

Unhappy nursery tales [UK]^[1]

Education

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Parents aged over 20 who seek to improve their life chances through further education can find that there is no help with childcare fees because funds provided to colleges are not enough, according to a report published last month from the Daycare Trust, a national childcare charity.

Colleges of further education receive money from the government for a learner support fund, part of which can be used to finance childcare for student parents. Students over 20 don't have automatic entitlement to help with childcare but can apply for discretionary support at their colleges. These decide who to support by setting their own criteria - normally, this includes lone parents, benefit claimants, or those who don't have level 2 qualifications (roughly equivalent to GCSEs).

No money left

Maxine Hill, policy and research manager at Daycare Trust, says: "In September and October last year, we received a large number of calls from parents facing real difficulties in paying for childcare to enable them to access further education. The learner support fund has seen a decrease in the amount allocated to childcare in recent years, and parents can find there is simply no money left in the pot when they apply for funding for their childcare costs."

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"Demand for help with childcare fees usually exceeds supply of funds, and we often have to turn away student parents who meet our eligibility criteria," says Sarah Weller, student support advisor at Carshalton College in Surrey. "If the funding was increased, we could offer triple the number of places we currently provide."

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The report says that many colleges have to use their hardship funds to make up for the shortfall from the learner support fund. Some spread the funding over the year, which means there is limited access, while others use equally problematic methods. "We offer places on a first-come first-served basis, which unfortunately can mean that funds dry up quickly," says Weller.

Claudia Forbes, who allocates funding to student parents for childcare at Lewisham College, says: "Before the term begins, there is already a waiting list of up to 80 people for help with childcare fees. Within one week, the funds are finished."

Parents lucky enough to receive help with childcare fees find it doesn't always cover the full costs, says Hill, with some colleges covering 85% to 90% of costs.

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As well as paying for top-up fees that they cannot afford, student parents in some colleges sometimes have to cough up a month's deposit to secure a nursery place, which, for a full-time place in London, for example, runs into hundreds of pounds. "Students find this impossible to afford," says Hill. "We believe that students on low incomes need to know that their full childcare costs will be covered. The government is emphasising the importance of building up people's skills and employability, but this requires support and funding for childcare."

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Students in higher education have far more options. They can choose between the childcare grant, which covers up to 85% of childcare costs; the parents' learning allowance; and access to learning funds if fee top-ups are needed. Student parents aged under 20 also have more choices than those who are over 20 in further education.

Some colleges have their own nurseries on site, which makes things easier to organise, but in some of these there are three-year waiting lists, says the Daycare Trust report. Anne Jacobs, manager of the nursery at Lewisham College, says: "The learner support fund isn't enough, so we have to restrict offers of college nursery places to student parents who are on benefits. It is a shame, because we come

across parents who are in need and would like to do a further education course - but they are put off because of the difficulties they face with childcare."

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At the heart of the Children's Plan is the aim to halve child poverty by 2010 and eradicate it by 2020. For many disadvantaged parents, further education is a way to improve their lives and reduce the risk of poverty. "Without it I would have just stayed at home on benefits," says Lang. But as research shows, having a child can prevent parents from getting on that vital first rung of the ladder.

Region: Europe ^[2]

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