



PARENTS' EXPERIENCES AND VIEWS ON SUPPORTING EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT (AT HOME)

Final Report
November 2023



Save the Children

The  **Lines
Between**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Save the Children and The Lines Between would like to recognise the work, time and openness of the participants who contributed their stories. We thank them for interrupting their days and evenings to describe their experiences of parenting young children. This research project would not have been possible without their insights.

We would also like to thank the partner organisations that assisted us in reaching families across Scotland, giving their time to promote the study, linking us with families, and sharing their facilities for our interviews. A full list of partners can be found in Appendix G of this report.

CONTENTS

i	Executive Summary
1	Introduction
3	Methodology and overview of participants
8	Parenting: confidence and challenges
12	Home learning environment in practice
19	Support used in developing home learning environments
25	Support from the public sector toolkit
32	Gaps and barriers
40	Conclusions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research for Save The Children aims to understand the best way to provide parents with support and information about the enhanced home learning environment and answer two overarching questions:

- What do parents living on low incomes in Scotland need and consider to be the best way to support them to create enhanced home learning environments in early childhood (pre-birth to age three)?
- To what extent is the combination of existing Scottish Government initiatives and policies supporting parents living on lower incomes in Scotland to support enhanced home learning environments in early childhood (pre-birth to age three)?

The Lines Between was commissioned to undertake this research and carried out interviews with 50 parents with at least one child under 36 months old¹ who live in low-income households in Scotland. Our sample spanned numerous local authority areas in Scotland, with a diverse group of parents across cities, towns and rural areas.

In this report, we are particularly interested in three aspects of an enhanced early home learning environment that impact future attainment: (1) Attunement - awareness of a child's needs and an ability to respond to them. (2) Serve and return interactions - responding to a child's cues and signals, including responding to babbles, gestures or cries by answering, providing eye contact or a hug. (3) Parental scaffolding – a technique where parents support children to learn new ideas and expand their capabilities, including dealing with frustrations or modelling new behaviours.

Many parents greatly valued different sources of support for child development, particularly when they had their first child. This played a key role in developing their confidence, approach and skills. We found that parents with high levels of confidence about their ability to support learning and development spoke about the types of activities that benefitted their child, but there were some potential gaps in their knowledge and understanding of how to support an enhanced home learning environment.

The competing demands of poverty, stress, and stigma affect parents' capacity to interact with and support their children in the ways they would like. Financial support and access to childcare have provided important time, stability and resources for parents on low income; parents felt that more of this practical assistance would help them to support an enhanced home learning environment. Some parents with experience of poor mental health, neurodiversity, or trauma articulated particular challenges linked to attunement, and parents told us that stigma and a sense of shame can prevent them from seeking out support and help to develop enhanced home environments.

Parents provide numerous activities to support their children's learning and development. Time outdoors, play and interaction in the home, and community activities such as

¹ Or pregnant at the time of the interview

playgroups were commonly mentioned. Parents struggle to pay for activities and resources, but some have developed strategies to create an enhanced home learning environment at little or no cost. The importance of play and interaction for the development of children's language, social, emotional and physical skills was stressed by parents. However, there was less discussion of what, why or how different elements contribute to development. An increased awareness of key aspects of development may be useful, such as ideas around the purpose of interaction and parents' roles in supporting independent play.

Most parents draw on informal learning and support from other people in developing an enhanced home learning environment for their children, including family and friends, peer support networks, and third-sector providers. The importance of trust, reassurance, time, understanding, and lived experience from those who are sharing advice and information is critical for parents. Much of the advice for parents focuses on practical issues such as developing routines, teething, breastfeeding and weaning rather than core features of an enhanced home learning environment. While informal support is highly valued by parents, there is a risk that some advice from peers may be outdated or inaccurate.

The third sector is crucial in facilitating a peer support group infrastructure that enables parents to connect with other parents and professionals. Some parents accessed financial support from services, which helped to alleviate financial stresses, freeing up their capacity to focus on and interact with their children. There were mixed views on the role of statutory services as sources of information about learning and development. Some described professionals who played a crucial role in supporting them to develop an enhanced home learning environment for their child; others found that professionals had little time to spend with them. Reflections on support from statutory services focused on learning about early developmental milestones. This suggests there may be scope for services to build on this and provide parents with further knowledge about enhanced home learning environments.

Self-directed learning through research and antenatal classes were the least frequently mentioned resources for supporting an enhanced home learning environment, and many parents reported that services were less accessible during the pandemic. Written learning materials, such as leaflets or website content, were considered less useful and effective than direct, practical or peer-to-peer delivery, either in person or through video content.

High levels of uptake are evident for the Baby Box, Bookbug, and *Ready, Steady, Baby!*, but some resources are used very little, and there are gaps in parents' awareness of how the resources can be used to enhance the home learning environment. Supporting parents to understand what well-used resources such as Baby Box and Bookbug are for and how they can benefit children will increase the reach and impact of these resources.

The use of the Scottish Child Payment to support the home learning environment is evidenced by this research and should be considered in any evaluation of the efficacy of these policy measures. Increasing the reach of mobile resources, better public transport networks and subsidised fares for parents living on low incomes would help parents access resources and activities, a particular consideration for those who face transport barriers, for example, families in rural areas. Access to free activities is essential, and greater provision and promotion of free resources, such as baby classes, will widen access.

Despite a range of initiatives and services across public, third, and community sectors in Scotland, many families living on low incomes are restricted in the extent to which they can engage with early learning opportunities due to gaps in support and barriers to access. Not all parents are aware of the links between how initiatives and services can support their child's development. This may make it more difficult for them to utilise these resources to enhance their home learning environments. There are missed opportunities to assist parents to learn about the resources available to support enhanced learning, for example, during pregnancy or in the first year of a child's life.

Overall, parents expressed a clear desire to support their children's learning and development; there is much to build on. They need access to knowledge and advice, ideas, peer support, safe spaces outside the home, and respite to enhance the home learning environment. Some require tailored interventions to address issues such as mental health or isolation or to connect with other parents with similar experiences.

Most parents expressed confidence in their ability to support their child's development; this confidence may prevent them from seeking out knowledge, so proactive strategies by stakeholders are required. Parents use many sources of information, mainly social media, family and peers and finding effective channels to enhance parents' understanding of the core components of learning and development is a crucial next step for policymakers.

Feedback from parents on the role of third-sector community groups and local services as a source of advice, ideas, respite, support and encouragement demonstrates the importance of this type of support in developing enhanced home learning environments.

Some families experience particular challenges, for example having single parent households, being young parents or experiencing in-work poverty. Timing is an important consideration for policymakers; more engagement with families during pregnancy could boost parents' knowledge of an enhanced home learning environment, allow support services to identify and respond to any specific needs, and help parents prepare.

Finally, parents told us they need policymakers to address systemic issues such as poverty, inflexible working arrangements, poor rates of pay, lack of affordable childcare and housing instability. These affect the home environment, exhaust and preoccupy parents, and restrict the time they can spend with their children.

INTRODUCTION

Save The Children aims to influence national policy, empower communities, evidence lived experiences and share insights to ensure policy and services are working for families experiencing poverty.

The impact of poverty on children is stark, affecting development and attainment in school, which can go on to influence their future. Children who experience poverty are more likely to have a concern recorded at their 27-30 month review and, on average, enter school 10-13 months developmentally behind children from wealthier families². This early learning gap is present before a child starts school and may widen through their school years.

This research, commissioned by Save The Children, seeks to understand how parents living on low incomes in Scotland create enhanced home learning environments for their young children aged 0 to 3 years. A package of support and services is available to help parents in Scotland create an enhanced home learning environment. Many types of support are funded or provided by the Scottish Government or other public bodies (see Appendix A); others are delivered by third-sector organisations. The research undertaken by The Lines Between examines parents' experiences with the existing resources and initiatives for use in building enhanced home learning environments.

Parents create enhanced home learning environments through attunement, responsiveness and language-rich environments and interactions, and children raised in these environments perform better in formal education settings³. Features of a child's enhanced home learning environment include toys, books, objects, everyday experiences, and regular interaction with people who provide love, support, and encouragement⁴. Conversations and modelling beneficial behaviours, like curiosity, positivity and self-confidence, help babies and children to develop and thrive.

Greater parental awareness about the importance of an enhanced home learning environment can foster positive outcomes and help to narrow the poverty-related attainment gap. Save The Children believes there is scope for improving the support to help parents create enhanced environments that cater to the development of children in their early years⁵.

² Save the Children (2023) *Joining the Dots: Making the case for a systems approach to tackling the poverty related early learning and development gap*.

³ https://www.peeple.org.uk/sites/www.peeple.org.uk/files/Scottish%20policy%20and%20the%20home%20learning%20environment_2.pdf

⁴ <https://education.gov.scot/parentzone/learning-at-home/home-learning-environment/>

⁵ IPPR, Save the Children, JRF (2023) *Tipping the Scales: The Social and Economic Harm of Poverty in Scotland*.

This research aims to understand the best way to deliver support and information about the enhanced home learning environment to parents and answer two overarching questions:

- What do parents living on low incomes in Scotland need and consider to be the best way to support them to create enhanced home learning environments in early childhood (pre-birth to age three)?
- To what extent is the combination of existing Scottish Government initiatives and policies supporting parents living on lower incomes in Scotland to support enhanced home learning environments in early childhood (pre-birth to age three)?

The report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter Two** presents the methodology and participant profile.
- The financial, emotional and practical support parents need to create an enhanced home learning environment is discussed in **Chapter Three**.
- **Chapter Four** covers how parents create an enhanced home learning environment for their babies and young children, including activities outside the home and in the community.
- An analysis of which types of support and services are most used by parents is presented in **Chapter Five**. This covers support used to develop an enhanced home learning environment, build confidence, or address other issues, such as mental health or financial struggles, that affect the quality of time spent with their children.
- **Chapter Six** provides an overview of the services, support and toolkits provided by the Scottish Government, the NHS and other public bodies to specifically assist with the home learning environment. This list includes Scotland's Baby Box, Best Start and Best Start Food Grants, the Scottish Child Payment, Bookbug, *Ready, Steady, Baby!*, ParentClub, Play@Home, *Off to a Good Start*, and the Play, Talk, Read Bus.
- The gaps and barriers raised by parents are covered in **Chapter Seven**. This chapter also presents interviewees' recommendations for improvements.
- **Chapter Eight** provides conclusions.
- Attached to this report are seven appendices. **Appendix A-D** provide a close examination of themes discussed in this report through individual case studies. **Appendix E** summarises the types of support we explored in the research, and the discussion guide is provided in **Appendix F**. **Appendix G** provides a list of partners who assisted in the recruitment process.

2

METHODOLOGY AND OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS

Eligibility, sampling, and recruitment

This report is based on an analysis of interviews with 50 parents⁶ with at least one child under 36 months old⁷ who live in low-income households in Scotland.

To classify low income, we used receipt of benefits such as Universal Credit, Scottish Child Payment, or any income-related legacy benefit, such as Job Seekers Allowance or Working Parent Tax Credits.

Some exceptions were made for people who are not eligible for benefits, such as asylum seekers. In this case, we used the Household Below Average Income⁸ (HBAI) definition, a measure of relatively low income, which takes into consideration different household types. The poverty eligibility for this research was a household annual income below £25,272, after housing costs, which is 60% of the UK median weekly income for 2021/2022 for a family of four⁹.

Other aspects of the sampling criteria included:

- A diverse geographical spread, spanning numerous local authority areas in Scotland.
- A sample of participants living in cities, towns and rural areas (including villages, remote countryside and islands).
- Groups often underrepresented in research on parenting, such as parents and carers from black and minority ethnic communities and fathers.

To reach parents, achieve diverse representation and ensure we did not over-recruit participants, we undertook targeted recruitment through social media and a range of partner organisations that have extensive contact with parents and families or people living on low incomes. These partners included Home-Starts throughout Scotland, Stepping Stones Edinburgh, Fife Gingerbread, TD1 Youth Hub, Dr Bell's Family Centre, Dad's Rock, Let's All Talk North East Mums, and Mind Your Head Shetland. Partners assisted us by raising awareness of the project and hosting in-person interviews.

We also wanted to interview parents who had not been supported by third-sector services and received no additional support beyond the statutory assistance, for example, that provided by health visitors. A specialist recruitment agency was appointed to find these ten interviewees. In total, 12 of the 50 participants had received no other formal or informal assistance from third-sector organisations.

⁶ One interviewee was a kinship carer; in reporting we use the term 'parents' to describe all participants

⁷ This also includes people currently pregnant with their first child

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/households-below-average-income-hbai--2>

⁹ <https://observatory.leeds.gov.uk/leeds-poverty-fact-book/relative-and-absolute-poverty/>

A small element of the research resource was dedicated to focused ethnography, a more intensive form of qualitative research in which the researcher shares and observes experiences in the home learning environment with a parent, as opposed to interviewing them about the topic. Two parents agreed to take part in this detailed element of work. These participants, drawn from the sample of 50 interviewees, were selected based on their proximity to Edinburgh and openness to share their experiences in this intensive way.

Before the fieldwork began, we obtained ethical approval for our methodology from Save the Children's Research and Evaluation Ethics Committee (REEC).

Approach to interviews

Interviews took place by telephone (39), video (4) and in-person (7). Partner organisations enabled the seven face-to-face interviews by hosting researchers at community groups and providing space for confidential interviews in adjacent rooms.

Before interviews, parents received information about the research project. They were given a Participant Information Sheet with a list of helpful resources if the discussions prompted further questions.

Participants were reimbursed for their time with a £30 supermarket voucher for a shop of their choice.

The research team approached each participant and interview with flexibility. Aware of the time constraints faced by parents of young children, we were available outside working hours, including weekends and evenings, and rescheduled any interrupted interviews. We approached conversations about sensitive subjects delicately, as many participants described difficulties linked to their parenting experiences, such as mental health struggles, homelessness or isolation. We checked the wellbeing of participants after interviews and provided contact details for helplines and charities on our Participant Information Sheet.

Interviews started in May 2023 and continued until September 2023.

The focused ethnography took place in August and September 2023 and involved two sessions with each parent, each lasting between one and two hours. Topics were guided by the participants, their interactions with their babies and the situation of the research. These research periods formed the basis of case studies. We asked the participants to collaborate with us on the case studies, providing further resources and feedback on the draft case studies. Participants in focussed ethnographic research received an additional £30 supermarket voucher for each session.

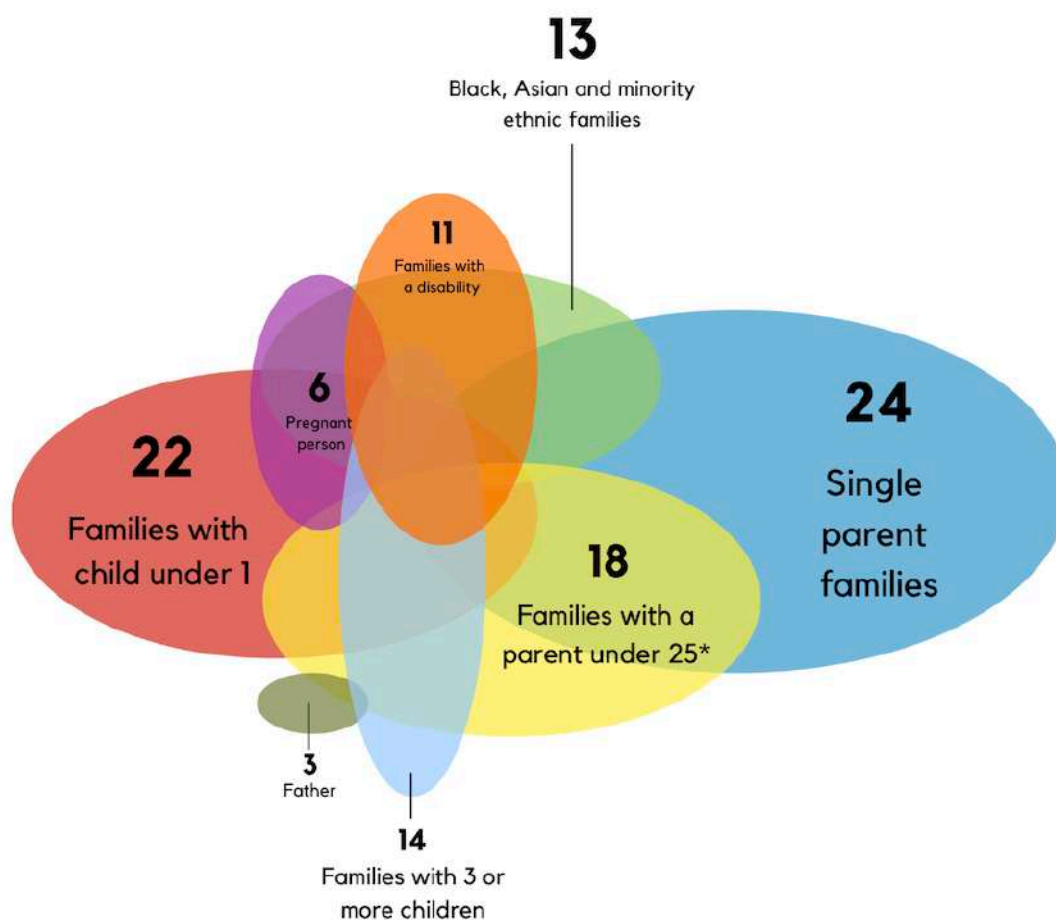
Participant profile

The Scottish Government identifies six characteristics that make families more likely to experience poverty: single-parent families; families with a disability; families with a child under one; families with three or more children; Black and minority ethnic families; and families where the mother is under 25.

Through our recruitment procedures, we were able to speak with:

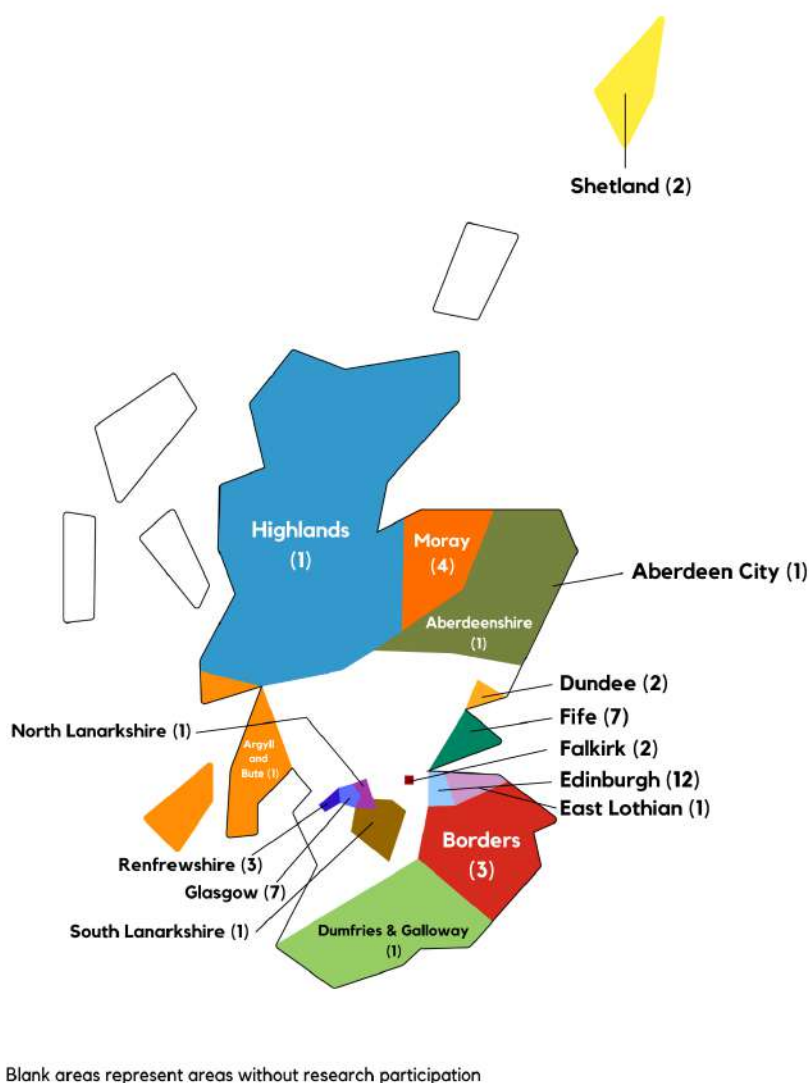
- 24 people from single-parent families
- 11 families with disabilities
- 22 families with a child under one
- 14 families with three or more children
- 13 people from Black and minority ethnic families
- 18 families where the mother was under 25 at the time of her first child's birth

We strived to include these groups in our sample and to include fathers and pregnant people, who are also seldom heard from when discussing issues surrounding parenting. We spoke with three fathers for this research and six pregnant people, although some of those people also had older children. The graphic below presents intersecting characteristics and representation. Exact figures are also included in this graph.



*At the time of the parent's first pregnancy

We sought to speak to families across Scotland and achieved participation from families living across 18 of Scotland's 32 local authorities. The image below highlights the reach of our research.



Research tools

A semi-structured discussion guide was developed to gather qualitative data through interviews. This was shared with Save the Children to ensure it covered the detail required.

Five pilot interviews were conducted in the first stage of fieldwork to test the research approach and effectiveness of the study guide.

Focused ethnographic research was based on the two core research questions, which researchers used to probe deeper into themes raised in interviews and gather more insight into experiences.

Analysis and reporting

Our research was qualitative in nature. Through coding and analysis of interview transcripts, we identified overarching trends, common themes, less frequently shared views, and any issues over which views diverged. We used the demographic data to analyse responses against specific types of characteristics or family structures; any differences identified are highlighted in the findings.

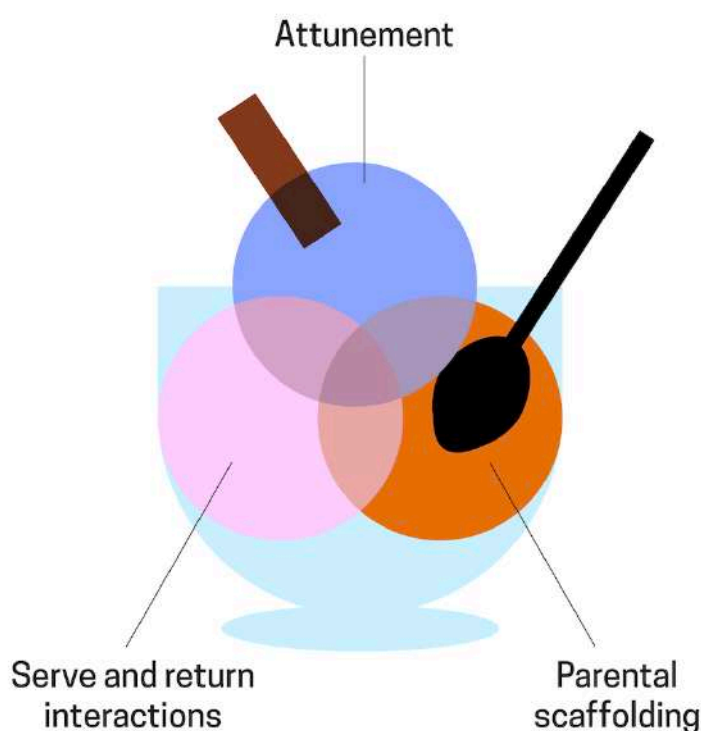
While all questions we asked were related to development and learning, many interviewees responded with comments about parenting in general. Where possible, we focused on comments related to the home learning environment. In this report, we comment on any themes which were prevalent or less frequently raised, and topics on which mixed views or experiences were shared.

Some quotations have been edited for readability; for example, gaps, repetition and filler words have been removed. All meaning has been retained.

Important terms used in this report

Three types of interactions are the foundations of an enhanced home learning environment:

- Attunement - ability to be aware of and understand a child's needs, see from their perspective, and respond to them.
- Serve and return interactions - responding to a child's cues and signals, including responding to babbles, gestures or cries by answering, providing eye contact or a hug.
- Parental scaffolding – a technique where parents support children to learn new ideas and expand their capabilities, including dealing with frustrations or modelling new actions or behaviours



This chapter presents parents' experiences in their children's earliest years. We cover views on their role, what underpins parents' confidence, factors that influence parents' experiences, and how this affects their efforts to support an enhanced home learning environment.

Key findings

- Many of the parents who participated in this study greatly valued different sources of support they received, particularly when they had their first child; this played a key role in developing their confidence, approach and skills.
- Parents with high levels of confidence about their ability to support learning and development were often clear about the types of activities they needed to do with their child, but there were some potential gaps in their knowledge and understanding of how to support an enhanced home learning environment.
- The home learning environment can be affected by a number of factors. Competing demands, poverty, stress, and stigma affect parents' capacity to interact with and support their children in the ways they would like.
- Financial support and access to childcare have provided important time, stability and resources for parents on low income; parents felt that more of this practical assistance would help them to support an enhanced home learning environment.
- Stigma and a sense of shame can prevent parents from seeking out support and help.
- Some parents with experience of poor mental health, neurodiversity, or trauma articulated particular challenges linked to attunement.
- Positive reinforcement, encouragement and information, which build on parents' strengths and respond to their needs, could effectively engage parents and enhance their capacity, knowledge and understanding of how to create an enhanced home learning environment.

Confidence

Parents across all demographic groups reported that they generally felt confident in their ability to support their child's learning and development. Many recognised the challenges of the role and the importance of the support they had received to build and maintain their confidence, which is explored in Chapter Five.



I would say I'm pretty confident. Because I'm her mum, I'm probably the best person to teach her at this stage because she'll respond more to me. And we have spent the most time together, so she's used to me, and I feel like we've done so much since she was a baby.” (Mother, Renfrewshire)

However, some acknowledged that their confidence can fluctuate depending on their feelings on a particular day. Confidence can also be affected by unfamiliar challenges or if a parent feels stressed or is worried about issues such as money, work or relationships.

A small number of interviewees reported notable concerns with their confidence; two said their self-belief is increasing as they become more accustomed to parenting, and another said their confidence was shaken because of a breakdown in their relationship with their partner.

Those with babies under 12 months described becoming a parent as daunting, but confidence among this group, in general, increased as they gained experience. Support from friends, family, and statutory and third-sector services helped to enhance their confidence and is explored in Chapter Five.

A recurring theme in conversations with parents was that they felt their skills improved as they got to know their baby. Some said they learned what worked by responding to their baby's cues; this attunement assists child development.



Lately... you're knowing him more and he knows you more, you're adapting to each other and I feel it's a little easier because at first he's crying, I don't know what's going on, what happened, why. But he's started talking, and he's making faces when he likes something, when he doesn't like it. You can read his face.” (Mother, Edinburgh)

Factors which prevent parents from spending quality time with their children

A range of personal, relational, economic, and environmental stressors were identified by most, but not all, parents as impacting their ability to spend quality time with their children. They said these stressors absorbed their attention and affected the extent to which they could bond with their child or hampered their energy, motivation or capacity to be available to their child. Some said this left them feeling guilty or inadequate.

In some cases, stressful factors intersected; for example, a single parent with poor mental health and multiple children said these wide-ranging challenges affected the time they could dedicate to focusing on enhanced home learning.



I've got a million and one things going on in my head... I try and give him my full attention, but it is hard...I should be telling myself...his development is crucial compared to tidying up. But.. by the time (he's asleep), I'm shattered, I dinnae want to cook dinner, I dinnae want to tidy up. So if I do that when he's awake, I can chill out when he's asleep - it should be the other way around.” (Mother, Edinburgh)

Household responsibilities were the most commonly mentioned demands on parents' time. These were raised by those with and without support from friends and family, by single-parent and two-parent families. Participants with more than one child also highlighted that they found it hard, at times, to have one-to-one time or be available to each of their children and respond to their individual needs.

Physical and mental health issues present another challenge for some, impacting their energy levels and emotional resources to play with their child. A small number of parents explained their experiences of parenting with conditions such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), anxiety, depression, or Autism. They noted that this could distract them from interaction and affect their energy and motivation for play, lessen their desire to spend time in the wider community with their child or affect bonding and interaction.

Financial pressures, or the strain of trying to juggle work and family life, was a further stressor impacting some participant's physical health, exhaustion levels, mood, and availability to be playful and responsive with their children at times.



If we're going through a bit of financial pressure... It's more like, 'Look, I just don't have the time right now', or you get a little bit snappy. When we have these environmental pressures.. that affect our emotions.. that's when we find it hard - we can't be the parents we know we are.' (Mother, Highland)

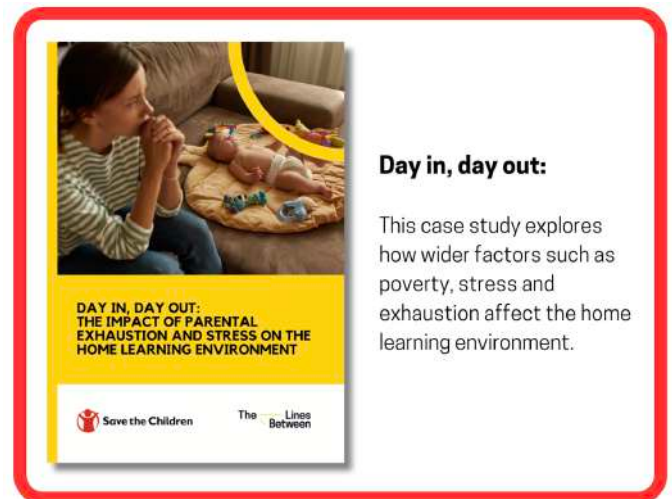
A small number of participants reflected that expectations of fathers to be 'providers' affected fathers' availability to build relationships with their children, increased their stress levels, or caused uncertainty about their parental role.

Other stressors, such as unsafe or unsuitable housing, affect both parental and child wellbeing. Parents described issues which affected their comfort going out into the community or staying at home, and other spoke about disrupted sleep from neighbourhood noises that reduced their energy levels and availability for their children.



The place we were living was unsafe.... I cannot leave my pram on the ground floor. I had to get the pram on the third floor...and it was very heavy, so I was going out maybe just for immunisation...It was very noisy during the night...I talked to...the housing company.. (providing) accommodation for asylum seekers...They just ignore it...And then we got like a murder attempt for a neighbour...the stairs were full of blood...The (police)..told me this place is not suitable for having a baby.' (Mother, Glasgow)

Parents from both single-parent and two-parent families said they had little time away from their children, which drained their energy levels and motivation to play. However, this was most commonly raised by single parents, who highlighted the strains of carrying the sole responsibility for childcare, housework, and finances.



Day in, day out:

This case study explores how wider factors such as poverty, stress and exhaustion affect the home learning environment.

A small number of parents described experiences of being in controlling and abusive relationships. They said this affected their sense of safety and, in turn, their ability to create an enhanced home learning environment for their children.

Support to address financial barriers and other issues that affect home learning

Participants outlined types of support that helped them overcome challenges in playing with their child, an important aspect of home learning. They also described unmet support needs that would help them achieve greater stability in the household.

Most commonly, improved benefits and financial support were called for, including adequate funds for those with disabilities; more financial provision for, and recognition of, the work parents do; better support for families in work and living on low incomes; increased funding to reflect the recent and ongoing cost of living increases; and support to access appropriate housing. A small number advocated for the cost of formula milk to be subsidised.

Some identified mental health support, tools, and coping strategies for parents as important or wanted more frequent access to this form of support. One also called for a parenting support service specifically for neurodiverse parents.

Parents told us support with childcare would reduce stress by freeing up their time to work and relieve financial pressure, attend to other demands, or provide respite. They explained this, in turn, would increase their availability, motivation or energy to interact with their child when they return home.



If she had that care elsewhere for even a really small amount of time each week, that would give me the time to recharge a bit... just be a bit more motivated...The times when I do have bits and pieces that I do without her... when I get back to her, I'm way more attentive.” (Mother, Edinburgh)

A small number felt that support with the tasks of daily living would help. One advocated for older siblings to be taught self-care and household skills at school from a younger age to help parents with young babies who “are under pressure taking care of everything”.

Stigma

Experiences of stigma and shame were shared; for example, a few spoke of instances of significant stigma related to being a young parent. A few parents expressed reluctance to ask for support because of a perception that parents should be able to cope without help. One feared their child would be removed from them if they asked for help.



I feel there's a stigma around mums that you should just know what you're doing; you should just get on with it... I'm a lot better at asking for help now, but at the start, I felt like, 'Oh no, if I ask for help, then I'm going to get my child taken off me, or Social Services will be involved'. They never were. That's not how it works, it's a total misconception, but you don't know that.” (Mother, Scottish Borders)

4

HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN PRACTICE

This chapter explores the activities and resources that parents use to support the enhanced home learning environment. It explains what good practice looks like for the parents who participated in this research.

Key findings

- Parents provide numerous activities which are designed to contribute to an enhanced home learning environment. These include activities that support language-rich learning environments and interactions that enable parental attunement and responsiveness. Time outdoors, play and interaction in the home, and community activities such as playgroups were commonly mentioned.
- Parents struggle to pay for activities and resources, but some parents developed strategies to create an enhanced home learning environment at little or no cost.
- The importance of play and interaction for the development of children's language, social, emotional and physical skills was stressed by parents. However, there was less discussion of what, why or how different elements contribute to development. Some potential gaps in understanding emerged, and an increased awareness of key aspects of development may be useful, such as ideas around the purpose of interaction and parents' roles in supporting independent play.

A range of activities with children in their early years were described by parents:



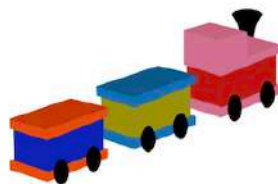
Outdoor play



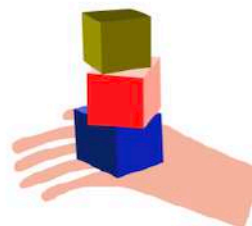
Community activities
and groups



Creative
activities



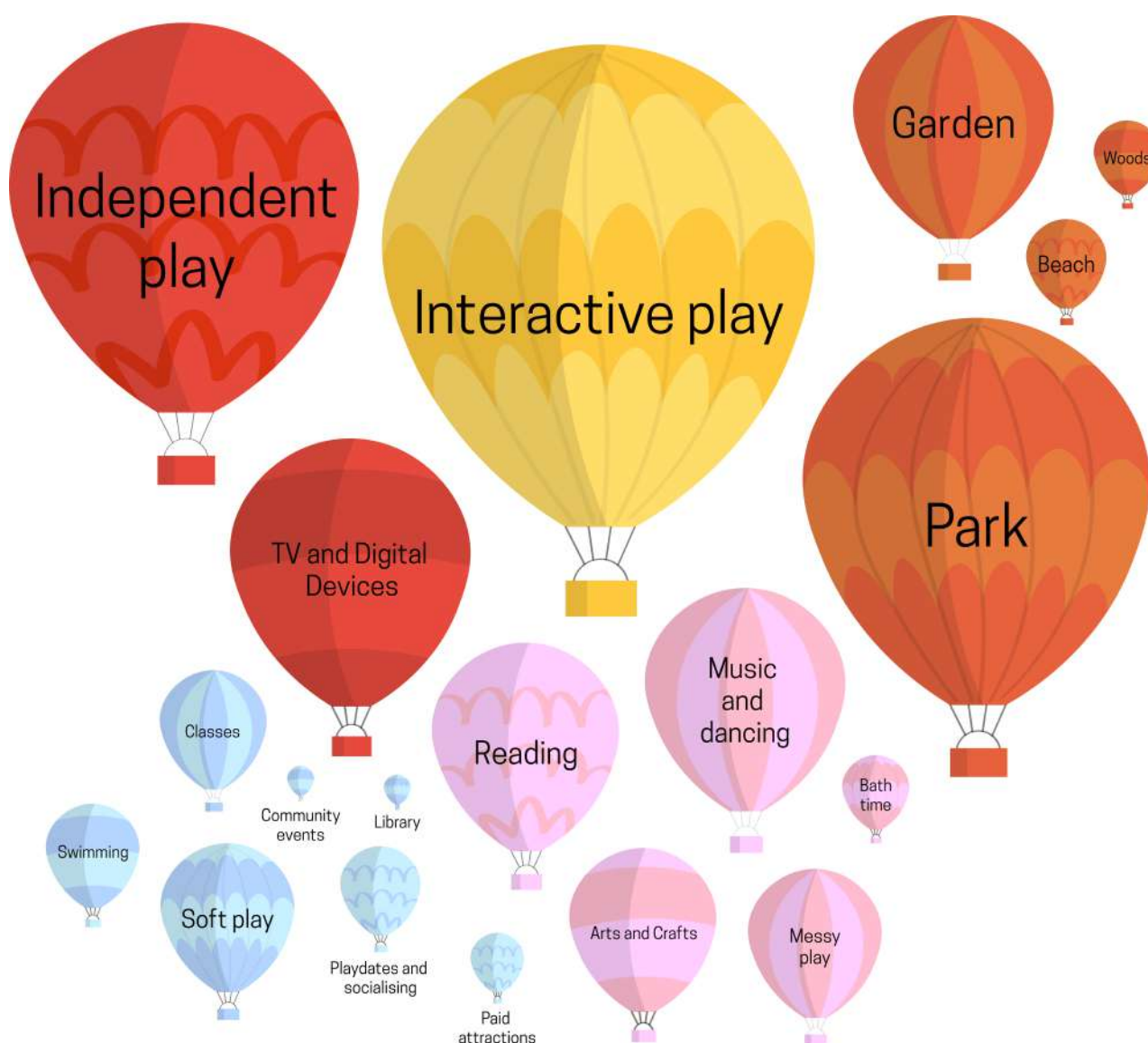
Interactive play



Independent play

The most commonly reported activities were outdoor play, which included things like playing in the garden and going to the park, and interactive play with toys and games. This was followed, in order of the frequency with which each activity was identified, with activities in the community, including playgroups and museum trips, creative play using music and dance, reading, arts and crafts, messy play and bath time. These wide-ranging activities are part of the daily routine across all demographic groups and family structures, and interviewees all recognised their importance for children's emotional and social development.

The image below presents the different types of activities described by parents and how often they were mentioned.



Free activities

A prevalent theme in conversations with parents was the importance of finding free activities to entertain children and contribute to their learning. This includes activities at home, such as reading and dancing, and outside the home, including playgroups, community centres, libraries, play parks, beaches and woods.

Outdoor activities

Getting outside and visiting local parks, beaches, and woodland was important for many parents who took part in interviews. This theme was prevalent among families in both rural and urban areas but was particularly valued by parents with no outdoor space at home who recounted their efforts to support their children to learn about nature and spend time in the fresh air.



Because I'm in a flat, I've not got any outdoor space, so I do try and push myself to get him out, get the fresh air and he does sleep better, so it's a win-win." (Mother, Edinburgh)

Parents also stressed the value of outdoor activities for teaching their children new things, emotional regulation, imaginative play, or allowing them to experience different sensations and experiences.



I'll take a walk to the park or a walk through the woods, and I'll always be talking to him and showing him what things are... when we're in the woods and I pick something up and I'll explain to him what it is and get him to repeat things." (Mother, Renfrewshire)

All parents valued outdoor activities, but those with babies under 12 months (and no older children) were more likely than other groups to discuss going for walks or to the park.

Interactive play

Many parents stressed the importance of responding to their children and interacting with them to develop and learn. They described spending time with their children without distractions, including playing games and taking part in activities, chatting while doing other tasks like changing nappies or preparing meals, or simply enjoying cuddling with each other.

Parents highlighted these interactions as an important aspect of nurturing their children, building an emotional bond and supporting their children to learn. All were clear this is a crucial aspect of a parent's role.

Responding to their child's needs and encouraging them to pursue their own interests, in contrast to attempting to influence their preferences, was mentioned by some interviewees. One, for example, emphasised the importance of allowing children to play with the toys they want to, regardless of traditional gender roles. Another said parents must follow their child's cues.



With my son, a lot of it is encouragement and praise and enthusiasm and just responsiveness to what he wants to do... It's just seeing his personality grow and what his interests are and what he likes." (Mother, Edinburgh)

Different forms of play and interaction were detailed, including games like peekaboo, playing with sensory toys such as scarves, and using toys and objects to teach language.



Today, we were on the floor playing with the ball and I practised speech with him so we emphasised the B for ball." (Mother, Fife)

A few interviewees with babies under 12 months stressed the importance of interacting with their child to encourage language development as well as fine and gross motor functions.



I enjoy hearing, you know, just the development and seeing it in things and being like, 'Oh, she's never been able to do that before, but look at her now'. I enjoy playing on the floor with her, and it's just so nice to watch and see how interested they are in little things... they pick up a toy and they just study it for ages." (Mother, Aberdeenshire)

A small number of parents' comments on interactive play indicated a potential lack of awareness of the range of ways a baby can respond beyond language. The provision of further information for parents about the different impacts of this activity may provide a fuller picture of development, possibly extending and continuing this type of engagement at later stages of development.

Community activities and groups

Many parents described community activities and groups as beneficial to their child's learning and development and an essential source of peer support. In these conversations, parents stressed the importance of access to free or low-cost community activities, given the expense involved with many other groups and attractions.

Community activities include:

- Parent and baby/toddler groups, which, in most cases, are free or low-cost and arranged by local third-sector organisations.
- Classes such as baby sensory, swimming lessons, and baby massage.
- Groups designed to support specific issues, such as breastfeeding or weaning. Often, statutory services such as health visiting teams provide these.
- Other group activities, such as Bookbug, delivered in libraries and other community venues.
- Playdates with other families.

Some highlighted their engagement with low-cost activities offered by third-sector organisations. These groups provide opportunities for learning and development. Parents noted the benefits of social activities for language, social and emotional development. Similarly, play dates and socialising with friends and family are essential for some interviewees. They help to develop children's social skills and allow parents to meet with and learn from each other.



Two of [my daughter's] favourite things are books and singing, so she's... her speech has improved massively. She's taken her out, the walks [family walks with a third sector organisation] are away from roads and stuff, so you feel better at being outdoors and walking." (Mother, Argyll & Bute)

A small number of parents had established their own activity groups or belonged to groups created by their peers. One described a group which formed in response to a lack of

affordable activities for families in their area. Another said a group established by parents reflected their wish to access an outdoor kindergarten with local families.

Parents of babies aged under 12 months and who have no older children were less likely than others to mention socialising as part of their daily routine.

A few mentioned trips to local amenities such as museums, soft play centres and aquariums. However, access to these, or the frequency of visits to places like this, was often curtailed by cost considerations.

Creative activities

Creative activities are often featured in parents' descriptions of time with their children in the home. Many told us they and their child enjoyed listening to music, singing and dancing, reading, arts and crafts and doing messy play together. Some parents told us this type of play helped with elements of learning and language development; for example, singing to their children to emphasise sounds, words and names.



[My son] will sit and draw these letters, these numbers. We kind of do more arts and crafts, if anything. That seems to be his thing right now because he gets engrossed. (Mother, Fife)

Messy play and playing in the bath were mentioned by a few parents as fun ways to contribute to sensory development and interact with their children, teaching them about colours and animals, for example.

A recurring theme was using items that would otherwise go to waste, such as plastic pots or bottles, to make toys that contribute to learning and development. For example, one mum used ground-up cereal to make 'sand' for their child to play with; others described using natural items such as sticks and shells for arts and crafts activities.

Many parents emphasised reading as an important activity, and a few highlighted the value of reading in enhancing the bond between parent and child. However, some expressed uncertainty about whether or not reading had an impact or was necessary for very young children. Parents of babies under 12 months (and with no other children) described reading to their children to a lesser extent than parents in our sample with children over a year old. A few parents said they believe that reading is beneficial for their children's intellectual development, but they did not know this for sure. Another parent said she knew others who questioned the value of reading to their young child.



I don't know if it's true, but I feel if I get her interested in books at a young age then she'll enjoy school better when she's older. (Mother, Scottish Borders)

The need to raise awareness among parents of the benefits of reading with their children, even with the youngest babies, was evident in some interviews. Some of those who spoke about reading mentioned the impact of Bookbug in cultivating their reading practice, discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six.

Bonding

Many parents said that sharing activities helped them to bond with their children. Implicit in the term 'bonding' was a sense that they and their baby love one another and feel connected and safe. Bonding may enhance parents' motivation to support their child's development and play a role in setting the conditions for attunement and relaxed play. However, none of the parents explicitly articulated how bonding links to learning and development, which points to a potential gap in knowledge about the enhanced home learning environment.

Independent play

Supporting children to learn for themselves was a common theme in conversations about the home learning environment. Many parents said independent play was part of their children's daily routine and mentioned using playmats and toys like baby gyms and bouncers. There was often a focus on the value of these activities to entertain the child while the parent does housework or prepares meals, but some suggested this type of play has developmental benefits.



Development toys. We've got loads of different things with numbers, letters, all that sort of thing. And he's quite happy to sit and push those things, and at the minute he doesn't know what they are, but as you grow, you're going to learn that that's the alphabet number one." (Mother, Scottish Borders)

Contemporary understanding of child brain development emphasises the importance of interaction, specifically the 'serve and return' interaction between parents and babies¹⁰. A few interviewees stressed the value of independent play or child-led play as a way for children to learn on their own and did not acknowledge the role of the parent as contributing to their child's development by extending such play. While parents said they allowed their children to guide the play or the type of interaction, they spoke less about their role in scaffolding that play or encouraging the reciprocal interactions that are beneficial for development.

Mixed views were evident about the use of screens and technology among parents. Some said they avoid these, while others felt there were benefits of some television programmes, YouTube channels and other digital content with an educational element in encouraging language, literacy, and numeracy.



My six-year-old's got a tablet, it's got all these learning games which have helped him get into top class in maths. Our two-year-old in the evenings, because she doesn't always settle down, we'll just give her the tablet, and she'll be sitting there doing the same games, and you look over, and you see her playing the games, and she's got an idea of realising what the symbols mean." (Father, East Lothian)

¹⁰ Center on the Developing Child (2007). *The Science of Early Childhood Development* (InBrief). Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

Parents also said digital devices can help entertain their children while doing housework. However, many parents stressed that the use of devices alone, or for long periods, was not helpful for development.



The TV or radio can be good for them as well, but we're going to try and avoid [them]... I don't want them to get any eye problems or get addicted to it."

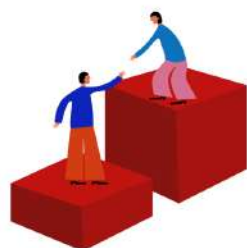
(Father, Shetland)

A few parents emphasised the value of focused interaction with their children, setting aside distractions such as smartphones and choosing not to use television or other devices to entertain them. One parent said they struggled to interact with their first child, partly due to postnatal depression, but they have discovered the importance of interaction through experience, learning from other parents and statutory and third-sector support.

This chapter presents findings about the people, services, information and experiences that have supported parents living on lower incomes to create an enhanced home learning environment, influenced interviewees' confidence as parents, and informed parents' understanding of their role and what children need to learn and develop.

Key findings

- Most parents draw on informal learning and support from other people in developing an enhanced home learning environment for their children, including family and friends, peer support networks, and third-sector providers.
- The importance of trust, reassurance, time, understanding, and lived experience from those who are sharing advice and information is critical for parents.
- Informal support is highly valued by parents, but there is a risk that some elements of advice from peers may be outdated, inaccurate or unhelpful.
- The third sector is crucial in facilitating a peer support group infrastructure, which enables parents to connect with other parents and professionals. Some parents accessed financial support from services, which helped to alleviate financial stresses, freeing up their capacity to focus on and interact with their children.
- Much of the advice parents receive focuses on practical issues such as developing routines, teething, breastfeeding and weaning rather than core features of an enhanced home learning environment.
- There were mixed views on the role of statutory services as sources of information about learning and development. Some described professionals, such as health visitors, who played a crucial role in supporting them to develop an enhanced home learning environment for their child; others found that professionals had little time to spend with them.
- Self-directed learning through research and antenatal classes were the least frequently mentioned resources for supporting an enhanced home learning environment, and many found services less accessible during the pandemic.
- Written learning materials, such as leaflets or website content, were considered less useful and effective by parents than direct, practical or peer-to-peer delivery, either in person or through video content.



Support from friends and family



Third-sector support



Support from statutory services



Previous experience with babies and children



Antenatal classes and outside research

Support from friends and family

Parents stressed the value of support from other people, including family members, old friends, and those they meet at peer support groups. Often, people who provide support to create an enhanced home learning environment also reinforce parents' confidence, either by modelling types of parenting or reassuring them that what they are doing is beneficial. This support was viewed as credible and effective when delivered through trusted people.

Support from families and friends during pregnancy and after birth was a recurring theme in interviews. Parents said that friends and family provided helpful parenting tips and advice, and they gained valuable insights by observing them interacting with their own children. This was crucial in enhancing parents' confidence and understanding of the parental role.



Especially my first, when he came along, I moved in with my mum for two weeks so she could teach me everything.” (Mother, Dumfries and Galloway)

Of the 12 interviewees who had not worked with third-sector organisations, the majority described strong family connections who provided support.

Advice from family and friends often focused on practical issues such as developing routines, teething, breastfeeding and weaning, rather than learning, play and development. However, some parents have received tips for children's social and emotional development. For example, one shared ideas for activities with friends, and another said their friend helped to encourage her child to be gentle with other people. A third received advice from friends about raising a bilingual child.

Other parents, who interviewees did not necessarily know before having their child, were also noted as a crucial source of ideas and advice in supporting an enhanced home learning environment. Interviewees had often met other parents at peer support groups, typically

facilitated by third-sector services. The groups were described as places to share ideas and advice on activities to support learning and development with other parents in person, at follow-up playdates and, in some cases, on social media pages linked to the groups.

Peer support groups also help children to socialise, and a few parents felt this was particularly valuable for children with no siblings.



I'll see him engaging with other children as well. It's going to help him massively.” (Mother, Scottish Borders)

There was frequent mention of the role of peers in helping parents develop confidence in their parenting skills, as discussed in Chapter Three. Family members, friends and peer groups reinforced interviewees' confidence and encouraged them to interact with their children in positive ways, helping them build good habits that support an enhanced home learning environments.

However, there was also a risk that parents, depending on family, friends or social media, received outdated or incorrect information. A small number of parents mentioned other relatives had told them that responding too much to a baby would spoil them. Parents spoke about receiving advice from family about health and wellbeing that were no longer favoured by the NHS, such as putting bottles with leftover milk in the refrigerator or using talcum powder. Another mother spoke about trying to get help for postnatal mental health assistance from her parents but was told to 'stop moaning'.

Parents also emphasised the value of talking to others who they share common experiences with, who have past experiences they can learn from, or who face similar challenges in supporting their children to learn and develop. For example, some young parents emphasised the importance of peer support and meeting other parents who also had children in their teens or early 20s. Similarly, a person seeking asylum found it helpful to share experiences with parents in a similar situation.

Finally, fathers reported a lack of peer support groups, but one gave an example of a group for dads. This interviewee valued the chance to socialise with other fathers and to enjoy quality time with his child. Gaps in services for fathers are explored in greater detail in Chapter Seven.



I've started going to... a young mums group and that's quite good because everyone is the same age and... we've got something to relate to each other about.” (Mother, Scottish Borders)



Third sector support

Third-sector services were described by parents as crucial in supporting an enhanced home learning environment and in developing their confidence and understanding. These include

services that facilitate peer support among parents, provide direct parenting advice and support, and assist with specific challenges such as mental health conditions and poverty.

Various local services noted as helpful include Home-Start, Fife Gingerbread, TD1, Step-by-Step and Stepping Stones. Others mentioned organisations that hosted classes on development, such as PEEP courses¹¹. This is not an exhaustive list, but it typifies the types of local organisations where interviewees have accessed support. Third-sector support was often referenced as a source of general advice and assistance about parenting, but a few parents gave specific examples of ideas that influenced how they support their child's learning and development.



When they were going into the science of how kids' brains are like little sponges, everything you say and do has an effect on their brain." (Mother, Dundee and Angus)

Parents articulated aspects of confidence they gained as a result of support from third-sector organisations, and a few highlighted other types of third-sector support they found valuable, including mental health support or the provision of, and support to access, resources to aid with the cost of living.

Support from statutory services

Interviewees discussed the support provided by statutory services before and after pregnancy that assisted their understanding of child development. These include health visitors, family nurses, community nursery nurses and perinatal mental health services.

In general, interviewees described this support positively. Many gave examples of support to create an enhanced home learning environment, including suggestions for activities at home and information about activities, groups, and classes in the community they might otherwise have been unaware of. Advice, information, and reassurance from these services about parenting and child development also helped to improve interviewees' confidence and understanding of their parental role. Help by these professionals to meet families' basic needs - such as access to food and secure and appropriate accommodation - was also seen as fundamental to enabling parents to focus on developing enhanced home learning environments.

Staff from statutory services provided useful information on child development, for example, directing interviewees to classes in the area that focused on play and development or providing information directly.

A small number of parents praised the community nursery nurses in the health visiting team who had supported them. One appreciated ideas for low-cost activities and resources to support learning and development.

Health visitors, family nurses, midwives and community nursery nurses also establish trust with parents, build confidence and assist transitions into parenting in general, which help shape the way people approach their role. Several parents shared examples of being reassured by their health visitor after expressing concerns about their child's developmental

¹¹ Parents support group focusing on 'supporting parents and children to learn together' (www.peeple.org.uk/about)

milestones. Some mentioned their trust in the health visitor, a belief that this person cared about them and their child, and a feeling they could be honest about the challenges they faced.



“She's lovely. I can tell her anything ... I feel like even though I feel a lot more confident with [my son], it's nice to get some reassurance of somebody who knows... she knows her stuff. So she'll tell me he's doing great and stuff and I'll believe her. Just the reassurance is good.” (Mother, Argyll & Bute)



**MISSING OPPORTUNITIES:
THE IMPACTS OF PARENTAL
MENTAL HEALTH ON
RESPONSIVENESS TO
THEIR CHILD'S NEEDS**

Save the Children

The Lines
Between

Missed opportunities:

This case study explores the role of mental health services in helping parents to create an enhanced home learning environment.

One interviewee described intensive support received during a one or two-month stay in a mother and baby mental health unit as invaluable in building their confidence to be a parent. Another spoke warmly about the mental health support their community nursery nurse, community psychiatric nurse (CPN) and psychologist provided.

However, a small number of interviewees felt that statutory services (health visitors in particular) only focused on practicalities like breastfeeding, weaning, allergies, weights and measures rather than issues around learning and development.



“I've only met her twice because we were in hospital quite a lot so... but she's never mentioned anything, she just comes in, weighs him, measures him, goes.” (Mother, Edinburgh)

Much of the focus of parents' reflections on support from statutory services focused on learning about early developmental milestones. This suggests there may be scope for services to build on this and provide parents with further knowledge about enhanced home learning environments. A greater understanding of the impact their relationship with their child has on continued development and learning may allow parents more confidence in playing and interacting with their babies and children.

Parents' feedback about statutory services was not universally positive, and areas for potential improvements are explored in the section about gaps and barriers. Some felt contact from their health visitor could have been more frequent, and one said the lack of contact affected their willingness to ask the health visitor for help. This includes gaps in the types of support provided or receiving support from multiple health visitors, which one parent felt affected their capacity to provide credible support in relation to their child's development.

Previous experience with babies and children

Previous experiences shaped the way interviewees felt about themselves as parents and how they supported their child's home learning environments. Some had gained experience through work or study related to child development that they could apply to their own children. Others had experience with nieces and nephews or informal babysitting jobs as teens. One dad learned from his partner, who had children from a previous relationship.



The majority of it I've picked up with some help from my partner. So a lot of it she's taught me.” (Father, East Lothian)

A small number of parents who had problematic relationships with their own parents used the negative experience to frame how they chose to interact with their children.

Older children

A few parents with multiple children commented on older siblings' influence on the home learning environment for their younger siblings. These interviewees observed that older children contribute towards younger siblings' learning and development through, for example, singing to them and undertaking household chores so that parents can spend more time with the younger children.

Self-directed learning through antenatal classes and outside research

Antenatal classes and outside research, whether online, in books or even on television, were contentious subjects with a few of the interviewees. Many of the women we spoke with were pregnant during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the restrictions on in-person gatherings limited the number of places and the type of programme offered. Most said they were offered an online alternative, but take-up of this option was variable due to technical issues. One said the cost of private classes was prohibitive, and another noted classes were only available for mums whose pregnancies were categorised as high risk.



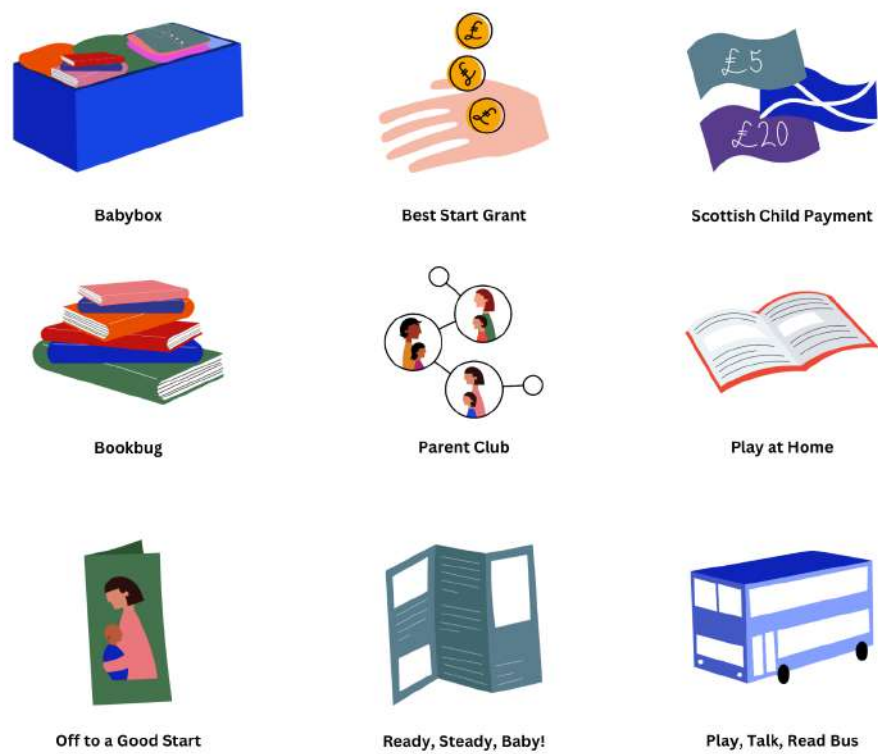
I was pregnant during Covid so we weren't able to do stuff like that. I didn't have a computer and I still don't so I wasn't able to join any of [the online] classes because they either needed certain software.” (Mother, Fife)

Interviewees who spoke about antenatal classes felt they focused mainly on issues around pregnancy and labour rather than learning and development or provided information they already knew. Some parents referred to helpful information they found through their own research, including books and online resources. However, this focused mainly on issues around pregnancy and labour rather than child learning and development. These parents noted that, while this information was helpful, they were more likely to ask friends, family members or peer support groups for advice. Gaps in antenatal education are discussed in Chapter Seven.

This chapter examines initiatives and resources funded by the Scottish Government and other public bodies to support parents in developing an enhanced home learning environment. We explore parents' awareness of the support and services in place, which types of support they used and valued, and how these have influenced their approaches to parenting and creating an enhanced home learning environments.

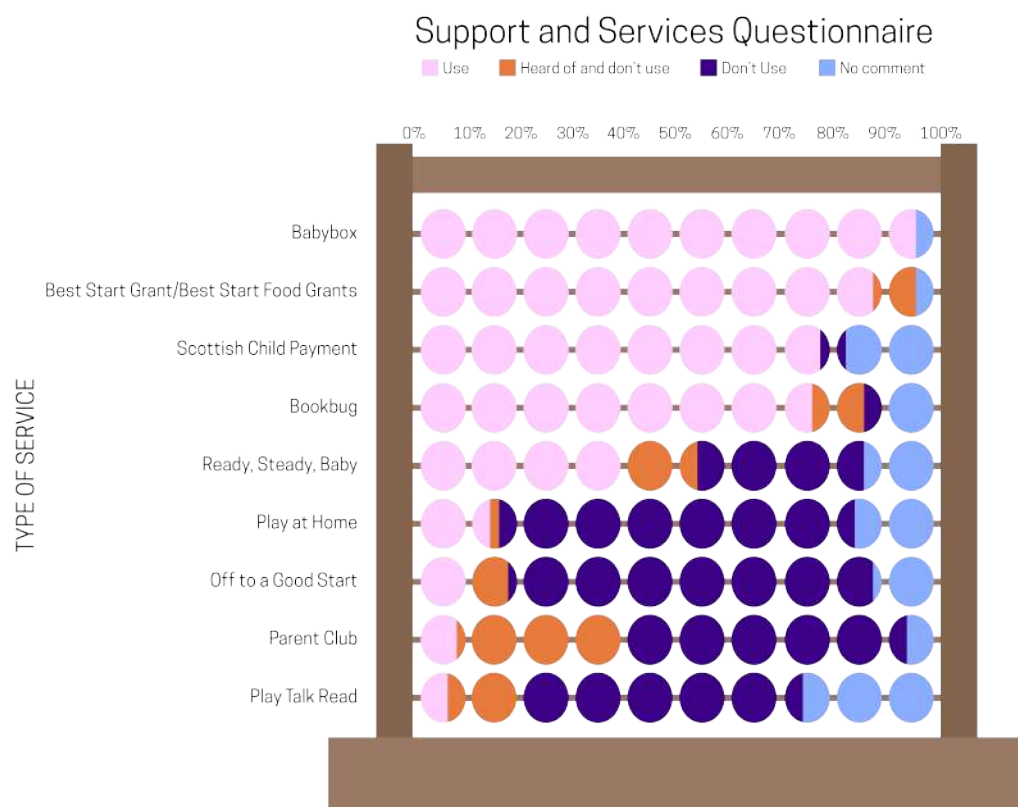
Key findings

- Almost all of the parents on low incomes who participated in this research have made use of the one of the following: Baby Box (95%), Best Start Grants (88%), Scottish Child Payment (78%) and Bookbug (76%).
- The Baby Box, Best Start Grants and Scottish Child Payment were praised in particular for their impact on alleviating financial pressures on parents; the Best Start Grants were used by parents to provide essential equipment and food for their baby, and the Scottish Child Payment was used to provide children in their early years with access to opportunities and resources.
- Parents described accessing important information about grants in direct conversations with midwives or health visitors. While most interviewees received the payments after the first application, some parents experienced difficulties. More widely, strong engagement with information delivered by people as opposed to leaflets and websites demonstrates the importance of a person-to-person delivery.
- Parents used the resources in the Baby Box but often spoke about the value of the items in relation to their baby's health and wellbeing rather than the impact it had on supporting the home learning environment.
- *Ready, Steady, Baby!* was used by 40% of parents. Less than a fifth of parents used the other four resources funded by the Scottish Government and other public bodies to assist parents in supporting an enhanced home learning environment.
- The importance of universal access to resources was stressed by a small number of parents.
- There was some criticism around the availability of classes and information on the continued provision of books after the Baby Box. A few expressed confusion about the value of Bookbug for babies, suggesting there is a lack of awareness about the nature and purpose of Bookbug among some parents.
- A few parents living in rural areas mentioned accessibility of resources and how they were less likely to engage with those that require transport for travel.



Use of support and services

Figure 6.1 shows different levels of uptake for each service we asked about. For example, all used the Baby Box, while less than 10% used ParentClub. A smaller number also used the Play, Talk, Read Bus, but as this service is only available at specific locations and at designated times, the uptake of this service is considered strong. The rest of this chapter presents findings about parents’ use of services from most commonly used to least used.



Scotland's Baby Box

The Baby Box was universally appreciated by interviewees. While many spoke of the ease at which it arrived - through the mail with a short application - most did not have the contents explained to them. Often, this caused no problem as many thought the contents was self-explanatory, but some said the reassurance of a personal explanation would have eased their worries and confusion. None of the interviewees said the Baby Box's role in supporting the development of enhanced home learning environments was made clear.

A few enjoyed having midwives and health visitors explain the contents of the boxes and how best to use them. Others struggled with the sling, seeking help through YouTube videos or finding assistance through third-sector support services. Another said they were scared the box was unsafe for sleep, which could have been resolved with further explanation or guidance.

All parents told us they had used and valued Scotland's Baby Box. The thermometer, the soft toy, and books were often highlighted as favoured items. Parents often spoke broadly about the contents, noting they had provided basic goods that they may not have been able to afford, particularly items they perceived to be expensive, such as the thermometer or sling.



For families or single parents that are struggling, that's pretty much everything you need is in that box." (Mother, Fife)

There were mixed experiences and understanding of the use of the box as a tool to support an enhanced home learning environment. The books included in the Baby Box, gifted through Bookbug, were mentioned often as items that parents used to support their children's learning and development, inspiring interactive games like peekaboo or singalongs, or prompting discussion of pictures, textures or colours, for example. Some parents said the boxes inspired them to play with their children by decorating with the babies as they grew or with older siblings to integrate them into the process of having a new baby. A few parents simply stated that they liked the toy or the mat but did not provide any further details as to how they used those items.

A small number of parents said the sling had helped them connect with their babies and accomplish daily tasks, freeing them up for interactive time later on. These parents described using the sling to settle the baby and provide connection and closeness, which they felt their baby needed in their development process.

Emphasising the importance of inclusion, two mothers suggested that the Baby Box provides an equal starting point, with all babies in Scotland having access to the same resources and toys at birth, regardless of parents' origin or income level.



I know how emotional I got, you know, just having that extra bit of help. So I think it's based on what children need. It shouldn't be based on money." (Mother, Falkirk)

Financial support

Almost all parents used either the Best Start Grants or the Best Start Food Grants, and one interviewee reapplied after confusion about her income. Many used the money for prams, baby bedding and other baby essentials, and the food grant was used to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. While this support was important for family health and wellbeing, there was no feedback from parents that either grant was connected with supporting an enhanced home learning environment.

This was different for the Scottish Child Payment. Most respondents received Scottish Child Payment. A few parents, especially those in rural areas, mentioned using the grants for educational activities or big days out.



Mine's does what it says on the box. It goes directly to the kids whether they need a new pair of shoes or a new jacket, or...they want to do a certain activity that I wouldn't normally be able to afford for them... It's been absolutely fantastic. My eldest son will be joining the town's rugby team in August, and it's something that I wouldn't have been able to afford beforehand, but because that money is there, it's coming in for the kids, I'm able to do it for him." (Mother, Dumfries and Galloway)

Most interviewees heard about the financial support through their health visitors and midwives, although there was no clear pattern between different groups of parents. One had only become aware of the grants when she was made homeless, and her health visitor helped her apply. Another was signposted by the midwives at the hospital when she gave birth. Other sources for information about grants included third-sector organisations that assisted parents in their application processes or other government agencies, such as JobCentrePlus.

Some parents felt it would be helpful if the grant amounts were increased or queried why these decreased as children got older.



Keeping it the same amount on it instead of decreasing it as a kid grows especially (with) today's cost of living." (Mother, Moray)

While many had positive experiences with the application process, others experienced long processing wait times or gaps in payments. A small number of parents noted that between getting pregnant and having a child, their financial situations changed, and they were not told about certain benefits through their midwives. One mother found out she qualified for Universal Credit through friends after her salary changed.

Bookbug

Bookbug, a programme that includes book gifting, free in-person sessions in local libraries, online resources, and personal at homes services was popular and described as having had a large impact on the home learning environment for many families who participated in this research. Almost all of the parents had heard of it, and most had used it.

Many parents in both rural and urban environments attended library events; of those who did not, there was no clear trend in demographic data. Families in cities, towns and rural areas engage with Bookbug, as well as young parents and parents with three or more

children. This could be due to the availability of at-home resources, as interviewees mentioned books provided in the Baby Box and the Bookbug gift bags.

Sessions in the library or another community setting were popular with interviewees. Some parents mentioned using both the Bookbug sessions and the at-home resources, whether the gifted books or the online tools. None mentioned experience of the personal at-home sessions. Many said their Bookbug experiences enhanced reading at home.



I think it's really good that the library does the Bookbug and the bags with books in it. I think that's brilliant for Mums, yeah... I just think books are everything... They were always just like book after book, like rainy days, like we would just go through the bookcase, and yeah, he would just sit on my lap, and we would just read book after book... I found that an easy way, like a really good tool for parenting, to be honest.” (Mother, Shetland)

A few parents shared reasons for not attending, although they were aware of the sessions. This included concerns about their child's behaviour or level of concentration, presumed discomfort in social settings on their child's behalf, or a belief that their child was too young to 'take in' or appreciate the sessions.



It's just [my son] doesn't sit and listen to the books. He just wants to run about.” (Mother, Dundee)

These parents may have been unaware that Bookbug is specifically designed to support babies' and toddlers' development and believed that children were expected to sit, behave, participate and focus. For those without transport or in rural areas, the session time could also be a factor in decisions, being too short to be worthwhile for those having to travel far to access this.

Notifications about sessions or oversubscription were mentioned by a few, as were concerns about the difficulty of attending either due to travel distance or fewer weekly sessions than those held in cities.



They've all got libraries running the sessions at different times, but it's not widely advertised. (Carer, West of Scotland)

Two parents liked the guidance provided through the curated books and through the Family Nurse who discussed the importance of reading to your child. They explained that they had little experience and did not know what books were best for different age groups.

A small number of parents complained that they had not received book gifts after those that came in the Baby Box. Of those, most were unaware they were entitled to further packages; they said this information was not shared by their health visitor, and they were confused about whether they were meant to be given through statutory services or through nurseries. One accessed a gift bag through her library directly after being alerted to the entitlement through friends.

Parents' enthusiasm for Bookbug matched that expressed for the Baby Box, despite a slightly lower uptake. Those who used it appreciated both the gifting and library services. The at-home, online resources were less used and none of the parents who participated in

interviews mentioned using the app. Parents described their child's joy at the books and songs, as well as their own, showing the important role of this provision in fostering child-parent interaction through books.

Leaflets, booklets and online resources to support enhanced home learning environments

The Scottish Government and other public bodies provide information and tools to help parents develop an enhanced home learning environment and learn about attachment, development and health. Email newsletters and online databases about child development from birth onwards are provided through resources like ParentClub, and printed leaflets and books are provided through midwives and health visitors. These resources had the least uptake among the range of support we discussed with parents, and none of the fathers we spoke with were aware of them.

ParentClub, for example, was used by only a small number of the interviewees, and around half had not heard of it. There was no trend in who found the tool useful. Two mothers said they occasionally read the email newsletter when they had time and did not use the website. A parent with previous experience as a nursery teacher and who had older children used the website and referred other parents to it.

Those who were aware of ParentClub but had not used it indicated a lack of interest, with some acknowledging that they had never looked into it further. One mother suggested this was due to a lack of time. Another who had been on to the website said she preferred Google search results. She noted she liked the NHS website for health information and Mumsnet for parenting insight due to the personal nature of the discussions. However, most often, interviewees had not heard of the resource or, during interviews, confused ParentClub with the Boots customer incentive programme, Parenting Club.

Ready, Steady, Baby! and *Off to a Good Start* were used by some parents. Those who were under 25 at the time of their first baby were more likely to have used *Ready, Steady, Baby!* than parents who were older when they had their children.



I looked at the leaflets that you get given at your midwife appointment, and I think it's the Ready, Steady, Baby! book. I did go through that. That was quite handy, actually. That was a good book." (Mother, Fife)

A few parents of multiple children mentioned how the information in the books often helped de-escalate stressful situations or calm anxieties over their children's health, either contrasting their experience with their first child or speaking about the time lapse between children as being like starting over. However, they did not mention the value of the resources in supporting the home learning environment.

Interviewees often highlighted the length of the resources as a deterrent to reading. They described reading smaller leaflets or only referencing certain sections. Some suggested reading was not the best way to learn the information provided.



"[Written information is] not the same as learning hands-on for me. Even in terms of changing a nappy properly and things like that, I'm not sure. To be shown how to do it would help rather than read how to do it." (Pregnant mother, Edinburgh)

Others mentioned they had heard of the information resources but had forgotten their purpose and if they had used them. For a small number of families, literacy issues prevented them from engaging with written material, as discussed in Chapter Seven.

The Play@Home leaflet, which provides information about simple at-home play option, were used by some interviewees, although not many provided further detail.

Play, Talk, Read Bus

The Play, Talk, Read Bus, which provides home-learning activities at their travelling sites, was only used by a few parents. All who used the service lived outside of the city centres. This suggests resources like the Play, Talk, Read Bus may be more appealing in places where there are fewer regular resources for babies, children and parents. While most had not heard of the Play, Talk, Read Bus, one parent spoke about how much her son enjoyed it.



[The Play, Talk, Read bus had] all the sensitive sensory stuff; they had slime, and they had recipes, and they had books. He loved all of it. And then the workers were just doing songs and all that. He recognised it all from book clubs.” (Mother, Shetland)

This chapter explores gaps in participants' understanding of early learning and the barriers they face accessing the support, services, and activities which aid them in developing enhanced home learning environments.

Key findings

- Despite a range of initiatives and services across public, third, and community sectors in Scotland, many families living on low incomes are restricted in the extent to which they can engage with early learning opportunities due to gaps in support and barriers to access.
- Not all parents are aware of the links between how initiatives and services can support their child's development. This may make it more difficult for them to utilise these resources to enhance their home learning environments.
- There are missed opportunities to support parents to learn about the resources available to support enhanced learning, for example, during pregnancy or in the first year of a child's life.
- Participants highlighted needs for specific support groups, such as sessions for fathers and those expecting a baby; more locally available support and activities; more affordable and reliable travel options; free or cheaper community groups and children's activities; better advertising, awareness raising, and support to access services and community groups and activities; and increased funding to address service capacity issues, particularly those that have not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Gaps in knowledge and understanding

Parents clearly want to do their best to support their child's learning and development. However, for many, confidence can understandably fluctuate and be impacted by wider stressors such as financial worries, a range of domestic responsibilities, relationship difficulties and experiences of domestic violence, insecure housing, and mental health issues. Some explicit and implicit gaps in their knowledge and understanding of ways of developing enhanced home learning environments also emerged in interviews. For example, some parents described confusion about which toys and activities are age-appropriate or how to engage in playful, reciprocal interactions to promote language-rich environments.



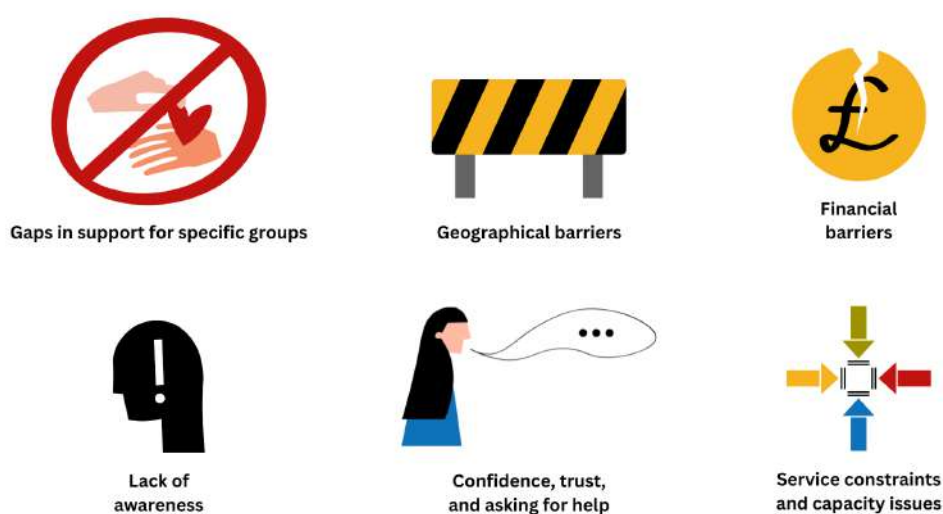
(The PEEP¹² group was) geared towards play and interaction with your child and that wasn't something I found easy... so the group was helpful.
(Mother, Edinburgh)

¹² Parents support group focusing on 'supporting parents and children to learn together' (www.peep.org.uk/about)

It is also unclear whether parents explicitly recognise the link between early learning and some of their daily activities with their children. Parents often talked about supporting their children to identify colours, numbers, words, sequences or shapes. They also spoke about responding and interacting with their child, although they less frequently described an understanding of why that is important for child development.

Gaps in and barriers to accessing support, services and activities

Most parents identified gaps in and barriers to accessing support, services and activities to help them develop an enhanced home learning environment. These are distilled into six themes:



Gaps in support for specific groups or at core times

The most prevalent theme was the gap in support for particular groups – such as those expecting a baby, fathers, families with children of multiple ages, older parents, or families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Most commonly, gaps in support during pregnancy were highlighted. Younger parents and first-time parents most frequently raised this, although this was also a concern for families with more than one child. Some described insufficient help with wider stressors such as housing, mental health, and isolation that affected their wellbeing or subsequent relationship with their children. Timely support with these stressors during pregnancy and post-birth is crucial, as it can make it more difficult for parents to attend to their child's learning and development.



I didn't know that it was normal not to love your child straight away. If I knew about services or we were referred (to the perinatal mental health team) earlier, I would have known that was normal, and I wouldn't have felt as guilty." (Mother, Edinburgh)

A lack of antenatal classes or inadequate help to prepare for caring for an infant was described. One participant advocated for education about baby care to be included in the school curriculum and enhanced in classes for those expecting a baby.

Parents told us that antenatal classes tended to focus on practical matters of child-rearing and not on learning and development. Incorporating ideas about how parents can enhance early home learning for infants into antenatal education may be beneficial. For instance, learning about bath time presents an opportunity to discuss how to incorporate scaffolding play or reciprocal serve-and-return interactions.

Further gaps in pregnancy support included a lack of accessible pregnancy information for parents and carers with low levels of literacy or English or not having the opportunity to discuss this content and ask questions. Some felt that fathers are inadequately supported, describing the lack of dad-focused activities and mental health, peer, and parenting support as detriments to fathers' wellbeing and confidence to play with their children. The parent below explained the difference a dedicated father's group made to his sense of ease when attending community groups.



My partner and I both suffered really badly with our mental health... we've had Social Work and I just felt like they didn't really see me... My partner ... had a mental health nurse, she referred herself to Home-Start, she got referred to Penumbra... I got told to contact my GP and that was it ." (Father, Dundee and Angus)

Further gaps in support for specific groups included support for older parents, parents with more than one child or older children. For instance, the challenges of finding family-orientated groups catering to the needs of children of different ages were raised as barriers to attendance. A small number of interviewees who moved to Scotland from other countries also mentioned the lack of culturally-specific support. One called for greater diversity in the health-visitor workforce. Another does not take their child to story groups because none are available in their home language.



These sensory classes and things ... they're all age-restricted, so because there's such a gap between them, it's quite hard to find something they can both do." (Mother, Fife)

Geographical and travel barriers

The second most common theme was geographical and travel barriers to accessing support to develop home learning environments. Participants from cities, towns, villages and rural areas all expressed concern about this.

Most of the comments on this theme highlighted a lack of age-appropriate groups and activities for children, peer support options, or antenatal classes in their local area. A small number of parents with older children felt that support had reduced in recent years. This is

of concern, given that parents stressed the value of these groups for learning about child development or gaining tips and ideas for activities to support this.

While participants across urban and rural areas highlighted a lack of options, this was most commonly raised by those living in towns. A few who lived in smaller or more rural places felt more restricted than city dwellers. One mother said that the cost of activities was higher in her town than in a nearby bigger city, limiting how often she could attend. Another highlighted the relative lack of choice and availability of activities.



If I lived in a city... you would have more choice, more days of the week... It's quite restrictive... They do football on a Monday, and the (kids) yoga class is on a Monday... you've got to decide what to do." (Mother, Renfrewshire)

There were calls for more locally available: parks, soft plays, outdoor activities, messy play, swimming classes, libraries, music and arts and crafts sessions, and parent and parenting services, such as mental health, peer support and weaning classes. Some said that these local facilities had closed in recent years; a few participants stressed that their local parks needed to be upgraded as they were unsuitable and unsafe for young children, or did not have enough green space.

Travelling resources could increase the accessibility of activities to support early learning—especially for those from less urban areas, for example, the PlayTalkRead Bus. Although not well known amongst participants, this service was appreciated by the few who had used it. As such, there may be value in extending its reach.

Travel barriers to accessing community groups, activities, and services to enhance home learning was a further theme highlighted by some. This was again an issue across both rural and urban areas. The cost, poor availability, and additional travel time associated with public transport were highlighted, particularly by those without access to a car.



Transport is another issue... if you really want to go out maybe apart from to our local park... you need to take the bus... which costs like £5.40... I only do it once in a while." (Mother, Glasgow)

Even among car drivers, fuel and running costs were described as prohibitive. One parent, whose partner uses a wheelchair, shared the difficulties in using the car to access activities. Another suggested that parents with low income should have the same entitlement to a bus card as children and those over 60 to prevent families from missing out.

Financial barriers

Cost as a barrier to developing an enhanced home learning environment was a recurring theme, highlighted by both single-parent and two-parent families. This was more frequently raised by families experiencing in-work poverty, although it was also a concern for those not in employment.

Parents said the cost of child-focused groups, activities, and resources were prohibitive or strained family finances, especially in the context of the cost-of-living crisis. They were less likely to be able to support their child to participate in baby yoga, music groups, gymnastics, football, messy play, dancing, sensory, and swimming classes. A small number explained

that the need to book classes or pay monthly fees upfront made these options less accessible to them than if payment was on a drop-in basis.

As outlined in Chapter Four, some interviewees described strategies for overcoming financial barriers to enable them to support their child's learning and development. They gave examples of researching and choosing cheaper or free activities, making their own toys, or saving money in other areas in order to afford classes or activities. Some used the Scottish Child Payment to cover the costs of activities outside the home, as discussed in Chapter Six. However, there were also calls to increase payment amounts or for free or cheaper community groups and children's activities to increase accessibility for those with low incomes or in more rural locations.



Offer it to parents who struggle or like a pay-as-you-go. A what you can afford design rather than a set price, and then some of these parents that do struggle could get along.” (Mother, Scottish Borders)

Lack of awareness of support, groups, and activities.

Another frequently mentioned theme was a lack of awareness of available or appropriate activities, support, and services to aid them with child learning and development; conversely, a small number of parents shared a sense of being overwhelmed by different options and not knowing which to choose from.

Parents told us they had not accessed support such as breastfeeding groups, peer support, parenting classes, antenatal classes, mental health support and benefits and housing entitlements because they were unaware of them. Others described not knowing about parent-and-child-focused community groups and age-appropriate activities for their child.

There were calls for better advertising and greater awareness raising by community groups or professionals. In particular, midwives and health visitors were felt to be in a good position to pass information on to parents. One mother shared the positive difference being informed of and supported to access services had made to her life.



Just being more aware of what entitlements you're entitled to... That took a lot of stress off me... One of the Health Visitors telling us about the benefits system, helping me sort that all out, took [away] that huge stress of 'oh my gosh, we're going to live on the streets'.” (Mother, Highland)

A few felt professionals should be proactive, not only in promoting available services and activities that support enhanced home learning but also in helping parents understand the benefits of and eligibility to access these - and their confidence to do so. Other suggestions for increasing parents' awareness of support, services and activities included promotional booklets, QR codes, and a “one-stop shop” for signposting. However, one participant cautioned against an over-reliance on social media to promote community groups and activities, explaining that these platforms are not used by all parents.



Years ago... the Sure Start programme... was a kind of a hub where there were health professionals, medical professionals... If services were within the one area, people would know exactly where to go, and it wouldn't be a guessing game or 'I can't go there because they'll think I'm silly because I'm not meant to be here'." (Carer, West of Scotland)

Confidence, trust and asking for help

Parents told us that community groups and peer support are important for providing children with play and socialisation experiences to aid their language, social, and emotional development and for giving parents ideas to support an enhanced home learning environment. However, some interviewees explained that low confidence leaves them hesitant to go to new groups or classes with their children. This view was commonly voiced by single parents, although parents across the age span raised this issue, and some in two-parent households. Their reasons included feeling anxious and lacking confidence in social situations, not knowing other attendees, their child being anxious around new people or in noisy settings, or worrying how their child's needs might impact others.

A small number said they found community groups unstructured, had not felt welcome, or had encountered cliques or judgement from other parents. Parents gave various reasons for feeling judged, including being a single parent, being a young parent, living on a low income, their parenting approach, and their child's developmental level.



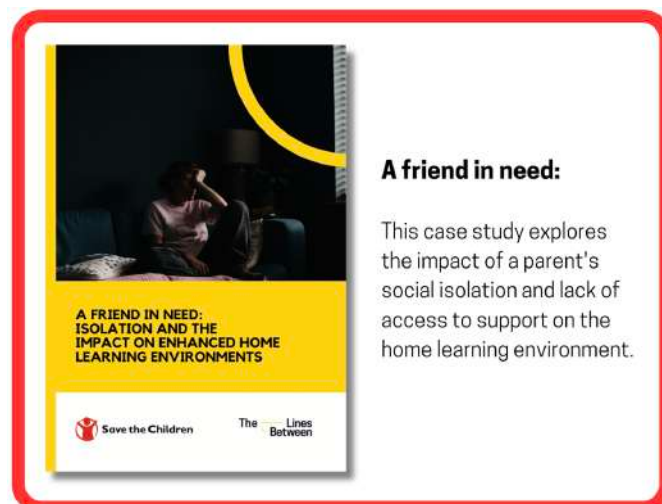
They look down at you... It's normally all the mums (who have) loads of money that can... dress [their kids up] in fancy clothes, and I can't afford any of that...so I distance myself from (those) groups... I felt like that since having my oldest because... I was 17... You get looked down on when you're pushing a baby, and you're looking like a baby yourself." (Mother, Aberdeenshire)

One parent explained that one-to-one support to access community groups had helped them build confidence to attend; another felt this type of support would be beneficial.



I got a support worker from [a third-sector organisation]... Before I met her, I was so anxious I wouldn't go out, do soft play or baby books... [My support worker] came with me... she knows what I'm going through because she was a lone parent... she understood where I was coming from." (Mother, Fife)

More generally, some parents said it can be hard to ask for help, both with their child's learning and development and meeting their own needs. Barriers included perceived expectations, fear of judgement, mental health stigma, not wanting to feel like a burden, not feeling "justified" in asking for support, and not trusting services such as social work. This highlights the importance of professionals being proactive in asking parents if they require help. It also emphasises the need for non-judgemental strengths-based support approaches that validate and build on what parents already do well.



Service constraints and capacity issues

Low service capacity and waiting lists were identified by some parents as barriers to accessing the relational and practical support they need to develop enhanced home learning environments. This was the least commonly identified gap, and parents in urban areas more frequently raised this concern, although some parents in villages also highlighted this.

Difficulties in accessing public services, including health visitors, midwives, speech and language therapists, community development workers and mental health care, were recounted by some parents. Within these conversations, parents commented on a decline in the availability of these types of support and services.

Service constraints were also highlighted as impacting the accessibility of peer and parenting support and community classes and activities such as swimming lessons and Bookbug. For a small number, timings, cancellations, or holiday closures meant they could not attend, while others highlighted the demand for services exceeding their capacity.

Increased funding to public and third sector services is vital to address these capacity issues and so these can better aid families living on low incomes to support their child's early learning. As the carer below suggests, this may prevent the need for costly future interventions.

Specific to parents who had children in the last three years, a further recurring theme was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, including social distancing measures and a lack of face-to-face options, on parents' ability to support early learning. Some explained they could not access pregnancy-related support such as antenatal groups, as discussed in Chapter Five. Others described finding parenting, peer, and mental health support harder to access. The reduction in activities and groups, such as mother and baby groups and classes, early years places, Bookbug sessions, and swimming, was also raised.



He was six months when I attempted suicide. I got taken to A&E, and they basically just kicked me out after a few hours. I didn't have any support... I just had phone calls from psychiatrists every six months... I guess it's not really anyone's fault; we were all in lockdown." (Mother, Dundee and Angus).

A small number of parents shared concerns about the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their child's development, speech and language skills, and socialisation, noting the lasting implications of this on the availability and accessibility of services. For example, some felt that services and support had not been reinstated to pre-Covid levels. Others described changes like having to phone ahead to book a slot to attend classes, such as Bookbug, as a continuing access barrier.



I think because everything was closed down for that length of time, things just haven't opened back up... if people within education and health services actually spoke to parents and educators within local areas and listened to what they need, they would find that there's a huge gap in what should be being delivered." (Carer, North Lanarkshire)

This report presents the experiences of 50 parents with children under three with low income levels. The findings provide a robust evidence base for Save The Children, policymakers and other stakeholders to draw on when determining how to support parents to create enhanced home learning environments and narrow the poverty-related attainment gap.

Core Question One: what do parents living on low incomes in Scotland need and consider to be the best way to support them to create positive home learning environments in early childhood (pre-birth to age three)?

Overall, parents expressed a clear desire to support their children's learning and development; there is much to build on. They need access to knowledge and advice, ideas, peer support, safe spaces outside the home, and respite to enhance the home learning environment. Some require tailored interventions to address issues such as mental illness or isolation or to connect with other parents with similar experiences.

The evidence points to gaps in some parents' understanding and awareness of the components of an enhanced learning environment, which indicates that building parents' knowledge will help them to support their children's learning and development. For example, some parents focused on the role of activities and toys in development rather than serve and return interactions or thought that independent play was important, unaware of the role of parental scaffolding in supporting development. A lack of confidence and material poverty meant that others felt they had little to offer their children, not appreciating their inherent capacity to nurture, attune, reciprocate, and support learning. Most parents expressed confidence in their ability to support their child's development; this confidence may prevent them from seeking out knowledge, so proactive strategies by stakeholders are required.

Parents turn to varied sources of information, mainly family, peers and social media, and finding effective channels to enhance parents' understanding of the core components of learning and development is a crucial next step for policymakers. Information provided by trusted, experienced individuals has the most impact and is highly valued by parents; strengthening the availability and capacity of services that engage with families would positively impact parents who need the most support. These trusted professionals provide support, guidance and reassurance; for example, many young parents described learning about child development from family nurse practitioners. Health visitors, family nurses, mental health support, and midwives contributed to a better understanding of how to support learning and development. The value of this was stressed by parents, who particularly valued input that was non-judgemental and encouraging, which highlighted their strengths, and understood the challenges they faced.

Parents described self-directed learning and peer learning as helpful, but the research identified potential risks; some advice parents receive from peers, social media, or family

members is inaccurate and outdated. While parents value social media as an easy way to find ideas and information, some convey a strong sense of pressure to adopt strategies advocated by influencers or buy the toys and items they sell. Consideration of effective ways to engage with families and the importance of accurate advice and information will be important in any strategy to communicate with parents and support their understanding of the important features that make up an enhanced home learning environment.

Feedback from parents on the role of third-sector community groups and local services as a source of advice, ideas, respite, support and encouragement demonstrates the importance of this type of support in developing enhanced home learning environments. Those who have accessed community groups and local services described how these positively shaped their ideas, built their peer networks, extended their capacity and informed elements of interactions with their children. However, there was variation in the extent to which parents had used local services, sometimes linked to availability, distance or other barriers.

Mapping service availability and uptake could provide a greater understanding of which parents are and are not accessing the benefits of engagement with third-sector community groups and local services to inform the development of a strategy to boost community-based resources. This mapping could extend to the provision of local facilities such as parks and green spaces, some of which parents told us have become unsuitable and unsafe for young children in recent years. Safe and inviting community spaces are another important learning environment for children, and time outdoors is a valued part of the daily routine for many families with young children.

Third-sector community groups and local services support parents to access resources they are entitled to, like the Best Start Grants or access to mental health support, as statutory services are often oversubscribed. Those without peer support, who had not accessed third-sector community groups and local services, shared how difficult, exhausting and isolating they found parenting to be. They described their fears about the quality of learning and development support they could offer. The examples of parents who went on to create groups demonstrate the extent to which families value these; increased funding and provision of these services and assistance to raise awareness of local networks would also help families develop enhanced home learning environments.

On the need for tailored support, we highlight the finding that some families experience particular or intersectional challenges, for example, single parents and families experiencing in-work poverty. There are risks of parental burnout for this group and others. Similarly, parents of babies under 12 months who have no older children were less likely to mention social activities with their babies in their daily routine; this group may be more susceptible to isolation. Families with multiple children described being stretched too thin, feeling that they cannot dedicate enough time to their youngest children's learning and development; there is scope to build approaches that recognise older children's contribution to siblings' learning and development.

Timing is an important consideration for policymakers; more engagement with families during pregnancy could boost parents' knowledge of the building blocks that enhance the home learning environment, allow support services to identify and respond to any specific needs, and help parents prepare for their relationship with their child. This would require more significant resourcing of agencies that provide antenatal and post-natal support to

enhance the capacity of services to work with parents. Overall, parents described a lack of capacity in services, and some talked of the ongoing legacy of the lack of support during pregnancy and gaps in the services they could access during the pandemic.

Core Question Two: To what extent is the combination of existing Scottish Government initiatives and policies supporting parents on lower incomes in Scotland to create enhanced home learning environments in early childhood (pre-birth to age three)?

High levels of uptake are evident for the Baby Box, Bookbug, and *Ready, Steady, Baby!*, but some resources are used very little, and overall, there are gaps in parents' awareness of how the resources can be used to enhance the home learning environment. Supporting parents to understand what well-used resources such as Baby Box and Bookbug are for and how they can benefit children, for example, through information and guidance by trusted professionals, will increase the reach and impact of these resources.

Consideration of how to increase the reach and impact of lesser-used resources might include mapping to identify whether they effectively reach groups that face specific access barriers, for example, those in rural areas. If not, the findings give grounds for considering whether this investment could be diverted to other forms of support that are known to be valued and used by parents, such as local third-sector organisations that support families.

The use of the Scottish Child Payment by families to support the home learning environment is evidenced by this research and should be considered in any evaluation of the efficacy of these policy measures. Parents would also strongly support increasing financial support for struggling families. Better public transport networks and subsidised fares for parents living on low incomes would help parents access resources and activities, a particular consideration for those who face transport barriers, for example, families in rural areas. Increasing the reach of mobile resources such as PlayTalkRead vehicles is another way to enhance the accessibility of support. Parents said access to free activities is essential, and greater provision and promotion of free resources, for example, baby classes and groups, will widen access.

Finally, parents also told us they need policymakers to address the systemic issues such as poverty, inflexible working arrangements, poor rates of pay, lack of affordable childcare and housing instability that affect the home environment, exhaust and preoccupy parents, and restrict the time they can spend with their children.



DAY IN, DAY OUT: THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL EXHAUSTION AND STRESS ON THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT



Save the Children

The  **Lines
Between**

This case study is based on an interview with Amelia, a 26-year-old mother. She lives in a village with two daughters, aged 4 and 10-months old, and her husband. We explore how work, finances and fatigue have reduced Amelia's capacity to interact with her children.

Loss of career and wages

After her first child was born, Amelia was unable to keep her job. Her employer, who had promised flexible hours, did not honour this once she returned from maternity leave. It was impossible for her work and be available to collect her daughter from nursery.

Amelia emphasises that the home learning environment would be far better if she had been able to keep her job. With childcare, the couple's working patterns would have aligned, enabling the family to spend time together, and for each parent to get some rest. The loss of income was significant, and Amelia took on evening work at a local shop. She cares for one or both daughters during the day, puts them to bed, then leaves for work once her husband is home. This level of activity is exhausting.

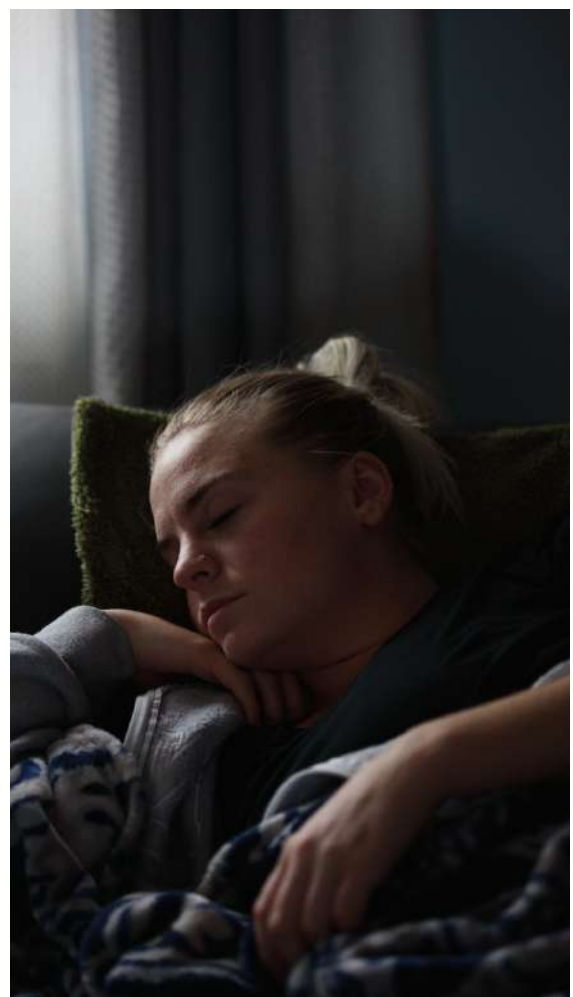
"It is difficult and trying to juggle work just now that I'm exhausted all the time."

The family's situation will not change until her younger child can qualify for funded hours and attend the local nursery.

No family to depend on

Amelia lives far from any family. She has a friend who will look after the children in an emergency, but otherwise the couple juggle everything around their work schedules.

She describes a good relationship with a health visitor who provided guidance during the difficult stages of early childrearing, and the value of a peer support network that focuses on maternal mental health. In Amelia's town there is little provision for parents, babies and children. She described having to drive long distances to access playgroups and peer groups, which adds to her exhaustion and sense of isolation.



No sleep and limited patience

Amelia follows social media influencers who advocate for ‘gentle parenting’. She believes in the value of patience and listening and validating children’s feelings, things she did not experience as a child, and stresses the importance of speaking to children, getting on the floor with them and playing. While she tries to do responsive parenting, she is tired on the days after evening shifts and finds it difficult to sustain.

“Working till 10 o’clock at night and then by the time you get home.... Like last night I was still up at half past 12. And then when you’ve got two kids to get up and out the door, you know, it’s just, yeah, it is a lot... When you’re tired, you know, your patience kind of wears thin and you just don’t have the brain capacity for any nonsense almost.”

Too many competing responsibilities

Staying on top of everything is difficult, and Amelia described the necessity of doing housework when she would prefer to be interacting with her children. She tries to do chores while her children nap, but there are days when she does not have the energy.

“When they’re napping, I’ll do the jobs I was wanting to do. But then some days you’re just so tired that you can’t even do it. So then you find like during the awake window when you normally like to sit and play with them or have snack or whatever; that’s when you’re like “okay, you have your snack and mommy’s going to do this”.

Conclusion

Inflexible work, low income, a lack of family support and a shortage of affordable childcare intersect to create a situation where Amelia is exhausted. She understands the importance of an enhanced home learning environment. However, due to full days at home and evenings at work, she is too exhausted to always provide the type of interactions she knows are important. She described a sense of burnout, juggling too much and limited support.

Amelia advocated for the provision of resources for families closer to her home, such as creches and baby and toddler groups. She said they would provide some respite, help exhausted parents find companionship, and provide opportunities to learn new techniques to energise and enhance home learning environments. Amelia also called for increases to Universal Credit and Scottish Child Payment, flexible working arrangements for parents, and less expensive childcare.



A GOOD INFLUENCE? WHERE PARENTS GO FOR ADVICE AND SUPPORT TO ENHANCE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS



Save the Children

The  **Lines
Between**

This case study is based on focused ethnographic fieldwork with Hannah, a 26-year-old single mother, who has a 7-month-old son. We look at Hannah's experiences of sourcing information about different elements of home learning, including the concerns about toys and the importance of outdoor spaces for families who do not have access to garden space.

I follow quite a lot of mums on [TikTok], and even now like a lot of people do things different. I suppose every baby is different, but you just never know what's right and what's wrong. I do google a lot as well. I do a lot of research now it's coming into weaning time, so now I've got to think of recipes that are like obviously cow's milk free and stuff like that. Social media is a big thing, but then it's also not so great because it compares you a lot to it which is'nae great."

Trusted advisors and access to information

As Hannah spoke about parenting, including how she plays with her son and her weaning journey, she described her search for information online. They live in an inner-city flat, with broken lifts. She loves to take him outside and appreciates living beside a large green park which provides a safe, outdoor space. The baby's mood improves as he watches and takes in the world around him, she says. Hannah notes that it is beneficial for his sensory development to be outside, something she learned from TikTok.

But because I'm in a flat...I've not got any [private] outdoor space, so I do try and push myself to get him out, get the fresh air and he does sleep better so it's a win-win but it is a lot of hassle to get out."

Hannah's mother and sister do not live nearby, but she speaks to them regularly about her son. She notes that they seem out of touch with current guidance, for example suggesting that she give him juice, which is not recommended by the NHS. Her health visitor and nursery nurse are good at answering questions, and they have mentioned social media accounts that can help with things like weaning.



Learning through social media

But I think because I'm a first-time mum as well it's like what do you do? What toys can you buy? What is suitable for his age? I do Google a lot of ideas. Like a tray, fill it with water, get some balls in it but he does'nae really like tummy time. So it's difficult, I just kind of go by him and just kind of what he wants to do."

In speaking about the home learning environment, Hannah mentions that she has started providing her son with only a few toys at a time. She keeps the rest of his toys in a box, exchanging toys every week or so. Hannah was pleased to notice that her son was curious about toys he had not shown interest in before, as if seeing them for the first time. Hannah refers to this as 'toy rotation', a practice she encountered on TikTok.

Hannah discovered the idea of toy rotation through a TikTok video created by a paediatric physical therapist from the United States, @baby_development_coach. In his video, he suggests that rotating toys – the process of limiting your child's access to four or five toys at a time and swapped every week or so – increases your child's attention span, improves problem-solving and creative skills, and makes toys last longer. He offers recommendations such as ensuring the toys in each rotation offer different developmental potentials and he created an Amazon list of toys that he believes are developmentally beneficial.

Tik-tok vs ParentClub Scotland – a more accessible medium

Hannah likes how relatable the people presenting and speaking in TikTok videos can be, whether it is a mother discussing giving medicines through a bottle teat or an NHS midwife showing how to put a nappy on a baby boy. She prefers this to traditional formats of presenting advice and information. For example, toy rotation is also discussed in the ParentClub Scotland article 'Helping your toddler develop through play', but Hannah does not use the website. Unlike the detailed two-minute-long TikTok video, the article provides a short, brief written description.



Considerations for families who cannot regularly afford new toys

Hannah highlighted the importance of understanding how low-cost items can be used to support child development; a particular stress, given her limited financial resources.

Toys are expensive as well. They're not cheap. They are extremely expensive. Like I bought balloons, a pound packet of balloons and he loves them. I do try and kind of like research cheaper options like who knew balloons...tie a bit of string to their feet and ideas like that are good and they're cheap as well which is good. But the toys are extremely dear. They're really dear. But I do instead of buying it, I'll research different shops price comparison before I'll just go and buy it which definitely helps. It does save a bit but they are dear that is for sure."

Her nursery nurse also provided some ideas of low-cost alternatives, such as cleaning out a yogurt package and adding rice to create a shaker or using ribbons for sensory play.

So the nursery nurse [gave me] a bag and it was things that are in your house so it was like a yogurt, a drinkable yogurt, and she just washed it out and put like pasta and rice in it and then that was kind of like a rattle. So I had yogurts there so I just gave it a wash out and I put pasta in it and I put rice in the other one. Just kind of material stuff, like he loves stuff over his face so like ribbons, so he's getting the different textures. He did sit and after that he slept for ages because I was like sitting playing with him, it obviously tired him out."

However, Hannah notes that social media showcases expensive toys and markets toy subscription services as well. The toys appeal to parents. She mentions seeing a ball pit on TikTok, researching and eventually buying one for her son.

I have seen a ball thing and it was £17 and I'm like oh god because of the amount of time he'll play with it. Can I really justify that?"



Different approaches to weaning

Hannah has used a range of approaches to learn about weaning. While she depends on her nursery nurse and health visitor to provide advice, in between visits, she goes to social media for information. This has caused her to question her previous attempts at weaning with purees. In a first attempt at baby-led weaning, she tried her mother's suggestion and bought high-quality beef mince, but her son refused to eat any. Cost in the weaning process is a consideration and can be exacerbated by social media influencers who push certain types of weaning and certain types of ingredients.

Hannah explained that she uses hashtags on TikTok to find content. Using the hashtag #babyledweaning brings up pages with over 4.4 billion views. Information can include quasi-medical information such as guidance on 'gagging vs. choking' and videos claiming developmental 'truths' about baby-led weaning. Whether these videos offer helpful information, the lack of oversight and the ability for anyone to post means that users must be careful when using and learning about child rearing through the mass of information available.



Social pressure and a sense of failure

Images from homes where babies have every available toy or parents appear to have boundless time and energy to play and encourage development cause Hannah to feel guilty about not buying her son enough or not playing with him enough. Hannah mentions that she has stopped following accounts that 'pull her down'. She acknowledges that these parent-influencers hide realities, but it still affects her wellbeing and confidence in her parenting.

Hannah described the impact of other corrosive ideas, such as the pervasive positivism that parents should enjoy every minute as kids grow quickly. She says felt reassured by having heard that a sense of guilt (#momguilt) at the end of the day is a sign of how much you care for your child. She says the video suggested that it would be worse not to feel guilt.

Conclusion

Social media promotes specific ways of living and being. For Hannah, this had the positive effect of providing her with ideas and information, which she finds more accessible than traditional parental teaching and support channels, such as ParentClub. She believes TikTok is a good medium because it uses 5-minute videos, which are low commitment and easily accessible on your phone. Through it she has understood the importance of being outside, even if her living situations make it difficult to get out, and different strategies to engage with her son.

However, critical thinking is required to weed through the advice and guidance, and parents need self-confidence to ignore the social pressure created by influencers who present the 'best' version of parenting. Often, this advice comes with an added source of financial pressure, as it comes with affiliate links to age-appropriate toys or baby gear.

Consideration of using different types of tools to connect with parents, especially younger parents, or those without access to informed advisors, should be a priority for the toolkits created by the Scottish Government and the NHS. Real people providing relatable and easily accessible posts and videos, or signposting trusted sources of guidance, may be more effective at reaching and engaging with parents who are short on time and concentration and those without strong informal support networks.



Save the Children

The Lines Between



A FRIEND IN NEED: ISOLATION AND THE IMPACT ON ENHANCED HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

This case study is based on focused ethnographic fieldwork with Hazel, a 32-year-old single mother of a 20-month-old daughter. We focus on Hazel's isolation, low confidence, and views on what she can provide for her daughter's learning and development. Hazel has three children; her first was born when she was 20. There is a significant age gap between her oldest and youngest child. The older children are in kinship care with Hazel's mother. Hazel lives alone with her youngest. She is unemployed and studying for a degree through the Open University.

Uprooted

Hazel has moved frequently. She lived in a small hamlet with her partner when her youngest was born. They were forced to leave that home and relocate to a nearby town when her daughter was still a baby. Very recently, she left the father of her youngest to escape a situation of domestic violence. Hazel stayed with a relative in a new part of Scotland until emergency housing was established. She then moved to her current flat in yet another new town. Her daughter, who is only 20 months old, has lived in 4 homes.

The trauma and upheaval of leaving an unsafe relationship have affected Hazel's confidence and self-esteem. She left her partner to ensure she and her daughter could be safe, but this has caused disruption, homelessness, and deeper poverty. She wonders if it would have been better for her daughter if they had stayed with the father. The emergency social housing

accommodation had no white goods, no furniture, and they existed on the bare minimum until receiving hardship funding. Hazel found herself in a new town, sleeping on the floor and without equipment to cook meals for her daughter, with no one to help her.

"If you'd asked me [if I was confident in parenting] about six months ago, I would have told you yes. But not now. I feel like I've let her down."

She feels she can no longer keep her baby happy or entertained. Her baby has few toys, and Hazel lacks the equipment to prepare home-cooked meals.

"Well, actually I can count and then place my hands on what we've got here... I left with just a bag of clothes and some things for [my daughter] and I thought we would have been sorted by now...I can count on my hand what [my daughter] has got, some toys, she's got clean clothes, things like that, but there's nothing in here to kind of occupy or [play] like I used to be able to do [with her]."



Sense of isolation

Our research has shown the value of peer networks in providing parents with ideas about developing an enhanced home learning environment, emotional support and encouragement, and opportunities for shared play and the use of community spaces and resources. Hazel feels a lack of community acutely and experiences social anxiety. She questions herself and wonders if she is a good mother.

It's just been difficult what I've had to kind of endure because you get to this point of being, because if it's been nearly a month of this going on, so, and like there's no support or anything and I just feel like my head's kind of hitting a brick wall sometimes."

Hazel's daughter was recently unwell. The nearest out-of-hours clinic at the hospital was over 45 minutes on the bus. Fortunately, it was a stomach bug, but by the time they left it was the middle of the night and no inpatient care was offered. Hazel felt she needed help, but she had nowhere to turn. Health professionals ignored her concerns about a late-night hospital trip as a single-parent household without a car and with no family or friend support. This experience stressed and frightened Hazel; she believed the journey prolonged her daughter's ill health and, by extension, impacted her development and learning opportunities.

Previous experiences of effective support

In the town where Hazel previously lived, Home-Start worked with Hazel one-to-one. With their support, she also participated in events, classes, and programmes for new mothers, which helped her build a network and sense of community. She described her support worker as a mother figure who offered companionship, encouragement, experience, and advice. Without a supportive family nearby or other friends with children, she could not gauge if she was a good parent. Home-Start provided the reassurance and emotional support that Hazel needed to be confident in her parenting skills and use resources for parents and babies.

Hazel shared examples of the gentle forms of encouragement her support worker provided. She recounted joining a WhatsApp group for parents supported by a third sector organisation. If an event was being held, and she said she was going, she became uncomfortable when other mothers would say they could not, thinking they did not want to spend time with her. Before she backed out, she would message her support worker, who would help her overcome those defensive thoughts and manage her social anxiety.

“When you grow up with friends, you just have kids together, and then you stay in the same social circle, but you're not from there and things like that, it makes me feel quite unwelcome. So that was why I kind of gave up with baby groups. And then Home-start came along and that was a totally different experience.”

Feeling unwelcomed by other parents and searching for community

Hazel has attempted to join groups for her daughter in her new town but felt a lack of acceptance. She loves swimming and signed her up for a class but regretted it. All the families who attended were two-parent households. The fathers were in the water with the children, and the mothers sat and watched. They chatted to each other during the lesson and helped children get out of the pool. No one spoke with her or her daughter. The instructor did not facilitate interaction between parents or children, which made her more anxious. She found herself narrating the situation to her daughter as a comfort, but worried that her daughter may feel her anxieties. She said she would not go to the class again.

Hazel has started attending a local church. She said they do not seem to mind her daughter playing or breastfeeding. People are kind and have offered to help with some toys and home goods. She mentions that she is

not particularly religious, but she goes every Sunday as it helps with her sense of isolation.

“We do attend church, that's on the basis...that sounds awful, but that was on the basis of community.”



Conclusion

Hazel and her daughter have moved over four times in the 20 months since her daughter was born. A lack of community, traumatic experiences and recent disruption have affected her confidence in her parenting abilities. She feels an acute sense of poverty and isolation, and is not confident that she is supporting her daughter's learning and development; she does not feel she has much to offer her baby. This suggests that Hazel is not fully aware of the features of an enhanced home learning environment, which do not require specific toys, activities, or experiences.

In previous homes, Hazel accessed third-sector support from staff who effectively supported her to build support networks and provided reassurance and encouragement. Feeling alone in her new community, she has low confidence and self-esteem, which have affected her attempts to join groups, and exacerbated her social anxiety. Access to one-to-one support and welcoming peer groups would help Hazel to grow in confidence, develop a fuller understanding of the features of an enhanced home learning environment, provide access to resources, and by extension, support her daughter to receive the type of care Hazel is capable of providing.





MISSED OPPORTUNITIES: THE IMPACTS OF PARENTAL MENTAL HEALTH ON RESPONSIVENESS TO THEIR CHILD'S NEEDS



Save the Children

The  Lines
Between

This case study is based on interviews with two parents who were diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) before their children were born: Hannah, a 26-year-old single mother with a 7-month-old son, and Claire, a 23-year-old single mother of a 3-month-old. We explore their views on how OCD affected their first months with their babies, the importance of access to perinatal mental health services, and what this means for an enhanced home learning environment.

Homelessness and a lack of support

Claire said pregnancy affected her mental health. During this time, she was made homeless. She moved into a homeless hostel, and while there was support with accommodation and pregnancy, she said there was little support for mental health. Claire was diagnosed with OCD as a child, but while pregnant, it became clear she also had antenatal depression. Each midwife she met was different, and a referral to the perinatal mental health team did not happen until after her child's birth.

She spent time in hospital after her child's birth due to his health and her own. At this point, she was referred to the perinatal mental health team. She noted that she struggled with bonding with her baby and believes the guilt and shame she felt at the lack of immediate love for her child would have been assisted with earlier mental health intervention. Since she has been referred, she has only met with the team once.

An early end to effective care

Hannah has received support from the perinatal mental health team since the birth of her son. Before her pregnancy, she had been waiting for NHS mental health support for four years. When support from the perinatal mental health team ends, she is unsure if she will lose all support, be transferred, or return to a waiting list. She feels her OCD has improved since being in therapy, and worries losing it would set her back.



Mental health impacts on the home learning environment

Claire and Hannah described difficulties managing their OCD when interacting with their children.

Hannah, who explained that she had contamination OCD, felt most comfortable at home.

I've got OCD and the thought of going out, like I feel safe in here, so the thought of going out definitely that is the main thing why I struggle to get out is because of that."

In public spaces, she worries about the buggy tyres getting dirty, as well as her son playing in local playparks. She described fears about attending classes, her son touching things in public, or her response to when he starts nursery. This limits the extent to which she encourages him to experience and explore social situations and new sensory environments, all important features in developing gross motor skills. It will also impact her return to work, putting greater financial pressure on her.

"I dinnae really go out unless I need to is the main thing, but yeah we're slowly trying to...that's something I'm working on with the psychologists is trying to kind of work on ways to get out more because I'm in a flat.... I'm going out a lot more than what I was which is a huge help but I do...trying to like plan things...if I've not got any plans I just dinnae go out. So I think planning it, planning my day helps definitely, yeah, I'm slowly getting there and it's definitely a work in progress. Small steps are still steps, I guess."

Hannah said she cannot control her emotional retreat when she feels triggered. While she says she 'has just gotten on with things' for most of her life, she wants to work with a psychologist to control her OCD for her son. She does not want him to experience her mood shifts or feel her shut down when she feels overcome.



In contrast, Claire finds staying at home is most stressful. At home, she sees things that she needs to do, and once she starts doing something, finds it very difficult to stop, even if her child needs her.

“I do actually have quite severe OCD, I was diagnosed when I was eight and when I’m at home which is probably part of the reason why we go out every day as well, I tend to want to just focus on the stuff that needs doing in the house rather than like playing with him. So there’s quite a lot of occasions where I will kind of leave him to have a bit of independent play and then if I’ve started something I have to finish it so if he starts crying sometimes, I’m kind of like no I need to finish this before I see to him. I would say my OCD definitely gets in the way of spending more time with him at home and stuff.”

She mentioned that she finds attending groups difficult. While she feels that getting out of her house is necessary, joining new classes can be intimidating. She feels isolated and lonely, often spending time in parks alone with her baby.

“There’s definitely a lot of places, classes I’d like to go to with him but it’s just anxiety and confidence really.”

Conclusion

Hannah and Claire described how OCD affects how they engage with their babies and the types of activities and interactions they have with their babies. Developing peer support networks—described as a crucial form of support by many parents who participated in this research—is difficult for both mothers.

Greater availability of support for antenatal and postnatal mental health is needed, beyond a child’s first year of life, especially for those with intersecting needs, such as single parents, young parents and parents on low incomes.



APPENDIX E

Scotland's Baby Box

Scotland's Baby Box is a resource provided by the Scottish Government. It includes a box and a number of items to assist parents in creating a safe environment for their new baby. The box provides a safe place for a baby to sleep and arrives with the following items:

- ☐ a mattress with fitted sheet and blanket
- ☐ clothes for new-borns to babies aged six months
- ☐ a bath towel
- ☐ a travel changing mat
- ☐ muslin cloth squares and a bib
- ☐ books, with a poem written by Jackie Kay
- ☐ a digital underarm thermometer and a bath and room thermometer
- ☐ reusable nappy voucher
- ☐ baby wrap
- ☐ play mat
- ☐ emery boards
- ☐ a teething ring
- ☐ comforter toy
- ☐ Childsmile toothbrush
- ☐ Royal Scottish National Orchestra Astar App and
- ☐ a pack of disposable nursing pads, a pack of maternity towels and a pack of condoms

Best Start Grants and Best Start Food Grants

Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods are payments that help towards the costs associated with being pregnant or having a child. They are part of the five family payments provided by Social Security Scotland, along with Scottish Child Payment.

Scottish Child Payment

Scottish Child Payment is a means-tested weekly payment of £25 for every child under 16 years of age to assist with child-related costs.

Ready, Steady, Baby! (NHS)

It is a guide created by NHS Scotland with information about pregnancy, labour, and early childhood. It is available as printed booklets, digital booklets, and an online resource.

Play@Home

Adopted by the Scottish Government in 2008, Play@Home is based upon a programme for babies and preschool children originating in New Zealand. In Scotland, three books are provided to parents through their midwife and provide information about child

development and building strong family bonds. The three books cover the following ages: baby, toddler, and pre-schooler.

ParentClub

ParentClub is an online resource for parents, carers, and soon-to-be parents. It includes a range of guidance from information about milestones and development to assistance with education and ideas to help manage commonly encountered parenting issues.

PlayTalkRead Bus

It is an educational roadshow comprising three vehicles which visit all 32 local authorities annually. It is part of the support package provided through the Scottish Government's ParentClub to promote positive parenting

Off to a Good Start

Off to a Good Start is a resource midwives provide to pregnant people to assist with breastfeeding.

Bookbug

Organised by the Scottish Book Trust, Bookbug is an early years, book gifting programme supplemented by online or at-home and in-person library events. It also includes an app. The goal of Bookbug is to encourage parents to share stories and spend time with their babies and children.

APPENDIX F

Background

We are interested to hear about you, your baby or child and your life.

I've got a few profile questions to begin with:

1. How many children do you have?
2. Can I ask how old you were when you had your child/first child?
3. How old is your child?
4. Does anyone else live in your house?
 - a. Confirm if another parent is involved.
 - b. Do you have support from family or friends who live nearby?
5. Can I confirm some other details about you:
 - a. What is the first half of your postcode?
 - b. Do you live in a city, town, village or the countryside?
 - c. What is your relationship to your child (i.e. mother, father, grandparent)?
 - d. Do you or anyone in your household employed?
 - e. Do you need or use childcare? If so, can you explain what types?
 - f. Ethnic group:
 - g. Does anyone in your household have a disability:

Learning environment

We are interested in learning about the tools and resources you use to play with your baby or make your days more exciting.

6. Can you tell me about your typical daily routine with your baby/child?
7. Do you spend time with them at home? If so, can you explain what you usually do with your baby/child while you spend time with them at home? (e.g., play, chat, talk, read, specific toys, online resources like baby yoga or Bookbug videos)
8. Do you attend any activities or events outside your home with your baby/child?
 - a. If so, which ones?
 - b. How often?
 - c. What do you like about them? How do they help you or your baby/child, if at all?
 - d. Are there any activities you would like to attend but don't or can't?
 - e. Are there any reasons you don't attend activities or events?
 - f. Does your child attend any childcare settings? If so, are you aware of the SG scheme to fund early learning and childcare for qualifying families with children of 2?

9. Do you have favourite things to do with your baby/child? Does your baby/child have favourite things?
 - a. If so, what are they?
 - b. What do you like about these activities?
 - c. Do they help you or your baby/child?
 - d. Are there things you would like to do that you find you aren't able to? Can you explain why?
10. Are there any challenges that prevent you from spending as much time playing with your child as you would like? (e.g. lack of time, housework responsibilities, work/career/study responsibilities, caring for other children/family members, lack of confidence playing with child)
 - a. What would help?

Confidence, skills and knowledge

We are interested to learn more about your confidence as a parent, such as previous experience with babies and children or skills and knowledge you have gained since becoming a parent.

11. Did you have any experience with babies and children before becoming a parent?
 - a. If so, what type of experience (e.g. working in early years settings, younger siblings/nieces/nephews, babysitting)?
 - b. Did you read any books, leaflets or online information about parenting while pregnant? If yes, how did you find this? How helpful was it, if at all?
 - c. Did you ask for any other support while pregnant? If yes, what?
 - d. Did you attend any antenatal classes or community services?
12. (As a mum/dad/carer), how would you describe your role in helping your child grow, play and learn?
 - a. What or who has influenced your understanding of a parent's role in supporting their child's learning and development?
13. How would you describe your understanding of what a child needs to play, learn, grow or develop?
 - a. Do you feel able to influence and support your baby or child as they learn and grow?
 - b. Have you used any support or services to help learn more about how babies and children learn, grow or develop? If so, what? How, if at all, did it help?
14. How would you describe your confidence in helping your child to learn and develop?
 - a. Has anyone given you any support or information to help develop your confidence? If so, who? What support did they give you? How, if at all, did it help?

Awareness and use of services

The SG and other local organisations and charities provide resources and tools to help parents of young children, either financially or through programmes in the community. We are interested to learn more about your awareness of the services and, if you use them, your experiences using them.

15. We are going to list some services. Please let me know if you've heard of them. *(The interviewer will review each item on the list and ask if the interviewee has heard of them. If they have, the interviewer will ask if they use them and, if so, how they use them, what they like about them, if there was anything that made it difficult for them to use them, what could be improved and how, if at all, they have helped to create a home learning environment).*
- a. Baby Box *(The interviewer will clarify if items in the baby box were explained or modelled by the health visitor or midwife.)*
 - b. Best Start Grants
 - c. Best Start Food Grants
 - d. Scottish Child Payment
 - e. Parent Club
 - f. Play@home booklets/leaflets/online resources
 - g. Off to a Good Start
 - h. Ready Steady Baby *(The interviewer will clarify if items in the baby box were explained or modelled by the health visitor or midwife.)*
 - i. Bookbug book gifting *(interviewer will clarify if items in the baby box were explained or modelled by the health visitor)*
 - j. Bookbug at home
 - k. Bookbug in library
 - l. Bookbug online resources
 - m. Play Read Talk bus or materials
 - n. Peer support (including formal and informal parent-baby/toddler groups, breastfeeding peer support, and sling library)
 - o. Maternal and infant mental health support
16. Do you have much contact with your health visitor? If so:
- a. Have they spoken with you about child development or mentioned any community services available?
 - b. Could they provide other support? If so, what?
 - c. Have you felt confident speaking with them or asking for help?
 - d. Could anything be improved? If so, what?
 - e. Have you had the same health visitor since your child's birth? If not, how many different health visitors have you seen?
17. Were any other parenting support services, such as Home-start, breastfeeding clinics, helplines, first aid courses, and weaning courses, available to you? If yes:
- a. Did you use these services? If so, which? If not, why not?
 - b. What do you like about these?
 - c. Could anything be improved? If so, what?
 - d. Have they helped you? If so, how?

18. Has the information or support you have received impacted your relationship with your child? This could include how you see yourself as a parent, your wellbeing, and your child's.
 - a. If so, can you explain how?
 - b. Has it had an impact on the way you parent? If so, how?
19. Have you used the information or support you've received to help your child play, learn or develop at home?
 - a. If so, can you explain how?

Gaps and barriers

We are interested to learn from you about any gaps and barriers in the services, tools and programmes offered to help you as a parent and help your baby develop.

20. Is there any other support, information or help that you wish you had been able to access?
 - a. Why do you say that?
 - b. How would you like that support to be provided? (e.g., videos, printed materials, app, in-person support, remote/online, in-person groups)
21. Do you encounter any challenges that stop you from doing things with your baby or children? If yes:
 - a. Can you describe the challenges?
 - b. How could they be overcome?

Summary

22. Do you have any other comments you'd like to make about your experiences parenting and the services or supports available?

APPENDIX G

We would like to thank the following organisations and their staff for their help and support with recruitment:

- ☐ Aberdeen North Food Bank
- ☐ Aberlour
- ☐ Ability Shetland
- ☐ Action for Children
- ☐ Barnardos
- ☐ Befriending networks
- ☐ Broomhouse Centre
- ☐ Circle Edinburgh
- ☐ Cranhill Development Trust
- ☐ Cyrenians
- ☐ Dads Rock
- ☐ Dr Bell's Family Centre
- ☐ Fast Forward
- ☐ Fife Gingerbread
- ☐ Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership
- ☐ Home-Start
- ☐ Kinship Care Advice Service for Scotland
- ☐ Let's All Talk North East Mums
- ☐ Let's Grow Kids
- ☐ Mind Your Head Shetland
- ☐ One Parent Family
- ☐ Red Cross
- ☐ Sound Lab
- ☐ Step by Step Church of Scotland
- ☐ Stepping Stones Edinburgh
- ☐ TD1 Youth Hub
- ☐ The Ripple
- ☐ The Trussell Trust