**Families and free early education entitlement**

**Coram Family and Childcare**

Coram Family and Childcare works to make the UK a better place for families by bringing together what we learn from our on the ground parent-led programmes and our research to campaign for solutions that parents want and need. We focus on childcare and early years to make a difference to families’ lives now and in the long term.

Since 2007, we have been running the Parent Champions National Network. Parent Champions are parent volunteers who spend a couple of hours a week speaking to other parents and childcare and family services. Through this we have seen the difference that the free early education entitlement has made to families’ lives, but we have also seen how many families miss out this entitlement and the many reasons parents can be reluctant to start using childcare. This briefing gives information about what we have learnt about the benefits of free childcare, the barriers to taking it up and what works in helping to overcome these barriers.

*Benefits for families*

Children starting childcare can provide some much needed respite for busier parents with a quiet (or quieter!) home, including:

* Allowing parents to spend time with younger siblings
* A chance to work part-time or start looking for work
* Time to spend volunteering and/or training
* A chance to attend appointments
* An opportunity for parents to have some time to themselves!

However, we have found that parents are often far more interested in the benefits that childcare can bring for their children rather than for them. Although it might seem like talking about how childcare can make their own life easier, for some parents, this may actually be off putting as it can bring up concerns about being a lazy parent.

Parents are often interested to hear about the new things that their children will get to try at childcare and how this can help their development. While there is a lot of academic evidence about the benefits of childcare, often stories of things that other children have learnt or experienced can be far more helpful in seeing the benefits it might bring for their own family, such as:

* Children get to make friends
* Learn new things, like sharing or taking turns
* Children get to do messy play – without having to clear up at home!
* Can improve children’s speech, language and communication
* Helps prepare children for the move into school

*What barriers to do parents face to using childcare?*

Although there can be benefits for the whole family of using childcare, many families will face significant barriers to starting to use childcare. These barriers can range from simply knowing that they are able to access free childcare to deeply held beliefs. It is likely that most will benefit from the opportunity to explore their barriers in order to make the decision that is right for their family about whether or not to use childcare.

Some parents worry that using childcare would mean that they were not a **good parent**. They might feel that it is their own job to look after their children and that passing that responsibility on to someone else would be a lazy thing to do. They may have heard stories about other people’s negative experiences and think that childcare is bad for children or even dangerous. When this is the case, it can be helpful to talk about other families’ positive experience of childcare and the evidence that it is something that is actually good for children’s outcomes, much like school will be later. Parent Champions have found that it is sometimes better to use the phrase ‘early education’ than ‘childcare’, showing that it is part of the education system. It can also be worth sharing that childcare providers have to meet strict requirements around safety and quality.

Often parents **do not know about the free childcare entitlements**. They might think that childcare is really expensive or only for working families. Even if they do know about free childcare, they might not know enough to be able to be able to access the childcare that is right for them. For example, they might think that they can only use their free entitlement in a school nursery or in a nursery, whereas they can also use the free entitlement with a private nursery or childminder. Finding childcare can also feel confusing, particularly if a parent finds that the setting they had expected to use does not have any places. Parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) might be particularly concerned about being able to find a childcare provider who is able to meet their needs. Local authorities have a Family Information Service who can provide parents with information about childcare entitlements and help find local childcare. They can also provide information about additional support that is available for children with SEND. You do not need to be able to answer all of parents’ questions, but you can let them know that they may be entitled to free childcare and tell them where they can find out more.

We are all influenced by our family, friends and social circles on many issues, including childcare. **Cultural expectations** can create a barrier to using childcare, particularly for communities where using childcare is not common. In some ethnic groups, there are strong expectations about the importance of family looking after children at home with extended family or the community helping when needed. Some parents may face active disapproval from friends and family for choosing to use childcare, others might just not know anyone that uses childcare which may increase anxieties about using it themselves. When families are facing cultural barriers to using childcare, it can help to show that other families like them are also using childcare. One of the strengths of our Parent Champions is that they are often recruited from communities who are less likely to use childcare and so can provide a role model of a positive experience at childcare. Sharing experiences from other families you know can play an important role in normalising using childcare, particularly if they can see other families who they might think of as more like them using childcare. It is important to remember that cultural influences are different for every individual person and not to make assumptions about the barriers or influences that a particular family may be facing just because of their community.

Sometimes parents have a positive view of childcare but struggle to see it working for their own family. Parents might feel that their child is too young for childcare or be concerned about how their child will manage without them or with a group of other children if they are not used to this. All children have unique needs that parents may worry about others being able to meet, but these concerns can be particularly acute for parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities. Starting to use childcare can be a very anxious time for all parents and these concerns are all completely normal. Childcare workers are qualified professionals who are likely to have experience of caring for and educating children with a diverse range of needs. The local Family Information Service will be able to give more information about this, as well as local childcare options that are best placed to meet additional needs.

*What changes parents’ minds?*

One in three parents spoken to by a Parent Champion go on to take up childcare – they are really effective in helping to change parents’ minds. This is partly a result of their particular approach, but also because it is useful for parents to hear about free childcare from a number of different places. Families you work with might have seen information about free childcare, but it could be a conversation with someone they know and trust already which will help them to think through how it could work for their family and decide to start using it. It is important to recognise that the barriers parents face to using childcare are real and that some families may decide childcare is not for them. Parents need time and space to think through their options to come to the right decision for them. Giving the space for a friendly informal conversation about childcare, as Parent Champions do, can really help parents to find out more and move closer to using childcare.

Focusing on the benefits for the child will normally be more convincing to parents than looking at how it can benefit them and what they could do with the time when their child is in childcare. Some families respond better to hearing about ‘early education’ rather than ‘childcare’, as this clearly places it as part of the education system. However, it is also important to know that their young child will not be sat at a desk expected to learn, but instead it will be a space where they can play and try new things that support their development. Personal stories can be really powerful in helping parents to understand what happens at childcare and how it can benefit families like them.

Signposting parents to further information is also really important as it is helpful for them to know where they can find reliable information and takes the pressure off you knowing everything. Instead, you can help parents to see that using childcare it completely normal, and can be really good for their child, and for them as well. It is also good to remember that you are unlikely to change minds with every conversation, and that’s ok. We encourage Parent Champions to respect the decision of the parents they speak and stress that it is fine to leave the conversation for another time if parents are not interested when they first raise the issue.

*Tips for talking to parents about childcare*

* Take time to understand individual barriers and give parents the chance to think these through
* Know your limits – and where you can signpost to for more information
* Personal stories work
* ‘Early education’ might be better than ‘childcare’
* Use the messages that resonate with you
* Follow a parents’ lead – you can always raise the issue again at a different time if they do not want to talk about it now

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