

Research Briefing - Early Years Settings and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This research briefing provides an overview of findings from a survey of early years settings carried out between September and October 2020. The survey was designed through a collaboration between researchers and practitioners to try and understand the impact of the pandemic on early years providers. The findings presented here will be of interest to practitioners, researchers and policy makers.

When the national lockdown was introduced in March 2020, all early years settings were required to close their doors to all children with the exception of children of key workers and children considered vulnerable. For some settings this meant closing completely, while others remained open but with reduced staff. The full impact on the early years sector of the first lockdown and subsequent reopening and operating in the midst of the pandemic is not yet clearly understood. A number of reports are emerging raising concerns about the impact of the lockdown on children’s development and on the sustainability of an already struggling sector. For example, a report by Kindred [1] found that 46% of children were not school ready when starting reception in 2020; an increase of 10% from the previous year. In addition, the Forgotten Sector report from the Early Years Alliance [2] raised significant concerns about the lack of support for early years settings during the pandemic, with 69% of settings reporting that they expected to be operating at a loss by the end of 2020.

What did we ask?

The questionnaire was devised by the authors as part of a working group focused on the impact of COVID19 on education. The survey covered six topics:

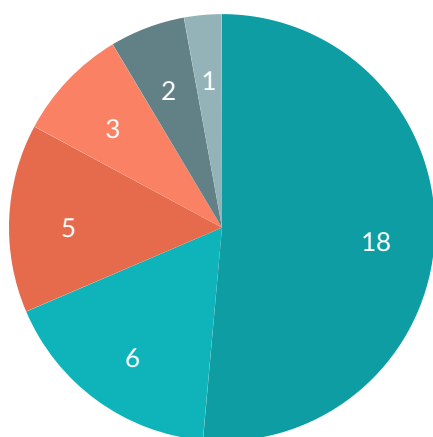
- 1) experience in the sector/type of setting, etc.;
- 2) the day to day impact of COVID19 on settings;
- 3) what practitioners thought were the educational and developmental implications of the pandemic for children;
- 4) how respondents had been supporting families during the pandemic;
- 5) what impact the pandemic had on staff in the setting; and
- 6) broader sector implications.

We piloted the survey with two Early Years practitioners before distributing more widely.

Who took part?

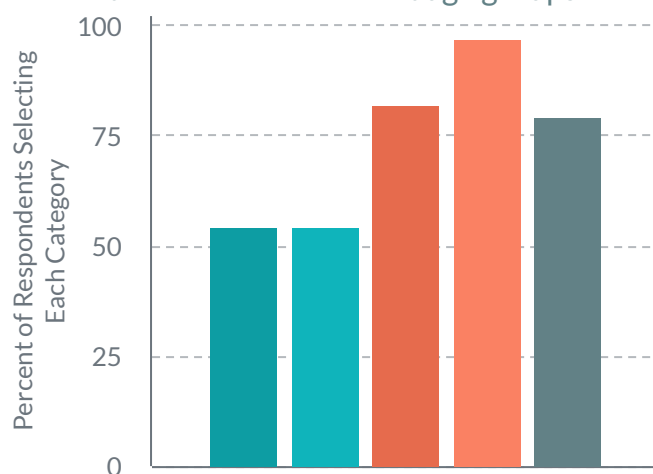
We sent the survey out via our contacts at Better Start Bradford, University of Leeds, City of York Council and the Aspirer Teaching Alliance. Thirty-three people responded to the survey, representing 35 settings. The vast majority were local authority nurseries (figure 1) and offered a range of provision from birth to five years (figure 2). Almost all settings offered provision for children aged three to four years (97%) (figure 2). Respondents held a range of roles within settings (figure 3), had been working in the Early Years sector for an average of 21 years (range: <1 year to 38 years) and had been in their current settings for an average of 10 years (range: <1 year to 24 years) (figures 4 and 5).

Figure 1: Breakdown of settings (% in legend)



Local Authority (51.43%) PVI (17.14%)
Preschool/Playgroup (14.29%) Day nursery (8.57%)
Childminder (5.71%) No Response (2.86%)

Figure 2: Percentage of settings offering provision to children in different age groups



Birth to One One to Two Two to Three
Three to Four Four to Five

Figure 3: Role of respondents in their settings (% in legend)

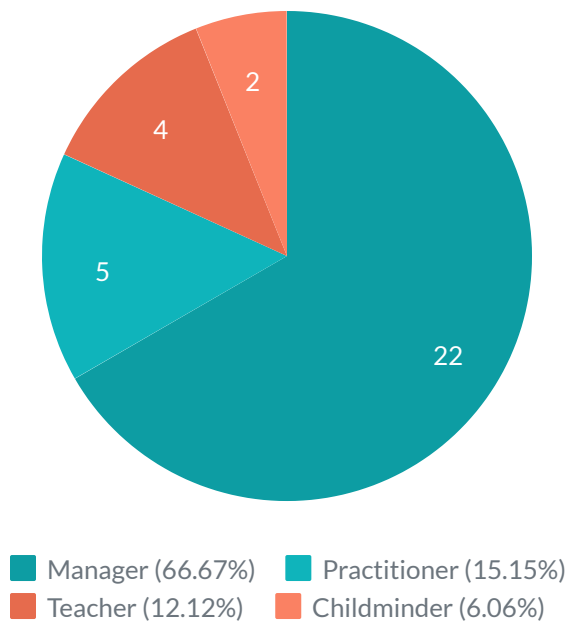
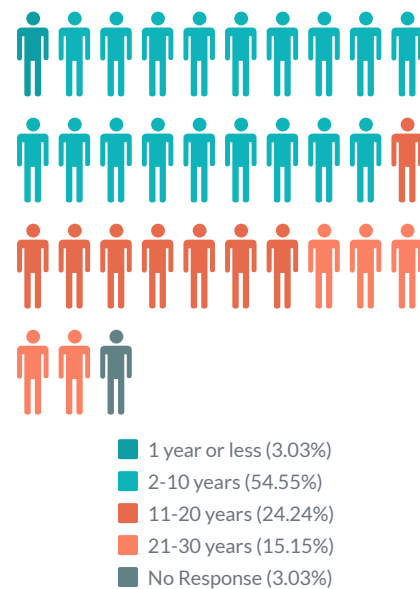


Figure 4: Time respondents have worked in the Early Years sector



Figure 5: Time respondents have worked in their current setting



Attendance Data

We asked questions about pre-lockdown and post-lockdown attendance at settings. Figure 6 shows the number of children on the roll in each setting before lockdown and when the survey was completed. The data suggest that, with the exception of one setting, numbers stayed the same or reduced after lockdown (September - October 2020). We also asked whether all children returned to nursery following lockdown and the overwhelming majority said no (97%). When prompted to provide a reason the majority of respondents reported that this was down to parent choice, primarily concerns over risk of infection, or not working and therefore not needing a place at the setting. Despite this, the vast majority of providers reported that they were able to maintain social distancing, e.g. were able to meet government guidelines with regards to social distancing of children within settings (figure 7). One nursery reported that parents were offered places at alternative nurseries but preferred to wait until their usual nursery reopened.

Figure 6: Number of children on the roll in each setting before and after lockdown (n=33)*

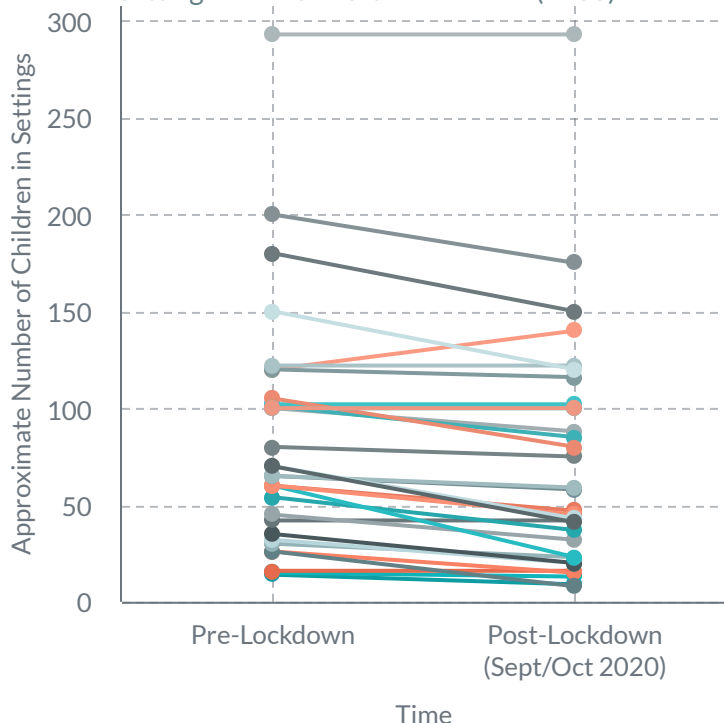
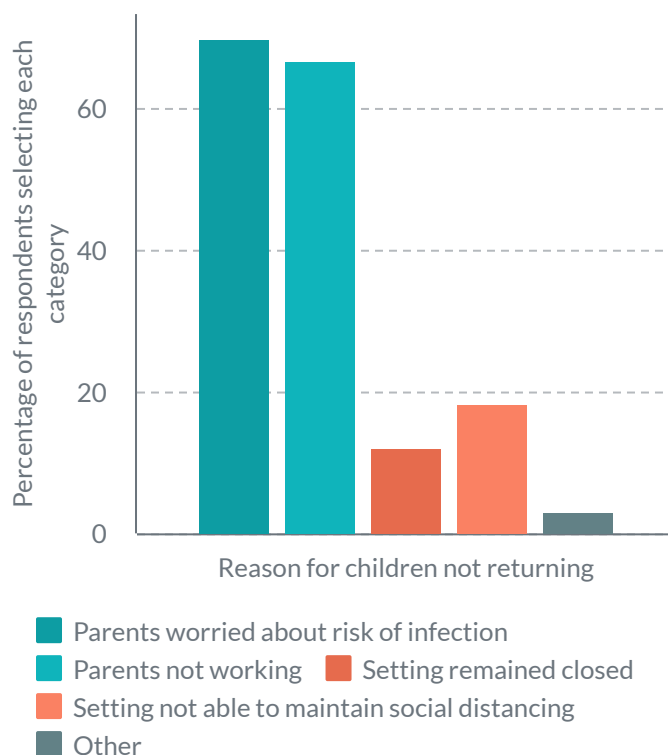


Figure 7: Reasons why children did not return to settings following lockdown.



*numbers for some settings are approximations

Changes to day-to-day activities

We asked whether the pandemic had had an impact on day-to-day activities in settings. Most respondents reported changes to drop off procedures, limited activities available, changes to hygiene procedures and changes to meal and snack-time procedures (figure 8). Around 60% of respondents reported disruptions to general day to day functioning, however, 60% also reported some positive changes, while over three quarters of settings said they would be keeping some of the new procedures. In addition, 76% of respondents felt that the pandemic was having an impact on their ability to develop or maintain relationships with families in their settings. Many of the open comments related to the new drop-off procedures with some respondents feeling that this had had a positive impact on their functioning.

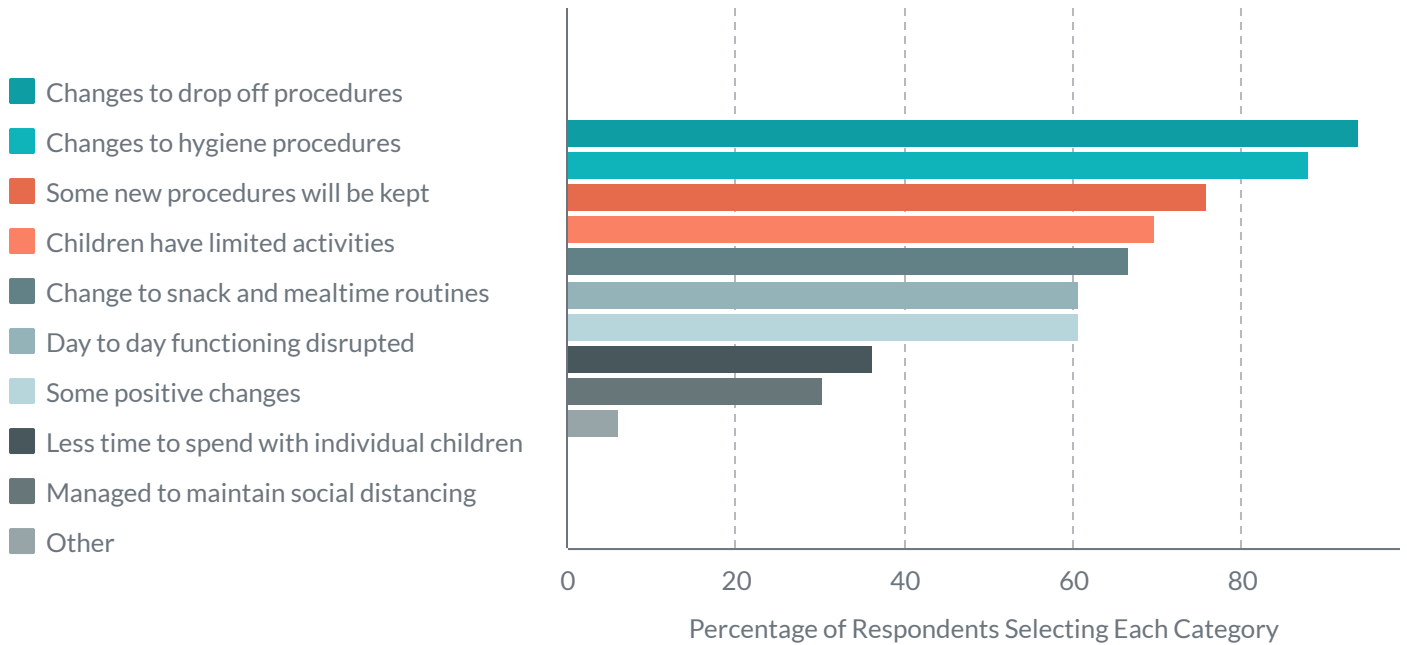
"we have maintained provision based learning across EYFS. We have had to have staggered drop off and pick up with no parents allowed in school, but this has had a positive effect on settling in as children have been much quicker at this. Staggered times also allow time outside to talk to parents at end of day..."

"I feel I know the parents this year from being outside at start and end of every day to talk to them."

"as parents are not able to come into the setting drop offs and pick ups can seem a bit rushed as parents are aware that other parents waiting to drop off/collect their child so do not chat to staff as long as previously."

"Families have not had home visits and drop off and pick up at the door. We work with vulnerable families who we need to build trusting relationships with to get best outcomes for families and this is difficult at the door."

Figure 8: How the pandemic changed day to day activities. (Respondents selected as many of the statements they felt were true of their setting).



Only 20% of settings felt that the pandemic was having an impact on the settling in of new children into nursery, with many positive comments e.g. *"We thought it would have a negative effect but have been surprised at how quickly our children have settled in."*; *"We have been amazed at how the children have settled with only one visit with a parent (in PPE)"*; *"New children have settled in much quicker than usual without their parents coming into the setting."* One setting was concerned about missing welfare issues i.e. *"...but I worry that if I am not interacting with parents as much I am not able to pick up on domestic violence, mental health or addiction concerns or parents in financial difficulty."*

Concerns about development and progress

We asked respondents about their concerns around the development and progress of the children in their settings (figures 9 and 10). 88% of respondents were concerned about children's development and progress over lockdown, 67% were still concerned even after children returned to nursery, and 60% were concerned about children's school readiness, particularly for those children who had been at home over lockdown. In terms of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum areas, 91% of respondents were concerned that children would struggle with Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) as a result of the pandemic, while 85% were concerned about children's communication and language. Similarly, 91% of settings reported that they prioritised PSED during lockdown, and 71% said they prioritised language and communication. When asked if they were concerned about addressing EYFSP goals under social distancing requirements, 60% of respondents answered No.

Figure 9: EYFS areas settings thought children would struggle with as a result of the pandemic

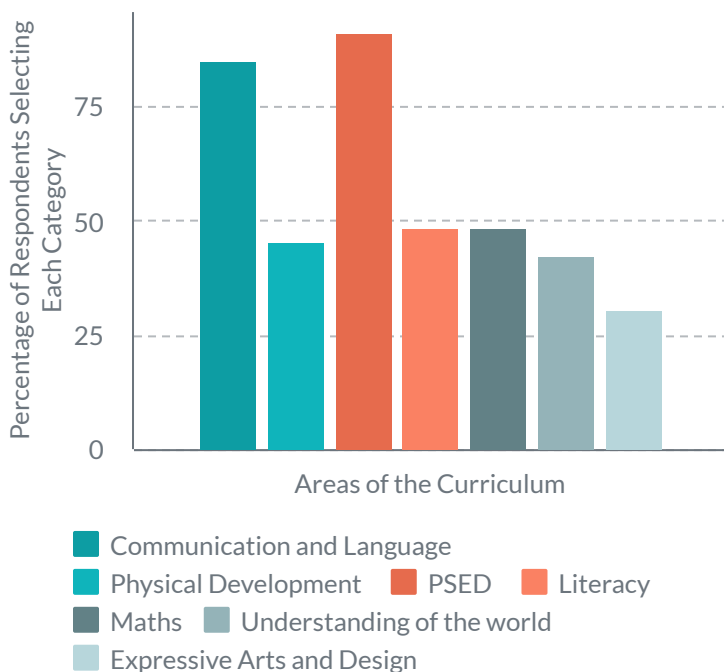
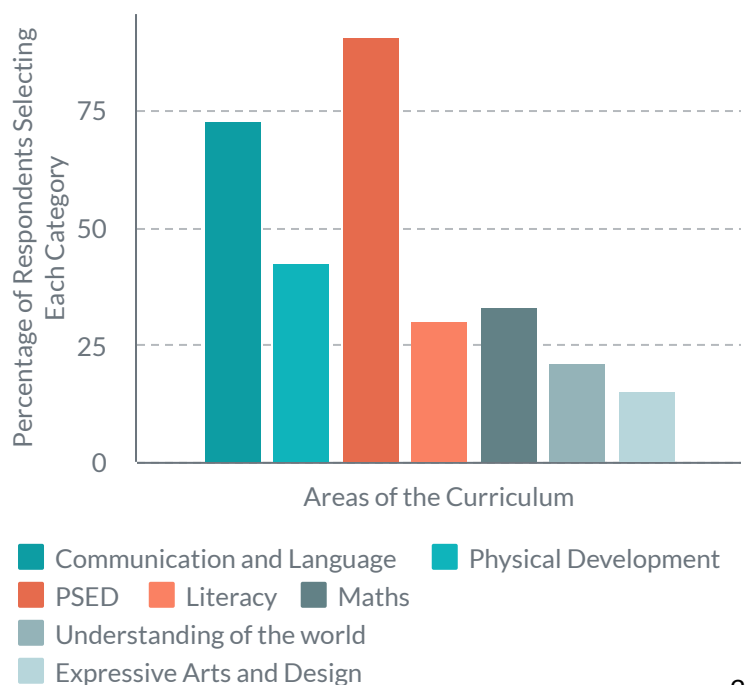
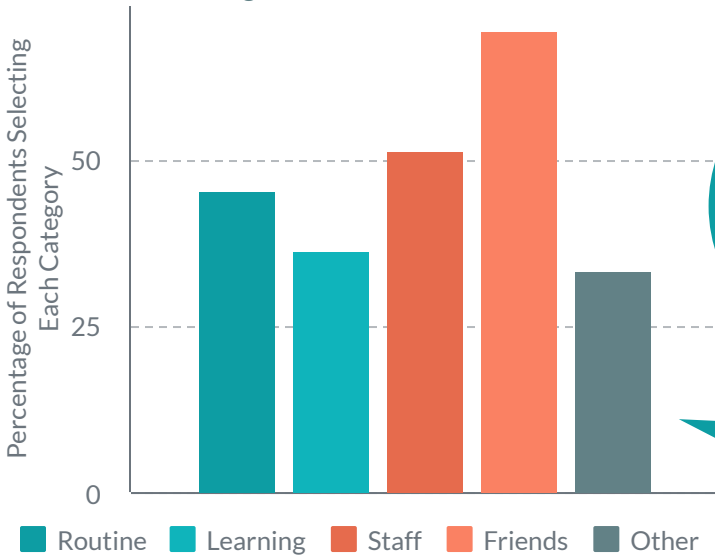


Figure 10: EYFS areas settings prioritised during lockdown



We also wanted to know what the respondents thought children had missed out on the most during lockdown, both children who had continued attending nursery and those that stayed at home (figures 11 and 12). For children who were still attending nursery, missing friends was the option most frequently chosen (70% of respondents). However, a number of settings also selected routine, learning and staff indicating that even those children who were attending nursery were impacted by the pandemic. For those children who could not attend, 100% of respondents reported that they were missing out on routine, and over 85% of respondents selected learning, staff and friends, indicating that children who could not attend nursery were significantly impacted by the lockdown.

Figure 11: What did children who attended nursery during lockdown miss out on?



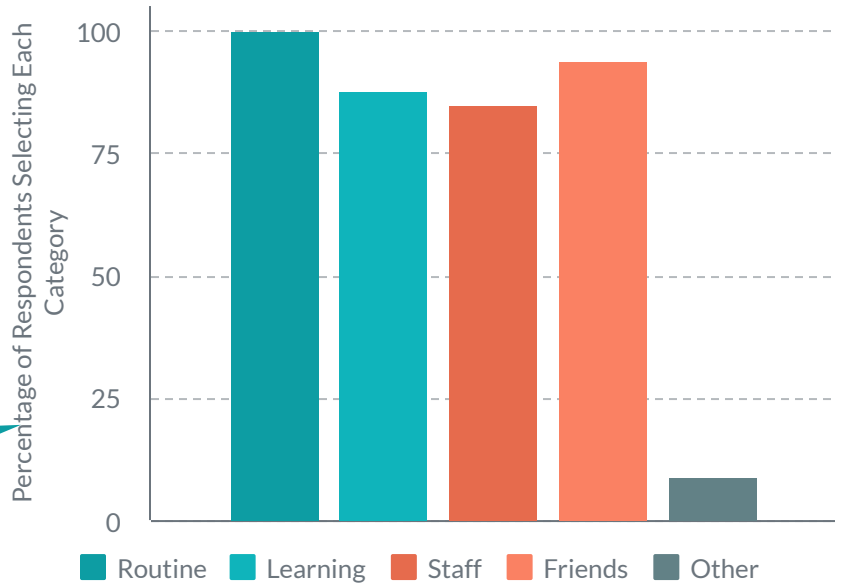
"I think the biggest impact is on PSED and particularly socialisation of children with other children and adults."

"limited resources, yet still plenty of play experiences. Sometime staff motivation and lack of continuity in staff due to absences related to covid (testing, self isolating)"

"vital assessments and other professional support for SEND"

"Developmental delay has widened or appeared and we are currently making a lot of speech and language referrals and ISPs."

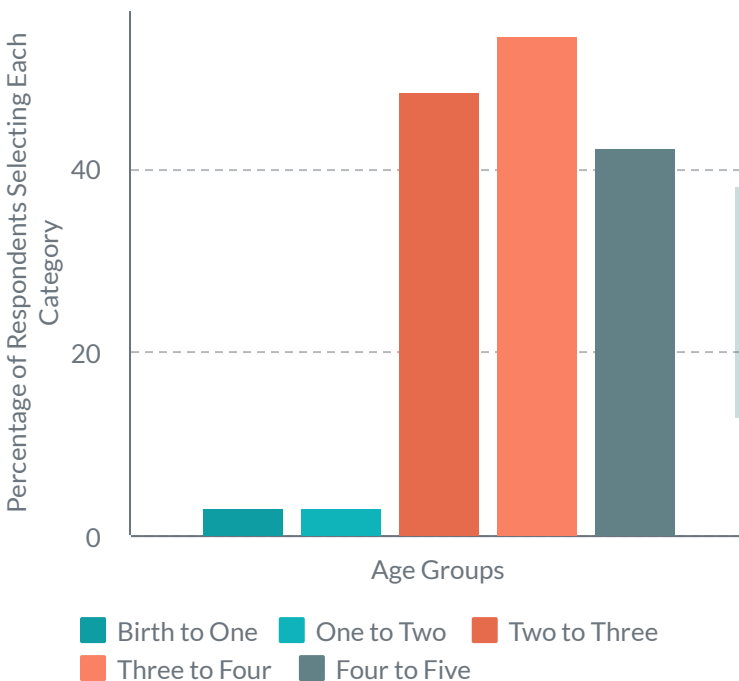
Figure 12: What did children who could not attend nursery during lockdown miss out on?



"routines to include lunch, snack and tea time food."

"Stimulation and being outdoors. A lot of our children live in flats."

Figure 13: Are you concerned about the progress of a particular age group?



We wanted to know if respondents were concerned about a particular age group. Over 50% of respondents were concerned about three to four year olds, followed closely by two to three year olds, and four to five year olds (figure 13).

Finally, we asked respondents what their priority would be going forward. Responses were broadly categorised as Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Working with Parents; Building Routine; Communication and Language; Identifying and Supporting Additional Needs; Hygiene and Safety; Children's Well-being; Staff and Organisational Issues; and Learning.



Personal, Social and Emotional Development

"Developing self-confidence...";
 "emotional wellbeing";
 "focus on PSHE and relationships";
 "...independence, establishing positive relationships"



Working with Parents

"...Work with parents to support home learning";
 "Ensuring that all families are supported...";
 "...developing a new way of working in partnership with parents/carers"



Building Routine

"Re-establishing good routines and eagerness to learn";
 "To make things as normal as possible...";
 "A routine and ensure children enjoy each day..."



Communication and Language

"Social communication skills";
 "...speech and language";
 "...communication and language"



Identifying and Supporting Additional Needs

"Closing the gap. Many children now also need ISP & S&L and CDC referrals";
 "...identify children with emerging behavioural needs potentially as a result of the lockdown"



Hygiene and Safety

"to ensure that the safety and wellbeing of all those who attend continues to be high";
 "Hygiene and safety measures";
 "Keeping the children safe and secure"



Children's Wellbeing

"Wellbeing of the children";
 "One to one with the children";
 "Settling new children into the setting";
 "Spending quality time with children, outside of observation"



Staff and Organisational Issues

"to build up the occupancy / supporting staff and children with the new way of working";
 "staff morale"



Learning

"...allowing them to learn what they need to in general";
 "Assessment of learning and next steps";
 "Continuing to support children to learn and develop"

Support for families

We asked respondents what support they had given families over lockdown (figure 14). Over 80% had kept in touch with families through regular phone contact, with over 70% providing resource packs, recommending resources and engaging with families via social media or nursery websites. 58% of respondents felt that there were not enough high quality resources available for families e.g. apps. However some respondents reported that it wasn't the lack of resources that was the problem, but the inability of some families to access those resources because they had no access to the appropriate technology.

"...but only if they had resources to access them such as wifi, computers, phones, etc";

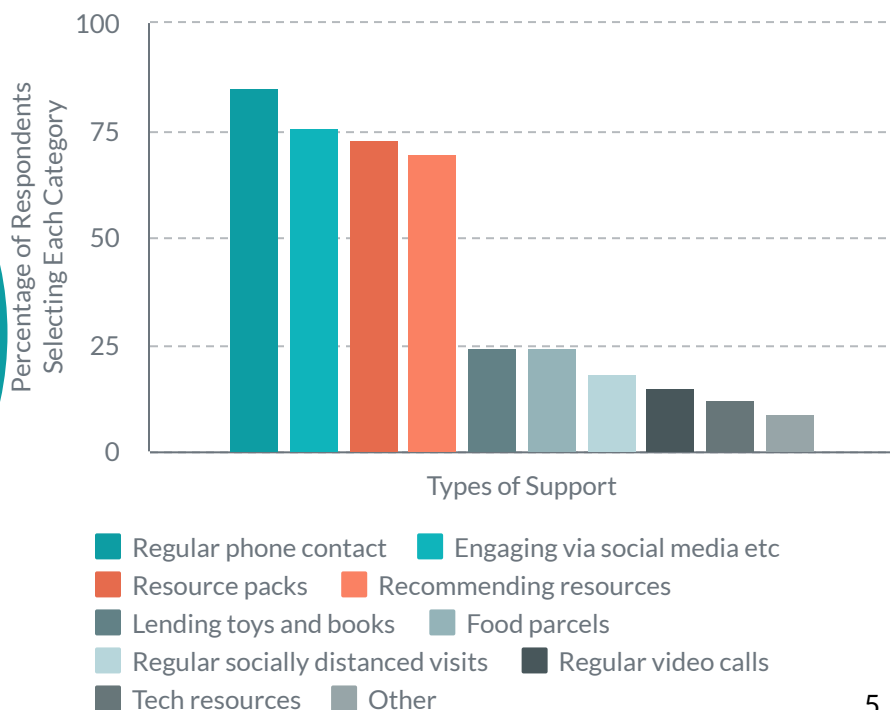
"not all families had the technology to access the apps";

"it was not the resources that were the problem, its families access to hardware to access online learning. Some of our families have 1 device to a family of 5".

Other settings felt that apps were not appropriate e.g. "I think what children probably needed most was time away from screens and hour a day outdoors";

"Possibly over used in some cases due to parents need to work at home".

Figure 14: Support offered to families during lockdown



Broader Sector Concerns

We asked respondents a number of questions regarding broader sector considerations. In response to the question "Do you feel there was enough recognition of the early years sector in the governments' response to the pandemic?", 94% of respondents answered No. In response to the question "Do you think your staff still feel invested in the early years sector?", 76% of respondents answered Yes, although there was a recognition that "There seems to be a lack of appreciation and acknowledgement". One setting responded "They were glad to return to the workplace. However, if they stay long term remains to be seen. This is due to underfunding and poor wages and not directly because of COVID-19. Though it has placed nurseries that were already under financial pressure under even more financial pressure, with even more work to do now that children have returned with delays." These comments reflect an ongoing debate in the sector.

We asked "What support would you have liked during lockdown that you did not get?" Some respondents were happy with the support they received. Three mentioned PPE. Other responses fell into three broad categories; Funding, Recognition and Guidance e.g.



"None, the Council were in regular contact";

"The furlough scheme was fabulous and has really helped to support staff at this setting";

"I felt I had good support";

"I received a lot of support from internal management."



"More...money into an already strained sector the funding already failed to meet the cost of running a setting and with the pandemic this is getting worse as the cost of PPE raises";

"Financial";

"I think my particular setting could have had more financial support as we had to stay open for NHS staff and emergency workers had children attending from closed settings".



"Recognition of the work done by EY settings and not simply focused on schools;"

"Recognition of the key role we had as workers";

"An acknowledgement that for childminders this is totally different to nurseries. We have to open our home to be able to work. I have children from 10 different families coming in and using facilities. If I have to self-isolate because of either myself or other family members I cannot open and therefore will be unpaid."



"clear guidance and advice - we had difficult situations where we were expected to make medical decisions - we are not doctors!"

"...The issues were that the guidance constantly changed and it was hard to keep up to date with all the restrictions;"

"Clearer and more succinctly guidance from government and LEA;"

"At times it was difficult to get hold of anyone for help and advice as so many were working from home. Having more support being able to ring a support helpline just for early years..."

We asked "What support will you need moving forward to ensure you can continue to provide high quality provision?" Five respondents said they would not need additional support, while two settings mentioned access to testing for CV19. Other responses broadly fell into three categories; Funding, Support, and Guidance e.g.



"I now have a far higher level of children with SEND/delays and also children for who interventions have been put in place or escalated over the summer such as social care/family support. Being able to support all of these children and families adequately is very costly to the setting and is one of the things that threaten our sustainability. Therefore we need adequate nursery education funding and additional funding to support additional support needs.";

"Funding for additional staff"; "Funding for cleaning products and a boost to the funding rate as the time to clean after, to make house safe, takes at least one hour a day unpaid";

"Higher funding levels to encourage the work force to stay within the sector and not move onto better paid jobs causing a high staff turnover"



"1-1 supervisions";

"I think it has been a difficult time for staff working throughout and they may need well being support...";

"...mental health for managers";

"SEND support from other professionals. Children with SEND and SALT are slipping through the net and not being assessed."



"Clear guidance re resources and environments as some areas have been restricted support with assessments as children have had big gaps in their learning and this will show in data";

"High quality speedy accurate advice...";

"Full guidance on what provision is and is not allowed"

Key Findings

Attendance data - data suggests that the number of children registered in settings either stayed the same or reduced following lockdown. The main reasons that children did not return to settings was because parents were worried about the risk of infection or they weren't working so no longer needed the place at the setting.

Changes to day to day activities - 60% of respondents reported disruptions to general day to day function, but 60% said that there were positive changes too, many of which were likely to continue. A high number of settings (76%) reported that relationship building and maintenance between settings and families were affected with drop off and pick up being the most reported day to day change. This may be mirrored by a lack of opportunities for parents to develop relationships between themselves, reducing the potential for support between families. However, in some cases the changes to drop off and pick up procedures were seen as positive. Most settings reported that children had settled in well following lockdown and were adjusting to the new procedures and routines.

Concerns about development and progress - A high proportion of settings were concerned about children's development and progress over lockdown, specifically in relation to children's communication and language, and their PSED. For children still attending nursery during lockdown respondents felt children missed out most on being with friends (70% of settings). For children not attending nursery during lockdown, all settings reported that routine was what children were missing out on most, alongside learning, staff and friends. Settings were most concerned about children in the three to four year old age group, then two to three years and finally the four to five year age bracket.

Support for families - 80% of settings kept in touch with families during lockdown with regular phone contact and many provided or signposted to resources. Access to resources was an issue for some families e.g. no access to appropriate technology

Broader sector concerns - Despite respondents feeling like there was not enough recognition of the early years sector, over three quarters (76%) of respondents reported that they felt that staff were still invested in their work. Respondents felt that during lockdown they would have liked more recognition for the work they do and they would like to feel more valued. They also felt that they would have benefitted from more financial support to meet the increased costs to settings (e.g. PPE) and more clear, timely and succinct guidelines on what they could or couldn't do. Moving forward, respondents felt that on the whole, they would continue to need: more funding (for staff to support children and for extra resources e.g. outdoor provision, PPE); more support for staff (supervision and well-being) and for children who have missed out on learning opportunities as well as those children with identified SEND; high quality, timely guidance and advice; and access to testing when required.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this research brief come in the wake of the spending review in which the Early Years sector was given an additional £44 million of funding for the coming year compared to £66 million last year. This equates to just 5p per child per hour. For an already struggling sector coping with the additional demands of a pandemic, this level of support is disappointing. In line with other research, our results suggest that demand for the sector is stagnant and in some cases is falling, while the cost to the sector is growing. As such, the risk of closure identified by the Early Years Alliance [2] and of decreasing quality of provision continues to be a threat. This has significant consequences for the developmental outcomes for children in the early years which are highly associated with whole of life outcomes e.g. education, health, employment, life expectancy [3]. There is strong evidence that attending high quality early years settings makes a significant difference to children's outcomes [4]. In addition, as existing market forces on the sector may be amplified by the pandemic this is likely to disproportionately affect children from lower SES families widening the disadvantage gap [5]. Finally, it is important to note that the early years sector is vital for our economic recovery; without access to high quality early years provision, a large proportion of the country's workforce would be unable to return to work. With implications for the educational, health and employment outcomes, of young children; the potential for widening the disadvantage gap and associated reduction in social mobility; and the importance to our economic recovery, it is clear that the Early Years Sector must be given the support it needs to not just recover but thrive in the wake of the pandemic.

With this in mind we make the following recommendations:

- A comprehensive package of financial support be made available to all early years settings. This support should cover the additional operating costs incurred as a result of the pandemic (e.g. PPE, staff training etc) as well as supporting settings to cope with reduced occupancy levels and ensure the sustainability of the sector
- A commitment to providing clear and timely guidance so that staff are able to focus on implementation of high quality provision with confidence
- A package of support for the wellbeing of staff in the sector to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and help with staff retention.
- A review of the training and progression opportunities for staff to increase the recognition of the early years as a skilled and valued profession offering high quality education retaining current staff and attracting high quality new staff into the sector.

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