

Nursery staff are being treated like cannon fodder so 'higher-value' work can go on ^[1]

In the Covid crisis the choice for early-years workers is: risk your life or your livelihood. But what if they, and parents, had better government support?

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EXCERPTS

Late last year, I went to pick up my toddler from nursery and was greeted with an accident form. It was only a bump, and he was fine, though he had been very upset at the time. Under the heading “treatment given” was written, “Lots of cuddles and kisses!” For the thousandth time since the summer, I was bowled over by the amazing nursery staff. They weren’t allowed to hug their own mums, yet they had not hesitated for a second to gather up my sad child and comfort him. If they were anxious about the risks to their own health, they didn’t show it.

In the past three weeks, more than a dozen of these women (they are all women, as are 92% of early-years workers) have contracted Covid. The elaborate safety precautions they have worked so hard to maintain are no match for reality: you cannot control the spread of the virus in a room full of two-year-olds. They are not alone. An estimated 1 in 10 nursery and preschool staff have had Covid since the start of December. Some have died. Nurseries are now the second most common location for people contracting the virus, behind supermarkets.

Despite a brief flurry of public concern, there has been little sustained political pressure for nurseries to close. Staff feel “abandoned”, says Prof Jennifer Tomlinson, who heads the Childcare During Covid-19 research project: forced to continue working in unsafe environments without PPE, testing or priority access to vaccines. “We’re just forgotten, we’re bottom of the pile – they don’t seem to care,” one said to me.

While teaching unions have forced U-turns and pushed school safety up the agenda, childcare workers have historically wielded much less collective clout. This is starting to change: United Voices of the World and the s IWGB are working to organise the sector, and their memberships have soared in recent weeks. But building union power takes time, and there are no quick fixes for decades of neglect and disempowerment.

I spoke to one childcare worker whose nursery management had responded to a positive test by asking staff to “carry on and just clean up – like it was our fault”. They had all been in contact with the infected staff member, but the nursery remained open and nobody was asked to self-isolate. Although staff have the right to refuse to work in unsafe conditions, her colleagues were too afraid of repercussions: “Everyone is scared.” She is now signed off work with anxiety, but knows she will have to go back soon: “I can’t afford to stay on sick for ever.” Thousands more face the same impossible choice: risk your life or risk your livelihood.

Even nurseries that want to do right by their workers are finding their hands tied by a lack of government support.

Recent guidance confirms that any closure periods will be funded if enforced by the need to self-isolate, but settings that close owing to “staff concerns” will have funding withdrawn. For nurseries who want to restrict places to key workers, the incentives are against them as the government provides funding based on how many children are in attendance. One nursery director told me that she desperately wants to close to all but key workers and vulnerable children, but that this “financial blackmail” makes it impossible.

As researchers from the University of Leeds have highlighted, early-years workers are being simultaneously treated as indispensable and disposable. They are being asked to shoulder huge burdens for the sake of society, yet given no protection and paid less than a living wage. Early education is apparently so essential that it must continue even when schools are closed – but not essential enough to be run as a universal public service, or for the government to step in as private providers implode. If this sector is so vital, why is it treated so shabbily? Part of the answer lies in the systematic undervaluing of care work.

Early-years education helps children’s development, but this is not why the government is keeping these settings open. When asked, England’s chief medical officer Chris Whitty made no bones about it: “The reason that nursery schools are open is to allow people who need to go to work or need to do particular activities, to do so.” Early-years staff are being treated as cannon fodder to prop up business-as-usual for other, “higher-value” workers. Parents who may want to take time away from work to look after children, rather than sending

them to nursery, are not being supported to do so.

Already, childcare pressures have led many working women to take unpaid leave or lose their jobs. Parents can be furloughed for childcare reasons, but recent research by the TUC found that 71% of requests were refused. I'm incredibly fortunate to be in a household with others who can help with our toddler, so have been able to keep him out of nursery during this lockdown – but not everyone has this luxury. Many people I know are hugely conflicted about continuing to send their children to nursery, but feel that they have no choice. Others will turn to other forms of childcare with even less bargaining power, such as undocumented nannies or gig-economy apps such as Bubble.

It's all too easy for overstretched working parents to be pitted against underpaid childcare workers. This is why a coalition of parents, providers and childcare workers is calling for a new deal for childcare. In the short term, this means combining nursery closures with proper support to enable parents, workers and providers to weather them. In the longer term, it means reimagining early years provision as the essential service it is. If we want to safeguard lives and wellbeing, we need to care for all those who care for children – at work or at home, no matter who they are or where they're from. The incredible people who wipe away my son's tears deserve so much better than this.

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: workforce ^[4]

COVID-19 ^[5]

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