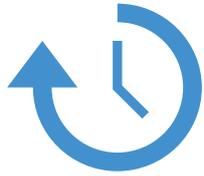


GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE

FIVE KEY MESSAGES



TIME MATTERS:

Parents want to spend more quality time with their children



FAMILY MATTERS:

Parents want a good work-life balance



CHOICE MATTERS:

Parents want supports and incentives to have the option to stay at home



MONEY MATTERS:

Parents want additional support to reduce their childcare expenses



SUPPORTS MATTER:

Parents want well-funded health and family support services, including breastfeeding services

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FOREWORD

Pregnancy and the early years of childhood are the most crucial times to ensure that children grow up healthy and happy and have the best possible chance of achieving their full potential. There is much research evidence that investing in evidence-based early intervention and preventative supports will result in better outcomes for children as well as in significant savings to the exchequer throughout the lifecourse of the child.



For many years the Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF) has been engaged in supporting initiatives that provide early interventions to children and families. In recent times this work has included the Parenting Support Initiative and the Nurture Programme – Infant Health and Wellbeing, full details of which can be found on our website at www.khf.ie.

Crucial to early intervention and preventative work is informing and empowering parents, so it is important that policy makers and service providers know what works for parents and what additional supports they would find most helpful.

As part of a cross organisation approach to marking Universal Children’s Day in November 2017, KHF carried out this survey. Almost 500 parents told us what helps them give their children the best start in life and what else would they find helpful in eleven key areas of their lives. While we invited parents to focus on pregnancy and the first three years of their child’s life, some of their feedback also relates to their older children.

The survey was designed to be as open as possible, giving parents the opportunity to give their opinions in a range of key areas of their lives. Parents responded with depth, thought and consideration. We thank them for their time, their insights and their wisdom.

We engaged an independent researcher, Dr Grainne Hickey, to analyse the survey responses and to write a full report and this summary report. The full report is available at www.khf.ie/the-voices-of-parents-final-report-2018. We thank Grainne for her attention to detail in analysing the data and in presenting the findings in a way which is clear and accessible and reflects the richness of the feedback that parents shared with us.

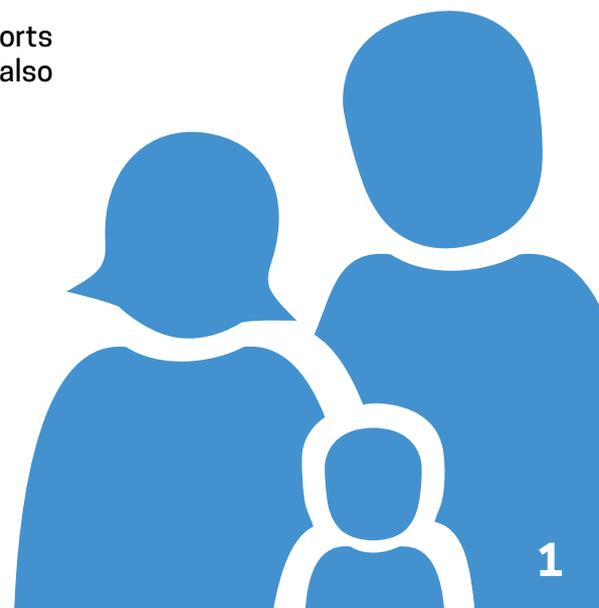


We encourage readers to read the entire report rather than just “their section”. Parents don’t always view the world in the same way that we structure services.

We are making the survey findings available to all the agencies that parents mentioned in the hope that the findings will inform future policy and service development. We also hope that agencies will consider how they can develop a culture of parental and service user consultation to ensure their services are closely attuned to the supports that parents tell us they need and find most helpful.

The findings outlined here can help to inform capacity building efforts across a range of family-focused services and supports and can also identify avenues for further research.

Dr Noëlle Spring,
Director,
Katharine Howard Foundation
March 2018



WHAT WE ASKED PARENTS

While we asked parents to focus on their experiences of pregnancy and of parenting their young children, many parents also shared feedback on parenting older children.

We were keen not to be over prescriptive and to encourage parents to think as broadly as possible.

We asked parents two questions across eleven key areas of their lives:

- What helps you give your child the best start in life?
- What could be improved to help you in giving your child the best start in life?

The eleven key areas were:

Being a Parent	Family Support and Child Protection services
Family and Friends	Social Protection and Taxation services
Community	Local Authorities
The Internet	Government
Health services	Employers
Early Childcare and Education services	

The survey ended with two open ended questions to make sure we had not missed any key issues parents wanted to tell us about.

The survey was promoted widely through personal, professional and service networks as well as through social media. The survey received a total of 481 valid responses representing the parents of 888 children. Responses came from every county in Ireland.

A detailed analysis of the responses including direct quotes from parents are compiled in the full report on the survey which is available at: www.khf.ie/the-voices-of-parents-final-report-2018

ADVICE TO THE READER

This report is laid out with a page for each area parents were asked to address, as displayed to the right.

The questions that parents were asked were open ended. Therefore, if the report highlights that “one third said...” or “11% said....” it does not imply that the rest thought the opposite – it just means that they did not mention the issue.

We encourage readers to read the entire report rather than just “their section”. Parents don’t always view the world in the same way in which services are structured.

HEADING
WHAT HELPS PARENTS
WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED TO HELP PARENTS MORE
QUOTES FROM PARENTS



Parenting behaviours which are identified as being crucial to child development include:

- Engaging in activities and experiences (e.g. play)
- Positive communication and listening
- Providing structure, routine and modelling positive behaviours.

Parenting is understood as a multidimensional role.

Providing love, security, supporting healthy development, building children's social and emotional skills and promoting educational development are highlighted as important for giving children the best start in life.



QUALITY OF LIFE



Parents say they want to spend more time with their children.

More time for play and activities is a priority for parents.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Many parents say they want greater work-life balance. Balancing parenting with work commitments and household management is challenging for parents.

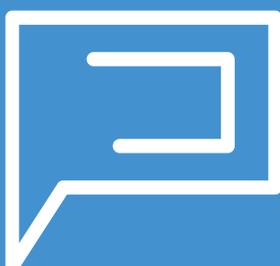
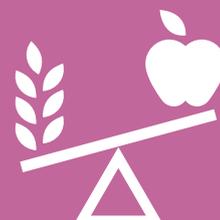
PARENTING SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES

Supports which would help to reinforce parenting skills are identified as a need.

Almost one in every five parents say they would benefit from additional parenting supports and resources.

HEALTH AND ACTIVITY

Parents say they want to help their children develop healthy eating patterns and emphasise the importance of outdoor activities and exercise.



"I nurture and care for my children, giving them love, security, confidence, looking after all their emotional and physical needs"

"I try to be more present in their day to day woes, free my head for them and encourage more independence and responsibility. Be more present to both of them and not allow the pressures of both work and running a household to over take that"



Parents say they highly valued the presence of extended family and friends in the lives of their children.

Family and friends are seen as providing support, encouragement and love and as a source of fun and learning.

Grandparents, in particular, are seen as important role models.

Family and friends are perceived as a crucial source of support for parents providing:

- childminding and babysitting support
- practical help with housework and cooking
- emotional support, guidance and advice.



SUPPORT AND HELP

25%

of parents say they lack readily available and close extended family support and feel it is difficult to develop support networks

18%

say they want their family and friends to spend more time with their children, play with them and listen and encourage their child to a greater extent

11%

say that they would like their family and friends to be more supportive of their parenting decisions and practices

Parents also want grandparents to provide fewer sugary and non-nutritional foods to their children.



"Sharing stories is important to help learning, positive role modelling and mentoring..."

"Due to distance and their own commitments they are not able to support me. Difficult to make friends especially when the children were younger. Felt socially isolated."



A wide range of community services and amenities are highlighted as helping to support high quality of life for families and children. The most frequently cited supports and facilities are:



28% Parent and child groups and parenting support programmes



21% Clean and safe parks, playgrounds and play spaces



18% Local schools, play schools and childcare facilities.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

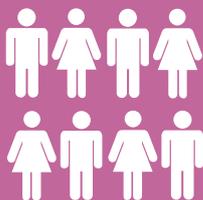
37% of parents perceive a need for development of green areas or the installation of playgrounds in their local area, as well as community centres and sports facilities.

COMMUNITY SAFETY

A need for improved community safety is identified which includes:

- Traffic regulation
- Safe walking and cycling paths
- Pedestrianised and civic areas.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES



Almost one third of parents say that families would benefit from greater availability of community-based family or child-focused supports, such as parent and baby and parent and toddler groups, breastfeeding groups or youth clubs.



“People in my local area are very friendly and love interacting with my son. Most people are respectful, enjoy keeping the area tidy and clean. We have a local volunteer run playgroup, parent and baby cinema, baby friendly cafes and lots of breast feeding support and parent support”

“Parents should have access to parenting courses. Many, many parents are struggling with their children’s behaviour and lack the tools or the support from their immediate family and friends to change negative patterns of behaviour”

58% of parents say they regularly consult internet sources for guidance and advice in relation to child development and parenting.



Parents see the internet as providing a valuable tool for accessing information. Internet sources are also described as helping to provide reassurance and confidence in parenting choices, particularly during times of stress and uncertainty.

RELIABILITY OF INFORMATION

Although the internet is an important source of information, many parents highlight fears regarding the reliability of this information.

Parents say they would like a trustworthy website with evidence-based information on parenting and child development.

CHILD SAFETY AND INTERNET REGULATION

Parents say child safety is a significant concern and many feel they would like more safety measures and regulation of internet content to ensure the protection of children.



LIMITING USE

Parents say it is important to limit household, and particularly children's, use of internet and screen technologies.

WHICH ONLINE RESOURCES ARE PARENTS USING

- The most popular internet resource is Facebook with 25% of all participants citing regular usage of the social media site
- 15% identify Google as an important resource
- 14% identify medical websites as an important tool.

TOP 5

The most commonly cited Irish websites are:

HSE.ie eumom.ie
Rollercoaster.ie First1000days.ie
breastfeeding.ie



50% of parents highlighted that developmental check-ups provided by public health nursing (PHN) services are beneficial to child development.

A significant proportion describe these PHN services as providing high-quality supports for parents and young children.

More than one third of parents say they value the provision of free GP care to children under the age of 6. Free vaccinations are also perceived as a beneficial service.



Almost one quarter of parents say that they perceive maternity services as providing good care, promoting maternal health, facilitating healthy pregnancies and promoting safe deliveries.

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT



Over half of all survey respondents say there is a need for capacity development and service reform within the health services.

Parents perceive health services to be under-staffed and under-resourced.

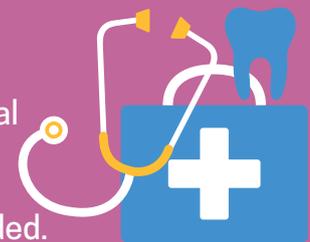
Child mental health services and waiting times for specialist services are identified as key areas of concern.

ENHANCED CHILD SERVICES

27% of parents say that their children would benefit from additional developmental check-ups throughout the early years.

Increased access to dental services is also identified as a need.

Expansion of the free GP scheme to older children is also recommended.



SUPPORTS FOR PARENTS

Parents identify a need for enhanced mental health and emotional supports for parents.

Development of breastfeeding supports and services is also suggested by 21% of parents.

“The best thing the health services provided for me was access to a breastfeeding support group. [...] It also meant I was linked in with my PHN and had access to ask her any questions I had about my son”



“I think more frequent visits and longer hours from a nurse when you come home from hospital with a new baby. Mothers should get emotional support in hospital after having a baby. We should have home help available to us with a baby up to a year old. More breastfeeding support. It takes a village to raise a child but we don't have that anymore. We need more professionals available to talk to”



Overall parents report positive experiences and perceptions of early child care and education (ECCE) services. Parents perceive ECCE services as caring and safe spaces where their children are loved and secure. Government schemes promoting access to ECCE are highly valued.

22% of parents say that ECCE services contribute positively to their child's social and emotional skills development. Parents see ECCE services as helping children to establish friendships and develop a sense of independence and connection outside of the family.



Play-based and child-led curricula are valued by parents. Parents also view ECCE services as promoting school-readiness and fostering learning skills.

ACCESS AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT



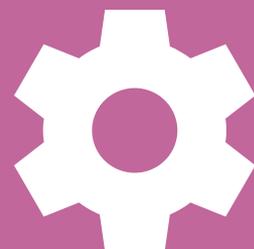
There is strong sentiment among parents that ECCE services are expensive and that childcare costs place a financial burden on families.

Further development and expansion of affordable, accessible services, as well as increased financial support for parents utilizing ECCE services are a significant priority.

DEVELOPMENT OF ECCE SERVICES

41% of survey respondents recommend some form of capacity development for ECCE services such as:

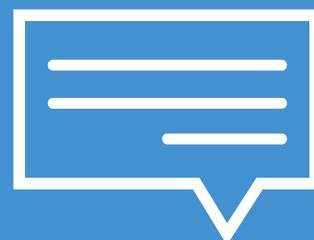
- Improving healthy eating and health promotion policies
 - Strengthening of child-led/play-based curricula
- Professional development opportunities for service providers and practitioners
 - Enhancing regulation of services.



FUNDING

Parents said that increased public funding for ECCE services was required. Parents also said that childcare practitioners and service providers did not receive sufficient financial reward for their work.

“They are amazing - They teach children social skills, how to play and make friends. Improve their oral language. Foster a love of art, music, dance, etc., in the child. Help the child to learn basic classroom rules like lining up, taking turns and not shouting out etc...”



“Better universal funding for all families, especially working parents and disadvantaged families. Funding should be at least doubled as it is too expensive for parents to pay”



Over half of survey participants said they do not have a good understanding of family support and child protection services or they have no direct experiences of these services. This suggests that a large proportion of parents do not see family support and child protection services as a relevant support in their families' lives or to their children's wellbeing.

Family support and child protection services are seen as providing important supports to children and families in times of crisis. The provision of community-based supports and prevention and early intervention programmes for parents and families is highlighted as an important aspect of the work of these services.

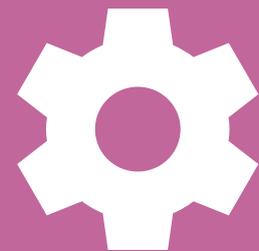


SERVICE DEVELOPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

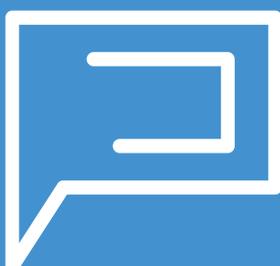


Perceived limitations of family support and child protection services include:

- Lack of staff and resources .
 - Inconsistent availability of services across the country.
 - Insufficient services for non-disadvantaged families.
-
- Service reform and capacity development of family support and child protection services is recommended.
 - Recommendations include increased funding and staffing, as well as increased interagency service delivery.
 - 10% of participants say that additional services are needed to ensure adequate support for vulnerable children and families.



30% of parents said that universal and prevention and early intervention services for children and families should be developed as a priority.



"I haven't needed this service but I know it's there if I need it. They have excellent staff doing great work"

"Provide universal supports for parents when first child is born so we start on firm foundations and follow-up as first born progresses from baby to toddler to teen with relevant parent training"



Social protection and taxation services are perceived as playing an important role in supporting quality of life for families, particularly disadvantaged and marginalised households.

64%

of parents identify child benefit allowance as an important aspect of social protection and taxation services.



Maternity / paternity benefits, housing supports and financial support for childcare expenses are also identified as important.

30%

recommend increased support for childcare costs and / or taxation relief on childcare expenses. There is strong sentiment among parents that childcare costs place a significant financial burden on families.

12%

recommend an increase in the rate of child benefit. A sub-group of these parents say that the age to which child benefit is paid should be increased.

14%

recommend taxation reform or the introduction of financial support for stay-at-home parents.

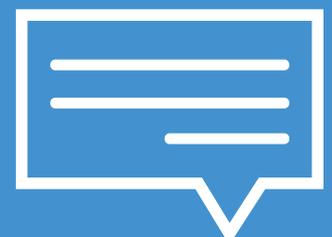
17%

recommend systems change and service development to ensure that public expenditure prioritises the needs of vulnerable children and families.

Overall, investment in community and public services, particularly health, mental health and early childcare and education services, is a priority for parents.

"In the bigger picture though these services contribute towards equalising society to some extent and keeping poverty at bay - which benefits my children as they grow up in a better society"

"Tax incentives for paying for childcare please. It's crippling working parents. Awful stress caused by this"



Community amenities and local authority resources are generally seen by parents as being well-maintained and of a high quality.

51% say that libraries are a beneficial community resource offering learning resources, child-friendly activities, family events and parenting supports (e.g. courses, talks and groups).



49% identify parks, green areas and playgrounds as crucial resources. They see these spaces as clean and safe.



Both indoor and outdoor sporting facilities, such as playing pitches, swimming pools and gyms, are highlighted as important local amenities.

Priority areas identified by parents for development and attention from local authorities include:

40% Parents say there is a need for more outdoor spaces for play and sports. Safety and tidiness of green spaces is a priority. Parents also highlight a need for development of safe footpaths, walking areas and cycling lanes. This reflects an overall desire for increased opportunities for exercise and outdoor activity.



Almost one third of parents perceive a need for strategic development of community resources, such as the development of local amenities to help promote community integration.

32%



Some parents also identify the development of housing for families as an important need.



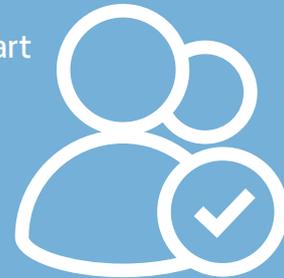
"[Our local authority] provides beautiful parks and play areas where they can play with each other and others"

"Parks, a community centre with funding for family centred events to encourage a community spirit"

For parents the provision of public services and supports, including health care, early childcare and educational services is identified as an important function of government. Parents also say that the development of policies and legislation are important in promoting children's rights and wellbeing.

The provision of benefits and allowances for children and families is highlighted as helping to give children a good start in life, including:

- ECCE supports
- Free GP care for children under 6
- Child benefit
- Maternity and paternity benefit.



MATERNITY AND POSTNATAL SUPPORTS



Improvements in maternity and postnatal services are a key area of concern:

- Enhanced maternity / paternity benefit and leave, as well as improved parental leave entitlements
- Improved maternity health care and implementation of the National Maternity Strategy
- Better breastfeeding supports and services.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

Enhanced funding for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services is also a priority for parents.

Taxation relief on childcare expenses and / or increased financial support for working parents are also emphasized.



PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES



Parents say they want increased parenting supports and enhanced public service provisions for children and families, including:

- Improvements in child health and mental health services
- Reductions in waiting times for specialist paediatric services
- Expansion of the free GP care for all children.

"[Government] ensures there are policies and legislation to protect children and uphold the rights of the child"

"Ireland is structurally anti-family, childcare costs are obscene and taxes overbearing. I would like to see childcare being made accessible and cheaper. Statutory days should be made available when children are sick."



Work-life balance and parents' ability to spend time with their children is a major priority.

32% of survey respondents say they benefit from employer flexibility and family-friendly work practices.

28% highlight maternity and paternity leave as important employment-based supports for parents.

FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS



There is a strong appetite for flexible working conditions including:

- Part-time and job-share opportunities
- Ability to work from home
- Flexi-time.

FAMILY FRIENDLY WORKPLACE

- Increased availability of child care facilities in the work place is suggested by a small proportion of parents.
- Participants say that family-friendly initiatives would help to reduce parent stress and improve work life balance.
- Family friendly employment supports are also seen as having a role to play in promoting gender equality and promoting participation of marginalised groups in the workplace.



Parents say that they feel it is often at the discretion of the individual employer whether family-friendly work practices are in place. A need for government enforced family-friendly employment policies and legislation is highlighted.

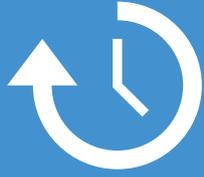


"Flexible attitude when kids are sick, trust that I will do my work well in the hours that suit me rather than watching the clock"

"In terms of the workplace in general, take the pressure off women to establish their career before having children, then leaving it so late. Equal treatment of and opportunities for men and women. Pressure off women to prove themselves since they have children, more opportunities for men / fathers to spend time with their children. Part-time work offered for both."

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