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## **Towards universal early year's provision: analysis of take-up by disadvantaged families from recent annual childcare surveys**

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### **Introduction**

A body of research evidence shows that receiving good quality early years education is associated with improved outcomes for children's development, and is particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Feinstein et al. 2008, Hansen and Hawkes 2009, Leseman 2009, Melhuish 2004, Smith et al. 2009b, Sylva et al. 2004). However, evidence also shows that children from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. those from workless and low-income families) are less likely to attend early years education settings and thus to receive the benefits of it (Ghate and Hazell 2002, Speight et al. 2010). As such, the scope of the entitlement to free early years provision has gradually expanded over time, with particular emphasis on improving access for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (HM Treasury 2004a, HM Government 2009).

This study aims to explore how the take-up of early years provision varies by different dimensions of disadvantage and the main barriers experienced by disadvantaged families. In addition, the study identifies and focuses on children from the most disadvantaged families to see what distinguishes those of them who receive early years provision from those who do not.

### **Key findings**

- In families experiencing no disadvantage, 97% attended early years provision compared with 87% of children in the most disadvantaged families.
- Children from the most disadvantaged families were more likely to receive early years provision at nursery classes and less likely to receive it at playgroups/pre-schools, day nurseries and childminders. Attendance at reception classes and nursery schools did not vary by level of multiple disadvantage.
- Four year olds were more likely to receive early years provision than three year olds (97% compared with 87%). This age difference was greater for disadvantaged children (95% of disadvantaged 4 year olds received early years provision compared with 76% of disadvantaged 3 year olds).

- Low knowledge of the availability and quality of local childcare providers appeared to constitute a barrier to the use of early years provision, particularly for highly disadvantaged families.
- Low awareness of the entitlement to free early years provision was a particular barrier to use for highly disadvantaged families. Use of childminders was a factor most pertinent to families experiencing no or little disadvantage.
- Amongst families who were aware of the entitlement to free early years provision but were not using it, highly disadvantaged families were more likely to mention constraints to taking up their entitlement (rather than choice or one-off circumstances).
- Thirty-four per cent of children received fewer free hours than their full entitlement (i.e. fewer than 12.5 hours). Three year olds were more likely to receive less than their full entitlement than four year olds.
- Children from families experiencing the highest level of multiple disadvantage were less likely to receive fewer free hours than their full entitlement than children from less or non-disadvantaged families (25%, compared with 35-39% respectively).

## Methodology

The data used for this study is from the 2008 and 2009 surveys in the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents series, which were carried out by the National Centre for Social Research on behalf of the Department for Education.

The sample for the surveys is randomly selected from Child Benefit records. Just under 7,100 parents in England with children under 15 were interviewed for the survey in 2008 (Speight et al. 2009) and just over 6,700 in 2009 (Smith et al. 2010). Interviews took place face-to-face in people's homes and lasted for an average of three-quarters of an hour. Each parent was asked basic information about all children they had living with them (e.g. type of childcare they received) and then more detailed information about one randomly selected child (if there were two or more children in the household).

For the present study, we use data only on children aged 3 and 4 who were eligible for the entitlement to free early years provision. For most of the analysis, we were able to use information about all children in the household (and not just the randomly selected child). As such we were able to analyse data on a total of just under 4,400 children. For the parts of the report that focus on highly disadvantaged families, we used a sub-set of this sample (28%), which was just over 1,300 children.

The data relating to parents' use of childcare and early years education refers to a reference term-time week (usually the last week before the interview). Parents are asked whether their children attended any of the providers of childcare and early years education listed below:

- Nursery school
- Nursery class attached to a primary or infants' school
- Day nursery
- Reception class
- Special day nursery or school or unit for children with special educational needs

- Playgroup / pre-school
- Childminder
- Other nursery education provider.

Where the child attended any of the types of providers listed above, they were considered to be in receipt of early years provision.

Since experience of disadvantage can cover a broad range of concepts, for this study, we constructed an index of multiple disadvantage that incorporates the following risk factors:

1. Lone parent families
2. Non-working families
3. Low income families
4. Families with three or more children aged 0-14<sup>1</sup>
5. Families living in disadvantaged areas
6. Families where the parents have no or low qualifications
7. Families where a parent has a long-standing illness or disability
8. Families living in rented accommodation<sup>2</sup>
9. Families where a child has a special educational need or long-standing illness or disability.

While it is clear that in many cases the factors above do not necessarily indicate that a family is disadvantaged, it is likely that an *accumulation* of such factors would indicate disadvantage. As such, the analysis in this report uses a sum of these factors as an indicator of families' level of disadvantage.

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<sup>1</sup> Since this report uses non-equivalised income, number of children has been included to capture the need for household income to spread further in larger families.

<sup>2</sup> As a proxy for social housing.

## **Receipt of the entitlement to free early years provision by children from different backgrounds**

Overall, 92% of eligible 3 and 4 year olds received early years provision in 2008-2009. Four year olds were more likely to receive early years provision than three year olds, which is largely explained by the prominent role played by reception classes in providing early years provision for 4 year olds.

Children were receiving early years provision at a range of maintained and private providers including nursery classes (28%), reception classes (27%), playgroups/pre-schools (19%), day nurseries (18%) and nursery schools (15%).

Receipt of early years provision was found to be associated with a number of socio-demographic characteristics. Children from lower-income and larger families (i.e. with three or more children), those whose mothers did not work and those whose mothers did not have any academic qualifications were less likely to receive early years provision. Children from lone-parent families were more likely to receive early years provision than those from two-parent families when the analysis took account of differences in work status, income and other socio-demographic characteristics between these two types of families. (There was no difference in the overall percentages of take-up of early years provision for children from lone- and two-parent families.) Children whose parents had access to a car had higher rates of take-up of early years provision than those without such access. However, once we controlled for income (as car ownership is correlated with income levels), the effect of access to a car became insignificant.

The take-up of early years provision was similar for boys and girls, and it did not vary by whether the child had a long-standing illness or disability or by whether they had special educational needs.

Compared with children whose mothers were White, children of Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers were substantially less likely to receive early years provision. However, once the analysis controlled for differences in socio-demographic profile between families from different ethnic backgrounds, the effect of ethnicity on uptake of early years provision was no longer significant.

The take-up of early years provision was the lowest in London compared with other regions of England. Children living in deprived areas were less likely to receive early years provision than those living in more affluent areas.

There was a strong association between the level of multiple disadvantage experienced by the family and their take-up of early years provision. In families experiencing no disadvantage only 3% of children were not attending any early years providers, whereas the proportion was higher for families experiencing some or a lot of disadvantage, with the highest figure (13%) found among the most disadvantaged families.

There were differences in the types of providers attended by children depending on the level of disadvantage experienced by their families. Children from the most disadvantaged families were more likely to receive early years provision at nursery classes and less likely to receive it at playgroups/pre-schools, day nurseries and childminders, whereas attendance at reception classes and nursery schools did not vary by level of multiple disadvantage.

## **Focus on families experiencing the highest level of multiple disadvantage – what distinguishes those who take-up early years provision from those who do not?**

Among children from families experiencing the highest level of multiple disadvantage (28% of children in the study), there were a number of socio-demographic differences between those who were

receiving early years provision and those who were not.

There were large differences in the take-up of early years provision by child's age: among disadvantaged 4 year olds only 5% were not receiving any early years provision, whereas the figure was 24% for 3 year olds. This age difference is greater than that seen for all families and highlights the role that the entitlement to free early years provision for disadvantaged 2 year olds could have to play in targeting disadvantaged families early and improving take-up of early years provision at age 3.

Children of lone parents and those whose mothers were in paid employment were more likely to receive early years provision, whereas those from larger and lower-income families were less likely to receive it. There was no association between the take-up of early years provision and family's access to a car.

Mother's educational level was associated with the children's take-up of early years provision: among children of mothers who had no academic qualifications 17% were not receiving early years provision, whereas this was the case for only 5% of children whose mothers had qualifications at A level or higher.

Girls from disadvantaged families were more likely to receive early years provision than boys, although when the analysis controlled for other socio-demographic characteristics, this difference was no longer statistically significant. There were no differences in the take-up of early years provision between children with and without a long-standing illness or disability and between children with and without special educational needs.

Children living in London were less likely to receive early years provision than children living outside of London. The level of deprivation in the area did not appear to make a difference to the take-up of early years provision by children from the most disadvantaged families.

We explored whether parents' negative perceptions of the availability of places at local providers of nursery education and childcare and of the quality of local provision were a barrier to their use of the entitlement to free early years provision. We found that this was not the case. Instead, it appears that lack of knowledge about local early years provision was a substantial barrier to taking it up.

### **Reasons for not using the entitlement to free early years provision**

As discussed above, 8% of children aged 3 and 4 and eligible for the entitlement to free early years provision were not attending any early years providers. We found that parents of 38% of these children were not aware that the government paid for some hours of nursery education per week for children of this age. Low awareness of the scheme was a particular barrier for the highly disadvantaged families, as parents of 50% of children in these families were not aware of their entitlement, compared with parents of 26% of children in less or non-disadvantaged families.

Those parents who were aware of the entitlement to free early years provision were asked why they were not using it. Parents of 47% of children mentioned personal preferences, parents of 33% of children reported various constraining factors such as lack of places at local providers, and parents of 20% of children mentioned one-off circumstances such as being on holiday in the week the survey asked about. Parents from the most disadvantaged families were much more likely to report constraining factors as their reasons for not using the provision than parents from less or non-disadvantaged families.

The surveys also showed that parents of 4% of 3 and 4 year old children reported that their children attended early years provision but were not receiving any free hours. This estimate appears to be somewhat inflated due to parents'

confusion over how the scheme works. The main reasons why some children received early years provision but not any free hours appeared to be low awareness of the entitlement to free early years provision and use of providers such as childminders who did not provide the entitlement to free early years provision. The prevalence of these reasons varied by level of multiple disadvantage experienced by the family. Low awareness of the entitlement to free early years provision was a particular barrier to take-up for the highly disadvantaged families, while use of childminders was a factor most pertinent to families experiencing no or little disadvantage.

### **Hours of the entitlement to free early years provision used**

Those children who were receiving some free hours of early years provision (except those who received them through attending school) received an average (median) of 12.5 free hours per week (which corresponds with the level of provision in most areas in 2008-2009 when the surveys took place).

Thirty-four per cent of children received fewer free hours than their full entitlement (i.e. fewer than 12.5 hours). Three year olds were more likely to receive less than their full entitlement than four year olds.

Children from families experiencing the highest level of multiple disadvantage were less likely to receive less than their full entitlement than children from less or non-disadvantaged families (25%, compared with 35-39% respectively).

Reasons why some children received their entitlement to free early years provision for less than 12.5 hours per week did not vary by level of disadvantage experienced by the family. Parents of just under a half of those children (49%) reported various constraining factors, such as that they would have had to pay for more hours or that the setting had no extra sessions available. Parents of 36% of children mentioned their personal preferences not

to send their child to an early years provider for more hours, and for parents of 13% of children it was due to one-off circumstances that their child received fewer than 12.5 free hours in the week the survey asked about.

### **Conclusions**

Our analysis revealed large differences in the take-up of early years provision by children from different backgrounds, with those from disadvantaged families being much less likely to access early years provision than those from families in better circumstances. What were the main barriers to accessing early years provision experienced by disadvantaged families?

The findings of this study suggest that lack of awareness of the entitlement to free early years provision and a low level of information about local options for nursery education and childcare were important factors affecting take-up of early years provision by disadvantaged families. In addition, the way the entitlement to free early years provision is delivered through a range of providers appeared to have an impact on its uptake by the disadvantaged families. Parents from disadvantaged families were more likely to mention lack of availability of places at local providers and other constraining factors than those from families in better circumstances. There is some evidence to suggest that some types of providers (e.g. nursery classes attached to schools) might be more easily accessible by disadvantaged families than others (e.g. day nurseries), which means that there may be fewer options open to disadvantaged families with regard to where to take-up the entitlement to free early years provision than to families experiencing no or little disadvantage.

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### **Additional Information**

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/research> Further information about this research can be obtained from Ann Claytor, 2 St Paul's Place, 125 Norfolk Street, Sheffield, S1 2FJ  
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