

# The value of childcare and Covid-19: A nursery worker's perspective <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Hughes, Holly

**Source:** Futures of Work

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 7 May 2020

## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

The poor working conditions of nursery workers have long been overlooked. The current COVID-19 crisis has shone a spotlight upon this work and it is hoped that the value of our labour will be recognised post-crisis.

As parents struggle to manage young children in cramped environments, they may wonder “who can do this every day?”

**Childcare workers.**

Who will make sure that essential services staff such as NHS workers and supermarket attendants can go to work and ensure the survival of our communities?

**Childcare workers.**

Which workers are exposing themselves to large numbers of children, despite acknowledgement that these gatherings are dangerous for the health of both children and staff?

**Childcare workers.**

And who is providing this work for minimal wages, often at the rate of the National Minimum Wage (£8.72 per hour)?

**Childcare workers.**

Things need to change. Childcare workers deserve an increase in recognition, pay, and rights at work.

We are considered to be non-skilled workers and ‘disposable’. Working a full-time position at 40 hours a week works out at around £1,200 per month after tax. This is an insufficient wage to run a household, with many childcare staff having to rely on partners, parents, family members, credit cards, or benefits to make ends meet. Now that the country is in crisis, we are being described as ‘front line’ and ‘essential’ workers. Indeed, without this workforce the country could not function – but this is not a new realization – the country could not function without us prior to the crisis and will not function without us post-crisis either.

We are risking our own health and the health of our loved ones to ensure that childcare is still being provided to those that need it. Yet we are still being paid national minimum wage. Perhaps Boris Johnson and Keir Starmer could use their energies and new found gratitude to raise our wages and give one-off payments for our efforts as opposed to ‘claps for carers’ and medals which are inadequate responses to a more pressing crisis in care. Please, do not insult us.

## Life as a nursery worker

I have a degree in Childhood Studies with Professional Practice Studies. I have worked in schools and private nurseries since graduating in 2009. Sadly, I have found it hard to make a career out of childcare and have struggled to meet my rent, student debt and living costs. As a result, I turned to waitressing where I received roughly the same salary, with the added bonus of tips. Financially, I was more comfortable waitressing.

As the years passed, I yearned to utilise my degree and missed the joys of working with children. I moved to Bristol and obtained a nursery job working with pre-school children and babies. Within six months I was promoted to a managerial position as ‘baby room leader’.

However, I was informed that my salary would not increase until after completion of a six-month probation period in the role. I was paid at a rate of £17,200 for this work which I had already had to negotiate up from £16,500 earlier in the year. I struggled to meet my debts and rising rent prices on this wage.

Unhappy with the situation, I approached the owner about a reduced probationary period. He assured me that if I “kept putting in the hard” work after a three-month probation period I could expect a salary increase. We agreed on a figure of £20,000 a year. I worked hard over those three months, leaving for work at 6am most days and ensuring positive outcomes for the children and staff under my

management. Four months passed without a pay rise or any communication concerning when this would occur. My emails were ignored by the owners. I informed them that they were in breach of contract and that I could resign and claim constructive dismissal.

Five months passed and I reminded the owners of their obligations under employment law. The next morning, I was called into the office and confronted by the owner (who was in Pakistan) via speaker phone. He accused me of threatening him, denied agreeing to a pay increase of £20,000 per annum and told me I would have to complete the full six months' probation before he would even consider raising my salary. I felt unable to work for the nursery anymore and handed in my notice. I was unable to make a claim for unfair/constructive dismissal as I had not completed two years continuous service.

These are the working conditions for thousands of nursery workers throughout the UK. I have since returned to Newcastle and joined a new nursery, but perhaps the next time you pick up your child(ren) from nursery, you could enquire about the pay and working conditions of those who care for them. It is only through collective solidarity that we can challenge these conditions and make positive changes.

Nursery workers are essential workers and this work should be valued. Forming secure attachments with children is crucial for their development. Psychologist John Bowlby maintains that a child's attachment figures act as a secure base for exploring the world. The attachment relationship acts as a prototype for all future social relationships and disrupting it can have negative consequences. Due to the low paid nature of nursery work, we suffer from a high staff turnover, meaning we regularly rely on temporary agency staff and new staff (often migrant workers) in order to function. A high staff turnover makes it difficult to cultivate attachment, or even to implement the Early Years Foundation Stage Guiding principles. This also raises safeguarding concerns as we must have strong relationships with our children to be aware of any family circumstances in order to safeguard them successfully. There are ratios in childcare which must be adhered to by law (for example, one member of staff to three children below the age of two).

Low wages and the potential impact of Brexit mean that nurseries already struggling with recruitment will find it difficult to cope. Working with children of any age is rewarding and joyful but the sector is struggling due to low wages and the demanding physical and emotional strain of the job. We often suffer from workplace injuries like back strain due to repetitive lifting, yet our sick pay entitlement is pitiful.

We are not disposable. We are the workforce preparing the future generation of children for school, and ultimately shaping the future workforce, without which the economy would collapse. It is well understood that the early years are when development is most rapid and this time has a major impact on the person you become in later life. A lot of young children spend more time with nursery staff than their parents and families, from 7:30am until 7pm Monday to Friday. Attitudes must change.

### The futures of nursery work

As the government began to shut down the schools and nurseries, I fell ill and needed to self-isolate for 7 days. Living with an elderly parent with health concerns, this was a worrying time for me and my family. That week, I received sick pay at £94.25 as my contract does not offer a higher rate. I have now been furloughed and will receive pay at 80% of my (already minimal) contractual rate.

After 3 weeks on furlough I will return to work, as my organisation has established a 3-week shift pattern. Due to the low salary we receive and inadequate PPE, many colleagues have considered whether it is worth risking our own lives or that of our family members. The Government relies on the good will of my working community, telling us that it is for 'the greater good of the country', 'the NHS', and that 'we are all in this together'. Despite my low pay, I feel I have a responsibility to perform my role, but we are not 'all in this together'. The majority of front-line workers are low paid, working class women, which partly explains why we remain undervalued and underpaid, as explored by Joanne Conaghan in her blog in this issue.

After the COVID-19 crisis things must change within the caring sector. The Government needs to recognise the value and importance of investing in childcare staff. We want an increase in pay and increases to the national minimum wage; more secure employment status with rights to unfair dismissal after one month of employment; higher levels of sick pay; and greater recognition of the importance of our work.

Society would not function without us. Invest in us, invest in your children and invest in our future.

**Region:** Europe <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** workforce <sup>[4]</sup>

advocacy <sup>[5]</sup>

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**Source URL (modified on 7 Oct 2020):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/10/value-childcare-and-covid-19-nursery-workers-perspective>

Links

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