

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS**Perceptions of the impact of childminding services on child, parent and family outcomes**

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This paper summarises the key findings of a qualitative research study that aimed to develop the evidence base on the impact of childminding services on child, parent and carer, and family outcomes. It is based on qualitative in-depth interviews with childminders and parents who use childminders.

Parents and childminders agreed that the main features of childminding which supported children included:

- the homely setting where children feel comfortable and secure – which in turn supports their learning and development
- the small numbers of children to childminder which enables the childminder to provide more one-to-one personalised care to each child and be more child-led and flexible
- the small numbers and continuity of care (children often stay with the same childminder for many years, from infancy to late primary school or beyond), which lead to very close relationships between children and childminders
- the professional approach, expertise and qualifications of childminders, and the range of activities they provide, which were linked by participants to improved learning and development outcomes

Additional features which supported parents and families were:

- flexibility (in terms of the hours offered)
- the close, but professional, relationship with their childminder
- the frequent contact and communication and chats at drop off/pick up time (providing an opportunity to informally seek advice about parenting problems)
- the fact that childminders would often go ‘above and beyond’ what might be expected to provide families with an extra level of both practical and emotional family support.

Recommendations from this research:

- the perceived benefits of childminding should be the starting point for promotion
- awareness of childminding should be raised, and misconceptions about it addressed by the Scottish Government, local authorities and health visitors.

Background to the research

Childminders are an important element of the childcare sector in Scotland and offer a unique experience of childcare for children and families. They provide care and learning in the childminder's own home, generally in small groups with no more than six children at one time. Often a childminder can provide flexibility for parents or carers who need to manage work commitments, and may be used to provide wrap around care alongside nurseries or schools. Childminders are also consistently rated, through independent inspection by the Care Inspectorate, as providing high quality childcare across all quality criteria.

Childminders can play an important role in supporting the expansion of the entitlement to funded Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) to 1,140 hours a year for all three and four year olds, and eligible two year olds. If childminding services were to play a more prominent role in the ELC expansion, families could potentially have more choice about the type, location and hours of funded ELC they can access. Further, childminders will have an important role in future policy development, for example the extension of funded ELC to include younger children and the development of a new system of wraparound childcare.

Research aims and methods

There is a lack of evidence on provision by childminders and its impact on child, parent and carer, and family outcomes. This study aimed to develop the evidence base on the existing and potential impact of childminding services on child, parent and carer, and family outcomes, in the context of the ELC expansion. It has done this by assessing what aspects of childminding are believed to contribute to improving outcomes for children and their families in Scotland, according to childminders and parents using childminding services.

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted by telephone with 26 childminders and 26 parents using childminders in March and April 2021.

Main findings

Perceptions of how childminding supports children

Parents and childminders agreed that the main features of childminding which supported children include:

- the **homely setting** where children feel comfortable and secure – which in turn supports their learning and development
- **the small numbers of children** in a childminding setting which enables the childminder to provide more one-to-one, personalised care to each child and be more child-led and flexible, as well as providing a quieter and potentially less overwhelming environment than a nursery
- and the **mix of ages of children** which supports learning and development as younger and older children learn from each other
- the small numbers and continuity of care (children often stay with the same childminder for many years, from infancy to late primary school or beyond)

lead to **very close relationships** between children and childminders, which was often perceived as providing children with more comfort, affection and nurturing than they might receive in a nursery

- the **professional approach, expertise and qualifications** of childminders, and the range of activities they provided – including participating in outdoor activities and in their local community – were valued by parents; they were also linked by participants to improved learning and development outcomes than might typically be achieved through informal care from grandparents or other relatives.

Perceptions of how childminding supports parents

Parents' primary concern was the wellbeing of their children, so the benefits for children listed above were seen by parents as the main benefits of childminding.

In addition, there are a number of features of childminding which were perceived to be beneficial for parents and families:

- **Flexibility** (in terms of the hours offered, whether that was early starts, late finishes, weekend care, or ad hoc and last minute arrangements) was seen as a key benefit by parents and often drives their decision to use a childminder. Childminders' ability to provide a flexible service gave parents peace of mind – there is room for last minute changes and if something comes up a childminder will usually be able to accommodate that.
- Parents also hugely valued the **frequent contact and communication** and chats at drop off/pick up time which built a **close yet professional relationship** with their childminder.
- The closeness and trust meant parents could open up about parenting problems and seek advice and support and draw on their childminder's **professional knowledge and expertise**.
- The expertise and knowledge of childminders was seen as a major benefit to children and parents; at the same time, the professional aspect of the relationship meant parents were comfortable being clear about their childcare requirements. Both of these aspects were seen as key benefits, particularly when compared to informal care from family members. Participants also spoke of making use of their childminder's experience and knowledge to help them support their child through specific issues or stages.
- Parents also appreciated that childminders would often go '**above and beyond**' what might be expected to provide families with an extra level of both practical and emotional support both when unexpected problems arose on a day or more longer-term support when families were going through difficulties. As such, childminding was viewed not just as a form of childcare, but also as a **form of family support**.

Other practical benefits for parents include:

- the fact that childminders are usually **very local** to them
- and that siblings can be cared for together.

Limitations of childminding

There was a general consensus among participants that there were no significant downsides to childminding for children attending the setting, and those who went on to discuss potential limitations typically only did so after being prompted.

The main drawback discussed was that smaller groups may limit children's social opportunities or the types of activities they can take part in. Other potential limitations mentioned included childminders having fewer resources than nurseries, children being split up after leaving their childminder (for example, when starting school), and offering fewer trips if childminders have to provide care for children with different schedules, for example juggling a baby's nap routine and nursery/school pick ups and drop offs.

There was also a perception that a childminding setting does not provide the same internal quality checks that a nursery does as a result of employing more people, who can act as a check on each other's standards; with parents being very reliant on one person for childcare.

Raising awareness of childminding

Participants agreed that there was a lack of awareness of childminding as an option and of what childminders can offer – and therefore a need for greater promotion of it. There was a feeling that national and local government have focused more on nursery provision.

There was a perception that parents who did not use childminders thought they were "like babysitters" or that the children are "just sitting watching TV". A lack of knowledge about the training, qualifications and experience of many childminders, and the regulations they must adhere to, was thought to be at the root of these misconceptions.

The perceived benefits of childminding should be the starting point for promotion. From the point of view of parents, the main selling points are the flexible hours, the one-to-one attention and the nurturing, home-from-home setting. Childminders were keen to promote the developmental aspects (including their training and qualifications, the child development plans they produce and the records they keep) and the regulations, risk assessments and quality assurance mechanisms that apply to them as well as to nurseries.

Awareness of childminding should be raised, and misconceptions about it addressed, by the Scottish Government (on television and through social media), by local authorities (on their websites) and by health visitors (when meeting parents).

When asked what might encourage a greater uptake of childminding, parents tended to suggest more funding (including extending funded hours to younger children) and greater clarity about what funding/financial assistance is already available (including information on tax free childcare, tax credits for childcare and universal credit for childcare). The need for more childminders to address the difficulty of finding a childminding place was raised.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- are available via an alternative route
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact socialresearch@gov.scot for further information.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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