

Early Years Commission:

Centre for Social Justice/ Fabian Society June 2020

Written evidence submitted by Mothers At Home Matter

Executive summary

Mothers wish to be with their children. Very young children are designed to be with their mothers. For the last 15 years mothers have been saying that they would rather be at home with their infants or spend less time away from their children if they could afford to. For a baby or young child the optimum carer is the mother. But no political party is prepared to advocate this and every so-called 'family policy' in the last 15 years has sought to separate mother from child at an ever younger age and for ever-increasing hours.

During this time we have seen a sharp decline in maternal mental health and a sharp decline in that of children and young adults. Mothers and/or fathers playing primary carer feel little valued whilst society values careers as more worthwhile and their contribution to the economy more important than the raising of the next generation. This needs to be questioned. There is evidence that children experiencing long hours in external daycare can suffer significant and long-lasting emotional and behavioural problems. The state now pays for intervention by professionals and for provision of anti-depressants, but we lack the courage and wisdom to allow children their mothers and mothers to be available for their infants and young children, and to support them physically and emotionally in this role, without being financially penalised.

This present time, particularly with the Covid situation, presents an opportunity to radically rethink our childcare policy empowering families to make their own decisions about what is in the best interests of themselves and their children. This submission argues that the early years policy which would have the greatest impact on a child's life chances would be one which acknowledges the value of care provided in the home and allows one parent to stay at home full-time in the early years without incurring a financial penalty for doing so.

1. How can we ensure that parents and children receive the best possible physical and mental health support, particularly during the perinatal period?

By recognizing that for a child the optimum physical and mental health support is the mother.

- She has given birth, she has the ability to breastfeed the child, she is physically, emotionally and hormonally primed to bond with her child and provide the nurture, comfort and security that is essential for both immediate and long-lasting wellbeing.
- **The crucial role of early infant attachment has been widely researched and shown to affect brain development** (Winston, 2016; Bernier *et al*, 2016;), **ability to cope with stress** (Komisar, 2017; Karkhanis *et al* 2016; Johnson, 2018; Luby, 2012), tendencies toward addiction in later years (Mate, 2012), social responsibility and communication (Feldman, 2013; Abrams *et al* 2016), language development (Beauchemin *et al* (2010) and emotional health in adulthood (Maselko *et al*, 2010; Korosi and Baram, 2012).

By recognizing that the mother needs to be taken care of so that she is able to provide the best possible care for her child.

- It is estimated that in the UK the economic and social cost of perinatal mental health problems is in the region of £8 billion for each one year cohort of births, with 70% of the cost attributed to helping the child throughout life after a parent has suffered (Bauer, A., Parsonage, M. 2014).
- Factors influencing maternal depression are complex and diverse but research indicates that social isolation, financial worries and a sense of disempowerment (Garcia and Yim, 2017) may be significant. It is well documented that for many women a direct consequence of motherhood is a loss of social status, weaker financial security and as such poorer decision-making capabilities (Slaughter, 2015).
- These structural disadvantages faced by mothers are not mitigated against but rather re-enforced by existing UK tax and benefits policies (**See Appendix A**) and political and media messaging which portrays paid employment as more socially useful than caring for one's children. This is the case despite the fact that

parents at home provide the same service as crèches and childminders, and ONS figures estimated that the “gross value added” by informal childcare to the economy in 2016 was £351.7 billion (ONS, 2016). The majority of this caring is still carried out by mothers (ONS, 2015).

- Beyond estimating the savings in childcare costs and potential prevention of need for mental health and other forms of support in years to come, the contribution made to society by families raising healthy, well-adjusted children is immeasurable. **Raising the status of this work needs to become a political priority.**

Support and Fund services for parents and infants

- Consistency of care throughout pregnancy, birth and peri-natal care is valued and gives confidence.
- Free classes on taking care of the baby for first time parents used to be a valuable service put on by local clinics giving parents particularly mothers a chance to meet peers going through same stage.
- Support peer groups are valuable to combat loneliness. Mothers at Home Matter have launched local support groups, Happy provides a platform of peer support, Parent Infant partnership are also doing this. Making these and other services such as children centres, libraries, community classes as accessible as possible by holding up-to-date information in one place would be useful.
- Parents find NCT helpful but there is a void after this period of support.

2. How can we ensure that parents are supported to balance work and caring for their child during the early years?

Give families choice.

- Parents need a real choice as to who cares for their child and how they balance work as a household. **Choice should be made by the family and parents should not be forced against their wishes into the labour market due to government funding and taxation policies which favour dual income families.**
- **Subsidisation of child-care should be supported in the same way whether that is a parent at home, care from a grandparent, home carer or an external care setting. It is being made more and more unaffordable to stay at home.**
- **Remove penalties for staying at home to care.** Under the Coalition government (2010-15) stay at home parents bore the brunt of greater tax penalties, including the higher rate child benefit tax

charge as well as being denied the tax relief introduced to 'working families' and the subsidies for external childcare (See Appendix A).

- If those who wish to are able to stay at home that would free nurseries to be able to offer better quality care, properly funded for those who wish it.
- Longer maternity allowance could be supported.
- Support more flexible working and working from home

Put evidence before ideology.

In 2016 Chancellor George Osborne set the target of 500,000 more women in the workplace by the beginning of 2016. The EU's five year Gender Equality Strategy states that Europe has a target employment rate of 75% overall for women and men by 2020 (Council of the European Union, 2011). According to EU data the "UK was 1 of 10 countries to have reached the Barcelona targets for children aged 0-3yrs old. In the UK, 35% of children aged 0-3 were in formal childcare in 2011' (European Commission, 2013). Parenting is consistently discussed only in terms of its "negative impact on employment".

This agenda is based on a number of problematic assumptions: that paid labour is 'liberating' and home childcare is not; that for children spending a significant portion of the day in formal childcare is universally beneficial in terms of social and academic development; that mothers in paid employment is essential for growth to our economy. In fact,

- It is self-determination which is liberating and policies should be aiming for equality of opportunities for all genders rather than equal numbers participating in the labour market.
- Research paints a mixed and highly complex picture of which children benefit, how and why, from different forms of childcare (Russel *et al*, 2016; Vandell *et al*, 2010).
- Access to centre-based childcare has been shown to lead to small improvements in academic outcomes for disadvantaged children; however childcare itself is not sufficient to alter the wide attainment gap between children from socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds (Russel *et al* 2016).
- Benefit is dependent on the quality of child care, and it is precisely high quality care that disadvantaged families have the greatest difficulty accessing.
- There is a large body of evidence (see Appendix B) linking in particular early and extensive day care to a wide variety of negative social-emotional outcomes including anxiety, hyperactivity, aggression and other behavioural problems.

- Studies (e.g. Vandell *et al*, 2010) have demonstrated that even after controlling for socio-economic background, parenting quality, and care quality, long hours of non-maternal care predict negative behavioural outcomes which persist throughout childhood and into adolescence. “Though the effects may appear small, they matter in the lives of individual children, and they matter in the collective consequences to communities and society at large” (Erickson, 2018).
- Growth is measured by a change in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), so working mothers, along with paid nursery workers, and additional commuting expenses, increase GDP. This is not a measurement of ‘real growth’. GDP registers an increase where something that was previously not bought and sold (such as care in the family for love) becomes a traded commodity (cared by agencies for money), and is measured as growth. Transferring care from the unpaid to paid is not an increase in output. What GDP also can not count is the quality and continuity of care and the emotional well-being and the strength of the family unit.

Listen to mothers.

- The political consensus that all mothers want to return to work is consistently contradicted by polling data spanning the past 14 years (see Appendix C)
- In 2020 a Centre for Social Justice poll reported 78% mothers with pre-school children would rather work part time or not at all.
- In 2011 a Centre for Social Justice poll reported that ‘88% mothers with very young children said the main reason for returning to work was financial pressure’.
- Also in 2011 *Britain Thinks* reported ‘Families today are tired, stressed and under pressure. 80% believe in an ideal world one parent would be able to stay at home.’
- In 2006 Netmums undertook a ‘Great Work Debate’ in which 88% of full time working mothers stated they would prefer to be part time or be at home as full time mums.

3. How can we support parents to develop the skills and maintain the relationships that support healthy child development during the early years period?

- Remove focus on getting mothers back into work as an objective and replace it with raising the status of those caring at home.
- Promote a better understanding of children’s developmental need for loving and consistent care to both parents and policy makers.

- Use funds to support parents in parenting skills, rather than removing their children for long hours each week.
 - Enhance the self-esteem of parents particularly mothers by including their voice in policy debates
 - Remove the financial penalties which force mothers into work.
- (See' Who Cares About the Family?)

<https://mothersathomematter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Who-Cares-about-the-Family-Jun-2015.pdf>

4. How do we ensure every family can access high-quality childcare that works for both parents and children?

- High quality childcare is also a mother or parent at home. It can be a grandparent, childminder or significant other as well as an external setting.
- Allow families flexibility to choose how many hours both parents work and how many hours they can care for their children. Don't adopt a one size fits all race to pour money into childcare.
- Create a level economic playing field so that CHOICE is a reality.
- Divert Government funds from additional investment in childcare into establishing a fairer family tax system by:

1. Giving families the option of being taxed as a household
2. Bringing in a full Transferable Tax Allowance for all single income families with children under 5.
3. Reduce the Marginal Effective Tax Rate.
4. Increase the threshold for the Higher Income Child Benefit Tax Charge to £99,000 for single income families, as it is for dual income families.

5. If you could introduce one early years policy designed to bring about the greatest impact on a child's life chances, what policy would it be and why?

- Mothers at Home Matter would level the economic playing field so that parents can make their own decisions about what is in the best interests of themselves and their children.

- We would do this by removing the financial penalties that families face if a parent stays at home to care. This would include the option of being taxed as a household restoring the transferable tax allowance to families with dependent children (or an additional person's allowance for single parent families), administering child benefit in a fair way and for childcare subsidies to follow the child.

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Appendix A

Additional tax paid by single income family (SIF) vs dual income family (DIF).

Total household gross income	Annual tax and NI paid by Single Income Family (SIF)	Annual tax & NI paid by Double Income Family - 2 equal earners	Higher rate child benefit tax charge (2 children) £	Extra tax paid by SIF annually & mthly
£	£	£	£	£
20,000	2,862	328		2,534 211 pm
30,000	6,062	2,524		3,538 295 pm
40,000	9,262	5,724		3,538 295 pm
50,000	12,462	8,924		3,538 295 pm
60,000	16,660	12,124	1,788	6,324 527 pm
70,000	20,860	15,324	1,788	7,324 610 pm

Disposable income on different families after the Higher Rate Tax Charge applied (removal of child benefit for certain families). Taken from figures 2015 *Policy in Practice UC calculator*

Family with 3 children

	Single income family on 12k East Midlands	Single income family on 12k Greater London	Single income family 60k	Double income family on 45k (25k/20k) London	Double income family on 45k (25k/20k) SE England	Double income family on 45k (25k/20k) East Midlands
Tax, Ni per month	£74	£74	£1,500	£707	£707	£707
Net Earnings per month	£926	£926	£3,495	£3,043	£3,043	£3,043
Employment support allowance	£36	£36				
Work allowance						
Base element						
Child element	£732	£732		£709	£220	£0
housing element	£506	£1,316				
Child Benefit	£207	£207		£207	£207	£207
Total Dispoable Income per month	£2,407	£3,217	£3,495	£3,959	£3,470	£3,250
Childcare Allowance*				£765	£765	£765
Total Income after childcare allowance pcm				£4,724	£4,235	£4,015

* For those on tax credits families can claim 85% childcare costs. Although childcare costs will vary according to location for simplicity they have been calculated at £700 month (full time nursery for under 2 yr old + breakfast and after school clubs for 2 older children).

Source: Calculations taken from Policy in Practice Universal Credit Calculator

The UK is one of the only countries in the world that does not recognise the dependent nature of the family in its taxation system. Treating the family as a unit should be the first principle of taxation.

Anomalies & unfairness from not doing so:

— Households on £30k, where a parent stays at home, are taxed double the amount as those where parents work.

— Some families are financially better off apart than together by £12k.

— Some families caught in the Child Benefit Tax Charge will be in the poorer 50% of the population while some of the richest families continue to receive it.

— Our taxation system together with the welfare system catches over half of all families with children in a tax trap. It becomes almost impossible for primary earners to bring home extra disposable income forcing the mother into paid work to plug the income gap.

<https://mothersathomematter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Who-Cares-about-the-Family-Jun-2015.pdf>

Appendix B

The impact of long hours in external childcare

Science Daily 2004. Early separation from their mother causes problems for babies. The earlier the stress caused by maternal separation, the greater the child's later social difficulties.

Belsky et al 2007 showed that parenting made more difference to how children developed than any child-care. In other words, good parenting is much more influential in a child's development than high quality child-care. Also that although high quality care predicted higher vocabulary scores, child care was associated with more externalising behaviour such as aggression when at school. So the children make cognitive advances in academic areas – communication, speech – but struggle with emotional developments such as managing their emotions. Some studies have shown that the cognitive advantages dissipate by the time the children are 7, but the behavioural problems remain.

A paper from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development by Professor Jay Belsky in March 2009 found that the more time children spent in centre based care from 3-54 months of age, the more cognitively and linguistically advanced they were AND the more they manifested aggressive and disobedient behaviour. These effects were less pronounced in home-based care settings. And, in fact,

many of these early linguistic benefits even out as the children grow older, whereas the emotional disturbance remains. In other words, by about age 7, the academic advantage of formal childcare settings had dissipated, but the negative effects in terms of aggression and disobedience, continued. So, care outside the home does seem to be the issue.

Anhert and Lamb 2004 studied children in a German nursery. After 5 months in day care children who had apparently 'settled' still had high levels of cortisol. This couldn't be detected through their behaviour.

Vermeer et al 2006 did a study of nine different research reports and found that 'in day care children have higher cortisol levels than children at home. This effect was notable in children under thirty six months.

Carrion et al 2007 stated that stress predicts brain change in children. Cortisol damages the pre-frontal cortex which is associated with impaired control of emotions.

Hanson et al 2012 showed that high levels of stress cause harm, especially to the executive functions such as control of inhibitions, working memory and sustained attention.

Burghy et al 2012 showed that childhood cortisol correlates with anxiety in older girls whilst for boys stress activates the release of testosterone which leads to externalising behaviour and aggression.

Neuropsychopharmacology 2016. Stress in early life can affect the formation of the brain, impacting emotional, social and cognitive behaviours,

Developmental risks (still) associated with Early Child Care, 2001, Jay Belsky's Emmanuel Miller Lecture Longer hours in day care result in worse behaviour in children and poorer quality of mothering.

The more hours a week children spend in a day care setting, the greater the negative effect on emotional development and on behaviour.

One reason for this, which is almost never highlighted, is the impact on the relationship between mothers and children. The longer children spend in non-maternal care, the less likely their mothers are to respond sensitively to them and the less likely children are to respond well to their mothers. This was found to be the case particularly where children spent more than ten hours a week in childcare, there was more than a single care arrangement in the first 15 months of life and the quality of

childcare was poor. In other words, where babies didn't receive the loving, sensitive, consistent care that the mother can usually provide.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (reported in Vandell et al, 2010) found that the higher levels of behavioural problems associated with longer hours in formal care persisted throughout childhood and into adolescence.

The importance of time spent with their mother or father

The Enduring Predictive Significance of Early Maternal Sensitivity: Social and Academic Competence Through Age 32 Years, by Lee Raby et al, has found that sensitive caregiving in the first three years of life predicts an individual's social competence and academic achievement, not only during childhood and adolescence, but into adulthood. The study used information from 243 individuals who were born into poverty, came from a range of racial/ethnic backgrounds, and had been followed from birth to age 32.

Socioeconomic Gaps in Early Childhood Experiences: 1998-2010, Reardon et al

Poor children are closing the gap on rich children due to better parenting.

This Stanford University study has found that there is less of a gap on entering kindergarten in maths and literacy between richer and poorer students than there was in 1998, despite the fact that the poorer children are getting poorer. This is important because gaps on entering kindergarten tend to be maintained throughout the school years. The crucial time is therefore before they start kindergarten.

It appears that the gap has narrowed because of richer home environments. The US Government has invested in programmes encouraging parents to read to their children and help their development, which has disproportionately helped poorer children. For example, going from 0-10 books in a home has a greater effect than going from 100-110. Interestingly, Reardon did not find strong evidence to suggest that public preschool participation made a significant difference.

Luby et al 2013 'maternal support in early childhood predicts larger hippocampal volumes at school age'. The hippocampus is a brain region key to memory and stress modulation.

The 'Lighting up Young Brains' report by Save the Children: 'Critically, the evidence also shows that growing up with an insecure relationship can affect a child's later physical and mental health, behaviour and education (APPG 2015). Recent research suggests that this happens because a child's relationship with parents or carers plays a role in regulating their stress hormones. Children who have more secure relationships have more controlled stress hormone reactions. Children who have less secure relationships have higher stress hormone levels. This creates elevated hormone levels that can potentially alter the development of brain circuits in ways that make children less capable of coping with stress as they grow up (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2008). 'Parents and carers have the biggest influence on their child's early learning: A strong relationship with a parent or carer gives a young child the confidence to explore the world, while everyday activities like talking and sharing books help stimulate young children's language skills right from birth.'

Neural circuits underlying mother's voice perception predict social communication abilities in children, Abrams et al 2016 Mother's voice stimulates brain areas associated with social communication in 7-12 year olds

This fascinating research, which is worth reading in more detail at: <http://www.whataboutthechildren.org.uk/research/research-summaries-2014-to-2016> identified that many different parts of the brain, mainly associated with social communication and self-regulation, were stimulated more by hearing the child's own mother's voice than hearing that of someone else's mother or anyone else. Recognition of the mother's voice plays a vital role in helping children manage their emotions and helping them learn. The mother's voice can reduce a child's stress and increase their feelings of well-being. No one else's voice has the same power as the mother's voice, even for 7-12 year olds.

Parents play a key role in facilitating 'affect regulation'.

Professor Jane Barlow at the Parent Infant Partnership conference outlined the connection between constant, sensitive parental care in the early years and a child's ability to manage their own emotions. 'Affect regulation' refers to the ability to tolerate and cope with strong positive or negative emotions, otherwise known as emotional resilience. Parents can help children to manage their emotions and find healthy ways to express themselves by responding appropriately to their own children and to others. This in turn helps their academic and social competence.

On the other hand, the failure of infants to learn how to regulate their emotions is strongly linked to delays in motor, language and cognitive development and ongoing parent-child relational problems (*DeGangi 2000a, cited by Jane Barlow*).

Appendix C

Mothers/ (parents) want to be at home:

CSJ/YouGov polling: 18–23 July 2019 and 6th–9th January 2020:

The CSJ commissioned YouGov to survey parents of pre-school children to understand their attitudes toward work and parenting. We surveyed a representative sample of 2,018 UK parents of children aged 0–4 across three waves of polling (17–23 July 2019, 6–9 January 2020, 24–28 February 2020).

This poll showed that over half of full-time working mothers would prefer to work part time or not at all (51 per cent). Over four in ten full-time working parents would rather be working part time or not working at all (46 per cent). Almost two thirds of all parents of pre-school children would rather work part time or not work at all (65 per cent).

Overall, a majority of all surveyed parents of pre-school age children would prefer to work part time or not work at all (78 per cent of mothers and 50 per cent of fathers). This is particularly acute for parents with children between the age of six months and one year (typically after maternity leave has ended). Two thirds of all parents would rather work part time or not work at all (65 per cent).

**All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 24,312 adults, of which 2018 were parents of children aged 0–4. Fieldwork was undertaken between 17 July 2019–28 February 2020 in three separate surveys (17–23 July 2019, 6–9 January 2020, 24–28 February 2020). The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).*

From a Department for Education and Childcare Early Years Survey 2019^[1]

- Two thirds (**65 per cent**) of mothers with children age 0-4 would rather work fewer hours so they could spend more time looking after my children.
- When asked “if I could arrange good quality childcare which was convenient, reliable and affordable, I would work more hours” a similar proportion (**58 per cent**) wouldn’t take up this offer.
- Almost four in ten (**37 per cent**) of mothers at work would rather be at home caring for their children full time and only **15 per cent** of part time working mothers would work fulltime if their “were no barriers”.
- Only **17 per cent** of mothers not working and looking after pre-school children would return to work if childcare were cheaper (or free) and **83 per cent** wouldn’t.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents-2019>

From a Department for Education and Childcare Early Years Survey 2016^[1]

- More women in the UK say they would like to be able to afford to care for their children at home, than the reverse (Department of Education, 2016)

From a Department for Education and Childcare Early Years Survey 2014^[1]

37% of working mothers said they would prefer to stay at home and look after their children if they could afford it, while 57% said they would like to work fewer hours and spend more time looking after the children if they could afford it.

Mothers want choice to be home with their young children but economic pressures are driving them into the workplace

Survey	Year	Sample	Findings
Dept. for Education Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents	2014	6393 parents	1/3 of working mothers would prefer to stay at home and look after their children if they could afford it. 57% would work fewer hours and spend more time with their children if they could afford it. 13% of those at home cited cost of childcare as the reason.
British Social Attitudes Survey	2012	3000	Twice as many of the youngest cohort (18-39) hold strong views in favour of mothers at home compared to older cohorts and compared to their peers in the previous two decades. This represents an abrupt change of direction in a 150-yr trend. ¹
U-Switch	2012	1000 mothers	3/4 of new mothers said they would stay at home if they could afford to. 6/10 return to work to pay off debt or ease financial pressures. Only 1 in 7 want to develop careers
Centre for Social Justice	2011		88% of mothers with very young children said the main reason for returning to work was financial pressure
You Gov	2008	2000	49% say it is better for mother to be at home with father working and 2 children under 5. 12% want to work full time, 31% want to be home full time.
Netmums: Great Work Debate	2006	4000 mothers with very young children	1/3 of part time working mums would prefer to be home full time if they could afford it. 88% of full time working mothers would prefer to work part time or be at home as full time mum. Mothers say choice is 'virtually eradicated'. Only 7% of those at home cited unaffordable childcare as the reason.

¹ British Social Attitudes. Propositions include: 'A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his mother goes out to work' 30% 18-39s agree, up from 22% in 2002. 'A job is alright but what most women want is a home and children' 30% 18-39s agree, up from 15% in 1992 & 2002