



Childminding

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Childminding

In February of this year, The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) announced the launch of a public consultation on new regulations governing the childminding sector in Ireland. This step marks a key moment in efforts to improve and enhance the quality and assurance of childminding services, and is an opportunity for childminders and parents to voice their opinions. The regulations are part of the implementation of National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028, which is designed to ensure a smooth transition for childminders, offering them increased status, access to public funding, and extensive support.

In this issue of *ChildLinks*, we consider the challenge now being faced by childminders and policymakers alike in balancing regulation and reforms with the preservation of the unique individuality that defines childminding.

The first article in this issue from DCEDIY offers an overview of the work underway in implementing the Childminding Action Plan and the next steps to be taken. This is followed by an article from Childminding Ireland that acknowledges the particular attributes of childminding when compared to other types of early learning and care, and asks, will childminders decide to adapt to a new reality of regulation?

Later in this issue, Dr Miriam O'Regan, Research Centre for Psychology, Education and Emotional Intelligence, Technological University Dublin examines the current practices and pedagogy of childminders in Ireland and considers how an understanding of these could inform changes in the sector.



Further articles examine childminding internationally. Rosanne Sluiter from Research Institute of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam outlines a comparative study undertaken on social-emotional development in centre-based and home-based childcare settings in the Netherlands. Dr Kay Aaronicks, Associate Professor and Head of the School of Education at Anglia Ruskin University, shares details of an action research project that explored the professional development needs of a group of childminders in the UK. Finally, Tina Maltman, Executive Director, Childminding UK gives an overview of the key findings from a survey seeking views of childminders on the sustainability of childminding in light of new funding arrangements in England and offer some recommendations to ensuring the sustainability of the childminding sector in the UK.

Sinead Kantar

The Reform of Childminding in Ireland – Next Steps

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On 8 February 2024, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O’Gorman, announced the launch of the public consultation on draft childminding regulations. This represents a major milestone in the development of childminding in Ireland and the implementation of the [National Action Plan for Childminding 2021 –2028 \(NAPC\)](#).

The publication of the draft regulations are the culmination of many years work, from the Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector to the publication of the NAPC. The overall objective of the National Action Plan is to improve access to high quality and affordable early learning and childcare through childminding.

But What Exactly is Childminding?

The term childminder can mean different things to different people. Although the term is often used to refer to those who are employed by parents to work in the child’s home, the National Action Plan defines childminders as those who care for other people’s children in the childminder’s home.

Childminding provides a pedagogical approach to children’s developmental and educational outcomes that is distinct from any other type of early learning and childcare setting. By virtue of working from their home, the learning opportunities arise from normal home-based activities such as cooking, washing up and playing

in the garden. The childminder’s home is not adapted to fit the children, and it is a home-from-home environment. There is no need for a “home corner”! Childminders work with small groups of children, often of mixed ages, from babies to teens. Childminders develop close relationships with the children and families they work with and, because of the consistency and continuity of care they offer, families often have the same childminder until the children no longer need early learning and childcare. The home setting also offers different opportunities for the children to develop close connections with the local community.

Childminding offers many benefits to children and parents but currently receives little formal recognition by the State. Whereas centre-based early learning and childcare services have evolved rapidly in the last 20 years in policy terms, childminding has remained at the margins of funding, support and regulation, in spite of its many advantages and its continued popularity among parents.

Under the current system, only those who are minding four or more preschool children, or seven or more children of any age, are required to and able to register with Tusla. At the end of January 2024, there were 78 childminders on the Tusla register. The National Childcare Scheme, which provides financial support to families with their early learning and childcare costs, is only available to parents using a Tusla registered childminder. Currently, most parents who choose to use a childminder to care for their children cannot access the National Childcare Scheme subsidies.

Yet, according to data from Census 2022, there are 53,000 children being cared for by a childminder in Ireland. This represents an approximate 13,000 childminders.



An Inclusive Reform Process

The Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector was formed in 2016 under the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The Working Group was chaired by Childminding Ireland and included a range of stakeholders. The Working Group was asked to consider issues related to childminding and make proposals concerning reforms and supports for the childminding sector in Ireland for the short, medium and long term, including the feasibility of mandatory regulation.

The Working Group published their report, 'Pathway to a Quality Support and Assurance System for Childminding in Ireland', in 2018. Their main recommendations included:

- Amend the Child Care Act 1991 to allow all childminders to become regulated providers of childcare;
- Establish an expert group on Registration, Regulation and Inspection that would develop minimum regulatory standards for childminding services for children from birth to 15 years;
- Garda vetting for childminders and the adults in the home;
- Create a communications strategy;
- Establish an expert group to recommend appropriate quality standards for childminding;
- Create a system of staffed childminding networks, facilitated by professionals with experience in childminding;
- Establish an expert group to develop education and professional training for childminders;
- Redevelop the QQI Level 5 minor award in Childminding, alongside basic training in paediatric first aid and Always Children First;
- Establish a funding and financial support expert group to review the effectiveness and efficiency of the funding and financial supports to childminding services;
- All registered and regulated childminding services should be eligible to apply to deliver the Affordable Childcare Scheme (now called the National Childcare Scheme) and other government funded schemes;
- Establish a National Childminding Strategy informed by the proposals of the Working Group to coordinate the regulatory and quality support aspects within one coherent framework;
- Establish the following expert groups to further develop the pathway to quality supports and assurance for childminding:
 - (a) Minimum standards, registration, regulation and inspection
 - (b) Quality standards, mentoring and network development
 - (c) Education and professional development
 - (d) Communication strategy
 - (e) Funding and financial supports
 - (f) Monitoring and review of strategy implementation
- Establish an appropriately resourced National Childminding Office to ensure the delivery of the National Childminding Strategy.

A commitment to reform was then made in *First 5, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families* published in 2018. First 5 called for the extension of regulation to all paid, non-relative childminders on a phased basis to make National Childcare Scheme subsidies available to more parents who use childminding services. It also looked for an Action Plan for Childminding that would set out a plan for moving progressively towards wider regulation and support for childminders over the lifetime of the Strategy, building on the 2018 Working Group report.

As part of its work, the Working Group carried out a consultation with parents through a parents' survey in May 2017, and consulted childminders through a survey of Childminding Ireland members and a discussion day that allowed more in-depth discussions with 22 childminders from around the country. It also drew on the findings of the consultation with 177 children aged 5–12 that was undertaken in 2016 to inform the Action Plan on School-Age Childcare. The parents' survey, which had 3,630 responses, asked questions about use of childminding and attitudes towards childminding. The survey of childminders had 357 responses.

A [Draft Childminding Action Plan](#) was published in 2019, for the purpose of public consultation.

The consultation on the Draft Childminding Action Plan took place in the second half of 2019. The consultation process consisted of four strands:

- Written submissions. 14 submissions were received.
- An online survey. In total, 467 respondents completed the survey. Respondents represented a range of stakeholders including childminders (57% of respondents), parents (36% of respondents) and others.
- Focus groups with childminders. Thirty-two focus groups were held. A total of 205 childminders took part in the focus groups.
- An open policy debate on the Draft Childminding Action Plan to which key stakeholders, including childminders, childcare organisations, and groups representing children, parents and childminders were invited, with 55 participants.

The National Action Plan for Childminding 2021 – 2028 (NAPC) follows the blueprint set out by the Working Group, taking into account the results of the consultations on the draft action plan and the recommendations within other Government strategies.

National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028

The NAPC sets out a process for extending State support and regulation to childminding on a phased basis, with accelerated access to subsidies for childminders through the National Childcare Scheme. The overall objective of the National Action Plan for Childminding is to improve access to high quality and affordable early learning and childcare through childminding.

To do this, the Action Plan sets out an incremental and supportive pathway to regulation. This will enable more childminders to access Government subsidies, making their services more affordable to parents. It will also enable them to access a variety of supports to assist them in meeting regulatory and quality requirements. In achieving this overall objective, the National Action Plan will contribute to the aims of supporting parental choice, and increasing access to affordable early learning and childcare places. It will help support labour market participation for parents, and offer more flexibility for parents who work irregular hours. It will help improve the quality of provision, supporting child outcomes, and provide greater recognition and support for childminders.

The National Action Plan has a number of specific objectives including:

- Enable a far greater number of parents who use childminders to benefit from subsidies under the National Childcare Scheme.
- Support quality assurance of childminders and safeguarding of children through extending the scope of regulation and inspection to all paid, non-relative childminders.
- Provide greater recognition of childminders and develop appropriate childminder regulations and inspection processes to reflect the home environment in which childminders work.
- Provide a supportive, phased transition process, to facilitate the largest possible number of childminders to enter the regulated sector, the sphere of quality assurance, and access to Government subsidies, while recognising the time and supports required for this reform.
- Support retention and recruitment of childminders.

These objectives will be achieved through the amendment of the primary legislation, the Child Care Act 1991; the development of new, childminder-specific regulations that are proportionate and appropriate to the home environment in which childminders work;

development and roll-out of new, bespoke training for childminders; and re-examining the funding and financial supports available for childminders.

The work of implementing the National Action Plan is supported by a Steering Group and four Advisory Groups, all of which include childminders and other key stakeholders among their members:

- Regulation and Inspection
- Funding and Financial Supports
- Training and Supports
- Stakeholder Engagement, Consultation and Communications

Work Underway

Phase 1 of the NAPC, which began in 2021, is nearing completion. Over the course of Phase 1, work has progressed across all areas of the NAPC, with the active participation of the four Advisory Groups. A key role has been played by the network of local Childminding Development Officers, who are employed by the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs). The number of Childminding Development Officers has been progressively increased, so that there is now a Childminding Development Officer in every CCC area.

The work on the amendment of the primary legislation (Child Care Act 1991) continues. As well as removing the exemption to regulation for childminders, it is proposed that the primary legislation should provide for a transition period for the regulations. This transition period is intended to give childminders time to meet the regulation and registration requirements before they become mandatory.

The Stakeholder Engagement, Consultation and Communications Advisory Group has worked with an external communications company to develop a communication strategy to support the progress of the plan.

The Funding and Financial Supports Advisory Group has advised on reforms to the Childminding Development Grant to ensure it continues to support childminders in their day to day work. Changes introduced in 2023 saw a 62% increase in applications for the Grant. Further enhancements are being planned for 2024.

The Training and Supports Advisory Group has been advising on the development of pre-registration training for childminders, essential to support the successful implementation of the regulations and registration process. They are also beginning to look at

a Quality Development Programme, which, in line with commitments in the NAPC, will be open to childminders after they have registered with Tusla and aims to support their ongoing professional development.

The development of the childminding-specific regulations began in 2022. The Regulation and Inspection Advisory Group has advised on the development from scratch of childminding regulations that are appropriate and proportionate to a home-based setting.

On 8 February this year, Minister O’Gorman launched the public consultation on the draft regulations. The consultation will remain open until 2 May. The information and documents are freely available on the [Government’s public consultation website](#). Regulations, by their nature, are written in legal language, and therefore an easy read summary of the regulations has been published setting out the regulations in plain, everyday language.

There are a number of ways that childminders, parents and other stakeholders can take part in the consultation process. There is an online survey, giving different options for changes to the draft regulations. The CCCs are hosting focus groups (both in-person and online) for both childminders and parents at local level to help explore the draft regulations in more depth. Written submissions can be made. And in addition, a national stakeholder consultation event will be held in May.



Next Steps

These regulations will be the basis of the reforms being introduced through the NAPC. They represent both a change and an opportunity for childminders and for the families that use childminding services.

Childminders provide an essential service and play a pivotal role in a child's early development and learning. The regulations and registration process will give childminders official recognition and access to State supports. Childminders will have access to funded, childminding-specific training and professional supports for ongoing practice, learning and professional development. In addition, parents will be able to access the National Childcare Scheme, which will help families manage early learning and childcare costs and provide more options. The National Childcare Scheme will also bring benefits to childminders by opening their services to more parents and attracting more business.

Regulations are an official recognition from the State that demonstrates that childminders are a valued part of

early learning and childcare in Ireland. Regulations set out safeguarding measures for children. These regulations will enable all childminders to register with Tusla and offer the access to the National Childcare Scheme for the families that use their services.

Childminders have already played a large role in the development of the regulations. We hope that many more childminders will become involved in the development of the childminding regulations by having their say in the public consultation.

Childminders, parents and anyone interested in the development of childminding in Ireland can still have their say on the draft regulations by taking part in the consultation until 2 May. The public consultation has an easy read summary of the regulations as well as the full draft regulation text. There are links to the online survey, which sets out the main requirements and the options for change.

The consultation page can be accessed by going to www.gov.ie/childminding and clicking on the Public Consultation on the draft childminding regulations button.





Navigating the Crossroads of Regulation and Flexibility: Charting the Future of Childminding in Ireland

Bernadette Orbinski Burke, Chief Executive, Childminding Ireland

Introduction

With childminding in Ireland on the brink of regulation for the first time in the history of the State, the future of childminding stands at a critical juncture. As the Government prepares to introduce the Draft Childminding Regulations 2024, childminders and policymakers alike face the challenge of balancing regulatory oversight with the preservation of the unique individuality that defines childminding in Ireland.

Current [Child Care Act 1991 \(Early Years Services\) Draft Childminding Regulations 2024](#) have been circulated and a 12-week public consultation is underway. At the time of writing, the Government are planning to open a childminding register with Tusla – The Child and Family Agency (Tusla) in autumn 2024. It is proposed that there will be a transitional period during which childminders may join the register, become subject to childminding regulations and be in a position to offer access to the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) to parents using their

childminding setting. At the end of the transitional period, it will become mandatory for all childminders to be registered.

The crossroads facing childminding now depends on the decisions that will be made. Will the Government choose the gravitational pull towards the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, or will they choose to acknowledge childminding as a valuable asset whose individuality need to be protected in order to survive? Will childminders decide to adapt to a new reality of regulation?

Background to the Regulation of Childminding in Ireland

Childminding is defined in the [National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028](#) (DCEDIY, 2021) as 'to mean paid, non-relative care of children aged from birth to 14 (including both early learning and care and school-age childcare) in which children are cared for singlehandedly within the childminder's family setting' (p.22).

Childminding has historically been virtually unregulated due to an exemption in the [Child Care Act 1991](#) and to [Section 22 of the Childcare Support Act 2018](#) which came into force in February 2019. As a result of the combined legislation, a childminder is only required to register with Tusla on the 4th minded pre-school child or on the 7th child of any age. In fact, unless the childminder is minding 4 pre-schoolers or more or 7 children of any age at one time, there is currently no pathway for childminders to register with Tusla. There are currently [69 Tusla registered childminders in the country](#). The total number of childminders in the country is unknown.

In this regulatory vacuum, some childminders have chosen to self-regulate and, under the 2002 National Childminding Initiative, became voluntarily notified to their local City and County Childcare Committees, however this had little or no oversight other than allowing childminders to apply for a biennial Childminding Development Grant. Childminders also joined [Childminding Ireland – the National Association of Childminders](#), some as full members and some as childminding contacts. Membership of Childminding Ireland has, for over 40 years, represented quality assurance due to the membership criteria in place, something that can be used as a tangible demonstration of quality for parents. Childminding Ireland's current membership criteria includes:

- Garda Vetting
- Paediatric first aid
- Tusla Child Safeguarding online course
- Insurance for childminding
- Signing up to a code of ethics
- Safety statement

At the time of writing, Childminding Ireland has over 9,500 childminding contacts (including members and parents using childminding settings). The reality is that many thousands of childminders are not currently in contact with any support organisation and may be unaware of the forthcoming regulation of childminders.

National Action Plan for Childminding 2021 -2028 (Action Plan)

In 2016, Childminding Ireland was asked to Chair a [Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector](#), which reported in 2018. The Department for Children, Equality, Diversity, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY) in 2021 published the Action Plan that was informed by the 2018 Working Group Report.

The overall objective of the Action Plan is: 'to improve access to high quality and affordable early learning and care and school-age childcare through childminding.' (DCEDIY, 2021, p.40)

The Action Plan outlines a phased approach to improving accessibility and quality of childminding services.

Draft Regulations

The Draft Regulations signal a significant shift towards formal regulation and oversight of childminding in Ireland.

The Draft Regulations were distributed on 8th February and there is a 12-week public consultation process underway. The consultation process aim is to capture stakeholder and public feedback on the Draft Regulations.

The Draft Regulations propose a comprehensive framework for childminding, encompassing registration requirements, safety protocols, child-to-adult ratios, mandatory training, and ongoing inspection mechanisms. While the aim is to enhance child safety and quality standards, there is emerging concern among childminders that overly prescriptive regulations could undermine the flexibility and spontaneity that characterise childminding services.

Childminding Ireland, as the national body for childminding, are encouraging childminders to fully engage with the consultation process and ensure that their perspective is heard and recorded. In order to properly inform its submission, Childminding Ireland is also running its own consultation with childminders and parents using childminding services.

To date, the many childminders that have contacted Childminding Ireland have expressed high levels of anxiety and stress. Although it has been known for some time that regulation was coming to childminding, the Draft Regulations have been confidential and, until the public consultation, were not shared with childminders at large. The fact that the Draft Regulations are seen by many as

being largely similar to the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 for centre-based settings has caused a significant amount of concern among those childminders contacting Childminding Ireland. It is perceived that there is a real danger of a 'one-size-fits all' incremental approach that could stifle childminding and lead to an exodus of childminders from the sector.

The majority of childminders currently canvassed would agree that appropriate and proportionate regulation is important for child safeguarding and also to ensure that families can benefit from the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). It is critical to strike the balance between appropriate, proportionate regulatory measures and the cost to childminding.

These Draft Regulations have the potential to significantly impact the operations of childminders and the broader childcare landscape in Ireland. While they aim to enhance child safety and quality standards, there is concern among childminders that overly prescriptive regulations would undermine their ability to be child led in their daily work, responding to the children's interests and spontaneous ideas for play.

Implications for Families

It is important to acknowledge the need for childminding regulation to address potential safety concerns. Anyone working with children should be Garda vetted, work to

child safeguarding protocols and meet appropriate quality standards. All children should have access to quality childcare.

Some stakeholders may call for strict regulation of childminding in order to ensure consistent quality and safety standards across all childcare settings. This is a logical theoretical position, however it does not acknowledge the fact that childcare models can vary significantly. Effective regulation will need to acknowledge those differences. One of the many difficulties in deciding what regulations should cover is that different models of childcare have unique features that result in unique benefits for children.

If Tusla registered, childminders could apply to provide the NCS to families using their childminding settings. The NCS provides financial support to help families with their childcare costs and is a valuable and much needed subsidy for many parents using childcare.

The introduction of regulations may have both positive and negative potential implications for families using childminding settings. On one hand, increased oversight and standardised quality standards may provide reassurance to parents regarding the safety and quality of childcare. On the other hand, overly stringent regulations may limit options for flexible childcare arrangements, particularly for families with non-traditional working schedules.



The Benefits of Childminding

According to the [CSO Census 2022](#), nearly one-third of Irish children under the age of 15 (331,783) rely on childcare services, with the majority (56%) receiving care in a home setting. Currently, throughout the whole country, [53,085 children are in the care of childminders](#), benefitting from personalised attention and the nurturing environment of a family home.

It is important to highlight what is potentially at risk if the regulation of childminding does prove to be disproportionate and/or inappropriate. The benefits to children of being minded by childminders include:

- Childminding allows a child's individuality to flourish (Ang et al., 2016; Freeman & Karlsson, 2012), thanks to the one-to-one attention and care each child receives (Garrick et al., 2010; Ahnert et al., 2006).
- Children develop optimally in the secure relationship and secondary attachment bonding with their childminders (Bowlby, 2007).
- Children thrive in childminding settings helped by smaller group sizes, which is an acknowledged marker of quality in childcare (Laevers et al, 2016; Clarke-Stewart et al, 2022).
- Toddlers and babies in particular flourish in the low stress environment at the childminders (Dalli et al., 2011).
- Childminding has been shown to lead to better outcomes for children in terms of well-being, language, and socio-emotional development (Otero, 2015; Melhuish et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2016).
- Children enjoy a home from home environment (DCYA, 2017; Shannon et al., 2014) as provided by childminders.
- Children benefit from the security provided by the continuity of care possible with childminders from babyhood to teenage years (Sure Start 2004; Tonyan, 2017).
- Children can be taken out and about, and benefit from being part of the local community and experiencing the world in a real way (Bromer, 2011; Garrity et al., 2017).
- There are fewer instances of sickness amongst children minded by childminders when compared with children in large group childcare (McGinnity et al., 2013).
- Childminding is also valued as an appropriate setting for children with additional needs, who can receive the extra care and attention they need with a childminder (Coplan et al., 2010).
- Since childminding services are so varied, parents can choose childminders that match their own parenting style, and the needs of their family (Fauth, 2013).
- The parents and the childminder can agree the details of the childcare required, including shift work patterns, such as overnight or at weekends, allowing for flexibility (Brooker, 2016).



The Power of Childminding

It must be remembered that until now many childminders have been specifically excluded from regulation, and have not, as is often suggested, been avoiding it. In this regulatory vacuum the uncomfortable truth is that childminding is working.

Parents have high levels of satisfaction with their childminders and complaints are rare. In the [Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector – Parental Survey](#) (The Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector, 2018), of the 1,208 parents who responded to the question ‘How satisfied are you with your childminder?’, 93% answered ‘satisfied (21.4%)’ or ‘very satisfied (71.8%).’

Insurance incidents in childminding are extremely low with only one claim in the last 5 years, and this claim resulted in a low-level payment.

In the childcare sector, childminders have publicly raised the least dissatisfaction with working terms and conditions or of an administrative burden.

This is not to say that everything is perfect in the childminding world, but the automatic assumption of many that childminding needs to ‘raise its quality standards’, are part of an ‘informal economy’, that children are somehow ‘disadvantaged by attending a childminding setting’ are unfair and ill-informed to say the least.

Childminders are the heartbeat of flexible childcare. Unlike many other childcare facilities, childminders and parents can negotiate flexible arrangements to suit diverse working schedules. This flexibility is particularly appreciated by those needing childcare due to working outside the standard working week, working shift patterns, weekend or nighttime working, and part-time workers. The importance of flexibility cannot be overstated for families, even for those working regular hours, as life can be unpredictable for any family.

At Childminding Ireland, we often hear of the importance of childminding in rural areas, especially in the West of Ireland where there are few alternative forms of childcare available. In order to support young families living in rural areas, it is essential that flexible childcare continues to be available.

Childminders are often the setting of choice for parents whose children have additional needs. In Childminding Ireland’s [Childminding in Ireland Survey 2022](#), we saw that 42% of respondents had been or were at the time of the survey minding children with additional needs.

Potential Unintended Consequences

It is important that the regulation of childminders is a success. It is also necessary to explore the risk of rejection of the Draft Regulations by childminders. Numerous childminders are reporting that if they can’t see the Draft Regulations working for their childminding settings, they will stop working as childminders and seek alternative employment as necessary. A number of childminders have already been in touch with Childminding Ireland to say that they have stopped childminding due to the uncertainty of the future. This is very distressing for the childminder, children and families involved as close bonds have developed over time.

It also leads to the question what happens if significant numbers of childminders cannot see themselves in the Draft Regulations? Whilst it has been acknowledged that a certain proportion of a workforce may be lost when regulation is introduced or modified, if the numbers become significant it will lead to additional pressures for childcare places on other childcare providers.

Potential loss of childminding places may lead to parents finding themselves struggling to find alternative childcare depending on local availability.

It is vitally important that childminders are fully engaged in order to meet the primary objective to ‘Improve access to high quality and affordable early learning and care and school-age childcare through childminding’ (DCEDIY, 2021, p.40).



Conclusion

As Ireland steers towards a regulated childminding sector, it is essential to strike a balance between oversight and adaptability. While the Draft Regulations are intended to assure child safety, access to quality childcare and parental subsidies, they must not unduly stifle flexibility or disenfranchise small-scale providers.

The public consultation is still underway, and Childminding Ireland urge stakeholders to engage as fully as possible so that a meaningful picture can emerge of the views of the most important stakeholders, childminders and parents using childminding settings for their childcare needs.

Childminders and policymakers alike face the challenge of balancing regulation with the preservation of the unique individuality that defines childminding in Ireland.

It now becomes about identifying specific issues, and engaging childminders, parents, and policymakers to identify solutions. The road ahead demands a delicate navigation, one that assures child safeguarding, quality childcare and parental access to the NCS while also retaining childminders, and preserving the benefits of childminding and the unique fabric of Irish childminding.

For more information, go to [Childminding Ireland - National Childminding Association](#)

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The Practice and Pedagogy of Childminding in Ireland: How Could Research Inform Policy Change?

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Introduction

Historically in Ireland, childminding (family childcare/day care) has been mainly informal childcare, outside regulation, and, currently, this is still the case. However, the National Action Plan for Childminding (NAPC) (2021–2028) (DCEDIY, 2021) has laid out a pathway towards new childminding regulations, supports and subsidies for all paid, non-relative childminders.

Census 2022 showed that there were 52,775 children with an estimated 12,500–20,000 childminders nationally. However, only 73 childminders are registered under existing Early Years Regulations ((Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016), as the majority have been excluded by exemptions in the Childcare Act for those minding three or fewer pre-school children, and those minding children all from the same family. At the time of writing (February 2024), the Childcare Act has been amended to remove these exemptions, and [public consultation](#) is in progress on new draft childminding regulations.

This article draws on recent doctoral research into the current practices and pedagogy of childminders in Ireland and considers how an understanding of these could inform changes in the sector. While the NAPC promises much, will it, in fact, respond to childminders' aspirations as identified in research?

Research into the 'Essence of Childminding'

Between 2015 and 2020, I conducted the first academic research into Irish childminding. Initially, an open online survey was conducted (n=325) on childminders and parents' attitudes towards the professionalisation of childminding followed by a world cafe forum (n=40) with members of Childminding Ireland in 2016.

That study revealed that childminders' main concern was that regulation might compromise the essence of childminding, which led to a significant shift in research focus. To describe the essence of childminding, a qualitative, ecocultural approach was adopted to paint an in-depth picture of childminders' practices in a doctoral study (2017–2020).

Ecocultural theory proposes that our daily activities are linked to our values and cultural models defined as 'presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared ... by the members of a society' (Holland & Quinn, 1987, p. 4). The familiarity of daily activities provides a window into these shared understandings or models, so when childminders talk through their daily caregiving routines, their descriptions reveal their underlying values and beliefs, and help us understand how and why childminders co-construct their daily routines with their client families.

A key aim of the ecocultural research was to identify the cultural models of childminding in Ireland using the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders (EFICH),

based on Tonyan's research protocol (California Child Care Research Partnership, 2014). EFICH had three main components: the semi-structured, conversational interview; childminder photographs illustrating their daily practice; and the completion of rating scales by the researcher, with qualitative vignettes to illustrate.

Childminders were rated initially according to fit with the Close Relationship and School Readiness models identified by the California Child Care Research Partnership (2014), being rated as either high, medium, or low. To receive a 'high' rating, the childminder had to show they valued a model in what they said, enact it in their daily-routine activities, and evaluate its impact on the children's outcomes. A 'medium' or 'low' rating meant partial or no evidence of valuing, enacting, or evaluating the model. The data were coded using Dedoose®, allowing for a qualitative analytic process of structured discovery.



Participation in the Ecocultural Study

The study was conducted with a small, self-selecting sample of professionalised childminders (n=17): two were registered with Tusla and 15 were members of Childminding Ireland (the national childminding association in Ireland). All participants were female, nearly 30% (n=5) were born outside Ireland and over 70% (n=12) held at least QQI Level 5 in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Almost 30% of interviewees also held qualifications at degree level in other disciplines, in line with the national average of 27% for 25- to 64-year-olds in 2018 (OECD, 2019).

With a self-selecting cohort, this study may reflect the views of the views of childminders who are better qualified and more confident about coming forward to participate; thus, caution should be exercised in applying the findings to Irish childminders in general. This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Technological University Dublin at every phase in accordance with its policies and procedures.

Key Ecocultural Research Findings

Using the ecocultural approach, two distinct cultural models were documented among childminders: a Close Relationship model of practice, similar to that described in California, and a new Real-Life Learning model of pedagogy, which contrasted with the School Readiness model found there (Tonyan, 2017). In addition, shared professional values were identified alongside a distinctive career pattern.

Close Relationship model

The most prevalent cultural model was the Close Relationship model with all 17 respondents rated 'high'. In this cultural model, the childminder's primary goal is for each child to feel loved and special. The childminder prioritises showing love and affection to children, interacting through play and conversation to build strong relationships.

Childminders value these strong relationships highly. Close bonds are developed in the intimacy and familiarity of the home setting, where interactions with the same small group of children occur on a daily basis. For some interviewees, this close bond was the essence of childminding, as well as its greatest reward:

I'd say one reward is the bond that you get with the children that you're looking after because it's a lot closer than say when you're in a creche, where it's bigger and you might not be with the same children all the time. (Shona)

Analysis highlighted how childminders valued long-term, enduring relationships, sometimes seeing client families as part of their extended family, and being included in the family celebrations and rituals of the minded children, such as birthday parties, communions, and even weddings.

Childminders' own family members were often directly involved in the service too (n=11, 65%). Their own children, relatives, parents, and other friends helped with school runs or with the purchase and preparation of food. Some husbands/partners became part of the children's routine, particularly if they worked from home.

A common understanding of professional conduct also emerged – one which upheld trustworthiness, reliability, and flexibility in relation to families. To be entrusted with caring for other parents' children was an honour and a responsibility. For example, one childminder spoke of working through migraines to maintain a reliable service for

families, and another mentioned how her husband/partner stayed home to mind the children if she could not. Going above and beyond was a source of professional pride.

Real-Life Learning model

The second cultural model identified was a model of pedagogy dubbed 'real-life learning' by interviewees, describing slow learning in a low stress home environment with regular outings. While most participants were rated 'low' on the School Readiness model, nearly all (n=16) were rated 'high' on the Real-Life Learning model.

In this cultural model, the childminder prioritises child-led, relationship-driven learning through everyday experiences both in the home environment and out in the community. The primary goal is to explore learning opportunities presented by everyday experiences as they arise, engaging children in a nurturing pedagogy with a flexible, emergent curriculum reminiscent of Reggio Emilia.

The value of this approach to learning was often highlighted in the photographs participants shared. One photograph showed a three-year-old child who was chopping vegetables with a real knife to prepare a stew for the evening meal, while another showed children playing together on a tyre swing:

But I just think children need to have real-life experiences instead of something that's orchestrated and so safe that they can't climb, they can't experience what it's like to climb up a tyre and sit on the swing or up a tree... (Nicky)

Childminders also emphasised the freedom of everyday contacts in the community, where the children are doing everything with the childminder, as illustrated by a photograph taken during the school run:

The children really come with me for everything. You know, if I do shopping, they come along; for the school run, they come along; if we have to go to the post office, they come along. (Rianne)

Childminder professionalisation

This ecocultural research has also highlighted a distinctive career path among childminders. Firstly, the most common reason for becoming a childminder was becoming a parent, not a previous career in ECEC. In fact, most interviewees had pursued careers in unrelated disciplines prior to starting a childminding service. Their main motivation was to earn enough income to be able to afford to stay at home, caring for their own babies and toddlers.

Secondly, as adult learners, they sought professional 'just-in-time' education specific to childminding. While most participants held QQI level 5 in Early Years, several found it was inadequate preparation for childminding. They advocated for specific education for childminders, preferably delivered informally with groups of childminders in their area (Bromer & Porter, 2019).

Thirdly, childminders sought public recognition for the uniqueness of childminding, rather than pressure to conform to unsuitable centre-based standards. Childminders bring children from other families into the intimacy of their family home – not a purpose-built, child-sized environment, open 7am to 7pm, but a home where all the generations live, eat, work and sleep (Freeman & Karlsson, 2012). Participants clearly articulated a desire for childminding regulations sensitive to this key difference:

Just remember that it's a family home more than anything. I don't want to go too far down the route of turning us into crèches ... to sort of respect us as a profession as well – that at the end of the day, the majority of us have our own families and we're working in our own homes. (Chloe)

In fact, bureaucratic processes, which could hamper more than help, were often mentioned as one of the things most feared by childminders. As one experienced childminder said:

I started off in a crèche, it was too much paperwork, too much administration, not enough playing with the children, so I decided to change and become a childminder. (Shona)

Finally, supportive coaching or mentoring for lone childminders was considered more useful than, and a necessary addition to, childminding inspections. Ultimately, childminders in this research were willing to register if – and only if – the regulations would respect, honour, and support the essential differences that make childminding what it is.

Policy Implications

While the NAPC does offer regulations adapted to the home environment and training specific to childminding, questions remain as to how well these will honour the essence of childminding in practice. What are the essential differences between childminding and centre-based ECEC provision, which need to be handled differently in the new system?

Agency of childminder

The essence of childminding in Ireland is summarised in the ecocultural definition of childminding that emerged from this study:

Childminding is a home-based ecological niche in which the childminder works together with children, their own family, children's families, and assistants to negotiate the project of raising children.

(O'Regan et al., 2022, p. 11)

Childminders in the study had a well-developed sense of agency and prized their autonomy. So, a major question of concern was: 'Would childminders still be free to run their services in co-operation with parents as they saw fit?'

Partnership with parents

One striking omission in the [draft regulations currently under consideration](#) is partnerships with parents. Childminders in the study frequently talked about working together with parents to create a customised service tailored to their families' needs. However, neither the draft regulations nor [the associated guidance](#) mention partnership with parents at all. This is concerning for both childminders and parents, who understand childminding as a form of ECEC where children enjoy individual attention in a learning environment adapted to their needs (O'Regan et al., 2019). This is the very heart of the Close Relationship model for childminders.



Outings

Similarly, the draft regulations make no mention of outings apart from the need for risk assessments. However, the freedom to go out and learn in the community is one of the defining features of Real-Life Learning as practised by most childminders (O'Regan et al., 2021). Currently, childminders bring the children out with the permission of their parents, who understand how enriching it is for young children to have access to a wider variety of affordances in the local environment in addition to the home (Kernan & Devine, 2010). Formal risk assessments for outings could merely create bureaucratic barriers to this approach.

Family involvement

Furthermore, the draft regulations make no mention of family involvement, other than the need for Garda Vetting for adults in the home and the person who provides emergency cover. Yet many childminders in the study could not have run their services without the support of family members, friends and neighbours (O'Regan et al., 2020). How will vital family involvement be supported under the new regulations?

Conclusion

In sum, some notable omissions in the draft childminding regulations suggest the need for more detailed attention to the rich fabric of childminding ecoculture if the NAPC is to sustain and develop these unique, deeply rooted, cultural models of ECEC: the Close Relationship model of practice and the Real-Life Learning model of pedagogy. The NAPC does address the broad aspirations of childminders, by offering both new childminding regulations for home-based ECCE and new qualifications specifically for childminders. However, unless the essential features which differentiate childminding are sensitively incorporated, the new system risks alienating existing childminders and deterring potential childminders from engaging at all, as has happened elsewhere (Ofsted, 2022). For a truly competent, high quality, Irish childminding system long-term, policy change needs to be informed by qualitative research, responsive to the realities of childminding in practice.

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HOME IS WHERE THE LEARNING STARTS

Exploring the Distinctive Pedagogy of Childminders through a Community of Practice



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Introduction

The family home serves as the primary and most influential learning space for our youngest children. At its very best, a home provides a safe, loving, developmentally rich environment for children to learn and thrive through play-based experiences. In England's diverse childcare landscape, childminders utilise the value of their own unique home-based environments to offer a distinctive pedagogical approach towards the provision of childcare and education for small numbers of children, typically under the age of eight years.

In this article, I share an overview of an action research project, carried out with a group of childminders, aimed at exploring their professional development needs. Recommendations by the childminders involved in the study prompted the need for a greater understanding of the distinctiveness of the childminding role and led to the creation of a local support network aimed at facilitating shared learning experiences and furthering insights into the distinctive elements of childminders' home-based approach to childcare and education.

Childminding in England

Childminding in England plays a vital role in the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC), offering families a flexible and individualised childcare option that nurtures the well-being and development of children in small groups from a home-based environment. The childminding profession, also known internationally as family day care or home-based childcare, has evolved significantly over time, from that of a caregiver to one of an early years educator. As the demand for high quality childcare increased, government policy developments and interventions led to the introduction of national standards (NCMA, 2002) and the implementation of early years curriculum frameworks (QCA, 2000; DfES, 2002; DCSF, 2008), which developed childminding into an Ofsted¹ regulated childcare and education service. In the 1990s and early 2000s, these changes were supported by substantial government investment in training and support networks (Owen, 2003) that recognised the ECEC sector as a critical and important opportunity for investment, to ensure that every child has the best start in life (DfES, 2003).

As societal needs and contexts continue to evolve, funding for the sector has decreased and vital support has diminished considerably. As such, the resilience and endurance of childminding has begun to come into question by PACEY (2019) who predict the total disappearance of the childminding profession by 2034. Childminders are accountable and responsible for their own professional development, yet the profession remains under-researched (Ang et al., 2017) and largely unsupported. They sit within the ECEC sector, driven through policy to develop as professional providers of childcare and education in a continually evolving landscape, yet the distinctive home-based

nature of their provision comprises some challenges. Childminders report a sense of isolation and perceive a lack of understanding and guidance for their role by those tasked with supporting them. There are significant and increasing national shortages in childcare provision, and sadly there has been a consistent downward trend in the number of new childminders joining the profession (Ofsted, 2023). Given that the implications of ongoing policy developments over such a sustained period of time are not fully known, sporadic initiatives, such as the introduction of Childminder Agencies or the ongoing funding disarray, exemplify a need for childminders to be connected to research and policy developments in order to inform the future stability of the role and contribute a greater understanding of the distinctive features that characterise a home-based approach to childcare and education.

Discovering a Model of Professional Development

I began childminding in 2007; a year prior to the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008), which was the first universal, statutory framework to guide policy and practice in all registered early years settings in England. During this time, I became a member of a local childminding group. Together we supported each other; provided cover for holidays; organised group activities for the children in our care, such as sports days and charity fundraising events; shared knowledge and experience; and formed close friendships. My aim through the doctoral research was to continue this shared approach, by working directly in collaboration with childminders, to explore and develop solutions to some of the challenges we and they had faced as a result of ever-increasing funding cuts for the early years sector, particularly in terms of accessing appropriate opportunities for professional development and promoting opportunities to get together and support one another. A further aim was to explore and make visible what I knew first hand to be an absolute strength of childminding – the distinctive characteristics of a home-based approach to childcare and education.

Osgood (2006) and Chalke (2013) suggest that professionalism is demonstrated through the ways in which practitioners, such as childminders, negotiate their

¹ Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills in England. It inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages, and inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people.

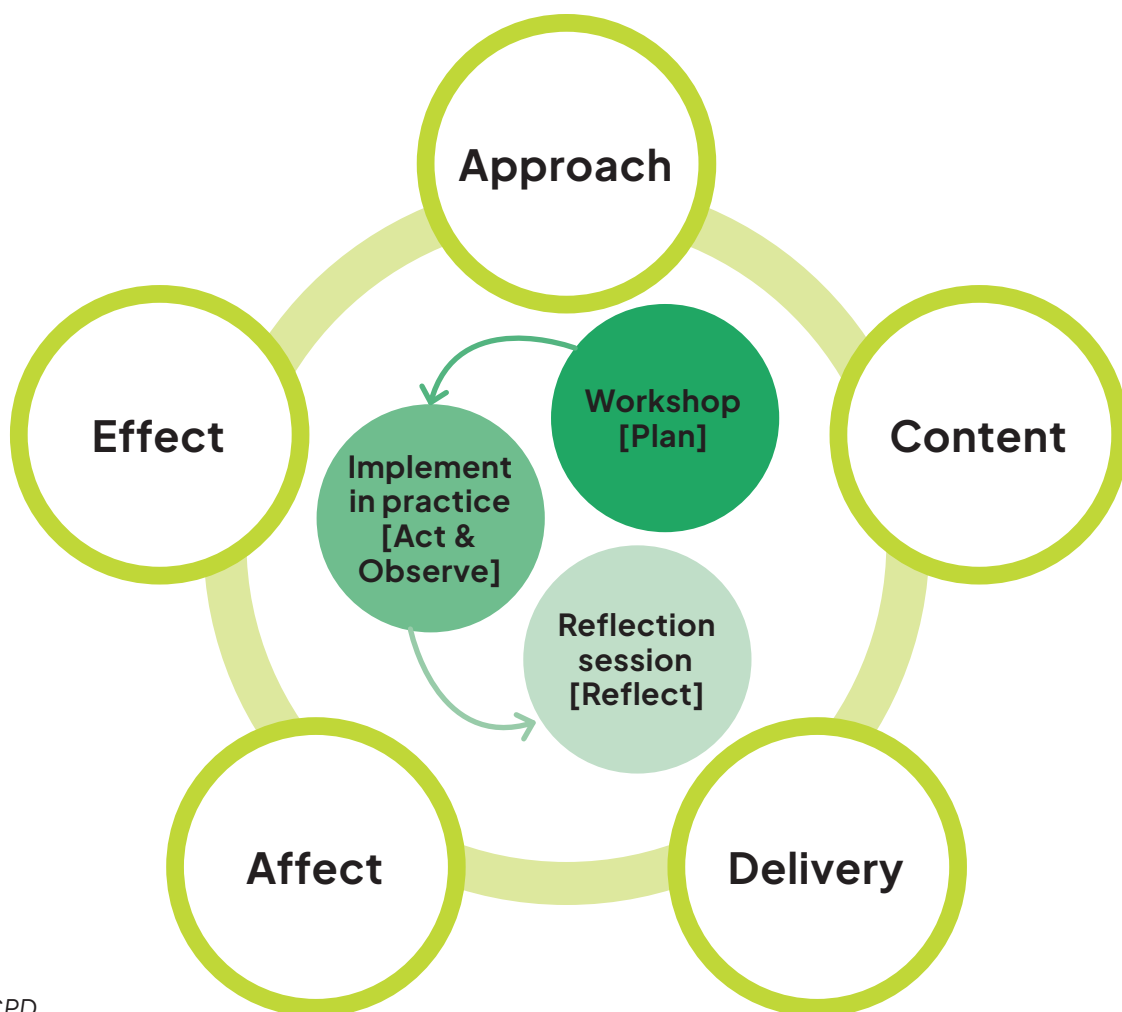
own identity within the policy and regulatory context in which they work. By working collaboratively with childminders and utilising the systematic, cyclical process of action research (Stringer, 2014), I was able to facilitate a collaborative enquiry into the professional development requirements and associated views of a small local group of 16 childminders, who described themselves as 'Inquisitive. Dedicated. Varied. Dependable. Professional. Caring. Versatile. Motivated. Experienced. Impassioned. United. Reliable.' (Aaronicks, 2020, p.2).

Childminders in England are not able to engage in the continuing professional development (CPD) that is commonly offered to early years practitioners during regular working hours, which is often geared towards group based settings and largely unaffordable for a self-employed childminder. As such, we worked together, meeting for a couple of hours in the evening once a month, across a period of 10 months, with the aim of exploring a model of professional development that was better suited to the distinct needs of childminders.

A three stage cyclical model of CPD developed that comprised an initial topic-themed workshop to support

the accumulation and creation of knowledge that was specifically relevant to a home-based setting; a second stage that provided time for the childminders to implement their ideas and new knowledge into practice; and, finally, a third stage, in which we came back together as a group to engage in the opportunity to reflect upon, question and consolidate new knowledge. Further, the model of CPD was underpinned by the emergence of five key features of CPD as needing to be cyclical and accessible in its approach; comprise relevant content; be delivered by someone with lived experience of childminding; thereby affecting a positive sense of motivation to learn and develop; and effecting an increased sense of pride and value in the important role childminders hold within the early childhood sector.

This model is different from the more commonplace opportunities for standalone training sessions, which Swim and Isik-Ercan (2013, p. 173) describe as 'divorced from daily practice'. Moreover, I argue that high quality CPD opportunities for childminders should be tailored to the unique challenges and responsibilities inherent in their distinctive role within the early childhood education and care sector.



Model of CPD

The Childminder Approach

The model evolved and matured through three cycles of continuing professional development (CPD), with each cycle focusing on a distinct aspect of early years practice. In the first cycle we explored schemas; the second introduced the concept of 'life outside of the EYFS' exploring international approaches to ECEC (such as Montessori, Steiner and Reggio Emilia); and through the third cycle we looked at theories and practices associated with nurturing secure attachments. It was during the second cycle of CPD that the childminders reported a familiarity with the domestic elements of practice valued within international approaches to childcare and education, such as caring for children in small groups of mixed ages and creating environments purposefully designed to replicate home-like features (for instance, eating at a dining table). As such, our discussions began to extend the notion of childminding as employing a distinct pedagogical approach to the provision of early childhood education and care from the base of a home environment.

It is interesting that the international approaches to which the childminders identified similarities in pedagogy are those held in high regard in terms of quality of practice (OECD, 2004), yet childminders in England continue to be typified by low status. Childminders are in a valuable position to encourage learning through every day, natural, playful opportunities from a secure home base in a way that group settings cannot. Barnettson (2012) goes so far

as to describe the possibilities afforded by childminders as having the whole world to play in, whilst O'Regan et al. (2023, p.907) define childminders in their study in Ireland as employing a pedagogical model of 'real life learning'.

A number of distinctive elements of a home-based pedagogical approach emerged from this study. These included working in collaboration with parents towards shared family values and providing real life opportunities for learning within a home and community environment, such as trips to parks and places of interest. There was also an emphasis placed by childminders on their capacity to provide care and education from a secure and loving relationship for small numbers of children that is 'like having a mum and teacher and role model all wanting the best for you and making you the best you can be - you feel attached, secure, loved, valued and able to flourish with these roots' (CM1).

Various insights were shared throughout the research of the home environment as a safe and loving space, childminders' use of everyday resources to promote learning, and examples of the ways in which children are involved in the daily life of the local community. There is enormous potential to engage childminders further in sharing, exploring and making visible their pedagogical approach to care and education, in order to better understand an alternative model of quality from that derived from group-based setting approaches, and to inform future professional development and support needs of childminders.



The childminders involved in this study demonstrated passion and pride for their distinctive approach and a continuing hope that their role will be better understood. Towards the final stages of the action research, I incorporated an important opportunity for us to review our experiences of creating a model of CPD that was appropriate and better met the distinct needs of childminders. They had felt motivated and empowered by the experience, subsequently identifying the need for childminders themselves to upskill and lead the sharing of good practice and professional development opportunities in the future. They expressed their frustration at the perceived societal lack of awareness of childminding as a valuable profession and reported an ongoing scarcity of opportunities to connect with other childminders and build community networks. As the doctoral action research approached its conclusion, I recognised the significance of enabling continuous opportunities for childminders to remain engaged and connected.

The Childminder Café

The Childminder Café was established as part of a subsequent action research initiative that aimed to provide childminders with a platform for building a sustainable network. Since May 2023, we have met regularly, working together to facilitate shared learning experiences and to promote an enhanced connection with local authority support services. In a study examining the quality of childminder provision, Otero and Melhuish (2015) recommended quality improvement opportunities to be available, such as local neighbourhood networks of childminders and other professionals. Nevertheless, the childminders that I work with report a lack of networking opportunities and feel they are not connected to or aware of other childminders in their locality anymore.

Communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) offer a shared and collaborative approach to creating spaces in which childminders and other professionals can share knowledge and build relationships, thus going some way to reduce the sense of isolation experienced by some childminders. Collaborative network models such as communities of practice also enable ownership of the network to be shared amongst all involved, which in turn encourages a sense of shared responsibility for the day-to-day operation and ongoing development of the network.

Through the Childminder Café, we have been able to continue a focus on shared learning opportunities by

furthering our exploration of key aspects of early years practice, such as sustainability in the early years. We have connected with wider professionals who have facilitated informative sessions and online training, for instance to better understand the new early years Ofsted inspection framework, and on topics such as how to support children's self-regulation. The local authority have been extremely supportive of the initiative, allowing us to work together to share information, attend cluster meetings online as a group from within the Childminder Café sessions, and explore the barriers and challenges to engagement and networking for a better understanding.

The ongoing development of the Childminder Café aligns with the principles of a community of practice model, further enriched by the insights gleaned from the action research project within which it operates. Childminders evaluate the café as having a beneficial impact as it motivates and inspires them, increases their confidence and promotes the exchange of ideas. They feel a sense of support and belonging within a community environment, where their voice is heard and respected. The opportunities afforded through an initiative such as the Childminder Café are countless, yet there are also ongoing challenges that need further exploration. The time and commitment required for childminders to engage outside of their regular working hours continues to be a barrier. Exploring digital platforms such as Teams chats or WhatsApp groups could complement and support community networks, but their feasibility needs further investigation. Research such as that of Brooker (2016) has explored the complexities involved in establishing a collective identity across a profession that comprises self-employed individuals who hold differing priorities in their roles as carers and educators. I am also intrigued by the challenges involved in connecting with a predominantly invisible workforce and the perspectives of childminders who do not participate in networks or seek to develop their knowledge and understanding of key aspects of early years practice.



Conclusion

Childminders are providers of high-quality home-based care and education, offering a unique and invaluable service within their nurturing environments. Unlike larger group settings, childminders offer a family approach and a flexibility of provision that caters to the individual needs and interests of each child and of their families. Their small group sizes foster intimate relationships and a sense of security, enabling children to thrive emotionally, socially, and cognitively. Childminders prioritise learning through real world play, creating enriching experiences that stimulate children's curiosity and creativity as members of a local community.

Continued evaluation and development of the Childminder Café, grounded in a community of practice framework and guided by action research, will serve as a platform for childminders to explore and showcase their unique pedagogical approach to childcare and education. In addition, understanding the complexities of connecting with an often unseen workforce, alongside the viewpoints of childminders who shy away from network participation, remains a compelling area for future inquiry.

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Unraveling Forces at Play

A Comparative Study on Social-Emotional Development in Centre-Based and Home-Based Childcare Settings



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Numerous studies have reported positive associations between participation in high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and various aspects of social-emotional development, such as emotional self-regulation, empathy, and social competence (e.g. Burchinal et al., 2010; Gialamas et al., 2014; Mashburn et al., 2008; Nores & Barnett, 2010; Sylva et al., 2020), although zero effects or inconsistent findings have also been reported (Keys et al., 2013; NICHD, 2005; Stein et al., 2012; Wustmann Seiler et al., 2022). A possible explanation for these heterogeneous findings is that the effects of quality ECEC also depend on the type of care provided (Sluiter et al., 2023), as well as children's individual and family characteristics, such as temperamental disposition, stress reactivity, and socioeconomic status (Phillips et al., 2011). This means that individual children's day-to-day experiences in ECEC settings may vary, resulting in different outcomes for different children in different settings.

Theoretical Considerations

Following the bioecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), ECEC can be viewed as an important developmental context for social-emotional development. This model distinguishes between several microsystems (e.g., home, ECEC, school) with structural quality characteristics and proximal processes (e.g., interactions between children and teachers). The nature of these proximal processes and their impact on children's development is influenced by the characteristics of those involved, the context in which they occur, and time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). There is an increasing emphasis on the differential effects of ECEC and their direct relationship to child characteristics, such as gender and temperament (see Jilink & Fukkink, 2017 for a Dutch overview; Fukkink, 2022). Consequently, the focus is shifting from determining whether ECEC is beneficial to understanding how child and environmental factors interact and influence children's development.

In our research, we focused on how various aspects of ECEC, including the quality of care, type of care, and individual and family characteristics of children, influence the social-emotional development of children, both while attending the childcare setting and during the transition into elementary school in the Dutch context. I will highlight some results that are specifically related to type of care.

A Focus on Type of Care

Comparative studies have investigated differences in child development taking into account the structural characteristics and process quality of different types of ECEC. In home-based care, group size is smaller, the caregiver-child ratio is more favorable, and the stability of staff is higher than in centre-based care (Dowsett et al., 2008; NICHD, 2004). These structural differences may have a positive influence on the quality of the dyadic relationship between the caregiver and individual children. On the other hand, the structural quality characteristics of centre-based care (i.e., caregiver-child ratio and group size with a larger number of same-age peers) and the educational climate resemble more closely the classroom environment of elementary school, which may help in the transition from childcare to school. As a result, there are two presumptions: home-based care may provide higher quality (i.e., a structural quality perspective), and centre-based care may prepare children better for school (i.e., a continuity perspective).

Some studies have reported that children in centre-based care have, on average, slightly poorer social-emotional outcomes than children in home-based care, although differences are small (e.g., Abner et al., 2013; Coley et al., 2013; NICHD, 2003). Other studies have not found any differences in social-emotional development between children from centre-based and



home-based care (Gordon et al., 2013; Votruba-Drzal et al., 2004). Hence, there are mixed findings regarding the relationship between type of care and children's development. Dutch research into the development of children who attend home-based care is lacking, which is unfortunate as many Dutch children attend ECEC (see Rijksoverheid, 2023). More research was needed to explore whether different ECEC environments may have different effects on children's development, particularly in the Dutch context.

A Focus on the Dutch Context

The Dutch Child Care Act includes the provision of full-day ECEC services to children in centre-based ECEC (384,000 children, 55% of the Dutch population of 0–4 years old) and home-based ECEC (57,000 children, 8% of 0–4 years old) (Rijksoverheid, 2023). The Netherlands has one of the highest enrollment rates for children 0 to 2 years old in Europe, and part-time attendance is common, with an average of 16 hours per week (OECD, 2021). Centre-based care classrooms consist, on average, of 11.1 children with two or more caregivers (vs. 3.7 with one caregiver in home-based care) with a maximum child-caregiver ratio of 1:8 (vs. 1:5 in home-based care, depending on the age composition of the centre or home; Slot et al., 2019), whereas Dutch elementary school classrooms consist on average of 22.9 children with no maximum group size restrictions (Rijksoverheid, 2023). In the Netherlands, there is currently a split system in place, with a clear transition from ECEC to primary education at the age of four.

The first, and only, Dutch study of comparative nature that included home-based childcare quality as well as associations with child development reported that caregiver sensitivity in home-based childcare – but not in centre-based care – was positively associated with children's well-being (Groeneveld et al., 2010). Furthermore, this cross-sectional study reported that in home-based childcare, children experienced higher caregiver sensitivity, lower noise levels, and showed higher well-being than children in ECEC centres. A cross-sectional study makes establishing cause-and-effect relationships difficult because it only represents a single measurement of both the alleged cause and effect. The impact of Dutch ECEC quality, including home-based care, on child development has not yet been examined over time.

Behind the Scenes: Our Approach

The study included three waves of data collection, with parents, caregivers, and teachers as informants. The children were followed from 30 months (T1) to 42 months (T2) and ~52 months (T3); the third assessment took place after entry into elementary school.

Participants were recruited through two national ECEC organisations for centre-based care and three national home-based childcare agencies, each with locations spread throughout the Netherlands. Data collection for the first wave took place between October 2018 and April 2019 (T1); between November 2019 and June 2020 for the second wave (T2); and between November 2020 and 2021 for the third wave (T3). A trained observer visited each childcare centre or home for an entire day at T1 and T2 following a standard protocol. The observer filmed the caregivers interacting with the children during four episodes of 20 minutes each during play, lunch or snack, and transitions. The research assistant conducted observations for coding the quality of the physical environment. Digital questionnaires were sent to the parents and caregivers before the visit at T1 and T2; the caregiver who had the most contact with the child completed the questionnaire. At T3, children transitioned from childcare to elementary school. When children were 3 months into elementary school, parents received a digital questionnaire. Through this questionnaire contact details of the teachers of the children were obtained. Subsequently, digital questionnaires were sent to the teachers as well.

Key Discoveries

At T1, the level of process quality was found to be somewhat higher in home-based childcare than in centre-based care, in particular the emotional support of the caregiver and closeness within the caregiver-child relationship. However, the quality of the space and furnishings was higher in centre-based than home-based care. Results further indicated that children in home-based childcare showed more favourable outcomes in terms of social-emotional functioning than children in centre-based care across different measures (i.e., observation and questionnaires) and different informants (i.e., parents, caregivers, and external observers). In addition, we found that the child-caregiver relationship appeared to be a stronger predictor for social-emotional functioning than other measures of process quality, both in the context of home-based and centre-based care.

The relation between process quality and children's well-being and internalising problem behaviour was moderated by type of childcare: the well-being of children was positively related to closeness between caregiver and children in home-based childcare only. A similar pattern was found for levels of conflict: levels of conflict in caregiver-child relationships were positively related to internalising problems in home-based childcare only. Based on these findings, we concluded that the process quality of home-based childcare is not only slightly higher on average, but also more strongly related to children's social-emotional functioning.

The results from wave 2 of our Dutch longitudinal study support our previous findings that quality of ECEC has a modest effect on social-emotional development in both centre- and home-based care. Our analyses indicated that dyadic relationships at the age of 2.5 and 3.5 years old predict the development of well-being, externalising and internalising problem behaviour, and social-emotional behaviour at the age of 3.5 years, controlling for baseline scores and characteristics at child, family, and childcare level. Based on these findings, we concluded that especially dyadic relationships between caregivers and toddlers predict the social-emotional development of 3-year-olds in childcare. This quality of the dyadic relationship thus complements traditional measures of process quality, which focus on the quality of the childcare environment and staff-child interactions at group level.

The home-based and centre-based care samples showed unique predictors for children's development in the preschool years. Classroom emotional and behavioural support and caregiver-child closeness promoted social-emotional development for children in home-based care, whereas caregiver-child dependency and conflict appeared to be risk factors for children in centre-based care. As our moderator models with differential effects for centre- and home-based care revealed, children's social-emotional development in ECEC is thus shaped by a complex interplay between quality and the type of care.

Wave 3 of our longitudinal study focused on the effects of ECEC on children at the entry of the first grade of elementary school (i.e., in Dutch: 'groep 1'). Our longitudinal research showed that the temperament of toddlers, specifically surgency, had a positive effect on well-being after children transitioned into elementary school. Our findings further indicate a relation between type of childcare and children's social competence in the first phase of elementary school: children who attended a centre-based setting had a higher

level of social competence during their first months in school compared to children from a home-based setting. Additionally, the quality of the dyadic caregiver-child relationship predicted the social-emotional development of children after transitioning into elementary school. Children with a more conflictual relationship with their caregiver during the previous two years of childcare were less competent in their interaction with peers and had lower levels of well-being during the first months in elementary school, according to the teacher. We also found transition difficulties, as indicated by the teacher, to be negatively related to social-emotional development of children in elementary school. Based on these findings, we concluded that characteristics at both child (temperament, transition difficulties) and environmental level (type and quality of childcare) influenced children's social-emotional development at the onset of their school career. Lastly, we concluded that surgency and centre-based childcare attendance are promotive factors for social behaviour in the classroom during the first months of elementary school.

Breaking Down the Findings: What Does it All Mean?

While other studies reported higher levels of process quality in centre-based care than home-based care (Bigras et al., 2010; Dowsett et al., 2008; Li-Grining & Coley, 2006; Porter et al., 2010), our findings confirm outcomes of a previous study into Dutch home-based care by Groeneveld and colleagues (2010). According to measurements at T1, home-based care provided higher levels of classroom emotional and behavioural support, as well as caregiver-child closeness. At T2, we found that home-based care showed higher levels of classroom engaged support for learning, as well as caregiver-child closeness, and lower levels of caregiver-child conflict than centre-based care. Although the quality of the physical environment was higher in centre-based care, as reported in T1 and T2, process quality was higher in home-based care than in centre-based care in our longitudinal study, consistent with previous Dutch research.

We also found some evidence that home-based childcare is, on average, more beneficial for children's social-emotional development at toddler age. Children in home-based care had higher observed, parent-, and caregiver-reported well-being, and home-based caregivers reported more favorable aspects of social-emotional behaviour at age 2.5 compared to their colleagues from centre-based care. At T2 we found home-based childcare

to be related to an increase in caregiver-reported well-being. However, when children entered elementary school, centre-based care attendance appeared to be positively related to social behaviour in the classroom. The structural characteristics of home-based childcare (e.g., smaller group size, more favourable caregiver-child ratio, and higher staff stability than in centre-based care) might have had a positive influence on the quality of the dyadic relationship between the caregiver and individual children, leading to better social-emotional development (mostly an increased well-being) in toddlers. On the other hand, the structural quality characteristics of centre-based care (i.e., larger caregiver-child ratio and group size with a greater number of same-age peers than in home-based care) and the educational climate in a centre more closely resemble an elementary school environment, which might have better prepared children for social behaviour at school.

At T1, we discovered that dyadic quality (closeness and conflict) was more strongly related to children's social-emotional functioning (well-being and internalising problem behaviour) in home-based care than in centre-based care. At T2 we also found that dyadic caregiver-child closeness, as well as classroom emotional and behavioural support, were stronger predictors of well-being in home-based care; however, dyadic caregiver-child dependency and conflict were stronger predictors of social-emotional development (well-being, internalising problem behaviour, and social behaviour) in centre-based care. To summarise, caregiver-child closeness is an important predictor of children's social-emotional development in home-based care whether children are 2- or 3 years old, whereas conflict and dependency (negative dimensions) appear to shift their influence on children's development from being most influential in home-based care to being most influential in centre-based care. More research is needed to understand how this complex interplay between quality and type of care works.



Our findings strongly suggest that environmental factors may vary across different childcare contexts. The advantages of long-term relationships between children and caregivers and the small groups as experienced by children in home-based care may be advantageous to social-emotional development. Meanwhile, children in centre-based care may experience a disadvantage from the relatively large groups and caregiver discontinuity at first but are eventually better prepared for social behaviour at school. The generic structure-process-outcome paradigm (NICHD, 2002) can, therefore, follow different pathways in home- and centre-based care.

Theoretical considerations

Motivated by the bioecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), we focused on how ECEC, and individual and family characteristics influence the social-emotional development of Dutch children. Two findings stand out on a theoretical level.

Firstly, we confirmed the importance of proximal processes in ECEC for the social-emotional development of children with a new emphasis on the importance of the caregiver-child relationship. We discovered that the dyadic relationship quality had a direct effect on several social-emotional development outcome measures, as reported by various informants (parents, caregivers, observers, and teachers), and the effects lasted until the first year of elementary school.

Second, the ECEC context in which these proximal processes take place influences the impact on social-emotional development. Home-based and centre-based care each shape children's social-emotional development in different ways. Type of care interacted with aspects of dyadic relationship quality: dyadic relationship quality has a different effect on social-emotional development depending on the type of childcare. When children were 2 years old, the dyadic relationship quality had stronger effects, for better and for worse, on social-emotional development in home-based care than in centre-based care. When the children were 3 years old, closeness in the dyadic relationship stimulated children's well-being in home-based care, and dependency and conflict in the dyadic relationship were risk factors for children in centre-based care. Centre- and home-based care have often been investigated with a shared framework (sometimes 'correcting' for type of care), but a more differentiated analysis with interactions of type of care and variables at child or childcare level may increase our understanding of developmental pathways of children in centre-based vs. home-based care in their early years, including preschool and school.

Implications for Childcare Policy and Practice

Within the Dutch split system, transitions from childcare to primary education are influenced by both factors such as experience with functioning in a large group, and an optimal transitory phase. Difficulties during the transition phase have a direct influence on children's academic self-regulation, social competence, and well-being in the classroom. The transition from ECEC to elementary school is more successful if children are more extroverted, have had positive relationships with their caregivers, and went to centre-based care (i.e., not home-based care). While these experiences take place before the onset of formal schooling, their influence on both academic self-regulation and social competence during the first months at school indicates the importance of these factors during children's early years in childcare. To avoid transition difficulties, caregivers and teachers should guide, supervise, and support children during the transition phase. Gathering information about children's temperament, and childcare background (type and quality, especially conflict in the caregiver-child relationship in ECEC), is important before the elementary school entry. Therefore, parents, ECEC caregivers, and teachers may share this information about children in a tripartite dialogue before elementary school entry. Parents and teachers may subsequently share their perspectives on children's experiences during the first

weeks at school at a follow-up. This two-step approach before and after the school entry may guide the social-emotional and academic support of individual children during the important phase of transition.

Finally, more awareness of the importance of caregiver-child relationship quality on children's social-emotional development in ECEC and elementary school is required in childcare policy and practice. For home-based care, caregivers must become aware of the importance and monitor their perceived relationship with individual children, because the influence of the caregiver-child relationship quality is strongest in home-based childcare, especially for young children. For centre-based settings, it seems important to invest in dyadic relationships by focusing on stable caregiver-child dyads (e.g., via caregiver-child mentorships) and stability of care (e.g., by reducing the number of caregiver changes). A strong emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of the caregiver's sensitivity and availability, to establish an affectionate relationship with a child (Koomen, 2022). In conclusion, while shaping the future of early childhood education and care in policy and practice, it is crucial to monitor and acknowledge individual dynamics, recognise their profound impact, and to benefit from strategic investments in stable caregiver-child dyads.

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Childminding Sustainability in England

Tina Maltman, Executive Director, Childminding UK

Background

It is widely recognised that the first five years of a child’s life are fundamental to their future chances, both in education and their opportunities for employment, and for building and maintaining effective relationships. We also know that there are two main factors that constitute good quality care and education – the qualification and training levels of adults and those all-important adult-child interactions. It is vital that good early years education focuses on the needs of the children at all times.

The mission of Childminding UK is to offer professional support to Ofsted¹ registered childminders, promoting high quality home-based childcare through education and training and championing the vital and unique role childminders play. We support and work in partnership with children and families in every community to ensure that they have access to high quality childcare, enabling children to reach their full potential and keeping them at the heart of all our activities.

In the budget in March 2023, the English Government announced the expansion of what they call “free” childcare to eligible families of all pre-school children from the age

of nine months. Under this new funding, from April 2024, two year olds will be eligible for up to 15 hours per week; from September 2024, children aged nine months to two years will be eligible for up to 15 hours per week; and from September 2025, all children over the age of nine months will be eligible for up to 30 hours per week. This expansion, aimed at encouraging and enabling more parents to work, relies on the availability of sustainable, good quality and affordable childcare. However, childcare is not available evenly across the UK – there is greater availability in affluent areas than less affluent areas – and there has been an unprecedented decline in the availability of childcare places in recent times.

¹ Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills in England. It inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages, and inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people.

In 2023, 3,500 childminders and 400 group settings across England left the sector, with many in the current workforce saying they are considering leaving within the next year.

In November 2023, we invited both the 1,300 members of Childminding UK and any interested non-members to complete a survey seeking their views on the sustainability of childminding in light of the new funding announced in the Budget. The primary aims of the survey were to find out:

- How many childminders provide funded places
- If childminders limit the number of funded places they offer
- How many childminders request voluntary payments or consumables payments
- If childminders are worried about the sustainability of their provision as the childcare expansion is rolled out to all eligible children over nine months of age
- What is needed to enable childminders to remain sustainable

In this article we give an overview of the key findings from the survey and offer some recommendations that Childminding UK feel are vital to ensuring the sustainability of the childminding sector in the UK.

Findings from the Survey

The survey results paint a clear picture of childminders who want to provide a quality service but feel that government funding and processes threaten their very existence as childcare professionals. We received an unprecedented number of comments from respondents that clearly outline their frustrations and the barriers to continuing in a job they love. The Government's own figures show that the funding for "free" childcare for three and four year olds only covers two thirds of the cost of providing a place. Under funding agreements, however, providers, including childminders, are not permitted to ask parents to pay an hourly/daily rate to make up the shortfall, which is putting childcare settings at risk of closure. Voluntary fees can be requested, but also refused if parents don't want to pay. The results from the survey highlighted that many childminders are worried about the roll out to all children over the age of nine months because currently it is the additional hours and younger children that keeps

settings viable. Some childminders told us that they will have to close as they can't survive if all children receive funding. Others say they won't provide funded places but will only offer private places. Many childminders report that changes mean they are actually receiving less funding than before. Others have difficulties with the terms of payment, with their local authority only paying termly or twice termly².

Providing funded places

Over 87% of respondents to the survey currently provide funded places. While there is no legal requirement for any early years setting to offer funded places, many respondents state that, as the expansion rolls out, they don't feel they will have a choice as there will be fewer children available to fill private places. Of the 13% who don't offer funded places, 7.3% of respondents suggested they will not offer funded places, even when the expansion is fully rolled out, while the remainder are waiting to see what the hourly rate is before committing or waiting to see if their local authority will pay them monthly instead of termly.

As we can only have a maximum of three children³, the rate for three year olds is too low. Once outgoings are paid, I would be working for less than minimum wage. I would only be able to do it for the lower age ranges. I enjoy working with the older age range so it's unlikely I would childmind for much longer knowing they will have to leave when they turn three.

Limits to the number of places on offer

Sixteen per cent of respondents already limit the number of funded places they offer. These respondents give a variety of reasons for this including:

- Practicalities such as needing to take time off for dentist appointments, which they say is not permitted with funded places
- The amount of time the additional admin takes to provide funded places
- The financial implications of being able to provide both private and funded places in order to be financially viable as the 'non funded' children keep the business afloat

² Funding in England is administered by local authorities and each local authority can decide themselves how and when funding will be administered.

³ In England, childminders can care for no more than six children under eight years old. These numbers include a childminder's own children and any children they are responsible for (such as foster children). Of the six, only three can be younger than five and only one can be under a year old. For more on this see <https://childmindinguk.com/becoming-a-childminder>

One voiced a common concern, 'I cannot afford all the children to be funded.'

All but one respondent reported that the hourly rate is below what they usually charge. Some said that, as self-employed people, they believe they should be able to set their own fees, 'If this is going to be available to all children from nine months to four years it will be dependent on hourly rate offered... being self-employed I should be allowed to choose my own hourly rate to ensure my own sustainability', with another respondent stating, 'The funding rate is a lot lower than my hourly rate so to offer all funded places would not be sustainable.' Some childminders have already made the difficult decision to close, 'I have decided to stop childminding entirely when it comes in.'

Limiting the number of funded hours in a day

Currently, only 19.9% of respondents limit the number of funded hours available during the day, with 68.3% not limiting at all. Some respondents stated that they must do this to remain sustainable or that they will introduce limits when the expansion is rolled out, otherwise they won't survive.

I feel it's sad that childcare providers have to manipulate the funding system in order to get a fair income. The issue is in both the funded rate being lower than the standard space rate, plus huge issues around funding not being paid in the month that the actual care takes place.



The stretched offer

Government funding for childcare is provided for 38 weeks of the year for eligible children. Childcare providers can offer "stretched hours" for the remaining 14 weeks of the year if they wish to do so. Nearly half of respondents to the survey (42.8%) provide funded places

during term time with parents paying in full during school holidays. Some state that holiday payments enable them to be sustainable. Many offer both term time and stretched offers depending on parents' requirements. Others report difficulties with complicated local authority admin requirements, which they say limits what they will offer parents, and one in ten respondents say their local authority won't permit the stretched offer. One childminder stated, 'Until now I have allowed parents to stretch funding but it is too complicated and I fear losing out financially if a child leaves - so I'm considering no longer offering the option to stretch', while another replied that 'The system for claiming is so complicated I can't afford the time spent trying to work out funding and invoices.'

Voluntary payments and charges for consumables

Government guidance for local authorities makes it clear that early years settings are not permitted to charge top up fees to make up the difference between government payments and settings usual fees, but they can charge for consumables as long as charges are voluntary and not compulsory. Our survey results showed that 50.6% of respondents requested a voluntary payment and 49.5% requested a consumables payment. Most introducing voluntary payments called them either voluntary or sustainability payments with 43.6% having a set amount per hour and 28% a daily fee. More than two-thirds of respondents have a set consumable charge per child with 32.2% setting it according to the individual child. 'My parents pay a flat voluntary contribution of £60 per week. This is specifically to cover travel, dance class, zoo pass, theatre and forest school experiences, all which are additional to our core Early Years Foundation Stage delivery.'

Respondents outline the reasons for the top up fees to parents, 'I explain that the funding amount is less than my hourly rate and ask for a voluntary payment to cover the difference otherwise I will struggle to provide the experience I would like for the children in my care.'

Parents know I can only offer funded hrs if they pay a voluntary/ consumables fee to top up the hourly rate to meet what I normally charge. The fee includes meals, snacks, outings, nappies and wipes. My parents know I cannot sustain without that support. I wouldn't be able to offer funded hrs. My business would end after 17 years of something I've put my heart and soul into.

Some respondents did, however, acknowledge the importance of working with families with regard to the fee set:

It's important to understand why a family is unwilling or unable to pay. Honest open, compassionate approach is required. Children should never be disadvantaged or left out if their parent cannot pay. Often the cost of the trips in this circumstance comes directly out of my own wage. I would not discriminate against a child on the basis of affordability of a voluntary contribution.

Worries about sustainability

Nearly two-thirds of respondents are worried about the sustainability of their childminding setting when the expansion is rolled out to all eligible children. 'Sustainability is already strained, if this additional funding offered to you for children is not covered properly by the government and local councils, many providers will close their doors, no one runs a business at a loss.'

Some cite the low hourly rate that doesn't meet their usual rates, with many also citing that their local authority only pays once per term and they can't survive unless payments are monthly, 'It's not very helpful for childminders as the payment is quarterly and I don't pay my bills and rent quarterly.'

Only a third of the childminders who responded to the survey say they aren't concerned about sustainability because they will continue to charge a consumables fee that covers the difference. Most respondents state that if they were permitted to charge a simple top up fee, they would be able to guarantee sustainability of their service. 'Very poor funding rates will make it harder to stay sustainable. I've taken the bullet by not charging any additional fees, but with more children being eligible to funding, I won't be able to carry on in this way'. 'I don't really like being fully dictated what we will be paid when we are self-employed and have no benefits of being employed (holiday pay, sick pay etc)'. A reported lack of information or late information from local authorities makes it harder for childminders to plan and budget for childcare places.

The survey also identified many objections to the use of government language in allowing parents to think places are free when, in reality, they are subsidised and not fully funded. The comments below sum up the strength of feeling among many respondents.

The word "Free" makes the parents believe it is a god given right for childminders to care for their children for free! It's not free! We are losing childminders at an unprecedented rate and the government only wants to help the parents to return to work.

With the shortage of childcare places currently, and the predictions being that this will only get worse, one respondent raised concerns about vulnerable two year olds accessing a funded place.

Not enough settings to provide care. Quality will suffer. Differing rates will make it hard for us to budget AND provide continuity of care for older children who need a small setting. Disadvantaged two year olds will get pushed out as easier to offer 30 hours rather than 15.

Summary & Recommendations

The findings outlined above show how strong the feelings and frustrations are among those childminders who responded to the survey, many of whom state they are being forced to give up a job they love and have put 'their heart and soul into'.

Childminding numbers have reduced significantly over the last few years and it is disheartening to see in the survey responses that many more are planning to cease trading due to the expansion of what the government call "free childcare places". The amounts of funding the government set for their "free" places is determined by nursery ratios, which are very different to childminding ratios. For example, the rate for three and four year olds is set at the ratio of eight children per adult, but childminders are not permitted to care for eight children. Childminders say they are having to consider only caring for younger children, which would disrupt the continuity of care that is so important for young children. The introduction of start up grants to encourage more to register will only work long term if childminders can afford to keep the job they are registered to do.

The majority of respondents are requesting a voluntary or 'sustainability' payment, to bring the funding rates up to their usual hourly rate in order to survive and to provide the high-quality provision they want to offer, with many reporting that parents are happy to pay. Others are stating that some parents are refusing to pay, which is leaving childminders out of pocket and threatening the future

of their setting or leaving childminders no choice but to not offer a funded place to the child. Others are limiting the funded hours in a day or week so that parents pay for some privately funded hours too and these hourly rates are set at a level to supplement the funded shortfall. These privately funded hours will largely cease to exist after the expansion is completed, apart from childminders who tell us they will only offer private places. Most respondents state that if they were simply permitted to charge a top up fee, they would be sustainable and that parents wouldn't expect their child's place to be free. For this to happen, the government would need to change the narrative from "free" places to "subsidised or part funded" places.

The different types of settings offering early childhood education and care, from nursery schools who have to employ and pay teachers, chain nurseries in purpose-built buildings, independent pre-schools operating from village or church halls and childminders operating from home, all have differing running costs, ratio requirements and different fees for parents. In Childminding UK, we

believe that the government has a difficult task if it is trying to set one hourly rate that will pay each setting what they need to without over paying or underpaying others. Changing the narrative and permitting settings to charge a top up fee would be a fair way for parents to understand the government contribution while still allowing them to choose the setting they feel is best for their child.

A slightly lower percentage than expected said that they are concerned the roll out of the expansion of childcare places will threaten the sustainability of their business. This may be due to the high number of childminders who are already successfully receiving voluntary payments from parents and plan to continue. It is saddening to hear from so many that are planning to close their business who may continue to thrive if the rules and guidance were changed. Local authority processes and delays in payment and information being relayed to childminders is cited as causing both financial hardship and difficulties for childminders' future planning.

Recommendations

Childminding UK puts forward the following eight recommendations that would help childminders remain financially viable instead of many thinking they have no option but to close:

1. Increase the amount of funding to fully cover the cost of a childcare place, or change the narrative around what the government call "free" childcare places to "subsidised" places so that parents are aware the funding doesn't cover all the costs of a childcare place.
2. Allow providers to charge a top up fee to cover any shortfall in government payments.
3. Ensure that all local authorities offer monthly payments to childminders.
4. Set time-scales for local authorities to inform providers of future funding rates.
5. Require local authorities to have a robust but simple to operate platform for claiming for funded children.
6. Align the childminding expenses that are allowable in such a way to prevent childminders losing benefits.
7. Set funding rates for childminders based on childminder ratios and not nursery ratios.
8. Enable childminders to claim funding for children related to them (as they do in Wales and as nursery counterparts can).

For the full survey report go to [childminding-sustainability-survey-2023.pdf \(childmindinguk.com\)](#)

For more from Childminding UK see [childmindinguk.com](#)

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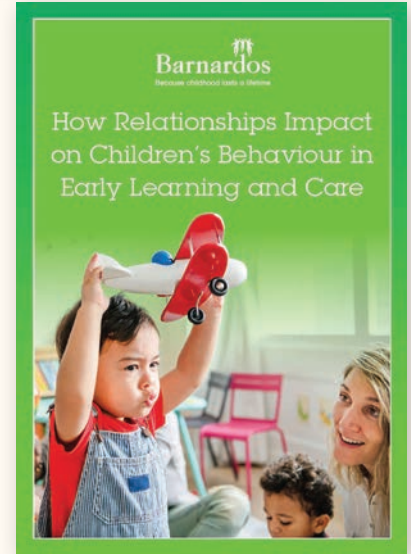


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