

COVID-19 series: briefing on early years, November 2020

Evidence from research interviews with 739 early years providers between 5 October and 11 December

During the autumn term, Ofsted has carried out a programme of research interviews with early years providers. This briefing note reports on our complete programme of autumn data collection.

Data summary

Table 1: Number of interviews in this analysis: 739

Phase	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement	Inadequate	No previous grade*	Total**
Total in sample	124 (17%)	453 (61%)	11 (1%)	2 (0%)	149 (20%)	739 (100%)
Childminder and private voluntary and independent providers	102 (14%)	437 (59%)	11 (1%)	2 (0%)	149 (20%)	701 (95%)
Maintained nursery schools	22 (3%)	16 (2%)	0%	0%	0%	38 (5%)

* Providers that have no previous inspection grade includes those providers that registered after March 2020 and have not yet been inspected.

** Due to rounding, the percentages may not total 100.

Main findings

Children who have returned to early years settings are making progress and starting to settle back into familiar routines. However, fewer children than expected are taking up early years places following the first national lockdown.

Providers were concerned about the financial impact of the pandemic on their businesses. A third were worried that their business will have to close. Most continue to operate with fewer children on roll and lower demand for places compared with last year. More providers in London and in the most deprived areas than others reported having far fewer children on roll than before the pandemic. Many are

struggling to provide consistent staffing due to periods of staff illness or self-isolation.

Children have now been back in their settings for a while and many providers have been able to assess their learning and development. Providers remained concerned about the impact of the restrictions on children's personal, social and emotional development. While some children had settled well, other children were still struggling to adapt to the structure and daily routines in their setting, particularly those who had difficult experiences during the pandemic. Some children's behaviour had deteriorated and providers reported that children who had become used to longer periods of screen time were struggling to engage in play and activities.

Providers have had to make changes to the activities and experiences they provide, in line with the COVID-19 guidance. Adapting their settings to accommodate these changes has required them to think carefully about what they want children to learn and remember. Providers had worked with their staff to plan how best to help children when they returned. Some were developing their staff with more training on topics such as language and communication, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and mental health. Providers reported that grouping children in smaller 'bubbles' had improved staff's knowledge about what each child could do. This had enabled them to plan more focused teaching, close gaps and make up for what had not been taught and learned so far.

Providers were concerned about the impact of the pandemic on managers' and staff's well-being. The nature of their work means they are in close contact with children with little social distancing. Providers were worried about risks to their own families, particularly those with vulnerable household members.

Methodological note

This is the final briefing note on early years provision. We invited providers to participate in telephone interviews with Ofsted Inspectors. Participation was voluntary, so the findings are not necessarily representative of the whole sector. The interviews were separate from the [interim visits](#) that form part of our phased return to routine inspection.

Overarching questions

This briefing answers **four** broad questions based on evidence from the research interviews:

1. What is the current state of early years provision?
2. How were children affected by the first national lockdown?
3. How are early years providers planning to maintain standards in education and care through the pandemic?
4. How financially sustainable is the early years sector?

The current state of early years education: changes in the demand for childcare places

Most providers are continuing to operate with fewer children on roll and lower demand for places compared with last year. Providers in the most deprived areas and those in London and the West Midlands were more likely than others to report that they had far fewer children on roll.

Changes to families' employment patterns have had an impact on the demand for places. Increases in unemployment in some areas and a greater ability to work from home in some sectors has reduced some families' need for childcare.

Providers told us that some parents are more anxious about sending their children to nursery, and some raised concerns that more parents will want to keep children at home during the early years.

How children were affected by the first national lockdown

Returning to the curriculum

Children's ability to settle back into the setting depended on the experiences they had at home. Many providers commented on how resilient and adaptable some children had been. Children who experienced particularly challenging family circumstances, such as bereavement, domestic violence or neglect, during this period have been finding it harder to cope and have needed more reassurance to readjust to the routines of the setting.

Most providers continued to prioritise teaching personal hygiene and making sure that resources and toys are clean. Many practitioners were moving on to consider what else is important for children to learn and remember. Some had focused on independent self-care, so that children can keep themselves safe when they get to school. Others had identified the need to close gaps in children's learning in mathematics and communication.

Some providers told us that the restrictions have had some positive consequences. They said that, because they could not provide all the usual activities and experiences, they were thinking more carefully about what they wanted the children to learn. Some people told us that the limited offer of toys was resulting in children getting more out of each activity.

Behaviour

Some children had not been in a routine at home during the pandemic, and parents said that the children's sleeping and eating habits had regressed as a result. Providers had noticed that some children now like to have their own schedule and have found it challenging to eat, play and learn to a fixed timetable. However, providers said children were gradually getting used to the changes.

Many children have needed help with their behaviour and, in particular, with understanding the rules, sharing and playing nicely together again. During the first national lockdown, some children did not have opportunities to play with children of their own age. Childminders in particular expressed concern that children had not been able to practice their social skills with other children due to groups and venues being closed. However, providers did note that some children with siblings had improved social skills from playing and interacting with their siblings at home. Some providers had retaught these skills through group and turn-taking games, storytelling, talking and planned activities that encouraged the children to think of and include others. Smaller group 'bubbles' also enabled children to play more cooperatively with one another.

Providers said that some children had felt angry since they returned and there had been an increase in shouting, snatching and getting cross if things did not go their way. Some children struggled to sit still, had shorter attention spans and were more difficult to engage in activities. Some providers said children were less inquisitive and curious and were no longer asking as many questions. They needed more direction and didn't seem to be as spontaneous. Providers said that many parents have had to juggle working from home with childcare and often relied on the television and other devices to keep children occupied. Providers said they were slowly getting back into a learning pattern and finding new ways to engage children in activities. Some had extra meetings with parents to reintroduce different behavioural strategies.

The continuing impact on key areas of learning

As children had been back in their setting for a while, many providers had been able to assess their development in all areas of learning. Some children had mastered new skills during the first national lockdown but missed key areas of learning, which were now having to be taught or revisited.

Forty-four per cent of providers said that children's personal, social and emotional development had fallen behind. As a result, providers were putting more emphasis on the care practices and personal development on offer in their settings. These practitioners put more time into children feeling safe and secure and supporting children's emotional needs. Some providers had helped children to understand their feelings and emotions through discussion, circle times, games and stories with puppets. Some providers said some children had returned to the setting happier. Some parents who were furloughed enjoyed the additional time they had to spend with their children without working. These children enjoyed a lot of interaction and experiences with their families. Children who had positive experiences during the first national lockdown may have taken a little while to readjust to the setting and interacting with peers again but in many cases they had more or less picked up where they left off.

Providers recognised that children have had different experiences at home that will have impacted on their physical development. Some children had been able to spend more time outside and had made progress in their learning. However, this was not the case for all children. Some children who had fewer opportunities to practise skills

such as holding scissors and pens at home were relearning them now they were back in their settings. Children who had limited access to outdoor space while at home had sometimes lost their physical confidence, for example in becoming more hesitant to jump off play equipment. Providers were using outdoor areas more frequently and going for walks to places with hills, rocks and steps. Some childminders were promoting physical skills, such as trying to get children out to the park each day, having fresh air and using the big playground equipment.

Providers told us that many children did not have access to the full curriculum during the pandemic or to the range of activities they would usually experience. A few providers identified that some children had not engaged in any imaginative play at home, such as singing, dancing or role play. Some providers had adapted their garden space for children to act out stories. Some providers had also created indoor activities to replicate external trips and stimulate imaginative play, such as a beach role play area and a small forest. Some children had limited access to sensory and exploratory play while at home and were now reluctant to get their hands dirty and explore. Providers were addressing this by providing more opportunities for creative and hands-on play.

Wider impact on safeguarding and family welfare/disadvantage

Children from disadvantaged or vulnerable backgrounds often had different experiences of this period from their peers. Some families struggled financially as a result of being self-employed or losing jobs. Some providers told us about helping families who relied on food parcels and food banks.

Many providers said families from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to be able to take advantage of the support providers offered, such as home learning activity plans. Not all families had access to resources such as arts and crafts at home. Instead, some children had spent more time watching television or on their tablets. Some families had many children at home, so toys, space and attention were sometimes limited. Some providers said these families were often harder to reach and were difficult to contact. This was particularly the case for two-year-olds on local authority funded places.

Some children were impacted by their parents' poor health at home. Many parents dealing with health concerns were anxious about sending their children into a setting, as they were worried that the children might bring back the virus or get an infection. Some providers said it took some encouragement for parents to start bringing their children to the setting again.

Of those providers that had made a referral to external agencies, such as SEND or safeguarding teams, during the pandemic, nearly 60% reported a similar number of children being referred to external agencies compared with the previous year. However, 31% of these providers reported that more children needed help from external agencies compared with last year. Providers in the most deprived areas were more likely to have referred children to external agencies during this period.

Some providers were concerned about the impact of additional financial stress, mental health and housing issues, such as overcrowding, on families' well-being.

Some providers told us they had made more referrals to social services for neglect and an increase in domestic violence in the home. These providers reported that the children affected had regressed emotionally and some were now displaying challenging behaviour on their return to the setting. Some providers said they had offered places to vulnerable children and have seen those that attended thrive as a result of smaller ratios and being taught in smaller groups.

How early years providers plan to maintain high standards

Providers have worked with their staff to plan how best to support children when they returned to the setting. Some providers said their staff have had more training on specific topics such as speech and language, special educational needs and mental health. Some providers said staff had been trained in conflict resolution to help children who may be returning to settings angry and/or sad. Some staff received training in how to engage two-year-olds and keep them focused and on how the role of the key worker could help children to settle back into the setting without parents on site.

The introduction of 'bubble' groups had enabled staff to get to know the children in their group really well. Some providers told us that staff have a greater knowledge of what children know and can do and of their interests because of the more concentrated time that they spend with children. Some said they were able to do this as their numbers on roll were still lower. Children got more quality time with staff, who were able to focus on what the children really needed to learn.

Providers were having to deliver parts of the curriculum differently to keep children in their bubbles. Providers often said this was a challenge, as children were used to making lots of choices about what to do next, whereas staff now had to make those choices for them. Staff also could not give the children the same amount of freedom because of the need to monitor health and safety and to supervise closely the use of resources, such as dough, and messy play activities. Staff were planning more role-play activities and there was more discussion about hygiene and how to wash their hands after coughing and sneezing.

Many providers said that staff's stress levels had increased, which was having an impact on their mental health. Some were finding teaching and being in the setting a lot more difficult than they did before the pandemic. Many managers said that they were appreciative of all staff, especially those who were working throughout the pandemic. Staff were appreciative of the positive environment that providers created. They felt very honoured to be working with children and realised the importance of early years.

The financial sustainability of the early years sector

Providers were adapting to the changes brought about by the pandemic but many were concerned about the ongoing impact on their businesses. Just under a third of providers were worried that their business would have to close. Providers were concerned about the financial implications of a longer-term fall in demand for childcare places. They were also worried about the impact of future restrictions on the sustainability of their businesses.

Many providers were struggling to provide consistent staffing due to periods of staff illness or self-isolation. They told us that they were worried about cases of infection in the setting and the impact this would have on the bubble system if staff were absent. Some childminders said if they had a child who tested positive they would be forced to close for two weeks and that would have an impact on both their finances and the children's education. Many providers were concerned about their own families and worried about bringing the virus back to vulnerable members of their household.



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