

Universal childcare: is it good for children?



First published: **January 2024**

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ISBN: 978-1-912581-52-8

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Designed by Rubber Duckiee Ltd.

Printed in Great Britain
by 4edge Limited, Essex

*‘Nobody wants to talk about the family,
and the family’s the whole story.’*

- Professor James Heckman

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Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Mothers at Home Matter for providing the time of their research director to complete this work and their ongoing support for this research.

We would also like to thank Frank Young, former director of research and communications at Civitas, for his contribution to this research.

Summary

In its 2023 Spring Budget, the Conservative Government announced plans to increase the number of hours of free childcare available to working parents and to extend the offer of free childcare to children from as young as nine months old. Similar plans to expand state-subsidised provision of childcare have been declared by the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party. These moves towards universal childcare, which have been described as ‘a subsidy to parents for choosing out-of-home care’,¹ are in keeping with an international tendency for ever greater public investment in formal early years care as mothers are returning to work more quickly after having children and working for longer hours while their children are still young.

Universal childcare

Universal childcare refers to a system in which every child from a certain age has access to government subsidised formal care and education before the start of school, regardless of where they live, what their parents do or how much their parents earn. There are many variations to this across the world and some schemes are not fully universal, meaning access is conditional upon parental employment or the entitlement is means-tested. ‘Universal’ is often used to mean childcare provision which includes children from all socio-economic backgrounds, and it is contrasted with ‘targeted’ provision which is focussed on children from disadvantaged families or children living in disadvantaged communities.

Four key narratives provide the rationale for this investment and the political ambition to increase participation in formal childcare amongst children from all backgrounds from the end of maternity leave until school entry. It is claimed that such an investment will:

1. Help to create a more equal society by reducing the achievement gap between more and less advantaged children;
2. Boost the economy through increased female labour participation. Children’s opportunities will be improved indirectly as a result;
3. Empower women by enabling them to enter work or increase working hours. This will also lead to greater gender equality;
4. Enhance the educational, social and emotional development of participating children, regardless of their age or background.

This report examines these four claims in the light of both UK and international evidence. It discusses a number of major problems posed by the research for each of the prevailing narratives on universal childcare. Because for popular legitimacy, claim number four is the most crucial, an extensive review of the literature was conducted focussing on universal childcare schemes and the impact of childcare on children under age three. Covering 40 studies spanning 12 countries and containing mainly large-scale longitudinal analyses, the review clearly shows that formal childcare does not benefit all children. This is true even when provision meets internationally recognised ‘quality’ standards. How formal childcare affects any individual child will depend on multiple different factors, and this includes family circumstances and preferences. The only logical response to this diversity of needs is genuine choice for parents on how and where to spend their childcare entitlement. From the perspective of child development, there is no evidence-based justification for public money to be spent on out-of-home care but not in-home care. Claims about the society-wide benefits of these policies are likewise found to be based on little more than ideological conviction.

¹ Havnes, T. and Mogstad, M. (2010) *Is Universal Child Care Leveling the Playing Field? Evidence from Non-Linear Difference-in-Differences*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp4978.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

The report concludes that, in the realm of early years policy, political leaders and campaigners have become so fixated on universal childcare as the answer that they have forgotten to ask the most important questions: what supports the healthy development of young children, and what do families need in order to create the conditions in which their children can thrive? For some families, affordable, accessible, high-quality professional childcare is the answer. For other families, quite possibly a majority of families, the answer is more rather than less time spent together. The political imposition of a one-size-fits all approach to the care and upbringing of young children is not good for parents,² it is not good for society and it is not good for children.

2 **Note:** A significant body of evidence points to the importance of mothers, especially in the first three years of life. We readily acknowledge that it is not always mothers who are the primary care-givers: sometimes fathers, grandparents or guardians take on this responsibility. Whatever the family circumstances, time and space for early bonding and the formation of strong relationships are the crucial factor in healthy child development.

Main findings

Universal childcare and social equality

- The claim that expanding the offer of universal childcare will create a more equal society by reducing achievement gaps between more and less advantaged children is not supported by available evidence. There is a solid body of evidence showing that, for children older than three who have been identified as having one or more disadvantage in relation to their family or home environment, attending a ‘high quality’ formal childcare setting can in the short term enhance their ability to pass tests on the kind of cognitive and academic skills which are focussed on in formal childcare settings. A smaller body of evidence investigates whether these gains in academic performance last in the longer term, with some studies showing they can persist throughout the school years and some suggesting they fade away before the end of school. There is, to date, very little research on the relationship between attending formal childcare and achievements across the life cycle. It is therefore unknown if modest or even moderate differences in academic scoring at school translate into later educational achievement. It is also not clear that improving exam results across the board translates into better jobs and higher earnings later in life for the children affected. The connection between early formal childcare and social equality remains, as such, largely speculative.
- The international childcare literature consistently finds that children from more advantaged backgrounds are over-represented in universal childcare schemes and that the families where children are most vulnerable do not access free entitlements. Particularly where the focus is on the working population or mothers who have the qualifications necessary for work, universal childcare is likely to subsidise childcare for the children least likely to benefit from it, at the same time as it does not reach the children who would be most likely to benefit. Although this report did not look specifically at targeted childcare or parenting programmes, the findings from the universal childcare literature suggest that targeted provision and direct family support would be a more effective way than universal entitlements to help the children who are most in need of help.
- The research consistently finds that family characteristics, parenting and the home learning environment have a more significant influence on children’s development than childcare. These factors are also more important than family income. The quality of care a child receives in the home can be high or low, independent of the family’s socio-economic status. Formal childcare only offers development benefits for children if it replaces lower quality care. If a parent is able and willing to provide high quality care in the home, then long hours in formal childcare may be detrimental rather than beneficial for the child’s development. Providing a public subsidy only for formal out-of-home care thus puts poorer children with good parents at a further disadvantage relative to children from wealthier families.

Universal childcare and maternal employment

- Forecasts on the likely impact of a full-time childcare entitlement on maternal employment are mixed. Some studies predict that it will significantly increase mothers’ working hours. Others predict that the main effects will be to reduce the cost of living for women who are already paying for formal care and to ‘crowd out’ informal care for children whose mothers are already employed. Research into universal childcare schemes in other OECD countries suggests that any impacts on employment rates have been, at best, modest. Research into the effectiveness of universal childcare schemes in reducing poverty is very limited and again shows, at best, modest results. As a policy tool to stimulate general economic growth the evidence is therefore inconsistent, and as a policy tool for raising the standard of living for low-income families the evidence is weak.

- The assumption that high maternal employment rates improve child development outcomes is not supported by the evidence. Both UK and international research consistently finds that parental income is not the most important factor in children's development, and therefore increasing parental income (either through savings on the cost of childcare or earnings from employment) is unlikely to enhance child development outcomes. Family characteristics, parenting styles and the home environment have the strongest influence on children's behaviour, abilities and achievements. The single most important (non-genetic) factor in child outcomes is the time invested in the child by the child's parents. Increased employment means a reduction in time available for parents to invest in their children. Research tends to show that the longer children spend away from their primary care-giver, the worse their social, emotional and behavioural outcomes. The only way maternal employment could be associated with better outcomes for children is if formal childcare could more than compensate children for the loss of time with parents.

Universal childcare and women's empowerment

- As a public subsidy, universal childcare will help many mothers with the cost of living. It is, however, only one of many ways that mothers could be helped with the cost of living. From a choice perspective, subsidising formal childcare will only help those parents who want to place their children in formal childcare. The assumption that most women want to do so is contradicted by available evidence. Population-wide surveys have consistently found that a large proportion of mothers with young children would like to look after their children themselves rather than outsource this care. The fact that no political party offers political or financial support for the choice of mothers to care for their own children reveals that political leaders are less concerned with responding to what women want than they are concerned with telling them what they ought to want.
- The claim that universal childcare will empower women is not supported by the evidence. Empowerment implies meaningful agency and an ability to live one's life in accordance with one's values and preferences. Within the prevailing narrative on childcare, female empowerment is construed only in terms of a woman's ability to participate in the labour market. A childcare subsidy offered exclusively for professional/formal childcare does not enhance choice, it incentivises work. Although it uses the language of equal opportunities, the childcare campaign displays a preoccupation with socially engineering an equality of outcomes, where equality between men and women means that they have identical priorities and make identical life-choices.
- The push to culturally normalise non-maternal childcare rests on the beliefs that childcare can be shifted from the home to the market with no adverse consequences for children, mothers or society; that a mother's attachment to the labour market is more important than her attachment to her children and family; and that paid employment is both empowering and personally rewarding for women, whereas homemaking and child-rearing are not. While these beliefs are influential in academic and political circles, evidence suggests that they are not representative of the values and beliefs of the general population.

Universal childcare and child development

- The claim that universal childcare will enhance cognitive and socio-emotional development for children from all backgrounds is not supported by available evidence. The only evaluation to date of the English part-time universal childcare entitlement has identified no beneficial effects for any participating children. Research on more well-established and extensive universal childcare schemes abroad has consistently found that, for children who have not been identified as disadvantaged in one or more ways, attending formal group childcare has no significant impact on cognitive development when compared to other types of care. Assuming that the proportion of children who are *not* disadvantaged is greater than the proportion of children who are, then the evidence suggests that not only some but the majority of children exposed

to universal childcare experience no educational benefits. Research on the non-cognitive (that is, social, emotional and behavioural) impact of universal childcare is limited. As such, the claim that universal childcare enhances educational outcomes for all children is directly contradicted by the evidence, and the effects of universal childcare on other aspects of children's development are largely unknown.

- The claim that expanding childcare entitlements (to cover more hours per week and include children at younger ages) will foster the 'education' of babies and toddlers is not supported by available evidence. For children who begin formal group care before the age of three, about half of the studies reviewed found a positive cognitive impact and the other half found limited or no impact for cognitive development for children from any background. Findings on non-cognitive development are overwhelmingly non-positive – that is, what evidence exists indicates that formal childcare before the age of three has either no measured effect or a detrimental effect on children's socio-emotional and behavioural development. In particular, research consistently shows that earlier starting ages and longer hours are linked to an increase in negative emotional and behavioural outcomes for very young children, and this applies to children from a range of backgrounds. Cognitive and non-cognitive development are inextricably linked and the long-term implications of increased socio-emotional problems at a young age are for the most part un-addressed within the literature on the impact of childcare.
- The justification offered to parents for a public subsidy for out-of-home care but not in-home care is that out-of-home care gives children 'the best start in life'. Of the 40 studies reviewed in this report, not one was able to demonstrate that placing children in formal childcare for 30 hours per week from nine months old leads to better long-term developmental outcomes than being cared for at home by their mothers.
- The claim that childcare will be 'good' for all children as long as it is 'high quality' is not supported by available evidence. Even if it were assumed that the government could guarantee that every subsidised childcare setting meets the standard criteria for both structural and process quality in childcare, for formal care to be developmentally 'good' for any individual child the care on offer must be of higher quality than the care that is being replaced for that particular child. This means that the child must receive more one-to-one time and attention in the care setting than he or she would have otherwise received; the provision must offer more learning and enrichment opportunities than the child would have otherwise had; it must offer a more stable and emotionally secure environment and it must have carers who are more sensitive and responsive to his or her needs. The notion that it is within the power or means of the state to ensure that every child has access to formal care that is superior *in every way that matters* to the care provided in a loving family home cannot be described as anything other than sheer hubris. It is a level of hubris that would be absurd were it not for the fact that it constitutes the basis for nation-wide (and increasingly world-wide) early years policy. In that context, it is alarming.

Department for Education Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents

The Department for Education conducts an annual survey of parents and asks a series of questions related to mothers' ideal childcare arrangements. The department has asked the same questions of mothers over a period of 10 years and the responses have seen very little change over that period. The 2022 survey found the following results:

Working mothers of children aged 0-4 years (sample size: 829)

- 37 per cent either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'If I could afford to give up my work, I would prefer to stay at home and look after my children'.³
- 67 per cent either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'If I could afford it, I would work fewer hours so I could spend more time looking after my children'.⁴
- 29 per cent either strongly agreed or agreed 'If I could arrange good quality childcare which was convenient, reliable and affordable, I would work more hours'.⁵

Non-working mothers of children aged 0-4 (sample size: 365)

- 54 per cent either strongly agreed or agreed 'If I could arrange good quality childcare which was convenient, reliable and affordable, I would prefer to go out to work'.⁶

Onward survey

The think tank Onward commissioned J.L. Partners to poll 1,037 parents of children under five in October 2022. The results found that parents were largely supportive of children being looked after by their parents, rather than entering formal childcare.

- 61 per cent of parents said that 'if money were no object, they would prefer themselves or their partner to stay at home and look after their children instead of going out to work'.⁷
- When parents were asked whether 'It is better for a child to spend time primarily with a parent until their second birthday' or 'It is better for a child to attend formal childcare as soon as they are able', the majority of parents (60 per cent) agreed it was better for a child to spend time primarily with their parent until their second birthday.⁸
- Mothers were particularly in favour of this – with 64 per cent agreeing 'it is better for a child to spend time primarily with a parent until they turn two'.⁹
- A similar proportion of parents agreed that 'It is better for a child to spend time primarily with a parent until their second birthday' – with 67 per cent of mothers and 62 per cent of parents overall agreeing with the statement.¹⁰

3 Department for Education (2023) *Childcare and early years survey of parents*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents> (Accessed: 9 November 2023). Table 8.12.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Guillaume, B. (2022) *First Steps: Fixing our broken childcare system*. Onward. Available at: <https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Onward-First-Steps-Version-1.pdf> (Accessed: 9 November 2023).

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

- Fewer than three in 10 (28 per cent) of parents thought it was 'better for parents to work and for their child to enter formal childcare'.¹¹

Centre for Social Justice survey

The Centre for Social Justice survey replicated this result. They found that:

- 78 per cent of parents with children aged 0-4 agreed that they would like to spend more time with their child, but cannot afford to (80 per cent of women and 76 per cent of men).¹²
- 44 per cent of parents of young children (aged 0-4) would like to stop working altogether and 47 per cent would like to reduce their hours to spend more time with their children if they could afford it.¹³
- If finances were not an issue, 49 per cent of parents of children aged 0-4 said they would prefer for themselves or their partner to take care of their child on their own, whereas only 19 per cent of parents currently do so.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Centre for Social Justice (2022) *Parents know best: Giving families a choice in childcare*. Available at: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Parents_Know_Best-CSJ.pdf (Accessed: 9 November 2023).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Introduction: All roads lead to universal childcare

In a speech to the think tank Onward in March 2023, Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Philipson said that the one thing ‘missing’ from the childcare system in England is ‘universality’. The next Labour government will build a ‘modern childcare system that gives families choices, enables parents to work and delivers the best start for every child’. Not only will Labour make ‘high-quality, affordable childcare’ available to all, but it will expand the sector to support families ‘from the end of parental leave, right through to the end of primary school’.¹⁵ (At the time of writing, it remains unclear whether Labour plans to introduce means-testing to their childcare proposals.)

Universal childcare, referring to a childcare entitlement for all parents regardless of their circumstances, income or employment status, is certainly on the agenda for the Liberal Democrats. Their 2019 Manifesto pledges:

‘[F]ree, high-quality childcare for every child aged two to four and children aged between nine and 24 months where their parents or guardians are in work: 35 hours a week, 48 weeks a year’.

This will ensure that parents who want to work can do so ‘knowing their child will be happy, healthy and ready to start school’.¹⁶

In Scotland, 15 hours of free childcare has been available for three- to four-year-olds (and eligible two-year-olds) since 2014, and this was increased to 30 hours per week in 2021. In one of his first policy announcements, the new First Minister of Scotland, Humza Yousaf, promised to ‘accelerate the rollout of free early years education for one and two-year-olds in Scotland’, again as part of the effort to ensure that the youngest Scots have ‘the very best start in life’.¹⁷

Although not going as far as unconditional universal provision, the current Conservative UK Government has also committed to a significant increase in state-funded childcare in England, both in terms of the number of hours per week children can attend and the age at which they can start. The 2023 Spring Budget announced an offer of ‘30 hours a week of free childcare for 38 weeks a year, for eligible working parents of children aged 9 months to 3 years’ to be rolled out in phases from 2024. The Government claims ‘this will help with the cost of living, support education for the youngest children, and remove one of the biggest barriers to parents working’.¹⁸

This cross-party political consensus on childcare is in keeping with an international trend toward greater public investment in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Childcare is increasingly being regarded as a basic public service and an integral part of state infrastructure. The Nordic countries are frequently held up as exemplary models because of their accessible, affordable and high-quality childcare systems. According to UNICEF, if it meets all three of these criteria, ECCE has the potential not only to ‘help parents return to work’, but ‘improve children’s social and cognitive development’ and ‘promote a more equitable society’.¹⁹

Three things are immediately clear from the selected quotations above. Firstly, an expansion of childcare provision, whatever form it finally takes, is the direction of travel in this country. This means an increase in the number of hours per week/year of free (or cheap) formal childcare available to parents of young children.

15 Phillipson, B. (2023) ‘Our focus will be on reform’—Bridget Phillipson’s speech on childcare. Available at: <https://labourlist.org/2023/03/our-focus-will-be-on-reform-bridget-phillipsons-speech-on-childcare/> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

16 Liberal Democrats (2019) *2019 Manifesto*. Available at: https://www.libdems.org.uk/fileadmin/groups/2_Federal_Party/Documents/From_NB/Stop_Brex-it_and_Build_a_Brighter_Future.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

17 Bol, D. (2023) ‘Humza Yousaf repackages SNP pledge on childcare expansion’, *The Herald*, 28 February. Available at: <https://www.heraldsotland.com/politics/23351635.humza-yousaf-repackages-snp-pledge-childcare-expansion/> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

18 HM Treasury (2023) *Spring Budget 2023*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1144441/Web_accessible_Budget_2023.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

19 Gromada, A. and Richardson, D. (2021) *Where Do Rich Countries Stand on Childcare?* UNICEF. Available at: <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1203-where-do-rich-countries-stand-on-childcare.html> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

Secondly, the offer will be extended to children at younger and younger ages, effectively bringing babies and toddlers within the broad remit of state-funded ‘education’.

Thirdly, subsidised childcare is a political strategy with a striking number and variety of hoped-for outcomes. These range from explicit and concrete goals, such as increasing employment rates for women, to vague and unmeasurable social desiderata, such as making life ‘better’ and people ‘happier’, with a considerable amount in between. In a paper analysing the impact of childcare on poverty, McKendrick et al list no fewer than 26 social benefits which ‘may’, ‘might’ or ‘could’ be the result of government investment in childcare services.²⁰

Undoubtedly, there is a great deal riding on this package of childcare-related policies and political priorities have shifted over the years. Once objectives have been disentangled from political rhetoric, however, it is possible to identify four core claims which lie at the heart of this movement toward formalising and standardising the care and upbringing of very young children. It is belief in the accuracy of these claims which gives the agenda both legitimacy and popularity.

The aim of this report is to outline these claims and examine them in the light of available evidence on universal childcare schemes from both the UK and abroad. The report will explore the potential impact of these policies on children generally and on very young children in particular.

20 McKendrick, J.H. et al (2022) *Rapid Review of Evidence on the Impact of Childcare on Parental Poverty, Employment and Household Costs in Low-income Families*. Glasgow Caledonian University. Available at: https://www.gcu.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/143296/Rapid-Review-of-Evidence-on-the-Impact-of-Childcare-on-Parental-Poverty-FINAL-221211.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

Childcare narratives: What claims are made about the benefits of childcare?

Universal childcare will create a more equal society

One of the most consistent claims underpinning the shift from traditional, family and community-oriented child-rearing to state-subsidised, predominantly centre-based childcare that has occurred across all industrialised countries since the 1990s is that access to affordable, good-quality early childcare could break the ‘cycle of disadvantage’ which sees poorer children more likely to perform badly at school and find themselves in low paid jobs in later life. It is well documented that high-quality, intense and targeted early intervention programmes can improve test results at school age for specific groups of children, for instance those from families with a low socio-economic status (SES) or from immigrant or ethnic minority communities.²¹

Today, promoting social equality continues to be one of the main goals of state-sponsored childcare and it is often presented in terms of reducing the ‘attainment gap’ or pushing ‘social mobility’ in an upward direction. Social mobility refers to change in a person’s socio-economic situation, either in relation to the person’s parents or within his or her lifetime, and it tends to be measured in terms of income, social class, health and education. It is theorised that if childcare can boost skills and education at an early age, this will have a long-lasting effect and increase the child’s overall earning and achievement potential. Helping more disadvantaged children to become ‘school ready’ was one half of the so-called ‘double dividend’ of benefits proclaimed by the Labour Party when childcare entitlements were introduced in England,²² and both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have re-iterated this commitment in more recent manifestos and speeches. Labour leader Keir Starmer, for instance, has called for a ‘national strategy’ to ‘close the education gap at every stage in a child’s development’.²³

The notion that more children in formal childcare enhances equality of opportunity is echoed in the media and has become something of an axiom in childcare discourses. In the *Guardian*, for instance, we are told that ‘decent childcare... improves social mobility and a child’s emotional and social development’.²⁴ Interviewed on Radio 4’s Westminster Hour, Joeli Brearley (founder of the increasingly prominent organisation Pregnant Then Screwed) stated:

*Early years education has a positive impact on social mobility, it can help to close the attainment gap between the richest and the poorest children...when early years education takes place outside of a formal setting ... there is the potential of increasing the attainment gap.*²⁵

These examples illustrate one of the most important public messages surrounding childcare policy; namely that when children are cared for at home (where there is an absence of ‘quality control’) the outcome is less good for society than when they are cared for in formal settings by professional carers and educators. The examples also illustrate how separate issues are commonly conflated in this conversation. Asking for help for parents with the costs of childcare is one thing, and perfectly legitimate in its own right; asserting that more children in formal childcare will constitute a net good for society is entirely another; nor does it necessarily follow that what is conceived of as a good for society will be good for all children. This report treats these assumptions separately and examines each in turn.

21 See, for example, Elango, S. et al (2015) *Early Childhood Education*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp9476.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023)

22 Blanden, J. et al. *Evaluating the Impact of Nursery Attendance on Children’s Outcomes: Final Report*. University of Surrey and UCL. Available at: <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/sites/default/files/evaluating-the-impact-of-nursery-attendance-on-childrens-outcomes-final-report.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

23 Whittaker, F. (2020) ‘Starmer demands taskforce to close attainment gap’, *Schools Week*, 22 September. Available at: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/starmer-demands-taskforce-to-close-attainment-gap/> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

24 Omer, N. (2022) ‘Thursday briefing: How to tackle the crumbling early-years childcare crisis’, *The Guardian*, 8 December. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/08/thursday-briefing-first-edition-soaring-childcare-costs-parents> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

25 BBC Radio 4; The Week in Westminster: 19th November 2022

Universal childcare will boost the economy by increasing female labour participation

The second plank of the ‘double dividend’ is that more funded childcare will boost the economy. There are a number of ways this may be achieved, but the claim that has been at the forefront politically in recent years is that it will do so by increasing employment rates among women with young children. The Conservative Party have announced their childcare plans as part of a package of policies targeted at people who are ‘inactive due to their caring responsibilities’.²⁶

This narrative often describes a lack of affordable, accessible childcare as a ‘barrier’ between mothers and paid employment but, of course, in actual fact it is the task of raising children which is the ‘barrier’ – and childcare is being offered as a way to resolve the tension created by the need to reproduce the next generation of workers on the one hand and the political goal of high employment on the other. A key aim of the current Conservative Government is thus to encourage more parents to outsource the care of their very young children, in the interests of overall economic growth. The Government estimates that by 2027/8 the increase in childcare hours will translate into 60,000 more part-time workers and will also have enabled 1.5 million mothers already in work to work more hours.²⁷

The debate is ongoing as to whether this spending, expected to be ‘in excess of £8 billion’²⁸ within the next five years, makes sense from a purely economic perspective. The focus in this report, however, is the likely or possible impact on children. Broadly speaking, it can be argued that what is good for the economy is good for children. More specifically in the childcare context, the reasoning appears to be that maternal employment will increase household income, which in turn will enhance opportunities for children within these households, leading to an improvement in their development. To examine this claim, then, it would need to be determined, firstly, if universal childcare entitlements increase labour participation. Secondly, if the answer is affirmative, does this improve material circumstances in real terms for the families involved? Thirdly, if the answer is again yes, does this translate into ‘better’ outcomes for children, and how are these outcomes defined?

This is a rather complex chain of questions. Within the childcare literature, any increase in female employment is presented as an unequivocal ‘good’, yet the relationship between this and children’s outcomes is rarely analysed within that same literature.²⁹ Questions remain about how any advantages for children produced by a family having more disposable income might be offset by the cost to children of mothers having less time to spend with them. Moreover, while free childcare will certainly help families with the cost of living, it is by no means the only way to do so.³⁰ In a similar way to academic test scores, maternal employment has become something of a surrogate outcome in the overall argument about how children benefit from ECEC and it also warrants closer examination.

26 HM Treasury (2023) *Spring Budget 2023*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1144441/Web_accessible_Budget_2023.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

27 OBR (2023) *Economic and fiscal outlook*. Available at: https://obr.uk/docs/dlm/uploads/OBR-EFO-March-2023_Web_Accessible.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

28 Coutinho, C. (2023) Fees and Charges. *UK Parliament: Written answer*, 6 June. HC 185436. Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-05-16/185436/> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

29 There is another strand of the literature which does investigate the relationship between maternal employment and child development. See, for example, Huerta, M. et al (2011) ‘Early Maternal Employment and Child Development in Five OECD Countries’ *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*. No. 118. OECD. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/48822253.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

30 For instance, childcare subsidies paid directly to families, family-friendly taxation and affordable housing are just some of the ways that costs of living could be eased for families. See, for instance, Perry et al (2023) *Who Cares? The Real Cost of Childcare*, ARC. Available at: <https://www.arc-research.org/research-papers/the-real-cost-of-childcare> (Accessed: 3 November 2023). Another option is to increase the Marriage Allowance. See: Centre for Social Justice (2022) *Parents know best: Giving families a choice in childcare*. Available at: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Parents_Know_Best-CSJ.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

Universal childcare will empower women

A third narrative around childcare that has come increasingly to the fore in recent years is that it is giving women what they want and/or giving them what they need. In the latest Spring Budget, the Government stated that closing the gap between the end of maternity leave and the start of free childcare at age three will mean parents are ‘empowered to work sooner to support their families and progress their careers.’ According to Labour Minister Bridget Phillipson, ‘most women want to be able to work when they’ve reached the end of their parental leave’.³¹ The Liberal Democrats state that:

*‘Parents wanting to go back to work will get the help they need, knowing that their child will be happy, healthy and ready to start school’.*³²

A selection of headlines from just one major newspaper tells the same story: ‘Childcare costs are the reason why many parents don’t return to work’; ‘It’s cheaper not to work: childcare shortage in England puts strain on parents’; ‘Two thirds of women say childcare duties affected career progression’; ‘Actually, Jeremy Hunt, many stay at home mums want to work. This is why we can’t’.³³

Again, there are several issues to untangle here. Certainly, many mothers will welcome a reduction in the cost of childcare. This ought not to be equated, however, with the idea that, all other things being equal, a majority of mothers with very young children would make the choice for someone else to care for these children while they are busy earning a living. Additionally, wants should be distinguished from needs; the financial pressures which mean families require dual incomes to make ends meet have arguably been exacerbated by government policy.³⁴ If the set of childcare policies being proposed are ‘solutions’ to problems at least in part created by another set of policies, then presenting the policy as a response to ‘need’ is disingenuous. Furthermore, when parents are asked if they support public investment in free childcare, the questions are not posed in a neutral context. Mothers are asked to assume that the childcare on offer will be high quality (‘as good as’ maternal care) and they are strongly encouraged to believe that taking up the offer will give their child the ‘best’ chance of success in life.

Interestingly, given that women’s empowerment is a core component of the self-described ‘feminist’ perspective on early years care, the narrative makes no direct link between women’s empowerment and benefits for children. That is to say, although benefits for children are part of the narrative, these are presumed to derive from outcomes associated with one particular choice, not with greater choice per se. It is not because, having more options, mothers will be able to make the decisions they feel are in their own and in their children’s best interests that children’s prospects will be improved. Rather, children’s educational and social development will be enhanced directly through participation in formal childcare and indirectly through increased family income, after mothers have entered paid employment. Since within this narrative all progress for women, children and society is dependent on mothers increasing their participation in the labour market, its main purpose is to promote that outcome. What is more, since mothers making alternative choices could undermine this objective, policy provisions which would broaden the range of childcare options available to mothers (such as schemes in Finland, Norway and Estonia offering support for mothers at home) are conspicuously absent from all party proposals on childcare reform.

31 Weale, S. (2022) ‘Labour plans expansion of state nursery sector in England to ease pressure on parents’, *The Guardian*, 5 November. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/nov/05/labour-plans-expansion-of-state-nursery-sector-in-england-to-ease-pressure-on-parents> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

32 Liberal Democrats (2019) *2019 Manifesto*. Available at: https://www.libdems.org.uk/fileadmin/groups/2_Federal_Party/Documents/From_NB/Stop_Brex-it_and_Build_a_Brighter_Future.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

33 *The Guardian*. ‘Childcare’. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/money/childcare> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

34 Mothers at Home Matter (2015) *Who Cares about the Family?* Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ed9e68a9557ec2f11733586/t/5efcb24e5eddbbd4e09fa6f42/1593619027807/Who+Cares+about+the+Family+Jan2015+spreads.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023); Stewart, K. and Waldfogel, J. (2017) *Closing gaps early: The role of early years policy in promoting social mobility in England*. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Closing-Gaps-Early_FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

Universal childcare will enhance children's social, emotional and cognitive development

The fourth claim, and the most crucial one from the standpoint of popular legitimacy, is that attending formal childcare will benefit children educationally and developmentally. As we have seen, spokespeople for all political parties in the UK have proclaimed these benefits at the same time – and in some cases almost in the same breath – as they have announced that free entitlements will be increased to 30 hours and extended to infants from nine months. In the Spring Budget the Government stated that its childcare plans would ‘support education for the youngest children’. The Women’s Budget Group argues that ‘Providing free and universal childcare will enhance children’s social interaction and education with knock-on effects on future outcomes’. In addition to fostering gender equality, the ‘care economy’ will provide ‘enhanced outcomes and genuine social mobility for all children’.³⁵

Frequently, it is not directly stated but strongly implied that ‘positive outcomes’ that have been found in connection to childcare for certain groups of children can be generalised to the whole population. Affirming that ‘high-quality early years education was clearly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds’, Shadow Education Secretary Phillipson went on to say that she wanted Labour’s offer to ‘benefit all parents, including many professional parents who find that the cost is crippling’.³⁶ The message to the public is loud and clear: there is evidence for the positive developmental impact of childcare; this applies equally to part- and full-time care and this can be applied to children from all backgrounds and of all ages.

Quality in childcare

The question of quality is central to the childcare debate and all claims about the positive impact of childcare are predicated on the provision being ‘high quality’. Quality in childcare refers to a number of ‘structural’ and ‘process’ indicators. Structural quality indicators include the level of staff qualifications, the staff-to-child ratios and the age-appropriateness of the curriculum being delivered. Process quality indicators include the levels of care, nurturing and support staff are able to provide and relates to the day-to-day experiences of the children. Although both structural and process indicators are important ‘the interplay between them is complex’ and only when they work together can a setting be deemed ‘high quality’.

Once again, there are many different dimensions to this claim. One line of questions relates to who the policy is designed to benefit and who it is most likely to benefit. There is a group of women, for instance, who are already employed and paying for childcare. Subsidised childcare will reduce their costs and so benefit them financially. Whether the children of ‘professionals’ benefit from being in formal childcare is a separate question and one that is rarely asked and never answered within the public discourse on childcare.

Then there is a group of mothers who are already employed and their children are being looked after informally by family and/or friends. A free entitlement means that these women can transfer their children from informal to formal childcare. The impact on the child will depend on the relative quality of these two alternatives. If, for instance, haphazard care arrangements are replaced by stable, consistent, sensitive and individualised care, the child’s situation may well be improved. However, this is an argument for stable, consistent, sensitive and individualised care, not formal childcare per se. If a child’s development can be enhanced by formal childcare that meets these criteria, then it can equally be enhanced by supporting mothers (or extended families) to provide this type of care themselves.

35 de Henau, J. (2015) ‘Costing a feminist plan for a caring economy: The case of free universal childcare in the UK’, *Open Discussion Papers in Economics*, No. 79, The Open University. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/147530/1/832958700.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

36 Weale, S. (2022) ‘Labour plans expansion of state nursery sector in England to ease pressure on parents’, *The Guardian*, 5 November. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/nov/05/labour-plans-expansion-of-state-nursery-sector-in-england-to-ease-pressure-on-parents> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

Finally, we have a group of mothers who are not working and their child is being cared for at home. Whether the policy is likely to impact these children depends again on the individual circumstances; more specifically, why is the mother not working and why is the child not in some form of care? The situation of the child whose mother has either the financial means – or has made the financial sacrifices – to remain at home with her child through choice is vastly different to that of the child whose parents are unable or unwilling to work for other reasons.

A second line of questions relates to how the term ‘benefit’ is defined, how it is measured and how do these relate to both the needs of children and the values and priorities of parents? As we have seen, the explicit intention of the Conservative Party’s childcare proposal is not just to reduce the childcare costs of mothers who are already working, but to encourage mothers with young children to increase the hours they are working and to encourage those who are not working back to work after maternity leave. The implicit aim, therefore, is to reduce the number of babies and toddlers who are cared for exclusively at home by their mothers and to increase the time that babies and toddlers who are already in care spend away from their mothers.

If it is being claimed that substituting maternal care with formal care enhances child development, then it is also being claimed that everything that matters when it comes to child development not only can be provided by professionals but is better provided by professionals; and, moreover, in order to make these claims it must be true that everything that matters when it comes to child development has been rigorously investigated and the results are conclusive. This narrative thus rests on a set of extraordinary claims. The main aim of this report is to examine the extent to which these claims can be substantiated.

Some problems with the evidence base

As with any controversial topic, there is a tendency on both sides for sweeping statements. With research studies the devil is very often in the detail. Analyses of the impact of childcare on children have to take into account a huge number of variables, including the age of the children, the socio-economic status of the children, the quality of the children's family relationships, how stimulating is the home environment, the type of childcare setting (that is, is it individual, small or large group) and the quality of the childcare setting. General claims are therefore very difficult to make on the basis of existing evidence and it is far easier to establish what is *not* supported by the evidence than what in fact is.

What is more, the word 'evidence' itself does not always mean what we think it means. The quality of findings in a study can only be equal to the accuracy of the input data and soundness of the methodology, and these vary considerably from study to study. This is especially important when we are talking about what are often tiny statistical differences in highly specific measured outcomes between groups of children. For example, what are presented as 'significant' findings in a study's abstract might in fact be supported by an effect of only 'borderline statistical significance', i.e. there is not a high level of certainty that the result is more than just chance. Or the effect may be of very small magnitude: if children cared for in one way score half a point higher on a particular performance scale than other children, is that really enough to base an entire system of childcare on, overriding all other considerations? Or, to take another example, the project might be based on a sample of 123 children from a small Swedish town more than 20 years ago, and therefore might not necessarily generalise to the whole of the UK in 2024. Whatever position is being advocated, one would be hard pressed to argue for a nationwide policy on the basis of such modest results. This only emphasises the importance of paying attention to the detail and looking at evidence accumulatively rather than singling out individual studies.

Another complication arises when attempting to define the terms 'benefit' and 'harm'. One type of setting might have a positive impact on children in one area of development (for example, verbal ability) but a negative impact in another area (for example, behaviour regulation). Indeed, this is exactly what several large-scale studies have shown. Thus, it remains a largely subjective determination whether the children's experience is overall more positive or negative, in that it will depend on the relative importance the observer places on different developmental characteristics and achievements.

While the majority of studies focus on academic achievement (numeracy, literacy, school readiness and cognitive functions), educational and developmental research is increasingly showing that academic, behavioral and social-emotional competencies do not develop in isolation from each other, rather they are 'intertwined and complementary'.³⁷ Identifying and categorising effects is thus an extremely complex process. Moreover, researchers can measure only what is measurable and what is measurable is not necessarily always the same as what is most important for the children themselves, to parents and for wider society.

Another term which has no standard definition is the term 'disadvantaged'. Most studies sub-divide children according to family characteristics, often in terms of the parent's education and income but also in relation to other characteristics, such as whether the family is native or non-native or whether the household is a dual or single-parent one. Because the terms 'disadvantaged' or 'low socio-economic status' are defined differently in different studies, when we speak more broadly about the effects of formal childcare on 'more' or 'less' advantaged children, it is not always clear who exactly these children are and what proportion of the population they represent.

37 Liew, J. and McTigue, E.M. (2010) 'Educating the whole child: The role of social and emotional development in achievement and school success'. In Kington, L.E. (Ed.) *Handbook of Curriculum Development* (pp. 465-478). Nova Sciences Publishers, Inc. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267952676_Educating_the_whole_child_The_role_of_social_and_emotional_development_in_achievement_and_school_success (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

Yet another problem is that there is a great deal of variation not only in childcare systems internationally but also in arrangements for parental leave and other family policies. The Nordic countries typically have generous paid leave, family-friendly support schemes, and fairly uniform quality across the childcare sector; in contrast to the United States, which has limited maternity leave and a less regulated childcare sector. Children in the US therefore will tend to enter childcare at a younger age and be in care for longer hours. Difference in school starting age is also something to consider. In the Nordic countries where the school starting age is later, children can be in pre-school from age three to six, whereas in the UK three years of pre-school would mean starting at the age of two. Again, what this tells us is that while studies from abroad are certainly useful in building a broader picture, their findings might not be directly applicable or relevant to a UK context.

Further difficulties arise due to the fact that the majority of studies take non-maternal care for granted. In other words, they investigate the relative impact of different types, quality and intensity of non-maternal childcare rather than comparing maternal childcare to formal childcare. Although use of formal and informal childcare has increased dramatically in the last decades, presumably making it more difficult for researchers to establish a home 'control' group, it cannot be impossible to do so. According to figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, 20 per cent of English families with children aged one and two use neither formal nor informal childcare.³⁸ This is still a substantial proportion of the population (a proportion that will be higher in some countries and lower in others). Given that the social-cultural trend is towards the normalisation of non-maternal childcare for more and more hours at younger and younger ages, it would seem to be of vital importance to examine the characteristics of these families and compare outcomes for their children – across a *broad range* of measures – to the outcomes of children cared for mainly in formal settings.

A final challenge when dealing with the evidence on the effects of childcare are the problems of political and ideological bias. Particularly with universal childcare schemes, evaluation and analysis are taking place after considerable financial and political investment has already taken place, so there is significant incentive in institutional research (and media reporting on such research) to find that policies have had a positive effect. To cite one example, the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) commissioned by the Department for Education states as its aim to explore not *whether* but *how* ECEC can 'give children the best start in life'.

As we will see, a tendency to emphasise positive associations and downplay negative or absent associations is evident across the international literature. This is not to suggest that researchers have anything other than the best of intentions; but rather to note that they are operating within a political and academic milieu that has already decided that replacing maternal childcare with professional childcare (so that mothers can work) constitutes progress for society. This 'progressive' outlook is explicitly stated within the literature itself. Where a preference for maternal care is detected, it is attributed to 'traditional gender role definitions', 'conservative cultural contexts', and 'patriarchal norms'. In other words, it is an outlook which (at its most extreme) does not allow for the possibility that a mother's desire to be with her baby can exist independently from her education, culture or political leanings.

Whether this is an ideological or an evidence-based position will be considered later in this report. For now, the point is that, to date, appraisals of the evidence on childcare have been carried out overwhelmingly by a community of researchers who are themselves thoroughly immersed in the narratives described above; narratives which see the academic, political and media establishments firmly in lockstep.

Of course, bias works both ways. As a stay-at-home mother advocating for other mothers who wish to spend more time with their children, I also cannot claim a neutral starting point. The balance, however, is at present heavily tipped in one direction. While the benefits of formal childcare are being widely and noisily promoted, there is no equivalent public conversation about the benefits to children of being looked after predominantly by their own parents in the first three years of life, nor indeed what rewards might be reaped for society by supporting them to do so. This is true despite there being a substantial body of research which demonstrates

38 Farquharson, C. and Olorenshaw, H. (2022) *The changing cost of childcare*. IFS. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/changing-cost-childcare> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

the importance of the maternal relationship in early neurological, psychological and physical development.³⁹ Having said that, the aim of this report is not to 'prove' that children need their mothers. The aim of this report is to critically assess the evidence that is being presented as 'proof' that children (at least for 30 hours per week from the age of nine months) do *not* need their mothers. In other words, I take the view that if a concerted effort is being made to weaken traditional values and alter what is 'normatively acceptable'⁴⁰ in society, then the burden of proof is on those responsible for this social engineering to demonstrate that their position rests on solid foundations.

39 For a list of relevant publications, see Early Years Commission (2020) *Written evidence submitted by Mothers At Home Matter*. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ed9e68a9557ec2f11733586/t/5f07776bc17252309b38cf99/1594324846563/June+2020+Early+Years+Commission+submission+Mothers+at+Home+Matter.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

40 Oehrli, D. et al (2022) 'How Does the Provision of Childcare Services Affect Mothers' Employment Intentions? Empirical Evidence from a Conjoint Experiment', *Journal of Social Policy*. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-social-policy/article/how-does-the-provision-of-childcare-services-affect-mothers-employment-intentions-empirical-evidence-from-a-conjoint-experiment/D2E27F3FE68DC854863DD972EA0C5595> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

Review of the evidence

Although early years education and care (ECEC) generally refers to any non-maternal care provided from birth to school age, for the purposes of assessing the child development claims outlined above I have limited my review of the literature to two areas. Firstly, because the cross-party political agenda rests on the assumption that participating in formal childcare is developmentally beneficial for the general population of children, not merely for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, I have focused on studies which look at universal childcare, that is, predominantly centre-based programmes in which children from all backgrounds are included. Targeted programmes are not the same as universal programmes. They tend to be more intense, highly regulated and resourced and with a more qualified workforce than large-scale, universal provision. Research on the former (predominantly from the United States) therefore although often referenced in support of investment in ECEC is not necessarily relevant to the debate about universal childcare.⁴¹

A search of the literature (using Google as well as following-up citations) produced 15 studies which included the term ‘universal childcare’ in the title and/or referred to large-scale, government subsidised childcare programmes. These studies examined both short and long-term effects, covered a range of cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes and draw from databases in six different countries. In addition, three meta-analyses which specifically examined the impact of universal childcare schemes were included. Studies which focused only on outcomes for disadvantaged children were excluded, as were meta-analyses which were only or mainly concerned with disadvantaged populations. However, all of the studies sub-divided samples according to different family and socio-economic characteristics therefore it is possible to draw conclusions relating to the impact on children from different backgrounds.⁴²

Secondly, because the UK government is proposing to extend childcare entitlements to children between the ages of nine months and three years, also on the assumption that this will be developmentally enhancing, I have carried out a separate review (with some inevitable crossover) of studies which concentrate on children under the age of three.

There is a broad consensus that the first three years of life are the most crucial in terms of emotional, social and cognitive development and that the experiences a child has in this period can influence the course of his or her whole life. Studies on the impact of childcare, however, have mainly focused on children in the pre-school (ages three–six) category. Since there are significant differences, both in terms of development and needs, between an infant of nine months and a pre-schooler, what is appropriate or beneficial for one group cannot automatically be assumed for the other group, nor can it be considered evidence-based policy to assume research related to one age group applies equally to the other.

A search of the literature produced 29 studies which focus on or include information about the impact of nursery care on the academic/cognitive and socio-emotional development of children under three, four of which also feature on the list of papers on the effects of universal childcare. The research spans 12 countries, with the majority of studies being large-scale (that is, with a sample of more than 1,000 children) and longitudinal.

41 There are two further strands of the literature which are relevant to the debate about universal childcare. The first is a body of research which looks at physiological measures, in particular cortisol levels, to assess children's stress responses in formal group care. For a review of this literature, see Vermeer, H. et al (2006) ‘Children's elevated cortisol levels at daycare: A review and a meta-analysis’, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 21, pp.390-401. Available at: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2006-11665-010> (Accessed: 3 November 2023). The second body of research looks specifically at the relationship between child development and maternal employment. See, for example, Huerta, M. et al (2011) ‘Early Maternal Employment and Child Development in Five OECD Countries’ *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*. No. 118. OECD. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/48822253.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023). It was beyond the scope of this project to analyse and include this evidence.

42 Mainly because of time and resource constraints, research on universal childcare in the United States was also excluded. There are strong indications that including this research would not have changed the overall argument. An evaluation of universal pre-school programmes in Georgia, Oklahoma, and Boston can be found in this meta-analysis: Elango, S. et al (2015) *Early Childhood Education*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp9476.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023). None of the studies analysed found long-lasting benefits associated with the three universal programmes. Furthermore, a consensus statement produced by a task force of US childcare specialists concluded that evidence relating to the long-term impact of universal pre-kindergarten programmes in the US was sparse and, as such, inconclusive. See Puzzling it out: the current state of scientific knowledge on pre-kindergarten effects: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/consensus-statement_final.pdf

Four meta-analyses are also included in this discussion. The heading ‘academic and cognitive development’ generally refers to assessment of children’s language, communication, literacy and numeracy abilities. The heading ‘socio-emotional development’ relates to children’s social skills (such as kindness and sharing) as well as their behaviour (including hyperactivity, aggression and conduct problems). Some studies investigate ‘internalising’ behaviour – that is, problems related to psychological disorders, such as anxiety and depression. Again, studies which focused exclusively on disadvantaged children were excluded. Research which contained no detailed description of methods or analysis of findings were excluded, as were studies with restricted access. The main conclusions of this report are based on findings that are either consistently reported across the literature or are consistently absent from the available literature.

Finally, because there is an evident political ambition to increase formal childcare participation and decrease maternal-only care, where possible I have identified studies which offer a comparison between care by a parent at home and formal childcare.

Evidence from the United Kingdom

In the UK, two major longitudinal studies provided the basis for government policy for many years and continue to be cited as key sources of ‘high-quality evidence’ on the associations between attending childcare and child development. The Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education project (EPPSE) is a longitudinal study funded by the Department for Education which followed a group of approximately 3000 children from 1997 to 2013. Most children were enrolled at age three upon entering pre-school and assessed again at various points until age 16. When the children reached school age (five), an additional 300 children who had no pre-school experience were enrolled to provide a ‘home’ comparison group. Pre-school provision spanned all sectors and included playgroups, private nurseries, voluntary nurseries, local authority nurseries and integrated settings. Key aims of the study were to investigate the short, medium and long-term effects of attending pre-schools of different type, of varying degrees of quality and for different lengths of time (duration in months). It also measured outcomes related to some pre-school versus no pre-school attendance. The study focussed on academic and socio-behavioural measures and it explored what made pre-schools effective in terms of improving these outcomes. It also included extensive information on how a range of child and family background characteristics and the home learning environment influenced children’s attainment and behaviour.⁴³

The main finding of EPPSE when children were assessed at the end of compulsory schooling was that family characteristics had the largest influence on outcomes, and this was true for all educational stages. (This result is supported by many of the other studies discussed in this report.) The quality of the home learning environment during the early years was still associated with achievements at age 16, although the effects were weaker than reported at earlier stages of the study (at age seven it was reported that home learning environment was more important than parental occupation, education or income). The single most important predictor of exam success was parental education.⁴⁴

In terms of the impact of pre-school, EPPSE concluded that attendance, longer duration (in months) and higher quality of pre-school were all associated with improved academic outcomes, the latter in particular for children with less educated parents. The study also states that, in comparison to the ‘home’ control group, attending any pre-school setting was a statistically significant predictor of ‘a higher total GCSE score, more GCSE entries’ and ‘better grades in GCSE English and maths’.

However, not only were the effect sizes in all cases ‘relatively modest’, but the report provides no information about the 300 children in the ‘home’ control group. Who were these children, and why did they not attend

43 Sylva, K. et al (2014) *Students’ educational and developmental outcomes at age 16*. DfE. Available at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/sites/ioe/files/16-education-al-Developmental-Outcomes-RR.pdf> (Accessed 3 November 2023).

44 Ibid.

formal childcare at all between birth and five years old? Even in the 1990s that would be uncommon. If these were the children of dedicated stay-at-home mums, then the results of the comparison with the pre-school sample would likely be understated. If on the other hand this group of children were receiving unusually poor-quality informal care or were disadvantaged in some way or ways, the positive impact of participation in pre-school would be overstated. The background characteristics of this group are crucial in determining the relative benefits of pre-school versus no pre-school. A separate section of the EPPSE report includes economic modelling carried out on behalf of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and in it the authors state that results relating to pre-school attendance need to be ‘treated with caution’ because ‘the study has no baseline data on cognitive ability (at age three) for those who did not attend pre-school, which could lead to over- estimates of the effects’.⁴⁵

An earlier report on the project (1997-2003) does contain some information about the ‘home’ group. It confirms that the children were ‘especially disadvantaged’, meaning that statistical control would be even more important when comparing them to the pre-school cohort. The disadvantage identified relates to maternal education. To give an idea of the extent of this disadvantage, 58% of the mothers in the ‘home’ group had no GCSE qualifications, compared to approximately 20% in the maintained and voluntary childcare settings. For private nurseries, the figure was 6.5%. Although the statistical analysis aims to control for this considerable disadvantage in the ‘home’ children, the authors acknowledge that there may be other unmeasured factors which could impact the comparison. They state that the ‘characteristics and attainment of the “home” group vary significantly from those who had been in pre-school’, and that therefore ‘it is not possible to conclude with certainty that the much lower attainments of the ‘home’ group are directly due to lack of pre-school experience’.⁴⁶ Although at this early stage, the study authors suggest that ‘caution should be exercised’ with regard to results drawn from a comparison with the non-attendance group, this caution is not exercised in subsequent policy briefings, nor is the problematic nature of the control sample mentioned when EPPSE is cited as evidence of the educational benefits of pre-school for the general population.

In terms of non-cognitive outcomes, a research brief summarising EPPSE from age three to age 16 states that pre-school has a positive long-term impact on children’s social behavioural development.⁴⁷ When we look at the full report we find that pre-school attendance does not predict social-behavioural outcomes by the time children were at the end of school, even leaving to one side the unknowns within the control group. Quality of pre-school setting was associated with positive social behaviours, but these effects were small and the evidence was thus presented as ‘weak’. Finally, the influence of pre-school ‘effectiveness’ measures on social and behavioural outcomes were no longer apparent by age 14.

As such, while the EPPSE project provides a rich source of information on a wide variety of factors which influence child development, and it demonstrates that *some* high quality professional care can ameliorate *some* of the effects of different kinds of disadvantage in children’s family circumstances, its findings on pre-school have limited relevance to the discussion on the potential impact of increasing the rates and intensity of formal childcare attendance for very young children (from nine months old) across society as a whole.

Also commissioned by the Department for Education, the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) is a major longitudinal study which looked at how different kinds of ECEC experience relate to cognitive and socio-emotional development. It included children at age two, three, four, five and seven. The 2020 revised report looked at how children who started ECEC from age two went on to perform in the first year of school, in terms of educational achievement, cognitive development and socio-emotional development. Overall, SEED found limited evidence for the impact of ECEC on cognitive development or educational achievement, and the

45 Ibid.

46 Sylva, K. et al (2003) *Effective Pre-school Education*. DfE. Available at: www.ioe.ac.uk/projects/eppe (Accessed 3 November 2023).

47 Taggart, B. et al (2015) *How pre-school influences children and young people’s attainment and developmental outcomes over time*. DfE. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a803cb240f0b62305b89bf/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

findings for socio-emotional development were mainly negative, particularly where children were spending higher numbers of hours in formal childcare settings.⁴⁸ (These findings will be discussed in more detail below.)

The 2021 updated SEED report re-analysed the data when the children reached seven years old. (The report excluded information on non-cognitive outcomes.) Again, the researchers found no association between the *amount* of any type of ECEC used between age two and the start of school and academic outcomes during the first two years of school. The update did however find an association between higher *quality* of formal ECEC between ages two and four and outcomes in maths, science and English. Although all results were of ‘borderline statistical significance’, because there was a consistent pattern in the association, the results were presented positively in the conclusion. Finally, for the 40 per cent most disadvantaged children, there was an association between starting formal ECEC early and positive academic outcomes. These findings were also all borderline statistically significant.⁴⁹

With a slightly larger and much more recent sample, findings from SEED are more relevant than the findings from EPPSE to today’s context. Although the study was not able to find any statistically significant impact of ECEC on children’s academic outcomes, the authors present the findings as a ‘good news’ story, proposing that the lack of results reflects the fact that early years care is generally better now across the board than it was in the 1990s. That is, because there has been a ‘levelling up of ECEC experiences’ – this means that ‘any effects of ECEC differences upon child development are reduced.’ However, because it includes both formal (nurseries, playgroups and childminders) and informal (friends, relatives and nannies) in its definition of ECEC, and its sample contained very few children who had no ECEC experience prior to school, SEED is likewise limited in terms of its contribution to the evidence on the impact of nursery versus maternal care.

Four further studies look specifically at the impact of different kinds of childcare on children under three years old, with mixed findings. (These studies will also be looked at in more detail below.) Drawing on the Families, Children and Child-Care study (FCCC), which looked at the effects of childcare in England from birth to school entry, Sylva et al found that for children assessed at 18 months old, more hours in nursery care were related to a modest improvement in cognitive scores when compared to other types of non-maternal care (for example, grandparents and nannies).⁵⁰ Drawing from a much larger cohort (13,000) of British children, Cote likewise found that early centre-based care was associated with better cognitive outcomes compared to informal care when children were assessed at three and five years old. However, the effects had disappeared by age seven.⁵¹

Looking at socio-emotional development for children using childcare at three, 10, 18 and 36 months, Barnes et al found that, based on maternal questionnaires, there were no effects of amount or type of childcare on disruptive behaviour at 36 months and a positive association between more childcare (nursery and nanny) and ‘expressive behaviour’. They concluded that overall ‘there was no evidence of adverse consequences of childcare in the first three years, and some limited evidence of benefits’.⁵²

However, in a follow-up study when the same children reached school entry, Stein et al found that children who spent more time particularly in nursery care ‘were more likely to have behavioural problems, particularly hyperactivity’, when they arrived at school. Overall, the effects of non-maternal care were small. This study had a sample of 991 English families and was based on both maternal and teacher questionnaires. Because the

48 Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. (2020) *Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age five years*. DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e4e5c10e90e074dcd5bd213/SEED_AGE_5_REPORT_FEB.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

49 Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. (2021) *Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age seven years*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/617a9eb2d3bf7f55fd843d0a/SEED_Age_7_Research_Brief.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

50 Sylva, K. et al (2011) ‘Effects of early child-care on cognition, language, and task-related behaviours at 18 months: An English study’, *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 29(Pt 1):18-45. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/49804917_Effects_of_early_child-care_on_cognition_language_and_task-related_behaviours_at_18_months_An_English_study (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

51 Côté, S.M. et al (2013) ‘Child care in infancy and cognitive performance until middle childhood in the millennium cohort study’, *Child Dev.* 2013 Jul-Aug;84(4):1191-208. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23331073/> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

52 Barnes, J. et al (2010) ‘Experiences of childcare in England and socio-emotional development at 36 months’, *Early Child Development and Care*, 180, 1215 - 1229. Available at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Experiences-of-childcare-in-England-and-development-Barnes-Leach/0cf423ed3058321c-66f4077ec93e724f922619e6> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

strongest and most consistent influences on child behavioral and emotional outcomes are derived from the home, the authors concluded that ‘interventions to enhance children’s emotional and behavioural development might best focus on supporting families and augmenting the quality of care in the home.’⁵³

Compared to several other OECD countries, the introduction of universal and semi-universal childcare entitlements is relatively new within the UK. Research evaluating the impact of the various entitlements in Wales, Scotland and England is therefore scarce and what exists has not looked at child development, with one notable exception. Blandon et al investigated the effect of the part-time (15-hour) entitlement in England and found ‘no evidence of any educational benefits of the policy at the ages of seven or eleven’. They also found no effects for ‘personal, social and emotional’ development. Commenting that ‘research for England is not alone in finding zero or small benefits from universal ECEC’, the authors speculate that inconsistency in quality may be a factor. Given that universal high-quality care is difficult to maintain, the authors suggest that improving quality (particularly in poorer areas) may be more beneficial from a child development point of view than expanding the entitlement to 30 hours.⁵⁴

Summary of evidence from the UK

Some UK evidence has shown that children who attend high-quality nurseries perform better in the short-term on certain cognitive tests when compared to children who attend lower quality nurseries, or when compared to children who are cared for by childminders or informally. Evidence on whether these cognitive gains last into later school years is contradictory. Findings on social and emotional development are also mixed but with mainly negative results. No studies have demonstrated socio-emotional gains lasting beyond the school years. Additionally, no studies have demonstrated benefits from universal childcare. Based on the UK evidence, no claims can be made about the relative benefits of maternal care versus formal childcare.

Universal childcare: evidence from abroad

Given the limitations of the UK evidence base, to further explore the potential impact of universal childcare we must look to the international literature and findings from studies on more well-established and extensive state-funded childcare programmes. A search of the literature found 15 country-specific studies (including the UK study) and three meta-analyses investigating the impact of universal childcare on the general population. These include both short- and long-term studies, measuring both cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes. Eight of the studies distinguished between maternal only and other forms of childcare.

53 Stein, A. et al (2013) ‘The influence of different forms of early childcare on children’s emotional and behavioural development at school entry’, *Child Care Health Dev.* 39(5) pp. 676-87. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22928988/> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

54 Blandon, J. et al. *Evaluating the Impact of Nursery Attendance on Children’s Outcomes: Final Report*. University of Surrey and UCL. Available at: <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/sites/default/files/evaluating-the-impact-of-nursery-attendance-on-childrens-outcomes-final-report.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

Research reviews

A comprehensive international review of the childcare literature carried out in 2015 by Melhuish et al stresses that the quality of childcare experience matters, as does the interaction between in home and out of home experience. The authors' overall conclusion is that:

*'[H]igh quality childcare has been associated with benefits for children's development, with the strongest effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is also evidence that negative effects sometimes occur.'*⁵⁵

These negative effects were described mainly in relation to 'low-quality' care and for children under three, which will be discussed further below.

The review looks at both targeted childcare programmes (mainly in the United States) and evidence on ECEC in relation to disadvantaged groups and at the effect of ECEC on the 'general population'. In its summary of the latter part, the review states: 'For provision for three years onwards the evidence is consistent that pre-school provision is beneficial to educational and social development for the whole population.' However, when we examine the detail, the evidence is neither consistent nor clear.

In terms of educational benefits, the report states that 'effect sizes from studies reporting everyday ECEC experience for the general population are considerably lower than for intervention programs targeting children from low-income families'. Attempting to determine how much lower, or to assess the overall effects for the general population, is very difficult – both because the section includes many studies which only looked at children in disadvantaged communities and because, for studies that included children from all backgrounds, the review does not clearly distinguish between outcomes reported for the general population and those reported for sub-groups of children. Moreover, the review does not include information for each study about what type or quality of care pre-school is being compared to.

The evidence presented in Melhuish et al also fails to support the statement that pre-school provision from three onwards benefits the 'social development' of the whole population. The section on 'socio-emotional development' for children over three includes only four studies. One is a meta-analysis of US studies looking at 'specific pre-school programmes for disadvantaged groups'. Another meta-analysis examining the effects of 'centre-based and home-based programmes' found a 'very small overall effect on socio-emotional outcomes', but again all selected studies in this meta-analysis focused on disadvantaged children.⁵⁶ The two remaining studies (see Zachrisson and Dearing, discussed later in this report) found no socio-emotional benefits for children from any background. In sum, the review claims social benefits for the general population but is unable to cite a single study which demonstrates social benefits for the general population.

A second meta-analysis by Heckman et al distinguishes more clearly between different types of childcare programme and outcomes for different groups of children. It comes to a broadly similar conclusion to Melhuish et al, in that specialised ECEC programmes improve the academic performance of disadvantaged children. However, evidence on universal childcare is limited, due to a dearth of studies on non-cognitive and long-term outcomes. From the research available it is clear that 'universal programmes are not universally effective'. The effectiveness of ECEC depends on the quality of provision relative to the quality of the next-best alternative. Universal programmes disproportionately benefit disadvantaged children because these children generally have lower quality alternatives. The study also found some evidence to indicate that universal programmes may harm children of affluent families who have better alternatives. This finding relates mainly to Quebec, which will be discussed in detail below. The overall conclusion of the meta-analysis is that the evidence for the developmental effects of universal childcare is 'somewhat ambiguous' and where a beneficial effect exists

55 Melhuish, E. et al (2015) *A review of research on the effects of early childhood education and care (ECEC) on children development*. CARE. Available at: care.org/fileadmin/careproject/Publications/reports/new_version_CARE_WP4_D4_1_Review_on_the_effects_of_ECEC.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

56 Blok, H. et al (2005) The relevance of delivery mode and other programme characteristics for the effectiveness of early childhood education. *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, 29, pp.35-47. Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1080/01650250444000315 (Accessed 3 November 2023).

it predominantly relates to disadvantaged children. As such, the economic case for universal (as opposed to means-tested) childcare is weak.⁵⁷

A third meta-analysis by Van Huizen and Plantenga focusses specifically on universal ECEC. It re-iterates that studies on causal effects are scarce and the evidence that does exist is mixed:

'About a third of the estimates indicates positive impacts on children's outcomes, half of the estimates are insignificant and about one out of six estimates is significantly negative.'

Like the other reviews, the study found that the gains from universal ECEC are concentrated on children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with almost 80 per cent of the estimates for higher SES children being insignificant. The negative effects were predominantly found in studies which looked at non-cognitive outcomes, with more positive effects found where cognitive outcomes were measured. The authors end by stating that:

*'[W]hile various scholars claim that there is compelling evidence in favour of targeted ECEC interventions, we would conclude that the effects of universal programs are rather ambiguous given that the majority of estimates is non-positive.'*⁵⁸

The Nordic countries

The Nordic countries are characterised by high-quality, publicly-subsidised day care, higher expenditure levels per capita compared to other OECD countries, generous family-friendly schemes, highly-qualified staff and low staff-to-child ratios. For these reasons, they are often held up as exemplary models for other countries to emulate in terms of childcare policy.

Finland has what has been described as one of the 'most universalistic' pre-school programmes in the world, heavily subsidised by the state and free for lower-income families.⁵⁹ Finland particularly is praised both because of its high-quality care sector and consistently outstanding Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) performance in the area of cognitive learning (at least until the last few years). However, it is considerably less well-known (and certainly less well-publicised) that, in Finland, over 40 per cent of children under five are taken care of at home, due to a generous home care allowance (HCA) scheme which supports mothers who stay at home until their youngest child is three years old.⁶⁰ As a result of the scheme, there are significantly fewer young children in formal childcare than in other Nordic countries. This makes Finland an ideal case study to test the relative benefits of maternal care versus formal care, and the four studies found on Finland are summarised below.

A 2015 study by Hiilamo et al compared the school performance of Finnish six-year-olds with younger sibling(s) who had stayed at home with the performance of children who had attended public daycare. Children's grades were examined at age 15 and 16, and entry into further education by age 21 was also a variable. The authors concluded 'The results of the study show that child home care is not associated with poorer educational performance.' The study did find some indication that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds had poorer outcomes at home, but this evidence was 'weak'. As such, the study gives 'more support to the notion that the positive results from targeted child day care schemes are not applicable for universal child day care schemes.'⁶¹

57 Elango, S. et al (2015) *Early Childhood Education*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp9476.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

58 van Huizen, T. and Plantenga, J. (2018) 'Do children benefit from universal early childhood education and care? A meta-analysis of evidence from natural experiments'. *Economics of Education Review*, 66, pp. 206-222. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775716303788> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

59 Karhula, A. et al (2017) 'Chapter 14: Home sweet home? Long-term educational outcomes of childcare arrangements in Finland', *Social and Political Science* 2017, pp. 268-284. Available at: <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/edcoll/9781786432087/978178643208700024.xml> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

60 Ibid.

61 Hiilamo, H. et al (2015) *Children who do not attend day care: What are the implications for educational outcomes?* Families and Societies. Available at: <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/WP42HiilamoEtAl2015.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

In an interesting twist, just three years later, in a study with a near identical abstract and design, the same authors came to the exact opposite conclusion. Hiilamo et al (2018) conclude that 'child home care before school entry is associated with poorer educational performance after 9 years of compulsory education'. On the basis of these findings, the authors called into question the rationale for the widely-used HCA scheme. The study again compared long-term outcomes of Finnish six-year-olds who stayed at home before school start and those who attended public daycare, with the latter achieving higher grade point average (GPA) scores at age 15 and 16. However, the study found no association between type of care and completion of further education by 25, confirming other research (see Heckman) which suggests that school performance does not necessarily predict later educational achievement.⁶²

While it is difficult to know what to make of these contradictory findings, it is worth noting that both studies by Hiilamo et al have significant methodologic limitations. The studies were unable to infer a causal relationship for the associations found due to several confounding factors. One of these was that the comparison was between two groups who had 'self-selected' into their care option, and they did not control for possible differences in characteristics of the two cohorts. Given that 'mothers with higher education and better economic situation place their children in day care more often than stay at home with them', the effects could have more to do with the children's background or home environment than the impact of daycare. This possibility appears to be substantiated by Karhula et al, who found that despite daycare in Finland being positively associated with later educational outcomes, 'Half or more of this advantage is explained by the positive selection into day care of children with highly educated parents', and the remainder was explained by other mitigating factors.⁶³

A third large-scale study on Finland (Saarinen et al), also measuring academic outcomes at age 15 (specifically reading, maths, science, and problem solving), found that there were no differences between children who had only participated in pre-school from age six and children who had started pre-school between one and five, regardless of background. Discussing the difference between theirs and other findings, the authors suggest that, on balance, evidence shows that ECEC is related to better outcomes in the kinds of tests that measure skills practiced in ECEC. In other words, the impact is on a child's ability to perform in testing conditions rather than the child's cognitive abilities per se:

'Early childhood education and care may improve the child's adaptation to the classroom environment and, in that way, improve the child's learning achievements during the first school years, but not cognitive performance in later years.'

The study's overall conclusion was that universal childcare 'has failed to promote learning outcomes at 15 years of age and to increase equality in the later school achievements in Finland.'⁶⁴

Only one study on Finland found consistently positive effects associated with childcare. It was also the only study on Finland to examine a non-cognitive outcome. Comparing children from families in receipt of the home care allowance (HCA) to children participating in public daycare, Gruber et al found both short- and long-term negative effects for the cohort cared for at home. In the short-term, children in the HCA group performed less-well on cognitive tests conducted at health clinics when they were four or five years old. In the long term, children in this group were less likely to enrol in an academic high school track (that is, more likely to follow a vocational path) and had higher rates of youth crime incidents between the ages of 15 and 18. The study concluded that 'shifting childcare from the home to the market... increases labor force participation and

62 Hiilamo, H. et al (2018) 'Long-Term Educational Outcomes of Child Care Arrangements in Finland', *SAGE Open*, 8(2). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2158244018774823> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

63 Karhula, A. et al (2017) 'Chapter 14: Home sweet home? Long-term educational outcomes of childcare arrangements in Finland', *Social and Political Science* 2017, pp.268-284. Available at: <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/edcoll/9781786432087/9781786432087.00024.xml> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

64 Saarinen, A. et al (2019) 'The Association of Early Childhood Education and Care with Cognitive Learning Outcomes at 15 Years of Age in Finland', *Psychology*, 10, pp. 500-520. Available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/dcf1/5c3dcd9a3ce4bb5f6f076e4e0f64574e4c95.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

improves child outcomes.⁶⁵ Closer inspection of the study however again reveals that the results for child outcomes are not quite so clear-cut; this will be explored further in the final section below.

Norway also has a generously subsidised and universally accessible childcare system. After parental leave, parents have the choice of enrolling their children in ECEC or receiving cash benefits for staying home with their children until age three. Investigating the impact of the introduction of universal childcare when participating children had reached 30 years old, Havnes and Mogstad (2009) found that exposure to public daycare increased the likelihood of completing high school and attending further education, but only for children with low-educated mothers. They also found that the girls who had been in daycare were more likely to 'delay child-bearing and family formation' as adults and thus were more strongly 'attached' to the labour market. Since the benefits are concentrated in these sub-groups of children, they conclude that 'good access to subsidised childcare levels the playing field by increasing intergenerational mobility and closing the gender wage gap.' However, the study found that the childcare reforms did not increase female employment, since they largely displaced informal care arrangements in families where the mother was already working. Their estimates, therefore, should be interpreted as 'reflecting a shift from informal care of presumably inferior quality, rather than from parental care.'⁶⁶

In a follow-up study, the same authors look more specifically at whether the childcare reforms in Norway have 'levelled the playing field' in terms of earning prospects when the children are adults. Again, they found that children whose parents had lower educational levels benefited in terms of later earning prospects. On the other hand, for children with more highly educated parents the childcare experience was either neutral or negative. The study found a 'detrimental' impact on children from 'families with monetary and human capital to facilitate alternative arenas for child development of relatively high quality'. This is consistent with Heckman et al, who report that children from more advantaged backgrounds might even be 'harmed' by attendance in universal childcare. Havnes and Mogstad conclude that 'although the child care reform failed to improve, on average, children's earnings prospects, it did succeed in levelling the playing field.'⁶⁷ They do not seem concerned that this included 'levelling down' as well as 'levelling up'.

A third study examined the impact of Norway's 'scale up to national ECEC coverage' on the language skills of children who were in childcare at 18 months. This study did differentiate between centre-based care, other types of 'unregulated' care and care by a parent at home but only looked at short-term outcomes. Based on questionnaires completed by mothers when the child was three years old, the study found that use of formal ECEC predicted a statistically significant improvement in language skills (grammatical complexity and general communication), but again only for children from low-income families. There were no significant differences observed between children cared for by a parent at home and children in other kinds of informal arrangement. Dearing et al conclude that, given the risks associated with poor early language skills, their results were 'consistent with the hypothesis' that attending large-scale public ECEC in Norway is 'narrowing early achievement gaps between low and high-income children'.⁶⁸ The 'hypothetical' nature of the achievement gap narrative will be discussed further below, as will the limitations of short-term studies and maternal-only reporting.

One final study on the Nordic countries, this time in Denmark by Gupta and Simonsen, likewise examined outcomes of care by a parent in the home compared to care in 'universal publicly subsidised high-quality' centre-based settings. This is the only study on the Nordic countries which focused solely on non-cognitive development, including conduct problems, peer relationship problems, hyperactivity and pro-social behaviour. Surveys were conducted when the children were six months, three years and seven years old (first year of

65 Gruber, J. et al (2023) *Paying moms to stay home: Short and long run effects on parents and children*. NBER. Available at: https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w30931/w30931.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

66 Havnes, T. and Mogstad, M. (2009) *No Child Left Behind: Universal Child Care and Children's Long-Run Outcomes*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp4561.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

67 Havnes, T. and Mogstad, M. (2010) *Is Universal Child Care Leveling the Playing Field? Evidence from Non-Linear Difference-in-Differences*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp4978.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

68 Dearing, E. et al (2018) 'Estimating the Consequences of Norway's National Scale-Up of Early Childhood Education and Care (Beginning in Infancy) for Early Language Skills', *AERA Open*, 4(1). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858418756598> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

school). The study found no difference between outcomes for children cared for at home and children who were enrolled in pre-school at age three, regardless of gender and mother's educational level. However, it also found that increasing hours for children in pre-school from 20-30 hours per week to 30-40 hours per week lead to significantly poorer outcomes. Despite this negative finding, the study still concludes that:

*'Pre-school, where children are met with highly qualified staff in environments that allow for specialization of labor... is found to be as good as home care no matter the gender and mother's level of education.'*⁶⁹

The authors thus attempt to present their results in positive terms, even though the results indicate that high-quality universal childcare in Denmark has failed to promote the socio-emotional development of participating children and sometimes undermines it.

Germany and Spain

With a sample of approximately 78,000 native children and 10,000 immigrant children, Dustman et al studied the effect of a German universal part-time (20 hours) childcare programme aimed at three- to six-year-olds on 'school readiness indicators'. They found that attending public childcare for a longer period of time (two or three years versus one year) 'strongly and robustly reduces language and motor skill problems and improves overall school readiness', but once again only for 'children of immigrant ancestry'. This group, on average, have parents with lower educational levels and who are less likely to be in work. As with the majority of country-specific studies, they found no significant effects for children of native ancestry, that is, for the general population. Also like the other studies, they observed a 'strong positive selection into childcare attendance in terms of observable parental background characteristics': children who attended childcare for three or more years tended to have more highly educated parents. In terms of employment, the study did not find that the expansion in childcare facilities increased labour force participation rates of German mothers. For native mothers in particular, the:

*'[S]hare of children in child care increases much more for working than for non-working mothers, suggesting that for native children public child care primarily replaces alternative care.'*⁷⁰

Spain is a particularly interesting example for a number of reasons. Unlike in the Nordic countries, family daycare and other extra-familial forms of care are uncommon: the majority of children under four are either cared for by their mother (or grandmother) or are in formal centre-based care (either public or private). A reform in the 1990s established a full-time (nine a.m. to five p.m., five days a week), publicly subsidised and universal (that is, regardless of parents' employment, marital status or income) pre-school placement for three-year-olds. Pre-school content is regulated and teachers are required to have a degree in pedagogy. As a result of the reform, public pre-school enrolment for three-year-olds jumped from 8.5 per cent in 1990 to 67 per cent in 2002. Because the public pre-school provision overwhelmingly replaced maternal care rather than other forms of informal care, Spain also provides an opportunity to examine differences between children attending high-quality, full-time universal childcare and children cared for by their mother at home (but without the subsidy for stay-at-home mothers).⁷¹

In a long-term study focusing on cognitive and educational outcomes of children within states where childcare provision was significantly expanded, Felfe et al found that universal childcare led to a 'sizeable increase in reading and math test scores' at age 15. This result applied to girls and to children of parents with low educational levels, in this case parents who had not completed high school. Consistent with the other studies,

69 Gupta, N.D. and Simonsen, M. (2007) 'Non-Cognitive Child Outcomes and Universal High Quality Child Care'. *IZA Discussion Papers*, No. 3188. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/34322/1/555704548.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

70 Dustmann, C. et al (2013) *Does Universal Child Care Matter? Evidence from a Large Expansion in Pre-School Education*. Available at: https://annaraute.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/kiga_website_2013.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

71 Felfe, C. et al (2012) 'Can't buy mommy's love? Universal childcare and children's long-term cognitive development', *IZA Discussion Papers*, No. 7053. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/69414/1/732536936.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

'no statistically significant effects' were found for children with higher skilled parents. As stated, in this case 'higher skilled' means having completed secondary education, not university. Additionally, the reform had a 'modest' effect on maternal employment and a 'negligible' effect on parental income.⁷²

Quebec

In the literature on universal childcare, if potential adverse outcomes are mentioned, it is commonly in reference to research carried out by Baker et al on the introduction of a large-scale, universal and low-cost childcare programme introduced in Quebec in 1997. Analysing a cohort of 2000 children between zero and four years old, an initial study in 2008 documented an increase in childcare uptake and maternal labour but also:

'[A] large, significant, negative shock to the pre-school, noncognitive development and health of children exposed to the new programme, with little measured impact on cognitive skills.'

Like the study by Gruber et al on Finland, the study on Quebec compared outcomes for children who had been living in the area where childcare provision was available to outcomes of children where no provision was available, rather than looking at the impact of childcare attendance on individual children. Based on parental reports (which has some limitations, see discussion below) the study found that the childcare policy led to 'worse' child outcomes for a variety of measures, including hyperactivity, inattention, aggressiveness and motor/social skills. Parental interactions with children were also 'worse along all measured dimensions' with 'some evidence of deterioration in parental health and a reduction in parental relationship quality'.⁷³

Follow-up research, published in 2019, confirmed that the negative impact observed 10 years earlier persisted as the programme matured. The study looks at the impact on older ages, on both cognitive and non-cognitive development, health and crime, assessing young people in their teens and early 20s. The authors found no consistent evidence on the impact of the programme on cognitive test scores. They did find, however, a significant decline in self-reported health and life satisfaction, as well as a sharp increase in criminal behaviour relative to peers not exposed to the programme. These results appeared predominantly in boys, who also showed the greatest deterioration in noncognitive skills.⁷⁴

Comparing their results with the more positive outcomes of targeted programmes in the United States (for example, the Perry Pre-School and Abecedarian Projects) the authors suggest that because universal programmes are generally poorer in quality, they do not have the same benefit for the general population.

Heckman et al expand on this explanation, arguing that because in Quebec low-income families were already being offered subsidised childcare before the policy, the increase in take up was mainly among more affluent families where children had been receiving higher quality care than the state programme offered. The main impact of the policy was thus that it 'crowded out maternal time spent on childcare by relatively affluent families'.⁷⁵

The findings of Baker et al generated some controversy and the study has been criticised on methodological and other grounds. Several studies have sought to re-assess the programme in order to either confirm or repudiate its overwhelmingly negative findings. Kottelenberg and Lehrer (2013), for instance, examined the robustness of the original analysis. Their results were consistent with Baker et al in all but one area (motor social development) and they concluded overall that 'the introduction of the Quebec Family Policy led to a significant decline in child, parent and family outcomes.' This did not lead them to reject the value of universal childcare

72 Ibid.

73 2008: Baker, M. et al (2008) 'Universal Childcare, Maternal Labor Supply, and Family Well-Being', *Journal of Political Economy*, 116(4), pp.709-745. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/591908> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

74 Baker, M. et al (2019) 'The Long-Run Impacts of a Universal Child Care Program', *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 11(3), pp.1-26. Available at: <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20170603> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

75 Elango, S. et al (2015) *Early Childhood Education*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp9476.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

outright, but rather to caution that ‘the exact workings of universal childcare programs on child development are far from obvious’. Given the high degree of ‘treatment effect heterogeneity’, that is, the fact that children and parents from different families respond differently to both the policy and childcare use itself, it is necessary to better understand who benefits, who does not, and why.⁷⁶

Like Heckman, Kottelenberg and Lehrer noted that the negative outcomes were ‘driven by children from families who only attended childcare in response to the implementation of this policy’. Although unable to establish a causal mechanism for this difference in experience, a possible explanation offered was a ‘large reduction in parental investments’ in the child once they enter the childcare programme. The authors speculate that ‘the changes in school inputs may be offset as parents substitute their investments into their children towards other activities’. Kottelenberg and Lehrer found further evidence for this interpretation in a follow-up study in 2016, in which they observed ‘large and statistically significant declines in many parenting practices for two-parent families as a result of childcare attendance’. They did not find a similar change in behaviour for single parents. The study confirms that while the policy significantly boosted developmental test scores for children from single-parent and the lowest income households, for children from two-parent and higher income households the results were significantly negative. Since this latter group formed a large part of the original sample in Baker et al, this explains why the overall results were negative.⁷⁷

Summary of evidence from abroad

Studies on the post-school impact of early universal childcare are very limited. Studies on the academic and cognitive effects of early childcare during school years show gains for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and some neutral results. Studies on socio-emotional and behavioural outcomes are limited, with mainly negative results. The most striking finding from the universal childcare literature is that children from more advantaged families are over-represented in universal childcare programmes but are rarely shown to benefit and sometimes shown to suffer detrimental effects.

Childcare and the under threes

A search of the literature produced 29 papers which focus on or include information about the impact of nursery care on the academic/cognitive and socio-emotional development of children under three. (As noted there is some crossover with the section on universal childcare.) The research spans 12 countries, with the majority of studies being large-scale (that is, with a sample of more than 1,000 children) and longitudinal. Four meta-analyses are also included. The heading ‘academic and cognitive development’ generally refers to assessment of children’s language, communication, literacy and numeracy abilities. The heading ‘socio-emotional development’ relates to children’s social skills (such as kindness and sharing) as well as their behaviour (including hyperactivity, aggression and conduct problems). Some studies investigate ‘internalising’ behaviour – that is, problems related to psychological disorders, such as anxiety and depression.⁷⁸ To reduce the length of this report, the findings have been summarised under five headings.

76 Kottelenberg, M.J. and Lehrer, S.F. (2013) *New evidence on the impacts of access to and attending universal childcare in Canada*. Available at: https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w18785/w18785.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

77 Kottelenberg, M.J. and Lehrer, S.F. (2016) *Targeted or universal coverage? Assessing heterogeneity in the effects of universal childcare*. Available at: https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w22126/w22126.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

78 There is another strand of the literature which looks at physiological measures, in particular cortisol levels, to assess children’s stress responses in formal group care. For a review of this literature, see Vermeer, H. et al (2006) ‘Children’s elevated cortisol levels at daycare: A review and a meta-analysis’, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 21, pp.390-401. Available at: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2006-11665-010> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

The most important (non-genetic) factor in children's educational and socio-emotional development is parenting and the home environment

In their comprehensive review of the literature Melhuish et al (2015) found that:

'[W]hile recent large scale studies have found effects in terms of both quantity and quality of childcare, these effect sizes are about half those for family factors'.⁷⁹

These findings were confirmed in a large-scale (2,857 children) study in the UK specifically on the effect of home learning environment on numeracy and literacy in primary school.⁸⁰ An influential study (sample size 1,300) in the United States carried out by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, 2006) found that:

'Parent and family characteristics were more strongly linked to child development than were child care features...family and parenting experiences were as important to the wellbeing of children who had extensive child care experiences as family and parenting experiences were for children with little childcare experience.'

The study also stated that 'one of the most important and consistent predictors of child cognitive and social development was the quality of the mother-child interactions', and that the quality of the family environment (for example, well-organised routines, books and stimulating play materials, enhancing experiences in and out of the home) all lead to more socially and cognitively advanced children independent of their childcare experience.⁸¹

Although the NICHD study has its limitations (a relatively small sample size being one, the US context being another) these findings are supported by other large-scale studies closer to home, such as the 'Growing Up In Ireland' study which involved an initial cohort of some 11,000 children enrolled at nine months and assessed at ages three and five. The authors concluded that:

'Overall the effect of childcare type at age three on socio-emotional development at age 5 is small and childcare type explained less than 1 per cent of variance in children's scores.'

Children's health, gender, background and family characteristics (including structure and parenting style) all had a stronger impact on children's outcomes than childcare.⁸²

Similarly, the UK Department of Education's Study of Education and Early Development (SEED, 2020) with a sample of 4,500 found that:

'[T]he effects associated with ECEC overall are small, making only a small difference to development, not always identifiable in practice... home environment factors, such as parenting, the quality of parent-child relationships and the home learning environment had a considerable influence on educational outcomes assessed during year 1.'⁸³

79 Melhuish, E. et al (2015) *A review of research on the effects of early childhood education and care (ECEC) on children development*. CARE. Available at: https://ecec-care.org/fileadmin/careproject/Publications/reports/new_version_CARE_WP4_D4_1_Review_on_the_effects_of_ECEC.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

80 Melhuish, E. et al (2008) 'Effects of the Home Learning Environment and Preschool Center Experience upon Literacy and Numeracy Development in Early Primary School', *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(1), pp 95-114. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227536016_Effects_of_the_Home_Learning_Environment_and_Preschool_Center_Experience_upon_Literacy_and_Numeracy_Development_in_Early_Primary_School (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

81 NICHD (2006) *The NICHD study of early child care and youth development: Findings for children up to age 4 ½ years*. Available at: https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/documents/seccyd_06.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

82 Russell, H. et al (2016) *Childcare, Early Education and Socio-Emotional Outcomes at Age 5: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland study*, The Economic and Social Research Institute. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309718320_Childcare_Early_Education_and_Socio-Emotional_Outcomes_at_Age_5_Evidence_from_the_Growing_Up_in_Ireland_study (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

83 Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. (2020) *Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age five years*. DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e4e5c10e90e074dcd5bd213/SEED_AGE_5_REPORT_FEB.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

Another English sample of 1,016 families (Barnes, 2010) investigated childcare at three, 10, 18 and 36 months, finding no effect for the amount and type of childcare on disruptive behaviour, with the main predictor instead being maternal care.⁸⁴ A follow-up study, looking at 991 families with children recruited at three months and assessed again at school entry, confirmed that ‘the strongest and most consistent influences on behaviour and emotional problems were derived from the home... Non-parental childcare had small effects on child outcome’.⁸⁵

In Europe, an early, small-scale study on verbal ability in Sweden in which children were tested at 16 months, and then again 12 and 24 months later, found that the quality of care at home was more influential than either type or quality of childcare.⁸⁶ Also a small-scale study, Pinto et al found that for a group of children in Porto, Portugal, the quality of their home environment positively related to language and literacy outcomes in the pre-school years, whereas centre-based toddler care did not.⁸⁷ Finally, the PIRLS study on reading also looked at home environment and found that children had substantially higher average reading achievement if they had parents who liked reading, parents who engaged in literacy-related activities with them and had literacy resources available to them in the home (although unfortunately the study does not attempt to determine whether home environment is more or less important than pre-school for reading development).⁸⁸

The impact of nursery depends on the quality of the care provided at the nursery relative to the quality of alternative care (maternal or non-maternal)

A rapid evidence review carried out by NHS Scotland found that for the under threes, as with all age groups, ‘childcare effects are moderated by family background with outcomes dependent on the relative balance of quality of care at home and in childcare’.⁸⁹ This is echoed by two further international evidence reviews. Van Belle (2016) found that ‘the best outcomes occurred for those children for whom the quality of childcare was higher than the quality of care at home’.⁹⁰ Bradley et al (2007) concluded that ‘Child care experiences interact with experiences at home and the child’s own characteristics, and research indicates that the quality of child care matters’.⁹¹

Drawing from data on 36,000 children and their families in a West German state, Felfe et al state that:

‘[T]he effects of attending early care are almost certainly not the same for every child... Children who already benefit from very high quality care at home may not benefit as much from further stimulation at the center if center care functions as a substitute for home care.’⁹²

84 Barnes, J. et al (2010) ‘Experiences of childcare in England and socio-emotional development at 36 months’, *Early Child Development and Care*, 180, pp.1215-1229. Available at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Experiences-of-childcare-in-England-and-development-Barnes-Leach/0cf423ed-3058321c66f4077ec93e724f922619e6> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

85 Stein, A. et al (2013) ‘The influence of different forms of early childcare on children’s emotional and behavioural development at school entry’, *Child Care Health Dev*, 39(5), pp.676-87. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22928988/> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

86 Brogurg (1990) cited in van Belle, J. (2016) *Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and its long-term effects on educational and labour market outcomes*. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1667.html (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

87 Pinto, A. et al (2013) ‘Effects of home environment and center-based child care quality on children’s language, communication, and literacy outcomes’, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 28, pp.94-101. Available at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Effects-of-home-environment-and-center-based-child-Pinto-Pessanha/a84c0a088a58bade1155b9f726ba2b804d09d43c> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

88 Mullis I.V.S. et al (2012). *PIRLS 2011 international results in reading*. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Herengracht 487, Amsterdam, 1017 BT, The Netherlands. Available at: https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2011/downloads/P11_IR_FullBook.pdf

89 Scobie, G. and Scott, E. (2017) *Rapid evidence review: Childcare quality and children’s outcomes*. NHS Scotland. Available at: <https://www.healthscotland.scot/media/1613/rapid-evidence-review-childcare-quality-and-childrens-outcomes.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

90 van Belle, J. (2016) *Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and its long-term effects on educational and labour market outcomes*. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1667.html (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

91 Bradley, R.H. and Vandell, D.L. (2007) ‘Child Care and the Well-being of Children’, *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.*, 161(7), pp.669-76. Available at: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/570794> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

92 Felfe, C. and Lalive, R. (2014) *Does Early Child Care Help or Hurt Children’s Development?* Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp8484.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

A small-scale study in Portugal specifically investigating the interaction between home environment and ECEC (Pinto et al, 2013) reported a:

*'[D]etrimental effect of poor-quality ECEC on children's outcomes, i.e. low-quality ECEC may 'hinder or even nullify' the positive effects of home environment quality on children's language and literacy skills.'*⁹³

The finding that for children to benefit from childcare it must be of high quality is consistent across the literature, although Belsky has raised questions about the extent to which all 'disconcerting child care effects' can be attributed simply to the experience of low-quality care.⁹⁴ Somewhat in contrast to the findings on universal childcare, which showed predominantly positive cognitive effects for disadvantaged children, several studies on the under threes have noted that for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, low-quality childcare can be detrimental. Melhuish et al (2015) state that:

'[F]or children of a low socio-economic status low quality childcare can produce a 'dual risk', that is to say, possible deficits in language or cognitive development.'

This is echoed by Scobie and van Belle.

Similarly, in a study of 1,500 children in Chile, Narea found that 'the association between attendance at centre-based care and socio-emotional outcomes is more negative for lower-income households relative to children from higher income households.' Although the study did not collect data on the quality of childcare settings, the authors suggest the mechanism for this might be that the quality of centre-based care attended by more vulnerable children is worse than those attended by more affluent children:

*'Hence, even though attendance at a high-quality centre can compensate for less stimulating and more stressful home environments of vulnerable children, low-quality centre- based care could worsen developmental delays of disadvantaged children.'*⁹⁵

Finally, Averdijk et al (2022) found that daycare was associated with fewer 'externalising' but more long-term 'internalising' behaviours and substance abuse, particularly for children from vulnerable backgrounds.⁹⁶

On the other hand, more in keeping with the findings on universal child care schemes, other studies on the under threes have noted either poorer or neutral outcomes associated with more advantaged children. When looking specifically at the impact of centre-based care on different groups of children, Russell et al found that while teachers reported small benefits for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, 'for more advantaged children centre-based care was related to increased socio-emotional difficulties.'⁹⁷ The UK SEED study found an association between 'formal group ECEC' and verbal ability, but 'only for children with a less enhancing home learning environment'; and Votruba-Drzal (2013) found that 'both centre- and home-based care for two-year-olds... were beneficial for children from lower income, less educated and less enriching family contexts'.⁹⁸ Both Dearing and Felfe reported that positive academic results were confined to children from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

93 Pinto, A. et al (2013) 'Effects of home environment and center-based child care quality on children's language, communication, and literacy outcomes', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 28, pp.94-101. Available at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Effects-of-home-environment-and-center-based-child-Pinto-Pessanha/a84c0a088a58bade1f55b9f726ba2b804d09d43c> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

94 Belsky, J. (2001) 'Emanuel Miller Lecture Developmental Risks (Still) Associated with Early Child Care', *J. Child Psycho. Psychiat.* 42(7), pp. 845—859. Available at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=b4ae35e4029fbcaffbd62b96c01107e9021c3998> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

95 Narea, M. (2014) *Does early centre-based care have an impact on child cognitive and socio-emotional development? Evidence from Chile*. LSE. Available at: <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103992/1/casepaper183.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

96 Averdijk, M. et al (2022) 'External childcare and socio-behavioral development in Switzerland: Long-term relations from childhood into young adulthood', *PLoS One*, 17(3). Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8906621/> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

97 Russell, H. et al (2016) *Childcare, Early Education and Socio-Emotional Outcomes at Age 5: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland study*, The Economic and Social Research Institute. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309718320_Childcare_Early_Education_and_Socio-Emotional_Outcomes_at_Age_5_Evidence_from_the_Growing_Up_in_Ireland_study (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

98 Votruba-Drzal, E. et al (2013) 'Center-Based Child Care and Cognitive Skills Development: Importance of Timing and Household Resources', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(3). Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263920891_Center-Based_Child_Care_and_Cognitive_Skills_Development_Importance_of_Timing_and_Household_Resources (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

Findings on the impact of nursery on the educational development of children starting under the age of three are divided, with some positive and some neutral results

Of the 29 papers included here, 17 examined either the short- or long-term impact of nursery care on the educational and cognitive development of children who started attending before the age of three. Of these, eight found a positive association. In two of these studies, positive findings were confined to children with disadvantaged backgrounds and in two of the studies positive cognitive outcomes were accompanied by negative socio-emotional outcomes. Nine studies found limited or no association between attending centre-based care and educational outcomes.

In their literature review, Melhuish et al reported that while results for behavioural outcomes are inconclusive, cognitive, language and educational effects are more consistently positive. 'This is particularly true for children in centre-based care starting between age 2 and 3 and particularly, though not exclusively, for children from disadvantaged homes.' However, at odds with this finding, the review later states that the evidence from different contexts and countries is inconsistent, indicating that:

'[P]aths of influence to longer-term child outcomes are likely to be complex and involve the intertwined issues of starting age, program duration and intensity, as well as several parts of ecological systems (child, family, school), each of which is vulnerable to external influences.'

Scobie et al report that nursery can have a positive impact, provided the quality is high. They reiterate that the greatest impact is made by targeted programmes, with universal programmes also having a 'positive, albeit weaker effect with the biggest impact on disadvantaged children'. The third literature review likewise found that:

*'Children in day care centers had higher language scores and early school achievement, especially if they came from disadvantaged backgrounds and the centers offered high-quality care.'*⁹⁹

Turning to the large-scale studies, a US study using data on approximately 6,000 children found evidence to 'suggest that centre-based pre-school was supportive of the math and reading skills development of the sample as a whole'.¹⁰⁰ In a study of 1,500 children in Chile, Narea (2014) found a positive association between cognitive development and children in daycare compared to children at home, with more hours increasing the benefit (although the association was negative for socio-emotional factors). Similarly, analysing the data of 14,000 children again in the US, Loeb et al (2005) found 'overall, centre-based care raises reading and math scores' (but was negative for socio-emotional measures) relative to parental care. Like Melhuish, this study also found that the greatest benefit was for children starting between ages two and three and that more hours per day lead to greater academic benefits (but also greater behavioural consequences). These findings were not dependent on family income, but there were differences when subdivided by race.¹⁰¹ In West Germany, Felfe found that for children with low-educated mothers and foreign parents, exposure to centre-based care lead to better language development, motor skills and 'school readiness'. Consistent with findings on universal childcare above, 'treatment' group children had a higher proportion of mothers with tertiary education, yet for these children there was no significant developmental effect. Finally, in a 'large, multi-ethnic study', Luijk et al (2015) found that children who spent more hours in non-parental care, particularly centre-based care, had better language abilities than children who did not.¹⁰²

99 Bradley, R.H. and Vandell, D.L. (2007) 'Child Care and the Well-being of Children', *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*, 161(7), pp.669-76. Available at: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/570794> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

100 Votruba-Drzal, E. et al (2013) 'Center-based child care and cognitive skills development: Importance of timing and household resources', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(3), pp.821-838. Available at: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2013-17508-001> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

101 Loeb, S. et al (2007) 'How much is too much? The influence of preschool centers on children's social and cognitive development', *Economics of Education Review*, 26(1), pp.52-66. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775706000422> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

102 Luijk, M.P.C.M. et al (2015) 'Hours in non-parental child care are related to language development in a longitudinal cohort study', *Child Care Health Dev.* 41(6), pp.1188-98. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25722078/> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

Two of the studies already discussed above also looked at educational impacts on the under threes. Based on an English sample, Sylva et al found that for children assessed at 18 months old, more hours in nursery care were related to a modest improvement in cognitive scores when compared to other types of non-maternal care (for example, grandparents and nannies); and in a Norwegian study, Dearing et al found that use of formal ECEC predicted a statistically significant improvement in language skills for children from low-income families. Finally, a small-scale study in Sweden in the 1990s found that:

*'[C]hildren who had spent more months in centre-based day care before they were 40 months old obtained higher scores on tests of cognitive ability than did other children.'*¹⁰³

On the other hand, seven major longitudinal studies carried out across six countries have found limited or no evidence of an association between educational outcomes and centre-based childcare for children starting before the age of three. Although NICHD in the US did find that more centre-based care experience from age six months and older was 'somewhat' linked to better cognitive and language development at age four than less centre-based care experience, these effects were far outweighed by family and parenting features. It concluded overall that 'children who were cared for exclusively by their mothers did not develop differently than those who were also cared for by others'.¹⁰⁴ In the UK, SEED found 'relatively little evidence for the impact of ECEC on the EYFSP [educational achievement] outcomes' and concluded that 'the effects associated with ECEC are small overall, making only a small difference to development, not always identifiable in practice'.¹⁰⁵ Also in the UK (with a sample of 13,000) Cote found that attending either formal or centre-based childcare at nine months was associated with positive cognitive outcomes at age three for children of mothers with low education, but these effects did not persist to ages five or seven.¹⁰⁶

A large-scale longitudinal study of ECEC in the Netherlands, involving over 30,000 students from 600 schools, found 'no effects of daycare attendance [or] pre-school attendance... on the cognitive or non-cognitive competencies of elementary school children'.¹⁰⁷ Another large-scale, longitudinal study, this time in Australia, found no association between more time in centre-based childcare and children's 'receptive vocabulary ability' at school entry.¹⁰⁸ As we have seen, Saarinen et al found that in Finland starting pre-school between one and five years old had no impact on reading, math and science outcomes when measured at age 15. And finally, as we also saw above, Baker et al found 'little measured impact of cognitive skills' for zero- to four-year-olds participating in Quebec's universal childcare programme. (As noted, however, when re-assessing the data, Kottelenberg and Lehrer found that there were some positive outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.)¹⁰⁹

One small-scale study, again carried out by Broburg in Sweden in the 1990s, found that neither the type or quality of out-of-home care for children at 16 months predicted verbal ability when re-assessed 12 and 24 months later.¹¹⁰

103 Broburg, 1997, cited in van Belle, J. (2016) *Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and its long-term effects on educational and labour market outcomes*. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1667.html (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

104 NICHD (2006) *The NICHD study of early child care and youth development: Findings for children up to age 4 ½ years*. Available at: https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/documents/seccyd_06.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

105 Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. (2020) *Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to Age Three*. DfE. Available at: [Study of Early Education and Development \(SEED\): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age five years](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904447/seccyd_06.pdf) (publishing.service.gov.uk) (Accessed: 2nd January 2024).

106 Côté, S.M. et al (2013) 'Child care in infancy and cognitive performance until middle childhood in the millennium cohort study', *Child Dev.* 2013 Jul-Aug; 84(4):1191-208. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23331073/> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

107 Driessen, G. (2004) 'A large-scale longitudinal study of the utilization and effects of early childhood education and care in The Netherlands', *Early Child Development and Care*, 174(7/8), pp.667-689. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235006671_A_large-scale_longitudinal_study_of_the_utilization_and_effects_of_early_childhood_education_and_care_in_The_Netherlands#full-text (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

108 Gialamas, A. et al (2015) 'Time spent in different types of childcare and children's development at school entry: an Australian longitudinal study', *Arch Dis Child*, 100(3), pp. 226-32. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25204736/> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

109 Kottelenberg, M.J. and Lehrer, S.F. (2013) *New evidence on the impacts of access to and attending universal childcare in Canada*. Available at: https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w18785/w18785.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

110 Broburg (1990) cited in van Belle, J. (2016) *Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and its long-term effects on educational and labour market outcomes*. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1667.html (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

Findings on the impact of nursery on the socio-emotional development of children starting under the age of three are overwhelmingly non-positive, with both negative and neutral results

Of the 29 papers reviewed, 14 included information on the effect of nursery care on children's socio-emotional and behavioural development. Eleven of the studies reported at least some negative effects, and three studies reported limited or no effects on socio-emotional development.

In their review, Melhuish et al note that results on the behavioural impact childcare for the under threes are mixed, with negative associations tending to occur where childcare is high-intensity and children are very young. They state that:

'[T]here is some evidence that high levels of childcare, particularly group care in the first two years of life, may elevate the risk of developing anti-social behaviour. This may be related to high levels of poor quality, centre-based care in the first year of life.'

This is supported in the review by Bradley et al, which found that:

*'[C]hildren who began care early in life and were in care 30 or more hours a week were at increased risk for stress-related behavioral problems. Elevated risk was more likely if they had difficulties interacting with peers or had insensitive parents.'*¹¹¹

That longer hours in group care result in worse socio-emotional outcomes is echoed in many of the studies. The US NICHD study found that more hours in centre-based care were weakly associated with behaviour problems, while SEED (2017) in the UK showed mainly negative associations between ECEC and socio-emotional development, again 'particularly where there where children were spending higher numbers of hours in formal childcare settings.' As we have seen, Stein et al came to a similar conclusion in a UK study:

*'One finding that did emerge was that children who spent more time in group care, mainly nursery care, were more likely to have behavioural problems, particularly hyperactivity.'*¹¹²

Both Loeb et al and Narea concluded that the intensity of centre-based care matters, finding that more hours per day in centre-based care lead to greater academic benefits but increased socio-emotional consequences.¹¹³ Gialamis et al in Australia found that 'More time in centre-based childcare (but not other types of care) through the first 3 years of life was associated with higher parent-reported and teacher-reported externalising problem behaviours' at school entry. However (in contrast to Averdijk's findings), parents reported 'lower internalising problem behaviours' for children in group care.¹¹⁴ In the USA, Coley et al followed a sample of 6,000 children from infancy through kindergarten and found 'both center-based and full-time pre-school predicted heightened behavior problems and more limited learning behaviors in kindergarten, with care type and extent functioning additively.'¹¹⁵ Finally, Gupta and Simonsen found that while for children in day care in Denmark for 20-30 hours there was no impact on socio-emotional outcomes, when these hours increased to more than 30 there was a significant increase in negative outcomes.¹¹⁶

111 Bradley, R.H. and Vandell, D.L. (2007) 'Child Care and the Well-being of Children', *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.*, 161(7), pp.669-76. Available at: <https://jamanet-work.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/570794> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

112 Stein, A. et al (2013) 'The influence of different forms of early childcare on children's emotional and behavioural development at school entry', *Child Care Health Dev.* 39(5) pp. 676-87. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22928988/> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

113 Loeb, S. et al (2007) 'How much is too much? The influence of preschool centers on children's social and cognitive development', *Economics of Education Review*, 26(1), pp.52-66. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775706000422> (Accessed: 6 November 2023). And Narea, M. (2014) *Does early centre-based care have an impact on child cognitive and socio-emotional development? Evidence from Chile*. LSE. Available at: <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103992/1/casepaper183.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

114 Gialamas, A. et al (2015) 'Time spent in different types of childcare and children's development at school entry: an Australian longitudinal study', *Arch Dis Child*, 100(3), pp. 226-32. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25204736/> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

115 Coley, R.L. et al (2013) 'Timing, extent, and type of child care and children's behavioral functioning in kindergarten', *Dev Psychol.* 49(10), pp. 1859-73. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23244403/> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

116 Gupta, N.D. and Simonsen, M. (2007) 'Non-Cognitive Child Outcomes and Universal High Quality Child Care'. *IZA Discussion Papers*, No. 3188. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/34322/1/555704548.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

Three long-term impact studies found negative effects for childcare lasting into adolescence and early adulthood. As we have seen, Baker et al found that the effect of a universal childcare programme in Quebec was ‘a large, significant, negative shock to the pre-school, noncognitive development and health of children’, and subsequent research confirmed that the negative impact persisted as the programme matured. The study looked at the impact at older ages on both cognitive and noncognitive development, health and crime, assessing young people in their teens and early 20s. The authors reported a significant decline in self-reported health and life satisfaction, as well as a sharp increase in criminal behaviour relative to peers not exposed to the programme. Also a long-term impact study, Averdijk et al (2022) examined early external childcare in relation to development from age seven to 20 in a Swiss sample:

‘Growth curve models revealed that, dependent on the informant, time in a daycare center was related to increased externalizing and internalizing problems until at least age 11’.

And:

‘[T]ime in a daycare center was associated with fewer externalizing but more internalizing problems and substance use for children from vulnerable backgrounds. This relation with substance use lasted to age 20.’¹¹⁷

Finally, based on a US sample, Belsky et al (2010) found that effects of childcare extend into adolescence, linking more hours in care at an early age to greater ‘impulsivity’ and ‘risk taking’ at 15 years old.¹¹⁸

Three long-term studies found no or limited impact on socio-emotional development. Drawing on data from the Growing up in Ireland study, Russel et al found little effect of childcare on socio-emotional outcomes, with background being the more important factor. On the key question of whether centre-based care affects the outcomes for different groups of children (that is, does childcare compensate for socio-economic disadvantages) reports from parents differed from those of teachers. For parents there were no differences between advantaged and disadvantaged children, whereas teachers found ‘small but significant improvements’ in pro-social behaviour and ‘marginally lower socio-emotional difficulties’ for those in centre-based care compared to those cared for at home. As we saw above, for more advantaged children, centre-based care was related to increased socio-emotional difficulties. The authors concluded:

‘[W]e find some limited evidence to suggest that access to centre-based care has more beneficial effects for disadvantaged children, but the effects are small and not sufficient to level the playing field’.¹¹⁹

In a later study also based on the Growing Up in Ireland data, Morando and Platt (2020) came to stronger, albeit negative, conclusions. Looking at centre-based care (CBC) compared to other forms of non-parental care with babies starting at nine months old, they found that centre-based care increased both externalising and anti-social behaviours by age three, and they estimated this negative effect would last into the school years. The study concludes that ‘given planned expansion of CBC for those needing subsidized provision, we conclude that such measures could exacerbate socio-emotional inequalities’.¹²⁰

Assessing conduct problems, peer relationship problems, hyperactivity and pro-social behaviour in a Danish sample, Gupta and Simonson found no difference between outcomes for children cared for at home and children who were enrolled in pre-school at age three, regardless of gender and mother’s educational level.

117 Averdijk, M. et al (2022) ‘External childcare and socio-behavioral development in Switzerland: Long-term relations from childhood into young adulthood’, *PLoS One*, 17(3). Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8906621/> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

118 Vandell, D.L. et al (2011) ‘Do Effects of Early Child Care Extend to Age 15 Years? Results From the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development’, *Child Dev.*, 81(3) pp.737-56. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2938040/> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

119 Russell, H. et al (2016) *Childcare, Early Education and Socio-Emotional Outcomes at Age 5: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland study*, The Economic and Social Research Institute. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309718320_Childcare_Early_Education_and_Socio-Emotional_Outcomes_at_Age_5_Evidence_from_the_Growing_Up_in_Ireland_study (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

120 Morando, G. and Platt, L. (2022) ‘The Impact of Centre-based Childcare on Non-cognitive Skills of Young Children’, *Economica*, 89(356), pp.908-46. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ecca.12440> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

However, as noted above, they did find that increasing hours for children in pre-school from 20-30 hours per week to 30-40 hours per week lead to significantly poorer outcomes.

Finally, two studies in Norway investigated whether long hours in centre-based childcare were associated with behaviour problems. Drawing on a large population-based sample (75,000) and using maternal reports of externalising problems at 18 and 36 months, Zachrisson et al found that 'Within a sociopolitical context of homogenously high-quality child care, there was little evidence that high quantity of care causes externalizing problems.'¹²¹ In a much smaller scale study (900 children), this time based on teacher reports, Dearing (2015) found that even high intensive centre-based care from one to four years had, 'at most, faint and fading consequences for children's aggression'.¹²² Both these studies will be discussed in more detail below.

Evidence on the long-term impact of starting nursery before age three is limited, with no exclusively positive results

Of the studies reviewed, only four looked at how nursery attendance before the age of three influences children's development and achievement as teenagers and young adults. None of the four studies had exclusively positive results. Three concluded that early childcare experiences had a lasting impact: Baker and Averdijk in terms of emotional and behavioural functioning at 20, and Belsky for both cognitive and emotional/behavioural functioning at age 15. As we have seen, Baker's findings were overwhelmingly negative, while Belsky and Averdijk showed some positive and some negative results. Drawing on the NICHD sample, Belsky found a modest connection between childcare quality up to age four and higher cognitive achievement at age 15, as well as less externalising behaviour. More hours in childcare, however, were linked to more externalising behaviour (risk taking and impulsivity) in later years.¹²³ Averdijk found that time in daycare was linked to less externalising but more internalising problems during later years, and increased substance abuse for vulnerable children in adulthood. Finally, investigating the academic impact of universal childcare in Finland, Saarinen et al concluded that it had 'failed to promote learning outcomes at 15 years of age and to increase equality in the later school achievements.'

Summary of evidence on childcare and the under threes

The most important (non-genetic) factor in children's educational and socio-emotional development is parenting and the home environment. The impact of nursery depends on the quality of the care provided at the nursery, relative to the quality of alternative care (maternal or non-maternal). Findings on the impact of nursery on the educational development of children starting under the age of three are divided, with some positive and some neutral results. Findings on the impact of nursery on the socio-emotional development of children starting under the age of three are overwhelmingly non-positive, with both negative and neutral results. Evidence on the long-term impact of starting nursery before age three is limited, with no exclusively positive results.

121 Zachrisson, H.D. et al (2013) 'Little Evidence That Time in Child Care Causes Externalizing Problems During Early Childhood in Norway', *Child Development*, pp.1-19. Available at: https://www.hms.harvard.edu/cldp/pub/pdfs/Zachrisson_et_al_2013_CD.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

122 Dearing, E. et al (2015) 'Age of Entry Into Early Childhood Education and Care and Aggression: Faint and fading associations for young Norwegian children', *Psychological Science*, 26(10). Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281054712_Age_of_Entry_Into_Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care_and_Aggression_Faint_and_fading_associations_for_young_Norwegian_children (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

123 Vandell, D.L. et al (2011) 'Do Effects of Early Child Care Extend to Age 15 Years? Results From the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development', *Child Dev.*, 81(3) pp.737-56. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2938040/> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

Discussion

Universal childcare and social equality

Conceptually, it makes sense that there is a correlation between participation in formal ECEC activities and the development of certain life-long abilities. The idea that universal childcare will level the playing field between different social classes because it disproportionately benefits children from more disadvantaged backgrounds is a steadfast belief in political circles. Improving ‘social mobility’ is thus a recurrent refrain within the childcare discourse, adding a sort of moral imperative to calls for the expansion of the sector. However, the picture that emerges from the evidence is neither straightforward nor definitive and there are a number of reasons why the potential of universal childcare as a way to reduce achievement gaps may be limited.

One reason is that, as Belsky states, ‘family factors and processes are typically more predictive of child functioning than child-care factors and processes.’ In other words:

‘[F]amily matters more to children’s developmental wellbeing than child care, though this result may be as much (if not more) a function of shared genes as pure environmental effects.’¹²⁴

Within childcare studies, the possibility of a substantial hereditary component to intelligence and ability are rarely mentioned (Belsky being the exception, see discussion in Saunders).¹²⁵ However, as we have seen, the finding that family characteristics, parenting (sometimes defined as ‘maternal sensitivity’), and the home learning environment have a greater impact on child outcomes than type, quality, or quantity of childcare is consistent across the international literature. Research by the Sutton Trust has also concluded that parenting is the single most important factor explaining gaps in early development.¹²⁶

Moreover, the socio-economic status (SES) of parents is not necessarily always predictive of the quality of the learning environment a child experiences in the home. A UK study (Melhuish et al, 2008) found that:

‘[T]he home learning environment is only moderately associated with SES and parents’ educational levels, indicating that low SES homes sometimes score highly and conversely, high SES homes sometimes score poorly on home learning environment measures.’¹²⁷

The 2019 Social Mobility Commission confirmed this, stating that the:

‘[R]ange and quality of activities which parents undertake with pre-school children is more strongly associated with children’s social and intellectual development as compared with either parental education or occupation.’¹²⁸

124 Belsky, J. (2001) ‘Emanuel Miller Lecture Developmental Risks (Still) Associated with Early Child Care’, *J. Child Psycho. Psychiat.* 42(7), pp. 845–859. Available at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=b4ae35e4029fbcafb62b96c01107e9021c3998> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

125 Saunders, P. (2019) *Social Mobility Truths*. Civitas. Available at: <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/socialmobilitytruths.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

126 Waldfogel, J. and Washbrook, E. (2010) *Low income and early cognitive development in the U.K.* Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Sutton_Trust_Cognitive_Report-2.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

127 Melhuish, E. et al (2008) ‘Effects of the Home Learning Environment and Preschool Center Experience upon Literacy and Numeracy Development in Early Primary School’, *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(1), pp. 95–114. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227536016_Effects_of_the_Home_Learning_Environment_and_Preschool_Center_Experience_upon_Literacy_and_Numeracy_Development_in_Early_Primary_School (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

128 Social Mobility Commission (2019) *State of the Nation 2018-19: Social Mobility in Great Britain*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5cc76d15ed915d5dce07e9fe/SMC_State_of_the_Nation_Report_2018-19.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

Studies in other countries have come to a similar conclusion. Research based on the longitudinal study ‘Growing up in Australia’, for instance, found that while there is a consistent association between financial disadvantage and the ‘cognitive and learning components’ of school readiness:

*‘[T]here is no clear evidence to suggest that financial disadvantage is a strong independent risk factor when other child, parental and community factors are included’.*¹²⁹

If the most important (non-genetic) feature in poor developmental outcomes for children is poor parenting (rather than education, class or income) and the most crucial period for this development is the first three years, it might be argued that a universal entitlement for more hours at younger ages could substitute this ‘low-quality’ care with ‘higher quality’ care and thus improve educational outcomes for these children.

This brings us, however, to a second reason why universal childcare may be unlikely to greatly reduce achievement gaps. A recurring finding across the international childcare literature is that the children least likely to benefit from formal childcare (that is, those from affluent families with enriching home learning environments) are the most likely to attend, and those most likely to benefit (from, for instance, non-working families with unstable home environments) are the least likely to attend.¹³⁰ In other words, universal childcare schemes ‘disproportionately subsidise advantaged families’ at the same time as they often do not reach the children who are most vulnerable and in need of intervention.¹³¹ In fact, even targeted childcare placements do not necessarily increase participation for disadvantaged children. Stuart and Waldfogel (2017) note that, in England, nearly one-third of eligible two-year-olds did not take up their free entitlement.¹³²

A further challenge to the notion that poor parenting can be replaced with good childcare is the difficulty of making sure that the childcare is in fact ‘good’. There is a strong consensus among researchers that for ECEC to enhance child development it must be high-quality (what this means and how to achieve it is discussed further below).¹³³ As we have seen, several studies have noted that childcare can have a detrimental effect particularly on disadvantaged children where care provided is ‘low-quality’. ‘Zero benefits’ have also been observed. In the UK an evaluation of the 15-hour entitlement for three- and four-year-olds in England found no sign that it reduced achievement gaps or had any educational benefit at all when the children reached ages seven and 11, and the authors note that ‘the free entitlement may not be consistently of high enough quality to have detectable and long-lasting benefits’.¹³⁴ Of course, another possible interpretation may be that the entitlement was not generous enough, and it remains to be seen what will happen when it is raised to 30 hours per week. That said, many commentators have noted the inevitable conflict that arises between the pursuit of *quality* combined with a rapid *expansion* of childcare places whilst ensuring *affordability* within a market system.¹³⁵

129 Edwards, B. et al (2009) *Financial disadvantage and children’s school readiness*. AIFS. Available at: https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/fm83c-EdwardsE-tal_0.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

130 See, for example, Drange, N. and Telle, K. (2018) *Universal child care and inequality of opportunity Descriptive findings from Norway*. Statistics Norway Research department. Available at: https://www.ssb.no/en/forskning/discussion-papers/_attachment/354482?_ts=1643bfc0af8 (Accessed: 6 November 2023). And McKendrick, J.H. (2022) *Rapid Review of Evidence on the Impact of Childcare on Parental Poverty, Employment and Household Costs in Low-income Families*. Glasgow Caledonian University. Available at: https://www.gcu.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/143296/Rapid-Review-of-Evidence-on-the-Impact-of-Childcare-on-Parental-Poverty-FINAL-221211.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

131 Cornelissen, T. et al (2018) ‘Who Benefits from Universal Child Care? Estimating Marginal Returns to Early Child Care Attendance’, *Journal of Political Economy*, 126(6). Available at: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/699979> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

132 Stewart, K. and Waldfogel, J. (2017) *Closing gaps early: The role of early years policy in promoting social mobility in England*. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Closing-Gaps-Early_FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

133 For a comprehensive discussion of ‘quality’ in childcare, see: Mathers, S. et al (2014) *Sound Foundations: A review of the research evidence on quality for early childhood education and care for children under three. Implications for policy and practice*. The Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312295686_Sound_Foundations_A_review_of_the_research_evidence_on_quality_for_early_childhood_education_and_care_for_children_under_three_implications_for_policy_and_practice (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

134 Blanden, J. et al. *Evaluating the Impact of Nursery Attendance on Children’s Outcomes: Final Report*. University of Surrey and UCL. Available at: <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/sites/default/files/evaluating-the-impact-of-nursery-attendance-on-childrens-outcomes-final-report.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

135 Lewis, J. and West, A. (2016) ‘Early Childhood Education and Care in England under Austerity: Continuity or Change in Political Ideas, Policy Goals, Availability, Affordability and Quality in a Childcare Market?’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 46(2). Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-social-policy/article/early-childhood-education-and-care-in-england-under-austerity-continuity-or-change-in-political-ideas-policy-goals-availability-affordability-and-quality-in-a-childcare-market/9B2859AD9EDFD7CC81753D4578041321> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

Although policymakers widely acknowledge the importance of quality, it remains difficult to see how they can guarantee universal quality along with universal access. It is this tension which has led a number of authors to suggest that policy efforts would be better focused on improving quality and flexibility than on increasing hours. Cornelissen et al assert that ‘programs targeted at minority and disadvantaged children are likely to be more cost effective and beneficial than universal child care programs.’¹³⁶ This assertion is echoed in the review by Heckman et al, discussed above. Research for the Sutton Trust has also criticised the ‘shift in focus of childcare policy away from quality towards quantity, with less focus on educational development’. It asserts that the 30-hour entitlement for working families is not ‘well-designed to promote social mobility’, meaning instead:

‘[L]onger hours in state-funded early education for children who are already relatively advantaged, which may be expected to widen gaps in child development at school starting age.’¹³⁷

There is a further dimension to the emphasis on ‘quality’ that is worth noting at this point. In his discussion of developmental risks associated with early, non-maternal childcare, Belsky mentions a ‘pressure’ to attribute ‘all disconcerting child-care effects to the experience of poor-quality care’.¹³⁸ Although it is not possible to determine ‘pressure’, there is certainly an identifiable trend across the international literature to interpret negative findings in terms of low-quality, even where there is no direct evidence for this interpretation. Specific examples can be found in Blanden; Melhuish; Pinto and Narea. This is not to suggest that quality is unrelated to children’s outcomes, but rather to point out that even when findings are ‘totally speculative’ in nature, this does not prevent them from being widely repeated in the literature as if they were fact. At the very least this demonstrates a reluctance within the research community to fundamentally re-examine the base hypothesis that childcare is in general good for children. Moreover, the international literature provides a number of examples of childcare schemes which have had either no impact or a detrimental impact on some participating children despite the schemes meeting all the generally accepted criteria for ‘high-quality’ (most notably schemes in Norway, Finland, Spain and Denmark).

Putting to one side for now issues surrounding the question of quality, as well as the fact that childcare policies are unlikely to impact the most vulnerable children at the margins of society, it is still possible to make the argument that because, out of the children who do participate in childcare, measured benefits are concentrated on the relatively more disadvantaged, childcare can decrease attainment gaps between these two groups of children.

Despite frequently being used interchangeably in everyday conversation, a ‘reduction in attainment gaps’ and ‘increased (upward) social mobility’ are not the same thing. The former generally refers to levels of achievement during the school years and later educational qualifications; the latter refers to either a change in socio-economic status over the course of a person’s lifetime or a change in socio-economic status between generations in one family. It is most frequently measured in terms of occupation (a proxy for class) and level of income. As we have seen, there is a consistent finding in the international research that universal childcare schemes (for children over the age of three and when compared to other types of childcare) can lead to gains in academic performance across the school years for children identified as having one or more disadvantage. As we have also seen repeatedly stated in the literature, however, research on the relationship between these performance indicators and ‘success’ beyond the school years is severely limited. A ‘consensus statement’ produced by a task force of ten eminent childcare scholars in the United States confirms this. All members of the task force agreed that ‘Convincing evidence on the longer-term impacts of contemporary scaled-up pre-K [pre-kindergarten] programmes and school progress is sparse, precluding broad conclusions’.¹³⁹ Since enhanced outcomes over the entire life-cycle are the foundation for this narrative, the dearth of long-term impact studies poses a major problem.

136 Cornelissen, T. et al (2018) ‘Who Benefits from Universal Child Care? Estimating Marginal Returns to Early Child Care Attendance’, *Journal of Political Economy*, 126(6). Available at: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/699979> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

137 Stewart, K. and Waldfogel, J. (2017) *Closing gaps early: The role of early years policy in promoting social mobility in England*. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Closing-Gaps-Early_FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

138 Belsky, J. (2001) ‘Emanuel Miller Lecture Developmental Risks (Still) Associated with Early Child Care’, *J. Child Psycho. Psychiat.* 42(7), pp. 845–859. Available at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=b4ae35e4029fbcaffbd62b96c01107e9021c3998> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

139 Puzzling it out: the current state of scientific knowledge on pre-kindergarten effects: A consensus statement: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/puzzling-it-out-the-current-state-of-scientific-knowledge-on-pre-kindergarten-effects/>

This review identified two studies which looked at the long-term impact of universal childcare in terms of indicators commonly associated with social mobility. Havnes and Mogstad (2009) found that for children with low-educated mothers, ‘exposure to public day care increased the likelihood of completing high school and attending further education.’ They also found that the girls who had been in daycare were more likely to ‘delay child-bearing and family formation’ as adults and thus were more strongly ‘attached’ to the labour market.¹⁴⁰ (The latter finding was considered a proxy for a reduction in the gender pay gap. Whether it can be unequivocally described as a ‘benefit’ will be discussed further below.) In this study, attending further education was considered evidence for an improvement in intergenerational mobility. In a follow-up study that examined earning prospects across different groups of children, the same authors found that attending childcare had improved earning prospects for children from low- and middle-income families. The ‘primary outcome variable of interest’, however, was average earnings over a period of just three years. Furthermore, the playing field was levelled not just by increasing earning prospects for less advantaged children but by reducing those of more advantaged children.¹⁴¹

On the other hand, in a study specifically comparing social mobility in Denmark and the United States, Landerso and Heckman found that in Denmark, although children achieved significantly better PISA scores than their counterparts in the United States, this did not translate into better educational outcomes. Indeed, despite stark policy differences, with Denmark investing heavily in universal access to education from nursery to university, educational mobility is remarkably similar in both countries. As the study acknowledges, ‘test scores are not the whole story, or even the main story of child success, despite the emphasis on them in popular discussions.’¹⁴²

In the UK, Saunders has pointed out that decades of government effort to close the gap in attainment levels of children from richer and poorer backgrounds has not significantly changed overall social mobility outcomes, which have remained remarkably consistent over time. Although more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may achieve qualifications as a result of these policies, this does not help them find better jobs if the relative value of their qualifications has been significantly reduced by the same policies (that is, they have been subject to ‘grade inflation’).¹⁴³ In sum, in addition to the evidence being extremely limited, what evidence does exist suggests that academic performance cannot be automatically equated with success in adulthood, even if we define adult success exclusively in terms of employment and income.

A further problem for the equality narrative is that, in their efforts to corroborate it, the research community has shown a distinct lack of interest in the social, psychological and behavioural aspects of achievement and success. This is the case at least where the more recent literature on universal childcare is concerned.¹⁴⁴ That academics are preoccupied with social equality is clear. Without exception, studies which demonstrate that the measured benefits of universal childcare are confined to minority groups are presented positively as evidence that universal childcare ‘levels the playing field’, rather than negatively as evidence that the policy has failed to benefit the majority of participating children.

That the whole experience of the child is being disregarded is shown by the strong focus on cognitive and academic scores as the key indicators of developmental progress. There is now a substantial body of evidence showing that early socio-emotional development has long-term implications. ‘Abilities to manage emotion, attention, and behavior and to form positive peer relationships are prerequisites for school readiness and

140 Havnes, T. and Mogstad, M. (2009) *No Child Left Behind: Universal Child Care and Children’s Long-Run Outcomes*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp4561.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

141 Havnes, T. and Mogstad, M. (2010) *Is Universal Child Care Leveling the Playing Field? Evidence from Non-Linear Difference-in-Differences*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp4978.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

142 Landerso, R. and Heckman, J.J. (2016) ‘The Scandinavian Fantasy: The Sources of Intergenerational Mobility in Denmark and the US’, *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 119(1), pp.178-230. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/sjoe.12219> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

143 Saunders, P. (2010) *Social Mobility Myths*. Civitas. Available at: <https://civitas.org.uk/pdf/SocialMobilityJUNE2010.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

144 The scarcity of studies on non-cognitive outcomes has also been noted in studies on employment and child development.

academic success'.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, 'non-cognitive skills promote the formation of cognitive skills but not vice versa'.¹⁴⁶ When it comes to universal childcare provision, then, a key question that needs to be answered is: are the cognitive benefits that have been identified for more disadvantaged children accompanied by non-cognitive benefits, and if the socio-emotional impact (particularly of early, intensive group care) is negative, could this offset any academic gains in the longer-term?

Finally, there is something troubling about the emphasis on equality when it is placed above all other considerations. Speaking in 2014, then Education and Childcare Minister Liz Truss stated that:

*'[T]he most important measure of success for the early years sector is whether the poorest children are doing as well as their better off peers by the time they start school.'*¹⁴⁷

The implication is that the experience of one group of children is more important than the other; or, that as long as a particular minority benefit from a policy, it does not matter what is the experience (or indeed, the preference) of the majority. This impression is re-enforced when we look at the literature on universal childcare. For example, the Sutton Trust criticism of the Conservative Government's 30-hour childcare proposals expressed concern that they would be unlikely to affect more disadvantaged children, but expressed no concern for the 'relatively advantaged' children who would be spending 'longer hours' in state-funded care.¹⁴⁸ Yet children from 'relatively advantaged' backgrounds have little if anything to gain academically from attending formal childcare, and spending longer hours away from their families may have other effects on their overall development which are as yet unexplored. As we have seen, in some cases the assumption that the experience of 'better off' children matters less than the experience of poorer children is quite explicit.¹⁴⁹ In the quest to 'level the playing field' it appears to have been forgotten that all children are vulnerable. Moreover, in the current policy context these are very young children we are talking about, sometimes babies. Their individual experiences matter. Whether they spend 15 hours or 30 hours a week in professional care makes a significant difference to them, irrespective of their parents' level of income or education.

Although not an exhaustive review of the literature, the studies examined here strongly suggest that the 'equalising' effect of universal childcare continues to be more hypothesis than established fact. Commenting on the scale-up of publicly-funded preschool programmes in the United States, Magnusen et al offer this summary of the situation:

*'Ultimately, although preschool programs can be an effective means of preparing children for kindergarten, in the long run, these programs, short of other supports, are not, and should not be expected to be, a remedy for educational inequality throughout the life course.'*¹⁵⁰

If the aim is to improve the situation of children in the most deprived circumstances, then the evidence points to a combination of targeted childcare provision and parenting schemes as the policy tools most likely to help these children. Because the strongest influences on child development are derived from the home, interventions to enhance this development 'might best focus on supporting families and augmenting the quality of care in the home'.¹⁵¹ It is true that past schemes aimed at more direct intervention (most notably, Sure Start)

145 Liew, J. and McTigue, E.M. (2010) 'Educating the whole child: The role of social and emotional development in achievement and school success'. In Kington, L.E. (Ed.) *Handbook of Curriculum Development* (pp. 465-478). Nova Sciences Publishers, Inc. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267952676_Educating_the_whole_child_The_role_of_social_and_emotional_development_in_achievement_and_school_success (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

146 Gupta, N.D. and Simonsen, M. (2007) 'Non-Cognitive Child Outcomes and Universal High Quality Child Care'. *IZA Discussion Papers*, No. 3188. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/34322/1/555704548.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

147 Grauberg, J (2014): *Early Years: valuable ends and effective means*. Centre Forum

148 <https://www.suttontrust.com/fairstart/>. Accessed 3rd January 2024.

149 Havnes and Mogstad 2010 is one instance; see also the discussion below surrounding the response to the negative findings on Quebec. Some countries (like France) have gone as far as making preschool compulsory, which raises many questions not only about the impact on children but the complete removal of parental rights.

150 Magnusen, Ruhm, Waldfogel 2007: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6426150/>

151 Stein, A. et al (2013) 'The influence of different forms of early childcare on children's emotional and behavioural development at school entry', *Child Care Health Dev.* 39(5) pp. 676-87. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22928988/> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

have shown mixed results and there are considerable challenges to implementing these kinds of programmes at scale.¹⁵² This does nothing to alter the fact, however, that public investment in universal childcare as a one-size-fits all approach to tackling inequalities does not seem to be the answer. All families are different and what benefits one child may not benefit another. The most important measure of success for early years policy should be whether it caters to this diversity of needs and in so doing supports the development of individual children.

Universal childcare and the economy

Findings on the impact of childcare policies on maternal employment are mixed. In their extensive review of the international evidence, McKendrick et al note considerable variation across countries, studies and time periods. The results were neither straightforward nor conclusive, with some studies reporting significant gains in employment while others reported modest, weak or insignificant gains. The authors concluded that, on balance, the evidence pointed to a modest, positive connection between childcare investment and employment. However, in countries where female labour participation was already high before the policy was introduced, such as is the case in the UK, its impact was minimal.¹⁵³

Studies on existing universal and conditional schemes in the UK also demonstrate underwhelming results. A report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in 2014 found that the 15-hour universal entitlement for three-year-olds in England had increased maternal employment by around three percentage points, equivalent to approximately 12,000 women. This came at a cost of £0.8 billion and was thus deemed an ‘inefficient way to increase female labour force participation’. The authors surmised that an extension of hours could achieve greater benefits, but it was unclear if it would ‘transform’ parental labour supply or be good value for money.¹⁵⁴ In their evaluation of the same policy, Blanden et al found that the main impact of the policy was to help parents who were already paying for childcare with the costs. They observe that although this is beneficial for many families it is a ‘transfer’ rather than an investment.¹⁵⁵ Similar observations were made in Pascal’s review of England’s 30-hour means-tested (‘extended’) entitlement introduced in 2017.¹⁵⁶ In Scotland, McKendrick et al found ‘neither definitive nor compelling’ evidence on the impact of the 16-hour entitlement on female employment,¹⁵⁷ echoing an earlier evidence review on parental outcomes carried out by Scobie et al, where the authors cited insufficient evidence to determine who benefited and how.¹⁵⁸ In Wales, Glover et al (2018) reported that ‘86% of parents reported no change in hours worked following the introduction of the Childcare Offer in Wales for 3 and 4 years old’, concluding overall that there was no significant impact on employment, at least in the early implementation period.¹⁵⁹

152 Stewart, K. and Waldfogel, J. (2017) *Closing gaps early: The role of early years policy in promoting social mobility in England*. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Closing-Gaps-Early_FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

153 McKendrick, J.H. (2022) *Rapid Review of Evidence on the Impact of Childcare on Parental Poverty, Employment and Household Costs in Low-income Families*. Glasgow Caledonian University. Available at: https://www.gcu.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/143296/Rapid-Review-of-Evidence-on-the-Impact-of-Childcare-on-Parental-Poverty-FINAL-221211.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

154 Brewer, M. et al (2014) *The impact of free, universal pre-school education on maternal labour supply*. IFS. Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/output_url_files/BCCR_mimeo_22%252520Oct.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

155 Blanden, J. et al. *Evaluating the Impact of Nursery Attendance on Children’s Outcomes: Final Report*. University of Surrey and UCL. Available at: <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/sites/default/files/evaluating-the-impact-of-nursery-attendance-on-childrens-outcomes-final-report.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

156 Pascal, C. et al (2021) *What do we know about the 30 hour entitlement? Literature review and qualitative stakeholder work*. Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/What-do-we-know-about-the-30-hour-entitlement-literature-review.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

157 McKendrick, J.H. (2022) *Rapid Review of Evidence on the Impact of Childcare on Parental Poverty, Employment and Household Costs in Low-income Families*. Glasgow Caledonian University. Available at: https://www.gcu.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/143296/Rapid-Review-of-Evidence-on-the-Impact-of-Childcare-on-Parental-Poverty-FINAL-221211.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

158 Scobie, G. et al (2017) *Provision of early learning and childcare and parents’ outcomes: an evidence brief*. NHS Scotland. Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/34157/1/provision-of-early-learning-and-childcare-and-parents-outcomes-an-evidence-brief.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

159 Glover, A. et al (2018) *Evaluation of the Early Implementation of the Childcare Offer for Wales*. Welsh Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-06/181122-evaluation-early-implementation-childcare-offer-en.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

These assessments relate mainly to part-time care placements, and several studies hypothesise the outcomes of expanding the offer of free childcare. Brewer et al estimate ‘significant impacts of moving from part-time to full-time care for mothers whose youngest child becomes eligible’. They argue it is unlikely that this will simply ‘crowd out’ the use of other types of care.¹⁶⁰ De Henau also simulates the potential for childcare investment to contribute substantially to employment among mothers with young children, suggesting various scenarios which could increase these figures by 23–31 percentage points. (De Henau acknowledges that it would be likely to reduce the working hours of those who are only working full-time to pay for childcare – see 2019 simulation.) In De Henau’s simulation, the majority of these young mothers would take jobs within the childcare sector itself.¹⁶¹ On the other hand, a more sceptical report by the Education Policy Institute argued that the main effect of extending the entitlement to 30 hours in the UK will be to replace existing private childcare arrangements with government-funded provision, meaning the policy will do little to raise employment.¹⁶²

Although not all of the childcare impact studies reviewed here included information on labour supply, a number of them did. In Norway, Havnes and Mogstad found that the introduction of universal childcare did not increase employment rates because it mainly replaced alternative forms of childcare. In Germany (which has a comparatively low maternal employment rate) Dustman et al reported that a 20-hour childcare entitlement did not increase maternal working hours. In Spain, which has even lower rates of maternal employment, a full-time (working day) childcare subsidy had only a ‘modest’ impact on maternal employment rates and a ‘negligible’ effect on income. Finally, the introduction of universal childcare in Quebec led to a ‘very large increase in the use of care’ for 0-4 year olds (14% points in Quebec relative to the rest of the country where no childcare provision existed), particularly among married or cohabiting women. However, ‘approximately one third of the newly reported use appears to come from women who previously worked and had informal arrangements’. As such, partly as a result of this large ‘crowd out,’ ‘the taxes generated by the new maternal labor supply fall far short of paying for the costs of the increased childcare subsidies.’¹⁶³

It remains unclear what effect the 30-hour entitlement will have on employment rates in the UK, but given the already high female employment and the policy focus on the working population, it seems reasonable to assume that savings for parents already paying for childcare will be a main result. It is rather hard to make an argument that, for the children of these parents, the increase in family disposable income from this saving will have much effect on their learning and development. At a stretch, we might say that less financial stress might improve parenting and foster a more tranquil home environment. Even then, as already pointed out, childcare entitlements tied exclusively to professional care are not the only way that the financial stresses on parents could be eased. At the very least, families could be treated fairly within the tax and benefits system.¹⁶⁴ A recent report published by the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship outlines a number of ways this could be achieved, including childcare budgets paid directly to parents, family-friendly taxation, flexible working opportunities and more affordable housing.¹⁶⁵ For the children who are transferred from informal to formal care as a result of the entitlement, the effect will depend on the relative quality of the two alternatives.

160 Brewer, M. et al (2022) ‘Does more free childcare help parents work more?’, *Labour Economics*, 74. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0927537121001354> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

161 De Henau, J. (2022) ‘Simulating employment and fiscal effects of public investment in high-quality universal childcare in the UK’, *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 16(3). Available at: <https://ijccp.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40723-022-00096-y>; (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

And De Henau, J. (2019) *Employment and fiscal effects of investing in universal childcare: a macro-micro simulation analysis for the UK*. The Open University. Available at: https://www5.open.ac.uk/ikd/sites/www.open.ac.uk/ikd/files/files/working-papers/DeHenau_costingchildcareUK.pdf (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

162 Johnes, R. and Hutchinson, J. (2016) *Widening the gap? The impact of the 30-hour entitlement on early years education and childcare*. Education Policy Institute. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/widening-gap-impact-30-hour-entitlement-early-years-education-childcare/> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

163 2008: Baker, M. et al (2008) ‘Universal Childcare, Maternal Labor Supply, and Family Well-Being’, *Journal of Political Economy*, 116(4), pp.709-745. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/591908> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

164 For a discussion on the ways that families are penalised within the tax system, see, for example, Draper, D. (2023) *Taxation of Families 2023: Analysis Paper*. Tax and the Family. Available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599d9140f9a61e6173ace13a/t/653ba251cf01ab046004ddb2/1698406995440/TTF_TaxationOfFamilies_2023.pdf (Accessed: 7 November 2023). See also Mothers at Home Matter (2015) *Who Cares about the family*. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ed9e68a9557ec2f1f733586/t/5efcb24e5edbbd4e09fa6f42/1593619027807/Who+Cares+about+the+Family+-+Jan2015+spreads.pdf> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

165 Perry et al (2023) *Who Cares? The Real Cost of Childcare*, ARC. Available at: <https://www.arc-research.org/research-papers/the-real-cost-of-childcare> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

If, as Brewer contends, free, full-time childcare encourages mothers back to work when their youngest child becomes eligible, this could (depending on whether the work was full- or part-time and other factors) mean a substantial increase in disposable income for the family. Likewise for women moving from part to full-time work. Yet, all the points already discussed in the previous section suggest that an increase in family income will not make a large difference to developmental outcomes for children. It is not parent's *financial* investment but their *time* investment that counts. This is further confirmed by studies which look specifically at the relationship between maternal employment and child development.¹⁶⁶ As such, for the child whose mother would have stayed at home but for the policy, whether it is a 'benefit' or a 'harm' will depend again on the extent to which experiences in formal childcare make up for the loss of maternal time and attention.

Of course, this is not to say that for children living in poverty an improvement in material circumstances will not be beneficial; quite the opposite is true. As previously discussed, however, families living in the lowest income households are the least likely to access free childcare. The Conservative childcare policy, moreover, is aimed at mothers who are either already employed or have the necessary qualifications for employment. It can be anticipated, therefore, that the children affected by the policy will not be the ones living in the most deprived conditions.

Even where childcare schemes are fully universal, it is not clear whether this has a significant impact on poverty reduction. In their review of the international evidence, McKendrick et al find:

'[A] lack of empirical studies, which estimate how many families/children have been, or are likely to be lifted out of poverty, because of universal or publicly subsidized childcare provision.'

The small number of studies available do show a slight but positive effect. That said, 'the removal of a childcare barrier to employment may not, alone, be sufficient to reduce levels of child poverty'. And furthermore:

*'[T]he impact of childcare as a tool to tackle relative poverty could be negligible (neutral) or even regressive, depending on how provision is made available.'*¹⁶⁷

It appears, then, that there are a group of families who are, as one study phrased it, 'highly resistant' to this kind of political intervention. Saunders argues that, while the UK does not have a serious social mobility problem, it does have a serious 'underclass' problem. In its report 'Social Mobility and its Enemies', the Sutton Trust describes "troubled pupils" who suffer 'multiple dimensions of disadvantage' and 'years of instability, abuse and violence at home as young children.'¹⁶⁸ If social justice is a key motivation in early years policy, then the foregoing discussion suggests that the considerable public effort currently being devoted to equalising the exam results of children from working- and middle-class families would be better spent on finding ways to alleviate the suffering of children from families which fall into neither category.

166 See, for example, Mukherjee, S. (2010) *The Impact of Maternal Employment on Child's Mental Health: Evidence from NLSY-Child*. Available at: <https://paa2011.populationassociation.org/papers/111558> (Accessed: 7 November 2023). And Gregg, P. and Washbrook, E. (2003) *The Effects of Early Maternal Employment on Child Development in the UK*. The Centre for Market and Public Organisation. Available at: <https://ideas.repec.org/p/bri/cmpowp/03-070.html> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

167 McKendrick, J.H. et al (2022) *Rapid Review of Evidence on the Impact of Childcare on Parental Poverty, Employment and Household Costs in Low-income Families*. Glasgow Caledonian University. Available at: https://www.gcu.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/143296/Rapid-Review-of-Evidence-on-the-Impact-of-Childcare-on-Parental-Poverty-FINAL-221211.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

168 Cited in Saunders, P. (2010) *Social Mobility Myths*. Civitas. Available at: <https://civitas.org.uk/pdf/SocialMobilityJUNE2010.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

Universal childcare and women's empowerment

The notion that universal childcare allows women to 'realise their full potential' by relieving them of the 'constraint' of caring for their children is a core assumption underpinning what has been presented as a 'feminist plan for a caring economy'.¹⁶⁹ De Henau describes it as part of a new 'social policy paradigm' which aims to increase equal opportunities of future generations through integrating their parents (and them later) into the labour market:

'From a care economy perspective, providing quality care is not just seen as a means to achieve greater (female) employment by reducing constraints on labour supply but also a necessary feature of a civilised society that offers social equality and security to its population. One aim of this 'social investment strategy' is to 'to improve upwards convergence in men's and women's economic perspectives'.¹⁷⁰

A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research echoes the claim that creating 'better labour market attachment for women' is crucial to creating a more 'socially just' society.¹⁷¹

There are two important things to note about the 'feminist plan' as described above. First of all, it initially appears to display somewhat confused priorities. Is the main aim to enable women to fulfil their potential, or is it to enable women to pursue a career, or is it to create a more just and equal society? The narrative is internally consistent, however, if all three are viewed as one and the same; that is to say, women realise their potential through pursuing a career and this in turn leads to a more just society as men's and women's attitudes toward and involvement in both paid employment and family 'converge'. The implications are that women are fulfilled through work rather than through family; that a just society depends on a precise equality of outcomes between men and women; and that differences in roles between men and women are the result of inequality of opportunities rather than the result of different choices.

The second thing to note about the 'feminist plan' is that it assumes that it does not matter who cares for children, so long as the care is 'high quality'. In his simulated model for childcare reform, De Henau proposes that the majority of mothers moving into the workforce would work in the expanded childcare sector itself, meaning that many mothers would leave their baby in care at six months old in order to go and look after other people's children. This scenario is presented as a win-win for everyone: babies are happy because the care they are receiving is 'as good as' the care they had at home; mothers are happy, because they are pursuing a rewarding career; and the Treasury is happy because now there are two people gainfully employed rather than just one. One study put it like this:

'By outsourcing women's sole responsibility for care-giving to external institutions and promoting mothers' entrance into the labor market, childcare policies also alter traditional work-family relations and undermine patriarchal norms and the cultural imperatives of how labor should be allocated between the genders associated with them.'¹⁷²

This worldview encapsulated by the 'feminist plan' for society is expressed almost universally across the international childcare literature. In Finland, for instance, Gruber et al state that 'shifting childcare from the home to the market' would 'increase labor force participation and improve child outcomes.' In Norway, Havnes and Mogstad present women's 'attachment to the labour market' as a 'benefit' of early exposure to childcare,

169 de Henau, J. (2015) 'Costing a feminist plan for a caring economy: The case of free universal childcare in the UK', *Open Discussion Papers in Economics*, No. 79, The Open University. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/147530/1/832958700.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

170 De Henau, J. (2022) 'Simulating employment and fiscal effects of public investment in high-quality universal childcare in the UK', *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 16(3). Available at: <https://ijccp.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40723-022-00096-y>; (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

171 Ben-Galim, D. (2011) *Making the case for universal childcare*. IPPR. Available at: https://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2011/12/making-the-case-for-universal-childcare_Dec2011_8382.pdf (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

172 Oehrli, D. et al (2022) *How Does the Provision of Childcare Services Affect Mothers' Employment Intentions? Empirical Evidence from a Conjoint Experiment*. Cambridge University Press. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-social-policy/article/how-does-the-provision-of-child-care-services-affect-mothers-employment-intentions-empirical-evidence-from-a-conjoint-experiment/D2E27F3FE68DC854863DD972EA0C5595> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

promoting ‘gender equality’.¹⁷³ A major study in Denmark concluded overall that ‘pre-school... is found to be as good as home care’, despite the study’s results showing that Denmark’s considerable investment in childcare made ‘no difference’ to children’s socio-emotional development where children were in care under 30 hours per week and led to ‘significantly poorer outcomes’ where children were in care for more than 30 hours per week.¹⁷⁴ The Spanish study, which found that childcare was associated with a ‘0.15 standard deviation’ improvement in reading skills by age 15 for a minority of children and had ‘no significant impact’ for the remaining children, concluded broadly that ‘high quality public childcare’ does in fact ‘neutralize potentially negative effects of maternal employment’. The authors went on to state that:

‘[S]ending children to public childcare may indeed be one way to ‘buy mommy’s love’, but only if the quality of care provided in the childcare centers meets the quality of care provided by the mother.’¹⁷⁵

In another study, this time on a German sample, the same author concluded that the children of more highly educated mothers have ‘nothing to gain but also nothing to lose from attending a childcare centre’.¹⁷⁶ The examples could go on.

In essence, what parents are being asked to believe is that everything that is encompassed in and represented by the word ‘love’ is less important for their children than a possible statistically significant advantage in literacy or numeracy skills during the school years. Beyond this, mothers who are ‘more highly educated’ are being asked to believe that, even though their children will experience no academic benefit at all from attending childcare, it is still worth substituting ‘mummy’s love’ for formal childcare. These beliefs are evidently widespread among academics and politicians. The question that needs to be answered, then, is threefold. Firstly, are these beliefs shared by the majority of the population? Secondly, is a mother’s preference to remain at home with her child always the result of patriarchal norms and out-dated cultural imperatives or could it be an ‘empowered’ choice? Finally, is the provision of a childcare subsidy which *requires* parents to choose professional rather than informal care being offered as a response to what mothers want or an attempt to *influence* what they want?

In a report drawing on data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and a number of major national surveys asking people about their views on childcare, Young provides some answers to these questions. In response to the 2018 British Social Attitudes Survey, ‘only six per cent felt the best way for a family with a child under school age to organise family and work life was for both parents to work full-time’, with the majority believing the mother should work part-time or stay at home. Moreover:

‘[T]he proportion of people agreeing that being a mother and housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay actually went up from 41 per cent to 45 per cent between 1989 and 2012.’

A 2017 survey on public attitudes to childcare carried out on behalf of the Department for Education reported that:

‘86 per cent of the British public felt the main reason parents of a child under five years of age use childcare was to help parents to work, with only 12 per cent saying it was of any benefit to the child.’

173 Havnes, T. and Mogstad, M. (2010) *Is Universal Child Care Leveling the Playing Field? Evidence from Non-Linear Difference-in-Differences*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp4978.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

174 Gupta, N.D. and Simonsen, M. (2007) ‘Non-Cognitive Child Outcomes and Universal High Quality Child Care’. *IZA Discussion Papers*, No. 3188. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/34322/1/555704548.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

175 Felfe, C. et al (2012) ‘Can’t buy mommy’s love? Universal childcare and children’s long-term cognitive development’, *IZA Discussion Papers*, No. 7053. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/69414/1/732536936.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

176 Felfe, C. and Lalive, R. (2014) *Does Early Child Care Help or Hurt Children’s Development?* Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp8484.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

It also reported that:

*'56 per cent of the public felt there were disadvantages to children under three attending nursery, with the reasons ranging from children being too young to the quality of care not being as good as at home.'*¹⁷⁷

This is only one survey, but it shows that, when the question is asked, there is a sharp divergence between the attitudes of the general public and the attitudes of those tasked with representing the general public.

That childcare policies do not mirror the priorities of parents is further indicated when we look at available research on mother's preferences. Data from the ONS reveals that:

*'Seventy-seven per cent of mothers who don't work are not looking for work and have no intention of finding it... and 92 per cent of mothers who work part-time don't want a full-time job.'*¹⁷⁸

A recent (2023) report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that 60 per cent of families use less childcare than they are entitled to in relation to the 30-hour policy in England, suggesting that for a narrow majority of families:

'[I]nsufficient hours entitlement per se is not something that they struggle with, and that an expansion of those entitlements would not immediately benefit their budgets.'

Exploring this further the report stated that, 'among families who don't use childcare at all, preferences seem to be more important than constraints.' Whereas:

*'[A]round a fifth of these families cited affordability as one reason for not using childcare... nearly three-quarters of these parents cited their preference to look after children themselves.'*¹⁷⁹

The IFS report acknowledges that 'these questions were only asked of the 10% or so of families who did not use any childcare at all', and 'we know less about the factors shaping the decisions of families who use some childcare but might wish to use more'. It does not consider, however, that there may be families using more childcare who wish to use less. The 2019 Department for Education Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents, a major survey of over 5,000 parents, found that when asked about their ideal working arrangements, almost two thirds (65 per cent) of mothers with children aged four and under would rather work fewer hours so they could spend more time looking after their children.¹⁸⁰ A poll carried out by the Centre for Social Justice in 2022 found that '78 per cent of parents with children aged 0-4 would like to spend more time with their child, but cannot afford to.'¹⁸¹

Taken together, this research strongly suggests that the 'constraints' on mothers are working in the opposite direction to what is portrayed within the feminist vision for society. It is not that mothers are looking after their own children because childcare is too expensive; it is that mothers are employed because looking after their own children is too expensive. The fact that mothers who do remain at home do not choose to work even when a free entitlement is available, demonstrates that this is a free choice and not the result of financial or cultural pressure. Indeed, as we have seen, the 'cultural imperatives' are likewise unquestionably all in the opposite direction.

177 Young, F. (2022) *Why can't mums choose? Rethinking Child Benefit and childcare spending*. Civitas. Available at: <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Why-Cant-Mums-Choose.pdf> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

178 Ibid.

179 Farquharson, C. et al (2023) *Early years and childcare in England: Public spending, private costs, and the challenges ahead*. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/early-years-and-childcare-england-public-spending-private-costs-and-challenges-ahead> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

180 See data tables in DfE, *Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents 2019*, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents-2019> (Accessed 3rd January 2024).

181 Centre for Social Justice (2022). *Parents Know Best*. Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/parents-know-best>

The most striking confirmation that when given a real choice mothers prefer to care for their own children is presented by Finland, where ‘four times as many mothers choose to use the Finnish Home Care Allowance as chose to take up free childcare places.’¹⁸² The Finnish childcare provision has been described as one of ‘the most universalistic’ in the world, and Finland is often held up as a beacon of enlightened progressivism not just in terms of childcare but its whole social welfare system. In other words, it is emphatically not a culturally conservative context where women’s decision-making can be explained away as the outcome of traditional power structures or entrenched gender bias. If results from the government’s own surveys are to be heeded, then it appears that cultural values in Finland and the UK are not so dissimilar. In other words, what makes Finland exceptional is not the widespread belief that caregiving and homemaking are equal in value to paid employment, but the fact that this belief is acknowledged by policy-makers and (at least to date) reflected in policy-decisions.

Plans to scrap the Finnish Home Care Allowance

In recent years there have been repeated calls to abolish the Finnish Home Care Allowance, though to date the Allowance remains.

In the autumn of 2019, the-then Minister of Education, Li Andersson (Left Alliance), proposed that the increase granted to the allowance for each additional child under three years old should be removed. Her proposal was denied by Petri Honkonen, a deputy chairperson of the Centre Party. In 2020 it was reported that measures – including the abolishment of the HCA – were being considered by the government (despite their programme stating the HCA will ‘continue in its present form’) to raise the employment rate to 75 per cent (at least 60,000 extra people in work).¹⁸³ In 2021, a group of researchers appointed by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment suggested that Finland’s Home Care Allowance should be removed – arguing that doing so would increase employment by around 10,000.¹⁸⁴

It would appear, then, that the vision for society promoted as part of the ‘feminist plan for a caring economy’ is less about listening to what women want than it is about telling them what they ought to want. This shaping of public opinion is explicitly recognised within the academic literature:

‘Childcare policies may also produce normative effects and trigger a change in individual and societal attitudes towards gender roles with regards to paid and unpaid work... Making non-parental childcare a (normatively acceptable) option may also generate normative changes at the individual level and promote women’s intentions to participate more in the labor market.’¹⁸⁵

Although it is possible to debate the extent to which public opinion *shapes* or *is shaped by* policy and welfare provision already in existence, it remains true that, both in the academic and political arenas, ‘freedom’ for women is nearly always construed in terms of ‘the freedom to participate in the labour market’¹⁸⁶ rather than the freedom to care for their families and raise their children in the way they see fit. Progress in gender equality, moreover, is when women’s priorities and aspirations increasingly conform to what were traditionally perceived

182 Ibid.

183 *Helsinki Times* (2020) ‘HS: Finnish government weighing up a variety of employment measures’, 20 January. Available at: <https://www.helsinkitimes.fi/finland/finland-news/politics/17235-hs-finnish-government-weighing-up-a-variety-of-employment-measures.html> (Accessed: 9 November 2023).

184 YLE (2021) *HS: Ministry working group to recommend ending home care allowance*. Available at: <https://yle.fi/a/3-11725679> (Accessed: 9 November 2023).

185 Oehrli, D. et al (2022) ‘How Does the Provision of Childcare Services Affect Mothers’ Employment Intentions? Empirical Evidence from a Conjoint Experiment’, *Journal of Social Policy*. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-social-policy/article/how-does-the-provision-of-childcare-services-affect-mothers-employment-intentions-empirical-evidence-from-a-conjoint-experiment/D2E27F3FE68DC854863DD972EA0C5595> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

186 Chung, H. and Meuleman, B. (2016) ‘European parents’ attitudes towards public childcare provision: the role of current provisions, interests and ideologies’, *European Societies*, 19(1), pp.49-68. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14616696.2016.1235218> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

to be male priorities and aspirations. It is a worldview based therefore not on respect for a diversity of values and lifestyle choices but on a desire for uniformity in both; a world in which women not only think and do the same as men but they think and do the same as each other. It is, in short, a deeply paternalistic project which in the name of liberating women from one set of cultural imperatives merely traps them in another.

A 2014 survey of mothers carried out by the Resolution Foundation (in collaboration with Mumsnet) reported that 'a significant proportion of mothers choose to stay at home with the children'. Stating that this choice 'must be respected', the authors nevertheless go on to reveal what they actually think of this choice:

'As women continue to become better qualified, the loss to the economy of wasted potential grows. Investment in childcare can ensure that women remain in the labour market throughout their prime working years.'

For mothers to invest their time and education into their children during their 'prime' is a 'waste' for society. At the same time, vast amounts of public money must be spent on a highly qualified childcare workforce in *an attempt* to mitigate for children the effects of losing this time investment from their mothers. The report goes on to say that when asked whether they would prefer government support to be paid to childcare providers or directly to parents, the two options were equally supported. These findings suggest that:

*'[D]espite the strongly held views of politicians about which way support is best offered, parents do not have strong views and would be in favour of most ways of delivering additional support for childcare, as long as that is not perceived to compromise the quality of childcare and reduce the development benefits it offers to children.'*¹⁸⁷

This final statement returns us to the crux of the matter. As observed at the outset, several different points are commonly conflated within the conversation about childcare and the assumption that childcare offers 'developmental benefits' for children is presented to parents simply as a fact in amongst other assumptions which may or may not be facts.

The claim that a reduction in the cost of childcare will benefit many women needs to be clearly separated from both the claim that women want to place their children in formal childcare and the claim that attending formal childcare is developmentally beneficial for all children. The first is about easing financial pressures on mothers. Universal childcare, being a 'subsidy to parents for choosing out of home childcare', is by no means the only way to ease the financial pressures faced particularly by women who have children. A more family-friendly tax system would be one alternative, and a childcare subsidy paid directly to parents would be another. Gruber *et al* observe that in Finland, although income from employment fell for mothers in receipt of the Home Care Allowance, total income actually rose as a result of the supplement.¹⁸⁸ As such, the financial disadvantages currently experienced by mothers is not in itself justification for the expansion of universal childcare. The second claim, as we have seen, is not supported by evidence from large- and small-scale surveys. Even if a majority of mothers wanted to work or work more hours, the failure to offer political and financial support for the mothers who do not makes talk of women's 'empowerment' and 'enhancing choices' ring hollow.

That leaves, therefore, only one claim remaining as justification for the expansion of universal childcare. Mothers (unless they are especially zealous promoters of a certain political ideology) will not place the aim of boosting the economy or reducing inequalities in society above what they perceive to be in the best interests of their own children. Empowerment rests not only upon their being a meaningful range of choices available to women, but that choices are made in the context of accurate and complete information about the potential advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. If mothers are being encouraged to place their children in formal childcare on the basis of inaccurate claims or incomplete information about the effects this might have on their children, then they are being manipulated, not empowered.

187 Cory, G. and Alakeson, V. (2014) *Careers and carers: Childcare and maternal labour supply*. Resolution Foundation. Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2014/08/Careers-and-Carers-FINAL.pdf> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

188 Gruber, J. et al (2023) *Paying moms to stay home: Short and long run effects on parents and children*. NBER. Available at: https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w30931/w30931.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

Universal childcare and child development

In 2021, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology put out a policy briefing paper entitled 'Early Education and Care'. In it they stated that:

*'In England the best available evidence indicates that some [meaning part-time] use of high-quality ECEC is beneficial from age 3 for all children and from age 2 for disadvantaged children. There are limited data on children aged 0-2.'*¹⁸⁹

Even if we were to take these assertions at face value, it is clear that this does not constitute support for the claim that expanding childcare to include children from nine months old for 30 hours per week will be developmentally enhancing for all children. Indeed, the briefing refers to the SEED findings that early high use of childcare can have negative socio-emotional effects. The claims being made to legitimise the Government's childcare policy are as such either directly contradicted by its own evidence (in the case of the increase to 30 hours) or based on a complete absence of any evidence (in the case of extending the offer to the under threes). This alone ought to be enough for a serious rethink of these proposals.

When we look more closely at the detail, however, it is evident that even these carefully constructed statements cannot be taken at face value. The claim that 'some use of high quality ECEC is beneficial from age three for all children' is based on results from the Department for Education research EPPSE and SEED. As we have seen, the EPPSE study did not collect detailed information about its 'home' comparison group and therefore it:

*'[I]s possible that the differences between these sorts of children in later years were also present before pre-school attendance began and cannot, therefore, be ascribed to it.'*¹⁹⁰

It is quite remarkable that a piece of research which has been so influential in policy and is so widely cited has such a serious limitation, and that this limitation is not generally acknowledged within the literature (the quotation was taken from a footnote). As we have also seen, SEED did not include children who have no childcare experience. Additionally, the only academic benefit (verbal ability) found in that particular SEED report was for children who were looked after *informally* by friends and relatives, not children in *formal* care.¹⁹¹ The use of the term ECEC to describe only formal care in one study but both formal and informal non-maternal care in another study can be somewhat confusing and give a potentially misleading impression to the general reader.

In short, the 'best available evidence' from England tells us nothing about the impact on children of attending childcare as compared to being cared for by a parent at home. Needless to say, studies which demonstrate that 'high-quality' childcare leads to better outcomes than 'low quality' childcare ought not to be used as justification for a society-wide shift from maternal to non-maternal care for young children.

Evidence from abroad also does not support the claim that 'childcare is beneficial from age three for all children', even when it is 'high-quality'. The most striking finding from the literature on universal childcare (which usually applies to pre-school children) is that for children who have not been identified as disadvantaged in one or more ways, the impact of childcare attendance is nearly always non-positive. There is a consistent finding across both the studies reviewed above and the broader literature that parents with higher income and educational levels 'self-select' into universal childcare schemes more often than parents with background characteristics indicative of lower socio-economic status. At the same time, studies consistently report that attendance has no effect in terms of measured benefits for these children. In their international review,

189 UK Parliament POST (2021) *Early Childhood Education and Care*. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0649/POST-PN-0649.pdf> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

190 UCL Discovery. *The impact of free early education for 3 year olds in England*. Available at: <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10115664/1/FINAL20Child-care20briefing20paper207.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

191 Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. (2020) *Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age five years*. DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e4e5c10e90e074dcd5bd213/SEED_AGE_5_REPORT_FEB.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

Heckman et al state that ‘Universal programmes disproportionately benefit disadvantaged children because these children generally have lower quality alternatives.’ Likewise in their meta-analysis, Van Huizen et al observe that:

‘[T]he gains from universal ECEC are concentrated on children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with almost 80% of the estimates for higher SES children being insignificant.’

Of the 15 country-specific studies reviewed here, only one on Finland (Gruber et al) found that ‘benefits’ associated with formal childcare applied to children regardless of their background (this study will be discussed further below). In Norway, Dearing et al found that short-term gains in verbal ability were confined to children from lower-income families; and Havnes and Mogstad found that formal ECEC improved high school completion for children who had mothers with a low level of education. In Germany, Dustman et al found that cognitive gains were confined to children from immigrant families; and in Spain, Felfe found that higher test scores were confined to children whose parents had not completed high school. Three studies (Hiilamo, Saarinen and Gupta) found that attending universal childcare had no impact on any children. All of these countries have childcare schemes which are considered to meet the internationally accepted standards for ‘high quality’ provision. What is more, Havnes and Mogstad, Baker et al and Kottelenberg and Lerner all found that attending universal provision was detrimental for children from more advantaged backgrounds, in relation to childcare schemes in Norway and Canada. In these cases, therefore, if universal childcare ‘did succeed in levelling the playing field’ it was by levelling down instead of up.

Of the universal childcare studies reviewed, several were identified as analysing the impact of childcare where the ‘counterfactual’ was either determined or presumed to be care by a parent in the home. Finland provides a good test case, or it would provide a good test case if there was more research available. Finland is interesting for three reasons: it has a high proportion of children cared for at home because of the generous home care allowance (HCA), which has been in existence since the mid-1980s and is used by over 80 per cent of mothers;¹⁹² it invests heavily in early years care and schools and has a highly trained teaching workforce; and it has consistently ranked at or near the top on PISA scores when compared to other OECD countries. When Finland’s PISA scores are discussed, they are generally attributed to its high quality education sector, and Finland is pointed to as example which presents support for public investment in ECEC.¹⁹³ This assumption is made in spite of the fact that ‘the home care option had been widely used among the Finnish children who have participated in the PISA studies in the 2000s.’¹⁹⁴ It would seem, then, that whatever factors influence the high performance of Finnish school children, it is not participation in formal early years care. This observation is confirmed in a large-scale study by Saarinen et al which specifically compared PISA scores of children with and without pre-school experience and found no differences on any learning outcome.

One study did find a difference between the two groups. Gruber et al concluded that:

‘[H]ome care benefits... negatively affect the early childhood cognitive test results of children, decrease the likelihood of choosing academic high school, and increase youth crimes.’

The ‘negative effect on early childhood cognitive tests’ refers to the finding that children whose parents were eligible for the HCA supplement were statistically more likely to fail ‘at least one’ of a series of development and school readiness tests (assessing skills like identifying colours, drawing a cross and cutting out a circle) performed at child health clinics when the children were four or five years old. The tests were reported on a

192 Gruber, J. et al (2023) *Paying moms to stay home: Short and long run effects on parents and children*. NBER. Available at: https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w30931/w30931.pdf (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

193 Hancock, L. (2011) *Why Are Finland’s Schools Successful?* Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/why-are-finlands-schools-successful-49859555/> (Accessed: 7 November 2023). And Niemi, M. (2023) *What is behind the PISA test results? Case Finland*. Available at: <https://sites.tuuni.fi/tamk-pub/tamkjournal/what-is-behind-the-pisa-test-results-case-finland-minna-niemi/#:~:text=Finland%20scored%20520%20points%20in,18%20in%20all%20participating%20countries.> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

194 Hiilamo, H. et al (2015) *Children who do not attend day care: What are the implications for educational outcomes?* Families and Societies. Available at: <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/WP42HiilamoEtAl2015.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

pass or fail basis, and as stated, the children only had to fail *one* of these tests for it to be marked as a 'negative' overall outcome. There was no statistically significant effect on motor skills, and when the tests were measured as a single outcome there were no statistically significant effects of the HCA supplement.

The 'home' cohort children were also reported to be less likely to enrol in academic high school, which was considered predictive of them being less likely to enter higher education. However, according to the Finnish National Agency for Education, around half of Finnish school students continue to vocational educational training and these qualifications do not prevent them from going to university.¹⁹⁵ This study does not as such offer robust evidence that 'shifting childcare from the home to the market' will lead to significantly better educational outcomes for Finnish children over the long-term. This conclusion is further supported by Hiilamo et al, who found no association between the type of early years care Finnish children received and completion of higher education by age 25.

Taken together, the Finnish evidence appears to support the contention made earlier that how well children perform on early testing is not necessarily predictive of their overall achievement. As Saarinen et al observe:

'[P]articipation in early childhood education and care is related to better cognitive performance in short-term outcomes, i.e. in such cognitive tests that mostly measure those skills that are practiced in early childhood education.'

As a consequence, it may be that:

'[P]articipation in early childhood education increases the child's school readiness or ability to perform in testing conditions, rather than the child's cognitive abilities per se.'

The entire premise of the research consensus that high-quality ECEC improves educational development is that the ability to pass certain tests is indicative of a child's broader capabilities and intelligence, and as such is predictive of a child's overall chances of success in life. In this the research community (and its funding institutions) have created something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. As with any skill or ability, more hours of practice generally lead to greater competency, and a child is more likely to spend dedicated time on formal learning activities in a nursery than in a home environment (although there will of course be exceptions to this). This is especially true now that 'school readiness' has become a sector priority and all childcare providers are expected to follow a set of national early years curriculum standards 'from birth up to five years of age'. Children who arrive at school after years of pre-school are, unsurprisingly, well-schooled. Whether the children who have not been 'schooled' have capabilities and qualities which go unmeasured but are equally or more important for overall development has not been studied. The research, we could say, is inadvertently designed from the outset to favour a certain outcome.

Nevertheless, even with this bias in the approach to assessing the impact of childcare, numerous studies have indicated that differences between groups of children fade as the school years progress.¹⁹⁶ This lends support to what would seem the reasonable assumption that if a child who has not been in formal care is intelligent and emotionally stable then he or she will soon catch up with better-trained peers and will learn to perform in the way that is required at school and in later educational contexts.

As far as non-cognitive outcomes are concerned, the study by Gruber et al on Finland did find a statistically significant association between the home care group and 'incidence of youth crime' (with or without a

195 Finnish National Agency for Education. *Finnish vocational education and training*. Available at: <https://www.oph.fi/en/education-system/finnish-vocational-education-and-training>; (Accessed: 7 November 2023). For a detailed discussion of the Finnish vocational system and its outcomes, see Virolainen, M. and Stenström, M. (2014) 'Finnish vocational education and training in comparison: Strengths and weaknesses', *International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training (IJRVET)*, 1(2), pp.81-106. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1127762.pdf> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

196 Côté, S.M. et al (2013) Child care in infancy and cognitive performance until middle childhood in the millennium cohort study, *Child Dev.* 2013 Jul-Aug;84(4):1191-208. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23331073/> (Accessed: 3 November 2023). Heckman et al observe that even with targeted childcare a 'general pattern for IQ and achievement scores is that they tend to surge while children are in Pre-K and then fade'. Elango, S. et al (2015) *Early Childhood Education*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp9476.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023). Magnusen, Ruhm and Waldfogel (2007) describe the 'convergence' in outcomes for different group of children: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6426150/>

conviction) including ‘minor and more severe offences’. However, this was one single measure of an outcome with a very low baseline occurrence and it is difficult to draw major conclusions from this about the overall non-cognitive impact of parental care versus formal childcare on Finnish children. Indeed, it is interesting given how long the Finnish home care entitlement has been in place that there have been so few attempts by researchers to investigate the effect of the policy on children in terms of a broader range of developmental outcomes. A similar observation can be made about Spain. Spain has had a publicly subsidised, universal and full-time pre-school placement available for three-year-olds since the 1990s. Although Spain has no grant for in-home care, because for children not in pre-school maternal care is the norm, Spain presents a good opportunity to assess social, psychological and behavioural differences between children cared for by their mother (or grandmother) and children in formal ‘high quality’ pre-school. Given that Spanish children in pre-school are there from nine a.m. in the morning till five p.m. in the afternoon, five days a week, it would seem especially important to explore the effect that this long separation from their family has on children beyond their performance in literacy and numeracy tests. The research, however, is once again silent on this matter.

All three of the meta-analyses included observed that within the childcare literature non-cognitive outcomes are under-explored. In their review of universal schemes, Van Huizen and Plantega state that the negative outcomes of universal childcare, accounting for one in six of their total estimates, were predominantly found in relation to non-cognitive measures. Only four of the country-specific studies looked at a range of non-cognitive effects associated with attending universal childcare. In Denmark, which has a comparable childcare system to Finland, minus the home care allowance, Gupta and Simonsen looked at behavioural indicators when children were seven years old – including conduct problems, peer relationship problems, hyperactivity and pro-social behaviour. They reported no differences between children in childcare for up to 30 hours per week and children who were cared for at home (but significantly worse outcomes when children were there for more than 30 hours). These findings can be interpreted, as the authors have done, as evidence which ought to alleviate concerns about the potential negative effects of non-parental care (at least up to 30 hours) and as such as evidence in favour of universal childcare. On the other hand, they can be interpreted as evidence that in Denmark (as in Finland) enormous sums of public money have been invested in providing a service which has produced no measurable benefit for the children involved. As a justification for public funding for out-of-home care but not in-home care, then, ‘enhanced child development’ is a claim that simply does not stand up to scrutiny, even in countries where the quality of childcare provision is widely regarded to be the best in the world.

The remaining studies which looked at a range of non-cognitive childcare outcomes all relate to Quebec. As we have seen, long-term studies by Baker et al and two follow-up studies by Kottelenberg and Lehrer all concluded that ‘the introduction of the Quebec Family Policy led to a significant decline in child, parent and family outcomes.’¹⁹⁷ There is a consensus within the research that the effect of the Quebec universal childcare policy was to induce large numbers of women who had not been working to enter the labour market and so take up the offer.¹⁹⁸ As noted, it was specifically the children of these mothers who were negatively affected by the experience of being in formal care. Kottelenberg and Lehrer, as well as Heckman et al, all argue that children from two-parent and higher income households had significantly worse outcomes because the childcare provision ‘crowded out’ maternal care and reduced the time that parents invested in their children. Again, given that the implicit aim of early years policy in the UK and across the world today is to reduce the time that parents have available to invest in their children, the Quebec results should give policy-makers serious cause for concern. In this case, gains to the economy in terms of increased labour market participation were achieved at a clear cost to very young children, with potential long-term consequences for both them and wider society.

197 Kottelenberg, M.J. and Lehrer, S.F. (2013) *New evidence on the impacts of access to and attending universal childcare in Canada*. Available at: https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w18785/w18785.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

198 Gupta, N.D. and Simonsen, M. (2007) ‘Non-Cognitive Child Outcomes and Universal High Quality Child Care’. *IZA Discussion Papers*, No. 3188. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/34322/1/555704548.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

The research from Quebec clearly illustrates something which, as we have seen from the review above, is consistently reported across the childcare literature. Participation in formal childcare will impact different children in different ways. As Elango et al state, it:

*'[U]nderscores the importance, in any evaluation, of considering who took up the policy and what their next best alternative would have been in the absence of the policy.'*¹⁹⁹

And Kottelenberg and Lehrer echo this, stating that 'the exact workings of universal childcare programs on child development are far from obvious'.²⁰⁰ Needless to say, this contradicts the accepted narrative that formal childcare is beneficial for all children. However, instead of generating a more nuanced discussion about the potential costs and benefits of universal childcare, the reaction of the research community has been either to dismiss the Quebec findings or to attempt to discredit them. Sometimes the negative findings are ignored entirely.

An example of the latter is presented in a report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) which describe itself as 'the UK's pre-eminent progressive think-tank'. The report argues that 'there is a very strong economic case for universal childcare', and it points to Quebec as a success story which supports this argument:

'The provincial government of Quebec... provides universal early years education which has boosted maternal employment rates and is changing the way that early years services are being designed and utilised.'

It does not mention that multiple studies relating to Quebec also suggest that 'standard childcare programs supporting the market labor supply of affluent women may harm their children'.²⁰¹ Moreover, the IPPR report goes on to state that 'it's not only an economic return' that can be expected from universal childcare, but 'academic evidence illustrates the importance of early years policy in improving a range of childhood and adult outcomes'.²⁰² In support of this claim the report cites just one piece of research, the EPPSE study. In other words, a report which makes the bold and sweeping claim that universal childcare will 'improve childhood and adult outcomes' fails to include plausible evidence from the international literature on the developmental impact of universal childcare.

Attempts have also been made to dismiss the findings from Quebec on the basis that because the negative outcomes were found only where childcare replaced maternal care, they are somehow irrelevant. Speaking of the group of women who were induced into work by the Quebec Family Policy, Gupta and Simonsen write:

*'Presumably, this group consists of women with lower labor market outcomes and greater attachment to their homes (otherwise they would have participated before the policy was implemented). This group may not be representative of the population in general, and their experiences of the transition from being a stay-at-home mother to being an employee are therefore probably not representative either.'*²⁰³

Similarly, in a study promoting universal childcare as 'good policy', Armstrong also appears to dismiss the experience of this group of children as irrelevant because it is atypical. Acknowledging the finding that children from two-parent households experienced poorer health and developmental outcomes as a result of attending childcare, he goes on to state:

199 Elango, S. et al (2015) *Early Childhood Education*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp9476.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023)

200 Kottelenberg, M.J. and Lehrer, S.F. (2013) *New evidence on the impacts of access to and attending universal childcare in Canada*. Available at: https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w18785/w18785.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

201 Elango, S. et al (2015) *Early Childhood Education*. Institute for the Study of Labor. Available at: <https://docs.iza.org/dp9476.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023)

202 Ben-Galim, D. (2011) *Making the case for universal childcare*. IPPR. Available at: https://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2011/12/making-the-case-for-universal-childcare_Dec2011_8382.pdf (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

203 Gupta, N.D. and Simonsen, M. (2007) 'Non-Cognitive Child Outcomes and Universal High Quality Child Care'. *IZA Discussion Papers*, No. 3188. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/34322/1/555704548.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

*'However, it was found that these children went from interacting with a caregiver one-on-one often in their homes, to much higher ratios when they entered childcare.'*²⁰⁴

In both examples it is not explicitly stated why these statements are considered grounds to dismiss the Quebec findings, but the implication is that, because nowadays receiving exclusive maternal care is uncommon, outcomes related to this circumstance ought not to influence the debate.

Again, this demonstrates the circular reasoning within the narrative. Instead of drawing the conclusion that one-to-one care at home might be better for some children than formal group care, and therefore efforts should be made to support this alternative for families, the conclusion drawn is that because non-maternal care is increasingly the norm, all efforts should be focussed on improving the standard of non-maternal care.

The concept of 'standards' in childcare brings us to a final way in which the findings from Quebec have been criticised. As noted earlier, a recurring theme across the childcare literature is that for childcare provision to be effective it must be 'high-quality'. It was also noted that where research finds negative outcomes associated with childcare, 'low-quality' is invariably cited as an explanation. Quebec is no exception in this regard. For instance, Dearing et al state that:

*'[T]he Quebec program covered relatively few 0- to 2-year-olds, involved relatively high adult to child ratios in care settings, and resulted in most infants and toddlers being cared for in accredited home care rather than in center care.'*²⁰⁵

Armstrong also suggests the negative findings may be related to quality: 'While Quebec's system is universal, not all centres are non-profit. Non-profit centres provide superior childcare quality compared to for-profit.'²⁰⁶ What the Quebec example illustrates, however, is that the accepted narrative on childcare entirely misses the most crucial point about quality. It is not high-quality childcare that matters but the quality of the childcare *relative* to the quality of the care that the child would receive if they were not attending childcare.

Quality in childcare settings is generally defined in terms of a number of 'structural' indicators and 'process' indicators. Structural quality is related to things like the number of children in the group, the child-to-staff ratio and the educational level of the staff. Process quality is related to the children's day-to-day experiences, their activities and their interactions with staff and other children.²⁰⁷ For formal childcare to be developmentally beneficial for any individual child, it is not enough for the care setting to meet standard criteria for structural and process quality, even if this were universally achievable: it must be of *higher quality* than the care it is replacing for *that* particular child. In other words, the provision must offer *more* learning and enrichment opportunities than the child would have otherwise had; it must offer a *more* stable and emotionally secure environment; it must have carers who are *more* sensitive and responsive to his/her needs, and so on. The 'large, significant, negative shock to the pre-school, noncognitive development and health of children exposed to the new programme'²⁰⁸ in Quebec was not due to the programme being low-quality; it was due to the fact that the children were receiving the one-to-one 'investment' of time and attention from their mothers and then they were not.

204 Armstrong, S. (201) 'Universal access to quality childcare is good policy and a positive determinant of health. Let's invest.' *Paediatr Child Health*, 26(2), pp.82-84. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7962710/> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

205 Dearing, E. et al (2018) 'Estimating the Consequences of Norway's National Scale-Up of Early Childhood Education and Care (Beginning in Infancy) for Early Language Skills', *AERA Open*, 4(1). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858418756598> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

206 Armstrong, S. (201) 'Universal access to quality childcare is good policy and a positive determinant of health. Let's invest.' *Paediatr Child Health*, 26(2), pp.82-84. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7962710/> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

207 Scobie, G. and Scott, E. (2017) *Rapid evidence review: Childcare quality and children's outcomes*. NHS Scotland. Available at: <https://www.healthscotland.scot/media/1613/rapid-evidence-review-childcare-quality-and-childrens-outcomes.pdf> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

208 Baker, M. et al (2019) 'The Long-Run Impacts of a Universal Child Care Program', *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 11(3), pp.1-26. Available at: <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20170603> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

In the previous section a Resolution Foundation report was quoted as saying that parents do not mind how financial assistance for childcare is given, as long as it does not compromise the ‘quality of childcare’ or the ‘developmental benefits that childcare offers’. That formal childcare offers children developmental benefits has become axiomatic. In actual fact, even if we qualify the statement with ‘high-quality’ and confine the discussion to mainly pre-school children in state-subsidised schemes, the international research suggests that for the majority of children replacing informal care with formal care will offer no academic benefits. Where children do experience gains in cognitive performance, it is only in very particular circumstances and it is not clear what it might mean for the children in the long-term. Moreover, none of the studies reviewed here have been able to demonstrate that attending universal childcare offers children socio-emotional benefits; and this applies to children from all backgrounds. Choice is important, and mothers’ choices should be respected. Yet mothers cannot make meaningful choices about how they raise their children if they are constantly and consistently presented with one-sided information.

When we turn to the research on the impact of formal childcare on children under the age of three, the prevailing narrative is even more strikingly contradicted. As we have seen, in the UK the language from all across the political spectrum is remarkably similar when it comes to expanding free full-time childcare entitlements to include one- and two-year-olds. This funding will enable women to go back to work and it will offer our children the best start in life. The phrase ‘the best start in life’ is repeated so frequently it has become like a mantra within political circles. But what does it mean? Although it is rarely explicitly stated in these terms, the recurrent combination of the phrases ‘mothers back to work’, ‘high-quality childcare’ and ‘best start in life’ are clearly designed to send a very strong message to parents: if one of you remains at home to care for your child, your child will likely not do as well in life as they would if they were sent to a formal setting to be cared for by trained professionals. This message, undermining both the role and confidence of parents, is reinforced by statements such as this one made in a recent publication put out by Kings College London: ‘Early years education is the bedrock of children’s future attainment.’²⁰⁹ The word ‘attainment’, like ‘best’, ‘better’ and ‘well’, is also not usually defined but is generally presumed to be backed by a solid body of evidence on the developmentally enhancing effects of formal childcare.

The body of evidence, however, tells a very different story. First of all, as has been demonstrated in earlier sections of this report, it is not ‘early years education’ that forms the bedrock of children’s future attainment, it is family. As James Heckman (Nobel Prize-winning economist and one of the most cited authors in the field of childcare policy) states, ‘family is the whole story’.²¹⁰ If parents want to ensure their child has ‘the best start in life’, what matters most is not which early education setting they opt for but what they do in their own homes and family lives; how they relate to their children; what activities they do with their children; and what kind of environment they foster around their children. Studies ‘typically’ find that ‘the more hours are spent away from the parents, the worse are child outcomes.’²¹¹

If politicians were following the evidence, the message to parents would be *spend more time with your children*. Moreover, if even some of the political capital that is currently being devoted to the promotion of formal ECEC was used to highlight the influence parents themselves can have on their children’s ‘future attainment’ (for instance, by the simple acts of reading to them and reading in front of them) the positive impact on children’s lives could be substantial at a fraction of the public cost. The evidence is perfectly clear: you do not have to be a professional early years practitioner to foster intellectual development in young children.²¹²

209 The Global Institute for Women’s Leadership (2023) *Essays on Equality: The politics of childcare*. KCL. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/assets/es-says-on-equality-2023.pdf> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

210 Mrozek, A. (2021) *Nobel Laureate James Heckman: ‘The Family Is the Whole Story’*. Available at: <https://ifstudies.org/blog/nobel-laureate-james-heckman-the-family-is-the-whole-story-> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

211 Gupta, N.D. and Simonsen, M. (2007) ‘Non-Cognitive Child Outcomes and Universal High Quality Child Care’. *IZA Discussion Papers*, No. 3188. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/34322/1/555704548.pdf> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

212 See, for example, Stole, H. et al (2021) ‘The Importance of Parents’ Own Reading for 10-Year Old Students’ Reading Achievement in the Nordic Countries’, *Equity, Equality and Diversity in the Nordic Model of Education*, pp.363-84. Available at: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-61648-9_14 (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

Not only do parenting and the home learning environment shape children's outcomes to a greater extent than childcare, but they are also more important than socio-economic status. The same 'child, family and community factors' affect development in children from both financially disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged families.²¹³ As such, although the research tends to show that children from more advantaged backgrounds ('the children of professionals') do not benefit from formal childcare, this does not mean that children from less advantaged backgrounds necessarily *will* benefit from formal childcare. To put it simply, poor or working-class people are not necessarily bad parents, any more than wealthy or professional people are necessarily good parents. It is perfectly plausible to have a scenario where one parent is both able and willing to provide high-quality care but the child receives lower quality formal care for long hours because both parents must work for financial reasons. In this case, the child's interests would be best served by a funding system which enabled one parent to remain at home. Yet it is precisely this kind of support for lower-income families that no political party is prepared to offer, despite the emphasis on 'equality' in political discourse.

In her recent speech on childcare, Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Philipson goes some way to acknowledging the importance of family, proclaiming that 'what children need is a family' and what government needs to do is ensure families have 'the time to thrive together'. 'I want strong families where the bonds are of love, and the foundation of that love is time spent happily together.' In the same speech, however, she announced Labour's plans to provide public funding for families not to spend more time *together* but to spend more time *apart*. Contradicting her earlier statement, she goes on to say that 'what children need' is 'high quality early years education and care', 'from the end of parental leave', i.e. from less than one year old.²¹⁴ The narrative, therefore, not only defies the evidence, it defies logic. The Conservative Government has also stated that while they are 'determined to support as many families as possible' there are 'no current plans to look at the potential merits of introducing an individual childcare budget to support parents with informal childcare arrangements'.²¹⁵ Heckman describes the love and attachment experienced within families as a 'powerful force'.²¹⁶ Instead of harnessing this 'powerful force' in the cause of ensuring that children really do have the 'best start in life', all political parties are placing their faith in the ECEC sector where babies and toddlers will be separated for longer and longer hours from the people they love to be cared for by people who do not love them.

The second major problem for the prevailing narrative is that, even if ECEC were the 'bedrock for children's future attainment', research to date on the effect of childcare before age three on later cognitive skills and 'school readiness' is far from conclusive. On the one hand, about half of the studies reviewed found short- or medium-term gains in terms of academic test results, cognitive abilities or language. Two of these studies found that these gains were confined to children from disadvantaged backgrounds with no impact on remaining children. Two studies found that formal group care improved academic outcomes for children compared to parental care, but these gains were accompanied by negative socio-emotional outcomes. The latter finding highlights the importance of looking at the whole experience of the child rather than only cognitive or academic indicators. On the other hand, seven major studies spanning six countries found that participation in formal childcare before age three had minimal or no effect on later educational outcomes. This includes the UK Department for Education's own SEED research; another UK study with a sample of 13,000; the influential NICHD study in the United States; a study of 30,000 students in Norway; a large-scale longitudinal study in Australia; and the Finnish and Canadian studies that have already been discussed. Finally, none of the studies were able to conclusively show that starting formal childcare before the age of three is better for children's long-term educational development than being cared for at home before the age of three.

213 Edwards, B. et al (2009) *Financial disadvantage and children's school readiness*. AIFS. Available at: https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/fm83c-EdwardsEtAl_0.pdf (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

214 Phillipson, B. (2023) "Our focus will be on reform"—Bridget Phillipson's speech on childcare. Available at: <https://labourlist.org/2023/03/our-focus-will-be-on-reform-bridget-phillipsons-speech-on-childcare/> (Accessed: 3 November 2023).

215 Coutinho, C. (2023) Childcare: Finance. *UK Parliament: Written answer*. 25 July. HC 194606. Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-07-17/194606/> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

216 Mrozek, A. (2021) Nobel Laureate James Heckman: 'The Family Is the Whole Story'. Available at: <https://ifstudies.org/blog/nobel-laureate-james-heckman-the-family-is-the-whole-story-> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

The third major problem for the accepted childcare narrative is that where socio-emotional effects of childcare under age three have been studied, the results are overwhelmingly negative. Of the 14 papers which included non-cognitive measures, 12 reported at least some negative effects, mostly in terms of behavioural problems associated with group care. Two of the studies found that these negative effects lasted into adulthood. Baker et al has already been discussed. Based on a Swiss sample, Averdijk found that time in a daycare centre was associated with more internalising problems and substance abuse for children from vulnerable backgrounds. A consistent finding across much of the research is that full-time, centre-based childcare has the worst outcomes, with ‘care type and extent functioning additively’.²¹⁷ In other words, the more time babies and toddlers spend in formal group care, the worse their social, emotional and behavioural outcomes.

Similar to the research on universal childcare and on cognitive outcomes, not one study was able to sufficiently demonstrate that participation in formal childcare before the age of three is better for the socio-emotional development of children than being cared for at home by their mother.

Only two of the 14 studies found no negative outcome associated with formal childcare. Looking at how these studies were carried out and reported on once again illustrates the biased approach to evidence in the conversation about childcare. In a small-scale Norwegian study (900 children) based on teacher reports, Dearing et al (2015) found that high-intensity centre-based care from one to four years had, ‘at most, faint and fading consequences for children’s aggression’. Also in Norway, and this time based on maternal reports, a much larger study (sample of 75,000) measuring externalising problems at 18 and 36 months, Zachrisson et al (2013) found that: ‘Within a sociopolitical context of homogenously high-quality child care, there was little evidence that high quantity of care causes externalizing problems.’ The results of these two Norwegian studies were reported in the UK publication *Nursery World* under the heading ‘Time spent in childcare little cause for concern’. In the article the authors of the studies state that:

‘Our work in Norway should help ease concerns over childcare as a potential risk for problem behaviours... Policy leaders and early educators can be confident that increasing efforts to ensure high-quality childcare will benefit children and society.’²¹⁸

The study authors were keen to emphasise the importance of disentangling cause and effect. There are, however, many other issues to disentangle here. First of all, the authors are right to claim that increasing efforts to ensure high-quality childcare will benefit children and society. High-quality childcare is obviously better than low-quality childcare for all concerned. At the same time, this needs to be clearly distinguished from the general and sweeping claim that high-quality childcare will always be the best option for children, regardless of the alternative.

Secondly, the two studies did not find that high-quality childcare benefits children; rather, they found no causal relationship between high-intensity childcare and one particular type of harm. No evidence of harm is not evidence of benefit and ought not to be concluded as such.

Thirdly, the *Nursery World* article failed to mention relevant methodological limitations of the research. For instance, the large-scale study by Zachrisson et al was based on maternal questionnaires only, which means that mothers who opted to place their children for long hours in childcare were asked whether this has had a negative effect on their child. It has been observed in other studies that parent and teacher reports on child behavior are often contradictory. The authors themselves acknowledge in the study that ‘our findings may have been different had we been able to examine caregiver reports.’ Moreover, the study focused on children under three and therefore was unable to examine ‘any later emerging consequences of child-care quantity beyond early childhood.’

217 Coley, R.L. et al (2013) ‘Timing, extent, and type of child care and children’s behavioral functioning in kindergarten’, *Dev Psychol.* 49(10), pp. 1859-73. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23244403/> (Accessed: 6 November 2023).

218 Dearing, E. et al (2015) *Time spent in childcare little cause for concern*. Available at: <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/opinion/article/time-spent-in-childcare-little-cause-for-concern> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

Fourthly, the two Norwegian studies were designed to test the hypothesis that early, high-intensity group care leads to more externalising problems, meaning disruptive and aggressive behaviour. They did not examine potential links between early, high-intensity childcare and internalising problems like anxiety and stress, even though it is widely recognised that these kinds of problems are common in early childhood, that they often persist into adulthood and that they increase the likelihood for subsequent psychiatric disorders. Both stress and ‘problematic attachment’ are risk factors for the development of internalising problems.²¹⁹

Finally, the *Nursery World* article claiming that there is ‘little cause for concern’ about the growing number of young children spending long hours in formal care ignores the fact that these two Norwegian studies are heavily outnumbered by studies (12 in this review) which suggest there is at least some cause to be concerned.

It is clear from the literature reviewed that the numerous and comprehensive claims being made about the developmental benefits of childcare are unsubstantiated by available evidence. In particular, to make any claims regarding the likely outcomes for children of the expansions currently planned by all UK political parties, there would need to be a substantial body of evidence which examined the effects of childcare for babies starting from nine-months old who attend childcare for 30 or more hours per week. Moreover, this research would have to extend far beyond cognitive performance indicators and investigate a broad range of outcomes that could potentially relate to overall wellbeing and development, and it would have to look at these effects in the long-term. Even further, to infer that early intensive formal childcare offers children ‘the best start in life’, research would have had to have explored all of the above in addition to one of the counterfactual childcare arrangements being care by a parent who has chosen this alternative. This body of evidence does not exist.

This absence of evidence itself should be enough to give policy-makers pause for thought in their unrelenting campaign to reduce the amount of time that children in general spend with their families. Wikipedia has a helpful article describing what has become known as the ‘precautionary principle’. In essence, the principle is about the importance of review and reflection before leaping into new innovations that may prove disastrous. The article states:

‘The principle is often used by policy makers in situations where there is the possibility of harm from taking a particular course of action and conclusive evidence is not yet available.’²²⁰

Available research is sufficient to present a plausible risk of harm to children from policies designed to culturally normalise non-maternal childcare, and it certainly does not present conclusive evidence that no harm will result from these policies. Neither boosting the economy nor an ideological commitment to some version of gender equality should supersede the health and wellbeing of a generation of children.

219 Jarvers, I. et al (2023) ‘Impact of preschool attendance, parental stress, and parental mental health on internalizing and externalizing problems during COVID-19 lockdown measures in preschool children’ *PLOS One*. Available at: <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0281627> (Accessed: 7 November 2023). And Jamnik, M.R. et al (2019) ‘Health outcomes associated with internalizing problems in early childhood and adolescence’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10(60). Available at: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-07587-001> (Accessed: 7 November 2023). And Zatto, B.R.L. and Hoglund, W.L.G. (2019) ‘Children’s internalizing problems and teacher–child relationship quality across preschool’, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 49, pp.28-39. Available at: <https://sites.psych.ualberta.ca/PEERSlab/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Zatto-Hoglund-2019.pdf> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

220 Wikipedia. *Precautionary principle*. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precautionary_principle#cite_note-2. When (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

Conclusion

For a number of decades now, politicians have been making a concerted effort to convince parents that placing their children in professional early years care will have a positive effect on both their educational and broader development. Although initially the focus was mainly on how formal childcare could support more disadvantaged families, attention has gradually shifted to the general population and the promotion of widescale, extensive and early childcare use by families irrespective of their socio-economic circumstances. Recent policy announcements by parties across the UK signal a definite movement toward what in other countries is termed 'universal childcare'.

Claims concerning the merits of formal childcare are getting bolder and bolder, almost, it seems, by the day. While this report was being written, the Department for Education issued guidance for early years practitioners which starts with the statement: 'high quality early education is good for all children'.²²¹ This statement is quite simply not true. Whether formal childcare is good for any individual child will depend on a range and variety of different factors extending well beyond merely the quality of the childcare being provided. It will depend, for instance, on the age of the child and the number of hours the child spends in care. It will depend on how we define 'good' – that is, whether we define it purely in terms of academic performance or whether we incorporate a child's psychological, emotional and physical well-being. It will depend on a parent's preferences for how the child is cared for. It will depend on the relationships the child has at home and the resources and opportunities that are available to the child outside of formal care. Most crucially, whether formal care is 'good' for children will depend on what the alternative form of care is. Where the alternative is care in their own homes by their own mother who wants to care for them, in all but the rarest of situations formal care will not be 'good' for these children; especially if the mother is supported in this task by her family, by her community and by wider society.

The same official guidance document communicates a strong message of encouragement to practitioners in early years care. They are both valued and respected because 'no job is more important than working with children in the early years.' Mothers, on the other hand, who leave the labour market to do this very same job are told they are 'wasting their potential' and that they must re-enter the labour market to regain their status as contributing members of society. In an absurd irony, if mothers leave their own children to care for another mother's children, they are once again doing an 'important' job. Adding to the absurdity, whether she works in the childcare sector or not, a mother leaving her child in care to enter employment may be better qualified and equipped to foster the development of her child than the people now employed to replace her. From a child development perspective, the narrative makes no sense at all. It is plain that the main concern of the incumbent UK government is not child development, but the economy, and the government makes only nominal efforts to disguise this fact.

Having said that, it is also evident that there is a political agenda to normalise non-maternal childcare that is both wider and deeper than the present UK government's fiscal priorities. It is international in scope and its central legitimising premise has been internalised by politicians from 'left' to 'right' and within the academic community. That legitimising premise is child development. The justification presented to parents, in other words, for public money to be provided for out-of-home childcare but not in-home childcare is that out-of-home care is best. Given the extent to which this agenda is being publicly promoted, and the considerable efforts being made by academics to find reason to endorse it, it is perhaps quite remarkable that, to date, research into the impact of childcare has failed so entirely to produce any evidence that early, extensive formal childcare is better for children in the long-term than being cared for by their mother at home. This is the case even if we define 'better' in the narrow terms of performance indicators and statistical analyses used by researchers to determine outcomes associated with childcare.

221 DfE (2023) *Development matters*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/development-matters--2/development-matters> (Accessed: 7 November 2023).

Since the evidence to support the agenda does not exist, popularising the agenda depends on the evidence being either ignored or misrepresented. Although it is common to read some variation of the sentence ‘childcare benefits children, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds’, the evidence tends to show that children who have not been identified as disadvantaged in some way experience *no* measured benefits from attending formal childcare. Parents are not made aware of the international research strongly suggesting that the majority of children who attend formal childcare do not experience any improvement in academic performance, or any other outcome, as a result of it. Nor are parents informed about the significant body of evidence showing that for children under the age of three, childcare has no measured benefit even for disadvantaged children. Most tragically, in the context of political campaigns framed as ‘supporting families’ and ensuring children have ‘the best start in life’, parents are not informed that the available evidence finds again and again that spending long hours away from their mothers at an early age can harm children’s social and emotional development, regardless of their background. Undoubtedly, if this evidence was fully and accurately represented and taken into account, the public conversation about choice and subsidised childcare would be very different indeed.

As stated earlier on, the aim of this report was not to prove that children need to be with their mothers, particularly at a very young age. The aim of this report was to critically assess the claims being made about the benefits of formal childcare, in terms of those making the claims. The concepts of ‘love’ and ‘attachment’ have been largely absent from the discussion. This is not because they are considered unimportant but because they are, in fact, largely absent from the discussion about the developmental impact of childcare. In other words, love and attachment are treated within both the political narratives on childcare and the academic literature as if they do not matter. For the only way it can be claimed that substituting maternal care for babies and toddlers with full-time universal childcare will be developmentally enhancing for children is if love and attachment do not matter in child development. Even where the claim is that childcare is ‘as good as’ maternal care, or that childcare makes ‘no difference’ to children’s outcomes, the assumption must be that love and attachment do not matter. However, as any parent who has left a baby screaming at the nursery gate can attest, they matter to parents, and they definitely matter to children. It is highly likely that the things which matter most to children are unmeasurable. This does not mean that they are unknowable. Mothers know. This is probably why when asked, most mothers express the desire to spend the early years of their children’s lives with their children.

In presenting this critique of the prevailing narratives around childcare, the point is not to argue that childcare is necessarily bad for children, or that mothers should not choose childcare. Mothers are faced with a myriad of different circumstances and have a myriad of different reasons for making the decisions they make. Choices should be respected. The point is that the effects of childcare will also be different for each child. Mothers should not choose full-time childcare in the belief that it offers developmental benefits for all children, because this belief is false. Choices are only ‘empowered’ if they are made in the context of facts and free from pressure and manipulation. Moreover, mothers should trust their own instincts and their judgement. As parents, we know our children best and love them the most. This makes us, not experts, not academics and certainly not the government, the right people to determine what is in their best interests. The central problem with early years policy is that politicians and campaigners have become utterly fixated on one answer and they are attempting to fit everything else around that one answer. But everything doesn’t fit. Only parents can know if universal childcare will be good for their child. So let parents decide.



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All of the UK's major political parties have recently declared their intentions to significantly expand state subsidies for childcare outside the home, including for babies from the age of nine months. It's frequently said that universal "early childhood education" is a way to "give every child the best start in life". It's believed this will improve children's educational outcomes, reducing social inequality; and also that it will empower women and boost the economy by enabling more mothers to go to work.

But what is the evidence for these claims? In this latest report, Maria Lyons takes an in-depth look at the academic literature from both the UK and abroad, and finds a worrying lack of support for many of the supposed benefits of universal childcare.

Damningly, of 40 studies reviewed in this report, not a single one was able to demonstrate a clear and lasting benefit for children under 3 of attending childcare rather than being cared for by their own parents. The claim that universal childcare from a young age gives every child "the best start in life" is simply not backed up by evidence.

What benefit is shown is mostly in children from the most deprived backgrounds. But, as Lyons points out, though this is typically presented as a positive for social mobility, it also means that "the policy has failed to benefit the majority of participating children". Universal childcare is also not the most effective way to help disadvantaged children, whose parents are less likely to use subsidised childcare, and who might instead benefit more from targeted intervention.

At a time when the political consensus is in favour of babies and toddlers spending less time with their families and more time being "educated" by the state, this report provides a vital counter to claims about childcare that do not stand up to scrutiny.

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