

Written evidence submitted by Equalise: ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Health Equity on 10th October 2025

Education Committee

Inquiry: Early years: Improving support for children and parents

Equalise: ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Health Equity is a £9 million ESRC-funded project (2024-2029) based in UCL's Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, with academic partners at City St George's University London, University of Essex, University of Glasgow, University of Strathclyde and Universite Toulouse III. Led by Professors Yvonne Kelly and Anne McMunn, in partnership with experts in local and national government and a wide range of health equity-focused advocacy and voluntary groups, **Equalise** tackles avoidable health inequalities across four key themes: Learning, Care, Work and Place. The Care theme focuses on how childcare uptake, provision and quality influence parental employment, health and wellbeing outcomes.

A. Executive summary

A.1. Research shows that navigating the childcare market is often stressful and costly for parents. Studies highlight that parents of children under the age of three face limited and expensive options, and reliance on formal childcare is linked to higher parenting stress, especially among mothers.

A.2. Affordability and access challenges are unevenly distributed. Migrant families, single parents, and those in deprived areas encounter difficulties in balancing childcare needs with employment.

A.3. Informal childcare, particularly support from grandparents, is a vital part of the UK childcare system. Studies show it increases mothers' labour market participation and enables families in deprived areas to access work and training. However, providing intensive or regular childcare can place physical and emotional demands on grandparents, which may negatively affect their own health and wellbeing.

A.4. To address these challenges, the government may wish to consider expanding affordable childcare provision, particularly for families with children under three. The government could also explore ways to enhance financial support for single-parent and low-income households, and to recognise and support intergenerational care while ensuring the wellbeing of grandparents is safeguarded.

B. How easy is it for parents to find the right childcare for their children which they can also afford?

B.1. Studies report that choosing a childcare provider is marked by feelings of risk, uncertainty, and time pressure. Parents with young children under three encounter the greatest difficulties due to fewer and more costly options¹, and many describe the process

¹ <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3564>

as emotionally draining, with concerns about quality and trust compounding the financial burden.²

B.2. Parenting stress was largely explained by a lack of support among both lower- and higher-educated mothers, although for different reasons. Lower-educated mothers faced barriers to resources, while higher-educated mothers experienced stress linked to combining demanding jobs with childcare.²

B.3. Parents often describe being forced into financially burdensome or suboptimal choices, which can negatively affect family wellbeing and the home learning environment.³

Recommendation: Expand affordable childcare provision for families with children under three and introduce measures that reduce the stress and financial strain associated with navigating the formal childcare market.

C. Is affordability of and access to provision more difficult for certain groups of parents or children?

C.1. Evidence indicates that affordability and access are especially problematic for specific groups:

- **Migrant families:** High childcare costs, limited flexibility, and hidden discrimination can push some migrant and ethnic-minority mothers out of paid work, often against their preference.⁴⁻⁵
- **Single parents:** Studies highlight disproportionately high childcare-related stress, driven by single incomes and limited family support.⁶⁻⁷
- **Families in deprived areas:** Research shows that grandparental childcare is particularly critical in deprived communities, supporting parents to work or study.⁸ Access to grandparental support has also been shown to increase mothers' likelihood of labour market participation.⁹ However, reliance on grandparents may place strain on older adults themselves, with some evidence suggesting intensive caregiving is linked to poorer wellbeing among grandparents.¹⁰

Recommendation: Provide targeted support to single-parent and low-income households through expanded subsidies or free hours. Invest in flexible childcare that accommodates irregular or shift-based working hours. Develop policies that recognise the dual impact of intergenerational care: protecting grandparents' wellbeing while reducing over-reliance on them as a substitute for affordable formal provision.

Acknowledgments

This response has been prepared by the **Equalise** Care theme with contributions from:

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² <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000129>

³ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2022.100082>

⁴ <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-018-0102-6>

⁵ <https://oro.open.ac.uk/103723/>

⁶ <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12991-023-00454-1>

⁷ <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0247959>

⁸ <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daab104>

⁹ <https://doi.org/10.1017/S004727941700071X>

¹⁰ <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2021.1963952>

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We would be pleased to speak further about our response. Please contact Enrico Pfeifer (enrico.pfeifer@ucl.ac.uk).

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