

Free childcare extension could widen gap between rich and poor, says charity ^[1]

Sutton Trust says move is at the expense of high-quality early years education which particularly helps disadvantaged children

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EXCERPTS

A charity has said the government's 30-hours free childcare offer risks widening the gap between disadvantaged children and their wealthier peers before they start school.

From this month all three- and four-year-olds in England are entitled to 30 hours of free childcare a week, up from 15 hours.

The Sutton Trust, an education charity, says the scheme is not adequately resourced and a new funding formula will divert resources away from state nurseries disproportionately attended by disadvantaged children.

The charity says the policy will help more parents to return to the workplace, but argues it is being implemented at the expense of high-quality early years education which particularly benefits children from poorer families.

Research has consistently shown that high-quality early years education delivered by qualified teachers is the most effective way of boosting the development of the poorest two- and three-year-olds. In recent years there has been a narrowing of the gap between disadvantaged and wealthier children in school readiness, from 21.2 percentage points in 2007 to 17.7 in 2015.

The Sutton Trust's report, *Closing Gaps Early*, says that progress may be in jeopardy with a shift in focus away from quality early years education towards affordable childcare for working families. It also says the funding will be spread more thinly.

Kitty Stewart, associate professor of social policy at the London School of Economics and one of the report's authors, said: "To make up some of the funding gap, a new funding formula reallocates resources away from state nurseries disproportionately attended by disadvantaged children, and they may in the future struggle to afford a qualified teacher. To remove this advantage must be expected to have negative effects on social mobility."

The report says a third of staff working in group-based childcare lack English and/or maths at GCSE.

It highlights other potentially damaging policies including the axing of financial support for graduate training for early years professionals and the lifting of the requirement for Sure Start centres in disadvantaged areas to offer graduate-led early education. It raises concern about a proposal to remove the requirement for nursery and reception classes to have a qualified teacher.

The Sutton Trust's chair, Sir Peter Lampl, said: "Good quality early years provision is vital to narrow the gaps that leave too many youngsters behind by the time they start school. But it's unlikely that the government's policy to provide 30 hours of free childcare will provide this."

Tracy Brabin, the shadow minister for early years, said: "The whole system is now being underfunded and undermined. They [the Conservatives] have created less than a quarter of the places they promised, excluded parents on the lowest incomes, and mismanaged the scheme so badly that many families simply can't find a provider prepared to offer them the free hours they are supposedly entitled to."

Ellen Broomé, chief executive at the Family and Childcare Trust, said her organisation's research had shown that many children arriving at primary school were not ready to take part in classroom activities.

"There is strong evidence that early education can help to boost children's outcomes and narrows the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers – but only if it is high quality. The government must make sure that every child can access high-quality early education."

A Department for Education spokesperson said 15,000 children were already benefiting from the 30-hours free childcare offer, which came in this month, taking pressure off family finances.

"Every child should receive the same high-quality care and support, regardless of their background or where they live, which is why we are increasing spending on childcare to over £6bn per year by 2019-20," the spokesperson said.

“Alongside our 30-hours free childcare offer, we are spending over £2.5bn on free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds over five years, as well as providing extra support for disadvantaged families through the early years pupil premium.”

-reprinted from The Guardian

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