

Top-up fees pervade free childcare ^[1]

Nearly a quarter of parents whose children receive free entitlement to childcare are being asked to pay "top-up fees", research has revealed.

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Conducted by the Daycare Trust, the survey of 400 parents whose children receive 12.5 hours of free entitlement, showed 23 per cent of them had been asked to pay for some of it.

Last month, CYP Now reported that nurseries had been charging parents for childcare and reimbursing them at a later date, despite a legal duty to provide the entitlement free at the point of delivery. The survey's results confirm that this is happening, with seven per cent of parents reporting being charged "up-front fees".

The findings come as the free entitlement is extended to 15 hours for all three and four-year-olds, and a new code of practice for childcare providers is introduced, making charging top-up fees for free childcare unlawful.

Kate Groucutt, Daycare Trust policy director, said: "Our survey shows that under the previous code there was widespread use of top-up charges, a real lack of flexibility and a lack of transparency, which has resulted in many parents not using the full entitlement and being confused about the system.

"Our findings show how important the new code of practice is so we are delighted that the government is going ahead with that and the extension to 15 hours."

The charity also found that only 38 per cent of parents receive bills with a clear breakdown of costs and 12 per cent are often left unsure of whether they have been charged top-up fees.

Groucutt added: "Good practice has been highlighted in this research where providers have really transparent billing systems and where parents absolutely understand how many hours are free. But where there is not good practice we hope the new code will help make the system uniform across the country and that parents can start to see this as a right for them and their children."

Purnima Tanuku, chief executive of the National Day Nurseries Association, (NDNA) also supports the new code: "We hope it will help nurseries to be fully clear with parents about what is free and what is chargeable," she said. "But funding remains an issue and delivering the free entitlement is becoming increasingly unsustainable."

Groucutt said the Daycare Trust was considering conducting future surveys to track the progress of the delivery of the entitlement.

- reprinted from Children & Young People Now

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