

Richer families in England 'almost six times as likely to benefit from childcare expansion'^[1]

Exclusive: Plan to offer free childcare when both parents work 16 hours a week risks excluding children most in need, study reveals

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Excerpt

Richer families in England are almost six times as likely to benefit from the government's childcare expansion as low-income families, research has revealed.

Experts have warned that poorer children will be "denied access" to early years education because their parents do not meet the government's eligibility criteria, which states that both parents must work at least 16 hours a week.

A new report argues that children of low-income households where one or both parents do not work because of issues including ill health, caring responsibilities or lack of job opportunity or security, would benefit most from childcare but are being shut out from it, which will exacerbate existing inequality.

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The government is expanding the 30 hours of "free childcare" scheme to all eligible children of working parents aged between nine months and two years by September 2025.

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The head of social policy at the New Economics Foundation and lead author of the study, Tom Pollard, said the government was "prioritising parents' working status over children's needs" resulting in "children from low-income households being denied access to vital early years education".

Making childcare accessible for everyone would "improve the life chances of low-income children and, in the process, create widespread economic benefits", including jobs in the poorer areas of the country, he said.

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Children from low-income families "stand to benefit most from early years provision, but they don't have equal access to it, and the education they receive is more likely to be of lower quality," said Sir Peter Lampl, the founder of the Sutton Trust and the Education Endowment Foundation.

By the time they reach school, they are "well behind their better-off peers", he said. "Treating early years education just as childcare is storing up problems for the future and putting a brake on social mobility."

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Experts are warning that the government's planned childcare expansion is undeliverable, with anxious nursery managers saying they may offer a limited number of funded places and that a mass exodus of childminders and nursery staff risks undermining the expansion. A report published recently by the Early Education and Childcare Coalition calculated the sector could need up to 100,000 new workers if those intending to leave the profession within one year went through with their plan.

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