



# 'Am I staying for lunch today?'

**A consultation project with 3 and 4 year olds to find out about their experience of the Free Entitlement.**

**Report by Lucy Williams**



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The Early Bird Pre School

Grange Tiny Hands Pre School

Greenway First and Nursery School

Knebworth Pre-school

Ludwick Nursery School

Stepping Stone Pre-school

St Michael's Pre-school

St Paul's Walden Pre-school

Studlands Rise First School

Squirrels Day Nursery at Oak Tree Children's Centre

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## 1.0 Executive summary

Since April 2004 all 3 and 4 year olds in England have been entitled to a free, part-time early education place. This is referred to as the Free Entitlement. From September 2010, all local authorities (LAs) will be extending the Free Entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds, from 12.5 to 15 hours per week, and offering it flexibly to meet parental demand where possible. This change in policy will impact not only on providers (for example nurseries, children's centres and childminders) and parents, but also, most crucially, on young children, and there needs to be due consideration if we are to ensure that this has positive impact.

In preparation for the rollout of the extension of the entitlement, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has consulted with LAs, providers across all sectors, parents and national organizations about what to include in the revised guidance to ensure a quality service is delivered. As part of this wider consultation, DCSF commissioned the Early Childhood Unit (ECU) at National Children's Bureau (NCB) to find out about young children's experiences of the 15 hour entitlement. As a result, a small scale young children's consultation project was developed in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council, one of the 34 LAs already offering the 15 hour entitlement through the Free Entitlement Pathfinder project.

This consultation project set out to explore young children's experiences of the extended Free Entitlement in order to contribute to the wider consultation on extending the free early education entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds, and to inform the *Code of Practice on Provision of the Free Early Education Entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds* (to be published later in 2010) which will provide statutory guidance to all English LAs. Continuity and daily transition (the everyday movements children routinely make between home and an early years setting) were identified as a key focus for this project, and were looked at in relation to the 'flexibility' aspect of the entitlement.

'Flexibility' within this policy and in the context of this project, refers to the way in which settings deliver the 15 hours to enable families to access it over 3, 4 or 5 days across a week, rather than a traditional structure of prescribed sessions.

Ten settings that were already delivering the 15 hour entitlement in Hertfordshire were selected to take part in the consultation, which involved 58 children aged 3 and 4 years. The consultation set out to look at the daily transitions children experience, focusing on how children 'settle in' when they

arrive at the setting, and how they prepare to go home towards the end of their session.

Findings showed that first and foremost young children expect settings to be places where they are happy and can play – these are perceived by children to be their main reason for 'coming to nursery'. The Free Entitlement is designed to ensure that all children can benefit from early years provision and is offered flexibly to meet parents' needs as much as possible.

Friendships and key adult relations are widely regarded as being central to providing a sense of continuity for young children, along with play, which is important for young children's wellbeing and development. These three factors were explored through the consultation in relation to children's experiences of their daily transitions resulting from the 15 hour entitlement.

### **Key Findings**

Friends, grown-ups and play were themes established from the start of the project and analysis shows children's perspectives on these in relation to their daily transitions. Further themes of children's preferences around food, outside and creativity also emerged from the consultation. Children's lack of awareness of their individual schedules and the importance of play in managing transitions were also identified as significant findings in relation to the flexible aspect of the Free Entitlement. These are summarized below:

#### **"Am I staying for lunch today?"**

Observations showed that with many children attending at different times, midday was often a time that caused confusion for children. Commonly, between 12.00pm and 13.00pm some children would be collected to go home, while others would sit down for lunch. As a result, there were many examples of children being unsure of whether they were staying for a full day or a half day, and turned to practitioners for reassurance.

Snack and lunchtimes were also identified as children's favourite times of the day, a finding which is worth further reflection as more settings begin to offer breakfast clubs and opportunities for children to stay for lunch in order to offer sessions more flexibly.

#### **"Freddy, he's not here, he's gone home"**

Variation in length of sessions resulting from the flexibility of the 15 hour

entitlement, means that children often attend on different days or session times to that of their friends. The consultation showed how important friends are to young children and how they help children to feel secure. There are many examples of

children searching the room for friends when they arrive, new children being upset if friends are not there, friends helping other children to settle, and comforting each other when tired or upset.

### **“I don’t like sitting on the carpet – It’s too long”**

Observations showed that children’s anxiety was reduced when play was used to support transition, and increased when children experienced a sense of waiting (to register, to be collected). The ending of sessions for individual children was highlighted as a process that could be improved by practitioners by incorporating play. Practitioners who knew the child well were able to distract children with toys and activities the child liked, emphasizing the importance of the key person approach (“The key person approach is an involvement, an individual and reciprocal commitment between a member of staff and a family”<sup>1</sup>).

Overarching themes around the importance of play, relationships and routines may not be new or unfamiliar to those who work in the early years sector; however, the individual perspectives shared by children provide new insights within these themes and have specific implications on how the 15 hour entitlement should be delivered by settings and supported by LAs. The project has been successful in capturing a snapshot of young children’s experiences in relation to the ‘flexible’ aspect of the 15 hour entitlement, and findings have already begun to inform setting practice, local and national policy via the *Code of Practice on Provision of the Free Early Education Entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds*.

### **Implications and actions**

The consultation has been useful to settings in evaluating practice - some findings confirmed what practitioners already knew about the children they work with, while others were surprising and prompted immediate and longer term changes to practice. The project has been inspiring for practitioners involved,

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<sup>1</sup> Elfer, P., Goldschmied, E., and Selleck, D. (2003) (Chapter 2, page 18)  
Key persons in the nursery: building relationships for quality provision. London: David Fulton

many of whom are keen to continue consulting with young children and making specific changes to practice when an opportunity for improvement is identified.

Based on the findings from this project, ECU recommended that the key principle '*The needs and best interests of the child should be paramount*' in the Draft Code of Practice was reinforced in the requirements by adding a specific reference to the consideration of children's sense of continuity and control over their daily lives. The proposed amendment has now been added to the Code of Practice.

Findings highlight the importance of ensuring that individual children's best interests are considered and supported in the way the 15 hour entitlement is delivered. LAs should support providers to work towards maximizing continuity and minimising disruptions for children. This project has shown how listening to young children can inform practice, local and national policy and illustrates the huge value of doing so.

All English LAs are required '*to have regard to any information about the views of young children as is available to the local authority and appears to them to be relevant to the discharge of these duties*', Childcare Act, s3.5, 2006. It is critical that all relevant policy includes due consideration for children's perspectives so that children's experiences and preferences inform continual quality improvement and the needs of individual children are met. Particular attention should be taken during periods of change, such as introducing the extended Free Entitlement or any other policy that will directly affect children's lives.

**For a link to the full report please visit: [www.ncb.org.uk/ycvn](http://www.ncb.org.uk/ycvn)**

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