



Childminding practice in England

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The NCB Research Centre was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to undertake an 18-month study on childminding practice.

Based on a survey with a random sample of 581 childminders, interviews and observations with 25 childminders, and interviews with 20 parents who use childminders, the study aimed to fill some of the gaps in existing knowledge on childminders including the key elements of childminding practice; childminders' views and understanding of children's learning and development and how their practice supports this; and childminders' views of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Findings in brief

- Most childminders were female and in their mid-40s, on average. More than half were qualified to at least Level 3, and more than 70 per cent had a childcare-specific qualification. Yet, 12 per cent of the sample had no qualification at all.
- Childminders tended to work full time and many worked long hours (i.e. more than 40 hours per week) or extended hours (i.e. early opening).
- Childminders engaged in a mix of activities with children including reading, counting and physical activities. Yet, they also seemed to value children's free time with all but 4 per cent of childminders indicating that children had at least an hour daily for free play. Most childminders incorporated community resources such as parks, libraries and playgroups into their care. The mix of activities and outings offered by childminders was one of the reasons parents selected childminders for their childcare needs rather than centre-based care.
- Childminders tended to involve parents in their care in a variety of ways, notably sharing information about children and supporting children's learning at home. Childminders were able to identify some tensions in working with parents including timekeeping, late payments and feeling 'taken for granted'.
- The majority of childminders in our sample were largely satisfied with their jobs. Childminders tended to be least satisfied with the job security and monetary aspects of their work.
- The choice to become a childminder often evolved out of personal caring responsibilities, but the choice to remain tended to focus on the love of the job and making an impact in the lives of children and families.
- A close, trusting relationship between childminders and children was the foundation upon which good childminding was built. Childminders' ethos of learning revolved around tailored provision, the use of child-directed free play and some planned activities.
- Our observations showed that there was a large variation in specific learning opportunities provided by childminders. Some childminders consistently provided activities for learning and structured children's play to support and extend their learning, whereas others were less likely to do so. By and large, childminders were aware of the kind of learning opportunities that should be provided to children to promote their development and learning; however, some childminders were more successful in putting these ideas into practice than others.
- Regular reflection and a willingness to improve their practice were important among childminders who offered consistent high-quality care. Advance planning appeared to be important to ensuring children were offered adequate opportunities for learning, particularly when childminders had large groups of children.
- Overall, childminders felt favourably about the EYFS, as they believed it put them on par with other early years providers and helped them improve (or, at least, reinforced) their practice. Due to an initial lack of clarity and support, the EYFS was a difficult framework to implement.

Background

In England, home-based childcare providers are known as childminders. Early years childminders caring for children from birth to five years must deliver the EYFS. Implemented in 2008, the EYFS is the first statutory framework followed by all early years providers and combines standards in education, care and welfare.

Over the past 15 years childminders have lost their pre-eminent position in England's childcare market. Prior to the late 1990s, childminding was the largest provider of full-day childcare outside the home for young children. Yet, recent figures indicate that there has been a sizable decline in the number of registered childminders over the past several years (although recent registrations statistics indicated that this decline ceased in 2011).¹ Further, there is very little robust research on childminders and their practice, notably how childminders use their unique position as home-based providers to help young children develop prior to school entry.

The present study aimed to fill some of the gaps in existing knowledge on childminders in England to try to better understand their place in the current childcare market, notably the key elements of childminding practice; childminders' views and understanding of children's learning and development and how their practice supports this; and childminders' views of the EYFS.

Key findings

Survey results: a snapshot of childminders in England

Most childminders who completed the survey were female and in their mid-40s, on average. Slightly more than half of childminders were qualified to at least Level 3 (53.2 per cent), and more than 70 per cent had a childcare-specific qualification (70.5 per cent). Yet, 12 per cent of the sample had no qualification at all. Most childminders were registered to provide care from infancy. Slightly less than a fifth of childminders cared for SEN or disabled children (17.4 per cent). Childminders tended to work full time and many worked long hours (i.e. more than 40 hours per week) or extended hours (i.e. early opening).

Childminders engaged in a mix of activities with children including reading, counting and physical activities. Most childminders (88.1 per cent) tended to read stories to children every day and involved children in counting activities (82.7 per cent) and gross motor activities (e.g., running, climbing, sliding, playing with the ball; 83.3 per cent). They also seemed to value children's free time, with all but 4 per cent of childminders indicating that children had at least an hour daily for free play. More than 40 per cent of childminders (43.7 per cent) allowed children to watch television daily. Most childminders incorporated community resources, such as parks, libraries and playgroups into their care.

Nearly three-quarters of childminders (72.2 per cent) reported that they always set aside time in the morning or at departure to allow parents to discuss their children. More than half of childminders reported that parents shared their observations of their children at home (56.3 per cent) and gave parents informal support for their children's learning at home (52.3 per cent). Childminders also reported some tensions with parents: almost half of childminders respectively, experienced incidents with parents around late payment (45.3 per cent) and timekeeping (44.0 per cent). Other common problems with parents included being 'taken for granted' or not feeling appreciated (40.9 per cent) and parents bringing in children when they are sick (35.3 per cent).

The majority of childminders (70.7 per cent) reported that they planned to continue working as a childminder in the next year or the foreseeable future and were largely satisfied with their jobs. Childminders tended to be least satisfied with their job security and pay.



Figure 1 Childminders' average job satisfaction

Childminders' beliefs about their practice

Data from the interviews revealed that the choice to become a childminder often evolved out of personal caring responsibilities, but the choice to remain tended to focus on the love of the job and making an impact in the lives of children and families. A close, trusting relationship between childminders and children was the foundation upon which good childminding was built, although most childminders drew a firm line between themselves and the children's families. Childminders very much saw their homes as a contrast to the 'busy, noisy' nursery environment and, thus, more appropriate for young children. Childminders felt strongly that young children could not – and would not – learn in an environment devoid of caring.

It's to just make the children feel safe and secure, because if you nurture children, and they've got good self esteem everything else will come.

Childminder, practising for three years

Some childminders, but not all, saw preparing children for nursery or school as an important part of their jobs.

¹ Quarterly registration statistics from 2003 onwards are available at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/registered-childcare-providers-and-places-england-december-2008-onwards>

Routines and activities

Routines – both children's personal routines and external routines, such as school runs – dictated the schedule that childminders followed in terms of when and what type of activities they offered, as well as the timing of other routines, such as naps and mealtimes. A variety of activities were offered to children including arts and crafts; music; dramatic play; reading; fine motor, gross motor and physical play; home-based activities such as cooking and gardening; messy play and television and computer use. Childminders used community resources, such as parks and play groups to support their delivery of childcare. The mix of activities and outings offered by childminders was one of the reasons parents selected childminders for their childcare needs rather than centre-based care.

Diversity in childminding practice

Tailoring provision based on children's needs and interests was identified as one of the most important aspects of high-quality childminding practice by childminders, and the observations of childminding practice showed that almost all childminders in our study provided this type of practice.

Baking cookies to playing with dough

The childminder planned a cooking activity. The cookie dough had been made in the morning and was ready for the children to roll and cut shapes out of. The children were having so much fun with rolling out the dough and moulding it into different shapes that the childminder let them continue to do this even though the dough would no longer be suitable for eating. The art pieces made by the children were baked in the oven and then painted once they had cooled down.

Childminder, practising for three and a half years

Data from the observations however, indicated that some childminders were less successful in tailoring their provision to individual children's needs and interests. These childminders often controlled the type and pace of the activities without focusing on what the children wanted. The largest variation in childminding practice was found to be the quality and quantity of childminders' provision of learning opportunities for children. To facilitate children's learning, some childminders planned learning activities in advance, whereas others primarily guided children's free play. Both groups reported being flexible in their approach and ready to adapt to children's changing needs and interests. A third small group of childminders saw themselves as carers rather than learning providers and did little in the way of guiding or interacting with the children.

Childminders who provided ample learning opportunities to children were observed to do the following.

- Communicate with children throughout the day both verbally and non-verbally, encourage children to talk and respond to children's communication.

- Provide lots of opportunities for language development by asking questions, using descriptive words and encouraging more complex communication.
- Provide learning opportunities by introducing spontaneous activities into children's play such as counting, naming colours and shapes, recognising letters, naming letters and pronouncing sounds, as well as introducing discussions around past events, weather, family members, food, animals and nature, among other topics.
- Organise specific and structured learning activities, such as cooking, reading, planting, arts and crafts, puzzle time and going shopping for groceries.

Childminders who were less likely to provide opportunities for learning tended to:

- miss cues from children (i.e. when children need assistance or when there is a clear opportunity to facilitate children's learning)
- provide few opportunities for language development
- occasionally or rarely introduce spontaneous learning activity
- rarely organise specific learning activities.

While many childminders were able to articulate (during interviews) the ways that they promoted children's learning, the observation findings suggest that some childminders were more successful in putting these ideas into practice than others.

Some examples of this variability in the provision of learning opportunities are presented below.

Learning on the school run

The childminder talked to the two- and three-year-old about the leaves on the ground as they walked to school to pick up the older children. The childminder encouraged the children to pick up the leaves and 'scrunch' them up in their hands to experience what they felt like. The childminder talked about the different shapes of the leaves and which tree they came from, and asked the children questions about the different colours of the leaves that they were holding.

Childminder, practising for four years

Learning during snack time

A child asked for a drink and the childminder made suggestions about what the children could have to drink. The child decided to have a hot chocolate. The childminder and two four-year-old children went into the kitchen to prepare the hot chocolate. The childminder explained what she needed to make the drink and talked about each item as she used it. Each child was given a turn to stir the milk chocolate while it was warming.

Childminder, practising for six and a half years

Lack of interaction and missed cues

When school-aged children arrived from school the two childminders did not offer any organised learning activities and tended to interact mostly with the school-aged children, leaving the younger children by themselves. The infant was left on the floor with no toys and no one to communicate with for about 20 minutes until she was collected by her parents. Also, a two-year-old was left on an adult-sized bench that she could not get down from on her own. The childminders used mostly vague terms (e.g. 'it', 'that') in communication and tended not to ask the younger children questions. They did not explain their reasons for asking children to stop certain behaviours. The childminders missed cues from the younger children. For example, one child pulled out a game that she did not know how to play and neither childminder helped her with it.

Childminder, practising for four years

Regular reflection and a willingness to improve were important aspects of the practice of childminders who offered consistent high-quality care. Advance planning appeared to be important to ensuring children were offered adequate opportunities for learning, particularly when childminders had large groups of children. 'On the spot' planning could also be effective, but perhaps worked better with smaller groups.

Childminding and the EYFS

Overall, childminder's feelings about the EYFS were favourable, as they believed it put them on a par with other early years providers and helped them improve (or, at least, reinforced) their practice. According to interviews, the EYFS offered childminders fresh ideas and new perspectives to approach and structure their practice. The EYFS also enabled childminders to think more about tailoring their provision to children's specific learning needs when they planned activities.

Due to an initial lack of clarity and support, the EYFS was a difficult framework to implement for childminders. Even though most childminders appreciated the usefulness of assessing children's developmental progress, some still struggled with recording requirements.

The requirement to share information about individual children's progress with other early years providers

was challenging for childminders, who struggled to be taken seriously by other providers. Despite childminders' best efforts to build relationships with nurseries and preschools, they felt that this had had limited impact and they had yet to build positive working relationships with their local settings.

Conclusions

Childminders are broadly satisfied with their jobs and are adjusting to the EYFS. They are a proud and professional workforce who believe they have made a strong contribution to the lives of young children and their families. They see themselves as an integral part of the early years workforce, offering provision that is distinct from and, in their view, better than centre-based care for very young children. Childminders' practice of facilitating children's learning through play has been formally validated by the EYFS.

The key elements of effective childminding practice include:

- sustaining caring, consistent one-to-one relationships with children
- tailoring provision to children's interests and needs
- maintaining flexibility to be responsive to children's interests and needs
- embedding learning in play
- extending child-directed play
- using community resources
- being willing to reflect and change practice.

Ultimately, the most important aspect of childminding practice was childminders' ability to make learning part of a caring, close relationship.

Methodology

This report presents the findings from an 18-month study of childminders in England that included a survey with a random sample of 581 childminders, interviews and observations with 25 childminders, and interviews with 20 parents who use childminders.

The full report is available at: http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/496733/childminding_report_final.pdf

February 2012



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