

OPENING DOORS: ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES FOR FAMILIES IMPACTED BY POVERTY IN THE UK

OVERVIEW

The UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) and the NSPCC have partnered on this UK-wide research which explores the barriers that prevent parents living on low incomes from accessing early childhood services. The research centres the voices of parents and the professionals who support them.

A child’s first few years of life are a unique period of rapid development. Young children in poverty are more likely to experience lower birth weights, chronic diseases, and developmental issues, leading to long-term disparities in health, education, and economic outcomes.

THE ROLE OF SERVICES IN MITIGATING THE IMPACTS OF POVERTY

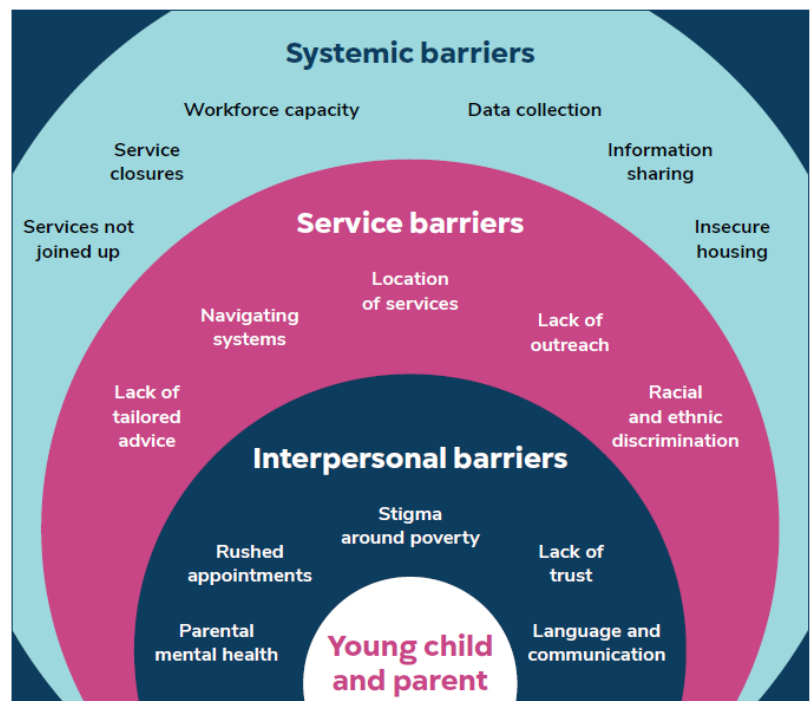
Early childhood services play a vital role in mitigating the impacts of poverty. High-quality local services, such as maternity care, health visiting, and children's centres are essential for healthy development, providing nurturing care, and strengthening parent-infant relationships. Professionals like midwives and health visitors are crucial in identifying health and development needs and referring families to specialist services. Evidence shows that:

- Continuity of care in maternity services [improves birth outcomes](#).
- The Healthy Child Programme [improved outcomes](#) that are strongly associated with reducing later inequality at a population level.
- Sure Start had important sleeper effects: including [reduced hospitalisations](#) and [improved GCSE grades](#).

Yet while babies and toddlers in low-income households stand to benefit the most from early childhood support, they are often the most likely to miss out on it.

Figure 1: Systemic, service and interpersonal barriers to accessing early childhood services

Barriers to accessing early childhood services exist at the interpersonal, service and systemic level



35% of parents on low incomes with children under-5 reported they cannot access children's centres or family hubs in their local area, compared to **23%** of parents on average (UNICEF UK 0-4 parents survey).

AT THE INTERPERSONAL LEVEL | The parent-professional relationship is fundamental to accessing support

- **Parents experienced stigma** around discussing financial difficulties and **feared judgement** when asking for help. A practitioner's approach to sensitive topics is crucial.
- **Continuity of care** improves outcomes and underpins the ability to develop a positive and trusted parent-professional relationship.
- **Early childhood services can provide a gateway to support** that mitigates the impact of poverty on early childhood development.

"It's so overwhelming and I haven't got much food, I haven't got enough for the kids, but then if someone supports you and points you in the right direction... it's like a godsend."

- **Mother, Wales.**

AT THE SERVICE LEVEL | Hard to reach services can create barriers to access and positive engagement

- Parents face challenges **navigating systems** and initiating care.
- Appointments in the home and community-based drop-ins are more accessible for parents and can **limit costs** relating to transport, childcare and time away from work.
- **Tailored advice** and specialist support can mitigate the challenges associated with poverty.

"Don't depend on a woman to just turn up, because she might never know a service exists."

- **Midwife, England**

AT THE SYSTEMIC LEVEL | Systemic barriers must be addressed to provide high quality, joined-up services

- Lack of **workforce capacity and resourcing** places pressure on professionals, and has knock-on effects for young children and their families.
- **Data collection and information sharing** can ensure better integrated support for families and facilitate robust evaluations of interventions.
- Integrated service offers can provide families with the full range of support they need.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **The UK-wide Child Poverty Strategy should set measurable goals to improve access to early childhood services for families on low incomes**, including maternity services, health visiting services and integrated early childhood services.
2. **The UK Government's Mission Delivery Boards on both Health and Opportunities should set measurable goals to improve early childhood health, wellbeing and development outcomes for babies and young children in low-income households by 2030.**
3. **The UK Government should design and commence implementation of a clear plan to rebuild and reform early childhood services**
4. **The UK Government should ensure that early childhood services act as a gateway to support and advice for families experiencing poverty.**