

The future of childcare?

The high cost of childcare for parents, and the changing world of work, are giving rise to a demand for a new daycare model. *Annette Rawstrone* reports on parent-led nurseries

Childcare is many families' biggest monthly expense. For typical parents of a child under two, full-time childcare costs nearly £1,000 per month – more than the average mortgage. But work is changing. The 9am-5pm working day is giving way to flexitime and remote working, for which traditional full-day or school-hours childcare models aren't a good fit.

Moves to explore the future shape of childcare are being jointly tackled by thinktank the New Economics Foundation (NEF) and the Family and Childcare Trust (FCT). The idea is the feasibility of co-operative childcare – not-for-profit childcare designed and co-delivered for parents by parents.

Parent-led nurseries are often established by a group of parents who plan how the service is shaped, sit on the management board and recruit paid early years professionals. Parents will often get involved in tasks such as delivering certain hours of childcare or administrative duties in return for reduced childcare fees. This model is growing in popularity in New Zealand, Sweden and Canada, but in the UK there are only a handful of such nurseries.

Is this just the traditional playgroup come full circle? At Happitime Playgroup in Hackney, where parents pay just £4.50 per hour (the London average is £6), it would seem not. 'Other nurseries charge thousands of pounds a month but we do everything that they do and charge much less,' says manager Stella Olasanoye. The 24-place not-for-profit nursery was rated Good at its last inspection by Ofsted, being praised for providing 'effective



opportunities for parents to support children's learning' at home. The setting also offers funded places for two- and three-year-olds, and has around 75 per cent of parents actively involved, while grandparents, aunts and au pairs also help out.

'We need parents on the rota so that we can spend less money on staff,' Ms Olasanoye says, adding that some parents are too time-poor to get involved. To combat this, it charges an extra £20 per half term for parents unable to give their time.

Lucie Stephens, head of co-production at NEF, believes this model has the potential to combine decent pay and conditions for staff with real control and affordability for parents. She experienced the benefits of a child-

At Childspace, the parents work at the setting one day every seven weeks for each place their children take

care co-operative first-hand when living in Canada. 'The approach turns parents from passive recipients of services into active participants by combining the skills of professional workers with the lived experiences of families,' she explains.

Along with financial savings, the model can lead to parents learning more about child development and behaviour from working alongside trained practitioners, while they can benefit from being able to shape provision to fit their need.

Research has found that practitioners working in parent-led childcare often have stronger career development and training plus higher pay, leading to less staff turnover and better-quality care. A Swedish

study found that 97 per cent of the users of parent co-operatives were either 'pleased' or 'very pleased' with their staff – more than the 84 per cent who replied the same for municipal childcare. The working environment was also found to be better.

Inspired by this example, the NEF and FCT have conducted research into parent-led childcare and are now using the findings to design a model that could work in the UK, particularly in areas that are poorly served by the childcare market.

'We want to build an approach that is open to all and build a strong community around the childcare provision,' says Ms Stephens. 'There is a risk that a more middle-class audience takes part at the moment and a particular driver is to make it work for low incomes and not make it a middle-class clique.'

Along with ensuring a diversity of membership, she highlights possible challenges including scheduling parent shifts, adequately training parents and financial sustainability.

They will be running pilots in the autumn to test the model – likely to be run as a 'charitable incorporated organisation' – before producing a package of support to help people establish their own co-operative childcare. Long term, there are plans to establish a network of these settings so they can support each other.

For Ms Olasanoye, however, the model has not translated into better pay. 'I wouldn't say we get paid more than the average and I do put



Childspace's parents are trained there and follow the EYFS



provision for myself and other freelance workers who need flexibility. I couldn't find anything in Birmingham other than crèches in cinemas or Ikea.'

Ms Martin refers to the co-operative childcare model as the 'gold standard', but thinks it suits more 'affluent, socially mobile families'. She is looking for the 'middle ground' and is organising workshops and community discussions to explore issues around childcare. 'If parents' horizons aren't widened then they can't see how they can effect change,' she says.

As part of the project, Ms Martin has piloted a co-work crèche at Impact Hub Birmingham, where parents work while their children are cared for by qualified childcare practitioners in the same building. There are toys and resources for the children and high-speed broadband, meeting rooms and quiet spaces for parents – who, to meet Ofsted requirements, have to stay on the premises and limit crèche use to three hours a day.

But, she says, 'A crèche, which can only run for three hours, seems to be about parking children for a few hours and I'm against that, so we're doing research with the Centre for Research in Early Childhood into how to measure the outcomes for children when working with them for such a small time. How do we offer top-level early years care for children when they only have three hours and the spaces are not geared up like a nursery?'

The pilot was so successful that a parent membership launched in February that includes 12 hours a month of childcare and an additional two days' access to Impact Hub for £55 plus VAT a month. Premium membership, worth £240 a month, is offered to parents who volunteer to work alongside the trained childcare workers for 12 hours a month. They receive playworker training and a DBS check. ■

in a lot of hours of my own to ensure that the nursery is run properly, though I do enjoy it.' But, she adds, 'It's nice working alongside parents because they can see our hard work and we feel valued. The children also look forward to their parents being on the rota.'

ANOTHER TAKE

Radical Childcare is another initiative aimed at exploring parent-led childcare solutions, supported by Big Lottery funding and set up by mother-of-one Amy Martin.

'My interest in new models of childcare came out of my own need as a freelancer. I realised as my son got older that the childcare on offer wasn't fit for purpose. I looked at nurseries and saw 16-year-olds with little resources and training delivering substandard provision,' she says. 'I looked for a different model and realised that there is a gap in



FURTHER INFORMATION

- *The value of childcare: Quality, cost and time*, NEF, <http://bit.ly/2wAokQu>
- Lucie Stephens is keen to hear from other parent-led childcare proponents. Email: lucie.stephens@neweconomics.org
- <https://motherhip.hackermoms.org>

CASE STUDY: CHILDSPACE NURSERY, TULSE HILL, LONDON

Launched in 1990 by five families, Childspace originally ran from the families' homes but is now a seven-place setting operating from a rented hall with a garden on the corner of Brockwell Park.

'We provide a beautiful, nurturing environment for children, and the parents who volunteer all bring their own skills, which the children benefit from – one dad is a music teacher, another a chef and we had a mum who was a speech therapist,' says manager Rashda Hamid. 'I give them the training and tools to work with children in a professional manner and follow the EYFS.'

Ms Hamid is supported by a parent on a rota basis with parents providing a day's childcare every seven weeks for each place their children take. They also take on responsibilities including food preparation, marketing,

administration, finance and maintenance and are expected to attend monthly meetings. 'Some parents have no idea how to handle other children when they start and learn a lot. I feel so proud and sad when they and their children leave,' Ms Hamid says.

The setting is open Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, from 9am-2.30pm. It charges £25 per session, plus a joining fee of £40, which is put towards toys, equipment and emergencies. It also takes funded two-year-olds.

The website quotes Professor Charles Desforges, which reads, 'It is the (parental) involvement of learning activities in the home that is most closely associated with better cognitive attainment in the early years. This was shown to be especially beneficial when parents and professionals negotiated a continuity of experience for the children.'