

COVID-19, CHILDCARE ATTENDANCE AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN ENGLAND

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The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a unique combination of shocks; not only to the National Health Service, but also to the economy and the routines of family life. How families care for children has had to change rapidly, as schools close, parents work from home and public services reduce.

Evidence shows that the impacts of these shocks are not being borne equally. Low-income workers, young workers, and workers from certain ethnic minority groups are more likely to have been working in sectors that were shut down at the start of lockdown, and have consequently lost their job or faced a reduction in earnings (Xiu and Joyce, 2020, Adams-Prassl et al., 2020, Platt and Warwick 2020, Blundell et al. 2020). For the same reasons, women are more likely than men to have lost their job or been furloughed, which, in addition to a direct loss of income, may have long-term implications for the gender pay gap (Andrew et al., 2020, Adams-Prassl et al., 2020). Women have taken on more of the childcare responsibilities resulting from school closures than male partners (Hupkau and Petrolongo, 2020), even when they are still spending time on paid work (Andrew et al., 2020).

Of significant concern are vulnerable families - who may be of low socioeconomic status, suffering from domestic abuse or single parent households. Families with members with disabilities or complex healthcare needs, and those living in poor quality or overcrowded housing are also vulnerable, particularly in the COVID-19 pandemic context. Reductions in essential services, such as health visiting and other perinatal and

community health services, will impact the most vulnerable the hardest (Conti and Dow, 2020, Saunders and Hogg, 2020, Romanou and Belton, 2020). Support for these families during and after the crisis is critical to avoid exacerbating inequalities and hindering the development of young children.

In addition to the physical health problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation and the reduction of social networks has had vast impacts on the mental health of families (Saunders and Hogg, 2020, Patrick et al. 2020). Schools and childcare services play an important safeguarding role for many vulnerable children, such as those suffering from domestic abuse, neglect or mental health problems (Romanou and Belton, 2020). Childcare closures may have left many of these children 'out of sight' (Wilson and Waddell, 2020).

Although children have been shown to be able to transmit COVID-19 to adults, the consequences of infection appear to be substantially less severe in children relative to adults (Boast et al., 2020). However, given that symptoms in children are often mild, the true infection and transmission rates can be difficult to determine (Oster and Alter, 2020). It is also unclear how effective school closures and social distancing measures within schools will be in lowering the rate of transmission (Donohue and Miller 2020).

In this paper, we present new survey evidence on the use of childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the risks parents associate with it. Our baseline survey was fielded on the last day of May, the day before nurseries and preschools were allowed to reopen on June 1; our follow-up survey took place between the 12th July and the 6th September. We confirm the official figures that, during lockdown, there was a very large reduction in the use of childcare services, even for eligible children. Nurseries and playgroups were allowed to reopen (on June 1st), and offer wraparound and

holiday care from July 4th (Department for Education 2020a). However, usage of these services had not increased to pre-lockdown levels by the time of our follow-up survey. Many parents cite health and financial concerns as reasons for not sending their child back to childcare and the majority of parents feel they can handle childcare themselves. We also examine parental beliefs about the health risk of children contracting COVID-19, finding that there is uncertainty about the risk of infection and rate of contagion among children. Though many parents are choosing not to send their child back to childcare, they are also concerned about the impact this may have on their development, especially social, and speech and language development. Finally, we investigate the extent to which parents believe they can remediate for the time lost in childcare settings by spending more time with their children. We find that parents are moderately optimistic about their remediating role.

Childcare attendance during the COVID-19 lockdown

For many children, nurseries and preschools were closed during the lockdown (23rd March-31st May). For vulnerable children and children of key workers, however, early years settings were allowed to open (Department for Education, 2020a). Yet, this allowance did not mean that all nurseries and preschools were open and offering a normal childcare service. Figure 1 displays the number of early years settings closed or open between April 15 and June 10, 2020. It shows that approximately only one third of early years settings in England were open during lockdown (Department for Education, 2020b).

1. Data

We collected primary survey data on 559 first-time parents, living in England, with one child less than five years old who had not started primary school pre-lockdown. Our baseline survey ran from 31st May to 9th June. We followed-up on the respondents for a second round between 12th

July and 6th September.

Our data is geographically representative of England. 32% of the sample are key workers. This is slightly higher than the 22% figure reported in Farquharson et al. (2020), which refers to all UK working-age individuals. 79% of survey respondents were female, and 21% male. The age of respondents varied from 19 to 49, with an average age of 31. 88% of respondents were White British, Irish or other. 72% of the sample were employed and working and 61% of the sample had a partner that was employed and working at the time of data collection.

2. Childcare attendance during lockdown and planned reopening of childcare services:

a. Baseline survey results

As mentioned in the previous section, only the children of key workers or

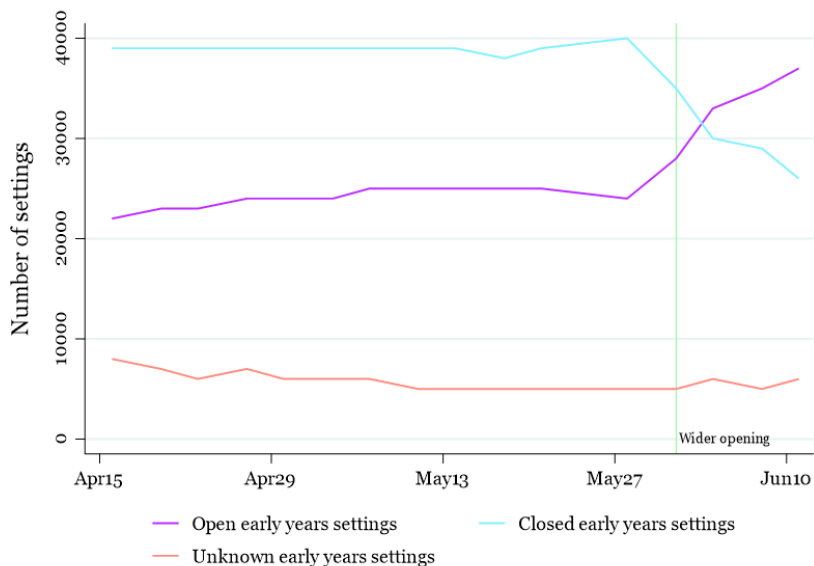


Figure 1: Status of early years settings in England during the lockdown. Source: Department for Education, 2020a.

vulnerable children were eligible for childcare during this period. However, many nurseries and preschools could not stay open for them, as it was not financially viable (Blanden et al. 2020, National Day Nursery’s Association, 2020). In our baseline survey, we asked whether respondents or other household members were key workers and whether the child was vulnerable, hence eligible for childcare. In our sample 62% (345 children) were not eligible for childcare during lockdown and 38% (211 children) were.

We also asked whether eligible children attended nursery or preschool during lockdown (March 23rd to May 31st). Figure 2 shows that 26% of our sample (143 children) were eligible for childcare during the lockdown but did not attend. 12% (68 children) did attend nursery or preschool at some point during lockdown: this corresponds to one third of eligible children.

For the 26% of eligible children that did not attend early years settings, we

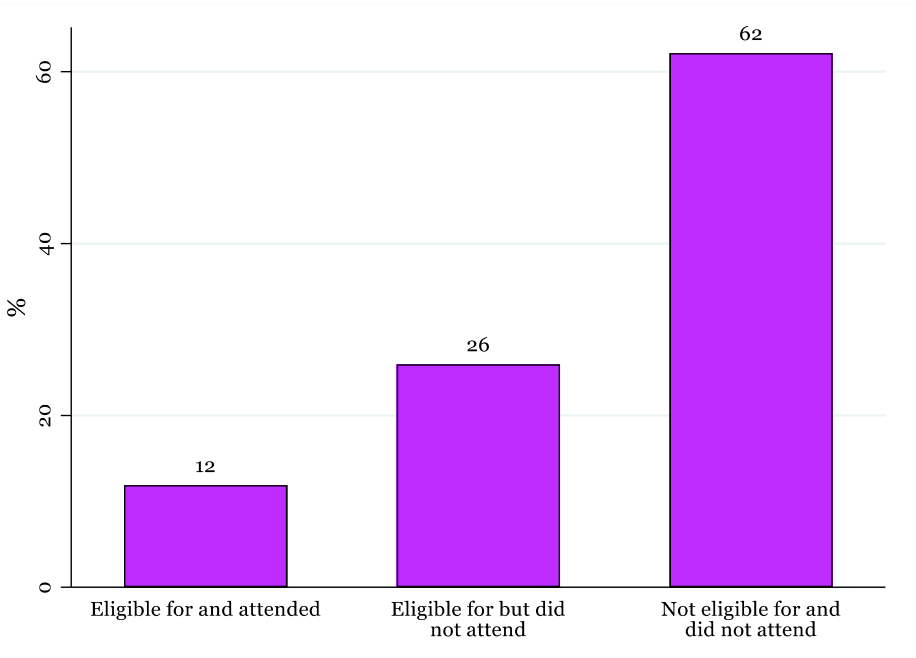


Figure 2: Eligibility for and attendance of nursery or preschool during lockdown.

asked respondents why they did not take up their place. The majority of respondents cited health risk concerns and the ability to look after their child at home. For example, *'I had concerns over safety and preferred to keep him home'*, *'I could work from home so deemed it safer to have him with me'*, and *'Me and my partner are both key workers [but] we managed to change our shifts temporarily to [be] able to sort childcare between us'*.

As indicated in Figure 1, many nurseries and preschools were closed, so many families did not have the option of sending their child to childcare, even if their child was eligible. Financial reasons for nursery closure were cited: *'nursery decided to close due to financial reasons'*, *'The nursery closed... financially it wouldn't work for the nursery as there was a lack of children'*.

From June 1st, childcare and early years providers were allowed to reopen. In the baseline survey, fielded on May 31st, we asked parents whether they

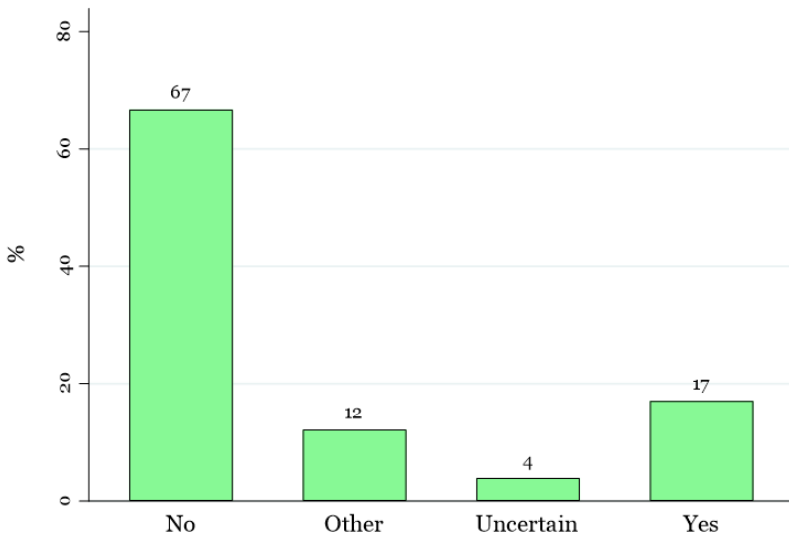


Figure 3: The figure plots answers to the questions "Are you going to send your child back to nursery or preschool on Monday June 1?"

were going to send their child back to childcare on June 1st (Figure 3). In line with our findings for key worker households, the majority (67%) of parents in our sample did not plan to send their child back to nursery or preschool on Monday June 1st. Only 17% of parents had planned to send their child back, and a small percentage were uncertain or had other solutions, as shown in Figure 3. Again, most parents quoted health and safety concerns and that their child could be looked after at home (*'I am not able to return to work and so I will not be putting my child at risk unnecessarily'*, *'Family has volunteered to look after my child full time while I am at work as we both feel this is less risky'*). Some respondents stated that their child was too young to attend nursery or preschool, or that it was not possible for their child to return as their nursery remained closed.

We also sought to understand respondents' perceptions of how other parents would react to the changes in the guidelines. We asked respondents how many parents out of 100 they thought would send their children back to nursery or preschool on June 1st, versus attending nursery or preschool in September. Respondents thought that, on average, only 44% of parents would send their child back to nursery or preschool on June 1st and that 80% of parents would send their child to nursery or preschool in September

b. Follow-up survey

In our follow-up survey, between July 12th and September 6th, we asked in greater detail what childcare arrangements respondents used pre-lockdown (pre-March 23rd), during lockdown (March 23rd to May 31st), and currently. Results of these questions are reported in Figure 4.

Before lockdown, 'Myself' and 'My partner' were the two most frequently reported options at 64% and 52%, respectively. These are the only two options to have increased during lockdown, to 81% and 65%, respectively.

As expected, the proportion of respondents that report using nursery during lockdown fell from 38% to 4% and playgroups fell from 14% to 1%. The Department for Education published similar proportions; on the 28th May, 7% of young children of key workers (71,000 children) and 9% of 0 to 4-year olds classified as ‘Children in Need’ or who have an Education, Health and Care Plan (9,000 children), attended childcare (Department for Education, 2020c). Combining these groups, we estimate that only 5% of the number of children who usually attend early years settings during term time were attending on May 28th (Department for Education, 2020d), rising to 13% by June 11th (Department for Education, 2020e).

Focusing on what respondents report as their ‘current arrangement’ (answered mid-July to September), the number who report using nurseries has increased to 23%. Current levels of childcare usage are still lower than before the pandemic; by comparing the responses about intended use at the baseline (Figure 3) with those on actual use at the

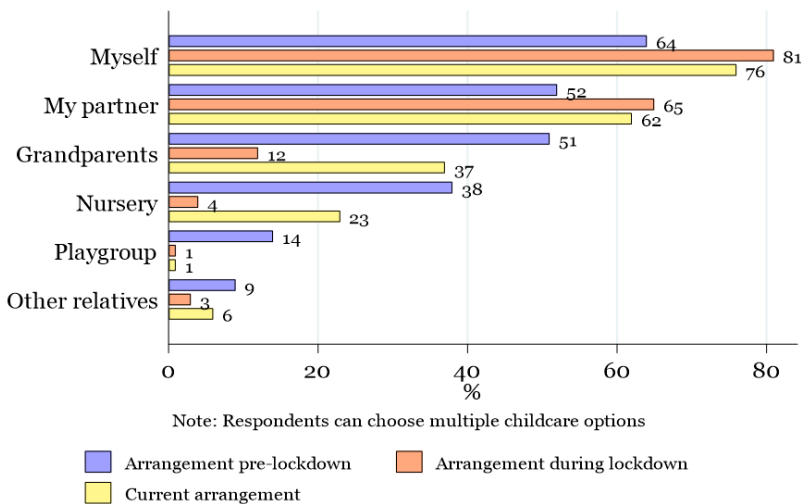


Figure 4: The figure plots answers to the questions “What childcare options did you use pre-lockdown, during lockdown and currently?”

follow-up, it emerges that few parents had changed their mind. However, our sample shows a stronger return to using nurseries than Blanden et al. (2020) who, using data from the Department for Education, show that by mid-July childcare usage in England was only 30% of pre-lockdown levels.

The use of grandparents for childcare had the largest fall of any option, from 51% to 12%. We would expect this result as it was clear from the beginning of the pandemic that the health risks to the elderly were much higher than other demographic groups (Boast et al, 2020).

3. Perceived risks of attending childcare: Baseline and follow-up

a. Baseline survey results

In the baseline survey, we asked respondents about the perceived risks associated with their child contracting COVID-19. Figure 5 displays the average number of children out of 100 that respondents expect to contract COVID-19 from returning to nursery or preschool on June 1st, and the health

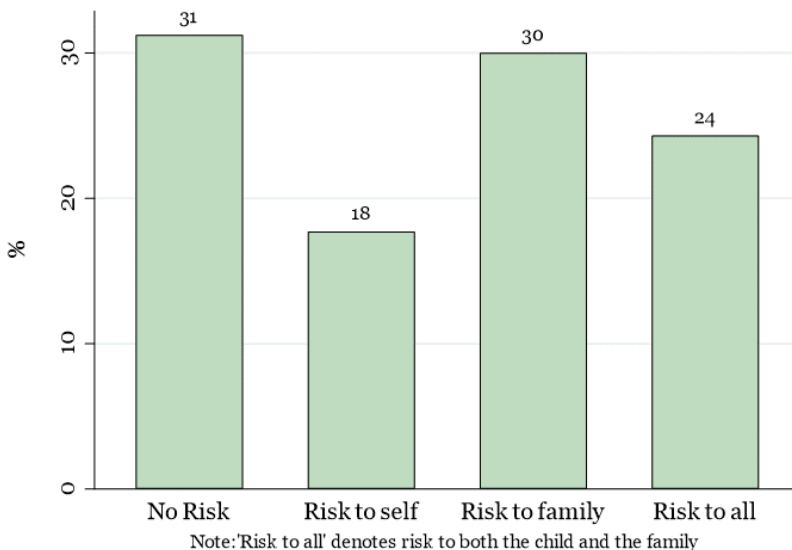


Figure 5: Average expected health risks due to child being in nursery or preschool on June 1st.

risk this implies for themselves or their family. We find that, on average, 31% of children returning to childcare were expected to contract COVID-19 with no risk to themselves or their family, and 30% of children were expected to contract COVID-19 with a health risk to their family but not to themselves. Many scientific studies of COVID-19 infection find less severe cases in children relative to adults (Boast et al., 2020). Our results are consistent with these studies as parents expect a smaller risk to both groups involving children. On average, the expected percentage of children to contract COVID-19 with health risks to themselves only is 18%, and with risks to themselves and their family is 24%.

b. Follow-up survey results

In the follow-up survey, we asked parents what was the average number of children they expect to contract and transmit COVID-19 by September, from taking part in different activities. The results of this question are

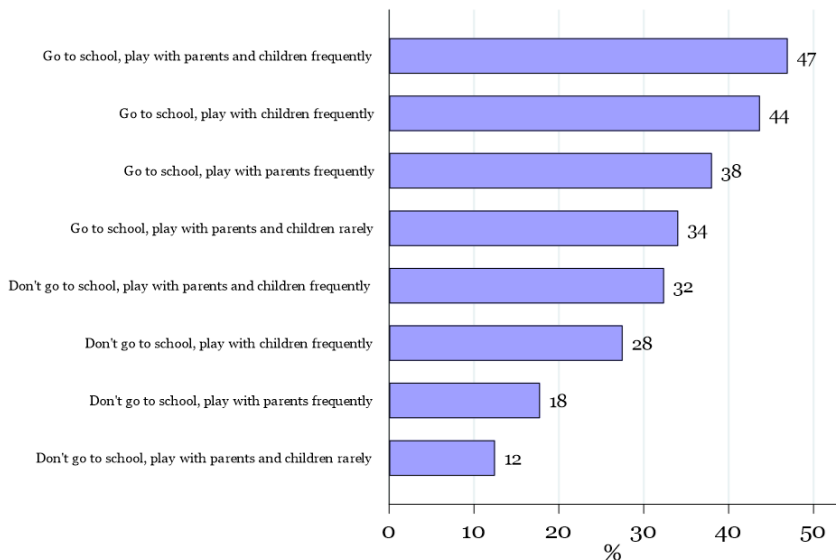


Figure 6: Expected average number of children that will contract and transmit COVID-19 by September

displayed in Figure 6.

Going back to school is seen as the largest risk factor in determining whether a child will contract and transmit COVID-19. Furthermore, respondents believe their child is more likely to contract and transmit COVID-19 from playing with other children than playing with their parents. During the early stages of the pandemic (for the UK, this was February to April), there was still substantial uncertainty about the risks of COVID-19 infection and transmission among children. We now know that children are a lot less likely to become seriously ill with COVID-19, and infection among children appears to be less than adults (Oster and Alter, 2020).

Falling behind: Results from baseline and follow-up

c. Baseline survey results

Notwithstanding the health risks to a child and family of contracting COVID-19, children face additional risks to their socio-emotional and cognitive development by not attending early years childcare. In a similar set of questions to those described above on contracting COVID-19, we elicited parents' perceptions of the risks to child development of not returning to nursery or preschool. We also asked parents to consider another input in the production of child development - private investments in the form of parental interaction and play. These questions not only allow us to assess parental beliefs in the importance of nursery or preschool in child development, they also provide information on how parents consider the relative benefits of formal childcare versus parental play in early child development.

Figure 7 shows the average number of children (out of 100) who are expected to fall behind their peers if they go back to school in July or in September and if parents play with them/ bring them to the playground frequently or rarely. Parents believe that children are at risk of falling behind their peers if returning to nursery or preschool is delayed to

September. Given the scenario where parents play with their child or take them to the playground rarely, an average of 31% of children are expected to fall behind their peers if they return to childcare in July relative to 40% of children who return to childcare in September.

If we consider only the frequent play scenarios, we see that the difference between the effects of a July or a September return to childcare on a child falling behind shrinks to 19% and 24%, respectively. Respondent's value of parental play is also shown through a comparison of the scenarios with rare versus frequent play and holding the date of return to school constant. For children returning to nursery or preschool in July, an average of 31% of children are expected to fall behind their peers with their parents playing with them or bringing them to the playground rarely, whilst this figure is only 19% for parents that play with their child or bring them to the playground frequently. Hence, formal childcare and parental play are viewed as substitutable to some degree and both parental play and formal

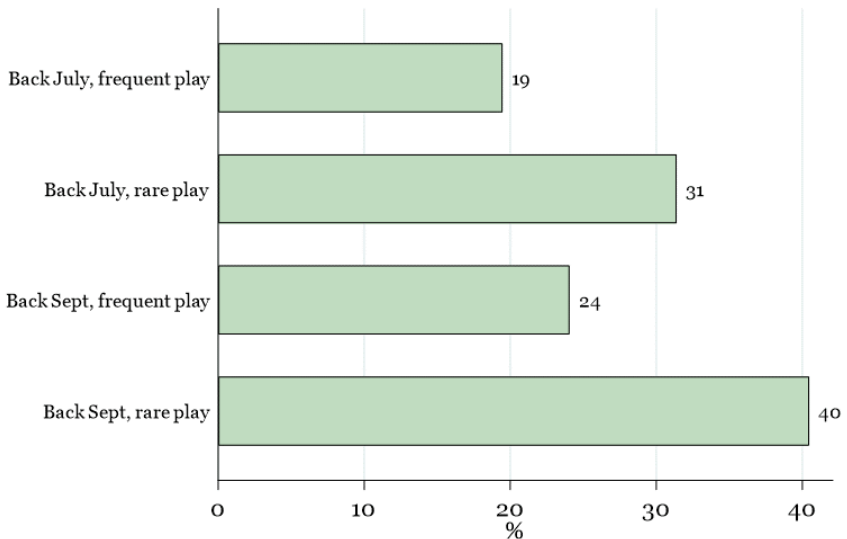


Figure 7: Average expected number of children at risk of falling behind

childcare are seen to be significant inputs into child development.

Lastly, Figure 8 shows which areas of development our parents are referring to when asked about their child falling behind. Strikingly, nearly 90% of respondents believe children would fall behind in social development. In a survey of 5474 families with young children run by the charity Home Start between April 29th and June 3rd, many respondents expressed concern about their children’s social development, and a third of respondents reported their child’s interaction with them had changed during lockdown (Saunders and Hogg, 2020).

d. Follow-up survey results

In the follow up survey (July to September), instead of asking respondents the number of children they expected to fall behind, we asked them the number of children expected to reach a good level of development. Respondents had more information about how their child’s development

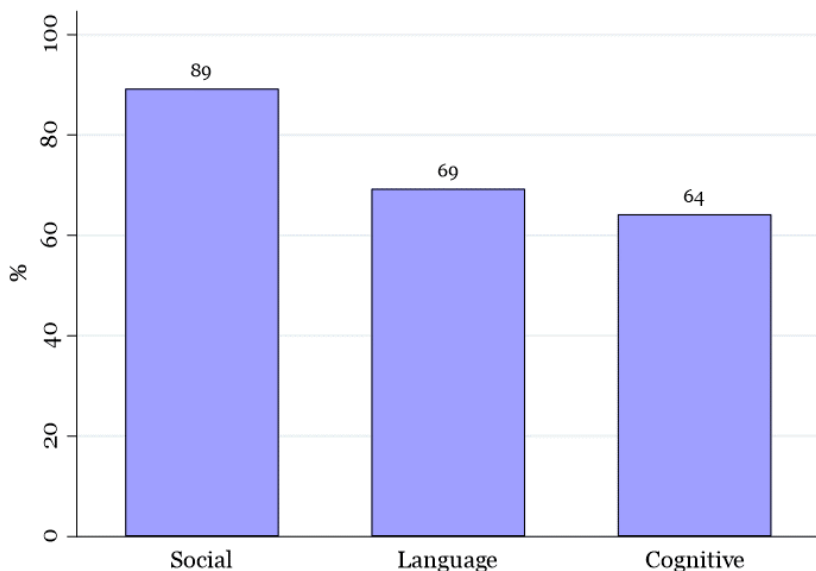


Figure 8: In which area of development do you expect children to fall behind?

has progressed during the COVID-19 pandemic than they would have done in the baseline survey. Figure 9 shows the average number of children respondents expected to reach a good level of development by September if they currently attend school or not, had playdates with other children frequently or rarely, and their parents read to them or played with them frequently or rarely. These questions allow us to assess not only the level of development attributable to childcare, but also the perceived benefit of parental play versus play with children.

Figure 9 shows similar trends to the baseline survey (Figure 7), in that respondents believe children will develop faster if they go to childcare. Given the scenario that children play with both parents and other children rarely, 45% of children are expected to reach a good level of development if they do go to school, versus 23% if they do not. This same belief holds for the scenario that children play with both parents and other children frequently. In that case, 83% of children are expected to reach a good level of development if they go to school, versus 68% who do not. However, going to school is not seen as a perfect substitute for play. If children don't go to school, but play with both parents and other children frequently, 68% are expected to reach a good level of development. Conversely, only 45% are expected to reach a good level of development if they do go to school but play with parents and children rarely.

Though social development is the area in which most children are expected to fall behind (Figure 8), Figure 10 shows that respondents deem speech and language development to be the most important. In the final question of the follow-up survey, we invite respondents to share the main ways the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Many respondents cite concerns for their child's emotional and social development, for example answers included: *"Affected my child as he has had 3-4 months with no socialisation. He has seen no other people or children and so is very wary of strangers and is distressed when alone. He's*

not had any chance to play with other children and I worry about whether this will affect him as it's happened at a key developmental time."

4. Where do we go from here?

It has been shown repeatedly that the environment individuals are exposed to in early childhood can permanently impact their lives. The COVID-19 pandemic represents a huge shock to a whole generation of children. Given seemingly small shocks have been shown to have significant long-term negative impacts (Almond et al., 2018), the COVID-19 pandemic raises serious concerns about who might be most affected during this crucial developmental period. Further research needs to address what can be done to halt additional negative impacts from social distancing and what can be done to remediate the effects that have already taken place.

Our analysis has shown there was a huge reduction in the use of early years childcare during lockdown in the UK. Not only the use of formal childcare,

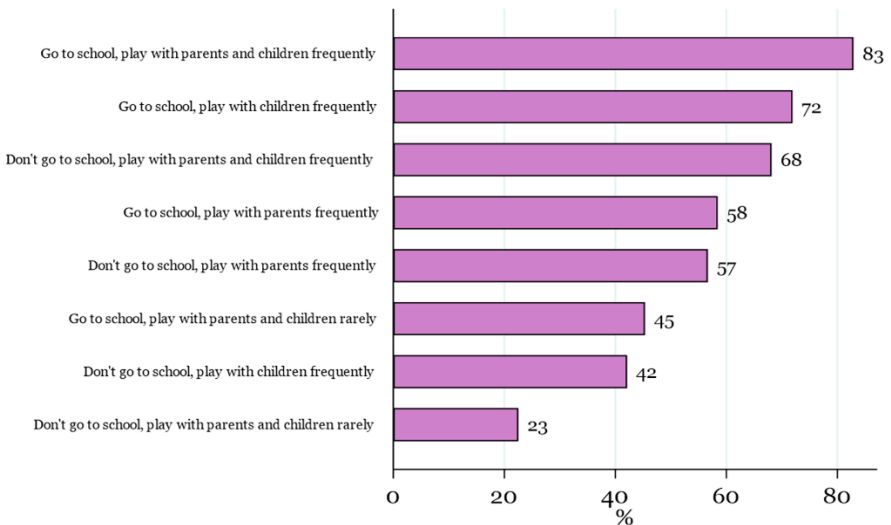


Figure 9: Average expected number of children that will reach a Good Level of Development

such as nursery and preschool, but also the use of other family members, such as grandparents, and neighbours or friends. We find that the reduction in childcare use has caused substantial concerns about child well-being, with 89% of our parents worried that their children’s social development will be negatively affected.

We have shown that attendance rates at formal childcare settings have then increased since lockdown, but without reaching previous levels. Our evidence also suggests that respondents believe a return to childcare poses a high risk to their family’s health. Respondents believed 47% of children would contract and transmit COVID by September if they returned to childcare and played with parents and other children frequently. If the perceived health risk of returning to childcare continues to be high, parents may continue to keep their child at home. Academic research, the media, and the government has a role to play in reducing any information failure surrounding the risks associated with a return to childcare.

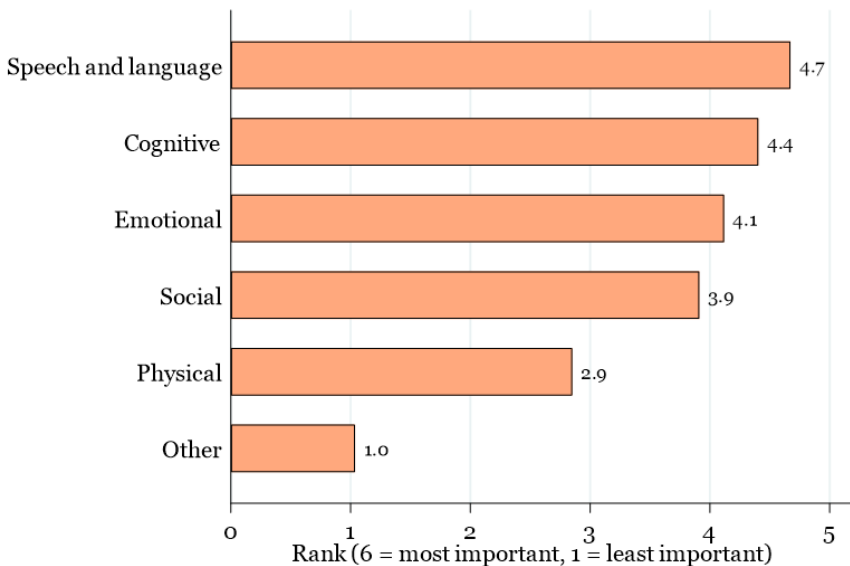


Figure 10: Average ranking of areas of development by importance

Our evidence, along with multiple others, has shown there are multiple stressors facing families with young children. Though much uncertainty remains about how long social distancing will be required, there is clearly more policymakers can do to maintain the development and wellbeing of these families. Policymakers need to draw on this existing body of evidence and take urgent action to make sure that the life chances of this generation of children are not permanently damaged.

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