

Written evidence submitted by the British Association for Early  
Childhood Education (Early Education)

**Submission to the Education Select Committee on behalf of Early Education  
(the British Association for Early Childhood Education)**

**Call for evidence: The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's  
services**

Early Education is a national charity advocating for high quality early education, especially for the most disadvantaged families, and supporting early years practitioners in developing their practice. We have members from across the early years sector, mainly in the maintained sector but also private, voluntary and independent providers and childminders, local authority early years teams, universities and college departments supporting teacher and practitioner training and research. We have particular expertise in early years pedagogy and children's learning and development.

**The effect of provider closure on the early years sector: impact on child  
development**

There is as yet no hard evidence as to the impact on children of ceasing to attend their usual early years provision. Previous research shows that high quality early years provision has a long-term beneficial effect on children, especially from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, which suggests that the closures will impact on children's learning and development.

Where children have a high-quality home learning environment (HLE), this can have as positive an impact on children's learning and development as attending formal early years provision, but we know that the quality of HLEs is likely to vary. To some extent this will correlate with socio-economic disadvantage because of the impact of lack of resources, stresses created by poverty, etc. However, research shows that it is what parents do, not who they are that matters. The pressures of trying to work from home may be a barrier to a good HLE even for better-off families. Parents who spend timing talking and playing with their children will support their learning regardless of socio-economic factors. Traumatic events such as bereavement may affect any family. Any measures to support children's learning and development as we go forward should therefore focus on treating every child as an individual and identifying the support they need, not working on a deficit model or assuming economically disadvantaged children have greater need of support.

The priority as children return to schools and settings should be on ensuring their wellbeing, focusing on personal, social and emotional development, which will have been impacted heavily by recent events including isolation from their peers and wider society, possible trauma and anxiety. Children's opportunities for physical development have also been severely constrained and should be a particular priority for the coming months. The third of the prime areas of the Early Years Foundation

Stage, communication and language, may well have been enhanced for children who had more one-to-one time with family, but in poorer HLEs or where opportunities for diagnosis of speech and language delay have been missed, this will need additional focus and support. The prime areas are designated as such because research shows them to be particularly time sensitive, and necessary to underpin children's learning in other areas, and these areas must therefore be the most urgent focus in addressing the impact on young children of closures and of COVID-19 more generally.

We are concerned that government's guidance for *Planning Guide for Primary Schools* (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparing-for-the-wider-opening-of-schools-from-1-june/planning-guide-for-primary-schools>) states that "The priorities for young children at this time are resocialisation into new style school routines; speaking and listening, and regaining momentum in particular with early reading." and "As far as possible, children should benefit from a broad range of educational opportunities, but this also provides schools with the flexibility to give additional focus to fundamental areas where support is required following time spent out of school, such as reading." In many countries children do not even start learning to read until age 6, so this call to prioritise reading is unnecessary and risks distorting the focus away from the prime areas mentioned above which are more fundamental and urgent. Schools may have to adapt their curricula to reflect that this cohort of children need a change of timescale for reaching particular milestones. At this time it will be counterproductive if accountability measures and Ofsted continue to focus on early literacy and maths at the expense of children's wellbeing and the development of the prime areas.

### **Support for pupils and families during closures, including home learning**

We have seen some excellent examples of support for young children's home-learning during lockdown, but the availability of such support and the extent to which it has been taken up will have been variable. Factors behind this include:

- The fragmentation of the early years sector and its mix of maintained, private and voluntary provision, with levels of staff qualification and expertise varying significantly between settings.
- Capacity, determined by staff availability to undertake this work and their expertise in how to deliver it.
- The erosion of the role of the local authority, with very much reduced capacity within LA Early Years teams to support settings and families.
- The erosion of children's centre services, as there is now little integration with early years education and lost opportunities to support families through shared networks and resources.

Where the system works well, local authorities and maintained settings have worked together effectively eg to operate provision through hubs and use staffing flexibly. Joint working between LAs and PVI's appears to have been less straightforward. All of this offers lessons for the future.

## **Children’s and young people’s mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education, especially for the most vulnerable groups**

The safety of vulnerable children has been one of the key concerns of our members. Settings have tried to encourage vulnerable children to attend, but families often heeded the message that children were safer at home rather than that vulnerable children might be safer in settings. It has been hard to follow up where families did not respond to phonecalls or emails. It has also been harder to spot where new vulnerabilities have arisen eg from parents losing jobs or facing increased risks at home. Often concern focused on families who lay just outside the government’s definition of vulnerable and who were in danger of falling through the cracks. Appendix 1 sets out some comments from members about risks to vulnerable children, concerns about the financial impact of the crisis, and the emotional impacts on children.

### **The effect of provider closure on the early years sector: viability and sufficiency**

Early years providers - including maintained nursery schools, private, voluntary and independent providers and childminders - have all faced significant financial challenges as a result of the lockdown:

- Loss of parent-paid fees – these not only cover the hours paid for, but in many cases subsidise the government-funded hours due to the insufficiency of the hourly rates paid for funded places. It is expected that even after re-opening take-up will be lower than previously, meaning income streams will be depressed for some time to come.
- Additional costs for those settings which remained open to support key workers and vulnerable children, eg where sessional providers remained open over Easter, settings incurred extra staffing or cleaning costs, paid for meals, additional staff expenses eg for costs of getting safely to work. Adjusting to the “new normal” after re-opening is also likely to incur additional costs for maintaining small consistent groups rather than maximising occupancy, additional cleaning, etc.
- Confusion over funding support eg that access to the CJRS was pro rata to private income, uncertainties over calculation of funding for the summer term in relation to expected versus actual registrations, SEND funding, etc
- Maintained nursery schools have not received equal support, as they are not eligible for the business rates holiday despite many paying business rates, and they have not received the additional support available to other schools for additional costs such as Easter opening.

Many early years providers are already barely viable, and so having to continue paying rent and bills without the fee income needed to cover these will push significant numbers towards closure, both in the PVI sector and among maintained nursery schools. This has implications for the sufficiency of childcare.

### **The financial implications of closures for children and families**

The most financially insecure settings tend to be in the most disadvantaged areas, meaning the impact is likely to be most severe for the most disadvantaged children. If lack of available childcare impacts on parents' ability to return to work, this is a further financial penalty, in addition to impact on the life-chances of these children.

### **Concerns re plans for the re-opening of schools and settings**

The plans for re-opening early years provision have been made with little consultation with the sector, and are being rushed through with guidance being issued without sufficient notice. This has caused huge workload issues and stress for leaders and managers. Discrepancies between policy and the scientific advice – for instance the decision not to allow schools to open on a rota basis – do not help build trust and confidence. No attempt has been made by government to assess the financial viability of these additional requirements at a time when early years providers have lost most of the fee income which makes them viable.

Also, current planning for the re-opening of schools and settings is being driven by safety concerns that will significantly change the experience of children within early years education.

- Environments will be stripped back to remove resources, toys and furnishings which are not easily cleaned, resulting in a much less welcoming and comforting environment. Transition objects are vital to very young children, but are rarely wipe-clean.
- Children's interactions will be constrained to smaller groups, with physical contact being discouraged.
- The range of activities available to children will be very much constrained, either due to being confined to smaller spaces, or not being able to use all resources (sand, malleable play, dressing up, etc)
- Children's opportunities for going outside the setting or for visitors to come in will be limited (awaiting guidance on use of public spaces eg for forest school)

We should question whether there is a point at which the impoverishment of the learning environment means that some young children would have a more positive experience at home than they can do at a provider (aside from any issues of safeguarding or vulnerability). Also, whether there will be an emotional impact from being in such an environment that will affect children's receptiveness to learning.

By contrast, increased use of outdoor learning has the possibility to reduce the risk of transmission, to provide a rich learning environment and improve children's wellbeing and mental health. However, there are issues about the availability of suitable outdoor environments and about the knowledge and confidence of the workforce in promoting outdoor learning. We note that the Scottish government have used outdoor nurseries as a way to increase capacity within their system while new early learning provision is being built, showing that it is possible to expand the availability of outdoor nurseries in a temporary or permanent basis. This is a solution which deserves serious consideration at present.

**What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency**

Factors which would facilitate greater robustness in the sector include:

- Early years funding which reflects the real costs of delivery to ensure the sector is robust enough to deal with shocks to the system such as the current crisis.
- Recognition that early years education is a public service and seek to move away from a mixed economy model towards local authority nurseries as the heart of a system of provision, closely integrated with other early years services, whether as part of Sure Start children's centres or a new model of joined-up early years services.
- An enhanced system of home-learning support, including early years funding reflecting the family support and parent engagement which the best settings already offer, and which all others should be enabled to provide as an integral part of the early years offer.

*Early Education, 28 May 2020*

## Appendix 1: Early Education members' concerns regarding the impact of COVID-19

By far the most common issues members raised in respect of the impact on children and families was the **impact on the most vulnerable**, including those who fall just outside the government's definition of vulnerable children.

*"I am concerned about our most vulnerable families who don't have a social worker but do not wish their children to attend the setting. It is very difficult to remotely access any needs."*

*"Those families who are not under social care but have other vulnerabilities - parental mental ill health, domestic violence, siblings with SEND."*

*"Those families that are just managing and keeping their noses above water. Many will not have enough data on their phone to complete things gov have asked."*

The second most common issue raised was the **financial impact on families**, for instance those who had lost some or all of their income, or who were already in or on the edge of poverty. Also, that children eligible for the 2-year-old offer and EYPP were not eligible for the FSM vouchers or any other support.

*"The main issue is economic with many parents now relying on universal credit but yet to see payments. We have been contacted by several families who are struggling to get food and basic requirements."*

*"I'm concerned about families who are on zero hours contracts- who aren't identified as EYPP or vulnerable but now have no income."*

*"Getting benefits out quickly to families also we have families with no recourse to public funds who are not eligible for the free school meal voucher or food parcel scheme. How can we ensure they are fed please?"*

*"Our setting has been vital to families even without this current crisis! We are running a food bank as none of our families get vouchers for FSM as they aren't eligible even though they are EYPPG!!! this hasn't been thought about at all. So we are providing food ourselves many of the staff are buying this."*

*"Families can't access free school meal vouchers if Nursery School age."*

*"I am concerned about the families who are eligible for 2 year old funding as this is the same criteria as FSM and those children eat in the time they are in setting. I'm concerned these families will struggle too."*

The **emotional impact on children** was also a significant concern, and the need for settings to provide additional support now, and on an ongoing basis, especially to support families who experienced bereavements. This linked in to another key thread on transitions, and how children would be supported, especially those moving on to new settings in September, and particularly children with SEND where it is likely that EHCPs will not be in place by the end of the year. Some also raised concerns that the current situation risked exacerbating the achievement gap for the most disadvantaged children.

*“Setting is in an area of disadvantage. Key worker children are the least disadvantaged and yet these are the children we are now working with. The gap between the most and least disadvantaged children will widen. The reality of 'home learning' with 0-4 year olds is that those children whose parents do not have the resources or knowledge how to support them will fall further behind their peers, with perhaps life-long implications.”*

*“Missing a term and a half of school will impact greatly, personally socially and emotionally and educational. We need a coordinated approach to addressing this when we return to schools. We will need specific PSED sessions and a sensible pick up where we left off attitude for our educational programmes. Certainly NO cramming to meet set assessment points.”*

*“Funding will be needed for wellbeing support for the children as should this go on for months, they may be anxious about being in a large group when we get back to normal. Also support for bereavement and possible trauma support for adults and children should there be deaths of close relatives as self-isolation and social distancing means that funerals cannot be attended and we may need to grieve alone at first.”*

May 2020