

Eminent academics warn childcare reforms will lower quality^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The Government's plans to reform childcare will lead to an unintended consequence of reducing quality, a group of eminent academics and experts in early years has warned.

Naomi Eisenstadt, (pictured), Professor Kathy Sylva, with Sandra Mathers from the University of Oxford, and Brenda Taggart from the Institute of Education have set out their concerns about education and childcare minister Elizabeth Truss's proposals in the context of an analysis of research evidence.

While they applaud the aims of 'More Great Childcare' for a highly qualified, professionally led workforce, they say that they have 'grave concerns that the detailed proposals are unlikely to achieve the desired outcomes in the immediate future'.

They examine the impact cutting ratios would have on children's experiences based on the Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund, which explored the relationships between quality and the characteristics of early years settings, including staff qualifications and adult-to-child ratios.

In their paper, 'More Great Childcare Or Not - Research Evidence'^[2], they say that the GLF study showed that ratios were very important for babies and toddlers, and that therefore relaxing ratios for under-threes so that staff can look after more children 'will lead to a reduction in quality and improving qualifications would not lessen the impact. Quality is likely to go down; with the evidence pointing to reductions in the quality of care routines, health and safety, and the extent to which settings are able to provide for children's individual needs. Given that quality may drop, even if qualifications are improved, it seems sensible to leave the current ratios as they stand for children under three.'

While there is 'little hard evidence on ratios with childminders', the paper points to EPPSE (Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education Project), which found that 'a rich early years home learning environment', including 'reading to children, playing with numbers and letters, and walks to the library', was found to have long-term educational benefits for children. It says, 'These will not be such rich experiences with larger numbers of children. Indeed, safety concerns will make informal outings virtually impossible.'

For pre-school children (three- to five-year-olds) research from the GLF shows that both qualifications and ratios were related to quality. 'This means that raising qualifications while also increasing ratios may not lead to quality improvement; but overall quality will not go down,' the authors of the paper write.

Current ratios should be maintained for this age group, but to maximise any improvement in quality a graduate leader should be working directly with the children, as the research showed that EYPs had the most impact on quality in the rooms that they worked.

Finally, the authors argue against the proposals to reduce floor space, which research shows is essential to children's physical development and well-being.

A Department for Education spokesperson said, 'Quality is central to our childcare reforms which will give parents choice and their young children the best start in life.

'There is a wealth of evidence which links highly qualified staff with high quality early education - which makes all the difference as young children prepare for school. For example, Andreas Schleicher of the OECD has said that "staff qualifications are the best predictor of the quality of early childhood education and care".

'Our reforms draw on the best aspects of childcare systems in countries like France and Denmark.'

-reprinted from Nursery World

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