

Childhood

It seems that some aspect of family life is always in the news — the decline of marriage, the increase in divorce, the number of lone parents, out-of-control teenagers, parents afraid to let their children play outdoors — the list goes on.

The many changes that have taken place in family structures and roles are not, of course, necessarily bad or harmful — indeed, many of them are positive and have beneficial effects. However, children, by definition, are a particularly vulnerable group in society. Recently, several research studies have looked at the impact on children of changing family life, and also of education — the next phase in the socialisation process after primary socialisation within the family.

The UNICEF Innocenti Report was published in February 2007. This looked at the wellbeing of children in 21 of the most

economically advanced countries in the world. The UK was placed at the bottom of the ranking of overall child wellbeing (see *SOCIOLOGY REVIEW*, Vol. 17, No. 1). So, what else do we know about the state of childhood in the UK?

Employment and childcare

It is increasingly the norm for parents, even those with young children, to be in paid employment, although many mothers work part time. This has led to a significant increase in the demand for childcare and nursery school places. Even if a parent is at home full time, it is often seen as desirable for small children to spend some time at a nursery or playgroup. The government has said that from October 2008, lone parents whose youngest child is aged 12 or over will be required to be available for, and actively seek, work. This is likely to increase the demand for childcare and after-school clubs even further.

Under the government's Sure Start programme, all 3- and 4-year-olds are guaranteed a free, part-time early education place in either state-maintained, voluntary, private or independent establishments. In this context, 'part-time' means 12.5 hours per week for 38 weeks per year. By 2010, it is intended that there will be a childcare place for all children aged 3–14 between 8.00 a.m. and 6.00 p.m. each weekday.

The take-up of the free early education places has been impressive. In January 2007, 96% of 3-year olds and 97% of 4-year olds were taking advantage of this provision. However, where parents are in employment, especially full-time employment, the free part-time education needs to be supplemented by paid care to cover the additional hours when the parents are at work. Remember that the UK has the longest average working hours in Europe, so the number of childcare hours needed is likely to be considerable. For children under the age of 3, and for the extra hours for older children, working parents will usually have to pay the full costs of childcare. This can be expensive. A survey published in 2008 by the Daycare Trust showed that average childcare costs are rising above the rate of inflation. A typical full-time nursery place in England for a child under the age of 2 is now £159 per week (see Table 1) — and average earnings are £457 per week.

The figures above represent the average costs of 50 hours a week in a nursery or with a childminder, and 15 hours a week in an out-of-school club. Remember that the figures are an average — parents in outer London will typically have to pay £202 per week to put a child under the age of 2 in a nursery.

Is childcare a good thing?

The changes in family roles and structures mean that for many parents of young children, full-time parenting for at least one parent is not seen to be an option, either through choice or financial necessity, and sometimes a combination of both. What are the effects on young children of being regularly separated



School breakfast clubs are increasingly in demand

from their parents, sometimes for the majority of the day during the working week?

A study conducted in 2005 by Professor Michael Lamb of Cambridge University and Lieselotte Ahnert of the Free University of Berlin looked at 70 small children in Berlin. The children, aged 15 months, were tracked from before they started childcare, through their first day, and then afterwards as they adapted and became more used to the childcare situation. The children were tested for their stress levels, as measured by the level of the stress hormone cortisol in their saliva. The researchers found that stress levels increased when the children entered childcare, and although the levels reduced as the children adapted to the new environment, they were still above normal several months later. The report advises that, if children in childcare are going to be properly settled and reassured, parents will need to provide 'child-focused emotional exchange', particularly in the hours before sleep.

Another study published in 2005, carried out jointly by Oxford University and the University of London, monitored 1,200 children from birth to school age. This was a longitudinal study that started in 1998. The children, from London and Oxford, were studied at the ages of 3 months, 10 months, 18 months, 3 years and 4 years. Half the children were cared for full time by their mother, a third had a mother who returned to work after 7 months, and 8% had a mother who went back to work after 3 months. The study showed that those children who

were *not* looked after full time by their mother tended to show higher levels of aggression and became more withdrawn and sad. The social and emotional development of these children was 'definitely less good' than that of children receiving full-time care from their mother. Overall, the research concluded that mothers were the best carers, followed by nannies and childminders, then grandparents, with nursery care the worst. However, the director of the research, Dr Penelope Leach, said that the results were not a call for mothers to give up work and stay at home. Rather, the research highlighted the need for developmental, high-quality childcare.

In 2001, the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative was set up, at a cost of £370 million, to provide more childcare facilities in some of the most disadvantaged areas of England. In April 2007 the results of an evaluation of the scheme were published. The study, carried out by researchers at Oxford University for the Department for Education and Skills, found that young children who spent 3 or more days a week in nurseries were more likely than those who attended only for 1 or 2 days a week to become anti-social, worried and upset. The length of time the children had been attending nursery also seemed to have an impact, with researchers finding that the longer children had been attending their neighbourhood nursery, the more anti-social they were. On the other hand, those children who spent only up to 30 hours a week in childcare showed more confidence and were more sociable with their peers.

Table 1
Childcare costs
in Britain (£)

Region	Nursery (under 2)	Nursery (2 and over)	Childminder (under 2)	Childminder (2 and over)	Out-of-school club
England regional average	159	149	144	142	43
Wales average	142	141	153	151	36
Scotland average	141	128	139	141	38

Source: Daycare Trust Childcare Costs Survey 2008



Do you think children start school too young?