

Free care 'should be given to all toddlers' [GB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents should be entitled to free child care for children under three to bring Britain closer to the high levels of state-funded care found in other European countries, according to a new children's services thinktank launched today.

Capacity, whose board is chaired by Norman Glass, a creator of the government's Sure Start programme, argues that the government must provide much more support for families if it is to justify ambitious claims to regard child care as a policy priority.

Child care and early years education will be highlighted in the government's five-year plan for education to be launched on Thursday.

In a paper out today, Capacity says ministers must build on significant expansion in childcare provision since Labour took power in 1997 by guaranteeing under-threes 12.5 hours' state-funded care each week - the same total to which three- and four-year-olds are currently entitled.

The free care available for three- and four-year-olds, meanwhile, should be extended from 12.5 to 20 hours a week, representing five full half days at nursery instead of the two-and-a-half hour sessions currently available, it adds.

Capacity, which will advise public bodies working with children up to 14 as well as conducting its own research, warns that Britain still lags far behind its European neighbours.

Of 21 western countries in a survey by the Childcare Trust, the UK offered the lowest number of hours of free child care.

If Britain is to catch up, Capacity argues, even the government's ambitious target of 1,700 children's centres - one in each of the 20% most deprived wards in the country - should be doubled.

Children's centres are intended to bring together a range of children's services, ranging from child care to health support to parenting advice, on one site.

While they are widely supported, the government has faced criticism for confining them to the poorest boroughs, excluding high numbers of families living in poverty outside those areas.

Margaret Lochrie, former chief executive of the pre-School Learning Alliance and a Capacity director, said the government needed to devote more spending to early years education and care.

She said: "It is a difficult decision for a government to switch resources from the gold standard of university education or schools, but that is the right thing to do if you really want to challenge social exclusion."

A mature child care system along continental lines required a universal state-funded service, she said.

The government today also faces criticism over child care from the Social Market Foundation thinktank, which claims that the national childcare strategy is failing to deliver for many poor families priced out of costly early years care.

The current system of subsidising child care via parents through the child care tax credit will never create an affordable solution, according to researcher Vidhya Alakeson. Instead, the government should fund the provision of high quality care directly.

- reprinted from the Guardian

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