

COVID-19 series: briefing on early years, October 2020

Evidence from research interviews with 208 registered early years providers and maintained nursery schools between 5 and 16 October

During the autumn term, Ofsted is carrying out a programme of research interviews with early years providers. This briefing note reports on the first two weeks of data collection.

Data summary

Table 1: Number of interviews in this analysis: 208

Phase	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement	Inadequate	No previous grade ¹	Total ²
Total in sample	28 (13%)	125 (60%)	4 (2%)	0%	51 (25%)	208 (100%)
Childminder and private voluntary and independent providers	19 (9%)	115 (55%)	3(1%)	0%	51 (25%)	188 (90%)
Maintained nursery schools	9 (4%)	10 (5%)	1 (1%)	0%	0%	20 (10%)

1. Providers that have no previous inspection grade includes those providers that registered after March 2020 and have not yet been inspected.

2. Due to rounding, the percentages may not total 100.

Main findings

Many children have left EY settings since the first national restrictions and have not returned. Almost all providers said that the pandemic had significantly impacted the learning and development of children who had left and subsequently returned. They were particularly concerned about children's personal, social and emotional development. Some children had returned less confident and more anxious. In some cases, children had also become less independent, for example returning to their setting using dummies or back in nappies having previously been toilet trained.

However, providers reported that children who continued to attend their setting or who were well supported at home had made good progress in their learning.

Many providers have given some aspects of the curriculum (what they wanted children to learn and be able to do) a greater focus as a result of children's experiences of the pandemic. Most said they have put more emphasis on personal, social and emotional development because they felt that children's skills had regressed. Some providers said their curriculum had stayed mostly the same but with small adaptations, such as allowing extra time for children to settle in with additional adult support on a one-to-one basis. Many providers have made changes to the resources and routines in their settings and most have increased their teaching of personal hygiene.

Methodological note

This is the first of our briefing notes on early years (EY) provision. We invited providers to participate in the interviews with our Ofsted Inspectors who were non-serving EY practitioners. Interviews were held over the phone and participation was voluntary, which is likely to affect the findings. The interviews were separate from our [interim visits](#) that form part of our phased return to routine inspection.

The sample is small compared with the whole sector and skewed towards private, voluntary and independent nurseries. Therefore, general conclusions should be drawn with caution.

Overarching questions

This briefing answers **four** broad questions based on evidence from the research interviews:

1. What is the current state of early years provision?
2. How have children been affected by the first national lockdown?
3. How are early years providers planning to maintain standards in education and care through the pandemic?
4. How financially sustainable is the early years sector?

The current state of early years education

Changes in the demand for childcare places

Providers that are now fully open are operating with fewer children on roll and fewer numbers of new children than in March. The fact that many parents are working from home has led to a reduction in the number of children attending and demand has reduced. This is making it hard for providers to predict future demand for places. Most providers (two thirds) reported having fewer children on roll, with around a third reporting that they had many fewer children. A quarter of providers said their numbers had remained the same and only 9% reported having more children on roll. Over half of providers said they had fewer children on roll than they would normally expect.

Returning to the curriculum

Practitioners recognised that children's different experiences of the first national lockdown meant that they required different approaches on their return to early years. Many said that they had adapted their daily routines to give more time to emotional well-being, health and self-care – for example, many spent time teaching children about handwashing and hygiene. Some settings had adapted their curriculum in response to changes in children's needs. Others have refocused the curriculum on areas that children have fallen behind in.

The majority of providers said their setting now gave more attention to the prime areas of learning.¹ Many children needed more support to make friends and mix with others outside of their home. Often, providers were helping children to think about how they interact with others, including turn-taking, being kind and sitting and listening to each other. Some providers said they focused on these areas initially until children felt safe, settled and happy in their environment and then returned to their usual curriculum.

Providers recognised that some children had limited access to outdoor play during the first national lockdown. They were providing more opportunities for these children to develop their physical skills and gross-motor movements outside. Some said they were doing more physical development activities, such as dancing and movement games. Other providers were focusing more on independent skills such as dressing, toileting and using a knife and fork, as they felt these skills had suffered.

Some providers said they needed to focus on language and communication because they had identified that children were now less likely to start a conversation or comment on things during play. A few providers said they were doing extra language work with children who speak English as an additional language as their use of English had fallen behind. One provider had started doing small-group work with these children at least once a day to help them catch up. Some providers said they were helping older children talk about their experiences during the first national lockdown and introducing new vocabulary.

Changing activities

Most providers had changed the organisation of their setting and the activities they offered in response to COVID-19 safety guidelines. Most providers said they had removed or limited shared resources like playdough or sand due to concerns about cross contamination. Some had also replaced dressing-up boxes and soft toys with washable individual toys. Many also mentioned changes to meal and snack times, providing individual portions instead of family-style tables.

Where possible, providers were offering more activities outside. Many had reduced the number of trips they made or kept them local, such as to the park. Most providers had introduced staggered handovers and were asking parents to remain

¹ The prime areas of learning are personal, social and emotional development, communication and language and physical development.

outside the setting. Providers had incorporated hygiene into the daily routines of their settings through increased handwashing and teaching about germs and the importance of hygiene. Some had introduced smaller group 'bubbles' to manage close contact between children.

As a result of these changes, providers have had to think about new ways of developing children's skills. Some providers said they had to increase the amount of adult-led activity because of the limited number of activities on offer. In some cases, they felt that this had enabled their staff to spend more time engaging children in their learning. Some providers had used this opportunity to revisit things that children previously knew and could do to make sure previous learning was secure. For example, one provider said that adult-led learning gave their staff more time to explain things and have deeper conversations with children about what they are learning.

Communications with parents

The majority of providers had changed the way they communicated with parents. In part, this was driven by the changes to handovers and parents no longer being able to enter their setting.

Providers were keen to encourage parents to return their children to their setting and to increase the number of children they cared for. Many said they used their websites and social media to engage parents and to reassure them about the safety of the setting. Many posted videos on social media to show new COVID-secure environments, demonstrate the new procedures and share guidance. Several mentioned they had also called parents to reassure them that it was safe for their children to return. Some also mentioned that they were giving virtual tours and regular online updates through apps to ensure that parents were able to see the setting's routine when they were no longer able to enter the setting.

Most providers were using apps and social media to share information about children's development, including links to home-learning resources. Some also used social media to record videos, such as of 'story time' and of school to support children's transition to school. Many providers were now holding online meetings with parents as an alternative to face-to-face meetings, such as parents' evenings. However, many providers were also still using more traditional methods such as emails, letters and telephone calls to keep in touch with parents.

Many providers said that they had observed positive benefits from these changes. Some said that they communicate with parents on the telephone a lot more than they did previously. A few providers mentioned that they continue to have socially distanced conversations with parents on collection and use entrance boards to provide information about activities and ideas for learning at home.

How children were affected by the first national lockdown

The impact on children's learning and development

Almost all of the providers said that the first national lockdown had impacted on children's learning and development. Providers identified three groups of children when talking about this impact:

- those who continued to attend the setting
- those at home who were well supported by parents who were able to spend time with them
- those at home with parents who were not able to spend time with them.

One in five providers thought that all their children had been impacted in a similar way. However, most were more concerned about the learning and development of the following groups of children:

- children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- those who speak English as an additional language
- children living in poverty
- those whose parents were not engaging previously.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds did not always have access to the variety of toys at home that they do in an EY setting. Some children had not experienced outdoor play while away from their setting, as they lived in flats or had family members who were particularly concerned about contracting COVID-19. Some children who speak English as an additional language had had limited opportunities to speak and hear English during this time.

Providers that stayed open said children who attended the setting continued to make the progress they expected. Many children who were at home also thrived when their parents were able to spend quality time with them. However, providers recognised that many parents experienced pressures, making it difficult for them to do this. This prevented some children from developing their language and communication and their physical skills. For example, some children had become more sedentary and others had become more reserved and withdrawn.

The impact on key areas of learning

We asked providers about their perception of the impact on children's development in the prime areas of learning.

Table 2: Responses to the question: overall, would you say that children’s learning and development has improved, fallen behind or stayed the same in the following areas?

	Fallen behind	Stayed the same	Improved	Not sure
Communication and language	29%	41%	21%	9%
Personal, social and emotional development	53%	31%	7%	8%
Physical development	19%	58%	16%	7%
Understanding the world	18%	48%	23%	11%
Expressive arts and design	15%	59%	17%	9%
Literacy	24%	57%	8%	12%
Mathematics	25%	57%	4%	13%

Some providers were not sure what impact the first national lockdown has had on all of the prime areas of learning. This may be because it was too early for them to assess when we spoke to them.

EY providers were most concerned about the effect of COVID-19 restrictions on children’s personal, social and emotional development. This was most frequently cited when we asked providers to identify one area of learning that had declined the most.

One provider summed this up by saying that their children were ‘understandably disorientated’ after the first period of national restrictions. Many children were more anxious and had struggled when they first returned to the setting, finding it difficult to separate from their parents. Some children were less confident with others and slower to join in. Others returned using nappies, comforters and dummies at an older age than providers would usually expect.

It is important to note that when we asked providers open questions about children’s learning and development, they interpreted questions requiring an opinion or judgement on children’s development differently. For example, some providers spoke to us in absolute terms about children ‘forgetting how to play’, while others spoke about children not developing as they would normally have done.

We also asked providers to identify one area of learning that had improved over the period. A quarter of providers thought that no area had improved. However, around the same number thought that children’s communication and language had improved, and slightly fewer thought physical development had improved. Providers said that parents who were able to spend more time talking to and reading with their children had had a positive impact on children’s communication and language skills.

They also noticed that some children had become more involved in daily routines, such as eating with parents and going on daily walks.

Despite some children continuing to develop well, it is clear that not attending their usual EY setting has had a detrimental impact on most children's learning and development. Beyond their personal, social and emotional development, four in five providers said that children's mathematics and literacy skills had either not progressed or had declined.

The wider impact of the first national lockdown

Safeguarding and family welfare

Some families struggled during this period, particularly in relation to parents' mental health and financial issues. In some cases, providers also had concerns about children being neglected. Some families found themselves increasingly isolated and many providers shared concerns about the closure of family support services (such as children's centres and parenting groups) and the impact of this on parents' isolation. A few providers had made referrals where existing concerns about children's welfare had escalated, particularly in relation to neglect and parents' mental ill health. Some providers said they had contacted their local authority to request that a child be offered a funded place in nursery.

Some families' financial situation worsened over this period and, as a result, some providers had more two-year-olds on local authority funded places.

SEND

Many providers said that children with SEND had not received the additional support they needed from other professionals because many services had closed or were limiting face-to-face visits. Many providers were concerned about the long-term impact of this on children's development and progress. Many children with SEND also missed the consistent routines and expectations that enabled them to progress. Some had struggled to engage with these routines at home and in some cases parents had told providers that they were finding their children's behaviour more difficult to manage.

Many providers reported increasing delays in accessing support for speech and language therapy. These were often for existing diagnoses but also for new referrals. Many providers said that they were concerned that children with SEND were not always continuing to receive support at home, which meant that some children's speech and communication skills were declining.

Some providers remained open for children with education health and care plans and continued to work with professionals over this period to refer children for SEND assessments. In some cases, local services had moved online, so children could receive an online diagnosis of SEND and access to occupational and speech therapies.

Communications

Many providers used video-calling apps to share story times and learning videos. For example, one provider had created a daily puzzle for children to do with their families. Some used social media to celebrate special occasions, such as birthdays, and hold weekly assemblies. One provider had received funding from a local business to produce home-learning packs for children unable to attend the setting. Many providers also used social media or apps to stay in touch and to provide support and information to families on topics such as food banks, other agencies, domestic violence help and public health guidance.

How early years providers plan to maintain high standards

The majority of providers said that they had observed positive benefits from some of the changes they had made during the pandemic and that they plan to keep some of the changes in the long term.

- Some providers also said that children have settled much better with a staggered start to the day and parents leaving them at the gate.
- Many providers said that reducing the amount of resources and options for children has meant that children are less likely to be overwhelmed.
- Providers that had grouped children into bubbles said that they planned to keep children, especially infants, in smaller groups because they felt the children benefited from this approach and that staff were able to engage with and get to know the children better.
- Many providers felt that their use of technology to communicate with parents had been successful and were keen to continue.
- The majority of providers were pleased with their enhanced cleaning routines and planned to continue them.

The financial sustainability of the early years sector

The pandemic has put many providers in a difficult financial position. Over half (58%) of the providers we spoke to had faced financial difficulties as a result of it. Almost half (48%) rated financial difficulties among the top three challenges that they had to face. Settings were having to absorb increased costs, for example for PPE, alongside less income. Some said that government funding levels were an issue for them, including funding for increased numbers of children with SEND. A few providers were worried about what will happen when they have to repay their government loan.

Providers said they were particularly concerned about the impact of future local or national restrictions on the families they work with and their financial stability. One provider said that another national lockdown would be 'a disaster for children' as they are only just coming back to their setting and re-establishing routines. Some

providers said that future restrictions would also impact on the sustainability of their business.

Staffing has also been an issue over this period, with many providers citing the supply of staff as a particular challenge. For example, many were managing the return of staff from furlough alongside some staff self-isolating. A few feared they may lose staff due to anxiety and not being able to maintain social distancing with this age group of children. Some said it was challenging to accommodate small-group bubbles in the long term and they had less flexibility because staff were unable to swap bubbles, which made it hard to cover in an emergency or for things like toilet breaks. This also had an impact on managing arrangements for key visitors, such as apprentice assessors and health professionals.

However, many providers remained hopeful about the future of their businesses. Around two thirds (65%) said they were not worried that their business would have to close and around a third (32%) were particularly confident about the future. Nearly half of providers (47%) said they felt their business could continue for six or more years. Only 1% reported that they felt their business could continue for less than three months. Most providers said they had not increased fees.

Contrary to what might be expected, supply within the early years sector has remained broadly stable during this period. There has been a small increase in the total number of childcare providers registered with Ofsted between 31 March 2020 (75,068) and 31 August 2020 (75,336).² Last year, numbers decreased over this same period. The number of registered childminders has fallen from 36,972 on 31 March to 36,631 at the end of August 2020. Nevertheless, this trend is generally consistent with the same period last year, when the total number of registered childminders also fell but at a faster rate.

² Joiners and leavers in the childcare sector, Ofsted, August 2020; www.gov.uk/government/publications/joiners-and-leavers-in-the-childcare-sector.



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