

Childcare plan 'failing to attract parents' [UK] ^[1]

Money, The Guardian

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AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

A government childcare strategy is struggling to increase the number of affordable nursery places, leaving families to rely on grandparents, a government-commissioned report concluded yesterday.

Tens of thousands of children are missing out on a free childcare scheme as fewer than expected parents join the scheme, according to the report for the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

"The evidence suggests overall that the 10-year childcare strategy has not had as much impact as intended, particularly in relation to the most disadvantaged children," said academics from the National Centre for Social Research who concluded that 56,000 children are missing out on the free childcare scheme.

Gordon Brown praised the strategy in 2004 as a sign of the government's determination to create a "welfare state that is truly family-friendly for the first time in its history".

In his 2004 pre-budget report Brown, then chancellor of the exchequer, announced an extension of free nursery education for three and four-year-olds. He also pledged funds to ensure that schools would be open from 8am to 6pm, to allow parents to work.

Every four-year-old has been entitled to 12.5 hours of free nursery care since 1998. Brown extended this to three-year-olds in England from 2004 and the limit will soon be extended to 15 hours. Government figures show that 95% of three and four-year-olds have used this scheme, meaning that 56,100 have not taken any places.

Yesterday's survey showed there had been no increase in the proportion of parents taking up places on the free scheme since 2004.

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The report, based on interviews with 7,200 parents last year, said: "A substantial minority of parents still thought that affordability was fairly or very poor (36%) and that there were not enough childcare places in their local area (37%).

"Despite a small improvement in parents' views on the affordability of childcare, cost remains an important barrier to the use of childcare for some parents, especially large families and those with younger children."

Brown wanted to ensure that childcare, often seen as the preserve of the middle classes, would reach the less well-off. But the report said many unemployed parents found nurseries and childminders prohibitively expensive. Many left their children with friends and grandparents. The study concluded that 47% of parents have used grandparents to help with childcare in the last year, with only 17% using after school clubs - a proportion unchanged since 2004.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families said: "We acknowledge that the take-up of childcare among lower income families is lower than among better-off families, which is why we spend £3.5m a day on support for childcare through the working tax credit."

A senior source at the department said it would take time for the strategy to be implemented. All schools will have extended hours by 2010, while the government has beaten its target for the number of Sure Start centres.

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- reprinted from The Guardian

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