

# A question of priorities: Childcare <sup>[1]</sup>

Editorial

**Author:** Guardian

**Source:** Guardian

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 16 Feb 2014

## AVAILABILITY

Full article on the Guardian <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

It is more than 50 years since the ideal of university education was upended by the Robbins report's determination that deciding who went to university should not be a matter of manpower economics but of entitlement. The report declared that everyone capable of benefiting from higher education - Lord Robbins called it the pool of talent - should be able to go. Embedding such a revolution took a generation, and arguably it was never quite achieved. But the report represented a paradigm shift. Now a similar revolution in thinking about the other end of the learning spectrum, the pre-school years, is overdue.

There is a political consensus building around the need to offer some childcare from the age of two, as is already in place for all three- and four-year-olds. In a speech last week, the education minister Liz Truss bounced back from her defeat over relaxing the numbers of babies and children a childminder could care for with ambitious - her critics would say unworkable - proposals, including encouraging schools to offer childcare and early years learning for some two-year-olds. Labour, just as ambitiously, wants to work towards universal childcare for all pre-schoolers from two up. All parties agree that schools should offer a longer day with more wraparound care, although they disagree on how the extra time might best be used. So attitudes to schools and education are changing. But the underlying justification remains - just like university until Lord Robbins turned his mind to it - a question of labour market economics.

Of course, the economic arguments are important. The costs of not enough good affordable childcare are all too clear in UK labour statistics. The number of women who work is above the European average, until they become mothers. The Treasury loses tax revenue, and mothers' links with the job market weaken, with long-term consequences for their earnings. One thinktank, the Institute for Public Policy Research, calculates that universal provision of 25 hours a week for all pre-school children could, over the four years, benefit the Treasury by £20,000 more than it cost. Successive governments have engineered taxes so that work is demonstrably the route out of poverty for parents. Last month, a survey by Mumsnet and the Resolution Foundation confirmed that a fifth of working mothers would like to work more, and two-fifths of non-working mothers would like to work a bit. Where trusted childcare is available it reduces the motherhood penalty - the pay gap between women and women who are mothers (it ought to, but doesn't, include women who care for adults).

Making childcare policy integral to the attack on poverty by channelling support for parents through the tax system helped to make work pay, although the coalition's latest proposals, which mean extra cash for families with household income up to £300,000, are a mockery of the idea. But childcare itself was mainly left to the market. The unsurprising consequence is that the poorer the area, the scarcer and less affordable the childcare. The Family and Childcare Trust reckons that a quarter - 30,000 - of the most needy two-year-olds will not be able to take advantage of the government commitment of free, quality early years education by September 2014 because, despite extra funding, there aren't the places. London is particularly vulnerable. The IPPR has found that while take-up of 15 hours' free care for older children is good, the cost of further hours is too high, so many mothers can't do more hours. In December the government's own research showed that more than 60% of children in affluent areas used some kind of formal childcare, but only 44% of children in the poorest ones. Affordable, available childcare remains a myth for too many families.

This is about more than the economics of parenthood, the future earning potential of children, or even increasing social mobility. Like higher education 50 years ago, childcare should be a question of what is best for children themselves. That means making the first priority access to good, affordable childcare.

- reprinted from the Guardian

**Region:** Europe <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** affordability <sup>[4]</sup>

quality <sup>[5]</sup>

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#### Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/14/02/question-priorities-childcare> [2]

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/16/question-priorities-childcare-editorial> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4]

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