

Ipsos MORI



# STATE OF THE NATION: UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO THE EARLY YEARS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



ROYAL  
FOUNDATION  
OF THE DUKE AND DUCHESS  
OF CAMBRIDGE

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## **The primary research, analysis and reporting was conducted by Ipsos MORI**

The report writing team was led by Kelly Beaver and consisted of Sarah Knibbs, Sylvie Hobden and Juliette Albone. The wider Ipsos MORI research team included Oliver Sweet, Jessica Long, Lucy Evans, Lucy Lindley and Gary Welch.

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**Kindred<sup>2</sup>**

## **The Duchess of Cambridge's Early Years Steering Group**

Members of The Duchess of Cambridge's Early Years Steering Group provided expert advice to inform the research design and interpretation of the data.

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## **Research participants**

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# FOREWORD

## **Our future will be shaped by what we do today**

Science tells us that a child's experiences from conception through their first five years will go on to shape their next 50. It tells us that the kind of children we raise today, will reflect the kind of world we will live in tomorrow. It tells us that investing in the start of life is not an indulgence, but economically, socially and psychologically vital to a prosperous society.

Over the last nine years The Duchess of Cambridge has heard this first-hand from those who are tackling some of society's toughest challenges. She has seen over and over again how often problems can be traced back to the earliest years of someone's life and it has become her ambition to bring about change in this area.

## **But change can only be achieved together**

This report represents the views of almost half a million people from across the United Kingdom, making it the largest public study ever conducted on the early years. Compiled through qualitative ethnographic research, nationally representative surveys, an open online questionnaire and a dedicated survey which explores the impacts of COVID-19 on parents, it provides an unrivalled insight into public attitudes towards this crucial topic and lays the groundwork for action.

And action is what we need. Within these pages lie the opportunities and obstacles which we must collectively embrace if we are to give every child in this country the very best odds in life, odds that the public think we have a real capacity to influence, since 98% place at least equal importance on the role of nurture as well as nature on a child's outcomes.

To do so successfully, we must make our reasoning clear. As it stands, only one in four people recognise the specific importance of the period from conception to 5 in securing health and happiness in adulthood. Yet we know that gaps in achievement at school entry make up a sizable share of later achievement gaps; just one of the lifelong generational inequalities that could be avoided with the right intervention.

The quality of the relationships that surround children, in addition to essentials like good nutrition and a safe environment, is therefore key to building the foundations of future success. When 90% of people in our study cited parental mental health and wellbeing as a critical factor in a child's development, they made that simple point: that supporting the child starts with supporting the adult.

Support is the key word, because it can be hard for parents to do it alone. Our research shows that only 10% of expectant parents mentioned taking time to look after themselves before their baby arrived, while a third expect the COVID-19 pandemic to have a negative impact on their long-term wellbeing.

## So how can we help?

Well, it starts with keeping an open mind. A high number of parents, 70%, admitted to feeling judged by others, with 48% saying this had taken an emotional toll. We absolutely want society to feel involved in the collective nurturing of the next generation, but it's important that we make this a positive mission, giving parents encouragement in place of critique.

For we know that the last year has placed an enormous strain on those sources of encouragement. Parents report that they rely most often on the backing of their family and friends, yet the global pandemic has forced us into silos of isolation. Parental loneliness has rocketed from 38% to 63% and the percentage of those who feel uncomfortable asking for help has doubled.

Most concerning, this impact has been greatest on those living the hardest lives, with responses from those in deprived areas consistently showing higher levels of loneliness and less likely to have experienced an increase in community support.

But there have been triumphs. We have seen people all over the country who have come together, who have lent a hand, helped with the shopping, shared a smile.

Today there is hope of an end to this crisis, but if we can retain one thing, let it be that spirit. Because if we all play our part to address parents' feelings of insecurity and loneliness, build their confidence and knowledge and create networks of trusted support, then we will go a long way to building a happier, healthier society.

On behalf of The Royal Foundation, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Kindred<sup>2</sup> for making this report possible and to the people across the United Kingdom who have generously given up their time and shared their views.

To those who are about to browse through its pages, I hope you will join us in raising this issue to the place it belongs: right at the forefront of society's consciousness.



**Jason Knauf**

CEO, The Royal Foundation

# 1. INTRODUCTION

**This report sets out the findings from the most comprehensive study of attitudes towards bringing up children from conception to 5 years ever undertaken in the UK. Thousands of parents and non-parents have participated to help shed light on how we approach the early years of life for children in the UK.**

## 1.1 Background and rationale for this programme of research

The first five years of childhood, are more pivotal for development, future health and happiness, than any other single moment in our lifetime. As part of The Duchess of Cambridge's work on these early years, Her Royal Highness and The Royal Foundation convened a Steering Group comprising academics, practitioners and charities.

The Royal Foundation undertook a rapid evidence review to explore existing data relating to public perceptions of the early years in the United Kingdom. This evidence review identified a rich body of research on the experience and behaviours of parents and families throughout the early years, and on parental attitudes towards specific policies. However, it found a gap in knowledge about how this period, and the role of parents throughout these years, are perceived by parents and the general public. How people view the first five years of life is an important determinant of the priority the early years are given by parents, organisations, and wider society.

Responding to this evidence gap, The Royal Foundation commissioned a substantial piece of social research in 2019 to understand the UK's perceptions about the period from conception to age 5 ("the early years"). This study addresses an important knowledge gap: what are public perceptions of the early years in the UK?

As well as informing The Royal Foundation's own early years strategy, we hope that this research will be used widely by others. The ambition is for the research to provide a robust baseline understanding of attitudes which can be used by all those working in, or interested, in the early years.

## 1.2 Methodology

The study methodology is mixed methods, with several sizeable quantitative surveys (pre and during the COVID-19 pandemic) alongside observational and qualitative research with parents and families. This report integrates findings from the following strands of research:

**Face-to-face survey** (December 2019 - January 2020):

A nationally representative face-to-face survey to provide robust, reliable and representative statistics on the views of the UK population. In total, 3,733 respondents were interviewed face to face. To allow analysis by nation, and by parents of 0 to 5-year-olds, more interviews were carried out among these groups. Findings discussed throughout this report are from this survey, unless otherwise stated.

**5 Big Questions** (January 21st - February 21st, 2020):

An extensive public survey with over half a million people responding; 435,141 of which were from the UK.\* An online questionnaire was shared as an open-link, so everyone was welcome to provide an answer. The intent of the '5 Big Questions' was to spark a national conversation about the early years. The survey received a large response however it was not intended to be representative of the UK population as it simply reflects the views of those who took part. Findings from the 5 Big Questions are shown in blue boxes throughout the report.

**Explanatory qualitative research** (February 2020):

In-depth qualitative interviews with 40 parents of a 0 to 5-year-old who had taken part in the face-to-face survey, and an online community\*\* to explore findings in more depth. Findings from this aspect of the research are described as 'conversations with parents' throughout the report.

**Observational research** (September-October 2019):

"Ethnographic research" with 12 families and 4 community leader interviews. Researchers immersed themselves in the home environment of families, following their daily routines to gain a detailed understanding of their attitudes to bringing up children. Case studies from this strand are presented throughout the full report in grey boxes.

**Online survey** (October 2020):

The strands of research described above were conducted between September 2019 and February 2020 before the coronavirus pandemic in the UK and worldwide. An online survey of 1,000 parents of 0-5s was carried out in October 2020 to identify any changes in parents' experiences of the preceding 6 months, when the COVID-19 pandemic has been affecting every aspect of life in the UK. Reflections on parent attitudes over the period of the pandemic are shown in green boxes.

\* UK responses were identified using IP address. A total of 527,898 completed the survey globally

\*\* The online community was a virtual group of parents discussing key issues arising from the quantitative research

## 2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

There is now scientific consensus that the period from conception to age 5 is critical in providing the foundation for future physical and mental health, as well as overall wellbeing and productivity.<sup>1</sup> This research reveals a discrepancy between current perceptions among parents and this scientific understanding. Equally, it shines a light on the particular challenges, as well as opportunities, that many parents face today. These findings highlight the need for improved translation and increased accessibility of scientific research to parents. They also make clear the importance of cultivating and sustaining greater support networks for parents and ensuring parents feel they have access to a wide range of trusted sources of support, particularly to enhance their mental health and wellbeing. Finally, they raise a key question as to how society as a whole can be more supportive of parents, carers and families in the early years.



### **Parents recognise that they play a key role in their child's development**

Parents' understanding of the nature versus nurture debate (i.e. whether children's development is pre-determined by their genes or whether the environment in which they grow up determines how they develop) affect attitudes and behaviours in bringing up children. Indeed, a fatalistic belief that the way children are at birth determines how they develop can affect how parents interact with their children. Research has shown that a belief that the only factor which determines a child's development are their genetics can, in itself, adversely affect child development.<sup>2</sup>



Positively, the vast majority of parents recognise that children's brains do not develop independently of their surroundings. Almost nine in ten (88%) parents of a 0 to 5-year-old recognise that development in the conception to age 5 period is influenced by the environment (nurture). Just 7% of parents hold the fatalistic belief that a child's outcomes are wholly pre-determined by their genetics (nature).

Reflecting parents' awareness of their nurturing role, they recognise the importance of understanding how children's brains develop. Three in four parents of 0-5s (77%) reported that it is very important to know what affects the development of children's brains and minds during pregnancy, increasing to 83% who think it is important to know about brain and mind development when children are aged 0-5.

### 5 Big Questions insight

Almost all participants (98%) believe that the experiences of a child in the early years (i.e. nurture) influence how a child develops from the start of pregnancy to age 5. A large proportion (42%) believe that nurture, rather than nature, plays the primary role in determining lifelong outcomes.

When asked what is most important for children growing up in the UK to live a happy adult life, the most important factor for 60% of respondents was "Good physical and mental health".

### The impact of COVID-19:

Most parents (63%) report that they have been able to spend more quality time with their child over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic to date. The vast majority of these parents (83%) say that they are likely to continue to spend more quality time with their child in the future.

However, this positive experience is not universal. Parents who have experienced financial difficulties during lockdown or who do not live with a partner are more likely than average to say they have spent less quality time with their child since the start of lockdown (13% and 16% respectively compared with 9% average).

## Parents tend to underestimate the importance of the early years

Science tells us irrefutably that the conception to age 5 period is crucial. Throughout this period the brain is developing rapidly. Our experiences lay down the foundations of the skills, knowledge and confidence that help us navigate future challenges and realise our full potential. This means children in the early years are especially sensitive to influences that promote the acquisition of perceptual, motor, cognitive, language, social, and self-regulation skills.<sup>3</sup> When children do not experience adequate care and attention (and love), this can lead to poor outcomes, including physical and mental

health problems in later life.<sup>4</sup> For example, there is now a considerable body of research on the adverse impact of neglect on the architecture of the developing brain.<sup>5</sup>

However, our research shows that recognition of the importance of the early years is far from universal. Even among parents of a 0 to 5-year-old, recognition of the first five years as being most important for health and happiness in adulthood is low, with 31% stating that this is the most important developmental period.\* This means that 7 in 10 parents of a 0 to 5-year-old (69%) are not aligned with the scientific consensus<sup>6</sup> that the conception to age 5 period is critical in providing the foundation of health and happiness.

Furthermore, parents underestimate the importance of the conception to 18 months period in particular. Scientific evidence shows that brain development during this time is faster than any other period of development.<sup>6</sup> However, just over one in three parents (36%) does not recognise that the brain develops fastest in the conception to two years period, and one in four parents (24%) does not recognise that what parents do between birth and 18 months has a large impact on their child's future.

Our conversations with parents suggest that a key way in which they judge brain development is by observing visible changes in their child's behaviour. Therefore, the fact that some aspects of development are harder to 'recognise' or observe, leads parents to underappreciate the speed at which their child is developing, particularly until the child is 18 months old. This challenge is not specific to parents in the UK. For example, in a study of how Albertans in Canada conceive of child development, a key finding was that the process by which the brain developed throughout childhood remained "shrouded in mystery".<sup>7</sup> Our conversations with parents also revealed an issue with the terminology used. The term "brain and mind development" led to conceptions of a purely biological, "black-box" process which is out of the control of parents. This suggests that the language may need clarifying in order to make clearer how the way that the brain develops is related to a child's everyday experiences and social relationships.

### 5 Big Questions insight

Just one in four (24%) participants recognise the specific importance of the 0-5 period for providing lifelong health and happiness. Instead, most participants (57%) perceive all periods of a child's life to be equally important for health and happiness in adulthood.

### The impact of COVID-19:

Relatively few parents of children aged between 0 and 5 (11%) think that the COVID-19 pandemic will have a negative impact on the brain and mind development of their child. Parents' key concerns relate to the lack of socialisation with other children (88%) and adults (56%) and spending too much time inside (56%).

In contrast, 44% think that their child's brain and mind development will be better due to the pandemic, citing increased time spent learning (73%), playing (68%) and talking (65%) with their child. Notably, parents whose working hours have reduced since the start of the pandemic are more likely to think that their child's development will improve than other parents (47% compared with 40%).

\* This finding is taken from the online survey of 1,000 parents of 0-5 year olds which took place in October 2020.



## Parents find it difficult to prioritise their own wellbeing

When parents provide support to their children (such as emotional support and intellectual stimulation), not only are the children themselves enriched, but society benefits from their child's contributions as adults (such as economically and socially).<sup>8</sup>

### The impact of COVID-19:

Over a third (37%) think that the COVID-19 pandemic will have a negative impact on their long-term mental health. Women (40%) and those who have experienced financial difficulties during the pandemic (43%) are particularly likely to report a negative impact.

Most parents work hard to provide positive experiences for their children and enjoy spending time with them and seeing them develop. However, parents face juggling priorities, conflicting demands on their time, stress and exhaustion. Studies have shown that when parents feel exhausted, this can impact their own personal wellbeing and in extreme circumstances can lead to parental burnout, which is harmful for both the parent and child.<sup>9</sup> Evidence also suggests that parental stress levels can impact a child's development. For example, a study by Morales and Guerra<sup>10</sup> demonstrated a correlation between cumulative stress experienced by parents and the lower academic achievement of children.



## Supporting the child starts with supporting the adult

Parents recognise the importance of maintaining their own wellbeing. The vast majority of parents of a 0 to 5-year-old (93%) agree looking after themselves is important for the health and happiness of their child. However, in reality, many parents are under huge amounts of pressure, with almost three in four parents of a 0 to 5-year-old (73%) reporting that being a parent is stressful or very stressful. The most frequently mentioned challenges of being a parent to a child of this age include balancing work demands (45%), feeling tired (22%), the demands of domestic chores (22%) and the demands of other children (17%).

Against this challenging backdrop, parents of a 0 to 5-year-old are more likely to put the needs of their children before their own. For example, when expecting their first child, only 10% of expectant parents report taking time to look after their own physical or mental well-being. Furthermore, almost one in five parents of a 0 to 5-year-old (18%) would feel uncomfortable seeking help and support for how they were feeling, compared with just 8% who would feel uncomfortable seeking help and support for how their child was feeling.

### 5 Big Questions insight

The vast majority of respondents strongly agree (90%) that the mental health and wellbeing of parents and carers has a great impact on the development of their child(ren).





## Feelings of judgement have a huge impact on both parents and their children.

Feeling judged has the potential to impact parents' mental health, which evidence has shown to impair children's development.<sup>11</sup> Given these detrimental outcomes, feelings of judgement experienced by parents pose a real risk to children's development.

Seven in ten (70%) parents of a 0 to 5-year-old say they feel judged by others. Among non-parents, six in ten (64%) admit that they judge other parents. Over a third of parents (35%) feel judged based on how their child behaves, or how they choose to manage their child's behaviour (36%). A quarter (25%) feel they are being judged for being too lenient or not strict enough. As a consequence of feeling judged, almost half of parents (48%) report an emotional toll. Of those parents who feel judged, 17% report a lowering of self-esteem or increase in self-doubt, 13% report feeling inadequate or like a failure and 10% report feeling sad or unhappy.

Furthermore, conversations with parents suggest that the impact of judgement can lead parents to change their behaviour. For example, 15% of parents report that the fear of feeling judged makes it difficult to ask for help and support for their child if needed.



## Support networks are crucial for parents

Studies indicate that parents who access help and support (for example parenting programmes) are less likely to report high levels of stress.<sup>12</sup> Where this support is not available however, the resultant stress may negatively affect parents' mental health and in turn, their children's development.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, evidence shows that those with smaller support networks are more likely to feel lonely and loneliness is associated with poorer mental and physical health outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, ensuring parents have access to a wide range of trusted sources of support, without fear of judgement, is vital for the early development of children as well as maintaining parents' own wellbeing.

## Forms of and breadth of support

Parents of children aged 0-5 reported needing help and support for a wide range of issues including child health (38%), nutrition (33%), behaviour (24%) and sleep (20%). However almost one in five (18%) report that they have two or fewer people that they can turn to locally for support if needed. A third of these parents (33%) report that the number of people in their network has decreased since they have had children. This highlights the potential vulnerability of many parents at times of stress.

Parents with small networks report being less likely to turn to both formal and informal sources of support for how they are feeling. For example, they would be less likely than those with larger networks to turn to their own parents (31% compared with 36%) or to healthcare professionals (30% compared with 43%) than those who report having a larger network.

Furthermore, those with a small network are more likely than those with a large network to say that they would have nowhere to go (6% compared with 1%) or that they wouldn't know where to go (7% compared with 4%) for support with how they are feeling. Those with a small network are more likely than those with a large network to feel lonely at least some of the time (27% compared with 17%).

#### **The impact of COVID-19:**

Parental loneliness has dramatically increased during the pandemic from 38% before to 63% as parents have been cut off from friends and family. This increase in loneliness for parents is more apparent in the most deprived areas; these parents are more than twice as likely as those living in the least deprived areas to say they feel lonely often or always (13% compared with 5%).

## **Trusted sources of support**

When unprompted parents are most likely to mention family and friends as trusted sources of support for bringing up their child. Mentions include their own parents (57%), their child's other parent (52%) and close friends (47%). Support from healthcare professionals including GPs and doctors (42%), health visitors (39%) and the NHS website (38%) follow closely behind. Specifically, when parents think about help for their child's physical growth and development they are most likely to mention a GP (59%), health visitor (35%) or their own parents (20%). When thinking about help for how their child is feeling they are also most likely to mention a GP (34%), health visitor (24%) or their own parents (26%). When it comes to seeking help for how they are feeling as a parent they are most likely to mention a GP (40%), but more likely to mention their own parents (35%) than a health visitor (18%).

A range of other sources of trusted support are mentioned by smaller numbers of parents of the under 5s. These include children's centres (18%), internet searches (15%), local parenting support groups (15%), parent and child groups (11%) and parenting blogs or websites (11%).

#### **The impact of COVID-19:**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents were particularly likely to report that they would turn to the NHS website for information they could trust about bringing up their children (47%). Positively the proportion of parents who said they would speak to a medical professional was in line with the nationally representative survey (41%).

However it seems there has been a rise in the proportion of parents who feel uncomfortable seeking help for how they are feeling from 18% before the pandemic to 34% during it.





## The role of wider society and primary schools

The last 100 years have seen extensive changes to family structures in the UK.<sup>15</sup> The nuclear family is no longer the accepted norm, with more households comprised of cohabiting parents, stepfamilies, single parent families and those co-parenting and living apart.<sup>16</sup> Alongside changes to family structure, societal trends include the geographic movement of parents away from their wider family, leading to what many commentators believe to be a weakening of community cohesion and identity.<sup>17</sup> This means that traditional parental roles and responsibilities have changed, and the role of wider society is under the spotlight.

Parents of a 0 to 5-year-old tend to assume that the responsibility for giving children the best chance of health and happiness is purely theirs (58%), rather than the joint responsibility of everyone in society (20%) or the equal responsibility between parents and society (18%).\*

When it comes to children's development however, many parents regard primary schools as having a key role. Almost six in ten parents believe that schools and parents should be equally responsible for reading and writing (59%) as well as non-core academic skills such as imagination and creativity (57%), speaking and listening (54%) and physical skills (53%). The proportion who feel schools and parents should have equal responsibility is just under half for social skills and behaviours (49%) compared with 46% who believe that parents should be mainly responsible. And when it comes to emotional awareness just

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\* Respondents were told "By society, we mean everyone on this card: Wider family, Neighbours, Friends, Schools, Nurseries, Wider community, Health professionals (e.g. health visitors, nurses, midwives and GPs), Social workers, Local authority early help professionals (e.g. family support workers, youth workers), Childminder or nanny, Charity/Voluntary sector.



over two-fifths believe that schools and parents should have equal responsibility (43%), but a higher proportion (54%) believe parents should be mainly responsible.

The finding that such a large proportion of parents perceive parents and primary schools to have equal responsibility for developing basic skills may mean that a large proportion of parents also underestimate the importance of their own interactions with children pre-school. It may also mean that parents may be leaving activities that encourage their child's development until they are at school age. Indeed, in our conversations with parents, a tendency to rely on primary schools to instigate various developmental activities including reading and writing was apparent.

The perception among some parents that learning does not begin until children start school combined with a tendency to focus on external, observable phenomena when assessing children's development may contribute towards a more 'passive' approach to child development in the early years in the UK. This may affect the preparedness of children for school. Government data shows over a quarter (28%) of children were not considered 'school ready' in 2018/19.\*

### 5 Big Questions insight

Around half (53%) of those providing a response, believed it is the shared responsibility of parents and others in society to give children aged 0 to 5 the best chance of health and happiness. However, a sizeable proportion (46%) believed it is primarily the responsibility of parents.

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\* Government data shows over a quarter (28%) of children in England were not considered 'school ready' with their language, communication and literacy skills in 2018/19, and this rises to over 2 in 5 (42%) in some deprived areas.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

There are three main themes that emerge from this research:

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| <p><b>1.</b><br/>The importance of promoting education and dissemination of evidence on the primacy of the early years to parents, parents of the future and the whole of society.</p> | <p><b>2.</b><br/>The need to cultivate and sustain more support networks for parents to enhance their mental health and wellbeing.</p> | <p><b>3.</b><br/>Encouraging society as a whole be more supportive of parents, carers and families in the early years.</p> |
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These are discussed in more detail below.

#### 1. Promoting education and dissemination of evidence on the primacy of the early years to the whole of society.

- A significant proportion of UK parents of a 0-5-year-old (69%) underestimate the primary importance of the early years. This contrasts with the scientific evidence which is clear on the primacy of the early years in providing the foundation for both children's future development<sup>8</sup> and their life chances as adults. This points to the need to elevate the importance of the pregnancy and early years period in the public consciousness; not only among parents but among the parents of tomorrow and the whole of society.
- There is a significant gap in understanding of how rapidly the brain is developing during the most critical first two years. Reflecting findings from other research,<sup>18</sup> this could result in less active interaction with children in the early years, particularly before the child starts to exhibit outward signs of development such as speaking. It may also lead to a more 'passive' approach to caring for children, focusing on physical needs (such as feeding and sleeping), rather than their emotional and social development.
- To increase understanding of brain development we need to translate and increase accessibility of developmental science, so parents, future parents and wider society understand the importance of active interaction with children in the 0-5 age group (with a particular focus on the 0-2 period) on the life chances of babies far beyond these first years.

#### 2. The need to cultivate and sustain more support networks for parents to enhance their mental health and wellbeing.

- While parents generally understand the impact of their mental state on children at a superficial level (e.g. in extreme cases of abuse or neglect), it is important to raise awareness of the long-term impact of common mental health conditions (such as

depression and anxiety) on children's development. It is vital to ensure parents have access to the support they need, especially those who have smaller support networks. The research indicates around a fifth of parents with children aged five and under are vulnerable due to a lack of formal or informal support networks.

- It is important to build trust in, and visibility of, sources of support that exist in communities as parents without support networks are at the greatest risk of poor mental health which impacts on the early development of children. Parents' first ports of call for support they trust are those with whom they have a personal relationship (such as family or friends) or the NHS (GPs, Health Visitors, NHS website). Other potential sources of support are often not front of mind and non-NHS online sources are the least trusted. It is important for online sources to have a clear association with a 'trusted' and familiar brand like the NHS, and to be promoted in a streamlined way between different services to engage parents.

### 3. Encouraging society as a whole be more supportive of parents, carers and families in the early years.

- Most parents work hard to provide positive experiences for their children. However, parents face juggling priorities, conflicting demands on their time, stress and exhaustion. They also feel judged by others at home and in the community, primarily for their child's behaviour. Parents require support and understanding from the whole of society.
- When parents feel stressed and judged they may adapt their behaviour and relationship with their child and be more reluctant to seek support. This moderation of behaviour may impact their child(ren)'s long-term development<sup>11</sup>. Stress and judgement can impact parents' wellbeing and mental health, with many parents often finding themselves prioritising other things over their own mental wellbeing.
- It is important that parents feel that society as a whole supports them in bringing up their child. An environment in which parents feel able to access support is important for their own wellbeing and that of their child. Feeling that society is unsupportive can place undue pressures on parents, but also limit the depth and range of relationships, opportunities and (more formally) interventions that children experience.
- We also find that parents see primary schools as having an important and sometimes equal role in supporting children's development. Parents therefore need to be supported to understand the knowledge and skills that will provide their child with a good foundation for school and to be equipped to play their role in child development in the pre-school years.

Collectively these findings are intended to provoke discussion and debate. They identify key issues to address to ensure support for parents and carers to raise the next generation, and highlight an opportunity to help people understand the early years. The significance of this opportunity is not just its bearing on better outcomes for children but its impact on health and happiness for the whole of life and for future generations.

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## STATE OF THE NATION: UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO THE EARLY YEARS 5 KEY INSIGHTS

**PEOPLE  
OVERWHELMINGLY  
BELIEVE THAT A  
CHILD'S FUTURE IS  
NOT PRE-DETERMINED  
AT BIRTH**

1

Yet worryingly, just one in four recognise the specific importance of the first five years of a child's life.



**98%**  
of people believe  
that nurture is  
essential to  
lifelong outcomes



**24%**  
say start of  
pregnancy to  
5 years is  
most important

**THE REALITY OF  
LIFE MAKES IT HARD  
FOR PARENTS TO  
PRIORITISE THEIR  
WELLBEING**

2

Parents recognise the importance of good mental health, but struggle to find time for themselves.



**90%**  
of people see parental mental  
health and wellbeing as being  
critical to a child's development



**10%**  
took time to look after their  
own wellbeing

Only 10% of parents mentioned taking the time to look after their own wellbeing when asked how they had prepared for the arrival of their baby.

### FEELING JUDGED BY OTHERS CAN MAKE A BAD SITUATION WORSE

3.

7 out of every 10 parents feel judged by others.  
Among these parents, almost half feel this negatively impacts their mental health.



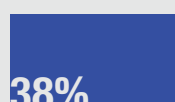
**70%**  
of parents say  
they feel judged  
by others



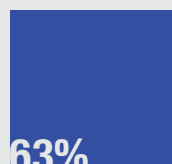
**48%**  
say this has taken  
an emotional toll  
on them

### THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS DRAMATICALLY INCREASED PARENTAL LONELINESS

4.



Before the  
COVID-19  
pandemic



After the  
first lockdown  
in the UK

The pandemic has pushed  
parental loneliness up from  
38% to 63%.

This increase in loneliness  
for parents is more apparent  
in the most deprived areas;  
these parents are more than  
twice as likely as those living  
in the least deprived areas  
to say they feel lonely often  
or always.



Most  
deprived



Least  
deprived

### IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY, SUPPORT FROM LOCAL COMMUNITIES HAS SUBSTANTIALLY INCREASED FOR MANY - BUT NOT FOR ALL

5.

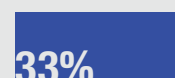
Across the UK, communities  
have united powerfully to  
meet the challenge of  
unprecedented times.



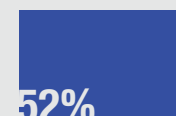
**40%**  
of people feel  
that community  
support has grown

Parents in the most deprived  
areas are less likely to have  
experienced increased community  
support than those elsewhere.

Experienced increased  
community support



Most deprived



Least deprived







Ipsos MORI

