

## Written evidence submitted by Emily Tredget, Co-Founder, Happity (follow-up) (GRC0021)

Happity has never just been about booking baby and toddler classes. We are a group of parents who care passionately about parents and providers. Therefore everything we do is done in a way to support parents, support providers, and make the world a better place.

This is why we also spend time and energy creating awareness about causes we care deeply about. The most obvious one is [maternal mental health](#). From our [#ShoutieSelfie](#) campaigns, to our [#HappityTogether](#) week raising for PANDAS Foundation (who support new parents struggling with their mental health).

Since the first HoC session where we shared about the importance of baby classes, and how interactive ones can replicated in-person classes most closely in terms of benefits, we have conducted a further survey, and thought further about the situation parents across the UK find themselves in.

Below are the survey insights, followed by our recommended course of action for the Government, and finally some outstanding questions from parents across the UK.

### As a summary our recommendations are:

- 1) Extend maternity leave.
- 2) Raise awareness of the provision of interactive classes and the benefits of them – primarily regarding mental health, which should help reduce the already £8.1bn per year perinatal mental health bill - over other options. Particularly for the period where in-person classes are not going to be economically viable.
- 3) Increase parent purchasing power without distorting the market.

## 1) Survey Insights

What we found was that interactive classes – which parents reported as useful for learning songs etc to do also in their own time – and particularly good to do with preschoolers with a friend or grandparent watching – are primarily to:

- 1) Develop child (86%)
- 2) Socialise child (69%)
- 3) Socialise parent (52%)

66% said interactive classes were best for their mental health, and 59% saying they are their favourite format because:

- 1) You can have conversations, socialise, connect, feel part of a community “Nice to have your presence acknowledged”
- 2) They provide structure, routine, and something to look forward to “Escape from your home for half an hour”
- 3) You can ask questions
- 4) You and your child can see the provider and other families

5) The provider can encourage your child by name

The disadvantages of interactive classes for some were that they have to be at a set time, you can't pause them if your child needs changing/feeding or your internet is poor.

There is also sometimes an issue in that it can take a few classes for a child to adapt to the online setting, and some give up before their child becomes used to it. But after a few sessions, those that continue find them enjoyable and continue.

Additionally, what parents of babies born just before or during lockdown, feel they need are online peer support, parenting courses and mental health support. They are not learning "how to be a parents" from their peers, or wider families. Or indeed from baby course which are often taught by those with Early Years training. We have introduced courses in this area, however parents are finding it hard to justify spending on these courses (even though they are incredible good value) as they will always put their needs last. And with the current financial difficulties or uncertainty, they are not currently prepared to pay for these.

The majority (56%) of parents expect to pay up to £10 per class in person, but a bit less online. However it was highlighted that classes are costly to do everyday – most parents wouldn't typically do a class a day in person, however with it being the only interaction currently available they feel they want to be doing one a day at the moment but costs are prohibitive.

89% said that having small interactive classes, at a set time, with conversation was important to them in a baby class.

Regarding returning to classes, it was interesting to see that parents really are pushing to return as soon as possible. This shows how vital baby classes are in a families life. 87% want to return as soon as school return providing social distancing ensures they are safe.

But interestingly 21% said they would continue some online classes after Covid-19 passes, and 47% might. This shows how well the online classes work – they are here to stay!

Parents biggest challenges at the moment were keeping their children entertained (42%), and looking after their mental health (35%). Baby classes help with both of these challenges and hence why we are keen to make them available to as many parents as possible.

68% said they would consider signing up to peer support chat sessions, and 69% to parenting courses led by practitioners to help maintain their mental wellness.

## **2) We would encourage the government to take as many of the following actions as possible:**

- 4) Extend maternity leave.
  - a. Lack of nursery provision
  - b. Lack of time to review nurseries and settle children – particular those who haven't ever/for a long while been around anyone other than parents. Can't expect parents to drop children into unknown setting
  - c. Lack of grandparent support requiring higher income for more nursery, of which there is less spaces available → could families be able to join one other family unit –

at the moment seem to be able to see lots on individuals, but not with child so those with working partner can't get out. If matched families they could share childcare.

- d. Lack of time for parents to adjust to "normal" life again, before facing the huge transition of going back to work (Our previous survey showed that for mums with children over 1yr mental health support in returning to work suddenly became a hugely important issue)
  - e. But needs to be in a ways that has the most impact – summer holidays coming when classes won't be on, or outside summer holidays difficult to be profitable with social distancing – so need to support the provision of classes being there – support good online options in the short term / over summer, and then support provision of classes as providers won't be able to make them financially viable until social distancing ends and class sizes can go back to normal (this is the case regardless of whether maternity leave is extended, so something needs to be done to support this industry, for the sake of parents and children's mental wellbeing and development)
  - f. Job security as can't be fired when on maternity leave; part-time furlough for parents doesn't work as many are key workers and is removes job security with many parents being discriminated against as they can't work full-time due to childcare so they are the first to be made redundant at this time.
- 5) Raise awareness of the provision of interactive classes and the benefits of them – primarily regarding mental health - over other options
- a. This option is of very low cost and helps everyone – parents, providers, and children's centres (see b) as well as government as mental health issues should be less due to good interaction and support
  - b. Historically this information has been tricky to centralise, hence why we exist – and we are socially driven so we champion community groups (children's centres, libraries, church groups etc)
  - c. We are set up to list children's centres as they come back but have historically had issues getting the information – most centres want to be listed but don't have the resource to list – but if they did list they would be utilised much more – we are happy to upload these. We are known for being the most reliable platform – and as we transition back to normal, with some classes being online and others in person, it is key that parents can rely on a platform to give them the most up-to-date information in their area, and enables them to find a class that they wish to attend.
- 6) Increase parent purchasing power without distorting the market
- a. The baby class market has very small margins and it is already a precarious market with some councils are distorting the market by funding one provider to give free / subsidised classes. This means that other providers cannot continue, and often the format isn't interactive as it is felt this reaches the highest number of parents. However it is not benefiting them as much as it could, and typically they therefore only use these non-interactive options a few times.
  - b. We need to become smarter at delivering free classes to those who need them – and this needs technology
  - c. If the government could provide "baby class vouchers" a bit like childcare vouchers to use across whichever providers who sign up for the scheme like nurseries this would enable parents to use the classes they like, and keep as many providers going as possible.

- d. We could provide the platform should you wish to enable these “baby class vouchers” to be used across any provider who wishes to sign up to the scheme
- e. This would be particular useful for the summer holidays which is going to be a very tricky time for parents. Most classes don’t run in the holiday as they are run by parents who have their school aged children at home – and this will be worse this year as there are unlikely to be summer clubs for school-aged children like normal. However, if lockdown is lifted just in time for the holidays, those wanting baby classes will find the provision isn’t actually there until September. We therefore need to make it viable for class providers to continue online classes (which are more likely to work around their family life as this is what they are currently doing)
- f. Subsidising classes would help parents on maternity leave, but also keep the industry going – and hence support thousands of providers who are struggling financially, likely with no government support, to provide for their families right now. They currently are struggling to justify spending on baby classes – and particularly not on parenting/mental health support for themselves as parents always put themselves last – as they don’t know their financial outlook. They could be facing much higher nursery costs than anticipate as grandparents can no longer help with childcare, or indeed may have to resign due to lack of childcare. This means they are not spending on classes/support as much as they would were they to have the assurance that maternity leave were going to be extended, or part-time furlough introduced.
- g. Once classes start to be in person again, they are likely to need to be with social distancing. This will mean perhaps 4 people per class where there may have been 12 previously – an obviously including venue costs and additional cleaning costs that will likely be required. Baby classes have small margins, so this will not be viable unless they increase their prices 3 fold – and then those who are likely to most be struggling with mental health at the moment (living in cramped accommodation with no outside space) still won’t be able to attend. These class providers are likely to be struggling at the moment (as we are!) with no access to government help due to being sole directors of Ltd companies, and potentially having run for only a couple of years. So to provide in-person classes with social distancing they will require subsidies. If you want this provision to be available, you will need to support them in a way that doesn’t undermine the entire market and kill off these parent-run businesses.
- h. It would therefore be prudent to in fact encourage providers to continue online classes for longer than the minimum time necessary so that they can continue to survive and make any profit, and to keep everyone safe. Extending maternity leave, or enabling part-time furlough for parents, as well as highlighting the benefits of interactive classes, and ideally subsidising them, would mean parents are less likely to rush out as soon as possible to in-person classes. They would have the funds to pay for online classes, understand the importance of the interactive versions, and know they have time to do in person classes when it is both safe to do so, and economically viable for classes to do so. At the moment, if classes are opened up with social distancing, there will be very few, very expensive classes available.

**3) There are some key questions that parents across the country are keen to understand:**

- 1) What are the changes of approving an extension to maternity leave (or part-time furlough for parents)
- 2) What are the timescales for knowing if it will be approved, and the timescale for implementation as many of the parents are nearing the end of their maternity leave
- 3) How would any approval effect those already returned to work (part-time furlough for parents would of course answer this)
- 4) Why has furlough been extended, but maternity leave not?
- 5) When is this topic being discussed by the government again?
- 6) How likely is it that wider families will be able to help with childcare if nursery spaces are not available/suitable – and if not, what options does this leave parents with?
- 7) Is the impact of grandparents being locked at – many are distraught at not seeing their grandchildren
- 8) Will dentistry be extended as can't get that at the moment
- 9) Will parents be paid for KIT days given they can't conduct them at the moment? Both for those employed and unemployed.
- 10) When can we match families – as those with children count as a group and so can't meet 1-2-1. And often can't leave child at home as partner working.

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