

EARLY MOMENTS MATTER

POLICY BRIEFING

July 2024

The UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) is calling on the new Government to commit to a national Baby and Toddler Guarantee, focusing urgently on improving financial support for families, fixing early childhood education and care sector, and guaranteeing timely mental health support for parents.

Every child in the UK has the right to early childhood development, but too many babies, toddlers and children under 5 are being denied access to the support they need to develop to their full potential. Deep inequities in early childhood outcomes persist, while the support systems that should be in place for our youngest citizens and their parents are failing. Urgent action is needed from the new UK Government to ensure babies and young children are more effectively protected from the consequences of poverty, gain the benefits of quality early education and care, and receive nurturing and responsive care from parents and caregivers whose own mental health is protected and supported.

What babies, toddlers and young children need

The first four years of a child's life are a period of rapid growth and cognitive, social and emotional development. They are the foundations that have a life-long impact on our ability to learn, cope with adversity, be healthy, build strong relationships, and thrive throughout our lives. It is also a time of risk, especially for babies and toddlers facing additional adversities.

UNICEF's Nurturing Care Framework illustrates the holistic range of support needed for early childhood development. It explains that nurturing care is the "set of conditions that provide for children's health, nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning". Not only is nurturing care critical to childhood development, it also protects children from the effects of adversity by lowering their stress levels and encouraging coping mechanisms. For parents/caregivers to provide nurturing care, they need enabling Government policies and supportive services. They also need to be emotionally, financially and socially secure themselves. Families with young children need a social security system that works for them and enables them to give their child the best start in life.

Current state of early years support

Evidence shows investment in early childhood is insufficient, meaning babies, toddlers and children are not getting the best or fairest start in life, and many are going without the basics.

Social security should be a safety net for all, but it isn't currently adequate for families. In the UK, 36% of children in poverty are in families where the youngest child is under five¹. Relative child income poverty² grew more in the UK than in 38 other OECD/EU countries between the periods 2012-14 and 2019-21, with a rise of 20%, while spending on 'cash and family benefits' for children decreased by almost 40%.³ Parents are more likely to see a drop in income once their child is born and when this happens, the social security system should be there to protect them and new babies from poverty.

Early childhood services and support benefit all children, whilst also mitigating against the impacts of poverty. However, services are often inaccessible or unable to cope with demand. This is demonstrated by UNICEF UK's 2022 research⁴ which uncovered concerning delivery gaps and geographical variation of universal statutory early years services in England, such as maternity services and health visiting, as well as parent-infant relationship support and early childhood education and care (ECEC). This year the Government began to roll out its expansion of Government-funded childcare hours for eligible working parents, however, the ECEC sector is facing fundamental funding and workforce challenges, resulting in some providers closing down. The poorest third of children will get no direct benefit from the expansion⁵, while 1.5 million children in England are living in a childcare desert with an average of three children for every one place.⁶ Only 6% of local authorities have enough provision for children with SEND⁷.

There is further evidence that investment in our youngest citizens is falling short. UNICEF's research on investment in early childhood found that the UK was the only country of all OECD countries to report a fall in per capita spending on under 6s between 2013 and 2019 in every category included (cash benefits, childcare, labour market policies and education).⁸ Total expenditure on Local Authority children's services in 2019-20, such as parenting programmes and safeguarding teams, remained £325million per year lower than it was in 2010-11. The most deprived areas experienced the biggest declines in early intervention expenditure.⁹

While the previous government invested £300 million to support families as part of the Best Start for Life Vision, including Family Hubs, this is limited to short term funding to only 75 local authorities and does not provide sufficient investment in underlying core services. This funding is only secured for the short-term, meaning local authorities are unable to plan long-term for consistent service provision.

¹ Child Poverty Action Group reference of DWP annual *Households Below Average Income* data <https://cpag.org.uk/news/child-poverty-reaches-record-high-failure-tackle-it-will-be-betrayal-britains-children>

² Before housing costs

³ UNICEF – Innocenti (2023) Report Card 18: Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/3291/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-18-Child-Poverty-Amidst-Wealth-2023.pdf>

⁴ UNICEF UK (2022) Early Moments Matter Policy Report https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/EarlyMomentsMatter_UNICEFUK_2022_PolicyReport.pdf

⁵ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2023) <https://ifs.org.uk/news/new-childcare-entitlements-have-little-offer-poorest-families>

⁶ New Economics Foundation, 2023, A Fair Start for All <https://neweconomics.org/2023/11/a-fair-start-for-all>

⁷ Coram Family and Childcare (2024) Childcare Survey https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Childcare%20Survey%202024_1.pdf

⁸ UNICEF (2023) Too Little Too Late. P.61 <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/2851/file/UNICEF-Too-Little-Too-Late-Report-2023.pdf>

⁹ Pro Bono Economics (2021) Children and young people's services: Spending 2010-11 to 2019-20 <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=fca940e7-7923-4eb3-90d3-be345f067017>

The state of parental mental health has the potential to impact a baby or child's mental health and their attachment with their child¹⁰. 1 in 5 women experience a mental health problem during pregnancy or in the first two years after birth, with the most common being depression and anxiety, yet most women throughout the UK do not have access to the necessary care.¹¹

Impact on children and families

The inadequate investment in the early years has a tangible impact on children and their outcomes. One in three children in England are not achieving a good level of development under the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, and inequity in outcomes persist: only 51.6% of children eligible for free school meals had a good level of development, compared to 71.5% children not eligible for free school meals - a 19.9 percentage point difference.¹² Disparities in cognitive, social and emotional development are identifiable as young as age 3, affected by factors including socio-economic circumstances and maternal mental health.¹³

The impacts of poverty on children and their outcomes are persistent and damaging, yet more and more children are growing up without enough nutritious food, clothes, resources for learning and play, or a warm home. Furthermore, poverty and financial stress can affect parental mental health and can make it harder for parents to respond to their baby's needs.

To explore the real-world experiences on families in the current social and economic contexts, UNICEF UK undertakes an annual survey of parents of under five year olds. Our latest survey of 2,892 parents in June 2024 presents a picture of the realities facing many parents and the consequences for their young children.

"We have had to delay potty training and other skills due to saving for equipment and developmental toys etc." – 2024 survey respondent

"I am a single parent... My money all goes on my child...I've worked all my life, but **as a single parent providing for a child has been made basically impossible...** These days you now need two incomes to run a household, and family help. I have neither." – 2024 survey respondent

UNICEF UK and YouGov's annual survey of parents with children under 5 shows that:

- 2 in 3 parents (66%) of 0-4 year olds say the rising cost of living has negatively impacted their family life, rising to 76% for those with a low household income.
- 55% of parents negatively impacted by the cost of living have cut down on activities for their children, and/or reduced spending on books, toys and crafting materials.
- Of the parents with a low household income affected by the cost of living,
 - 20% reported they are unable to properly heat their home
 - 21% reported they are struggling to feed their family

¹⁰ Parental mental health conditions are associated with increased risk of child mental health conditions (Campion, 2019; Robinson et al, 2022) and adversely associated with a child's development (Rogers et al, 2020). This is in part due to the impact of the parental mental health condition on attachment.

¹¹ Maternal Mental Health Alliance (2022) A Sound Investment <https://maternalmentalhealthalliance.org/about-maternal-mental-health/>

¹² Government EYFS data <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results>

¹³ Cattán, S., Fitzsimons, E., Goodman, A., Phimister, A., Ploubidis, G. B. and Wertz, J. (2022), 'Early childhood and inequalities', IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Early-childhood-inequalities-IFS-Deaton-Review-2.pdf>

- 26% reported they are skipping meals
- 1 in 7 (14%) parents struggled to afford the essentials when preparing for the arrival of their baby, such as a cot, pram, clothes and toiletries. This rises to 1 in 4 (26%) of those with a low household income.
- 62% of all parents surveyed cite the lack of local, affordable, and quality childcare as one of the biggest challenges they face.
- Almost 1 in 5 (18%) parents surveyed could not take their child to baby groups and other activities to support their child's learning. The figure rises to almost 1 in 4 (23%) of parents with a low household income.
- 63% of parents of 0-4 year olds reported to have struggled with their mental health since becoming a parent. Of these:
 - 14% did not receive the support they asked for
 - 9% were still waiting for the support they asked for
 - 22% did not know that support was available
 - 29% received timely support, and 19% received support which took a long time
- When asked what they worried about the most, parents said: saving for the future (57%), making ends meet (47%), childcare (44%), and children's health and development (44%).

“Everything costs more - fuel, car insurance, utilities, food, etc. as a result, I had to go back to work full time after 4 months mat leave in order to pay the mortgage and bills. **My time with my baby has been drastically reduced which has impacted my ability to bond with my child.** Additionally, I'm unable to afford full time childcare so having to juggle work and childcare which means I'm risking my career and income. If I lose my job, we will lose our home.” – 2024 survey respondent

The economic case for change

In England, the Government spends more than £16 billion each year on remedial steps to addressing issues that might have been avoided through action in early childhood, and this figure is likely to be an underestimate, as it neither includes the later costs of failing to provide the right support early on, nor the losses to the productivity and earnings of individuals over their lifetime.¹⁴ Investing in early childhood could generate at least £45.5 billion in value for the national economy each year. This includes £12.2bn from equipping people with improved social and emotional skills in early childhood, £16.1bn from reducing the need to spend public funds on remedial steps for adverse childhood experiences (as above), and £17.2bn from supporting parents and caregivers of under-fives who work.¹⁵

¹⁴ Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood and London School of Economics (2021), Big Change Starts Small <https://centreforearlychildhood.org/report/>

¹⁵ Deloitte and Royal Foundation (2024) Prioritising early childhood for a happier, healthier society <https://thebusinesscase.centreforearlychildhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Prioritising-early-childhood-for-a-happier-healthier-society-Report.pdf>

Recommendations

The three areas set out below are part of a wider early childhood support system that is needed, as outlined in our policy report, '[Early Moments Matter: Guaranteeing the best start in life for every baby and toddler in England](#)'. As matters of urgency, the Government must:

1. Increase financial support for families with young children

- Remove the two-child limit on the Child Element of Universal Credit which disproportionately impacts third and subsequent children
- Remove the benefit cap which disproportionately affects families with children
- Increase financial support to households with young children, beginning with increasing the value of the Sure Start Maternity Grant and extending eligibility beyond the first child
- Annually uprate benefits in line with inflation to preserve the value of support.

2. Ensure local, affordable, quality early education and care

- Guarantee every child a place in an affordable, local, high quality early years setting by 2030
- Amend the entitlement policy to equalise access to the number of government-funded hours for all children
- Place the sector on a sustainable financial footing by increasing rates for providers to meet the true cost of quality delivery and indexing rates to inflation

3. Improve access to timely mental health support for parents of under 5s

- Ensure parents/caregivers and young children are included in all relevant strategies and plans, as part of a multi-sectoral and life-course approach to mental health
- Ensure health visiting, maternity services and GPs have the capacity, sustainable resources and training to meaningfully include mental health and parent-child relationship checks in every contact with parents/caregivers
- Improve data collection and transparency on mental health outcomes of babies, young children and caregivers (of 0-5s) by publishing a cross-government shared outcomes framework for young children and implementing an updated population level prevalence survey for 0-5s

About UNICEF and the UK Committee for UNICEF

The UK Committee for UNICEF is a UK registered charity that raises funds for UNICEF's emergency and development work around the world and advocates for lasting change for children worldwide. We have also been delivering programmes in the UK for more than 25 years, in line with our universal mandate to be there for every child.

We work in all four nations of the UK reaching around 2.5 million children each year through our Baby Friendly Initiative, Rights Respecting Schools and Child Friendly Cities programmes. We put our years of experience working for children around the world into practice in the places that reach UK children day in, day out. We're working with the hospitals where they are born, the schools where they learn and grow, and the services that shape their lives.

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