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Research and analysis

Education recovery in early years providers: summer 2022

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Applies to England

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The picture overall

In December 2021 and March 2022, we published [briefings on the continued effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and education recovery in early years providers](#), including childminders and nurseries. The continued effects of the pandemic on children were evident. Providers continued to prioritise the prime areas of learning (communication and language; personal, social and emotional development; and physical development).

This briefing draws on inspection evidence gathered in the summer term in 2022, and discussions with early years inspectors.

Children's communication and language development continued to be affected. An increased number of children have been referred for additional support, although children are having to wait months for this specialist help. Providers are encouraging children's vocabulary development and have returned to learning activities that were commonplace before the pandemic, for example by supporting role play, reading stories and ensuring that children can see the movements of adults' mouths when they speak.

Many children were still lacking confidence in social settings, with some taking longer to settle into nursery or with a childminder than would have been expected before the pandemic. Providers continued to focus on supporting children to work together and develop their sharing, turn-taking and listening skills.

There have been some concerns about children's physical development. The lack of physical activity, including access to large-scale play equipment, during the pandemic has meant that some children have not developed the gross motor skills they need. Some children are lacking in independent self-care skills, such as toileting and dressing, to a greater extent than would usually be the case for their stage of development.

Fewer children are ready for the move up to Reception than would have been expected before the pandemic. Some providers have focused on getting children ready for Reception, which may have meant that younger children did not receive the same learning and development opportunities as pre-school children. Other providers have continued to view every stage of the early years as needing equal priority.

Providers report that they have had fewer than usual 2-year-olds who have taken up their funded places. This could be for a number of reasons. For example, in some cases it might be due to families having a lack of contact with health and other professionals who can tell them about the availability of funded places. In other cases, it might be due to parental anxiety resulting in parents not taking up places.

Despite COVID-19 restrictions being lifted, most providers still do not allow parents or carers to enter the building when dropping off or collecting their children. This is particularly common in nurseries where there are still concerns of a risk of infection to staff.

Most providers have continued to struggle to recruit high-quality qualified staff. Since the start of the pandemic, they have also reported increased difficulties in retaining staff.

Methodological note

In this briefing, we use evidence from routine inspections and focus groups with early years inspectors to show:

- how the pandemic continues to impact on children's learning and development
- how early years providers are helping children to catch up
- how early years providers are adapting to the removal of COVID-19 restrictions
- how sustainability, including staffing, has been affected by the pandemic

The briefing is based on evidence collected during routine inspections of 29 early years providers between 24 April and 13 May 2022. This included 9 childminders and 20 nurseries.

We held discussions and collected insight from 21 early years inspectors. Those taking part had professional experience of inspecting early years providers in the summer term.

We cannot assume that the findings are representative of the whole sector. However, overall they illustrate the challenges that some providers and children are experiencing, and the approaches providers are taking to help children catch up.

The current state of children's education

There is a continued need to focus on the prime areas of learning for the children most seriously affected by the pandemic.

Providers continued to see delays in some children's communication and language development; personal, social and emotional development; and physical development.

Most providers have implemented a range of strategies to help these children catch up with their learning and development. Providers have always cared for children who are behind in areas of their development to a greater extent than others, and the approaches to support these children remain the same.

Communication and language

There continued to be gaps in some children's communication and language development.

Providers have found that more children are needing speech and language support than before the pandemic. Children from all backgrounds have been affected. Providers tell us that some children appear to be spending a significant amount of time on devices such as tablets while they are at home. As a result, they have poorer communication and language skills than those who have had more interaction with adults at home.

Children's speech and language delays have not always been identified as early as they could have been, and most providers have struggled to access the support that they need from speech and language therapists. Providers reported that many children have had limited contact with health professionals or services that may have been able to identify these problems sooner. Some providers have not been able to get advice and support for these children as quickly as they need it. In some local authorities, there is a wait of 9 to 12 months for speech and language intervention, unless parents decide to pay for a private referral. Long waiting times for services and external support mean that the help that childminders and nurseries can give to children becomes even more important.

Strategies and interventions have been put in place to help children catch up. Providers have created more opportunities for children to have back-and-forth interactions with adults and other children throughout the day, in a language-rich environment. This is crucial in enabling children to develop the communication and language skills that underpin all areas of their development.

Providers are also reinstating some learning activities that would have been normal practice before the pandemic, which they say is helping them to teach children what they want them to know and what they want them to be able to do. These were not easily delivered earlier in the pandemic because providers minimised sharing toys and books between children to reduce infection risk. Examples of reinstated activities include playing with soft toys and engaging in role play, which have extended children's way of thinking, ideas and vocabulary. Some providers are also now sending home books and learning activities for parents to do with their children. Providers have found this successful in improving communication and language, but say some children need more targeted support.

Not all providers are giving children the support that they need while waiting for referrals, or providing internal interventions that could resolve delays in learning quickly without the need for external help. However, many providers have arranged staff training to enable the staff to implement strategies to help children catch up. A few providers were able to continue working closely with their local authority, for example to support the provider's staff. An increasing number of childminders and nursery staff have carried out specialist assessment training. This helps them to identify problems with speech development and to put strategies in place. Providers have been in contact with speech and language therapists for advice and strategies to use.

Not all staff and providers have had access to training. It has often depended on how much time and money the local authority has available, so in some cases providers have struggled to release staff for training and to pay for it. The shift to online training was seen as largely beneficial because of time constraints, but some staff members said they would have preferred face-to-face training.

Personal, social and emotional development

Many children were still further behind in personal, social and emotional development than expected.

Providers noted that social skills have been particularly affected. Children have continued to need support with sharing and turn-taking. Staff have recognised that although the pandemic has enabled children to have more time with their families, it has also meant that they have missed social interaction with their peers and the wider community. Some children are very shy when they start at a nursery or with a childminder. They are reluctant to join in or have little confidence when speaking to adults. As a result, providers have continued to focus on children's sharing skills, taking turns, listening, working together and developing children's patience. Self-confidence and social skills have been developed by providers through group games involving small numbers of children.

Some providers have noted that it is taking longer than usual for toddlers and babies to settle. They noticed that some children were getting distressed when they were leaving their parents at the

door. However, this may be a natural reaction for children who have spent longer with their parents, and less time in early education, as a result of the pandemic. Providers are having to use different strategies to settle children better so that they have a positive start to the day and their learning.

Some children do not interact as much as they could do with their peers, especially children who started early years provision after the national lockdowns. To develop children's interpersonal skills, many childminders have built up a social network with other childminders. They take children to groups to meet and play with other children of similar ages to gain those social skills.

Physical development

Some children have not had regular opportunities for physical activity to develop their gross motor skills. For example, children have missed out on using playground equipment and going to soft-play areas.

Providers are giving children more opportunities to develop their confidence through using soft-play and outdoor play equipment. Many have thought about how they can use an outside space to make learning purposeful and meaningful to children. This included providing resources and activities that encourage physical activity, increase children's heart rate, build stamina and develop gross motor skills. Some childminders said they looked for places to visit that provided different spaces and learning opportunities, such as woods or streams, rather than just the playground.

Readiness for the next stage of education

Fewer children are ready for the move to Reception. For the last 2 summers, providers have adapted how they help children through the transition to Reception. One of the main restrictions over the last 2 years of the pandemic was that visits between schools and providers were stopped.

There has been a lot of disruption to children accessing early years provision, such as temporary closures, permanent closures or COVID-19-related isolation. This has meant that some children have missed time at their early years providers. Some providers have prioritised helping pre-school children to be ready for school, but this might have meant that children in other age groups have had less attention.

Most providers are now trying to re-establish previous links and transition processes with schools. These are particularly important where information about health conditions, extra support or specialist training needs to be shared. More generally, most providers are now resuming face-to-

face meetings between schools and children by inviting Reception teachers in and by taking children for school taster sessions.

Providers are focusing on social skills, supporting children in making friends, building confidence and being able to communicate with adults.

Some providers recognise that extra measures are needed for children moving to Reception this September. For example, one provider is hosting a session for school teachers to tell parents what to expect.

Providers have identified that some children cannot yet do things for themselves, such as toileting and getting their cups and plates for snack times. They are providing more opportunities for children to follow instructions, so that they can become more independent. The children are shown how to get their own cutlery, cups and plates. They are taught how to line up to use the toilet and wash their hands. Providers have put routines in place, such as when children should put their own coats on, and have encouraged children to do things for themselves, all of which will help them at school.

Some providers have identified that some children lack confidence and are teaching independent skills to make children feel good about themselves and promote confidence.

All providers need to focus on the prime areas to help children who are behind in basic skills get ready for school. Schools also need to be aware of gaps in children's development, and to respond to these once children are in Reception.

Continued changes to practice and procedures due to COVID-19 restrictions

Providers are no longer required by law to continue with COVID-19 restrictions. Despite this, most have chosen to continue with some restrictions, stating that this is because they do not want to risk staff illness. Providers feel that there is a lack of guidance and direction. They are worried about getting it wrong and so are nervous about easing restrictions.

Interactions between providers and parents

Most early years providers have maintained restrictions on parents or carers entering buildings. Parents are continuing to drop off and pick up at the doorstep. This is less common with childminders, where parents are more likely to enter the building.

Some parents told inspectors that they have not questioned why their provider still continued with door drop-off and pick-up. When asked by inspectors, many were not aware that they could ask to enter the provider's premises. Almost all parents who spoke to inspectors would like to go back to entering the buildings. This is because they believe that early years is an important time for their children's development and they want to engage with practitioners.

Some providers have adapted this restriction: for example, they may have door drop-off in the morning and allow parents to enter the building foyer or similar at pick-up. Staff explain that parents not entering the building helps children to settle better. However, most providers are evaluating their procedures and are now considering how best to start letting parents back into their premises, as they believe that this makes a big difference to children. The providers who are not considering easing this restriction do not appear to be evaluating any potential long-term impact on children.

Communicating with parents and carers is key to building relationships. Parents know their children best and are important advocates for them. Some providers believe that having a conversation at the door at pick-up time is a suitable alternative to parents entering the premises. The opportunities for regular discussions that help children to make progress are more difficult to have at the door than in the learning environment.

Parents not entering providers' premises has affected parent partnerships. For example, parents and providers have missed the opportunity to agree how they will work together to support children's learning and development. Some parents still did not know their child's key person because different staff were responsible for allowing children in and out. If parents do not develop an interest in and engage with early years provision, this may affect how parents engage with their children's schooling in the future.

Providers have continued to use digital platforms as an alternative to face-to-face interaction. Online communication from providers often includes a lot of pictures and a small amount of text. Parents say they would like to know more about what their children are learning. Some parents say they do not check the online platforms and do not know what their children have done. They would prefer a more balanced approach to face-to-face information-sharing and online communication. Some providers are spending a lot of time recording and documenting on apps and this can take some time for staff to complete. For some parents, online engagement has worked better for some things. For example, when parents' evening meetings are held remotely, parents can manage this better around work arrangements.

Restrictions on parents entering buildings create barriers between parents and staff. Staff are less likely to form close enough relationships with parents to be able to assess changes in behaviour and refer risks to the relevant agencies. Similarly, parents cannot be certain that their child is in a safe environment, since they do not regularly enter the buildings. Also, parents cannot see or question poor practice. Potentially, there are safeguarding risks for children if parents continue to be unable to enter premises, especially for vulnerable children and those with child protection plans

in place.

Other changes

Routine local authority visits have continued but at a reduced rate. This means that advice and information that are usually shared and promoted at these visits have also reduced. Some providers have not had a local authority visit for more than 2 years. Some local authority early years services have not returned to pre-pandemic ways of working. They now use telephone calls instead of visits and online staff training in place of face-to-face courses. This has meant that childminders, in particular, might not have had the support and guidance that they need.

The restrictions that providers imposed around not using shared areas, for example book corners and role-play areas, have been lifted in almost all early years provision. Providers have identified that this had a negative effect on children and have mostly returned to pre-pandemic practice.

Most providers have continued to have an increased focus on hygiene. Children have established good routines around handwashing. Providers have also continued to focus on the cleaning of premises. Most providers are still using hand sanitiser for adults. Almost all providers have stopped using face masks. They have found that this has helped to improve children's communication and language.

Most providers are choosing to continue with online staff training, which was introduced during the pandemic. However, some staff say that they are not picking up the content as well as with face-to-face training, especially in relation to safeguarding scenarios. This is particularly the case for the less experienced or less qualified staff. Some providers are prioritising training for the prime areas of learning so that staff can give children the foundations for learning across the early years educational programmes.

Children who are most in need of high-quality education

Many 2-year-old children with funded places are joining with a lower level of personal, social and emotional development and communication and language development than they would have done previously. Providers are therefore having to put more emphasis on developing children's speech. Providers are identifying children's needs and know what support is needed but are finding it challenging to put well-targeted strategies in place quickly.

Although published [statistics from January 2022](#) indicate an increase in the percentage of eligible 2-year-olds taking up funded places, providers in our small sample said that they had fewer eligible 2-

year-olds than before the pandemic. This is a concern when the most disadvantaged children may not be routinely accessing the free education that they are entitled to. It is also not clear how much this varies by region or local area. In addition, some providers said that they were not actively promoting funded places for 2-year-olds due to financial pressures and staffing constraints.

Providers' staffing challenges

The majority of providers have struggled to recruit staff who are well qualified. Many report difficulties in retaining staff, and say this is due to the low pay they offer in comparison with other work available.

A few providers have recruited unqualified staff to meet the legal requirement of the number of staff per children in their setting. While this meets statutory requirements, it does not necessarily provide the best learning experiences for children. It also does not support staff development and a manageable workload.

The challenges in recruiting and retaining staff are having a negative impact on how a provider can plan, both for children's learning opportunities and financially.

In some providers, staff were not always deployed appropriately based on their knowledge and skills. In nurseries, sometimes inexperienced staff were all together in one room, for example in the baby and toddler rooms, so these children may have had fewer learning opportunities compared with older children. This was due to the provider prioritising getting pre-school children ready to move up to school. Good-quality education is important throughout the early years; if younger children are not receiving this routinely, then there is a risk that they will move to the next stage of their development still behind with their learning, and also develop poor attitudes to learning.

In some larger nurseries, staff were being moved from one group of children to another in the day to allow for staff to have a break. This was to maintain ratios throughout the day. This meant that the time children spent with key persons and other staff was sometimes limited, which in turn meant that key persons may not have identified children's learning needs as readily as they could have due to a lack of continuity. Providers reported an impact on children's personal, social and emotional development, particularly their sense of belonging and willingness to take part in activities. Nurseries that were part of a large chain were more able to balance staff and resources across their various sites to enable greater consistency for children.

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