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FULL REPORT

KHF KATHARINE
HOWARD
FOUNDATION

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 intervention supports to children and families. In recent times the Foundation's Parenting Support Initiative has focused on providing targeted supports during the first three years of a child's life while the Nurture Programme – Infant Health and Wellbeing is focusing on supporting the Health Service Executive to strengthen the universal services provided to every baby and their family during pregnancy and during the first three years of the child's life.

Crucial to this work is informing and empowering parents, so it is important that we know what works for parents and what additional supports they would find most helpful.

In September 2017, KHF was invited to participate in a cross organisation approach to mark Universal Children's Day on 20th November 2017. One element of KHF's approach to mark this event was to conduct a survey of parents to gather a snapshot in time of their views on what helps them as parents to provide the best start in life for their child and what additional supports they would find helpful. 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 "Giving Our Children the Best Start in Life" survey set out to develop a broad understanding of the needs and priorities of the parents of young children, whilst also demonstrating to policy makers and service providers the benefits of developing ongoing feedback and consultation processes with their service users.

The online survey was open for almost a month and we were delighted that almost 500 parents, with a total of 888 children, drawn from every county in Ireland gave their input to the survey.

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.

It is notable that parents gave more replies to almost all of the "what works" questions in comparison with the "what could be better" questions, indicating a strong appreciation for the supports they already receive as well as a desire to see supports strengthened.

We engaged an independent researcher, Grainne Hickey, to analyse the survey responses received and to draw up this report on the findings. Grainne's work involved reviewing all the feedback provided and extracting the key messages from parents and presenting them in a way that is accessible to all audiences.

The responses of many parents to the survey questions emphasise the complexity of the service environment as well as the inter-relatedness of the task involved in bringing up a young child. Therefore, we encourage policy makers and service deliverers to consider parents' feedback across all the sections of the report and how these often interconnect as opposed to just concentrating on the sections which relate to their own area of interest or responsibility.

We wish to thank the parents who participated in the survey for their time, their wisdom and their desire to give their children the very best start in life. Their responses have such richness that we have included a range of direct quotes throughout the report in addition to the analysis of key themes.

We particularly thank Grainne Hickey 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 are making this report and a printed summary version 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 parent consultation culture to ensure their services are closely aligned with the supports that parents need and find most helpful.

Noelle Spring,

Director,

Katharine Howard Foundation.

March 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

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1. Summary of Key Messages – Giving Our Children the Best Start in Life

	What parents say is important	Where parents feel they could get more help
Being a parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing love, security, responsive interaction, play and positive communication • Strengthening children's social and emotional skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents want to be able to spend more time with their children • More parenting supports to help parents build better parenting skills
Family and friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family and friends were seen as important role models for children and as a source of guidance, advice, emotional support and practical help for parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many parents lack readily available support from family and friends • Family and friends to spend more time with children and to provide support for parent's own style of parenting
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community features which were identified as beneficial supports included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Parent and child groups → Clean, safe parks, play spaces and green areas → Childcare services and schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe parks and playgrounds, as well as better traffic management and additional cycle- or walk ways • Increased access to parent and child support groups and services
Internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The internet is a source of information, guidance and advice on parenting • It also provides opportunities to interact with other parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One Irish evidence based source of information on parenting and child development • Ensuring the safety of children on-line through better regulation • Limit parent's and children's screen time in the home
Health services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valued supports to parents and children include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Maternity services, Public Health Nurses → Developmental check-ups and vaccinations → Free GP care for under 6s 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health services would benefit from increased staffing numbers and resources • Reduce waiting times for paediatric services • Additional developmental check-ups and dental care and expand access to free GP care for all children • More parenting supports, particularly improved breastfeeding support and advice
Early childhood care and education services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents were very positive about early childhood care and education services • They were seen as safe, caring spaces which help children to make friends, learn and prepare for formal schooling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better financial support or taxation relief for childcare costs • Staff development and better funding for childcare services

	What parents say is important	Where parents feel they could get more help
Family support and child protection services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family support and child protection services were seen as providing crisis support to children and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall, there was a lack of familiarity with, or understanding of, the role of family support and child protection services Parents felt that more preventative and universal services and supports were needed
Social protection and taxation services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social protection and taxation services which are beneficial supports to me include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Child benefit → Maternity and paternity benefit → Housing and childcare supports → Supports for disadvantaged families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better financial support or taxation relief for childcare costs Better supports to allow parents the option to stay at home during early childhood Prioritised supports for vulnerable children and families
Local Authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community amenities and local authority resources were generally seen as well-maintained and of a high quality Libraries, parks and playgrounds, and sports facilities were also highlighted as important community resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local authority should provide more clean and well-maintained outdoor spaces for play and sport for children and safer walking paths and cycle lanes Community integration and housing for those who need it
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The government's role was understood as gathering taxation, providing public services (e.g. maternity services) and supports to families (e.g. child benefit and childcare support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve maternity services and supports for breastfeeding Extend maternity / paternity benefit and parental leave Improve health and mental health services for children and parents Expand free GP care to all children
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many parents felt that they benefit from family-friendly practices and flexibility in the workplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some workplaces need to offer more flexible working conditions and become more family friendly in order to promote greater work-life balance The right to family friendly working needs to be enforced

2. Introduction and background

A child's life is influenced by a broad range of factors. Their home environment and extended networks of family and friends are important, whilst their communities and broader systems, such as educational, health and social care services, can also exert direct and indirect influences on child development. Broader factors such as government policies and parents' employment conditions may also shape and impact the quality of life of families. Supporting early child development is an important public policy priority (European Commission, 2013). There is increasing political consensus, both nationally and internationally, that public investment in early childhood can help strengthen child development and reinforce family and community wellbeing. Investment in childhood can also yield significant economic benefits by, over the longer run, tackling a cycle of inequality and disadvantage and by reducing or removing the need for later costly interventions (Allen, 2011).

In a context of limited resources, it is crucial that public expenditure is directed towards child and family services and interventions which are evidence-informed. Exploring and understanding the experiences of parents and care givers, their perceptions of their achievements on one hand, the challenges they face on the other, and the supports and services which they find helpful, is a useful endeavour. Such data gathering systems are important to continuous quality improvement for interventions, implementation supports and organisational practices (Fixsen et al., 2005).

The "Giving Our Children the Best Start in Life" survey was aimed at developing a broad understanding of parent and care giver needs and priorities, whilst also forming part of an important process of ongoing feedback and consultation with service users. This report presents the findings of this qualitative consultation with parents and care givers in the Republic of Ireland. This survey aimed to gather valuable information on a range of contexts, systems and services which can influence early child outcomes by asking parents and care givers their opinions on:

- Being a Parent;
- Family and friend networks;
- Community;
- The Internet;
- Health services;
- Early Childhood Care and Education services;
- Family Support and Child Protection services;
- Social Protection and Taxation services;
- Local Authorities;
- Government;
- Employers.
- The survey ended with two open ended questions.

3. What were the survey aims and objectives?

The purpose of the research was to generate important practical knowledge regarding parents' and care givers' experiences, whilst also playing a role in informing service responses for all families. More specifically, the research objectives are to:

- Examine the experiences and perceptions of parents and care givers in their role in caring for their children;
- Identify aspects of supports and services which they find helpful; and
- Identify areas where parents and care givers experience challenges, as well as their preferences and priorities in relation to service and support development.

Thus, the principal aim was to promote greater engagement and dialogue between parents and carer givers and services and supports and help to inform and support the delivery and implementation of family interventions.

Survey design

The "Giving our Children the Best Start in Life" survey was designed by the Katharine Howard Foundation in consultation with a number of researchers. The survey was also piloted with a small number of parents before being finalised. The survey was designed to be as open-ended as possible in order to allow participants the 'space' to identify their own achievements, concerns, priorities and/or issues. Parents were invited to answer as many or as few questions as they wanted to.

Survey distribution

The survey was distributed through a range of online platforms, including social media and websites (e.g. the Universal Children's Day website, the Katharine Howard Foundation website). A wide range of professional and personal networks were leveraged to distribute the survey as widely as possible and to reach parents from different backgrounds and in different geographical locations throughout the country, including (but not limited to):

- The Parent Support Initiative;
- The Children's Rights Alliance;
- The Parenting Network;
- The Prevention and Early Intervention Network;
- Children's Research Network for Ireland and Northern Ireland;
- Primary Schools
- Public Participation Networks;
- Maternity services;
- HSE Child Health Services;
- Partnership, Prevention and Family Support Teams; and
- County Childcare Committees;

Organisations who were forwarded the survey and the participants themselves were encouraged to distribute the survey link to anyone they knew who was pregnant or was parenting young children.

4. Who took part in the research?

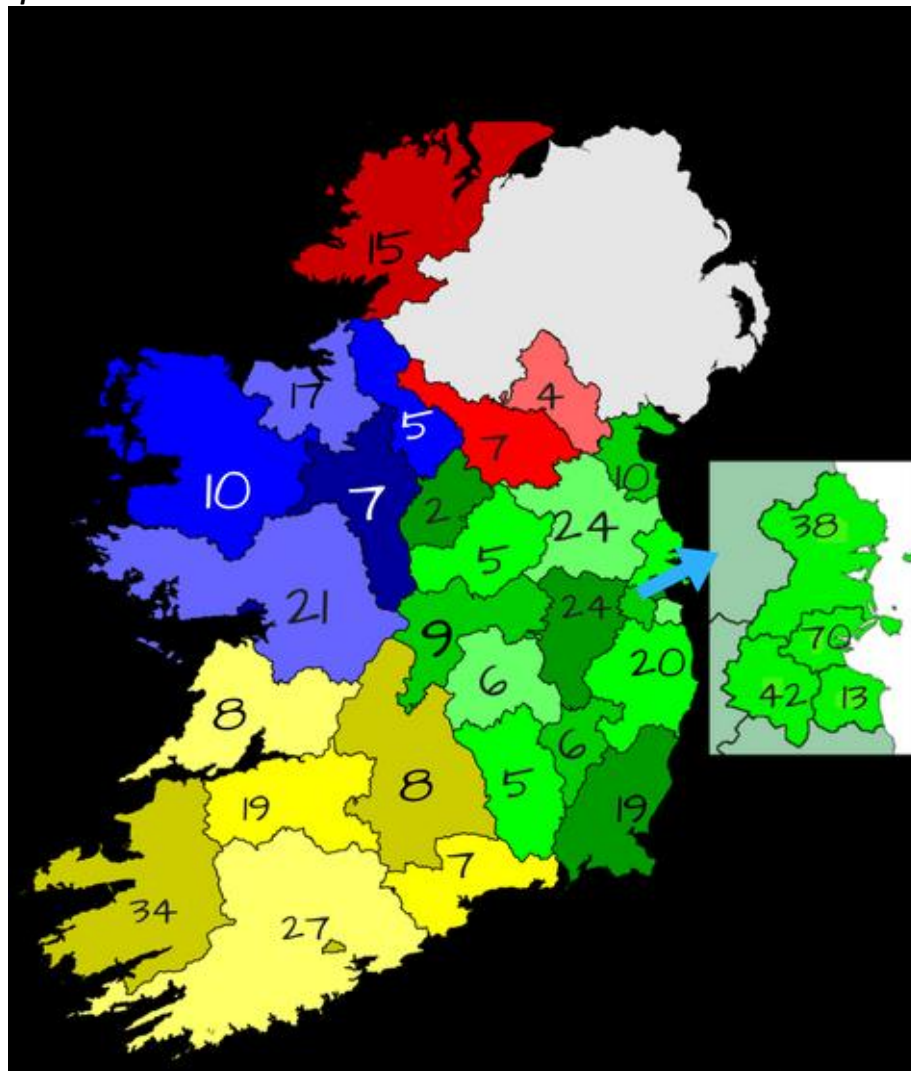
In total 1048 parents commenced the survey. Of those who started the survey, 481 (46%) provided at least one valid response to the main survey items:

- 90% of these were mothers
- 7% were fathers
- 4% were carers or other relatives such as a grandparent or aunt
- 8% of the sample worked as a service provider for children and/or parents of young children¹.

The 481 participating parents had, on average, 2 children ($SD=1.1$). Collectively, the parents had 888 children between the ages of 0 to 18. A total of 241 children were under the age of 3, while the remainder were between 3 to 18 years old. 51% were girls ($n=457$) and 49% were boys ($n=431$). 14% were expecting a baby at the time of participation.

Parents and caregivers from every county participated in the survey (*Fig. 1*). By a slight majority, the largest proportion of families lived in a city area (31%); 27% in a town, whilst 15% and 27% respectively, lived in village and rural areas.

Fig. 1. Participant distribution



¹ Some participants filled more than one of these roles, thus, the total is over 100%

5. Analysis methodology

Data emerging from the parent consultation were analysed using a standard thematic analysis. This involved identifying codes to explain the data and outline attitudes, experiences, perceptions, activities and processes inherent in the data. Subsequently, codes were categorised into overarching themes and finalising conclusions. Overall, the analysis was guided by two broad research questions: (1) 'What is working well for parents and care givers?' and (2) 'What would help parents and care givers in their role in caring for their children?'. Each question included in the survey was analysed separately in order to identify the activities, processes and resources which parents perceive as beneficial to child wellbeing, as well as areas where parents perceive individual services and supports could be augmented and enhanced to better meet the needs of children and their families. The final stage of the analysis, "core" or cross-cutting themes were identified, which reflected parent experiences and/or perceptions which emerged across the responses to the individual survey questions. Data analysis was supported by the use of MaxQDA.

Understanding the findings

It is important to note that all questions included in the survey were open-ended. Participants were free to choose the topics / areas to include in their replies. To illustrate the strength / commonality of each finding, percentages were generated. These percentages are indicative of the proportion of parents who referred to or mentioned a theme, given the overall number of participants who responded to each particular question (see Appendix 1). It is important to note that if 30% of parents mentioned an issue, it should not be taken that the remainder felt the opposite – just that 70% did not raise this particular topic. Quotes are provided as illustrations of each finding. These quotes, which are shown in relation to the specific question the parent has been answering, can be understood as reflective of parents' experiences, opinions and/or attitudes. When grouped together with other participants' views, these may be reflective of more general trends within parents' priorities and preferences. There are key themes which emerged across the different survey questions which helps to emphasise the complexity and the interconnected nature of systems and issues which influence both parenting and children's lives.

6. Report structure and findings

Below, the findings emerging from the survey are presented in relation to the core questions / areas explored in the survey:

- a) Being a Parent;
- b) Family and friend networks;
- c) Community;
- d) The Internet;
- e) Health services;
- f) Early Childhood Care and Education services;
- g) Family Support and Child Protection services;
- h) Social Protection and Tax services;
- i) Local Authorities;
- j) Government;
- k) Employers; and
- l) Two open questions.

For each question, a brief overview of the core findings is presented, followed by an in-depth description of parent responses.

BEING A PARENT

GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE



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.

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.



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"

6 a. Being a parent

What parents do to give their children the best start in life...

479 parents (46%) gave a response to this question

It is well established that the nature and quality of the caregiving in the earliest years of life are crucial to developmental outcomes. Parenting, however, is a significant challenge. Caring for and interacting with children is a source of much joy in the life of a parent. However, fatigue, exhaustion, anxiety and stress, as well as the corrosion of mental health and wellbeing and deterioration of family relationships may also occur (Giallo, Rose & Vittorino, 2011). Parenting is a multidimensional role that involves a wide range of responsibilities, the most basic of which involves looking after and ensuring child safety, health and nourishment. Parents, however, also play a vital role in shaping their child's educational, social and emotional development. Overall, the responses reflected the multidimensionality of the parenting role, highlighting a broad range of parenting responsibilities, functions and activities.

The findings indicate that **affection, love and responsiveness to a child's needs**, as well as building a **safe, loving, and secure environment for growth and development** were identified as crucial aspects of parenting.

- *"Most of all, love them and ensure they know I love them all the time. And keep them safe of course."*
- *"We love her and care for her, and look after her material and emotional needs"*
- *"They are not left to cry. I tell them how much I love them and support them"*
- *"I provide a loving, secure environment {...} I give them lots of affection, I take care of their physical and emotional needs and I support their education"*
- *"I nurture and care for my children giving them love, security, confidence looking after all their emotional and physical needs"*
- *"Safe and comfortable family life with education and endless love"*
- *"He is loved and cared for. He is stimulated with educational as well as imaginative toys. He is read to every day and encouraged to be a happy healthy and active little boy"*
- *"A warm home with a supportive family."*

Supporting healthy development was highlighted by 70% of respondents. Parents described providing **healthy meals** and **breastfeeding** to support their child's growth. Establishing **good sleep patterns** was also perceived as important to child health, as well as providing opportunities for **exercise and outdoor activities**. Parents also emphasised the importance of **accessing health services** to support their child's development including maintaining **regular check-ups and vaccinations**.

- *"I ensure my baby receives any medical attention required, and ensure his vaccinations are kept up to date."*
- *"I make sure she eats well and take care of her physical, emotional, hygienic and social needs to the best of my ability"*
- *"Good sleep patterns, healthy diet, fully vaccinated"*
- *"Try to keep them active and eat a healthy diet. They have a set bed time and we stick to it no matter what. I vaccinate"*
- *"Feed them properly, ensure they get enough sleep"*
- *"Good healthy food and healthy living"*
- *"Give nutritionally good food, breastfeed, play with her, talk to her, lots of cuddles, ensure she gets enough sleep, ensure she is healthy by getting vaccines and going to her check-up appointments with PHN"*

Promoting educational development was noted by participating parents as also being important to giving children a positive start in life. This included actively teaching learning skills and providing access to information, educational materials, helping with homework, as well liaising and linking with educational services (e.g. Schools and preschools).

- *"Teach them how to do things, help them understand new information"*
- *"Take interest in her education"*
- *"Help them with their homework"*
- *"Prioritise their education. I ensure they are involved"*
- *"Teach them as much as I can about science and teach them critical thinking"*
- *"Encourage learning, creativity"*
- *"Support them in school environment, help with homework"*

In many responses there was a significant emphasis on **building social and emotional skills** in children. Many parents were highly concerned with nurturing their child's sense of identity. Parents were also focused on their child's resilience and independence and the findings highlight parents' wish to help their children develop confidence, coping skills and the ability to manage their emotions. Closely related was parents' emphasis on shaping positive behaviours and values in their children. For example, parents expressed a desire for their children to be respectful of and kind to others, to have good manners and to be able to socialise, interact positively with others and build successful social relationships and friendships. Arguably, this illustrates parents' desire to build a foundation for future health and wellbeing by instilling 'life skills' in their children:

- *"Encourage confidence, independence, and resilience"*
- *"I try to encourage emotional health and maturity for my three year old. He knows I'll always listen and that it's OK to cry"*
- *"I teach them independence. I teach them to love themselves"*
- *"Enable my child to be independent and to build her own life"*
- *"Try to build their sense of self and confidence in who they are"*
- *"We teach our kids to treat each other and the people in their life with respect and kindness"*
- *"Teach them values and the importance of respect, honesty and kindness"*

Parents identified a range of parenting behaviours as being important to achieving a good start in life for their children. **Providing a variety of experiences and activities** was the most widely cited behaviour which parents said was important to child health and wellbeing. **Play** and **reading** featured prominently as important activities parents perform with their children, whilst other activities including singing, music, sports and art.

- *"I love my baby and respond to him and his communications as promptly as I can, I play with my baby, I read books with my baby, I sing nursery rhymes and songs with my baby. I do all of these things to strengthen our attachment and to help his brain development."*
- *"We read books, we play games, we do pretend play, we paint, colour and draw, I talk to him and ask him questions."*
- *"Play with them! Talk to them and listen to them, and read to them. Fresh air and exercise."*
- *"We read books, we play games, we do pretend play, we paint, colour and draw."*
- *"Play, cuddles, singing, books, walks, talk to my baby, lots of interaction and stimulation"*

Parents also described **engaging in cultural events and encouraging hobbies** as being important. **Outdoor activities, sports, fresh air and exercise** also featured prominently.

- *"Spend a lot of time with my kids, do a broad variety of activities - park, library, beach, time with friends."*
- *"Try to always have fun and to get baby laughing, do lots of messy play and activities, try to go to different places / days out and experiences etc."*

Parents' focus on activities and experiences can be understood having a dual purpose: firstly, activities and experiences were portrayed by parents as helping to promote positive physical and cognitive child development through stimulation and exercise; and secondly, as helping to promote positive parent-child relationships, as well as social and emotional child development through socialisation opportunities. **Child-friendly and child-led** activities, supported by parent responsiveness to their child's developmental and emotional needs, were highlighted:

- *"Support brain and physical development- e.g. through tummy time, baby sensory classes, swimming, baby massage."*
- *"We support them to be involved in a range of activities, musical, sporting, creative that try to build their sense of self and confidence in who they are."*
- *"We are responsive parents very much into child development and attachment."*
- *"My parenting style is child-led and therefore I respond to my children's needs with kindness and empathy."*
- *"Cuddle him a lot, listen to him babble, follow his lead in play"*

The emphasis on activities and experience also speaks to parents' focus on interacting and spending time together as a core aspect of supporting their child's potential. **Quality time together** as a family, including eating together and family outings and activities, was highlighted as important by 42% of parents:

- *"We give our time, our education, our love to our boys. We spend time with them, read stories every night, we go on family days out at the weekend (not expensive, walks in park etc.). One of either my husband or myself try to be home most days after school so we do homework."*
- *"We aim to provide a caring and loving environment spending as much time as possible with our kids. We place a lot of emphasis on eating together, and playing with the kids as much as possible outdoors. We teach the kids to treat each other and the people in their life with respect and kindness."*

Positive communication was also identified by many parents as being important to early development. Importantly, listening and communicating regularly and sensitively was identified as a core aspect of providing **encouragement** and **emotional support**, and as helping parents to foster life skills and social and emotional wellbeing in their children.

- *"Listen, comfort, hug, be there for them, support their hobbies / sports, set boundaries, accept their choices for life & support their choices, support them in school environment, help with homework, provide opportunities for physical activity, meeting friends, social & psychological support, comfort them through their disappointments."*
- *"Be there to listen and support them. Provide what they need and want to the best of my ability and resources."*
- *"I spend quality time with them, talk about important things such as emotions."*
- *"Talk to them, give them information, listen to their views and take them into account."*
- *"Listen to them and giving them the opportunity to express themselves."*
- *"Listen to them, play with them, empathise with them, support their social, emotional, cultural development. Being there for them."*

- *"I tune in and connect with him, we are good buddies, I listen and respond to his needs..."*
- *"I believe in connection and attachment to give my child the best start. Always being emotionally responsive and available."*

Providing **structure, routine, and modelling positive behaviour** was also noted as an important parenting role. This included **setting boundaries** and providing appropriate praise and attention to promote positive child behaviour and social development. Establishing **consistent bed-times and healthy sleep routines**, as well as **limiting screen time** were also highlighted by parents (15%):

- *"I have developed a routine that fits in with their age and stage of development. They sleep well and eat well and this gives them the best start for their life and allows them to play and learn each day..."*
- *"I have firm yet clear boundaries. I model resilience."*
- *"Being consistent with limit setting. Parenting in the moment... i.e. a bad day in work doesn't dictate how I respond."*
- *"Set rules and try to have some discipline, set bed times."*
- *"I give them my time, affection, play, I feed them well, I provide structure and boundaries."*
- *"Provide my baby with a predictable routine."*
- *"Sleep - lots of it, boundaries, rules, rewards, consequences."*
- *"Show them that we love them. Listen to them, spend time with them, give them structure, predictability and stability. Say sorry. Involve them in activities with friends."*
- *"Lots of attention and one to one time, routine..."*

Many parents wrote about making **personal life adjustments** to ensure their availability and ability to fulfil their child's needs. For some parents this involved cutting back on work or changing their employment conditions, working part-time or leaving paid employment, whilst other parents noted their commitment to work or further education in order to better provide for their child:

- *"I'm choosing to stay at home with the baby whilst the toddler attends crèche 3 afternoons a week. We're lucky enough that I can offer that balance of early inclusion in a crèche environment but also I'm present at home."*
- *"We spend a few hours outdoors every day. I only work part time so that I can be part of my children's everyday life. This means we'll probably never own a home. We are money poor but time rich."*
- *"I took a 5-year career break when the two youngest were born. I take one day parental leave."*
- *"I have stayed at home to raise my children myself."*
- *"I only work part time so that I can be part of my children's everyday life."*
- *"Work hard while at work to try better our future prospects."*
- *"Everything a parent can do. Work hard, keep a clean home."*
- *"I am back working full time so my children can have more hobbies."*

Strengthening parenting skills through formal and informal supports was highlighted by parents – this included **advice seeking, reading and researching** parenting practices, and utilising and engaging with **formal parenting support services**. Overall, parent responses were indicative of a significant emotional investment in parenting and a desire to optimise their child's potential:

- *"Big emotional investment and learning to parent well, to parent from connection and from the heart, understanding Infant Mental Health and the impact of my behaviour and responsiveness on their wellbeing and development."*
- *"Researching best practice for bringing up my baby, seeking advice from others."*

- *"I get information about the stage she is in regards to feeding, social / learning / emotional skills and apply on our routine..."*
- *"Researched needs for phase of growth and joined in community groups to learn more about what other parents are doing."*
- *"Learn about child development and my job is to support them to reach their potential."*
- *"I read everything I could find to help make educated choices for my children."*
- *"I attend parenting and other courses relating to children and babies and attend baby / toddler groups to socialise."*

Self-care was also noted by parents as helping to strengthen parenting skills. Parents and other significant caregivers (including grandparents and extended family) working together as a team and supporting each other in the task of parenting was also highlighted. **Building links and positive relationships** with extended family and the community, schools and preschools was also seen by a smaller proportion of parents as helping to buttress child's health and wellbeing in the early years.

- *"I eat well, exercise and try to set a good example."*
- *"Lead a healthy lifestyle myself and get plenty of rest."*
- *"I've taken care of myself during pregnancy, taking supplements, eating well, keeping active (doing prenatal yoga), monitoring my health, getting vaccinations, and receiving midwife led care."*
- *"Work together with my wife to be united in our child rearing, care and love our child, demonstrate to show our child manners, positive social skills, positive relationships with people, family, food, life. Play and have fun..."*
- *"I make sure they get to spend time with other family members such as Granny and Grandad."*
- *"I give her opportunity to play, be herself, make friends and see family."*
- *"They have a happy home and happy parents."*

What parents would like to improve or to start doing in order to give their child the best possible start in life...

479 parents (42%) gave a response to this question

The most widely cited area where parents wished to make improvements related to their ability to **spend more quality time together** with their children and **to engage in more activities and experiences** in order to support positive family interaction and relationships and child development. More time for one-to-one interaction and play was also highlighted, whilst many parents also said they would like to engage their children in **more outdoor and cultural activities** and to **reduce use of screens and televisions** in the home.

- *"I would like to give more time to them individually to ensure they are happy, confident and able to talk and confide in me if and when they need to."*
- *"More time to do activities one on one..."*
- *"I have returned to work full time and am always looking for ways to spend quality time with my children that include exercise and/or education, especially on the weekends."*
- *"Have more fun doing more crafts & hands on projects with the children."*
- *"Reduce tablet and game console time and get children more active outdoors..."*

- *"I'd like to get outdoors with them more often, some days I'm lazy and don't! My two-year old watches too much TV."*
- *"They are more connected with technology then I was growing up. I'm up to date to an extent but need to know how to manage better boundaries around the use and access to technology. It can be a challenge as my Mom had to manage our TV and video watching when we were younger, there was one TV now we have a modem in their bedrooms for PlayStation. We do curtail the use but the issue is at weekends when they can be used 2 hours becomes 4...my issue but needs to be kept on top of..."**"Less gaming & more jigsaws and playtime outside. Make more time for trips to theatre, music, zoo, museums."*

Just over half of all respondents felt they needed **better work-home life balance**. Balancing parenting with work commitments and household management was a major challenge and parents said they often felt daily hassles and that work-related stress impinged on the quality of the time they spend with their children.

- *"Try to be more present to their day to day woes, free my head for them, and encourage more independence and responsibility. Be more present to them when I am with them and not allow the pressures of both work and running a household to overtake that."*
- *"I'd like to have more time with her. Mornings and evenings before and after crèche can be short. I work weekends occasionally."*
- *"I would like to spend more time with them and also to improve the quality of that time - reduce stress and other activities while being with them."*
- *"More time for quality time like for sitting with them such as puzzles, jigsaw, colouring, etc..."*
- *"I'd love to have more individual time to give one-to-one attention, and a lot less other house chores!"*
- *"I'd like to find a better work life balance in our household. I feel not enough time is spent together as a family."*
- *"Wish I could spend more time with her. I work full time."*

Other areas where parents said they would like to make improvements included developing **healthier eating patterns**. Parents expressed a desire for greater knowledge in relation to healthy eating patterns and greater / enhanced access to healthy, child-friendly recipes and nutritional advice:

- *"Better food. My first child eats OK but the middle one does not, last one much better but starting to be picky now. I have had issues with food my whole life and feel like I am not doing the best thing here. I breastfed for 6 months on the 3, weaned on all lovely proper food but all 3 have decided from 2 to eat badly!!!! It is a constant struggle and I hope I'm not creating issues for their future."*
- *"Better diet. I need help with meal ideas and how to tempt fussy eaters..."*
- *"Increase my knowledge on nutrition..."*
- *"Cut down on unhealthy food."*

Further development of parenting skills was also identified by some parents as a need. For example, some parents said they would benefit from greater patience when coping with the demands of day-to-day parenting. Many parents also said they would like to develop their ability to positively manage their child's behaviour and to develop suitable routines for their children.

- *"Have more time and patience for them in difficult moments."*
- *"Be more patient. Learn to establish limits in a gentle way."*
- *"Would love to improve my patience and tolerance, and remain calm during conflicts..."*
- *"I would like to be less cross when they misbehave and find better strategies for managing misbehaviour."*

- *"I would like to be calmer when my girls get frustrated and upset."*
- *"Learn how to deal better with their behaviour, cultivate emotional resilience in them."*

In total, 18% of parents expressed a need for **additional parenting supports and resources** such as parenting programmes, additional contact with health care professionals and additional opportunities for their child for socialisation and interaction with other parents and children (e.g. parent and baby and parent and toddler groups).

- *"I would like support and encouragement around child development and when and how to start giving my children more independence for example feeding themselves etc."*
- *"I want an online parenting course that speaks to mothers as intelligent people rather than in a patronising manner."*
- *"More support from Public Health Nurse or others when babies are young."*
- *"Would like to see more support given to parent about advocating for your child..."*
- *"I feel my son needs to spend more time around children. I think it is lonely for him with just me all day and the only others he sees are also adults. I feel like despite best efforts I am holding back his development, I don't know what he should be doing to learn and develop well."*
- *"I'd like him to see / interact with other babies / young children but there aren't any groups around."*

A small group of parents (8%) also indicated a need for **personal supports and personal development**. These varied from practical (e.g. learning how to drive) to educational (e.g. furthering career opportunities) needs which parents felt would help them be more proactive in promoting their child's development. Better **self-care**, including addressing sleep, physical health, stress and mental health was also identified as a need by some parents.

Financial and home security was named as a concern by 14% of parents. An inability to purchase a stable home for their family, for example, was a notable source of stress for some of these parents. Other parents also expressed a desire to cut back on work or to remain at home while their children are young, yet felt unable to do so due to financial pressures.

- *"We are in rented accommodation & have had to move twice in two years due to our homes being sold. I would love to be able to rent with some sense of security - it is so disruptive to move house frequently & never know how long you'll get to stay in one place, not to mention the stress of finding somewhere new."*
- *"Would like to be able to buy a house rather than renting and having to move house so often."*
- *"I would like to move to an apartment / house with more space for the baby, as we're currently living in a one bedroom apartment that barely fits a cot in the bedroom. Ideally, I would've liked to have been living in our own home rather than renting before the baby arrives, due to the persistent insecurity in renting, but we'll make the most of what we have and what we can provide for our baby."*
- *"I would love to be a stay at home mammy but unfortunately can't afford to stop working."*
- *"Ideally would like to be at home full time especially in these formative years but finances do not allow this."*
- *"My husband and I are both full time working parents (hubbie works away). Ideally I wish I didn't have to work full time so as to spend more time with my children and be able to take them to more clubs / classes (sadly most don't suit working parents!!)"*

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE



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."



6 b. Family and friends

What family and friends do to give our children the best start in life...

467 parents (45%) gave a response to this question

The vast majority of responses are indicative that parents highly valued the presence of grandparents and extended family, including uncles, aunts and cousins, in the lives of their children. Family and friends were perceived by participating parents as providing **support, encouragement and love** which, in turn, helping to promote child development. Grandparents in particular were identified helping to provide children with guidance and promoting development, whilst family and friends were also described as important role models:

- *"They show him unconditional love and support his development in all aspects."*
- *"Grandparents are wonderful role models, and look after the kids one day per week."*
- *"My best friends visit each year & he has a close relationship with them & they are great male role models, other friends locally with children have play time & my goddaughter thinks she's his sister & that relationship is very special for him."*
- *"Sharing stories is important to help learning, positive role modelling and mentoring..."*
- *"Explore with them. Pass on wisdom..."*
- *"Advice and support from extended family is very important. The intergenerational exposure of grandparents and older aunts and uncles is valuable too."*

Family and friends were perceived as an important source of **fun** in their child's life (e.g. bringing children on activities and outings and interacting and playing with them). This role was understood as helping to **promote child learning**. Extended family and friend networks also provided an important **avenue for socialisation** for both parent and child and were perceived as providing opportunities for children to develop friendships and hone and develop social skills.

- *"Their grandparents bake with them, do arts and crafts, give cuddles and read stories. They teach them about nature and provide them a space to mix with other kids their age. They build my children up and play with them and love them."*
- *"Grandparents care, interact, teach. Friends children help socialise."*
- *"Take them for walks in the country, teach them things for life ahead..."*
- *"They love my daughters and nurture them. Teach them things..."*
- *"We have play dates with friends and their children which helps them develop friendships."*
- *"They offer fun connectivity and demonstrate the importance of family..."*
- *"My parents help out with child care, and we spend a lot of time together as a family so she has formed some great friendships with her cousins."*
- *"My parents, (my children's grandparents), help out with childminding occasionally. We are regular visitors to their home which is like a 'home from home' for my children. My children have positive relationships with their aunts and uncles, as well as our friends and their children."*
- *"Engage with the children, provide 'special' time and treats! Provide a broader network of support."*

For many of the participating parents, grandparents in particular, provided an important '**back-up**' support and filling childminding gaps (e.g. during bouts of illness or emergencies). Just over 30% of parents noted that family and friends provided childminding support and baby-sitting, enabling

parents to get a break or have time together as a couple. Grandparents were also providing regular childcare for a smaller proportion of working parents.

- *"Grandparents have him over to stay and help with child minding..."*
- *"Give me time out and help if ever stuck, e.g. school collection. Listen when having a hard day."*
- *"They take a huge interest in her. They see her often even though she lives a good distance away from them. They help out when she is sick..."*
- *"Help me out when needed especially if children are sick or I have urgent appointments and need someone to look after them."*
- *"They are a constant support, helping to babysit on the few nights out we take. They love our daughter and care for her. They respect the way we parent our daughter and support us to do so."*

Family and friends were a crucial **source of guidance, advice and emotional support** for parents and helped to reinforce parents' decisions and child rearing practices:

- *"My family are around and give a lot of love to my children. My mother minds them when my husband and I both have to work. They look after them as well as we do. My friends are similar to me and we all bring up our children very similarly. It is wonderful to be around these people, we have relationships where we can speak to our children if they misbehave and this is ok. This is v. important to me."*
- *"Play dates and we support each other for child care, so our children learn different rules in different households..."*
- *"My friends always check in with us and are full of helpful suggestions when I have questions."*
- *"My friends are always so welcoming to me and my children. They are a great support when I am needing advice, and are always happy to share experiences and help. My family are always there for me, if I am stuck. One aunt in particular is fantastic at giving my girls enriching life experiences as gifts."*
- *"Family especially are always there to help out, it's mostly just for company, you need them with a first born."*
- *"They love my children and show them this all the time with being generous with their time and advice for me as I struggle with day to day work life balance and parenting..."*
- *"It can be quite daunting when your partner goes back to work and you've 10 hours ahead of you unsure of what you're doing! At this time it's great to see a family member or friend to reassure you."*
- *"Support me, discuss parenting techniques, help with childcare and household chores. Spend time with the children, making them feel special..."*
- *"They provide support when I've had a hard week or need a little break they give good advice and reassurance to me. Which I feel helps me to be a better parent."*

Family and friends also provided **practical help** with housework or cooking. Gifts given by friends and family were perceived as an important resource, helping to provide additional stimulation and learning opportunities in the home. Presents of clothes and toys and support from family were also seen by a small proportion as helping to relieve financial pressures.

- *"Support, help buying clothes and other necessities for child which is difficult when we have so many other expenses."*
- *"My family have helped us financially which enables me to be a stay at home parent."*
- *"Support me by visiting and helping with housework..."*
- *"They are helping buy items that the baby will need, they already love the baby, checking up on me to make sure I'm okay..."*
- *"My own family would have similar values and views to mine and tend to purchase educational toys, stimulating books, etc. for my children."*

- *“Offer to babysit, provide support face to face, over text and phone, mind her occasionally, give presents and hand me downs.”*

What family and friends could improve or to start doing in order to give children the best possible start in life...

375 parents (36%) gave a response to this question

Almost 22% said that their family and friends were already providing significant support and help (response rate = 36%). A small proportion of parents (4%), however, noted a lack of readily available extended family support, whilst a quarter of all parent participants said that they found it difficult to develop or access support networks and that greater interaction and better relationships with grandparents and family would benefit their child’s development. An additional 11% wished their family and friends would **spend more time** with their children and **play** with them, **listen to and encourage** their child to a greater extent.

- *“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.”*
- *“My family all live outside Ireland & when my children were very young it would have been a big help if I'd had family closer to me. Now I wish my children could see their grandparents & uncles more often.”*
- *“More family gatherings so that kids will get to know them better...”*
- *“I have a few close friends locally who I would love to give him more time with, especially 2 close childhood friends who are fathers as I am always concerned about him having a positive male role model around.”*
- *“I do not live close to my family so support from them is not on a daily basis, it’s over the phone or on visits. Support structures are not as strong as they might be due to geographical restraints.”*
- *“I would like greater input from my children's aunts and uncles, but they don't live nearby and they work a lot...”*
- *“I would like to see family members visit us more often and to interact with our children more. This could include playing with them, reading to them, spending more time together.”*

Over 18% of parents said they hoped for their family and friends to be more supportive and understanding of their parenting decisions and to develop a better understanding of their child’s world in order to better support their child’s interests and development. Parents also wanted grandparents to provide fewer sugary and non-nutritional foods to their children.

- *“Be more educated on his issues. Be more in tune to his needs in terms of his delays or autism.”*
- *“Remove the stigma of first time mother jitters and trust mother’s (and father’s) instinct when it comes to their child, stop seeing attachment as a negative thing. Stop making parents feel that they need to get up and get on with it. It takes a village to help raise well rounded individuals. Bring back the village and support system.”*
- *“I would like my mother-in-law to stop judging us and criticising us and to live and let live - so we can spend more time with her.”*
- *“At the moment we are trying to enforce rules and boundaries and my parents can override these sometimes when they're minding the girls which can be frustrating. I need to talk to them around this and ensure that our rules and boundaries as the girl’s parents are respected and adhered to.”*
- *“Supporting my parenting style, approach and decisions without judgement.”*

COMMUNITIES

GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE

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"

6 c. Communities

What communities do to help give children the best start in life...

440 parents (42%) gave a response to this question

A wide range of community resources and facilities were highlighted by parents as helping to give their children the best start in life. 28% of parents noted that their local community provided **groups and support programmes**, such as mother and baby groups, breastfeeding support groups, parent and toddler groups and parenting programmes. Overall, parent sentiment was indicative of significant demand for locally-based parent- or family-focused resources. These kinds of community-based supports were perceived as helping to strengthen parenting skills, providing an important source of social and emotional supports for parents and opportunities for children to socialise with others.

- *“They have the most amazing parent group called “Playmatters” which is facilitated by an early years specialist. This group has been my saviour over the years. Always someone on hand to help me with connections, give information, activities. Would have been lost - completely lost without it.”*
- *“The local HSE centre hosts a breastfeeding support group through the Public Health Nurse team. It was a beacon for me in the early days of trying to breastfeed. It also offered a community of other new mums to share the experience with and that helped me to give my son the best start.”*
- *“Parent and Toddler / Parenting groups, arts and crafts / sports / music facilities and activities are really important, especially to families who do not have a strong family / friend support network.”*
- *“Provide a Public Health Nurse, free medical care, a breastfeeding group, classes and exercise groups for mums with babies, coffee chats and ways to connect with things going on in the community.”*
- *“Has breastfeeding groups, and other groups where mum and baby can meet, keeping mum sane to care for baby better, and good for baby to meet other babies and interact.”*
- *“There are various playgroups and activities around but you really have to find them, if you are not from the area it can be isolating...”*
- *“Mother and toddler groups - Provides a wide range of activities to enhance social development.”*

Playgrounds and play spaces were also highlighted as important community resources by 21% of parents. For 18% of parents, access to local schools, playschools and/or childcare facilities was also considered an important feature of the local environment, as were local sport and club activities (e.g. GAA clubs), as well as libraries, community centres, swimming pools, gyms and cinemas.

- *“We have an amazing crèche in our nearest village, neighbour children to socialise with, green spaces and a playground, welcoming community at mass.”*
- *“There are good amenities in our local area for kids including good child minding facilities, play areas, clean and safe public spaces ideal for walks.”*
- *“The local library is very nice and has a fantastic area for the children. We have a lovely playground too.”*
- *“Our library is great. Free park with playground and farm to visit across the road. Such an amazing resource.”*

More broadly, communities were perceived as offering families **a sense of belonging** (14%), as well as providing **a safe space** for development (7%). A further 12% of parents mentioned that they lived in a

friendly community where they were supported by neighbours and friends and 11% said their local area offered child-friendly activities, amenities and/or social outlets for their children.

- *"They are friendly and tell the children that they like to see them playing outside."*
- *"Great community spirit, lots of people looking out for each other's kids. Help with school runs, friendship..."*
- *"People in my local area are very friendly and love interacting with my son. Most people in the area 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 breastfeeding support and parent support from Cuidiu."*
- *"My community provides friends, neighbours and peers for my children (and us.)."*
- *"Good sense of family and friends nearby."*
- *"The community is friendly and supportive."*

What communities could improve or start doing to help give children the best start in life...

380 parents (36%) gave a response to this question

According to survey respondents, key areas where communities could improve in order to better promote child development included the **development of attractive and safe local amenities and facilities**. Indeed, 37% identified a need for **infrastructural development** within their local communities such as the development of green areas and/or the installation of playgrounds or play spaces, as well as community centres and/or sports facilities. A need for improved **community safety** through better traffic regulation and the provision of safe walking and cycling paths, pedestrianised / civic areas was also noted by parents.

- *"I would like to have a playground locally or a safe area for my children to play and possibly some local child friendly groups or activities..."*
- *"It would be great to have more green spaces to go to locally."*
- *"A real park that the whole community could use and be proud of which is safe, secure, maintained and patrolled."*
- *"Make our streets safer, slow traffic and allow our children to play and cycle on the roads."*
- *"More facilities for families - a pool would be great in the locality..."*
- *"Provide better places to play; clubs and activities for all children, especially those who find it hard to fit in."*
- *"More playgrounds in more areas of town. Safe cycling areas e.g. canal towpath, school routes."*

Almost 32% of parents said they would benefit from **greater availability of community-run family or child-focused supports**. It was important for parents that supports be inclusive, accessible for all parents (including working parents), and low-cost, thereby enabling better community engagement. Of these parents, many also felt they would benefit from more community-based parenting support services (e.g. parent and toddler groups, breastfeeding groups):

- *"More free and cost-effective activities for children and more opportunities for parents to engage in the community and feel that everyone has something to offer..."*
- *"Parent and Toddler / Parenting groups, arts and crafts / sports / music facilities and activities are really important, especially to families who do not have a strong family / friend support network."*

- *"I would love the opportunity to participate in more planned community events outside of the local sports clubs, not everyone is sporty."*
- *"I think there could be more resources in the community for working mothers and their children, where there are more things to do and events at the weekends which are low cost. Play groups are all on during the week."*
- *"Some free resources but a lot of very expensive classes, which can make it inaccessible when you have mortgage and other expenses."*
- *"More support services for new mothers like mother and baby groups."*
- *"More support for mental health in pregnancy and after. More support groups or access to more information for parents whose kids have issues. Ones where parents can find people in the same situation as them. More autism friendly areas and groups."*
- *"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. Courses like Hand-in-Hand or Parents Plus should be disseminated widely as they can be very useful."*

Improvements in social services such as social housing, schools and (particularly) local affordable childcare were mentioned as a priority for a smaller proportion of parents, whilst 7% also felt the promotion of community spirit was necessary.

- *"Have a more community look on life. I have been living in my house for over 4 years and don't know my neighbours."*
- *"I wish that there was more of a community spirit. Everyone is just too busy."*
- *"Parents on my street do not really come together - most are working - no time and no public shared spaces."*

THE INTERNET

GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE

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

6 d. The Internet

What the internet does to help give children the best start in life...

371 parents (35%) gave a response to this question

The internet was perceived by parents as a valuable **tool for accessing information** as well providing a source of support through communication with other parents. 58% of parents said they regularly consult internet sources for **advice and guidance** in relation to general child development and parenting advice, as well as specific issues such as health, illness, nutrition and learning.

- *"Provides information on health, childhood illnesses, mental health, nutrition and the importance of exercise."*
- *"Gives me strategies for helping me and my child through difficult periods..."*
- *"Easy access to a world of information no matter what the query."*
- *"Makes info accessible. Helps me access support in niche areas e.g. reflux babies support groups online were hugely helpful when local medics were not."*
- *"Helps us become more informed and easy access to evidence based information on parenting and early childhood care and education."*

Many parents also reported using the internet to **connect and interact with other parents** through social media and internet forums. For some parents, connecting with others through internet resources was an important source of support and community and was perceived as beneficial to parent mental health and wellbeing.

- *"It connects parents with like-minded others in similar situations to theirs which acts to alleviate the isolation felt during prep for birth, antenatal and the first year of the child's life. It is an extraordinary support tool, free and accessible to all, regardless of socioeconomic circumstances."*
- *"It's my sanity some days for tips on sickness and parenting. I would have found the first year so isolating without the support of Google!"*
- *"Provide info for 1st time mothers who may not have support and are not sure where to find answers."*
- *"Good advice from reliable sources. Peer support, empathy, ..."*
- *"Lots of info and advice and also support network at any time day or night which makes it less isolating."*

Overall, parents felt internet sources could be beneficial for parenting skills and also helped to provide reassurance during times of stress and uncertainty, thereby helping parents to feel more confident in their parenting choices.

- *"Obtain info to educate myself in order to make best decisions possible for my children..."*
- *"Huge source of information. Blogs can offer affirmation and confidence."*
- *"It's a source of information when you are not sure about something, it is good for new and fresh ideas regarding activities to do with my daughter. It's a great source of music too and resources to facilitate play."*
- *"Very helpful for me at different stages to google problems I'm having which help me get suggestions and to feel my difficulties aren't unusual."*

A smaller proportion of parents (10% and 7% respectively) said they use the internet to promote child learning and for entertainment purposes.

What are the key sites or ways parents use the internet to get advice on giving children the best possible start in life?

437 (42%) of parents gave a response to this question

- The most popular internet resource was Facebook with one quarter of all parents citing regular usage of the social media website. A further 19% reported regular use of social media or internet forums
- 14% identified medical websites as an important tool (e.g. HSE website, the NHS website)
- 15% identified Google as a common resource
- 13% identified specialised parenting and child-focused websites / applications such, as “The Baby Center” and “What to Expect”, as important resources
- 11% of parents reported regular use of breastfeeding support and promotion websites.
- The top five most commonly cited Irish websites were HSE.ie, Rollercoaster.ie, eumom.ie, first1000days.ie and breastfeeding.ie

What the internet could start doing or improve to help give children the best start in life...

302 parents (29%) gave a response to this question

In order to further explore the role of internet resources in parenting experiences, participants were asked what could be changed or improved to better help them in their role as parents. Responses illustrated that, despite the internet being perceived as an important source of information, mistrust regarding the reliability of information available on the internet was also prevalent and many desired a **trustworthy** website containing evidence-based information on parenting and child development.

- “One good evidence-based website which can give me the information I need, answer my questions and help me to connect with other parents and carers...”
- “I have a science and research background and am able to distinguish between evidence-based information and all the other junk online. The internet can often overwhelm parents with a mass of conflicting, or simply erroneous, information. I find that the existing evidence and knowledge that we already have on infant development, attachment, sleep, breastfeeding, nutrition etc, is not easily accessible to parents. I don't know what the internet can do to improve this.”
- “I would like to ensure that I use only reputable sites / pages / apps to avoid getting 'worst case scenario' stories all the time.”
- “Have more areas to provide factual information, there is a lot of old and not up to date information as well as contrasting advice.”
- “Internet safety is paramount in our home so more education re same...”
- “You can find anything you want to convince yourself you are right on the web. I think teaching parents to filter better would help.”
- “I can access information on a topic. Not always sure if what I read is correct. I wish there was one site I could access and get all that I need.”

Nine per cent of parents said that they would like access to a national, Irish website which focused on child development and parenting, whilst others also suggested that there should be better online access to, and/or promotion of, locally-based family events and/or community-based parenting resources and supports.

- *"I would love one good Irish based information site that had knowledge or links to knowledge about children and their needs."*
- *"More Irish based articles / advice for different developmental stages."*
- *"Would like an Irish site for parents which is good and has a range of different info."*
- *"I'd like a better website that tells families about kid-friendly events on at the weekend. There are a few sites but they are quite haphazard."*
- *"An app showing childcare, groups, health information specific for local area."*

Parents also said they needed to become savvier in their use of the internet and to be more educated in best and/or safe internet use practices. **Child safety** emerged as an important parent concern and many felt they would like **more safety measures and regulation** of internet content to ensure child protection, as well as greater guidance in how to promote safe internet usage for their children.

- *"More safety measures for children to be protected online..."*
- *"Internet providers should provide better parental controls..."*
- *"All parents to be well educated on the dangers of social media. Monitoring of its use to be the norm for parents."*

Parents' experience of the internet, particularly social media and forums, was not always positive, with some reporting criticism and judgement regarding parenting choices. For these parents, **access to non-judgemental information and advice** was important.

- *"Social media groups are toxic. Always a few mother's tearing down new mums, berating decisions and generally causing a bad atmosphere."*
- *"Monitor negative comments on social media forums such as Facebook..."*
- *"Facebook and other sites and chat rooms are dangerous due to the bullying."*
- *"Internet trolls and negativity is awful. An odd time, on my first child I used to go to parenting chat rooms with a concern about my child only to be told I'm doing everything wrong and should be at the Doc etc... you have to know where to look for reliable information."*

In total, 18% of parents said it was important to **limit household, and particularly child, use** of the internet and screen technologies.

- *"Spend less time on my phone in front of my kids."*
- *"I would like if there was less emphasis on the internet altogether."*
- *"To be more disciplined, we are far too lenient, we allow too much screen time..."*
- *"I am not a fan of my children having access to very much screen time."*
- *"Reduce my own TV time and screen time... encourage good practice of time away from technology."*

HEALTH SERVICES

GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE



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"

6 e. Health services

What the health services do to help give children the best start in life...

375 parents (36%) gave a response to this question

Parents were asked to identify what they felt the health services do to help give children the best start in life. Almost one quarter of parents noted generally positive experiences of the health services. In particular, free access to maternity health care, developmental checks and vaccinations, as well as the free GP card for children under 6 were highlighted as important aspects of the public health care system.

For 24% of parents the **maternity services** were perceived as providing good care and supporting maternal health, facilitating healthy pregnancies and promoting safe deliveries.

- *"I got very good care during and after my pregnancies. My only complaint was the waiting times for appointments in the hospital and at the doctors."*
- *"A safe environment to give birth."*
- *"I had fantastic care during my pregnancies as a public patient..."*
- *"Maternity cover I have gone public twice and had complications with both. Could not fault the care I received."*
- *"The support I got from the midwives through my pregnancy and birth was excellent."*

In total one third of parents noted the **provision of the free GP card** for children under six as a helpful provision. Parents and their young infants are often frequent users of public health services (Hickey et al., in submission). Indeed, the free GP card was perceived as an important financial relief and as facilitating access to medical help in times of need. As noted by the following parent:

- *"The under six card is fantastic and a real help. It sometimes means the difference of getting to the doctor or waiting which sometimes is bad as an infection in children can be dangerous."*

Developmental check-ups provided by Public Health Nursing (PHN) services were mentioned by almost 50% of parents as an important and beneficial service. Importantly, PHN services were perceived as providing a **high-quality services** by a large proportion of parents (29%). For these parents, interactions with PHNs were also generally seen as supportive and helpful. Breastfeeding supports delivered through PHN services were also reported as valuable service by a smaller proportion of parents (6%).

- *"The Public Health Nurse is very approachable and excellent at giving advice and directing us... towards appropriate services."*
- *"Public Health Nurse is very helpful for developmental checks."*
- *"Public Health Nurse was very supportive."*
- *"The Public Health Nurse was also great upon discharge, and they told me to call anytime if I have any questions or worries!"*
- *"I had an excellent Public Health Nurse who was very important in my recovery after traumatic birth injuries..."*
- *"... the best thing the health services provided for me was access to a breastfeeding support group. This group helped me get going with feeding my son on the hard days when I wanted to give up. It also meant I was linked into my PHN (who facilitated the group) and had access to ask her any questions I had about my son. This helped me to give him a good start."*

Nevertheless, 5% of parents noted negative experiences of, or lack of faith in, the public healthcare system, whilst some of these parents felt that the health services and supports for children and families were overburdened and insufficient to adequately support optimal child wellbeing:

- *“My Public Health Nursing service is appalling. I really don't feel like my PHN has done anything to give my child the best possible start in life.”*
- *“I paid privately for maternity care and wouldn't trust the service if I went public.”*
- *“Public Health Nurses seem to be very hit or miss. My PHN has been zero support with my 2nd child, [my child] has gone through multiple surgeries and ambulance transfers to Dublin. I could have used the support but it just hasn't been there, and sometimes extremely dismissive.”*

What the health services could improve or start doing to help give children the best start in life...

362 parents (35%) gave a response to this question

Despite a large proportion of parents reporting positive experiences of the health services, more than half of all respondents said that **capacity development and reform** of child health services was needed. Some of these parents emphasised the need for expeditious implementation of the new National Maternity Strategy, whilst access to specialist services and waiting times for consultants emerged as a particular concern for parents. Several parents noted personal experiences of long waiting times for specialist services for their children, highlighting their frustration and concern. 31% of parents said that public health services were **under-resourced** and that better funding and increased staffing was needed. **Reform and increased funding of mental health services** for both children and parents emerged as a prominent sub-theme within these findings. This included enhanced prenatal and perinatal mental health supports, as well as changes to the delivery and implementation of child and adolescent mental health supports.

- *“A properly funded and managed health service. My youngest has dyslexia, we had him privately assessed. He has suspected dyspraxia we are waiting on a HSE assessment but will privately assess him if we are not called in the next few months...already waiting 3 months. We intend to keep him on the public list because this will remain of benefit into the future.”*
- *“My middle daughter is awaiting occupational therapy since she was 4 and she turns 6 in 3 months, over 18 months of a wait is ridiculous, she has trouble writing in school and I believe she has sensory issues...”*
- *“My first had a problem with her kidneys; the public system did nothing for her. We paid out the money so we could go private and the problem was sorted in a week which wouldn't have happened if we stayed public...”*
- *“Shorter wait times for infants. My son was over 2 years before he had a first appointment that was referred from birth & needed to be assessed & monitored since birth.”*
- *“Have shorter waiting lists for public patients. My son was referred onto a waiting list to see ENT consultant which is 2 years long. If we wait his speech and language maybe already affected. So in the end we paid to see the same consultant privately and had an appointment within 2 weeks!”*
- *“I am petrified that my daughters will need mental health services in the future because these services are not fit for purpose and substandard compared to the early years services. No-one wants their child to have mental health problems but in rural Ireland it can be impossible to get help...”*
- *“I feel much investment is needed in mental health services. There is little in the way of prevention or early intervention. Also, those with special needs or a disability need to have*

roadblock removed whereas it would seem that a parent needs to fight tooth and nail for anything they receive."

A small proportion of parents (8%) mentioned that that communication with, and inclusion of, parents within maternity and child health service provisions needed to be enhanced. These participants felt that **parents need to be included as a partner**, rather than a passive participant in the process.

- *"A more patient-led model. I found that the doctors in the [Maternity Hospital] were much more about ticking boxes than listening to me or seeing me as a person. It seemed clear the staff in the hospital were stretched."*
- *"Educate old-school doctors and older doctors who feel they know everything and are dismissive..."*
- *"Quality information, attitude of inclusion of parent, evidence-based discussions. More training on up to date research relating to food and nutrition and childhood development. Implement the [National] Maternity Strategy in full and as a matter of urgency. More access to midwife-led care and homebirth options. Respect for bodily autonomy and for the woman as the lead agent in the birthing process."*
- *"I feel the mother is very much secondary through it all: like she is just the vessel carrying the baby. It should be a collaboration between the health service and parents, not just told what to do."*

A further 13% of parents said they felt that **parenting supports need development**. In particular, parents said that enhanced emotional and mental health supports for parents were needed during the early years. Access to community-based support groups and increased service provision for parents from PHN services were highlighted. Improved public health promotion and educational campaigns were also suggested.

- *"More support for new mothers. Support network is poor - more home visits from midwives..."*
- *"Look after the parents better. There was little follow-up for me following the birth..."*
- *"A drop-in parenting support group where parents can go with their children to get support, a cup of tea, information and understanding."*
- *"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 also need more professionals available to talk to."*

Development of **breastfeeding supports** were also mentioned by 21% of respondents. Indeed, existing services and supports were frequently perceived as outdated, inadequate and inconsistent:

- *"I wish there was better breastfeeding support in the maternity hospitals. I was discharged without any help from a lactation specialist."*
- *"Breastfeeding specialist on wards. Help at home breastfeeding."*
- *"More breastfeeding support. I found the support extremely poor in the [Maternity Hospital]. And my friends have had similar experiences. [My baby] was misdiagnosed for tongue tie twice before discharge. She lost weight and they tried to force me into formula. I resisted, engaged a lactation consultant and tongue tie specialist and significant cost and stress just because of their denial that tongue tie is so prevalent. The services are paying lip service to breastfeeding. The hospitals need more and better trained lactation consultants they need paediatricians to take the issue seriously."*
- *"I felt that there wasn't a lot of information on accessing lactation consultants after having my first baby. We only met them after she was sent to paediatric day ward due to her not putting on weight."*

- *“After I left the hospital I found that the support for breastfeeding wasn’t really there. I exclusively breastfed until she was 4 months and combination until she was 6 months [...] If I had more support I may have fed for longer and was very disappointed when I stopped.”*

Finally, 27% of respondents said that **additional developmental check-ups** for children throughout the early years would be beneficial. Enhanced access to **dental care** and the **expansion of the free GP scheme** to all children was particularly recommended.

- *“I’d love to see them extend the age on these services. It would be lovely to have children seen in secondary school, right up to 6th year.”*
- *“The dental services are inadequate for all children, it is not right that some parents have to pay privately to get their child seen by a dentist.”*
- *“More PHN visits in child’s first year. Great if they were resourced to come to your house at set times throughout first year.”*
- *“Better Public Health Nurse care when children are born and young, nurse visiting more and coming to the home to support parenting and the child, family, more services and more information on accessing services through the school system. School Nurse Programme to assess children.”*
- *“Health development checks done more often after 9 months...”*

EARLY CHILDCARE AND EDUCATION SERVICES

GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE



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"



6 f. Preschool and Early Childhood Care and Education Services

What preschool and early childhood care and education services do to help give children the best start in life...

348 parents (33%) gave a response to this question

The clear majority of parents' perceptions of early childcare and educational (ECCE) services were positive. 20% of parents described positive experiences of these services; 22% felt they helped to promote positive child development by providing a safe environment for care and early education; and 22% felt that ECCE services helped to develop children's social and emotional skills through socialisation and play with other children. Overall, parents felt ECCE services were **caring spaces**, where their children were **loved and secure**. These findings also suggest that parents' felt ECCE services played an important foundational role in child development, by helping to promote skill development and learning, as well as overall wellbeing.

- *"My son thrives in his preschool. They look after him so well and do extra classes like fit kids."*
- *"Great opportunity for socializing and learning."*
- *They are amazing. 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..."*
- *"Services are great, lots of good initiatives and programming around healthy eating, diversity, civic responsibility, emotional wellbeing..."*
- *"They provide for the social, emotional, physical and educational needs of the children in their care. They observe children and provide an environment that is playful to support and encourage learning. They provide a home from home for the children and support families by providing care so they can work and provide for their family."*
- *"They are paramount in my children's early learning and development and wellbeing while they are there. Very happy with our local pre-school..."*
- *"Early childhood education is central to the well-being and physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of young children, and I believe existing preschool and early years services do the best they can within the parameters that they operate."*

Parents' responses also highlighted that ECCE services provided children with **socialisation opportunities** beyond the immediate family context, thereby allowing the child to **develop friendships** and helping children to build a sense of **independence and connection**.

- *"They give children a sense of belonging to a community outside of the family. They engage children's right to have friends and peers and a safe place to play and learn."*
- *"...provide opportunity to learn through play and socialise, develop skills."*
- *"Teaches independence away from Parents, social interaction, develops creativity and provide a great foundation for future learning."*
- *"They have them two years so they build their confidence and get the child to be social and great for learning practical things as well as educational."*
- *"Nurture and builds confidence socially."*
- *"Socialisation and an opportunity to foster early learning and early independence..."*

Child-led and play-based curricula were identified by 29% of parents as beneficial for child learning and development. Other aspects of ECCE services which were positively perceived included healthy eating policies and exercise promotion. Just under 10% of parents emphasised the role of these services in promoting **school-readiness** and interest in learning at an early age.

- *“They make learning fun.”*
- *“Give foundation for learning...”*
- *“They build confidence in children, which is very beneficial for when they go to school. Preschool also prepares the child for routine, e.g. sitting at a desk for a specific amount of time.”*
- *“A gentle introduction to the process of learning...”*
- *“A quality based curriculum which focuses on the strengths of the child. Opportunities for every child to get a good start from the early years which promotes learning later on.”*

A small proportion, 10% of parents, noted that ECCE services were an important source of information, support and referral for parents, particularly in cases where parents had worries or concerns regarding their child’s development. For a minority of parents, these services also helped to provide a sense of connection and community with other parents, whilst parents’ experiences of interacting with childcare service providers were also generally perceived positively.

- *“They are amazing in so many ways, socialising and meeting other parents, networking...”*
- *“Absolutely essential within rural communities. I found them a great source of support as an isolated parent. Great for children to meet and grow up with other children in the community as many went onto the same primary and secondary school. Great connections made for the children and basis for future relationships, connections and identity.”*
- *“They are very caring and create a good sense of community.”*

Within this context, **government schemes promoting access to ECCE services** were broadly welcomed by parents. Indeed, 21% of parents specified that the “free preschool year” and new ECCE schemes (e.g. the Affordable Childcare Scheme) were beneficial and provided important financial relief for families.

- *“Providing the 2 years preschool helps prepare the children for school so they are ready for the transition to school.”*
- *“Free ECCE is an excellent support to pre-schoolers. It gives structure and compliments learning from home.”*
- *“Free preschool year is great. I’m lucky my child attends an excellent preschool.”*
- *“The two free preschool years are fantastic.”*

What preschool and early childhood care and education services could improve or start doing to help give children the best start in life...

304 parents (29%) gave a response to this question

Although parents’ perceptions of ECCE services were very positive, survey participants provided a broad range of responses which helped to highlight a number of areas which parents felt would help to enhance or improve these services. Most significantly, 35% survey respondents said that access to ECCE services needed to be improved. There was strong sentiment amongst parents that ECCE was expensive and placed a financial strain on families. Overall, there was a perceived need **for further development of affordable, accessible childcare services**. In line with these opinions, parents felt that **public funding** for these services needed to be enhanced:

- *“More community crèche options giving lower cost and part-time childcare options...”*

- *“More funding for parents to have their child in quality early years services.”*
- *“Childcare costs are extremely high; parents need more support with these.”*
- *“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.”*
- *“Government should fund some new buildings too as some places do not have sufficient services. Funding for equipment and towards running costs is needed.”*
- *“More funded childcare places and after school care. Very expensive childcare in local area so not attainable for a lot of parents.”*

A large proportion of parents felt that current government schemes (e.g. “free preschool year”) supporting and promoting access to early years educational services needed to be extended and enhanced.

- *“Each child should have two full years access to pre-school not just from 3.”*
- *“ECCE dates that are more equitable, as my [daughter] was born in April she won't qualify until September and most likely will start school the following year when she will be 4.5 so she will only get 1 year ECCE.”*
- *“I'd like them to expand the age ranges of the ECCE scheme so that my son who was born in November can also start school at 5+. The scheme currently prohibits children from attending a free year where they will be aged 5 years and 6 months in the June of the academic year.”*
- *“Give 2 actual free years (not just three hours a day) and make the €80 reduction easier for childcare providers so more will avail of it and put a policy in place that prevents these providers from putting up their fees.”*
- *“ECCE scheme should be available to all children for a full 2 years. My daughter only qualifies for 1 and a half years as her birthday is Oct. My son qualified for the full 2 years. It should be equal for all children.”*
- *“Start the period of free schooling / care earlier, care is too expensive for a single parent...”*

A total of 41% of all respondents mentioned there was a need for some form of **capacity development** for ECCE services including: improved healthy eating and health promotion policies and increased facilities for outdoor play; strengthening of child-led and/or play based curricula within early years educational facilities; lower staff to child ratios; greater professional development opportunities and training for childcare service providers; and enhanced regulation of early years services. Greater engagement and enhanced communication between service providers and parents was also mentioned by a small proportion (6%) of parents.

- *“Less structure and more outdoor play. Local crèche and Naíonraí have no outdoor play opportunities. Children are indoors all day. I think that's just unbelievable in this day and age when it's been proven time and time again that the time spent outdoors in free play is linked to the quality of our long term mental health.”*
- *“Clear ethos, goals, and aspirations for the children who attend. Clear structure for interacting with children (High Scope, Montessori). Link in local community.”*
- *“Investment by Government to further professionalise the sector - better qualified and better paid professionals with adequate funding to ensure every child gets full access to a quality service similar to schools.”*
- *“Get a better inspection system to ensure all preschool educators take their role seriously.”*
- *“More supervision to ensure all preschools are providing the highly standard of care and education offered in most.”*

There was a notable proportion of parents who felt that childcare staff did not receive sufficient financial reward / reimbursement for their work and that early educational services and staff should be a publicly funded service within the larger public education sector. These findings indicate that

parents consider that **increased funding and pay** for childcare practitioners would help to reduce staff turnover and improve the quality of early childcare provisions:

- *“Childcare is so expensive and those working in childcare do not get paid what they deserve...”*
- *“Less expensive for parents and better pay for the people who love and care for our children in their formative years.”*
- *“They do a super job and are underpaid and under resourced...”*
- *“Be properly resourced. Under paid staff is not good for baby. Sector needs to be valued & invested in. It's an investment in the child. Quality, affordability, sustainability are all key...”*
- *“Staff are overworked and underpaid which causes issues with staff retention and this is very unsettling for young children. It would be wonderful if there was greater investment in the early years to allow services to provide the quality that children deserve. Pay staff enough so they are happy in their work and don't move to different jobs in order to afford a fair standard of living. Higher qualifications should also be encouraged.”*

FAMILY SUPPORT AND CHILD PROTECTION

GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE



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"

6 g. Family support and child protection services

What family support and child protection services do to give children the best start in life...

280 parents (27%) gave a response to this question

Unlike the other services explored in this survey, over half of parents who responded to this question indicated that they did not have a good understanding of family support and child protection services. This suggests that a large proportion of parents do not perceive family support and child protection services as a relevant service and support for their family life or to their child's wellbeing. The remaining 125 parents who provided information in response to this question largely identified these services as providing **support and protection for families and children experiencing risk** and vulnerability (e.g. mental health, addiction issues and/or socioeconomic deprivation). Of these parents, 22% also highlighted the provision of **community-based supports and prevention and early intervention programmes** for parents and families as an important aspect of the work of family support and child protection services.

- *"They support people in need to try and maintain stability in the home."*
- *"They provide support for children who may be in vulnerable situations."*
- *"Supports for disadvantaged families and lone parents. Supports for families with addiction or mental health problems."*
- *"Provide support if needed and an outlet for struggling families."*
- *"Know they look to support those families less well-off and who struggle through everyday life."*
- *"There is a great parenting programme here in Offaly called Triple P. I found this very valuable and great that everyone can attend..... Helped me to reduce my stress and parent better."*
- *"Family Resource Centres in the community provide good courses and supports..."*
- *"I loved the Clonmel Community Mother Program. I attended the mother and baby groups. They were a God send at the time."*
- *"Provide opportunities for preventative work such as Meitheal cases before referring straight to social work. Set up child and family networks locally."*

Approximately, 20% perceived family support and child protection services as accessible, providing a source of guidance and advice for families. The implementation of Children First and Garda Vetting Guidance, as well as the provision of professional support and training for practitioners were recognized as important safeguards in the promotion child protection and wellbeing. In addition, 12% noted limitations of family support and child protection services, namely **lack of staff and resources, inconsistent availability of services across the country, a lack of services for non-disadvantaged families** and insufficient prevention-focused supports:

- *"They are a point of contact to look for advice, help and support as a parent."*
- *"Social workers have always been an excellent source of advice and support..."*
- *"Information on Tusla website is helpful."*
- *"I haven't need this service but I know it's there if I need it. They have excellent staff doing great work."*
- *"Family support and child protection under resourced and slow to intervene..."*
- *"Very little as there are no services nearby to where I live - no family support, no child protection team."*
- *"Nothing for mainstream families - only there when there is a crisis - very little preventative work and support for parents. FRC's are hit and miss and (in) some communities they don't exist."*
- *"Not had personal contact with them. As a middle class parent these services are not available, all parenting support, speech and language etc has had to be sourced and paid for privately."*

- *“Family support workers in some areas but not advertised or consistent service in all areas, Parents wouldn't know what they can expect from family support.”*

What family support and child protection services could improve or start doing to help give children the best start in life...

230 parents (22%) gave a response to this question

Survey participants were asked their opinions how family support or child protection services could be improved, as with the previous question, 40% of these respondents were unsure or did not know how family support and child protection services could enhance their supports for children and families. Overall, this suggests a gap in parents' understanding and awareness of the role and availability of these services within the public service system.

Of the remaining 135 parents who responded to this question, a need for **systems and service reform** and **capacity development** to better promote child safety and family wellbeing were highlighted by many parents (32%; 43/135). Areas identified for development included increased resources (e.g. funding and staffing), as well as increased interagency service delivery.

- *“In my job, I understand how ineffective it can be - not because of the people on the ground but the systems.”*
- *“More resources to provide support for foster carers and children in care.”*
- *“Give family support and child protection services more resources. Children should be protected more and while it is best to keep families together, children should NOT be left with parents who neglect or abuse their children.”*
- *“Need more social workers & family support workers.”*
- *“Link better with community and voluntary sector in responding to gaps / support...”*
- *“Greater co-ordination across all stakeholders, concerned about breakdowns in communication between agencies means that some children fall through the gaps.”*
- *“Improve links with other disciplines involved in the care of the child within the health service and provide education to allied health professionals.”*
- *“Links between HSE and Tusla websites should be seamless.”*

Ten percent also felt that **additional family support services and supports** were needed to ensure child protection and guidance for families in times of crisis. Parents also felt **universal prevention and early intervention supports** should be developed as a priority (30%).

- *“They need to seriously consider the rural towns and areas and service provision. They are seriously lacking and recent changes have further impacted the county as they closed the Child Protection team and moved it to the city.”*
- *“More services for all families, early intervention and prevention, more [Family Resource Centres] with very professional services, hubs for parents to access supports and services in each community not only socially disadvantaged.”*
- *“Having the same menu of support available to families throughout the country. Helping early before the problem gets too big.”*
- *“Have more access to support services for families who are not in crisis situations but need advice and support.”*
- *“Realise that children in ALL social classes may need support / child protection.”*
- *“Greater emphasis on early intervention & prevention.”*

- *“Be better resourced for preventative work. Prevention and early intervention please...”*
- *“Provide universal supports for parents when first child is to be born so we start on firm foundations and follow up as first-born progresses from baby to toddler to teen with relevant parenting training. Identify where are Mental Health issues e.g. depression in a parent and that this may impact on parenting ability / quality / stress and therefore impact on child. May pick up on maternal, but what about impact of father’s Mental Health.”*

SOCIAL PROTECTION AND TAXATION SERVICES

GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE



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"



6 h. Social protection and taxation services

What social protection and taxation services do to help give children the best start in life...

311 parents (30%) gave a response to this question

Social protection services provide income support to those living on a low income and taxation services collect taxes to fund our public services. These services were generally perceived as playing an important role in supporting quality of life for families, particularly the most vulnerable.

- *“Those services are a huge financial help to make sure my children have the basic needs and comforts to live life to the full.”*
- *“It provides us with additional income to provide weekly for our children if we didn’t have it we could not afford to look after them properly.”*
- *“Maternity benefit. Child benefit. Home carer's tax credit. Back to school allowance. All of these payments and benefits are vital to parents living on a low income to support them in giving their children the best possible start in life.”*

In total, 64% of parents identified **child benefit** within their responses, indicating that this support was perceived as an important aspect of social protection services for families. Participant responses indicated that child benefit was important for covering child-related expenses and in helping parents manage the expenses of family life. **Maternity / paternity benefit** and financial support for childcare expenses were also identified within parent responses.

- *“It allows me save for my children's education into the future. I then use other money to pay for my children being involved in sporting and social activities (scouts, sports, guitar lessons, educational trips etc.).”*
- *“The money assists with providing supports to my child.”*
- *“Provides financial support to aid parents in providing optimum care to their children. Crucial as the cost of childcare and daily living continues to rise.”*
- *“Child benefit allowance reduces parental financial strain therefore providing less stressed parents for our children.”*
- *“Child benefit enables me to give my children what they need or even a little treat.”*

Investment in public services, as well as health and education and supports for vulnerable families, including medical cards, housing supports and educational-focused allowances, were also noted as important by 6% of respondents.

- *“In the bigger picture though these services contribute towards equalising society to some extent and keeping extreme poverty at bay - which benefits my children as they grow up in a better society.”*
- *“Hopefully they equally distribute our country’s finances fairly, to support the needy.”*
- *“They help reduce the risk of child poverty.”*
- *“It is good that it is used to help those in less fortunate situations.”*

What social protection and taxation services could improve or start doing to help give children the best start in life...

287 parents (27%) gave a response to this question

Overall, financial support and taxation relief for families was considered important. For 30% of parents, a lack of financial supports and incentives for working families was noted, whilst introduction

of **taxation relief and/or increased support for early childcare and educational costs** were emphasised by many of these participants. There was strong sentiment amongst parents that childcare costs were a significant financial burden.

- *"Tax incentives for paying for childcare please, it's crippling for working parents. Awful stress caused because of this."*
- *"More tax relief for working parents, more help towards crèche costs for middle earners."*
- *"Make childcare tax deductible."*
- *"I would like to see tax relief on childcare for working families."*
- *"Improved tax credits to support childcare for middle income families and the services to meet the demand."*
- *"Make crèches affordable! And help to mother's that want to stay at home to afford it."*
- *"More childcare subsidies would mean we could return to education or that I could work full time when the kids are at school."*
- *"Reduced cost of childcare - feels a bit like a vicious circle as in order to pay for childcare I have to work in a job which allows me very little time with my children outside the weekend."*

In total, 12% of parents suggested that **child benefit should be increased**. A sub-group of these parents also felt that the age to which child benefit is paid should be extended.

- *"More child benefit because rent increases and families struggle."*
- *"Child benefit should be provided until 21 if in full time education. Those living in urban areas are always complaining about the cost of childcare (but) it doesn't bother them when their children don't have to leave home to attend third level education. It costs rural families too much money and [there is] very little support for parents [who] are employed."*

Supports for vulnerable families and reform of service provisions was also a prominent theme. A total of 17% of participants identified a need for **systems change and service development** to ensure that public expenditure prioritized and meet the needs of the most vulnerable children and families. A subtheme within these findings related to reorganisation of social protection supports towards the provision of high quality public services, rather than the delivery of financial supports for families. A small proportion advocated for child benefit to be means tested in order to ensure that the support provides most benefit to the most vulnerable and needy. A need for **investment in community and public services**, particularly health, mental health and early childcare and educational services was also noted by participants.

- *"Re child benefit, I think as we have limited resources it should be means tested and redirected to more needy families or services. I would like to see tax relief on childcare for working families."*
- *"Properly (access) cases and provide support to families that really are in need."*
- *"Child benefit should be means tested to ensure that those who need it get it."*
- *"Greater distribution of wealth and provide a much higher income level for children at risk of poverty."*
- *"Means testing for wealthy families."*
- *"To ensure the resources are actually going to the genuine cases."*
- *"Greater investment in early years education, currently Ireland invests less than 28 other EU countries. Early years investment is critical as is the need for greater co-ordination between agencies."*
- *"Invest in quality universal services with targeted income supports for low income families."*
- *"More services in health, education for children particularly mental health..."*
- *"Free health and early education services for all children..."*
- *"See public services improve for children. Houses are been built again and no services for children. Community services and a playground needed in my area. No swimming pool in my area."*

The findings also suggest that 14% of parents would like reform of the taxation system and social protection services to enable families to stay at home or to take up self-employment in order to spend more time with their children.

- *“Increase the child benefit. Or better yet introduce a professional parent wage as being (a) stay at home parent is a job and it's a hard one.”*
- *“Help to mothers that want to stay at home to afford it.”*
- *“Maybe offer incentives for mums who want to stay at home to look after their children. It's a full-time job after all, and completely unpaid...”*
- *“Reverse tax individualisation, it prejudices against stay-at-home parents by up to €500 a month!”*
- *“Why can't stay at home parents get their stamp, why should we miss out on our pension? Why also am I not entitled to extra benefits because my partner earns more than a set amount yet he can't claim my tax credits - that does not seem fair to me.”*
- *“Parents should be incentivised to stay at home if that is their wish in the early years. Families should not be forced to place their children in childcare for long hours in order to maintain a decent standard of living.”*

LOCAL AUTHORITIES

GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE

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"

6 i. Local authorities

What local authorities do to help give children the best start in life...

315 parents (30%) gave a response to this question

The provision of **high-quality and well-maintained resources and community amenities** was a primary emphasis amongst parent respondents:

- *“Social and cultural facilities offered are to a high standard.”*
- *“They provide nice local amenities such as walks and clean safe public spaces.”*
- *“I have a community rich in all of these amenities.”*
- *“Investment and maintenance of parks and outdoor recreational areas is pretty good and the library services are excellent. Maintenance of sports facilities is also quite good.”*
- *“We have access to a lovely park, playground, library, swimming pool and cultural centre. We are very happy with our local authority.”*

Across the findings, the most prominently featured local authority-funded facility was **libraries**, followed closely by **parks and playgrounds**. In total, 51% of parents said that libraries offered beneficial learning resources, as well as child-friendly activities, family events and parenting supports such as courses and talks. Libraries were also perceived as offering socialising opportunities through parent and child groups.

- *“There is a local library which runs workshops etc for children. The librarian is also excellent and really shows an interest in the children.”*
- *“There is a lovely library in the town and a nice park.”*
- *“...storytelling at local library...”*
- *“Local Library is a great resource with a toddler group for socialising.”*
- *“The library services are wonderful for children. They provide safe and nurturing places for children to be.”*

Parks, green areas and playgrounds were also identified by 49% of parents as a crucial resource. Importantly, these spaces were perceived as **clean and safe**. The accessibility of these amenities and the availability of cycle paths and safe footpaths was also highlighted as important. Parks and playgrounds were seen as providing important spaces for exercise and activity, whilst these areas were also seen providing opportunities for socialisation and community engagement.

- *“We have lovely parks available close by which we use regularly which we both love.”*
- *“Our new park, in Dublin is fantastic and sorely needed in our concrete jungle part of town. It has also started to bring communities together, as the areas close by are also starved of parks.”*
- *“Provides beautiful parks and play areas where they can play and interact with each other and others.”*
- *“We are lucky to live in a clean, attractive town with a large National Park within minutes of it.”*
- *“We have a lovely tidy park down the road, that is always clean and tidy...”*

Other local authority funded amenities which were highlighted by a smaller proportion of parents included indoor and outdoor sports facilities (e.g. playing pitches, swimming pools and gyms), as well as community and resource centres (10% of respondents). Cultural events, theatres and museums were also highlighted by a small number of parents (7%).

What local authorities could improve or start doing to help give children the best start in life...

276 parents (26%) gave a response to this question

Participants provided responses which identified a range of areas which they felt could be addressed by their local authority in order to improve or enhance community amenities and family and child services and supports. Overall, 40% of these parents said there was a need for **accessible outdoor spaces for play** in their area (e.g. parks and playgrounds) and/or that these areas needed development and **better maintenance**. For parents, the **safety and tidiness** of these spaces was a priority

- *"Would love a park in my neighbourhood, have to drive 15 mins to the nearest one."*
- *"More seats and toilets in parks, litter bins and these emptied, parks cleaned frequently including equipment."*
- *"Alas, a few undesirables make the majority of us avoid playground due to bad behaviour, awful language etc."*
- *"Local playgrounds needed to be maintained and upgraded regularly."*
- *"Remove anti-social behaviour and make parks safe for children to use."*
- *"More parks that are of a better quality, plus make sure that they are kept clean and tidy."*

Additionally 32% of parents said there was a need for the **strategic development of community amenities**, whilst cultural events and activities which could help to promote community integration and child / family learning. Amongst these parents, were rurally-based parents who felt that their areas were lacking easily accessible amenities (e.g. libraries and playgrounds). Better promotion of existing community events and activities was suggested by a small proportion of these parents. Parents also said that community and/or civic facilities could be more **family-focused and/or child-friendly**, this included the development of parent and baby / toddler groups, youth clubs and centres, community centres, breastfeeding-friendly groups and spaces. Some survey respondents also called for **development of sporting facilities** this included both indoor and outdoor sports amenities (e.g. playing pitches and swimming pools), whilst 4% of parents felt that libraries needed to be better resourced. Amongst these parents was a strong demand for greater accessibility of libraries at evenings and weekends to enable access amongst families with working parents.

- *"Clear aims / goals / ethos/ plans for involving children and keeping young people engaged in their local community."*
- *"I'd like to see better outdoor play facilities with community cafes alongside to create social spaces for all the family..."*
- *"More ways of connecting those of us living in areas away from our families."*
- *"I would like to see more investment in amenities in my area. We live in a very rural location and have none of the above amenities in our village. Also very poor public transport links."*
- *"Parks, a community centre with funding for family centred events to encourage a community spirit."*
- *"Increase visibility of services, advertise events on Social Media, set up a variety of activities for children living in the community."*
- *"Better promotion of what's family friendly in the locality. Currently dependent on local knowledge."*
- *"Breastfeeding or [a] parent's groups, more activities or clubs, more diversity in the community"*
- *"A toddler dance group or similar would be good too, and funding for the playgroup to help with marketing and promotion would be good idea."*
- *"Group activities to outdoor arenas, i.e. forest, field trips to elder care facilities and volunteer work should be encouraged to ensure a well-grounded understanding of the environment, community and elderly."*

- *“An indoor space where all in the community can go including parents for classes, coffee, support in health, mental health, parenting, play games etc. A natural outdoor playground. Our youths are currently fighting to get a youth centre up and running. It should be part of every community funded by the councils, government.”*

Some parents also highlighted a need for development of **safe footpaths, walking areas and cycling lanes**. Arguably, development of safe walking and cycle paths was part of an overall desire for healthier communities and the need for greater exercise and outdoor activities:

- *“More footpaths are needed in rural areas to make it safe for children and families to go for walks / runs.”*
- *“I like to walk with my children. Walking with 3 children including a buggy is not easy. They need to make sure that the paths are suitable for this. There is a nice canal walk but there are no seats or picnic areas along it.”*
- *“I think there needs to be more emphasis place on (providing) safe green space for children to play in local towns, lighting to be improved around local amenities, Footpaths need to be made more family friendly...”*
- *“Ensure that cycling is a safe way to travel around the city. Reduce footpath "furniture" and signage to create more accessible and simpler footpaths. Improve planning so that new building projects have better street frontage with trees and natural spaces. Reduce cars in the inner city and increase public transport, improve roads for cyclists and pedestrians.”*
- *“Proper cycle lanes - not just a line drawn on the road, more access to swimming pools, design infrastructure like housing estates, roads and bridges with the pedestrian in mind - promote walking and physical activity by (ensuring) our public spaces and infrastructure are designed around the walking child not the car, more parks, more pedestrianised streets, more licences for cafe culture not pubs!, do not give planning for too many fast food outlets especially none near schools, secure bike parking, more licences to healthy food outlets, incentives for the healthy option...”*

Finally, a small proportion (9%) of parents focused on the development of, and investment in, housing for families.

- *“Provide more homes for families on the street. Provide homes in a timely manner. Waiting lists of years aren't good enough when kids are living in horrible conditions. Understand and support parents who are struggling to put a roof over their family's heads. Too many feel the horrible pressure and can't take it and take their own life!”*
- *“The housing situation is chronic and unnecessary. Private landlords are being prioritised in this situation not the people looking for homes. Tenants need to be further protected in their homes, social housing needs to become a reality for people, the banks need to be held to account for the mistakes they have made.”*
- *“There is an imperative that they provide quality housing for all children.”*
- *“Deal with homelessness crisis / invest in social housing ... lots of very vulnerable families and children at risk of homelessness or living in unsuitable accommodation. Council does little to help.”*

GOVERNMENT

GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE

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."



6.j. Government

What the Government do to help give children the best start in life...

270 parents (26%) gave a response to this question

In order to explore how parents perceive the role of government, parents were asked what the government do already to help give their children the best start in life. For just over half of all survey respondents, the provision of public services and supports were identified as an important function of government in the promotion of child health and wellbeing (most prominently educational and health services, as well as early childcare and educational supports and services). The provision of benefits and allowances, such as the free preschool year and free GP care for children under 6, as well as the children's benefit allowance and maternity and paternity benefit, were also highlighted here as helping to give children a good start in life.

A smaller proportion of parents (14%) identified the development of policies and legislation to promote children's rights and wellbeing (e.g. the National Children's Strategy) as significant and positive. The government's role in economic and strategic planning for future prosperity was also evident as a theme:

- *"Ensures there are policies and legislation to protect children and uphold the rights of the child."*
- *"Provide legal safeguards for children. Provide for children's education and provide healthcare for children and their parents."*
- *"Smacking is now included in child abuse definition so children can be protected"*
- *"There are politicians fighting for children's rights. I appreciate it!"*
- *"Provides policies which endeavour to protect our children..."*
- *"Children's rights are an increasing focus and there is more funding for programmes and services for children and parents."*
- *"Legislates for childcare, social welfare, safeguarding and social protection."*
- *"Keep the economy on track & make sure there will be employment for my children when they leave school"*

What the Government could improve or start doing to help give children the best possible start in life...

298 parents (28%) gave a response to this question

Inadequate or a lack of government supports and services for children and families were a concern for 14% of the respondents. Negative perceptions of social conditions and public policies included the high cost of living and childcare expenses, insufficient support for working parents, inadequate public services and inaction on implementation of family- and child-focused policies and legislation.

- *"There is no interest in children in this country, although I work, it was shocking that parents who choose to give up work did not receive some incentive. I am lucky that I could take over a year off after the birth of both my children, not all are as fortunate and returning to work at 6 months, is for some very difficult."*
- *"Child allowance is really nice gesture, I'm grateful for this, but unfortunately Ireland is very expensive country and money we earn isn't enough."*
- *"Sometimes that it is more lip service about the services they support rather than actually really supporting parents and families. I think the services are far too stretched."*

- *"They provide services some of which work OK but are at best average."*
- *"Could do a lot more to help 'squeezed middle' families with childcare."*
- *"I feel the government does its best to look after children that are in poor social / economic environment however ignores the hardship and struggles hard working parents' experience. I feel they get little to no help from the Government as we have to pay for everything or do without."*

Amongst the responses in relation to what the government could start doing or improve, development of maternity and postnatal services and supports emerged as a common priority for a large proportion of parents. This included:

- (i) Enhanced maternity and paternity benefit and leave, as well as augmented parental leave entitlements and financial support for parents to stay at home during the early years.
- (ii) Implementation of the National Maternity Strategy and improved maternity health care, such as additional ultrasounds and scanning for pregnant women, increased availability of community-based antenatal and postnatal care and additional mental health supports during pregnancy and the perinatal and postnatal periods.
- (iii) Better breastfeeding supports and services, such as increased availability of lactation consultants, training in breastfeeding support for primary health care professionals and enhanced legislation promoting breastfeeding.

- *"Implement the National Maternity Strategy in full without delay...."*
- *"Improve maternity services, not just focus on the hospital setting but a more community primary care approach. Caring for women and infants at home by appropriate health professionals (i.e. midwives)."*
- *"Fund midwife-led maternity services instead of promoting the doctor led medical model which dominates in Ireland."*
- *"Legislate for breastfeeding breaks until breastfeeding ceases. [...] Mandate CPD training for all PHNs and GPs on Breastfeeding, child development and evidence based parenting. Implement the National Maternity Strategy in full without delay."*
- *"Give more supports to parents through more PHNs and supports. (e.g. more breastfeeding support in the hospitals and when mothers come home)."*
- *"Implement Breastfeeding Strategy; Develop legislation to protect breastfeeding during at least the first year of life."*
- *"We need more time to spend with our babies, the maternity leave is too short. At least we need the option to stay at home for 12 months..."*

Enhanced funding of early childcare and education services, additional financial supports and/or taxation relief on childcare expenses and family-friendly employment legislation for working parents was emphasised by 28% of survey participants.

- *"Provide adequate subsidies to early childhood care and education services so that their staff can be paid salaries in line with their qualifications and responsibilities."*
- *"Better financial support for childcare costs..."*
- *"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 - employers must be part of the solution for becoming a family friendly society."*
- *"Provision for parents who choose to work (in terms of subsidised and flexible childcare)."*
- *"The free preschools do not give time to mothers' work (only 3h!!) And the private crèches is almost a full salary. Please support more young families, so we can raise our kids with love and time without stressing about bills and afraid of losing our job or our house just because we have small kids."*

- *"Giving more allowances for working parents who are struggling to make ends meet. I worry because it is currently very difficult and we have literally no savings for a rainy day."*
- *"Me and my partner have to work full time in order to support our child, we pay high taxes and struggle month to month. Government need to support the "middle people" the ones struggling, the ones getting up and leaving their children everyday just so they can provide for their family."*
- *"I would like them to increase investment in early years services. They expect high quality which they are not funding."*
- *"Early years services need to be better funded - ideally a universal, publicly funded pre-school system would be great - but otherwise these services need more support."*
- *"Encourage companies to have job positions for mums with part time and flexible working hours."*
- *"Also government policies should empower and provide opportunities for women to work part-time to spend more time with their children rather than pushing women into full time employment."*

Just over 23% of parents said that government policy and legislation needed to become more child-focused to better enforce the rights of the child, strengthen child protection and to promote optimal child wellbeing and development. The need for government policy to tackle childhood disadvantage and inequality were also emphasised, whilst incentives and supports for stay at home parents also featured prominently amongst parents' responses:

- *"Budgets to be more family and child centred."*
- *"Having baby friendly communities where babies and young children are seen as full citizens now..."*
- *"Addressing the socioeconomic imbalances in society. Provision for the underprivileged communities in terms of opportunities for employment, education for parents (in terms of nutrition etc), protecting children from drugs, gang culture, violence, creating brighter healthier living spaces for them."*
- *"Long-term planning. Invest in children, early and save a fortune over the child's life."*
- *"Develop a more cohesive and comprehensive strategy to support children. Currently very fragmented."*
- *"Tackle inequality to ensure all children have access to what they need..."*
- *"Focus on the rights and needs of the child, educate the population in school regarding relationships, raising children, the impact of neglect and trauma."*
- *"Recognising and placing greater value on families and children in Ireland through increased resources for all of the vital services required in infancy and early childhood."*
- *"Further or wider supports (or perhaps more resources) for new parents..."*
- *"Better support for parents, especially low-income ones."*
- *"I would like to see the government respecting and putting policies in place to help people who are stay at home parents."*
- *"Supporting parents to stay at home for the first 2 to 3 years. It's vital for kids. It would be a preventative measure for problems in society down the line."*

Enhanced public service provisions were also a significant priority, including improvements in child health services such as increased availability and accessibility of mental health services, expansion of the free GP care scheme to all children and reductions in waiting lists for health care services were again highlighted by 20% survey respondents. Sixteen percent of parents also looked for changes to the educational system including reduced pupil teacher ratios and increased availability of non-denominational schools.

- *"Extension of free under 6 card for older children. Further or wider supports (or perhaps more resources) for new parents."*

- *“Standardise health care - no need for Public V Private, reduce waiting lists for Speech and Language, OT, Physio etc.”*
- *“Decrease waiting lists, employ consultants and staff to operate theatres.”*
- *“There is very little choice for education if you don’t want to go catholic route, the schools aren’t equal so if you want to get a good education you can’t go locally to schools where I live.”*
- *“Smaller class size, and more access to Resource Teachers.”*
- *“Finance education sufficiently including offer more services to schools e.g classroom assistants, more SNAs, smaller class sizes. Better HSE services..... More services to be available with shorter waiting lists...”*
- *“Need to reduce class sizes, increase SNA numbers; reduce hospital waiting lists; provide mandatory training for parents in parenting as those that need it most are not availing of services that are available.”*

A need for the strategic development of community resources was also highlighted by 14% of parents, particularly the development of infrastructure, transport links and amenities (such as parks and playgrounds), as well as improvements in social and private housing policies. Child homelessness was criticised and emphasised as an important priority by a smaller proportion of parents. Increased governmental focus on environmentally-friendly policies and legislation were also encouraged by a small cohort of participants.

- *“Better housing. Dealing with the insane rents in the country that are making so many homeless. Dealing with social housing and having so many houses empty and boarded up. Better screening for landlords and the rent rates they ask for.”*
- *“More focus on environment and infrastructure and housing rather than short term half-hearted measures.”*
- *“Sort the housing crisis so that parents and children are not in these devastating conditions.”*
- *“Focus on child homelessness....”*
- *“Government need to support vulnerable families more - too many homeless because of policies government implemented.”*
- *“Work towards a greener and cleaner environment.”*

EMPLOYERS

GIVING OUR CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE

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."

6 k. Employers

What employers do already to help give children the best start in life...

302 parents (29%) gave a response to this question

As noted earlier, work-life balance and the ability to spend quality time with their children was a central parent priority. In total, 32% of respondents felt they benefited from **employer flexibility** and family-friendly work practices. For example, parents felt their employer was understanding of the pressures of parenthood and/or provided parents with time off / scope to manage illnesses and emergencies. Maternity and paternity leave were also highlighted as important for parents (28%).

- “My employer offered full paid maternity leave which was essential for us. They also offer flexible working conditions including working from home and flexi time to help me keep the number of childcare hours to a minimum.”
- “My employer gave me full pay for the 26 weeks of maternity leave. This helped me give my son the best start in life by being with him. It also enabled me to be able to take a further two months unpaid leave.”
- “Allow me to leave in an emergency situation which is a great comfort. Allows me to attend short performances at schools or playschool.”
- “My employer is very flexible and if I require time off this is not a problem, I just work it up at a later stage.”
- “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.”
- “Flexibility for around times, working from home, time off when child is sick.”
- “I am fortunate to have an excellent employer offering the best of standards to help families.”
- “I am extremely lucky to work for a company that is extremely flexible and family friendly.”

What employers could improve or start doing to help give children the best start in life...

284 parents (27%) gave a response to this question

Overall, there was a strong appetite amongst parents for more flexible and family friendly working conditions. For example, parents were interested in more **part-time, job-share and/or flexi-time** working arrangements. Greater availability of childcare in the work place was also suggested by a number of parents. Parents felt these initiatives would be beneficial to obtaining better work-life balance and reducing parental stress. A small number of parents said that family friendly work has a specific role to play in supporting marginalised groups, such as single parents, to obtain and sustain employment, while also helping to promote, more generally, gender equality.

- “Increased flexibility and understanding for parents of small children, allow parents of children options to job share on weekends / not work weekends.”
- “Give reasonable flexibility to both parents to take parental leave and be supportive of breastfeeding mothers.”
- “Be more flexible with parents. Be more understanding of family life and its complexities. Provide better support and wages to people.”

- *“More flexibility for all employees. More focus on work life balance.”*
- *“Allow parents to start / leave early to facilitate school runs, allow working from home, be understanding of days off to care for sick children.”*

A small proportion of respondents (6%) noted negative experiences in the workplace and a lack of support / flexibility regarding parenting duties. Indeed, parents noted that it was often at the discretion of the individual employer / company whether family-friendly and/or parental leave policies were in place. Thus, a need for family-friendly employment policies and legislation were highlighted. **Extended and enhanced parental leave**, particularly during the earliest stages of a child’s life were also desired by parents, whilst other issues which were highlighted by parents included a need for breastfeeding support in the workplace.

- *“Expectation is that I work my day plus significant overtime. I can't do that and spend time with my daughter. Feel like I am doing a bad job constantly at home and in the office. Really wish there was a limit on hours required to work.”*
- *“Paid maternity leave. 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 once they have children, more opportunities for men / fathers to spend time with their children. Part time work offered for both.”*
- *“Stop saying women are a financial burden ‘cos they go on maternity leave. Flexibility to do reduced hours with younger children.”*

6 I. What else helps to give children the best start in life...

156 parents (15%) gave a response to these questions

Before completion of the survey, parents were offered a chance through two open ended questions to add anything which they felt was important to giving their child the best possible start in life. Organisations or professionals which were mentioned by a small number of parents in these open-ended questions, but which were not directly included in the questionnaire) included religious organisations (e.g. church communities) and teachers, whilst community and voluntary organisations and activity groups (e.g. parent and child groups) featured more prominently. Nevertheless, parent responses to these questions largely echoed key findings from across the survey. Findings which were re-emphasised included:

- A perceived need for enhanced maternity and postnatal services, as well as mental health and parenting supports in the community.
- Parents wanted to be able to spend more quality time with their children and to experience fewer financial pressures and daily hassles. Many parents noted that childcare was a significant expense. Relief and support for these costs was a priority. Others felt that supports for stay at home parents were also a key area for increased development.
- A need for better breastfeeding policies and services. Voluntary breastfeeding organisations and groups were frequently identified here as being vital supports for parents.
- The importance of strengthening children's social and emotional skills, as well as respecting the rights of the child. Promoting health through healthy eating education campaigns and legislation (e.g. sugar tax) and increased outdoor play and activity featured as a parent concern.
- Strengthening of public services and supports which cater to children were also seen to be crucial. Activity and local community groups and voluntary organisations (e.g. mother and child groups, GAA clubs) were also highlighted as important to giving children the best start in life.
- Safe and connected communities were also an important parent priority. Tackling drug dealing and homelessness was underlined as important for improving societal and community wellbeing.

Some additional quotes

- *"More support for mental health and emotional issues for children, especially in disadvantaged areas. There are long waiting lists for children's supports."*
- *"Healthy parents set the foundation for a healthy child, more needs to be done towards mental health instead of leaving it to charities to take care of (Nurture). Healthy eating could be promoted more, especially with the cost of living really starting to hurt it's easier to turn to cheap foods."*
- *"Interventions in the first year are crucial. More should be done for parents and children in the first year"*
- *"More PHN visits, more mum & baby groups, paid parental leave in first year shared between parents."*
- *I would really like more time with my children during the week."*
- *"No parents should have to accept unsafe streets and normalising of [drug] dealing outside their homes."*

- *“Better care during pregnancy - if you were supported during pregnancy more you wouldn't spend ages afterwards being upset about how awful your experience of pregnancy was and you could care for your child better.”*
- *“Providing more resources for new parents, aiding new mums with resources to help postnatal depression & pointing them in the direction of baby classes, baby massage, play groups, etc. to help them feel less isolated.”*
- *“Support parents to make the best possible choices regarding nutrition, education, physical wellbeing, etc., rather than expecting compliance with general guidelines.”*
- *“I think fundamentally children need love and security to flourish in the early years. Parents need to be educated in what children's basic needs are beyond food; clothing; housing etc. Children's social and emotional needs are as important as their physical needs.”*
- *“Address children's social and emotional needs at the pregnancy stage and at every available juncture emphasising their importance.”*
- *“Support for parents in early years is crucial, as this is a vital stage of development for children. State and employers need to recognise the role of mothers and fathers, and support them to be with their children as long as they would like with greater flexibility built into work.”*
- *“I strongly feel the area of breast feeding support needs to improve. People need more face to face contact with specialists. Website, written flyers and antenatal classes really fall short of the mark as do the PHN support in this area. People are having to seek advice privately and outside of the home in the very early days.”*
- *“Connecting children & parents with their local communities & services is really important in supporting the development of every child. More recognition needs to be given to 'non-cost' supports such as P&T groups, mother & baby initiatives in local libraries.”*
- *“Support in mental health of parents, feeding and parenting support. Creating spaces in towns, villages, etc. to create that village. I'm not looking for new friends, just a safe space to hang!”*
- *“There is a lot of hidden poverty in communities, many parents are living in difficult situations and do not have security in terms of their homes or children's health. The day to day living with young children and teens is a challenge and when you add in financial difficulties, homelessness, disabilities it becomes a different support all together. I know there is free health care for under 6's but we need to look after the most vulnerable first to ensure that children get the best start in life and are not left behind waiting for services, supports, operations etc. We must ensure that those who are most in need are supported through our schools, health services, work places, social supports.”*

7. Summary

This qualitative survey produced rich and detailed feedback on parents' experiences, ideas, opinions and preferences in relation to the services and supports available to them, their families and their children and the systems which shape and influence child development. Overall, comprehensive and varied responses were provided from a large number of parents and care givers. The research findings indicate that parents experience a range of positive supports in their parenting role from their family, community and services, as well as a number of challenges and difficulties. Several "core" findings can be identified which emerged across parents' responses to the individual questions posed in this survey. These include:

- The importance of quality of life for families, in particular work life balance and the ability of parents to spend meaningful time with their children in play and activities was evident throughout the survey. Parents indicated their preference for community-based family-focused events and activities, including the availability of clean, safe parks, playgrounds and play spaces, whilst enhanced, accessible and well-funded libraries were also identified as an important community resource.
- Support for working parents was identified as a major priority for a large proportion of parents. This included a perceived need for additional financial support for childcare costs and expenses, as well as employment-focused legislation to protect and support parents and promote better work-life balance. In addition, additional funding for, and capacity development in, early childcare and educational services, was recommended. These services were seen as playing an important role in promoting child development and learning.
- A significant cohort of participants also advocated for additional supports for stay at home parents and initiatives to enable parents to have the option to be stay at home parents during the early years of a child's life.
- There was a strong appetite for parenting supports, particularly community-based parent-to-parent, parent and baby / toddler and breastfeeding groups. Additional support from public health care services for both parents and children was also requested. The personal and psychological resources of parents are of crucial importance, particularly in the face of stressors such as socioeconomic disadvantage, low social support, teen parenthood, low parental education and parental psychopathology, stress and anxiety (Bornstein & Bradley, 2012; Paulussen-Hoogeboom, Stams, Hermanns, Peetsma & van den Wittenboer, 2008). Given that one quarter of all participants said they lack readily available support from extended family and friends, community-based group supports and services and public health care can play an important role in strengthening parent competency, promoting parent wellbeing and encouraging positive parent and child relationships.
- Health promotion, particularly opportunities for outdoor activities and exercise was an important priority. Parents said that additional support, information and education for parents in relation to health behaviours should be made available. Mental health and universal, preventative supports for parents and for children were reported as an area where service reform and capacity development were needed. This included the enhanced provision of antenatal and postnatal supports for parents and infants.

Although the principle of service user engagement and participation in service development is well established, much needs to be done to embed and promote a culture of public and parent involvement in the development and delivery of child and family focused services and supports. Strengthening our understanding of parenting experiences and service utilisation patterns, preferences and priorities, is important in informing the development and delivery of early years parenting supports.

However, some limitations of this research should also be noted. This survey was anonymous and participants were not asked to provide any personal information. The background and characteristics of the participants are unknown and this limits our ability to generalise from the findings. The voices of fathers are particularly underrepresented in this survey and more needs to be done to understand their perspectives on, and experiences of, parenting and parent and child services and supports. Overall, the findings presented here are descriptive, and further research is needed which focused on engaging with fathers and, overall, placing the voice of parents, at the centre of the development and delivery of family services and supports.

Nevertheless, these findings can help to inform policy and service developments, as well as to identify avenues for further research. Indeed, the responses and participation of parents and care givers in this survey highlights parents' willingness to give their views and participate in research and service development processes. A climate where parents and care givers, and indeed children themselves, are encouraged and enabled to actively and meaningfully participate in services, decision making and policy planning is an important public policy priority. These kinds of data gathering systems are important to quality improvement for public services and organisational practices. Thus, increasing engagement can help towards the development of higher quality services, and, in turn, help to strengthen parent, child and family wellbeing.

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Appendix 1: Response rate matrix

Questions	n	Response rate %
Q1a What do I do already which helps give my child the best possible start in life?	479	46
Q1b What would I like to improve or to start doing in order to give my child the best possible start in life?	440	42
Q2a What do my family and friends which give my child the best possible start in life?	467	45
Q2b What would I like them to improve or to start doing in order to give my child the best possible start in life?	375	36
Q3a What does my community do already which helps give my child the best possible start in life?	440	42
Q3b What would I like them to improve or to start doing in order to give my child the best possible start in life?	380	36
Q4a What are the key sites or ways I use the internet to get advice on giving my child the best possible start in life?	437	42
Q4b What does the internet do already which helps give my child the best possible start in life?	371	35
Q4c What would I like it to improve or to start doing in order to give my child the best possible start in life?	302	29
Q5a What do the health services do already which helps give my child the best possible start in life?	375	36
Q5b What would I like them to improve or to start doing in order to give my child the best possible start in life?	362	35
Q6a What do pre-school / early years services do already which helps give my child the best possible start in life?	348	33
Q6b What would I like them to improve or to start doing in order to give my child the best possible start in life?	304	29
Q7a What do the family support and child protection services do already which helps give my child the best possible start in life?	280	27
Q7b What would I like them to improve or to start doing in order to give my child the best possible start in life?	230	22
Q8a What do the social protection and tax services do already which helps give my child the best possible start in life?	311	30
Q8b What would I like them to improve or to start doing in order to give my child the best possible start in life?	282	27
Q9a What does my Local Authority do already which helps give my child the best possible start in life?	315	30
Q9b What would I like them to improve or to start doing in order to give my child the best possible start in life?	276	26
Q10a What does the Government do already which helps give my child the best possible start in life?	270	26
Q10b What would I like them to improve or to start doing in order to give my child the best possible start in life?	298	28
Q11a What do employers do already which helps give my child the best possible start in life?	302	29
Q11b What would I like them to improve or to start doing in order to give my child the best possible start in life?	284	27

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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