. It emerged that all respondents associated 'childcare' with a formal setting, defining it as someone (not a relative) who is paid to look after children, outside the parental home.

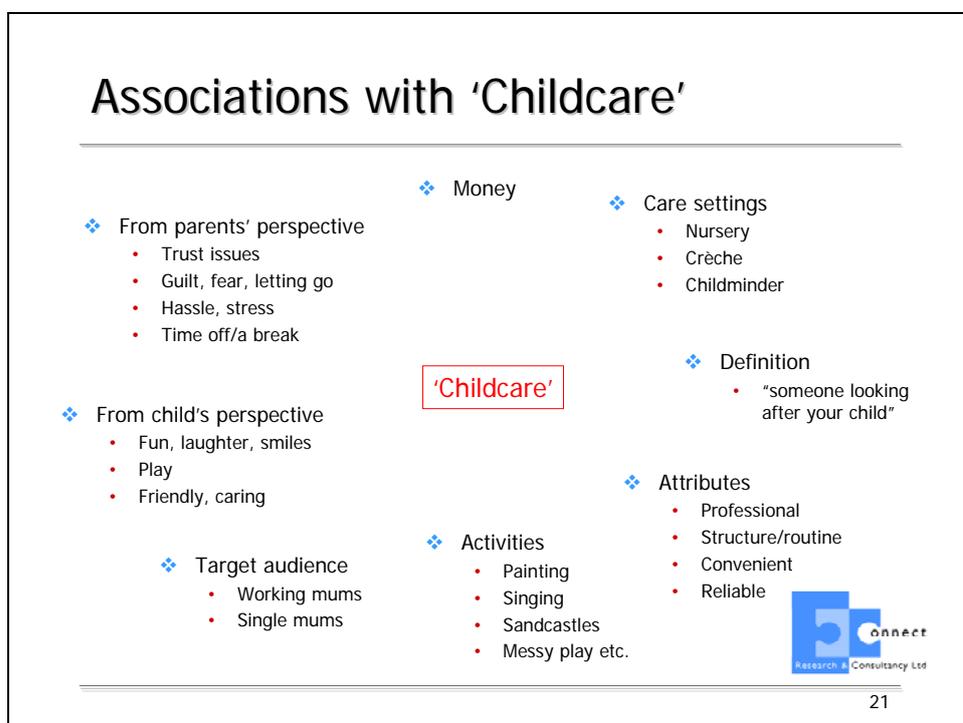
However, 'childcare' was not a term which low-income parents used in everyday conversation. As one father put it: *"That's the official title, isn't it?"*

Respondents would more commonly say:

- *"Helps out"*
- *"Minds the children"*
- *"I leave them at my mum's"*
- *"Watches them"*
- *"Has the children"*
- *"Takes the children"*
- *"Looks after"*
- *"Comes and sits with them"*
- *"Babysits"*

This was in contrast to the much more active and conscious language used to describe formal childcare usage e.g. *"I put her in nursery"*.

The spontaneous associations that respondents made with the word 'childcare' are shown in the chart below:



Moving clockwise from the top of the chart, the primary association was cost.

*"It's expensive. Your wages don't cover those of a childminder and so you have to go to family. You have to think 'can I afford this?'"*

Mother, child aged 9 months-2 years, Nottingham

*"Once I applied for a job at First Direct. One of the reasons I applied was that it said 'crèche available'. So I didn't think you'd have to pay for it. I thought 'Oh, I can go and work and they'll look after my kids, brilliant!' But when I worked out what it was going to cost me to put two children in the crèche, it just wasn't worth my while working"*

Mother, child aged 6-11 years, Leeds

Other associations included specific care settings, such as nurseries or crèches, or people gave a definition of the term.

*"It's something paid for, expensive. It's someone else, not you, not family"*

Pakistani mother, child aged 3-5 years, Birmingham

A number of positive attributes were mentioned, including professionalism, the structure and routine of (formal) childcare settings, convenience and reliability.

Many also associated childcare with activities for children, such as painting, drawing and singing.

However, some responses showed that these parents did not identify with 'childcare' because they saw it as something aimed at "working mums" and "single mums". Similarly, while benefits were evident for children (laughter, play, caring etc.), associations for parents were mostly negative, in terms of distrust, guilt, fear of leaving their children and the hassle and stress of getting them there and picking them up on time. The only significant benefit mentioned for parents was the opportunity to have a break from the children and regain some 'me time'.

*"Feeling guilt for neglecting my child because I can't look after him myself"*  
Pakistani mother, child aged 6-11 years, Oldham

*"Expense, trust and hassle – finding it, finding the money to pay for it, going to it, picking them up from it, everything!"*  
Mother, child aged 9 months-2 years, Nottinghamshire

### 5.3 Associations with 'Formal Childcare'

As mentioned earlier, 'childcare' equates to 'formal childcare' for low-income parents. They were unfamiliar with the concept of 'formal childcare' when it was referred to in those terms. Many did not understand the word 'formal'. Some associated it with formal dress codes. For others, the phrase seemed like an oxymoron because the word 'formal' suggests something strict and structured, while 'childcare' evokes images of play, fun and informality.

Due to a lack of genuine understanding of the term, respondents assumed such care would be out of their reach, both in financial and social class terms. Their spontaneous associations were:

- Very expensive/for high earners
- Professional/qualified/registered
- Posh
- Official/documents/contracts
- Uniforms
- Strict/discipline
- Curriculum/syllabus
- Inflexible
- Private nurseries
- Boarding/private/grammar school
- Supernanny

Respondents explained their thinking in the following terms:

*"Formal childcare sounds like you'd be saying to the children 'for the next 15 minutes, we are doing this and then we will do this for half an hour'"*  
Mother, child aged 3-5 years, Wirral

*"It would be strict. It would be learning instead of fun"*  
Teenage mother, child aged 9 months-2 years, London

*"Formal is uniform, smart, strict, posh. It'd be by the book, type of thing"*  
Mother, child aged 6-11 years, Leeds

#### 5.4 *The Importance of Family Care*

Not only was family care the first port of call for the parents in the sample, it was also considered the best form of care for children.

Family members were seen as an extension of parental care (*"the next best thing to being there myself"*), while using childcare was seen as leaving one's child with a "stranger".

Family care was felt to offer the following advantages:

- Trustworthy and trusted carers
- The child receives love and attention and is given high quality care because relatives see the child as *"one of their own"*
- Family members want to look after the children and offer to do so
- Children enjoy spending time with the family
- Family members – particularly grandparents - have the benefit of experience because they have raised their own children
- Family care is free (or may be 'paid for' via the odd favour or bunch of flowers)
- It is convenient, given that many live very near to or with their extended family
- 24 hour availability/flexibility/availability at short notice
- Care is provided in an in-home environment
- Grandparents and other family members are usually familiar with the child's routine
- Parents feel it is good for their child to bond with members of their extended family
- They also see it as an opportunity for the child to hear stories about the family's history and learn about their heritage

However, informal care was not without its problems, namely:

- Grandparents often spoil and indulged their grandchildren
- Interference could become an issue if family members failed to respect the rules and boundaries laid down by the parents
- Children lose out on interaction with other children in most family care settings
- Children were less likely to do any structured or stimulating activities with family members
- Family members could be unreliable and let the parent down at the last minute
- Parents often felt (or were made to feel) guilty about asking family members to babysit

In addition, a few stated that arranging childcare with grandparents could be difficult if the grandparents were still working or were socially active. A few reported that their parents refuse to look after the grandchildren on principle. Others told us that there are a large number of grandchildren in their family so it was sometimes hard to secure the grandparents' time.

Across the board, however, family care was by far the preferred option, as illustrated in the chart below:

### Family care vs childcare

Family	'Childcare'
Someone I know and trust	"A stranger"
Free	Paid for
Love and want to have the children	"Just a job"
Experience	Paper qualifications
In-home	Outside the home
One-to-one attention	Group interaction



20

Comments included:

*"I would have to pay someone else to look after my child, but if my mother looks after the child, then it is free. Also she will look after the child much better than an outsider"*

Bangladeshi mother, child aged 9 months-2 years, London

*"'Childcare', to me, seems like an outsider"*

Expectant mother, Canterbury

*"[With family] It's from love, not just because it's a job"*

Mother, child aged 3-5 years, Nottingham

*"I removed him from nursery and my mum is now the person that looks after him. She's free, she cares and she'll do everything and anything that I ask! She is my childcare and if she wasn't, then my life wouldn't exist"*

Mother, child aged 9 months-2 years, Nottinghamshire

This contrasts with the public discourse where informal care is noticeable by its absence. Except for one mention of grandparents on the BBC Parenting website<sup>2</sup>, care within the family is virtually ignored as a viable and appropriate option. The effect of this is to implicitly favour professional childcare and to suggest that grandparents etc. are not 'approved' as a form of childcare. However, in practice, a great deal of childcare is delivered by grandparents (a recent Age Concern report

<sup>2</sup> <http://bbc.co.uk/parenting/childcare/> accessed 18 & 23 September 2007

suggested it may be as high as 60%) and this research indicates that parents value family care very highly.

### 5.5 Barriers to Using Formal Childcare

As discussed in section 5.1, the main barrier to using formal childcare was not so much lack of information, but a lack of connection with the concept. Most parents – with the exception of Muslim and expectant mothers - had a reasonable level of awareness of the options available to them. However, childcare was perceived to have little personal relevance to their lives because they saw it as something used by working mums or mums with a career, or people who put work before their family.

In addition, there was often no significant need for low-income parents to use formal childcare. A number of the mothers in the sample were not working and had no immediate plans to return to work. Furthermore, nearly all respondents had a family support network nearby, with the remainder reliant on close friends and neighbours (especially on estates) so there was usually someone around to “*help out*”.

Others rejected formal childcare because of their lack of trust in carers outside the family. They said they would blame themselves for making a bad choice if their child were harmed or mistreated in any way.

Cost was another barrier, both actual and perceived, although this was rarely mentioned spontaneously.

There was also a lack of understanding of the benefits of childcare for the child and a perception that childcare is mainly used by parents who put their own needs first.

A few found the perceived inflexibility and the need for a regular commitment offputting. They were critical of strict timings, being fined for picking up the children late and of having to plan childcare in advance of need.

Parents said:

*“If you don’t work, then the children don’t need to be with the childminder or anyone else”*

Mother, child aged 6-11 years, Liverpool

*“I don’t trust people to look after my son. I would need proof that they could do it. I’d need to know them”*

Teenage mother, child aged 9 months-2 years, London

Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers faced additional cultural, language and religious barriers. Culturally, Muslim mothers reported that they are expected to be their child’s primary carer. Thus, the notion of ‘childcare’ was an alien concept, particularly for Bangladeshi mothers, most of whom were not working. They added that any social occasions they attended in the evening would be a family outing (to visit relatives, or to a wedding etc.) so they had no need for paid babysitters. Plus, if the need ever arose, the Pakistani and Bangladeshi mums all came from large families so relatives were always available to help. They also spoke of the stigma attached to using formal childcare within the Muslim community and the risk of offending family members by seeking professional care.

In addition, some were worried about very young children not being able to make themselves understood within a formal care setting because the children often spoke a hybrid of English and their parents' or grandparents' mother tongue language.

They also expressed concern about how far the childcare provider would accommodate their child's religion – for example, would halal or vegetarian food be available and how would it be prepared?

*“In our culture, if you're putting your child in childcare, then you're neglecting your children and you're just thinking about your needs before your children's needs”*  
Bangladeshi mother, child aged 3-5 years, Birmingham

*“I've never had her in a nursery or with people, my mum's had her since she was two months old when I went back to work. My mum's not around at the moment, so it's my sister-in-law helping out”*  
Pakistani mother, child aged 3-5 years, Birmingham

## 5.6 Current Use of and Drivers to Using Formal Childcare

Connect specifically recruited some parents who were already using formal childcare. However, overall, we found that there was some use of formal childcare in nearly every group, although none of the parents were using solely formal childcare and none were using formal childcare full time. The only group which was solely using informal care was the group of Bangladeshi mothers with children under 2 years old, who went to mother and toddler sessions, but who never left their babies alone with anyone outside the family.

The main types of formal childcare used were:

- Nurseries (mostly parents using the free entitlement, but a few paid)
- Breakfast and after school clubs

A few had also used crèches at the gym, Sure Start or those provided by retailers such as Ikea. A handful had used or were using childminders, but interestingly, the vast majority of these were recommended or were people the parents knew personally.

(The perceived pros and cons of nurseries, after school clubs and childminders are discussed in sections 5.7 to 5.9)

When asked why they had chosen to use formal childcare, three respondents explicitly mentioned work commitments.

Instead, social aspects were most commonly cited as the driver for using formal care. Parents spontaneously saw many advantages to their children mixing with other children of their own age. It was interesting to note how often they used the language of popular psychology to describe this e.g. *“bonding”*, *“interacting”*, *“socialising”*. All felt nursery could provide important preparation for school and the wider world, in relation to teaching children social skills such as sharing and *“how to play nicely”*.

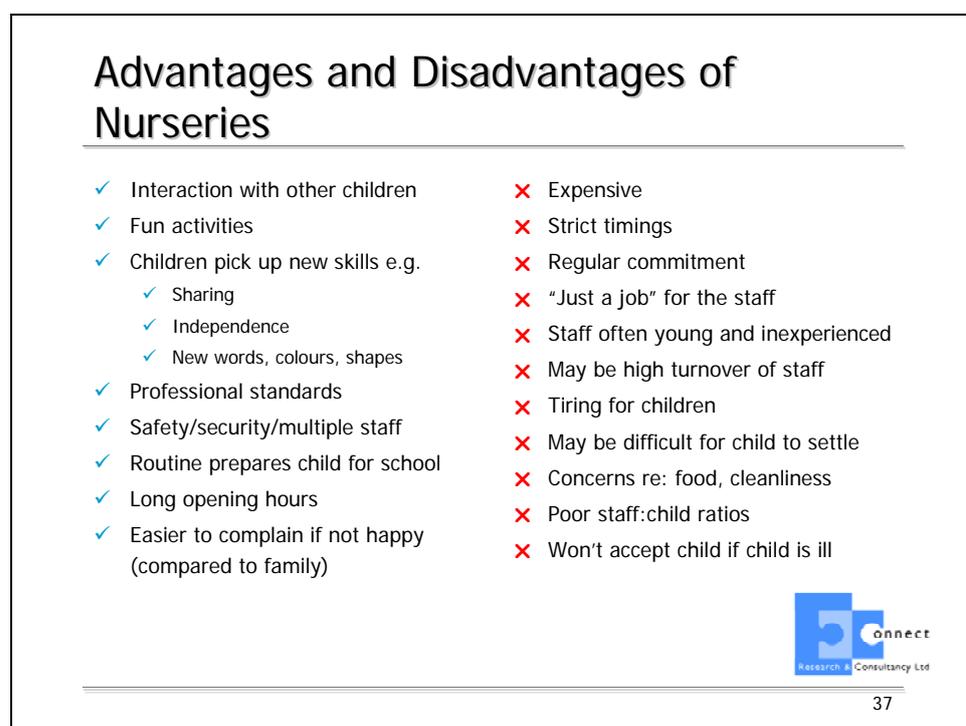
The other main reasons given related to the unavailability of family care. Some reported that they had no option but to use formal care because their family members were unable or unwilling to look after their children. Others said that their relatives were unable to provide care for all the hours they needed, for example when family members were elderly. In these instances, the parents combined formal and informal childcare.

Some of those with school age children said that their child had asked to go to after school club in order to spend more time with their schoolfriends. As a result, non-working mothers sometimes used after school clubs, even though they were available to pick their child up straight after school.

As mentioned earlier, a few also knew a childminder or nursery worker personally, and so for them, trust was not a barrier to using formal care.

## 5.7 Views of Nurseries

The chart below illustrates the positive and negative comments that were made about nurseries.



Thus, the social benefits and fun activities emerged as the key 'hooks' which could be leveraged to persuade more low-income parents to use nurseries. Respondents expected the children to learn new things such as words, colours and shapes, but they expected this to be achieved through play and games rather than formal classwork (see section 5.11). In addition, some associated nurseries with professionalism and safety and liked the idea of the children having a structured routine.

However, nurseries were considered an expensive and inflexible option by some. Some were also concerned about the quality of the staff, in terms of their maturity

and experience, commitment to the job and their love of children i.e. do they really care or is it “just a job” for them?

### 5.8 Views of Breakfast and After School Clubs

The chart below illustrates the perceived advantages and disadvantages of using breakfast and after school clubs.

## Advantages and Disadvantages of Breakfast and After School Clubs

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Fun activities/children enjoy going</li><li>✓ Social aspects/friends present</li><li>✓ Children are fed</li><li>✓ Trust/safety because clubs are in-school</li><li>✓ Convenience</li><li>✓ Good for working mums</li><li>✓ Children get help with homework</li><li>✓ Stops children being late for school (breakfast clubs)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✗ Have to pay/expensive</li><li>✗ Not available at all schools</li><li>✗ Need to book in advance</li><li>✗ Inflexible timings</li><li>✗ Fussy eaters may not eat breakfast</li><li>✗ Sometimes subcontracted/held outside the school</li></ul>
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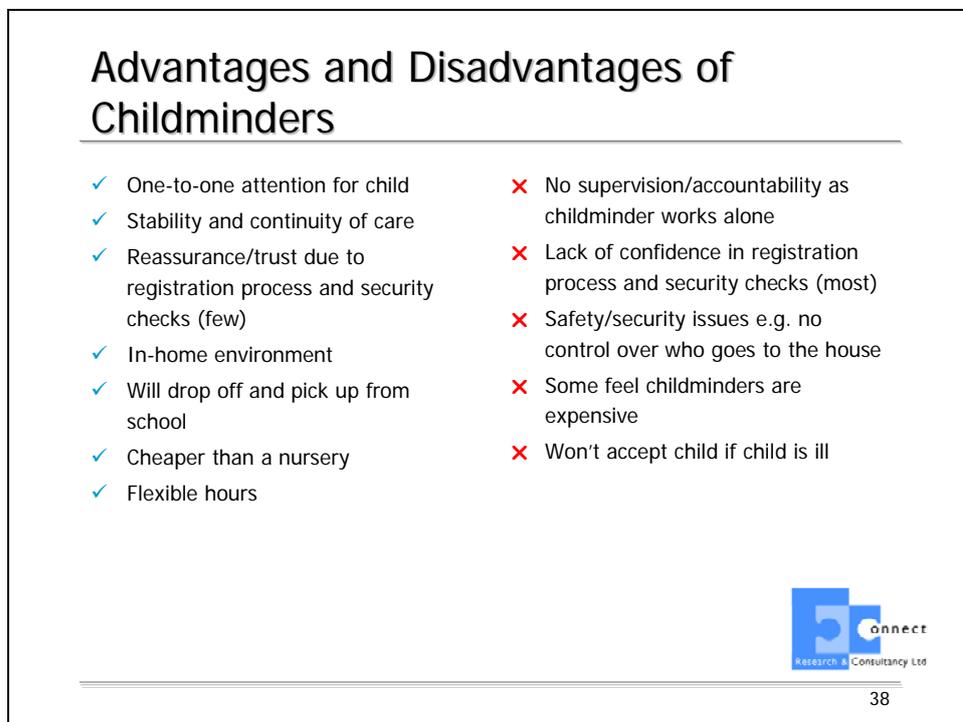
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These were widely used by parents of school age children, mainly due to the fact that the children enjoyed going and there were fewer trust issues for parents because the clubs were usually held in-school. These were felt to offer fun for children and convenience for parents because those running the clubs feed the children and help them with their homework.

Few disadvantages were mentioned, the main ones being the cost and the lack of availability. A few did not approve of school clubs being subcontracted to other organisations or held outside the school.

## 5.9 Views of Childminders

The chart below illustrates the perceived advantages and disadvantages of using childminders.



There was a great deal of suspicion about the status of childminders and how they become registered, which meant that the majority of parents voiced concerns about security and safety issues, such as the lack of supervision and the lack of control over visitors to the childminder's house. A few horror stories from the press were relayed in the discussions. Others claimed to be aware of the registration process and described it as wholly inadequate.

*"All they do is have a quick look around their house and that's it. They don't see how they are with the children"*

Mother, child aged 3-5 years, Crawley

On the positive side, some said that children would be able to develop a close relationship with a childminder over time, which would mean stability and continuity of care. Others felt children would benefit from one-to-one attention and would be more comfortable in a home environment. Some parents also liked the fact that childminders will drop off and pick up children from school.

## 5.10 Choosing Childcare

One of the objectives of the research was to explore the current decision making process which parents go through when choosing between childcare options. However, the qualitative work shows little evidence of a rational, thought out process. Instead, low-income parents appear to navigate their way through 'childcare' on

recommendation and gut instinct. Decision making seemed to involve a complex, emotional 'journey' as parents struggled with issues of trust.

Parents were very aware of being responsible for the safety of their children, so there was a great deal of fear of making the wrong choice. As a result, some parents opted out altogether if asked to consider formal childcare – for example *"If my mum wasn't around, then I'd stay home with him myself"* (from a mother in Liverpool)

Others seemed to feel they had reduced the risk of something going wrong, by, for example, waiting until their child was slightly older or only putting their child into formal care for a short time. Comments included:

*"[I'd only send my child to nursery] when they can speak and tell you what's going on"*

Mother, child aged 9 months-2 years, Canterbury

*"[The nursery] is only for a couple of hours a day. The rest of the time she's with my mum"*

Father, child aged 3-5 years, Nottingham

In line with this, willingness to consider using formal childcare increased once children were three years old or over. Consequently, free early education provision was well received, and quite a few parents were already using their entitlement.

There appeared to be four main reasons why parents welcomed the early education entitlement:

- a) By the age of three, children are able to talk so they can feed back to their parents on how they have been treated during the day and report any problems. They can also communicate with childcare staff if they are ill, unhappy, hungry etc.
- b) Parents had more trust in 'government run' nurseries than those in the private sector. They saw the government as sharing responsibility with parents for keeping children safe and so they believed State nurseries would carry out stringent security checks on their staff. There was a general perception that owners of private nurseries were *"only in it for the money"*.
- c) The cost barrier was removed because the places are free
- d) Parents generally seemed to feel that children should be mixing with other children by this age, in the run up to starting school.

Further reactions to free early education entitlement can be found in section 7.1.

### 5.11 *Linking Formal Childcare with Educational Benefits*

A number of parents made the link between formal childcare and educational benefits (although some groups had to be prompted to do so). However, parents' discourse and way of thinking about early education was markedly different to that found in the official discourse.

In parents' minds, a nursery environment prepares children for school by:

- Getting them used to a structured routine
- Teaching them how to make friends
- Helping them learn through play - parents expressed this as children learning their "colours", "numbers" and their "shapes" etc.

Parents were concerned that pre-school children should learn in a fun – not academic - way. They spoke about "activities" rather than "education". They associated the latter with classrooms, tests and stress, which all felt should not be expected of very young children. Comments included:

*"There was one nursery in Oldham that my other daughter used to go to. It was only pre-school. She was two and a half and they used to sit her down and make her write her name. And I used to say 'the weather's nice. Why aren't they playing out in the garden?'"*

Pakistani mother, child aged 6-11 years, Oldham

*"Nurseries follow some sort of structure, education and they do learn, but it's too much pressure on them. They can learn as they get older. They don't need to know it anyway. All they need is play because they learn from play, don't they?"*

Mother, child aged 9 months-2 years, Nottinghamshire

*"That child that's not been to nursery learning French has probably been having fun playing the garden, throwing mud pies and riding bikes!"*

Mother, child aged 9 months-2 years, Nottinghamshire

By contrast, the official discourse assumes its readers value "educational goals" and "development stages". The act of choosing childcare is constructed as closely related to the future success of the child, with an emphasis on education over care e.g. "Learning as they grow"<sup>3</sup>. Separate categories of childcare are also established – "play, care and educational experiences"<sup>4</sup> - while we know from the qualitative work that low-income parents think of play (in a formal setting) as providing both fun and learning.

In this way, the official discourse constructs childcare as one part in a longer process of transforming the child into a 'successful schoolchild'. The literature prescribes stages to be reached in a child's development and uses language focused on the idea of reaching pre-set goals and stages on time e.g.

*"Each area of learning contains a number of Early Learning **Goals** setting out what most children should **aim to achieve** by the end of the Foundation **Stage**"<sup>5</sup>*

We believe this construction of childcare reflects particular (probably middle class) values, which low-income parents may not share. Therefore, it will be important in future communications materials to start from where low-income parents are now (activities, not education) and use this as a platform to talk to parents about the ways in which formal childcare can benefit their child's progress in school.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Looking for childcare? A SureStart guide to help you make the right choices' Spring 2007

<sup>4</sup> <http://brent.gov.uk/educ.nsf/> accessed 18 September 2007

<sup>5</sup> 'Looking for childcare? A SureStart guide to help you make the right choices' Spring 2007

However, any discourse which implies that formal childcare is better for children's progress than family care is to be avoided as many respondents rejected that notion when it was put forward in the group discussions. Parents believed that family care also plays a role in teaching children, for example, family values and practical skills such as cooking and shopping. The Muslim mothers also mentioned the value of extended family teaching their children about Pakistani/Bangladeshi culture, religious values and mother tongue languages.

### 5.12 *The Ideal Childcare Environment*

When parents were asked to describe their 'ideal' formal childcare environment, human and social values emerged as most important. Parents were primarily looking for warm, friendly staff who relate well to children. They would expect the staff to be First Aid trained. Ideally, they wanted staff who were mature and/or who had children of their own.

Many said they would look around the childcare facility to see if the other children there looked happy, clean and well fed. They added that they would want to arrive at the facility unannounced so that they could observe how the staff 'really' behave on a day-to-day basis.

Further down the list, parents would ideally like a wide range of activities and toys to be provided and an outdoor space where the children could play in fine weather. The environment should be clean and tidy and there should be adequate safety measures in place, such as security to stop strangers walking in off the street, stair gates and electric socket covers.

The ideal location would be close to the parental home or to the grandparents, so that they could pick up the children if the parents were unavailable.

A few were concerned about the menus, in terms of whether healthy food would be served and specific dietary requirements catered for e.g. allergies, vegetarian, halal. Proof of registration (childminders), health and safety certificates and OFSTED reports would be inspected by a minority. One or two also mentioned the importance of having a mix of children at the nursery in terms of ethnic group and sex.

### 5.13 *Parents' Views of the Ideal Childcare Mix*

Finally, in this section, we asked parents to describe their ideal mix of childcare.

For regular and/or frequent care, responses were fairly evenly split between those preferring solely family care and those preferring a mix of formal and informal care. In addition, a small number of parents suggested that their ideal would be for the government to subsidise family care by paying relatives to look after children and giving them some of the training that professionals receive e.g. First Aid training.

Comments included:

*"I would rather have my children with their grandmother because they have the love and the care"*

Mother, child aged 6-11 years, Liverpool

*"I'd still prefer family, but after [the age of] three, then I'd think about a nursery probably, for the socialising"*

Pakistani mother, child aged 3-5 years, Birmingham

*"Family members should be paid for looking after the children. If they did that, more single parents would go back to work because they'd know they can trust the person the child is with"*

Mother, child aged 6-11 years, London

For one off or infrequent care, all would call on the extended family or friends.

Few could imagine any circumstances which would prompt them to switch to wholly formal care.

*"I'd have to be backed into a corner"*

Father, child aged 6-11 years, London

## 6. Key Themes from the Discourse Analysis

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This section summarises key themes from the discourse analysis which do not directly fit in with the qualitative work i.e. any interesting communications barriers which became apparent from looking at the government and private sector literature, rather than from talking to parents directly.

In previous sections, we have discussed:

- The gender neutral discourse used throughout the literature and websites, which ignores the reality of mothers as the main carers (see section 4.1)
- The lack of acknowledgment of informal care in the official discourse (see section 5.4)
- The assumed shared values around education which may not actually be shared (see section 5.11)

In this section, we will explore the following themes:

- Addressing the parent as a sophisticated consumer/skilled researcher
- Relegating the parent to a subsidiary role
- Constructions of childcare

### 6.1 *Addressing the parent as a sophisticated consumer/skilled researcher*

Much of the literature reviewed by the discourse analysts presents childcare to the reader as a list of options (usually with pros and cons identified, questions to ask and issues to consider) from which they can select the “*right choice*”. For example, the ChildcareLink website<sup>6</sup> presents a list of seven types of childcare and each is briefly described. The SureStart booklet<sup>7</sup> presents a longer list of options with detailed descriptions. The choice of language immediately creates a problem for the reader, who is made to feel that there is a right and a wrong choice to be made.

The reader is addressed as a sophisticated ‘purchaser’ of childcare, using a middle-class consumer discourse of evaluation and choice. Choosing childcare is constructed rather like buying a washing machine or a food processor. It is assumed that parents will follow a rational process i.e. they are expected to know and be able to articulate their child’s needs, to research the options available, assess their own resources and priorities, analyse the advantages and disadvantages of each type of care and reach a decision as to what is best. The emotional and cultural complexities are therefore ignored, as are the practical barriers (there is little mention of cost or local availability in the literature).

Initially, the language used appears to empower the parent in their decision-making:

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.childcarelink.gov.uk/> accessed 18 September 2007

<sup>7</sup> ‘Looking for childcare? A SureStart guide to help you make the right choices’ Spring 2007

*“Don’t forget that you are the expert on your child and should trust your feelings”<sup>8</sup>*

*“Always trust your own feelings about childcare – you know your child best”<sup>9</sup>*

However, the language is also deployed to avoid the responsibility of making recommendations or giving specific advice. For example, Hampshire County Council preface their answer to the question *“How do I know my child will be safe and secure?”*, which appears in each section on the different types of childcare available, with the words *“First of all, you know your child best”<sup>10</sup>*.

The expert status of the parent is then undermined in other discourses, as shown below.

## 6.2 *Relegating the parent to a subsidiary role*

The inclusion of highly technical information is present in much of the material. Examples include information on the OFSTED regulatory framework, descriptions and analysis of how learning develops and legal issues arising out of contractual relationships with providers of childcare. When this relates to learning, however, the parent is sometimes relegated to a subsidiary role e.g.

*“You can support your child’s development by reading to them, teaching songs and nursery rhymes”<sup>11</sup>*

*“How parents can help with learning”<sup>12</sup>*

This implies that the main role in the child’s development is being carried out by professionals. There is also an in-built assumption in the promotion of certain types of childcare that parenting has its limitations.

## 6.3 *Constructions of childcare*

The discourse analysts also looked at the different ways in which ‘childcare’ is constructed in the material.

### 6.3.1 *The double benefit: childcare as facilitation*

In government publications, childcare is often positioned as a device that facilitates parents in achieving a ‘work life balance’. Thus, it is constructed as offering a double benefit – good for you, good for them – e.g.

*“Great for your kids, great for you”<sup>13</sup>*

*“Find out what affordable childcare can do for you and your children”<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/> accessed 18 September 2007

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/> accessed 18 September 2007

<sup>10</sup> <http://hants.gov.uk/childcare/> accessed 18 September 2007

<sup>11</sup> ‘Looking for childcare? A SureStart guide to help you make the right choices’ Spring 2007

<sup>12</sup> ‘Looking for childcare? A SureStart guide to help you make the right choices’ Spring 2007

<sup>13</sup> ‘Affordable childcare: great for your kids, great for you’, DfES, undated

<sup>14</sup> ‘Affordable childcare: great for your kids, great for you’, DfES, undated

*“How childcare and early education can help you and your child”<sup>15</sup>*

Staying home to care for one's own children is not acknowledged as a positive choice. Consequently, the literature does not reflect low-income parents' prioritisation of the family.

Only very occasionally is the benefit constructed in non-work terms. In the case of government publications, this is mentioned in the context of the free early education entitlement for three and four year olds and SureStart centres.

*“You can use the free early education places to take a break, even if you are not working or training”<sup>16</sup>*

### 6.3.2 Childcare as a lifestyle option

In the case of private sector providers, advantages are not expressly couched in terms of opportunities to work, train or study. Childcare is constructed more as a lifestyle choice that fits in with and accommodates parents' wider commitments and preferences.

*“It might be an idea to book some Christmas shopping time and let us entertain your children”<sup>17</sup>*

*“We will be running at selected sites over October Half Term so book now for a post summer treat for the children”<sup>18</sup>*

*“Our Out of School Clubs cater for school age children at the most critical times – during summer holidays and after school.....For parents this means that your life needn't revolve around school holidays”<sup>19</sup>*

This positioning may well appeal to some low-income parents, who liked the idea of having some time to themselves to go shopping, to the gym etc.

### 6.3.3 Formal care favoured over informal

Government publications distinguish between formal and informal childcare and implicitly favour the former in a number of ways.

Formal care is constructed as structured, goal-directed, official and professional e.g.

*“It's a great way for them to develop new skills and talents through learning and playing with other children in a well-organised, safe and structured environment”<sup>20</sup>*

*“Your child should experience learning and development activities suitable for their age [in relation to Nursery schools]”<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> 'Looking for childcare? A SureStart guide to help you make the right choices' Spring 2007

<sup>16</sup> 'Looking for childcare? A SureStart guide to help you make the right choices' Spring 2007

<sup>17</sup> Email from Super Camps Ltd, October 2007

<sup>18</sup> Email from Super Camps Ltd, October 2007

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.busybeeschildcare.co.uk/> accessed 18 September 2007

<sup>20</sup> 'Affordable childcare: great for your kids, great for you', DfES, undated

<sup>21</sup> 'Looking for childcare? A SureStart guide to help you make the right choices' Spring 2007

*"[A nursery school] has its own head teacher and staff (trained teachers, nursery nurses and classroom assistants). [It] has to be registered with the Government"*<sup>22</sup>

Informal care is presented as problematic e.g. unregulated, slightly risky, difficult

*"You will need to negotiate hours, terms and conditions with the childminder"*<sup>23</sup>

*"Not all [nannies] are inspected by OFSTED"*<sup>24</sup>

*"Unregistered childcare is care where the parents remain responsible for their children throughout..."*<sup>25</sup>

As has been shown throughout this report, this discourse does not reflect the world view of low-income parents who favour informal over formal care.

#### 6.3.4 *Childcare as Individualisation*

The private nursery reviewed in the material employed a discourse which individualised the child.

*"[We] encourage creativity, individuality"*<sup>26</sup>

*"They can develop at their own pace"*<sup>27</sup>

*"individual expectations of local families"*<sup>28</sup>

In this case, childcare was presented as a service provided to and in partnership with parents.

#### 6.3.5 *Care vs. education*

As mentioned earlier, childcare is set firmly in the context of the child's long-term educational prospects. 'Education' is sometimes referred to separately from 'care' and 'education' is constructed as a job for professionals.

*"Day nurseries provide play, care and educational experiences"*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> <http://bbc.co.uk/parenting/childcare/> accessed 18 & 23 September 2007

<sup>23</sup> <http://brent.gov.uk/educ.nsf/> accessed 18 September 2007

<sup>24</sup> 'Parent Know How: Making Childcare Choices', DfES, Nottingham 2005 (downloaded 18 September 2007)

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.childcarelink.gov.uk/> accessed 18 September 2007

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.busybeeschildcare.co.uk/> accessed 18 September 2007

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.busybeeschildcare.co.uk/> accessed 18 September 2007

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.busybeeschildcare.co.uk/> accessed 18 September 2007

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.brent.gov.uk/educ.nsf/> accessed 18 September 2007

## **7. Communicating with Parents About Specific Early Years and Extended Schools Provision**

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Towards the end of the discussions, parents were presented with descriptions of free early education, Children's Centres and extended schools. We asked parents to comment on the provision itself and also to revise the wording of the descriptions to make them more 'parent-friendly'. Reactions to each type of provision are described below.

### **7.1 Free Early Education**

Nearly all respondents were aware of this provision and it was generally well received. The Bangladeshi mothers were the only respondent types who had not heard of this provision before it was mentioned in the sessions.

The perceived advantages were:

- The provision is free
- It helps children adjust to a formal care setting and, later, to school
- It is just enough time to give mum a break

However, respondents pointed out that the current format does not allow enough time for mums who want to work. Indeed, a few of the mothers who were working part time and who were using this provision reported leaving work at lunchtime to pick up their children and take them to grandma's for the afternoon before returning to work. Clearly, this was quite stressful and was only possible when the mothers' workplace was in close proximity to the childcare facility.

In addition, some of the Pakistani mothers wondered whether free provision might mean substandard care and unqualified staff.

*"But how good are they? Have they got people doing work experience or are they fully qualified?"*

Pakistani mother, child aged 9 months-2 years, Oldham

#### **7.1.1 Suggested Revisions to the Description**

The following description was shown to respondents:

#### **Free Early Education**

Parents of all three and four year olds can claim a free early education place for their child for up to 12½ hours a week. The right to a free place ends when the child starts school or at the end of two years.

Parents suggested changing it to the following:

**Free Pre-School/Free Nursery Places/Free Part Time Nursery Places**

Children aged three and four are entitled to a free nursery or pre-school place for up to five sessions a week. The entitlement ends when the child starts school/starts Reception.

Parents wanted the focus of the description to be on the children's entitlement, rather than on parents needing to claim. The word 'claim' had negative connotations e.g. of filling in application forms, a lengthy wait and the possibility of the application being rejected.

Those who were aware of the provision felt it would be more meaningful to present it as 'five sessions a week' rather than '12½ hours a week'.

All agreed that parents would be aware that children start school at four or five years old, so there was no need to state that the entitlement lasts a maximum of two years.

Respondents also wanted contact information added to any communication about this provision, plus information on any eligibility criteria which would apply. Those who were less aware of this provision wanted to know how the entitlement would break down in terms of the maximum number of hours per day.

## 7.2 *Children's Centres*

There was near universal awareness and widespread use of 'Sure Start', but parents were less familiar with the name 'Children's Centres'. A few knew of them as 'Sure Start Children's Centres'.

Sure Start appears to be a well-established and well-known brand, as it was mentioned spontaneously in nearly all groups. The centres have a good reputation, but are associated with underprivileged areas and problem families. As such, some assumed that the service was not aimed at families like their own.

The concept of Children's Centres was well received overall, but parents wanted to know:

- Would the centres be able to cope if awareness - and demand - were to increase substantially?
- How much do their services cost?
- Why do they only cater for under fives?

Some of the mothers who had used Sure Start suggested promoting the social aspects for parents as well as for children. For example, the teenage mothers appreciated the opportunity to meet other young mums in their area at 'stay and play' groups.

### 7.2.1 Suggested Revisions to the Description

The following description was shown to respondents:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Children's Centres</b></p> <p>Children's Centres offer the following services for under fives and their parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Learning while being cared for</li><li>- Health advice and classes e.g. ante natal classes, well baby clinics</li><li>- Support for children with special needs</li><li>- Support for parents e.g. parenting classes, family support sessions</li><li>- Help for parents to find work or training</li></ul> <p>There will be 3,500 Children's Centres, one for every community, by 2010.</p>
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Parents preferred the following wording:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Family Centres or Sure Start</b></p> <p>Family Centres/Sure Start offer the following activities for under fives and their parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Learning through play</li><li>- Health advice from health visitors and midwives e.g. ante-natal classes, baby clinics</li><li>- Support for families with children with special needs</li><li>- Advice and support for parents e.g. parenting classes, family support sessions</li><li>- Advice for parents who want to find work or courses</li></ul>
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Parents either wanted the government to keep the 'Sure Start' name or change the name to 'Family Centres' because the centres are aimed at children and their parents. They consistently fed back that 'Children's Centres' reminded them of a children's home or young offenders institution.

No one understood the phrase "*learning while being cared for*". Several people thought this meant parents would be learning while their children were cared for. Once the phrase was explained, however, nearly all groups spontaneously agreed that this would be better expressed as "*learning through play*".

Some felt 'health advice and classes' might lead people to expect to see GPs, paediatricians and nutritionists at the centre. For this reason, they proposed making it clearer that health visitors and midwives would give the advice.

The word 'support' was sometimes liked and sometimes not. Some disliked the implication that parents were struggling and needed help. Others liked the word because it encompassed the idea of emotional support. Many suggested adding in the word 'advice'.

Some asked for the purpose of the parenting classes to be clarified and an explanation of how the classes would work.

The majority wanted the last bullet point to be amended to show that advice would only be given to those who expressed an interest in finding work or training. They greatly disliked the original wording because this suggested that unemployed people would be pushed – or, at the very least, encouraged – to find work, whether they wanted to or not.

Finally, all respondents recommended deleting the final sentence. They said the key information that they would want to know is whether or not a centre is available in their community, rather than an overview of the government's targets.

### 7.3 *Extended Schools*

None of the parents were familiar with the term 'extended schools' or with the wording used in the description. However, it was clear that this was an issue of language rather than awareness, given that most of those with school age children had talked about breakfast and after school clubs spontaneously before this point in the discussion. Where such clubs were on offer, nearly all parents had used them.

This provision was considered an excellent idea because:

- It gives added flexibility to working mums
- It allows children to spend more time with their friends in a safe environment
- There are no trust issues to overcome because the clubs are held in-school or are endorsed by the school

#### 7.3.1 *Suggested Revisions to the Description*

The original description was as shown below:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Schools Offering Extra Help to Parents and Children Outside Normal School Hours</b></p> <p>Some schools offer extra help and services outside normal school hours, such as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Help looking after children (in primary schools only)</li><li>- Homework clubs</li><li>- Sports, arts and music classes</li><li>- Breakfast and/or after school clubs</li><li>- Parenting and family support</li><li>- Allowing other people to use school facilities including adult training courses and computer classes</li></ul> <p>This is sometimes referred to as 'extended schools'.</p> <p>The extra services can be offered in school or somewhere else and sometimes the schools work with other local organisations to offer these services.</p> <p>Around 7,000 schools are offering these services at the moment. By 2010, all schools will be offering these services.</p>
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The revised version was as follows:

**Extra Activities for Parents and Children Outside School Hours  
OR Before and After School Clubs**

Some schools offer extra activities, such as:

- Homework clubs
- Sports, arts and music classes
- Breakfast and/or after school clubs
- Parenting and family support
- Allowing parents to use school facilities for adult training courses and computer classes\*

Please note that some of these activities may be held in other locations, and that sometimes the school works with local organisations to offer these activities.

\* To be omitted if these are not for parents alone

Parents wanted the description to be more succinct. All took out the reference to 'extended schools' since this was felt to be confusing. As with 'Children's Centres', they were disinterested in the statistics quoted at the end.

The main content was generally clear and understandable. However, they wanted 'services' to be replaced by 'activities' because 'services' are for parents, while 'activities' are for the children. Also, 'help looking after children' seemed to be the same service as that provided by 'breakfast and after school clubs', so the first bullet was deleted.

Respondents also raised a number of questions and issues about the provision itself, namely:

- Parents were keen to know whether the 'other people' who would use the school facilities would be parents or the general public. If schools were opened to the public, even after hours, parents would be concerned about the safety of their children. They also said that the information on adult training courses should not be included in parent communications unless these courses were only available to parents.
- They asked whether childcare would be provided for parents attending adult training
- They wanted the purpose of parenting and family support to be clarified
- On a practical note, parents suggested adding in the finish times of the activities, and also mentioning the costs (or at least, referring to the costs as 'affordable')

#### *7.4 Preferred Communications Channels*

Parents were also asked which communication channels they would most like to see used.

Health visitors and GPs were considered the ideal channels for information related to childcare, as they are widely consulted and trusted. A number of parents mentioned that they had started using Sure Start following a recommendation from their health visitor.

Parents also suggested a range of other communications channels, as shown in the chart below. Targeted channels particularly appealed, such as Bounty packs, leaflets sent out with child benefit information and school newsletters.

## Preferred Communication Channels

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❖ Health visitors	❖ Sure Start
❖ GPs	❖ Local Councils
❖ Local press	❖ Info in Bounty packs
❖ School leaflets/newsletters	❖ Local radio
❖ School notice boards	❖ Posters in colleges
❖ Info with child benefit	❖ Swimming pools
❖ Local 'What's on' leaflets	❖ Bus stops/shelters
❖ Leaflets through door/in post	❖ Town halls
❖ Internet	❖ Mothercare
❖ Libraries	❖ Boots
❖ Free press	❖ Community centres



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**Appendices:  
Discussion Guides**

## **CHILDCARE LANGUAGE SHOWCARDS**

### **FREE EARLY EDUCATION**

Parents of all 3 and 4 year olds can claim a free, early education place for their child for up to 12½ hours a week. The right to a free place ends when the child starts school or at the end of two years.

### **CHILDREN'S CENTRES**

Children's Centres offer the following services for under fives and their parents

- Childcare and early learning
- Health advice and classes, e.g ante-natal sessions or well baby clinics
- Support for children with special needs e.g. speech therapy sessions
- Support for parents e.g, parenting classes, family support sessions.
- Help for parents to find work or training

There will be 3,500 children centres, one for every community, by 2010.

### **SCHOOLS OFFERING EXTRA HELP TO PARENTS AND CHILDREN OUTSIDE NORMAL SCHOOL HOURS**

Some schools offer extra help and services outside normal school hours, such as:

- Help looking after children (in primary schools only)
- Homework clubs
- Sport, arts and music classes
- Breakfast and/or after school clubs
- Parenting and family support
- Allowing other people to use school facilities including adult training courses and computer classes

This is sometimes referred to as 'extended schools'.

The extra services can be offered in school or somewhere else, and sometimes the schools work with other local organisations to offer these services.

Around 7,000 schools are offering these services at the moment. By 2010, all schools will be offering these services.

**Caring for Children  
Discussion guide, Version 3  
Connect Research JN 1228  
September 2007**

*Please note that this discussion guide represents the key areas we aim to cover in each focus group, but that the exact content of the group will be guided by the comments and views of the respondents. This means that we may not ask some questions if we feel the answers have already been given elsewhere. It also means that we will follow up any issues raised by respondents as being important and therefore may cover some areas which are not shown here. Also the amount of time spent on particular sections is likely to vary between groups.*

**A. Introduction and Background**

- Introduce self and Connect Research
- Introduce purpose of the research: ***"I am here this evening to talk to you about how you manage as a mum/dad with children. We are doing a series of sessions like this one to find out about the challenges faced by parents in looking after their children, and also more broadly to understand what types of help parents are aware of and which they prefer. The research findings will be used to help our client communicate more effectively with parents about these issues."***
- Stress independence and explain confidentiality/MRS Code of Conduct
- Discussion will last around 2 hours
- No right or wrong answers; a chance to share your experiences and air your views; everyone to have a say but please speak one at a time
- Explain tape recording and how it will be used (for analysis purposes only)
- Introduce observer, if applicable
- Ask group to turn off mobile phones

Respondents to introduce themselves:

- First name
- Age
- Working status/occupation
- Marital status; household composition; number/ages of children

**B. Warm up**

- What would you say are the best things about being a parent? (Keep this short)
- And what, if anything, do you find difficult or challenging?
  - Prompt for practical difficulties, as necessary
- Tell me about your child's day on a typical weekday....
  - Note any spontaneous mentions of childcare and language used to describe it

### C. Immediate and Extended Family

#### In terms of other members of your family.....

Ask married/cohabiting parents:

- What does your partner do for a living? What hours do they normally work?
- How do you and your partner divide up responsibility for looking after the children? Why so?
  - Are you happy with how this is working?
    - IF NOT, Why not? How would you like to change things and why?

Ask single parents:

- Does your child/ren's father/mother help look after them?
- IF YES, How and when e.g. weekends, evenings, holiday periods etc.? How did you agree on this?

ASK ALL:

- And what about the children's grandparents?
  - Where do they live? Are they working, retired, etc.? Do you and your child/ren see much of them – explore frequency, occasions etc.?
- Have you (or your partner, if you have one) any brothers or sisters? Are they younger/older? Do they have any children? How often do you and your child/ren see them – explore frequency, occasions etc.?
- Do you have any other family living close by?
- IF YES, Who? How often do you see them?

### D. Awareness of childcare

**We are now going to talk about all the different types of help that parents may have with looking after their child or children. I have some cards here and I would like you to write down on separate cards all the places and people you can think of which a parent might use or ask to look after their children if they are unavailable e.g. if they have to go out, go to college or go to work. There are no right or wrong answers; we are just interested in hearing your thoughts on what a parent like yourself might do in this situation.**

(Divide focus group into two and ask subgroups to work together on coming up with a list)

- Once complete, moderator asks each group to share their lists, noting language used (asking for clarification if anything is not clear); then ask:
  - Have you ever used \_\_\_\_\_? Why/why not?
  - What's good about \_\_\_\_\_ from a parent's point of view? Why do you say that?
  - And what's good about \_\_\_\_\_ for the child? Why do you say that?

- What could the problems or downsides of \_\_\_\_\_ be, as far as the parent is concerned? Why do you say that?
- And what could the problems or downsides of \_\_\_\_\_ be, as far as the child is concerned? Why do you say that?

ASK ALL

- As far as you are aware, which of the types of help on the list are available in your local area?

E. Current arrangements

ASK PARENTS OF SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

- Location of child's/children's school? How do they get there? Who takes them/collects them?

ASK ALL

- So, tell me what help, if any, you have with looking after your eldest child (outside of school hours)?

*Prompt as necessary and note language/descriptions used*

- Before and after school
- Evenings
- Weekends
- During school holidays
- Other

FOR EACH FORM OF HELP MENTIONED

- What led you to choose \_\_\_\_\_ (insert as appropriate)? Who else was involved in the decision to choose \_\_\_\_\_?
- How often do you leave your child at/with \_\_\_\_\_? Why?
- (If informal help) Do you pay \_\_\_\_\_ to look after your child?
- Roughly how much do you pay to have your child looked after each week?
- What do you like about \_\_\_\_\_? Why do you say that?
- What difficulties, if any, have you had with using \_\_\_\_\_? What happened?
  - Have you overcome this/these problems? If so, how?
- When did you first start to think about asking someone to help look after your child? What prompted this? How old was your child?

#### ASK THOSE USING FORMAL CHILDCARE

- How did you go about finding someone to look after your child?
  - What sources of information or recommendation did you use and why?
  - What were you looking for?
    - Spontaneous first, then probe
    - Quality of staff/carer (what qualities?)
    - Affordable/low cost (how much is affordable? Current perceived cost?)
    - Location
    - Environment
    - Facilities offered (which?)
    - Number of children and/or staff to child ratio
    - Other (which?)
  - What difficulties, if any, did you experience in finding someone suitable to look after your child? Why do you think this was?

#### ASK ALL

- If your current arrangements had to change, how would you go about finding someone else to look after your child?
  - What would you do differently and why?

#### ASK PARENTS WITH NO REGULAR CHILDCARE

- What are the main reasons why you don't have regular help looking after your child/ren?
- In what situations could you imagine having someone look after your child/ren on a regular basis?
- What would worry you about having someone else look after your child/ren regularly?
  - FOR EACH, PROBE: How could this be overcome? What could be done to reassure you?
- If you wanted to go to school/college/work, how would you go about finding someone to look after your child/ren?
- And what would you look for?
  - Spontaneous first, then probe
  - Quality of staff/carer (what qualities?)
  - Affordable/low cost (how much is affordable? Current perceived cost?)
  - Location
  - Environment
  - Facilities offered (which?)
  - Number of children and/or staff to child ratio
  - Other (which?)

## F. Image of formal and informal childcare

Moderator hands out paper and pencil to each respondent

**I'd now like you to do a short exercise with me where I will say a word and I want you to write down what comes to mind when I say that word (check everyone understands). There are no right or wrong answers; I am just interested in learning more about what this particular word means to you.**

- So, when I say the word *childcare*, jot down the words, phrases or images which immediately spring to mind? (encourage respondents to think as widely as possible)
- Group shares their thoughts; moderator leads discussion of differences and similarities among the responses and asks for reasons for these
  
- Tell me what you think of in terms of the age of child/place/activities when I say the word 'childcare'?
- Would you describe any of the types of help we've talked about so far as 'childcare'? Which and why?
  
- Which other words could be used instead of 'childcare'?
- FOR ALL MENTIONED
  - Which of these would you normally use and why?
  
- And now write down any words, phrases or images which come to mind when I say '*formal childcare*'?
- Group shares their thoughts; moderator explores reasons
- Moderator refers to list group came up with earlier (on cards): Can you tell me which of these you would describe as 'formal childcare'? Why do you say that?
  
- What do you think are the benefits of having your child looked after by someone with formal qualifications e.g. a registered childminder or someone working in a nursery or playgroup..
  - For you?
  - For your child?
  
- (If not spontaneously mentioned), how, if at all, do you think this might help your child's progress at school? Why do you say that?
  
- In general, what do you think are the benefits of having your child looked after by a relative or friend...
  - For you?
  - For your child?
  
- (If not spontaneously mentioned), how, if at all, do you think this might help your child's development? Why do you say that?

- Who would you ideally like to look after your child if you were unavailable for any reason on a regular basis – someone with professional qualifications, a relative/friend/neighbour, a mix of the two etc [Add if necessary: if the barriers we've talked about so far were overcome e.g. money, location]? Why do you say that?
- And what about on a one off or occasional basis – someone with professional qualifications, a relative/friend/neighbour, a mix of the two etc? Why do you say that?
- What might prompt you to switch from having a friend or family member watch your child to putting your child in a more formal setting?

#### G. Awareness and views of specific provision

##### ASK ALL

- Have you heard anything about:
  - Free early education for 3-4 year olds
  - Children's centres
  - Schools offering extra help for parents and children outside normal school hours

##### IF YES

- What do you know about this?
- How did you hear about it? From whom?
- Are you using\_\_\_\_\_ at the moment? Why/why not?

##### IF NO/LITTLE AWARENESS, HAND OUT SHOWCARDS AS APPROPRIATE

- Free early education for 3-4 year olds (Parents with children under 5)
- Children's centres (Parents with children under 5)
- Schools offering extra help for parents and children outside normal school hours (Parents with children at school, including children aged 4 who are in reception class)

ASK FOR RELEVANT PROVISION:

- What's good about this idea? How useful would it be to you?
- What, if anything, puts you off or worries you about this idea?
- I am going to be showing this information to parents like you up and down the country and from all walks of life. How can I make sure that they all understand it? I want to make the description as clear as possible, so help me to do this. (moderator works with group to revise wording)
- What would be the best way to reach parents such as yourselves to tell them about this?
- What should it be called?
  - Spontaneous first, then prompt as necessary
    - For free early education, suggest 'pre-school', 'early education', 'early years' or something else
    - For children's centres, suggest 'family support centre', 'Sure Start centre' or something else?
    - For extended schools, suggest 'breakfast club', 'after school club', 'family/parenting support centre' or something else?

H. Conclusion
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- How would you like to see help for parents improve in the future? Why do you say that?
- How should organisations and/or the government communicate with parents about their entitlements and what is available in their area?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

THANK AND CLOSE

**Caring for Children**  
**Discussion guide for expectant parents, Version 1**  
**Connect Research JN 1228**  
**September 2007**

*Please note that this discussion guide represents the key areas we aim to cover in each focus group, but that the exact content of the group will be guided by the comments and views of the respondents. This means that we may not ask some questions if we feel the answers have already been given elsewhere. It also means that we will follow up any issues raised by respondents as being important and therefore may cover some areas which are not shown here. Also the amount of time spent on particular sections is likely to vary between groups.*

**A. Introduction and Background**

- Introduce self and Connect Research
- Introduce purpose of the research: ***"I have come here today/this evening to talk to you about becoming a parent. We are doing a series of sessions like this one to understand what types of help expectant parents are aware of and which they think they might prefer in the future. The research findings will be used to help our client communicate more effectively with parents and expectant parents about these issues."***
- Stress independence and explain confidentiality/MRS Code of Conduct
- Discussion will last around 1½ hours
- No right or wrong answers; a chance to share your experiences and air your views; both to have a say but please speak one at a time
- Explain tape recording and how it will be used (for analysis purposes only)

Respondents to introduce themselves:

- First names
- Ages
- Working status/occupation; whether work full time, part time, shifts/unsocial hours etc.
- Marital status; household composition

**B. Warm up**

- When is the baby due?
- How are you feeling about everything at the moment?
- What would you say you are most looking forward to in terms of being a parent? (Keep this short)
- And what, if anything, do you think you might find difficult or challenging?
  - Prompt for practical difficulties, as necessary

Ask married/cohabiting parents:

- How do you and your partner plan to divide up responsibility for looking after the baby? Why so?

Ask single mothers:

- How involved will the baby's father be in helping with the baby? Why is that?
- IF WILL BE INVOLVED, What are you planning e.g. as and when or regular, what times/days etc.?

Ask all

- And have you started to think about who else you might ask to help with the baby?
  - IF YES, Who do you have in mind and why?
  - IF NO, Why would you say you haven't started to think about this yet?

### C. Immediate and Extended Family

**So, tell me a little about your family.....**

- Tell me about the baby's grandparents....?
  - Where do they live? Are they working, retired, etc.? How involved do you think they will be in helping you with the baby – why do you say that? What about when he/she is a little older, say 3 or 4 years? Why do you say that?
- Have you (or your partner) any brothers or sisters? Are they younger/older? Do they have any children? How involved do you think they will be in helping you with the baby – why do you say that? What about when he/she is a little older, say 3 or 4 years? Why do you say that?
- Do you have any other family living close by?
- IF YES, Who? How often do you see them? Do you think this might change when the baby arrives – why/why not?

### D. Awareness of childcare

**I'd now like to talk about all the different types of help that parents may have with looking after their child or children. I have some cards here and I would like you to write down on separate cards all the places and people you can think of which a parent might use or ask to look after their children if they are unavailable e.g. if they have to go out, go to college or go to work. There are no right or wrong answers; I am just interested in hearing your thoughts on what a parent might do in this situation.**

(Ask respondents to work together to come up with a list)

- Once complete, moderator asks respondents to share their list, noting language used (asking for clarification if anything is not clear); then ask:
  - What do you think might be good about \_\_\_\_\_ from a parent's point of view? Why do you say that?
  - And what might be good about \_\_\_\_\_ for the child? Why do you say that?
  - What could the problems or downsides of \_\_\_\_\_ be, as far as the parent is concerned? Why do you say that?
  - And what could the problems or downsides of \_\_\_\_\_ be, as far as the child is concerned? Why do you say that?

#### ASK ALL

- As far as you are aware, which of the types of help on the list are available in your local area?
- If you didn't have a relative/friend/neighbour available, how would you go about finding someone to look after your child?
  - What sources of information or recommendation would you use and why?
  - What do you think you would be looking for?
    - Spontaneous first, then probe
    - Quality of staff/carer (what qualities?)
    - Affordable/low cost (how much is affordable? Current perceived cost?)
    - Location
    - Environment
    - Facilities offered (which?)
    - Number of children and/or staff to child ratio
    - Other (which)?

#### E. Image of formal and informal childcare

Moderator hands out paper and pencil to each respondent

**I'd now like you to do a short exercise with me where I will say a word and I want you to write down what comes to mind when I say that word (check understanding). There are no right or wrong answers; I am just interested in learning more about what this particular word means to you.**

- So, when I say the word *childcare*, jot down the words, phrases or images which immediately spring to mind? (encourage respondents to think as widely as possible)
- Respondents share their thoughts; moderator leads discussion of differences and similarities between the responses and asks for reasons for these
- Tell me what you think of in terms of the age of child/place/activities when I say the word 'childcare'?

- Would you describe any of the types of help we've talked about so far as 'childcare'? Which and why?
- Which other words could be used instead of 'childcare'?
- FOR ALL MENTIONED
  - Which of these would you normally use and why?
- And now write down any words, phrases or images which come to mind when I say *'formal childcare'*?
- Respondents share their thoughts; moderator explores reasons
- Moderator refers to list respondents came up with earlier (on cards): Can you tell me which of these you would describe as 'formal childcare'? Why do you say that?
- What do you think are the benefits of having your child looked after by someone with formal qualifications e.g. a registered childminder or someone working in a nursery or playgroup..
  - For you?
  - For your child?
- (If not spontaneously mentioned), how, if at all, do you think this might help your child's progress at school? Why do you say that?
- In general, what do you think are the benefits of having your child looked after by a relative or friend...
  - For you?
  - For your child?
- (If not spontaneously mentioned), how, if at all, do you think this might help your child's development? Why do you say that?
- Who would you ideally like to look after your child if you were unavailable for any reason on a regular basis – someone with professional qualifications, a relative/friend/neighbour, a mix of the two etc [Add if necessary: if the barriers we've talked about so far were overcome e.g. money, location]? Why do you say that?
- And what about on a one off or occasional basis – someone with professional qualifications, a relative/friend/neighbour, a mix of the two etc? Why do you say that?
- What might prompt you to switch from having a friend or family member watch your child to putting your child in a more formal setting?

## F. Awareness and views of specific provision

### ASK ALL

- Have you heard anything about:
  - Free early education for 3-4 year olds
  - Children's centres

### IF YES

- What do you know about this?
- How did you hear about it? From whom?

### IF NO/LITTLE AWARENESS, HAND OUT SHOWCARDS

- Free early education for 3-4 year olds
- Children's centres

### ASK FOR RELEVANT PROVISION:

- What's good about this idea? How useful would it be to you?
- What, if anything, puts you off or worries you about this idea?
- I am going to be showing this information to parents like you up and down the country and from all walks of life. How can I make sure that they all understand it? I want to make the description as clear as possible, so help me to do this. (moderator works with group to revise wording)
- What would be the best way to reach parents to tell them about this?
- What should it be called?
  - Spontaneous first, then prompt as necessary
    - For free early education, suggest 'pre-school', 'early education', 'early years' or something else
    - For children's centres, suggest 'family support centre', 'Sure Start centre' or something else?

## G Conclusion

- How would you like to see help for parents improve in the future? Why do you say that?
- How should organisations and/or the government communicate with parents about their entitlements and what is available in their area?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

THANK AND CLOSE

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