

# Mixed blessing [GB] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

In the extended family of government policies, childcare used to be the Victorian child - rarely seen, and certainly not heard about.

Families of children where both parents, or a lone parent, wanted to work, had to engage in a lonely private struggle to find suitable care at the right hours and the right price from the patchy provision available.

The current Labour government, even its worst enemies would agree, has changed all that. Almost as soon as it swept to power, it pulled childcare from the shadows towards the forefront of policy-making, culminating, three years ago, in the 10-year strategy for childcare.

The care of children, the then chancellor, Gordon Brown, pledged, would become a "new pillar of the welfare state", providing the dual benefits of a flying educational and developmental start for small children and support for parents to get back into work - helping to ease child poverty.

So, a decade after childcare policy was finally allowed to grow up, how has it turned out? Are parents relishing a brave new world allowing them to skip happily and guiltlessly from nursery to workplace, or are the same old problems still besetting working families?

According to a major report published today by the childcare campaign group Daycare Trust, there is still far to go before the needs of parents and children are matched by the childcare available.

The study, *Childcare Nation?*, paints a picture of "a nation divided in its experience of childcare and early years education", with high cost, unsuitable hours and concerns over quality still preventing many families from getting the childcare they want.

For the most disadvantaged, even the free entitlement to nursery education for three- and four-year-olds is not always taken up, and the baffling complexity of the childcare tax credit is deterring many of those eligible from claiming much-needed help.

Despite a government-driven dramatic expansion in both pre-school childcare and out-of-school care, provision can still be very patchy, particularly in the school holidays or for the thousands of families who work "atypical hours" such as evenings and weekends.

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This rather mixed picture could be partly down to the way the Labour government sought to expand childcare, according to today's report. Tony Blair's administration never attempted to create the kind of universal, heavily state-subsidised system established in Scandinavian countries; instead it opted for a market-led approach based on funding demand rather than supply.

Stimulated by parental demand that would be supported by childcare tax credits to increase affordability, the theory went, childcare provision would flower. In deprived areas, where the market would not tread, the government pitched in significant pump-priming money to create new places, as well as investing to increase quality.

While this "mixed economy" approach has expanded places and settings, there are concerns over whether the increase is sustainable - a significant minority of nurseries are operating with empty places and losing money. Provision in deprived areas may prove particularly vulnerable once the start-up funding from government initiatives runs out.

Meanwhile, parents still aren't getting the flexible care at the times they want. "There is continued evidence that more needs to be done to assess parents' needs at a local level, and that the government might need to increase its involvement in order to deal with market imperfections," warns the study.

Lack of money also has major implications for the quality of childcare, since low pay does not attract well qualified staff. The researchers raise concerns that a high proportion of the childcare workforce still does not meet minimum Ofsted requirements - NVQ level 3 for managers and at least half the staff at level 2 in each setting.

In the end, says Garnham, it comes down to hard cash. "It seems there is not yet enough money in the system to deliver the kind of quality that would put us on a par with other European countries."

That tension between cost and quality lies at the heart of the UK's childcare challenge, she believes. "It is everyone's view that parents are

at saturation point. We have very expensive childcare which parents pay the lion's share of. So how do we get the quality we want without passing on the costs to parents? It seems to us the answer has to be more public investment."

When good childcare is free, the report makes clear, most parents grasp it with enthusiasm. The strategy to expand free early years education has been a great success - take-up is near universal (though, worryingly, the most disadvantaged and low-income groups are still staying away).

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There's a lesson there for a government still keen to subsidise demand rather than supply, according to the Daycare Trust. Its report notes that the success of free early education for three- and four-year-olds "could be applied to the development of paid-for childcare: providing parents with free childcare at the point of delivery, rather than giving complicated subsidies, works effectively".

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A host of recommendations in the report also includes moves to create a better qualified and paid workforce, more government funding to boost more flexible childcare provision - especially in disadvantaged areas, increased subsidies for parents and more sophisticated research to disentangle the effects of parental attitudes towards childcare services from barriers that might restrict their choices.

It's a long list, but one that will provide a telling test of the depth of commitment of Gordon Brown and his opposition counterparts to ensuring the newest "pillar of the welfare state" is strong and enduring enough to merit the name.

- reprinted from the Guardian

**Region:** Europe <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** quality <sup>[3]</sup>

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