

Understanding public perceptions of early years development

A report produced by Ipsos on behalf of the
Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood

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ROYAL FOUNDATION
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Overview



Research context and topics

Recap of earlier research

In Spring 2022, Ipsos UK was commissioned by the Centre to conduct a survey (Phase 1) to explore public attitudes to early years development (EYD). This consisted of a predominantly quantitative survey to understand attitudes to EYD and social and emotional development (SED).*

In July 2022, a second phase of research was commissioned to build on these findings in more depth through qualitative research, specifically looking at:

- 1 Understanding of baby development**
- 2 Concerns around parenting / raising under 5s**
- 3 Understanding of empathy, attachment and resilience**
- 4 Parents' own childhood experiences**
- 5 Parenting support sought and barriers/ motivators to this**
- 6 Views on wider societal perceptions**

*4,682 adults aged 16+ across the UK were interviewed between the 21st April and 5th May 2022 using a quantitative survey via the online Ipsos i-Say panel

Overview of the methodology

Phase 2 included additional qualitative research over a two and a half week period in July 2022 with 30 participants who were all parents of children aged 0-5

Stage 1 (days 1-8)

Pre-task activities on an online community (Community Direct)

Participants answered a series of short questions about baby development, empathy, attachment and resilience

Stage 2 (days 4-11)

Depth interviews

Participants took part in individual depth interviews to discuss their experiences of parenting, their childhood, and parenting support

Stage 3 (days 9-18)

Post-task activities on an online community (Community Direct)

Participants contributed to an anonymous forum discussions on key issues about parenting concerns, support and society

In this report, **parents** refers to the 30 participants who took part in phase 2 of this study

Participant sampling table

| Characteristic | Description | Quota achieved |
|--------------------------------------|--|----------------|
| Parents of children aged 0-5* | Children aged under 1 | 10 |
| | Children aged 1-2 | 10 |
| | Children aged 3-5 | 15 |
| Ethnicity | White British participants | 19 |
| | Ethnic minority participants | 11 |
| Gender | Man | 10 |
| | Woman | 20 |
| Age | 18-24 | 7 |
| | 25-29 | 6 |
| | 30-39 | 10 |
| | 40 and over | 7 |
| Employment status | Full time employment | 14 |
| | Part time employment | 7 |
| | In full time education | 1 |
| | Not currently employed | 4 |
| | Full time carer/looking after children | 4 |

*Total sums to more than 30 because some participants had more than one child aged 0-5.

| Characteristic | Description | Quota achieved |
|--------------------------------------|--|----------------|
| Family composition | Joint parent household | 11 |
| | Lone parent household | 19 |
| Location type | Urban/suburban | 25 |
| | Rural | 5 |
| Region | England | 14 |
| | Northern Ireland | 4 |
| | Scotland | 6 |
| | Wales | 6 |
| Socio-economic grade | ABC1 | 16 |
| | C2DE | 14 |
| Number of children | 1 | 14 |
| | 2 | 14 |
| | 3 | 2 |
| | 4 or more | 0 |
| Access to childcare support** | Uses paid childcare: nanny/childminder | 3 |
| | Uses paid childcare: nursery | 11 |
| | Uses non-paid childcare e.g. support from wider family | 9 |
| | No childcare support | 9 |

**Total sums to more than 30 because some participants used a combination of paid and non-paid childcare.

Summary of key findings (1/3)

1

Parents were aware of the importance of early years development but tended to associate it predominately with physical and cognitive rather than social and emotional development. Most said they were interested in social and emotional development, but they found it a more difficult concept to grasp and didn't necessarily have a clear idea of their parental role in enabling this.

2

Parents typically had to be prompted to associate empathy, attachment and resilience with 0-5 year olds. They recognised the importance of these concepts in forming positive development outcomes. However, they felt that these attributes can go “too far”, resulting in “oversensitive” or “clingy” children.

3

Various approaches to parenting were described, ranging from laid back to authoritarian. Parents sometimes described combining styles to give their children the best approach. This typically included providing some structure but also allowing their children the freedom and independence to develop their own unique selves.

Summary of key findings (2/3)

4

Some parents described actively developing a parental style based on their childhood experiences (positive or negative), or based on books they have read or courses they have done. Parents who identified as having a style seemed to be more confident in their approach to parenting compared to those who did not easily identify their style.

5

The issues and concerns that parents raised were often things they didn't see in their immediate control such as bullying and social media, and there was a sense that there was a limited amount parents could do to influence social and emotional development at ages 0-5. Most parents said that they would learn to tackle these “on the job” as they arose, but some expressed interest in wanting to do more to influence these ahead of time.

6

Whilst physical milestones tended to be of greater concern among parents than social or emotional ones, some raised worries around their child's social skills (both for themselves and their children). This was often especially in the context of having had babies during lockdowns where spending time with other families was not possible.

7

Most felt that positive progress in parenting styles had been made since their own childhood. Developments in parenting which parents saw as positive were trends towards less physical discipline, greater parent-child communication and understanding of childhood mental health.

Summary of key findings (3/3)

8

However, parents described a strong negative trend in feeling a lot more judged as parents and feeling a general sense of "not doing enough". In particular, parents mentioned the mounting pressure to meet ambiguous social expectations and the growing influence of social media.

9

Some parents said that they were unable to access suitable early years support or were unsure of which advice to follow. They felt that access to good support and guidance was largely dependent on the provisions available in their local area, as well as the credibility of the source providing information on parenting.

10

Though aware of the importance of social and emotional development, parents often said they don't think there is much they can do to help their children it. Some parents did feel that they would benefit from additional guidance on how to support their children with this, and socialisation or social skills was an area that came up most.

Knowledge and understanding of early years development



Key findings

Parents were typically aware of the importance of early years development. They tended to think of this in terms of physical and cognitive development. Social and emotional development (SED) was also considered to be important, but tended not to be at the front of parents' minds.

Parents were generally positive about fostering their child's social and emotional development. There was an interest to learn more about SED and its associated concepts, and a desire to create positive relationships with their children.

Most parents did not spontaneously associate empathy, attachment and resilience with their children or their development. However, specific examples helped parents unpack these concepts and recognise these in their child's behaviour.

Parents felt it was important to strike a balance between empathy, attachment and resilience to prevent negative development outcomes. They shared positive and negative connotations of the terms, including concerns around children becoming “oversensitive” or “clingy”.

Parents were familiar with and confident in their understanding of the term “early years development”

Parents tended to show a strong interest in their own child’s development, and were keen to learn more

- Consistent with findings from Phase 1, parents were **familiar with early years development** and were able to **provide specific examples** to illustrate their understanding.
- They showed **interest in concepts raised and a desire to learn more**.
- However, in some cases parents did find it **difficult to give specific examples of some concepts such as empathy or resilience** related to their children.

“

I think development in early years as a child is very important because I think that if we give the child a chance to develop and learn these new things as a child it will help them as they grow older and take these things into their life and use them in everyday things.”

Joint parent household, 1 and 3 year olds, formal and informal childcare, working FT

“

It is hard to demonstrate that our baby intentionally shows empathy because he is only 7 weeks old.”

Joint parent household, 1 year old, on maternity leave

However, the concept of “social and emotional development” was trickier for parents to articulate

Fewer parents were able to explain what it was, perhaps because there were not clear milestones, as with other aspects of development

- Fewer parents knew or were able to specifically describe what is meant by the term “social and emotional development”. This echoes findings from Phase 1 in that parents of 0-5 year olds are less knowledgeable about SED (68%) (vs 79% for EYD).
- Where parents gave an explanation, SED was most typically associated with being able to interact with others, form relationships, communicate feelings and regulate emotions.
- Parents of “lockdown babies” mentioned particularly the importance of social development, feeling they missed out on this due to the national lockdowns.



I think social and emotional development gets overlooked. The pressure on parents is to project an image of a perfect family like on Instagram.”

Joint parent household, 7 month and 3 years old, informal childcare, studying



There is a gap for an awareness raising campaign on the core concepts of SED

Empathy was generally defined as being emotionally aware and having the ability to communicate one's feelings

Some parents felt it is important to demonstrate empathy with their children to help it develop

We asked parents to share illustrations of what empathy means to them. Here are some examples of what they shared:



- Parents more easily associated **empathy as something that adults have**, but could give examples of how their own children demonstrated this when encouraged to think about it such as comforting a younger sibling when they are upset, or spontaneously asking about somebody's day.
- Parents thought that it is important to show empathy towards their children as it helps to **normalise this behaviour**.
- Some **deliberately modelled empathy** to their children such as by making eye contact and holding hands.

Not all parents easily saw their role in helping their children develop empathy, seeing it as a more natural process

Some also felt that empathy can go “too far” and lead to children being oversensitive

“Comfort and console”

“Tolerance”

“Seeing things from a different perspective”

“Being in touch with your emotions”

“Expressing oneself”

“Sympathy”

“(Over)sensitive”

“Recognising others”

“

Empathy is something which parents need to have and demonstrate to get a good connection with their child. But it can be really hard to do. Empathy comes much later on in child development as their brains mature.”

Joint parent household, 5 year old, formal childcare, working PT

- Some expressed concern with children becoming too empathetic as this could lead them to being **overemotional** or **irrational** in their behaviour.
- There was also a view among some that empathy develops gradually and naturally as children age and is therefore not something they need to worry about.

Case study – Linda

Who are they?

Linda is 33 years old and works as part-time as a hairdresser in Northern Ireland.

She is a lone parent with a 5 year old child. Her child attends full-time school.

Linda occasionally receives support with childcare from her immediate family. She does not use paid childcare.

Linda is a first-time mum who considers raising her child to be a learning experience for them both. She typically learns about what does and doesn't work with each new situation, and describes her parenting approach as one whereby Linda intends to be as much as a friend as she is a mother to her child. That said, she is conscious of needing to find a balance between her child being comfortable in communicating with her, but also being respectful of her and appreciating boundaries.

Linda is highly aware of how her own behaviour influences her child's personality, particularly their ability to emphasise with others. She describes herself as being very empathetic, and therefore considers her child to be alike in this sense. However, she has some concern that her child may be "too emotionally sensitive" and thinks that this is due to all the additional attention they receive being an only child. Linda worries that this may influence their relationship with peers as they are overly empathetic and unable to "stand up for themselves" due to a lack of confidence or take initiative as will often follow the lead of others.

Linda says she would particularly benefit from better support with childcare costs as she hopes to return to work full-time. More generally, Linda thinks that even by simply increasing awareness of the financial help available to parents more would be encouraged to return to work sooner.



Empathy for me is a trait I have which I believe is a trait [child] has by watching how I act with others, he is definitely very in touch with his emotions and the emotions of others."

Attachment was typically associated with bonding to build relationships, safety and trust

Parents typically described having a close attachment to their children in physical and emotional terms

We asked parents to share illustrations of what attachment means to them. Here are some examples of what they shared:



- There was a universal desire amongst parents to create positive attachments with their children. For example, those who said they did not have a strong bond with their parents when growing up tend to **want to prioritise this** when forming relationships with their own children. Whereas, some of those who recalled being closely attached to their parents during their childhood were also **keen to recreate this** in their own parenting approach.
- Attachments were seen in both **physical** (e.g. skin to skin such as during breastfeeding) and **emotional** (e.g. when comforting or consoling child) terms, forming as a result of **spending quality time together**.
- Parents said that bonds can form not only between **parent and child**, but child **and other caregivers**, as well as with **peers** and **objects** (e.g. blankets, toys and teddy bears).

As with empathy, some parents felt attachment could go “too far” and lead to needy or clingy children

The word attachment often had negative associations for parents, and there seem to be differing interpretations of the word

“Arm baby”
“Closeness” *“Safety net”*
“Unhealthy” *“Clingy”*
“Strong bond” *“Separation anxiety”*
“Feeling safe” *“Connection”*
“Comfortable”



Attachment is a good thing because of the bond and mutual love between adult and child. But can also be a bad thing if it becomes over attachment which can lead to separation anxiety.”

Joint parent household, 2 year old, informal childcare, not working

- Though able to recognise the positive benefits of having an attachment to one’s child, some parents felt that it could go “too far” and become **unhealthy** or turn into **clinginess**.
- Some acknowledged that parents can be **as equally attached to their children** as is the other way around which makes separation difficult.
- Even parents who describe having a strong bond can worry about it going “too far” and hampering rather than helping their child’s development



Using the word “bond” may be better than “attachment” as the latter has negative connotations

Case study - Cerys

Who are they?

Cerys is a 24 year old living in Wales, and is not in employment.

She is a lone parent and has two children – a 4 month old and a 2 year old. She does not use childcare support.

Cerys describes her parenting style as “firm but fair”. She feels it is important to work with her children to complete tasks, such as tidying away toys. She tries as much as possible to communicate with her children, and only take control of a situation as a last resort.

Her style of parenting was shaped by her dad. She describes him as level-headed, calm and understanding. He was the kind of parent she wants to be. Cerys feels her mum was not as good a parent because she was “absent” when she was growing up.

As a result of this experience, Cerys prioritises spending time with her children, such as family days out, playing together and having fun. She feels this is important for fostering a strong bond with her children. She does not believe this means she needs to be with her children constantly. It is acceptable for parents to take some time for themselves without it impacting their child’s development.



If it’s 10 minutes in the day a child doesn’t get attention, I don’t think that’s wrong... if the mother shows love, affection and attention 24/7 then the child will know this.”

Resilience was associated with perseverance and a can-do attitude

Recognising that success does not always happen on the first attempt was also commonly associated with resilience

“Bouncing back”

“Repetitiveness”

“Encouragement”

“Prewired”

“Reacting positively to challenges”

“Practice makes perfect”

“Keep going”

“Overcoming obstacles”



Resilience in early childhood is when a child experiences a set back of some sort but responds to this positively. Good relationships with their adults and positive experiences are the backbone of children's resiliency.”

Joint parent household, 9 month and 3 year olds, formal childcare, working FT

- Resilience was considered important as it helps children to **prepare for later stages** of their life. This included developing healthy coping mechanisms when faced with future adversities around schooling, friendships and peer-pressure.
- Some thought that although resilience is valued within society, it is valued less so than other behaviours (e.g. empathy). However, there is a wider expectation on being able to withstand adversity with reference to having a **“British stiff upper lip”**.
- Parents tended to agree that resilience is something that can be **taught**. However, some thought that it is **innate** and part of a child's "natural survival instinct" and only needs to be encouraged occasionally.

Parents considered resilience to be important, but worried that other parents may not prioritise encouraging this in their children

These parents felt that other parents may fail to promote resilience in their children or do so in a way that can compromise other elements of social and emotional development

We asked parents to share illustrations of what resilience means to them. Here are some examples of what they shared:



- Parents who faced **repeated hardships through their own life experiences** said they actively encourage their children to be resilient.
- Some felt that there is **widespread failings in teaching children resilience** because a growing number of parents feel guilty for being away from their children for prolonged periods due to work. Therefore, these parents may overcompensate for this by spoiling children, and giving in to demands in order to avoid conflict.
- Similarly, others said there is a need to **strike a balance between** encouraging children to be **resilient** and "stand up for themselves" **and being empathetic** towards others. They thought that resilience cannot come at the expense of someone else's wellbeing.

Case study - James

Who are they?

James is 41 years old and works full-time in Scotland.

He and his wife have two children – a 1 year old and a 3 year old.

Both children attend nursery.

James and his wife do not shout or punish their children. He feels that saying “no” to children too quickly can lead to an adversarial relationship. He feels it is important to explain things to his children, such as not dropping food on the floor.

James takes a “natural consequences” approach to parenting. If his child is doing something they shouldn’t, he will not immediately stop it. He believes it is important for children to learn from their actions, provided they are in a supportive environment.

James feels his parenting style is a reaction against own “traditional” upbringing that took a gendered approach to social and emotional development. He wants to be “present” with his children, show them affection and encourage them to communicate their emotions with him.



If he has a toy and he's being rough with it, we'll say 'look, you're going to break it' and if he breaks it, he breaks it - that's a natural consequence.”

Experiences of parenting



Key findings

There was a range of parenting styles among parents, from disciplinarian to laid-back. Some tried to reflect a combination of styles in their approach to parenting.

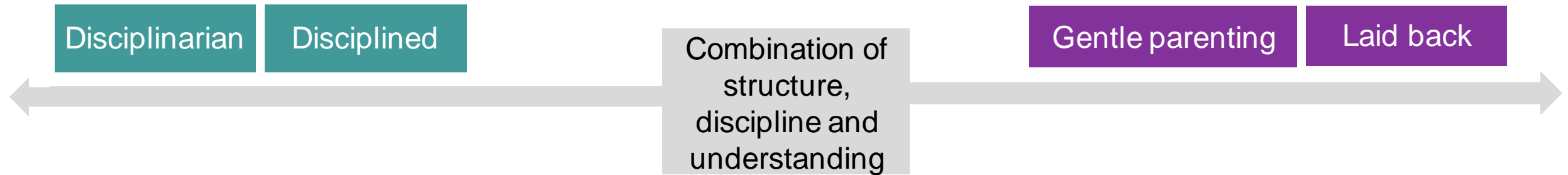
Parents with older children were aware their parenting style influenced their child's development. They also mentioned the importance of recognising their child's independence as well as the need to change their parenting style to meet their child's unique development needs.

Parents' approach to raising their children was often based on their own experiences of growing up. They identified a range of parenting techniques, both positive and negative, that they aimed to either use or avoid as parents.

It was important for parents to develop a positive relationship with their children. Either by replicating the relationship they had with their own parents, or by consciously avoiding negative aspects of that relationship.

Parents mentioned various styles of parenting, ranging from disciplined approaches to more laid-back parenting

Parents generally reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of each, with some consciously aiming to strike a balance between the two styles



- Some parents found it harder to spontaneously identify their parenting style. However, by asking about their own upbringing and referring to different parenting scenarios, these **parents were usually able to describe their approach.**
- Parents from joint households with a mother and father reported that **fathers tended to focus more on discipline and structure such as behaviour and bed times, while mothers tended to be seen as responsible for emotional development.** This was often seen as a positive thing – as styles complement each other – but sometimes resulted in tensions between parents.
- Those who more easily described a particular parenting style often seemed more confident in their approach.



Helping parents develop a more conscious style may enable them to feel more confident in their approach

Case study - Fran

Who are they?

Fran is a 42 year old office worker living in England with one child, Janey, aged 5.

She lives with her husband who also works.

Janey goes to nursery part time.

Fran describes her parenting approach as “gentle parenting”, treating and respecting Janey as a person. Fran consciously developed this approach in response to experiences as her child where she was left alone to cry, wasn’t allowed to choose what she wore and consciously worried about upsetting her mum.

Fran does worry that she perhaps keeps Janey a bit too close – and she should probably let her try things on her own a bit more. She thinks it’s important to give children choice and freedom as much as possible.

While she feels parenting norms have improved, Fran thinks there is a lot of judgement and high expectations on parents. She would like to see more emphasis on socialisation especially early on and less on strict physical milestones.



They expect us to control our children and keep them quiet and 'well behaved', a bit like seen and not heard. There's also the expectation to do everything as a parent. Work full time, bring up our children, keep a tidy house, socialise, spin all of the plates at once.”

Most articulated their approach as aimed at giving their children both the support and freedom to develop

The importance of recognising each child's independence and unique needs came up repeatedly, even among parents who articulated different approaches

- Parents often articulated their role as being to **help their children find their feet** or develop their own way by giving them independence but also a clear structure.
- **Recognising the independence and uniqueness of each child** was a common desire expressed by parents with different styles and backgrounds.



You want a strong bond but not to the point they are spoilt/molycoddled. They need to appreciate their space and independence too to think for themselves later in life! .”

Joint parent household, 1 month old, working FT, no childcare



Supporting the independence and unique inner life of each child could be a relatable way of explaining SED to parents

Parents with older children tended to be aware of how their parenting style impacted on their child's development

They recognised their parenting style as having an important influence on their children's overall development, including social and emotional development

- These parents also identified how their **parenting style had changed according to different circumstances**. This included realising that their approach needed to change as their children got older or using different approaches for different situations.
- The importance of social and emotional development was evident in parents who felt they should try and **understand their children, treat them with respect or let them make decisions about things**, such as what they wear or eat.
- Although some parents of younger children were aware that their parenting style would influence their child's development, they were generally less aware of *how* this would happen. Priorities tended to focus on feeding, sleeping and changing nappies rather than SED.

“

I like to give him options so that he has a bit of control in what he does.”

Lone parent household, 3 years old, working PT, formal childcare

“

I just try to do my best and listen to what my son needs.”

Lone parent, 5 years old, working PT, no childcare

Parents often drew on experiences from their upbringing to inform how they should raise their own child

Many parents identified positive and negative parenting techniques that could support or hinder their child's development

Positive techniques

- Encouraging children to explore their emotions
- Parents and children articulating their feelings
- Supporting children to learn from their mistakes
- Combining consistency and structure with a sense of fun and approachability

“

I don't want [child] to ever feel she can't talk to me in case I get upset or angry.”

Joint parent household, 5 years old, working, formal childcare

Negative techniques

- Shouting at children and physical punishment
- Not engaging with what children are doing
- Lack of bond between parent and child
- Ignoring children when they are upset
- Over-praising children
- Being overly strict, inflexible or overbearing

“

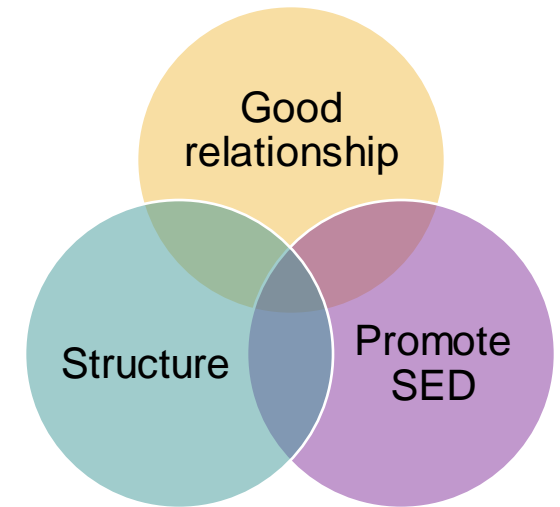
I put more love and affection to my children than what my mother did [with me].”

Lone parent household, 1 and 3 years old, unemployed, no childcare

Parents' relationships with their own parents influenced how they wanted to develop a relationship with their own children

This included parents who wanted to replicate positive relationships, as well as those who consciously reacted against the kind of relationship they had with their parents

- Parents in the **ABC1 socio-economic groups** tended to have had a **positive relationship with their parents** that they wanted to replicate with their children because they recognised the positive impact it had on development.
- Those who had more **negative relationships** were from a range of **socio-economic groups** and were clear that they wanted a more positive relationship with their own child.
- Regardless of their own upbringing, **for many parents it was important to combine discipline and routine with emotional communication**, alongside a positive relationship between parent and child.



“

I had a happy childhood and it's that thing where you want the same for your weans.”

Joint parent household, 3-5 years old, uses formal childcare, working FT

“

I wasn't cuddled or told "I love you" every day.”

Joint parent household, 1 year old, on maternity leave

Concerns around parenting and raising under 5s



Key findings

Physical milestones were generally a more top of mind concern for parents, with social and emotional development secondary, if mentioned at all. Some did express concerns about their child's socialisation, often referring to the impact of Covid on interacting with those outside the household.

Most parents said they were satisfied with learning “on the job.” However, some parents felt they were “not doing enough”.

Parenting concerns often centred around money, online safety and bullying - but most did not think these worries affected their children's behaviour or relationships with them.

A small number did worry that their stress is being picked up by their children, or that challenges in early parenthood are affecting their bond.

Most parents felt that skills and knowledge are acquired through “learning on the job”

But some parents were more concerned about whether they are doing enough to support their child's development

- Although many parents were concerned about their skills/knowledge in the first days of being a parent, they also said they have “**learned on the job**” or that this level of worry subsided as they got used to parenthood.
- For some whose children need **extra help or support**, there may be more worry that they do not have the right skills/knowledge to support them – for example, when a child is identified as potentially being autistic.
- Some parents describe concern around whether they are “**doing enough**” to support their child's cognitive development. Several mention a tendency to compare themselves to other parents and children, which can be exacerbated by social media or social environments such as baby/toddler groups.

“

I sometimes feel like I'm not doing enough - I do try, but doubt whether I do enough or should be doing more. In terms of development, should I be doing more interactive educational things with him?”

Lone parent household, 1 year old, working FT, informal childcare

“

It's always comparing yourself to other parents and children.”

Joint parent household, 2 year old, not working, informal childcare

Most parents were concerned with development related to physical milestones although socialisation was also a concern

But some parents with concerns around physical milestones felt these could lead to delays in social and emotional development

- **Physical milestones** were top of mind for many parents, with concerns around issues such as **fussy eating** and difficulty **potty training**.
- Amongst parents of children under 1 year old, some described being entirely focused on meeting their baby's physical needs. They were not looking ahead or thinking about other aspects of their development. Parents of slightly older children were more typically concerned about areas like socialising and literacy.
- Some parents linked concern about physical milestones to SED, e.g. delayed potty training being a **barrier** to a child attending nursery and learning to **socialise**, or poor **speech/language skills** preventing their child from making friends or expressing their needs at nursery.
- A few parents mentioned concerns directly linked to **emotional development**, such as believing that their child needs to develop more resilience or could be “too sensitive”. However most did not spontaneously mention SED concerns, suggesting these are generally **less top-of-mind than physical milestones**.

“

He's never going to be independent, which is a worry.”

Joint parent household
[including 5 year old who has autism], working FT,
informal childcare

Case study - Esther

Who are they?

Esther is a 24-year-old retail worker in Northern Ireland.

She is a lone parent to her 3-year-old son, Christoph

She currently receives no childcare support but Christoph will be starting nursery in the autumn

Esther describes her approach to parenting as laid back and relaxed – partly because she wants to give Christoph more freedom than she had, and partly for practical reasons: as a single working parent, she can't have as much of a structure as her parents had for her.

She describes a strong and positive relationship with Christoph, but she does worry about how he will socialise with other children as he does sometimes hit others and struggles with sharing. She thinks starting nursery in the autumn will help with this.

She feels society's expectations of parents have become too rigid (for example when she was told to put her son on a diet because he was above weight range), and would like instead for there to be more focus on children's freedom.



He just can't cope with sharing his toys, so I'm hoping nursery will help him to share better."

Parents' broader concerns around parenting included increases in the cost of living, and technology/online safety

Some also express concern about their child socialising as they get older, and continued worries about Covid

- The **cost of living/unaffordable childcare** were key concerns for early years parents. Some described having to work long hours to support their families, or sacrificing earning more money to spend more time with children.
- Exposure to **technology/online safety** was a common concern, with some worried about how early this begins in life and the difficulty of regulating children's tech use.
- Children's future experiences of **socialising** (e.g. at school) were also a common concern, with some parents expressing worry about how their children will interact with others, potentially "falling in with the wrong crowd" or encountering **bullying/racism**.
- For some parents, **Covid** remained a top concern and they have found parenting "normally" after lockdown difficult.

“

School makes me a bit nervous, what if they fall into the wrong crowd? Lots of my friends in school went down a really bad path in life.”

Lone parent household, 4 month old and 2 year old, not working, no childcare

“

Childcare fees are astronomical... I'm trying to balance part-time work with childcare financially, but sometimes I'm having to sacrifice that to prioritise having a relationship with my children.”

Joint parent household, 1 year old and 5 year old, working FT, formal childcare

Parents were generally aware that their current parenting style influenced their child's future social and emotional development

But concerns related to children using technology and social media in the future were less likely to be seen as linked to early SED

*Being safe on
social media*

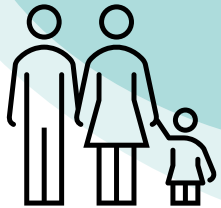
*Perceived as
less affected by
current
decisions*

*Learning to
socialise*

*Perceived as
more affected
by current
parenting style*

*Using
technology in
a healthy/safe
way*

*Learning to be
independent*



- Where concerns around future **socialising** and gaining **independence** were mentioned, parents were likely to see this as an area in which their **current parenting style** has an impact.
- However, among parents who were concerned about their child's future use of **technology and social media**, most perceive this as something they will prepare their children to cope with **when the time is right**. They do not necessarily see development in early childhood, and parenting at this time as helping to mitigate or alleviate against these.



Interventions need ways to cut through to parents to make it feel like more is within their control, without feeling overwhelming

Most parents with concerns about their child's early years development did not think these impact on their child's behaviour

But some parents did worry that their children could pick up on their stress around physical milestones

- The majority of parents who expressed concerns about raising children aged 0-5 **did not feel** that these concerns had an impact on their child's behaviour.
- However some parents who were worried about aspects of their child's development such as eating, potty training and speech/language expressed concerns that their **child could pick up on** this and feel stressed themselves.
- For parents still feeling worried about Covid, there were concerns that a **lack of socialising** due to lockdowns and avoiding crowded environments will impact their child's **social development**.
- Some parents were concerned that their being busy and unable to spend as much time as they would like with their child could lead to **resentment** in later life.



I'm so busy, I'm always on the go... I do worry that it could make them feel a bit resentful when they're older."

Joint parent household, parent working, formal childcare

Similarly, most parents with concerns did not feel these impacted their relationship with the child

But for a small number, concerns could make attachment and forming a bond challenging

- Most parents who expressed concerns around parenting **did not feel** that these impacted the parent/child relationship.
- But some said their concerns may make them **overly protective** of their children, and were worried that this may make them less independent.
- Similarly for some parents, the experience of looking after babies in lockdown made them feel more worried about **being apart** from their child (for example, when compared with older children).
- In addition, some parents described how struggles with milestones like potty training had caused some **strain** in their parent/child relationships, as they felt **frustrated** with their child.
- For new mothers in particular who experienced a complicated birth, **forming an attachment** and coping with normal concerns around the baby's health may feel extremely difficult and stressful.



I worry that sometimes I keep [name] a bit close, I don't let her try things on her own as much.”

Joint parent household, 5 year old, working PT, formal childcare

Views on wider societal perceptions



Key findings

Parents typically felt that there have been significant improvements in parenting styles in recent years, especially when it comes to discipline, communication and understanding of childhood mental health.

However, parents felt that there is a growing pressure to meet the standards set by society which leads to a general feeling of “not doing enough”. This is felt to put parents under immense strain and lead to competition between parents as a way of being seen to comply with expectations.

Though parents said that there is a general pressure to conform, they also said that what they were supposed to be doing was not always clear as they were subject to significant conflicting advice.

Social norms around parenting styles were generally seen as having shifted positively in recent years

Parents were most positive about shifts to encouraging communication and awareness of mental health



Positive changes

Parent-child communication/ interaction is encouraged

Physical discipline is unlawful

Increased representation in household composition

Smoking in the presence of children is no longer acceptable

Increased mental health awareness



Negative changes

Increased reliance on technology and being expected to be computer literate

More emphasis on material possessions

Overpraising and mollycoddling

Rise of parenting influences on social media

Stigmatisation of stay-at-home parents

However, parents felt there is an increasing pressure on parents to follow a specific mould when raising young children

Part of this pressure is the need to be seen conforming with these expectations to avoid judgement

- There was a perception that society **assumes there is a single perfect approach to parenting** and tends to overlook the fact that children develop differently and different styles of parenting can work.
- Social media was seen as a key culprit for this – with lots of parents feeling **Facebook, Instagram and TikTok drive a sense of perfectionism.**
- Whereas others felt that there is more flexibility when it comes to raising children because of the recent proliferation in different parenting styles.
- Health visitors and other professionals were seen to **“go by the book”** when it comes to development rather than encouraging parents to make their own judgment.

“

I feel that society's expectations are extremely rigid and does not account for the change in modern times and the family structure. There are pressures for children to walk at certain times and talk by certain times with little consideration to external factors.”

Joint parent household, 6 week old, no childcare, on maternity leave



Any campaign or intervention needs to avoid feeling like it adds to the pressure and noise

Despite feeling they are driven to be the “perfect” parent, information about what this looks like is often conflicting

As a result, parents would often follow their own instinct before seeking the advice of others

- Parents learn about societal expectations on how to parent through **social media** (e.g. Facebook and Twitter), **TV programmes** like "Supernanny", **(pre)school staff and teachers**, as well as parenting books and courses. Though many find this parenting information to be overwhelming because it tends to be contradictory.
- Some thought there is “**too much noise**” from different sources, and consider **social media to be particularly didactic**.



One minute you're reading that it's the right thing to do something and then you're reading it's wrong.”

Lone parent, 5 year old, no childcare, working PT

Suggestions from parents on navigating information

- A **central information hub** that groups a variety of **impartial and objective advice** according to topic, type of household and health status. The hub should include links to various sites (including the NHS website) for further advice as well as available support centres (e.g. clinics and classes).
- A **hotline** or **app** which directs parents to local, easily accessible (and preferably free) support networks.
- A collation of “**how to**” **guides** and **videos** which includes generic parenting advice (particularly targeted at new parents), as well as specific guidance on socialisation, breastfeeding and diets etc. SEN support for those with disabled children was also mentioned.

Support with parenting and early years development



Key findings

Findings from the phase 1 survey showed that many parents of 0-5s look to friends and family as well as health visitors, the Red Book and NHS website for information and support with their child's development.

Findings from phase 2 show that parents were open to more support, particularly with social and emotional development.

Not all parents have access to good support and advice, such as parent and baby classes, nursery provision and advice from health visitors. There is a strong sense of postcode lottery when it comes to getting good support.

Parents were aware of the benefits of social and emotional development, but wanted more guidance on how they should support this with their children. Specifically, parents were keen to receive help with socialisation and expressed a strong interest in accessing support for this.

Parents were wary that the volume of parenting advice available could be a barrier to knowing how to support their child. They valued reliable advice that backed up their views on parenting and social and emotional development.

Access to good support can be inconsistent

There are especially gaps in support with social and emotional development



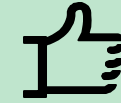
Barriers to accessing support

- Lack of **local availability of classes** such as parent and baby groups, especially since the pandemic.
- It can be **daunting** for parents to attend classes for the first time.
- It can be **difficult to judge what information is trustworthy** or relevant on the internet.
- Perceived **stigma about asking for support** and concern this will indicate that parents are not coping, especially when their children are no longer babies.



I find it hard to believe that I have to wait 3 months to find the right classes and meeting other families, other mums. The babies also need to meet other babies.”

Joint parent household, 2 month old, on maternity leave



Ideas for support with SED

- Raise awareness among parents that **health visitors** can support with social and emotional development.
- More **information for parents of new-borns** on how they can support social and emotional development.
- A **focus on reassuring parents** and encouraging them to follow their own judgement.
- **Reduce stigma** in asking for support.



I'm not scared to ask for advice on my parenting [...] there's a lot of parents that are like 'no, no my children are fine, I'm doing the best thing as a parent.'”

Lone parent household, 5 year old, working PT, formal and informal childcare

Parents were aware they played a central role in nurturing their child's social and emotional development

They were also aware of the benefits of social and emotional development, but less clear on what they should do to support it

- Many **parents see themselves as responsible for their child's social and emotional development**, although some feel it just happens naturally.
- Nevertheless, they look to friends and family, nursery and other groups to provide **opportunities for their child to practise socialising**, recognising the importance of children interacting with other children.
- Parents tended to be **clear on what the outcome of social development should be** for their child, such as being able to make positive relationships with others, share toys and behave well.
- However, **parents were less certain on what they should do** to foster social and emotional development to reach these outcomes, particularly as there is so much information available online that can be contradictory.



At the moment I would say family is most important as I have a new born, but it could also be a teacher or a healthcare provider who have a significant impact on a child's development.”

Joint parent household, 2 month old, both working, no childcare

Parents wanted information that was reliable, relevant to their child and consistent with their style of parenting

Parents also valued reassurances that their child was meeting development milestones

- Parents were open to **more advice and support about supporting social development** to build on what they already know, but some acknowledged that stigma about reaching out for support may be a barrier.
- Parents wanted to know where they can go for **trustworthy support and advice** that combines evidence with direct experience of parenting.
- They also wanted more **information about opportunities in their area** so their child could go and practise their social development.
- Formal support such as nurseries, schools and health visitors **gave parents confidence** about how and when their children are meeting development milestones.
- Interacting with other parents and children **helped parents feel reassured** about how they were doing as parents and how their children were developing.

“

I am open to all types of support but it is nice to have scientific support alongside a lived experience so that you can use a bit of both.”

Joint parent household, 5 year old, working FT, uses childcare

“

[I would like] more regular updates on what my child is doing at school and what we can do at home to support this.

Joint parent household, 5 year old, working PT, uses childcare



Providing a space for parents to go if they need it, whilst recognising each child is different are seen as ways to provide support without judgement

Parents also felt that pregnancy or very early on are the best times to provide information

- When asked how support can be provided without adding to the feeling of judgement, parents suggested a **hub or hotline that's available for them to go to anonymously** could be a useful way of providing support to parents as and when they need it.
- It was also felt that **when expecting a baby or very early after birth are the best times for information to be provided** to avoid making parents feel judged or shamed.
- More **informal types of support and socialisation** for parents as well as children were also seen as ways to make parents feel supported without feeling judged.
- Many parents also mentioned the importance of **recognising each child's uniqueness** in any support provided.



Always re-affirm all kids are different and that is to be celebrated and the information provided is designed to support but will not always suit every family.”

Joint parent household, 5 year old, working FT, uses childcare



Interventions that feel hopeful and reassuring, and recognise each child's uniqueness are likely to resonate with parents the most

Thank you.

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