

30 hours free child care: 'National scandal' as children from poor families 'locked out' of early education ^[1]

Poorest children are already on average 11 months behind their peers when they begin primary school

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Source: iNews

Format: Article

Publication Date: 19 Aug 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Children from poor families are "locked out" of state-funded early education at ages three and four because their parents do not earn enough, a report has found.

According to analysis by social mobility charity The Sutton Trust and the Sylvia Adams Charitable Trust, 70 per cent of those eligible for the full 30 hours of free childcare are in the top half of earners, while just 13 per cent of eligible families are in the bottom third of the income distribution.

All three- and four-year-olds in England are currently entitled to 15 hours of early education and childcare per week for 38 weeks of the year.

Since 2017, children in families where both parents – or the lone parent in a lone parent family – are working and earning above a certain threshold are entitled to an extra 15 hours.

While there is a salary cap for eligibility, this only comes into effect if either or both parents earn over £100,000, meaning two parents could have a combined income of £199,998 and still be eligible for the additional 15 hours of childcare.

The Sutton Trust said that the poorest children are already on average 11 months behind their peers when they begin primary school.

Research by the charity suggests this has started to widen in recent years, with the 30 hours policy exacerbating the gap.

The Covid-19 pandemic is also set to make the situation worse. More than half (54 per cent) of primary school leaders surveyed by the Teacher Tapp polling app said that fewer pupils were "school ready" when they started reception this year than they would usually expect.

The Sutton Trust called on the Government to spend £250m a year to make the full 30 hour entitlement universal.

Sir Peter Lampl, the founder and chair of the charity, said: "The poorest children start school almost a year behind their peers. This is a truly shocking finding when you consider that the gap between low-income children and their better off peers widens over time.

"We know how important high-quality early education is for young children, yet the poorest three- and four-year-olds are locked out of these opportunities, simply because their parents do not earn enough. This is a national scandal.

"We wouldn't accept the state providing longer school hours for well-off families, and we shouldn't accept it in the early years. If we want to make our school system fairer, it needs to begin with giving every child the foundation to succeed at school."

Tiffnie Harris, primary specialist at the Association of School and College Leaders, said: "It is outrageous that we have an education funding mechanism in place that gives the young children of more privileged families a crucial advantage over their disadvantaged peers."

And Tulip Siddiq, Labour's shadow minister for children and early years, commented: "The Conservatives are holding children back, with policies that are widening the gap in learning between three and four year olds from the richest and poorest families."

A Department for Education spokesperson said: "We know the early years of a child's life are the most crucial, which is why every three and four-year-old in England is eligible for 15 hours of free childcare a week, no matter their circumstances or family income, with 90 per cent taking up this offer as of January.

"We have put unprecedented investment into childcare over the past decade, spending over £3.5bn in each of the past three years for our free childcare entitlements – including 15 hours per week for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds.

"Our 30 hours offer supports working parents, including single parents on incomes as low as £7,500 a year, helping them work more flexibly or increase their hours."

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