

Parents set to benefit from changes to free childcare ^[1]

Children's minister will propose more flexible free childcare entitlement, which will benefit working parents

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EXCERPTS

Millions of working parents could benefit from a proposed change to a free childcare entitlement being announced as part of a shake-up of early-years education.

Parents of all three- and four-year-olds are currently entitled to 15 hours of free childcare, which they have to use spread across three days.

The children's minister, Sarah Teather, will propose on Wednesday that the time can be used in two days, enabling many more parents of toddlers to get a part-time job without paying extra to top up the free childcare.

Ministers will also propose an extension to the time in which the hours can be used; from 7am to 7pm rather than from 8am to 6pm as at present, fitting in better with the hours of commuters and shift-workers.

Around 1.2 million children in England aged three and four - around 95% of the total number in this age group - currently benefit from free early-years education.

In an interview with the Guardian, Teather said the changes were aimed at making childcare more flexible.

"The reality of a lot of families' lives, especially if you're trying to get two children out in the morning, is that you may have to begin your childcare arrangements earlier than 8 o'clock.

"You've got to drop one child in one place, and another child in another, and get yourself to work and be in by half-past eight. It can be tremendously challenging for families."

Anand Shukla, acting chief executive of the Daycare Trust, the national childcare charity, welcomed the change: "This gives parents a fighting chance of being able to get to work and take their children to the nursery for that seven-and-a-half hours, without having to top up the extra time from their own pay packet."

In a further change, Teather will propose that every two-year-old should receive a progress check, to pick up any signs of delay in development.

This is likely to be implemented by September 2012, after a consultation on the changes, which will be launched this autumn.

Parents will be encouraged to append details of this progress check in the "red book" that records their child's vaccinations, creating a combined health and education passport.

The announcement forms part of a wider government strategy on early intervention, which includes plans set out by Iain Duncan Smith for an innovation fund aimed at getting 40,000 unemployed teenagers ready for work.

The government will declare on Wednesday that getting children "school ready" is to be the new core purpose of children's centres. It will announce an extra £3m in up to 30 different areas for trials of payment-by-results schemes that reach out to the most disadvantaged families.

Local schemes will be rewarded on how well they narrow the gap between rich and poor in child development, and how well they raise children's attainment and improve family health.

Children from a more deprived background tend to have poorer language skills when they arrive at school, research shows.

Teather said: "To get a child to be school ready, in a lot of people's minds, is about getting them to sit still in rows and hold a pen, and of course that's not what it's about, it's making sure that children are resilient enough to be able to cope at school.

"A lot of that is about supporting parents in their parenting."

Teather draws on research that shows that intervention in children's centres can reduce "harsh parenting".

It sounds like a small thing, but actually harsh parenting styles tend to lead to [problems with] behaviour at a later stage, going into those difficult years of adolescence. It's those young people who end up in the criminal justice system or who end up excluded from school. The perception is that some of these things are fluffy, but actually they're the bread and butter of what this government is trying to do on early

intervention."

The minister is also looking at encouraging parents and charities to become more involved in running Sure Start children's centres, arguing that community-based models are more likely to respond to parents' needs.

The department for education is looking at set-ups like the Millmead children's centre in Margate, a community mutual where parents are involved in key decisions.

Jan Collins, chair of the partnership that runs the centre, said there was initially "huge scepticism" from parents when it was set up.

"People felt let down, they'd been promised various things by health service and the local authority and they'd not delivered."

There are now seven elected community representatives on the mutual's board of 13, who exercise a collective right of veto over decisions. Parents have set spending priorities, such as insisting that the centre put on paediatric first-aid courses.

The mutual runs a nursery, offering flexible hours. Collins said: "We don't tell them you have to have a morning or an afternoon - they ask for two hours on Thursday or four hours on Friday. We offer them a service that is very different from most private nurseries, and certainly local authority ones."

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