



Social research number: 30/2026

Publication date: 25/02/2026

# A synthesis of evidence on parental decisions about childcare for children aged 9 months to 2 years old

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

This document is also available in Welsh.

**OGI** © Crown Copyright Digital ISBN 978-1-83745-165-4

A synthesis of evidence on parental decisions about childcare for children aged 9 months to 2 years old.

Author: Maddison Wright

Full Research Report: Wright, M. (2026). A synthesis of evidence on parental decisions about childcare for children aged 9 months to 2 years old. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 30/2026.

Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/parental-decisions-about-childcare-children-aged-9-months-2-years-old>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

For further information please contact:

Children and Families Research Team

Equality, Poverty and Children Evidence Support Division

Welsh Government

Cathays Park

Cardiff

CF10 3NQ

E-mail: [Research.ChildrenAndFamilies@gov.wales](mailto:Research.ChildrenAndFamilies@gov.wales)

## Table of contents

List of tables.....	2
Glossary.....	3
1. Introduction .....	5
1.1. Background .....	5
1.2. Purpose of the review .....	5
1.3. Scope and approach.....	6
2. Methodology.....	7
2.1. Approach .....	7
2.2. Search strategy and pilot searches .....	7
2.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.....	8
2.4. Search results and screening .....	9
3. Findings.....	14
3.1. Affordability of childcare.....	14
3.2. Accessing childcare .....	15
3.2.1. Availability and practical constraints .....	15
3.2.2. The inflexibility of formal childcare.....	17
3.2.3. Administrative complexity .....	18
3.2.4. Complex application processes .....	19
3.3. Parental values, beliefs and preferences.....	21
3.3.1. Perceived developmental benefits.....	21
3.3.2. Trust, culture and connection in childcare settings .....	23
3.3.3. Preference for informal childcare.....	25
4. Limitations and future research .....	28
5. Conclusions.....	29
6. Reference section .....	30

# List of tables

Table 1: Types of literature included in the review, 2015 to 2025 ..... 10

Table 2: Geographic distribution of studies included in the review, 2015 to 2025..... 11

Table 3: Studies grouped by relevance to children aged 9 months to 2 years, 2015 to 2025  
..... 12

# Glossary

## **ALN**

Additional learning needs.

## **Additional Support Grant (ASG)**

A funding stream provided under the Childcare Offer for Wales to ensure that eligible children with additional support needs can access government funded childcare on an equal basis with their peers.

## **The Childcare Grant**

This is a grant available for parents who are registered on a higher education course and is administered by Student Finance Wales.

## **Childcare Offer for Wales**

A Welsh Government funding scheme that provides eligible working parents of 3- and 4-year-old children with up to 30 hours per week of funded early education and childcare for up to 48 weeks per year.

## **EAL**

English as an Additional Language.

## **ECEC**

Early childhood education and care.

## **Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC)**

A Welsh Government framework that brings together policies, strategies and guidance to support the development, well-being and learning of children aged 0 to 5 years. It promotes a holistic, child-centred approach that integrates play, care and early education, recognising the importance of relationships, rights and responsive environments. In this report the terms ECPLC and ECEC are used because it is recognised that ECEC is the preferred term in some of the studies referenced.

## **Flying Start**

A Welsh Government programme supporting families with children under 4 in disadvantaged areas. As part of a phased expansion of early years services, it aims to offer funded childcare to all 2-year-olds in Wales.

## **Jobs, Education and Training (JET)**

The jobs, employment and training (JET) programme provides childcare fee assistance to those with a formal employment plan in Australia.

## **KAS**

Knowledge and Analytical services at Welsh Government.

### **Population, Intervention, Comparison and Output (PICO)**

A PICO framework is a structured approach used primarily in evidence-based practice to formulate focused and answerable research questions. It helps in identifying key components of a clinical or policy question to guide literature searches and evidence synthesis.

### **Survey of health, aging and retirement in Europe (SHARE)**

A multidisciplinary and cross-national panel database of microdata on health, socio-economic status, and social and family networks of individuals aged 50 or older. Conducted across numerous European countries, SHARE provides longitudinal data that supports research and policy development related to ageing, retirement, and health systems.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

Childcare for children aged 9 months to 2 years plays a critical role in supporting early development, enabling parental employment and promoting equitable outcomes for families ([Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Plan in Wales 2024](#); Department for Education 2025; Bucelli and McKnight 2022). In Wales, the childcare landscape is shaped by 2 key programmes, the Childcare Offer for Wales, which provides up to 30 hours of funded childcare and early education for eligible children age 3 to 4 of working parents and parents in education and training, and Flying Start, which offers 12.5 hours of funded childcare per week for eligible children aged 2 to 3.

Recent policy developments have significantly expanded the reach of Flying Start in Wales. Phase 2 of the expansion which launched in April 2023, extended Flying Start childcare provision beyond the original postcode-based eligibility. The Minister for Children and Social Care (2025), reported in a [written statement](#) that in 2025 to 2026, the Welsh Government is investing an additional £25 million to support the further expansion of the program, allowing Wales to eventually offer “universal provision of childcare for all 2-year-olds”.

Phase 2 focused on delivering high-quality childcare to 2-year-olds and was supported by £46 million in funding across 2023 to 2024 and 2024 to 2025. The latest data shows that since this phase was launched, it has exceeded its target offering places to over 15,100 children, with more than 11,100 children taking up places, including over 2,300 in Welsh medium settings. In 2024 to 2025 alone, over 80% of eligible children took up their Flying Start childcare place in the expansion of the programme (Minister for Children and Social Care 2025).

In England, funded childcare provision for a younger age range is already underway, though this is not universal. Since September 2024, eligible working parents of children aged 9 months to 3 years in England have been able to access 15 hours of funded childcare per week, with a full 30-hour entitlement available from September 2025 (Department for Education 2024b; Department for Education 2023).

Policy developments like the expansion of Flying Start childcare reflect a growing commitment to improving access to funded childcare in Wales. However, as the findings of this evidence review outline, formal childcare uptake remains uneven, with many families choosing to rely on informal care or delay engagement with formal care. Understanding the factors that influence parental decision-making is essential for ensuring that government funded childcare provision meets needs of all families and children.

## 1.2. Purpose of the review

This rapid evidence review was designed to explore the evidence on the key factors that shape parental decisions about formal childcare use for children aged 9 months to 2 years

old. The review synthesises existing UK and international literature to identify themes, highlight barriers and enablers of formal childcare use, and inform future policy development in Wales. The aim is not to predict parental decision-making behaviours, but to provide a thematic overview of the current evidence base and identify areas where further research and policy attention may be warranted.

### **1.3. Scope and approach**

The review identified 6 key themes, which include affordability, access and availability, perceived developmental benefits, trust, culture and connection and informal care preference. These have been organised and presented in this report into 3 overarching themes:

1. affordability of childcare
2. accessing childcare
3. parental values, beliefs and preferences

The studies included in this review span a 10-year timeframe, 2015 to 2025 and draw on a range of methodologies, including large-scale surveys, qualitative research and policy reports.

While the review was intended to prioritise evidence related to the Welsh context, due to evidence gaps, this review also includes findings from other UK nations as well as international data, which ultimately help to provide comparative insights. Particular attention is given to studies that explore the experiences of families with children under the age of 3, however, some studies do cover a broader range of ages, where the relevant findings to this review are extracted.

## 2. Methodology

This review was conducted as part of a doctoral 3-month internship within the Welsh Government and was commissioned to provide timely insights into what factors influence parental decisions around formal childcare use for children aged 9 months to 2 years. This section outlines the approach taken to identify, select and analyse relevant literature, including the inclusion criteria, search strategy and thematic synthesis methods used.

### 2.1. Approach

A rapid evidence review approach was pre-selected to identify and synthesise current and relevant evidence. Rapid reviews are a form of knowledge synthesis in which elements of a systematic review process are simplified or excluded to produce evidence in a timely manner (Hamel et al 2021). According to the Cochrane Rapid Reviews Methods Group, rapid reviews are often used to address “urgent and emergent issues and questions deemed to be of high priority” (Garritty et al 2021). Moreover, as outlined in the Magenta Book (2020), rapid evidence assessments are useful for scoping existing evidence within a short timeframe. Given the limited timeframe of the internship, this methodology was both practical and appropriate. It enabled a structured and transparent review process while ensuring that the evidence was handled and synthesised to a high standard.

The research question was what factors influence parents’ decisions about childcare use for children under the age of 2. A PICO framework (Population, Intervention, Comparison and Outcomes) was created to guide the development of the search strategy and inclusion and exclusion criteria in answering this research question. While this framework was not used to generate the question, it helped ensure that the search process remained consistent and conceptually structured. The PICO framework used is broadly defined below:

- population: parents of children aged under 2
- intervention: decision making about childcare for children under the age of 2. What factors influence decisions
- comparison: Wales, where funded childcare is available to children from age 2, to England where funded childcare is being rolled out to children from the age of 9 months
- outcomes: factors influencing parental decision-making, including cost, access, availability, preferences of formal versus informal childcare, trust, cultural beliefs

### 2.2. Search strategy and pilot searches

Once search terms were finalised, pilot literature searching was conducted, primarily through Google Scholar, to scope the literature to prepare the search terms. These pilot results were shared with the Children, Families and Childcare Evidence team within the

Welsh Government, and were then finalised ready to share with Library Services in Knowledge and Analytical Services (KAS). The finalised search terms were:

- barriers, cost and access
- childcare preferences
- socio-cultural factors

Library Services carried out 3 structured searches using the finalised search terms and strategies provided by the Library Services team which included:

- two searches carried out by the report author on the barriers, cost and access of childcare, and the preferences of childcare
- a search conducted by a member of Library Services on the socio-cultural factors that influence parental decision-making on childcare use

The following databases were used:

- Welsh Government electronic Resources
- ProQuest (Social science premium collection)
- Web of science
- Scopus
- Google scholar (as a main tool to search potential doctoral theses)

### **2.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

The initial search stage involved a desk-based search of existing research and grey literature (which refers to research produced outside of traditional academic publishing channels) known to the Welsh Government and broader UK policy context. Following this, structured searches were conducted to identify additional academic and grey literature. No formal geographic restrictions were applied during the search process; the focus remained largely on UK-based literature, with attention to Wales. The results indicated there is limited Wales-specific research evidence other than it being included in 'UK' studies. International studies were included if they offered transferable insights into parental-decision making or early years childcare systems. Where the relevance to a Wales and UK context was less direct, studies and findings were reviewed more cautiously. Additionally, literature was restricted to English language.

Similarly, to ensure the quality and relevance of sources, the review included materials from scholarly journals, commissioned reports by government departments and think-tanks. After initial searches, results were further refined based on research field and topic. For example, when conducting a search via Web of Science the primary categories chosen were family studies, sociology, education and educational research, humanities multidisciplinary and

economics. Likewise, when conducting searches across different databases such as ProQuest, the following subjects were included to achieve the most relevant results: attitudes, perceptions, workers, childhood, policy making, early childhood education, young children, child development, socioeconomic factors decision-making and family life.

To ensure relevance and manage the scope of the review within the limited timeframe, the search was restricted to literature published in the last 10 years (2015 to 2025). This approach aligns with best practice in rapid review methodology and was intended to prioritise reflecting recent developments in policy and parental behaviours. Limiting the review to the past ten years is likely to have excluded earlier studies of potential relevance (for example Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999); Wheelock and Jones (2002); Anderson et al (2002)). However, this was considered appropriate given the time constraints of the rapid evidence review and the need to focus on the most recent evidence.

Moreover, the decision to screen the literature from the past ten years also allows this rapid review to capture the evolving landscape of early years childcare policy in Wales. Central to this are programmes such as the Childcare Offer for Wales and Flying Start. The Childcare offer for Wales was piloted in 2017 and nationally rolled out in 2019. Flying Start has existed since 2007, but the childcare element has recently been expanded beyond the original postcode areas. The expansion of funded childcare from these programmes represents a major shift in the accessibility, cultural relevance and quality of early years childcare in Wales. A 10-year screening window ensures the review captures both the pre-expansion context for these programmes and the early impacts, providing a robust evidence base for understanding how Welsh Government policy may influence parental choices in the early years.

## **2.4. Search results and screening**

A structured search strategy was developed to identify literature relevant to parental decision-making in childcare for children aged 9 months to 2 years, with a particular focus on Wales. Boolean operators (words like AND, OR, and NOT that combine or exclude keywords to refine search results) were used to combine key concepts such as “childcare access”, “barriers”, “cost”, and “parental choice”. These concepts were then searched alongside age-specific terms ("9 months" OR "infants" OR "babies" OR "toddlers" OR "1-year-old" OR "2-year-old" OR "under 2"), and geographic filters ("Wales" OR "Welsh") and ("United Kingdom" OR "UK" OR "England" OR "Scotland" OR "Northern Ireland" OR “Wales”).

During the searching process, several challenges emerged in identifying focused literature on parental decision-making in childcare for children aged 9 months to 2 years. For example, the use of the terms “babies” and “infants” frequently returned results related to neonatal care, premature birth care or breastfeeding, which were outside the scope of this review. Similarly, the term “childcare” often overlapped and yielded studies that focussed on social care and health care contexts and settings, rather than early years education and care and parental choice. Some studies appeared relevant based on titles, particularly those referencing maternal labour supply, however, upon further inspection revealed that most of

the studies were more concerned on the economic outcomes, such as changes in employment, rather than motivations behind childcare choices.

An initial search using predefined terms and strings yielded 30 studies. In addition, the library team conducted an independent search and identified 41 studies. Following relevance and date-based screening, 23 studies (8 excluded due to publication date and 15 due to lack of relevance) were removed, leaving 18 studies for further consideration. Upon reviewing these 18 studies, 5 were found to be duplicates of those already identified in the initial search. Therefore, the library search contributed 13 unique and relevant studies to the review. In total, this evidence review is based on 43 unique studies.

To ensure thoroughness, multiple variations of each search query were tested using academic databases including Web of Science, ProQuest, and Scopus. This approach consistently produced additional sources with each refinement. Over time, the results began to converge, indicating that the search strategy had effectively captured the relevant literature available within the defined parameters.

These 43 results include both academic and applied research. These specific types of literature are outlined in the table below:

**Table 1: Types of literature included in the review, 2015 to 2025**

Literature Type	Number of studies
Peer-reviewed journal articles	25
Government/ government commissioned reports	9
Independent research reports	5
PhD theses	3
Briefing notes	1

The 43 studies included in this review span a wide range of geographic contexts, with a strong emphasis on the UK and its devolved nations. Specifically, the literature covers the countries outlined in Table 2 below. In cases where a study covered more than one country, these were counted under each relevant country in the breakdown of studies by geography. As a result, the per-country totals may sum to more than 43.

**Table 2: Geographic distribution of studies included in the review, 2015 to 2025**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of studies</b>
UK	4
England	10 (includes 1 study jointly covering England and Scotland)
Wales	6
Scotland	4 (includes 1 study jointly covering England and Scotland)
USA	4
Australia	3
Germany	2
Belgium	2
Ireland	2
New Zealand	2
'Europe'	2
'Europe + UK'	1
Switzerland	1
Malta	1

Of the studies included in this review, relatively few focused specifically on Wales. The majority of studies examined parental decision-making in childcare in England or Scotland, with one study jointly covering both. This uneven distribution reveals a notable gap in the evidence base relating to the Welsh context. Given the distinct policy landscape, cultural factors, and childcare provision models in Wales, this lack of targeted research may limit the applicability of wider UK findings to Welsh families. As such, there is a clear need for further research focused on parental decision-making in childcare in Wales, to ensure that policy development and service design are grounded in contextually relevant evidence.

Moreover, as the literature search progressed, it became clear that there was limited evidence on the specific age range 9 months to 2 years, with many studies grouping a broad range of ages, and this limits the ability to report on specific age boundaries. To help understand the scope of the literature reviewed, studies have been grouped into 2 tiers based on their alignment with this age focus. This grouping is used to support transparency in the review process, as well as highlighting the evidence gap on research focussed specifically on 9 months to 2 years.

Column one includes studies that either focussed directly on children aged 9 months to 2 years or covered a slightly broader range (0 to 5), where findings relevant to this age range were clearly identifiable and extractable. The second column includes studies with a much wider age range (0 to 10 or 0 to 15), that do not exclusively focus on under 2s, but contain relevant insights, or dedicated findings to children aged 9 months to 2 years. In these cases, as discussed in the findings section, applicable findings were extracted and used with appropriate caution. This involved reviewing age specific data via tables or sections (if available). Out of the 43 studies, 39 included information on the children, with the remaining

4 being pieces of literature that serve more as contextual findings or were reviews themselves.

**Table 3: Studies grouped by relevance to children aged 9 months to 2 years, 2015 to 2025**

<b>Studies that specifically focus on 9 months to 2 years</b>	<b>Studies with wider age ranges, but with relevant findings to 9 months to 2 years.</b>
1. Department for Education (2025)	1. Etherington et al (2025)
2. Bosire et al (2025)	2. Ni Luanaigh et al (2024)
3. LaValle et al (2024)	3. Gambaro et al (2024)
4. Department for Education (2024)	4. Doorley et al (2023)
5. Collischon et al (2024)	5. Crossfield et al (2023)
6. Berlinski et al (2020)	6. Wilson – Smith et al (2022)
7. Mendizabal-Espinosa et al (2024)	7. Brewer et al (2022)
8. Maes et al (2023)	8. Mhathúna and Fhionnlaoich (2021)
9. Benison and Sin (2023)	9. Hughes and Jones (2021)
10. Lane and Lewis (2023)	10. White-Tennant (2021)
11. Mollidor et al (2022)	11. Biegel et al (2021)
12. Arad Research (2021)	12. Bouchard et al (2021)
13. Ferguson et al (2020)	13. Bordone et al (2020)
14. Rutigliano (2020)	14. Dallimore (2016)
15. Zangger and Widmer (2020)	-
16. Airey et al (2020)	-
17. Chen and Bradbury (2019)	-
18. Hutchinson (2019)	-
19. Mumford et al (2019)	-
20. Degotardi et al (2018)	-
21. Simon et al (2017)	-
22. McLean et al (2017)	-
23. Sollars (2016)	-
24. Skattebol (2016)	-
25. DiGessa et al (2016)	-

While a substantial number of studies were identified that align closely with this review’s age range of 9 months to 2 years, it is important to note that many of these cover broader early

years ranges (0 to 4 and 0 to 5) and do not consistently disaggregate findings for 9 months to 2 years. This limits the ability to draw age-specific conclusions particularly around parental decision making on childcare for children under 2. In contrast, studies that focus more closely on 9 months to 2 years remain relatively limited, and several key sources of insight were drawn from studies with wider age ranges, where relevant findings were extracted. This highlights an evidence gap in targeted research that isolates the experiences and needs of parents of families with children in the first 2 years of life.

The reliance in broader age group studies underscores the need for more detailed, age-specific evidence to inform policy and practice around early childcare provision, especially in the context of accessibility, affordability and parental choice for children under the age of 2.

## 3. Findings

This section presents the key findings from the rapid evidence review, organised thematically around the 3 overarching areas: affordability of childcare, accessing childcare and parental values, beliefs and preferences. These overarching themes reflect the most consistently reported factors influencing parental decision-making for children aged 9 months to 2 years. The findings draw on a mixture of UK and international literature, with particular attention to studies relevant to the Welsh context where available.

### 3.1. Affordability of childcare

Affordability is one of the most consistently reported and significant factors shaping parental decisions about childcare for children aged 9 months to 2 years. Evidence from a wide range of UK and international studies indicates that the high cost of formal childcare leads many parents to delay or reduce their use of childcare provision, adjust employment plans, or exit the workforce altogether.

Recent data from the Department for Education (2025) found that 34% of parents surveyed in England struggled to pay for childcare, the highest proportion since 2014. The Department for Education (2024) also reported that 18% of families with children aged 0 to 4 could not afford childcare at all, identifying cost as a primary barrier.

Internationally cost is also reported as a key issue. In New Zealand, Benison and Sin (2023) found that nearly 3% of mothers with children aged between 9 months and 2 years were not working solely due to lack of affordable childcare access. Their study estimated substantial foregone earnings, especially among Māori mothers, highlighting how constrained provision for under-2s can deepen existing inequalities and reduce maternal employment, a dynamic that echoes concerns reported by UK parents. The study quantified the economic impact of affordability barriers, estimating \$116 million a year in lost maternal wages due to lack of accessible childcare.

Together, these findings suggest that affordability remains a critical constraint on childcare access, with far-reaching implications for family wellbeing and labour market participation.

Affordability barriers are particularly acute for families with children under 3, who often do not qualify for universal funded hours. In Northern Ireland, for instance, Chapman and Fitzpatrick (2025) found that full-time childcare costs exceeded mortgage or rent payments for many households, representing over 30% of median income. This made formal childcare financially unviable, especially for mothers of very young children. Other studies show that affordability interacts with other factors, for example, Collischon et al (2024) demonstrated that cash-for-care policies in Germany encouraged low-income families to opt for home-based or informal care, reinforcing gendered care patterns and reducing maternal labour market participation.

Affordability appears to also be a key driver of informal care use. Across nations, studies such as, Crossfield et al (2023) in England, and White-Tennant (2021) in the US, show that families have reported turning to grandparents and friends because formal childcare, such as nurseries and centre-based care was too expensive, despite preferring these arrangements.

These affordability concerns have been a consistent feature in the evidence in this review. A mixed method study conducted by Skattebol (2016), explored how disadvantaged families in Australia make childcare decisions about using early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. From 131 qualitative interviews with mostly mothers, the study found that families often delayed engagement with formal childcare until basic needs such as housing and employment were met. Even when subsidies like the JET (jobs, employment and training) scheme significantly reduced costs of childcare, the lack of awareness and complexity of accessing the scheme limited its use.

The studies reviewed here collectively highlight a critical issue, without substantial and accessible financial support, many parents are either unable or reluctant to utilise formal childcare during their children's earliest years. This limitation not only affects maternal employment and children's developmental opportunities but also reinforces broader patterns of socioeconomic inequality. Addressing this gap is essential for creating more equitable outcomes for families and society as a whole.

## **3.2. Accessing childcare**

Access and availability emerge as the most commonly cited factors influencing parental decisions about formal childcare use for children aged under 3. Evidence from UK and international studies highlight how parents frequently report difficulties finding suitable formal childcare that fits their location, working hours, or specific needs. In addition, many face structural and informational barriers when navigating childcare systems, such as unclear eligibility criteria, fragmented support schemes, and poor communication. These challenges often delay or prevent the use of formal childcare, regardless of parental preference. One example of this is the Additional Support Grant (ASG), which is intended to help children with additional needs, including additional learning needs (ALN), to access the childcare element of the Childcare Offer for Wales. However, a Welsh Government research report ([Ni Luanaigh et al 2024](#)) reported local authorities had difficulties navigating the broader funding landscape, and awareness of the ASG among providers was relatively low, with two-thirds having never heard of it. These factors combined may result in eligible families missing out on support due to unclear processes or limited communication.

### **3.2.1. Availability and practical constraints**

The Department for Education's Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents (2024 and 2025) show that availability of childcare provision is a barrier. In both years, the large scale and representative survey found around 6% of parents with children aged 0 to 4 in England reported being unable to access childcare because providers were full, compared to 1% of

families with older children. These findings highlight a disproportionate shortfall in provision for the early years, a concern that is especially relevant for children under the age of 2. In terms of decision making, the survey highlights that convenience, which includes ease of access, location and alignment with working hours, was the most common factor parents reported as a reason for using formal childcare, with 64% reporting this in 2024, increasing from 60% in 2023.

Evidence from Etherington et al (2025) reinforces the issue of availability, showing that formal childcare provision is particularly limited in disadvantaged areas such as the Welsh Coalfields <sup>[Footnote 1]</sup>, where there were only 26.8 registered childcare places per 100 children under the age of 7. However, because this measure spans a wider age range of 0 to 7 year olds, it reduces the precision of the finding for the purpose of this review, and highlights a gap in the granularity of the existing evidence base in Wales

The qualitative studies reviewed provide further insight into how limited access can shape decisions. For example, Mollidor et al (2022) conducted a qualitative study on behalf of the UK Department for Education to explore parental perceptions of childcare in England. The research involved in-depth interviews with 55 parents of children aged 0 to 4 <sup>[Footnote 2]</sup>. Parents reported barriers such as year long waiting lists, as well as availability only at certain times of year, and days of the week, location and needing to enrol before birth to ensure a place. Additionally, the study found most parents were looking at using formal childcare for when the child turned a year old, however other parents reported that nurseries only take children from 18 months onwards, suggesting a gap between parental childcare needs and provision available.

Similar findings are found in a qualitative study exploring parental decision-making on childcare in England by Crossfield et al (2023). The study found that some parents of children under 2 were unable to access nursery places due to age restrictions, with nurseries often only accepting children aged 2 and above. In such cases, childminders were sometimes the only available option, though parents also reported difficulties finding local childminders. Additionally, similar barriers were found in Scotland in Wilson-Smith et al's (2022) study, who note that many families in their sample who had children under the age of 2, were unaware of, or ineligible for, funded childcare provision, reflecting how eligibility restrictions further constrain the access and availability for childcare.

La Valle et al (2024) provide more recent insights in England, showing that while formal childcare may appear more accessible and affordable on paper, practical barriers, such as inconsistent local implementations, hidden costs and restrictive provider criteria, limit formal childcare take-up. For instance, some local authorities lacked the capacity or strategy to effectively promote and deliver funded childcare entitlements in England, while others used tailored outreach like home visits and text reminders to boost participation. These issues

---

#### Footnotes

[1] These are defined as former coal-mining communities that have experienced long-term economic and social decline following the closure of the coal industry. Their analysis includes areas such as Neath/Port Talbot and Merthyr Tydfil in Wales.

[2] Participants were selected from Wave 9 of the Department for Education's Childcare Survey, with quotas applied to ensure a diverse sample in terms of family structure, employment status, and childcare usage.

were particularly pronounced among disadvantaged families, who found that the available options did not meet their needs in practice.

Access and availability for children under the age of 2 are not new concerns parents face. These emerged as significant themes in Chen and Bradbury's (2019) qualitative study of parental childcare decision-making in England. While the study mentions childcare decisions for children aged 5 and under, there are several findings particularly prevalent for children under the age of 2. The study predates the expansion of funded childcare for under 2s in England and its findings remain relevant to the Welsh context, where similar structural constraints persist. Findings from interviews with parents highlighted how a lack of state-funded childcare provision for children under the age of 3 forced many working parents, especially those with children aged under 2, to rely on private day nurseries, childminders, or nannies. This created a "split market" in which access was shaped not only by age eligibility but also by parents' working patterns and financial resources. These constraints led many parents to make decisions on childcare based on convenience and availability rather than quality, with some describing their choices as "emergency" decisions. Given the similarities in childcare market structures between England and Wales, it is likely that Welsh parents of children under the age of 2 experience comparable challenges in accessing suitable and affordable childcare.

Building on these insights which collectively highlight how structural constraints and limited availability policy design shape parental access to childcare, Maes et al (2023) examined how these dynamics can play out across different social groups. The study is a longitudinal study of formal childcare uptake in Belgium and focuses on second-generation migrant mothers with children under the age of 3. While increases in local formal childcare availability were associated with higher uptake overall, Maes et al (2023) discovered that significant gaps persisted between native and migrant origin mothers, particularly among those from Turkish and Maghreb backgrounds. This adds a new dimension to the discussion of access and availability, highlighting how intersecting factors such as migration background and socio-economic status can create barriers to childcare, a pattern that may also be relevant in a Welsh context.

These findings suggest that availability alone does not guarantee equitable access. Ensuring equitable access aligns with the ambitions of the [Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan](#), which includes actions to improve inclusivity and cultural responsiveness in childcare settings and addresses structural inequalities affecting ethnic minority families.

### **3.2.2. The inflexibility of formal childcare**

Another theme across the literature is how the limited flexibility of formal childcare provision influences parental decisions about whether and how to engage with early education and care services. Across the literature, rigid hours and limited flexibility in formal childcare settings often fail to accommodate the needs of working parents, particularly those who work full-time and irregular hours, such as night shifts and weekends (Dallimore 2016; Doorley et al 2023). [Lane and Lewis \(2023\)](#) reinforce this with their review of all 22 Welsh

local authorities' 2022 Childcare Sufficiency Assessments (CSAs) which evaluated how each met statutory duties to identify recurring issues and gaps. The review found that all local authorities identified flexibility as a key barrier to access, with many providers unable to offer care beyond 6pm or on weekends.

Similar findings have been reported internationally by Degotardi et al (2018), who found that Australian parents that use long day care (i.e., full-day childcare) were more likely to cite pragmatic concerns, such as opening hours and proximity, as central to their childcare choices. Drawing the focus back to Wales, [Hughes and Jones \(2021\)](#) provide qualitative insight, with parents describing how shift work and irregular hours made it difficult to commit to formal childcare. One parent from their study noted that “formal childcare is not set up to meet the needs of working parents who work shifts—they can’t accommodate changes at short notice”, while another explained that the lack of wraparound care and transport between settings made accessing their full government funded childcare entitlement impractical. Collectively, these studies suggest that the structural rigidity of formal childcare not only limits access but actively shapes parental preferences, often pushing families toward informal care or partial uptake of entitlements.

Similar findings were reported by parents in work by Crossfield et al (2023) which found parents in England who relied on formal childcare to work had “no flexibility in its use,” as the hours were fixed around their working schedules. This rigidity meant that any changes in work patterns or financial pressures could not easily be accommodated, leading some parents to increase their use of informal care instead. The study also highlighted that childminders were valued for their ability to offer unplanned or short-notice care, underscoring the limitations of more structured formal settings.

In addition to this, the temporal constraints of formal childcare have been highlighted by McLean et al (2017). In their qualitative, cross-national study which explored the logistical challenges parents face when arranging childcare by conducting semi-structured interviews with 62 organisational actors across 6 European countries, they found parents faced consistent logistical challenges when trying to coordinate childcare with employment. These challenges are not only about whether formal childcare is available or affordable, but also how well it aligns with families' daily routines. Parents struggle with spatial constraints, such as the distance between home, childcare and their work, as well as temporal constraints including mismatched hours between childcare and parents work hours.

### **3.2.3. Administrative complexity**

While parental decisions about childcare are often shaped by practical constraints, as outlined above, there is an additional body of evidence that highlights how confusion, unclear eligibility rules, and poor communication pose significant barriers to accessing formal childcare, particularly for families with infants.

For instance, the Welsh Government report on the ASG found that many families receiving additional childcare support in Wales through the grant had little to no awareness of the scheme. During qualitative interviews, some parents often did not know they were recipients

of the grant, or what it covered, and heavily relied on proactive childcare providers to secure the support on their behalf. Interviews revealed widespread frustration due to a perceived lack of transparency and communication from their local authorities, some of which reportedly avoided publicising the grant to manage demand. These findings suggest that even when childcare support is technically available, families may be unable to make fully informed decisions about it without clear and accessible information.

This link between structural complexity and accessing formal childcare is further supported by research conducted by Mendizabal-Espinosa et al (2024). This was a rapid evidence review of evidence in the UK and synthesised findings from 106 studies on barriers and enablers to ECEC access. Although the review spanned the age range 0 to 5, the review offers important insights for parents of children aged 9 months to 2 years, particularly in relation to the 2-year-old funded childcare entitlement. The review highlighted how confusion around eligibility, such as if parents need to be employed, how benefits interact with entitlement, and what types of childcare settings are covered, can deter families from engaging with funded formal childcare. These issues were especially pronounced for ethnic minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged families, who often faced additional barriers such as language difference, digital exclusion and a lack of culturally appropriate and multilingual information.

Additionally, in the rapid evidence review the application process itself was a barrier, with online forms being inaccessible to parents with limited IT or literacy skills, and the absence of centralised, multilingual information systems meant that many families relied on informal networks to navigate the system. This reliance can exclude those who are new to an area or socially isolated. These structural and informational barriers delay access, and actively shape parental decision-making, sometimes leading families to delay or avoid formal childcare altogether.

Together, the research findings demonstrate structural and informational barriers complicate access and shape parental decisions in fundamental ways, which can sometimes result in delayed uptake of formal, and funded, childcare, early return to work or avoidance of formal care altogether.

#### **3.2.4. Complex application processes**

While confusion and poor communication have shown to limit parents' understanding of their childcare options, an additional barrier arises during the application process itself. Even when families and parents are aware of their entitlements, several studies have shown that navigating the systems present further challenges and even barriers for some.

An example of this is evident in [Arad Research's \(2021\)](#) review report which highlights that while various childcare support schemes exist for parents in education, training or returning to work, the application process themselves often present significant barriers. The review found that the Childcare Grant was widely described by representatives from further and higher education as "lengthy", "overwhelming" and a "real hassle". More broadly, the review identified the complexity and length of the application processes as key barriers across schemes, with parents facing confusion due to overlapping eligibility rules between different

funding sources, such as Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare. Each scheme has its own criteria, thresholds and application methods making navigation and completion difficult. This confusion from the interview participants was echoed amongst the parents on the online forums <sup>[Footnote 3]</sup>.

Similar findings are evident in [Hughes and Jones' \(2021\)](#) ethnographically informed qualitative study involving 53 families with children aged 3 to 4-year-old across 9 local authorities in Wales. Although this study focused on the Childcare offer for Wales, which applies to an older age group than the focus of this evidence assessment, the findings remain highly relevant. In particular, the study highlights how complicated and burdensome application processes can deter eligible parents from applying for formal childcare. This emphasises the importance of ensuring that parents are supported in completing applications and are aware of where they can access support for this.

Further findings from the study showed that the application process for the Childcare offer for Wales acted as a significant deterrent for eligible parents in accessing childcare. While awareness of the Childcare offer was generally high among participants, many reported difficulties in navigating the application itself. Findings described the application forms as overly complex, time-consuming and not user friendly. For some, the process was described as complicated, with participants reporting a lack of confidence and time as key reasons for not completing the forms. [Hughes and Jones \(2021\)](#) found that this was especially the case for lone parents, those with limited digital access, or families with insecure employment. For instance, self-employed parents and those on zero-hour or irregular contracts faced additional challenges in proving eligibility. The requirement to submit payslips or evidence of consistent working hours was often incompatible with their employment circumstances, effectively excluding them from accessing support.

Furthermore, in some cases, parents expressed discomfort with the level of personal information required, describing the process as “intrusive” or “very invasive”. This perception led some families to opt out of applying altogether, even when eligible, preferring to rely on informal childcare or pay privately for childcare.

These administrative barriers are not recent. Research conducted by Chadwick et al (2018) identifies that the childcare application process for childcare in England, itself is a significant barrier to uptake of funded childcare entitlements. Some parents chose not to apply at all, anticipating a frustrating and complicated process that outweighed the perceived benefits. Others began but were deterred partway through due to practical obstacles. Key challenges included technical issues, such as missing application codes and poorly designed digital forms, which were especially difficult for parents with limited computer skills. Communication problems such as misinformation and erroneous rejection letters added further confusion. Some parents perceived the system as deliberately complex, designed to discourage applicants who were not in desperate need. The study also highlights that online-only systems posed major accessibility issues for families without reliable internet

---

#### Footnotes

[3] Arad Research (2021) did not conduct primary interviews with parents due to COVID-19 restrictions. Instead, the research analysed existing online discussion forums, specifically Mumsnet, Student Room, and Money Saving Expert, to explore parents' experiences and queries regarding childcare support.

access or digital literacy. One parent, for instance, had to ask a friend for help completing an online form.

Similarly to the findings of Mendizabal-Espinosa et al (2024), parents with English as an Additional Language (EAL) found the process especially difficult, often needing face-to-face support that was not consistently available. Overall, Chadwick et al (2018) show that the application process, can be a significant deterrent. These structural and informational barriers can prevent families from accessing funded childcare entitlements even when they qualify, shaping parental decisions about whether and how to engage with formal childcare.

Overall, the evidence reviewed in this section highlights that access and availability are not only practical considerations for families with children under the age of 3, but deeply structural issues that shape, constrain and sometimes determine parental childcare decisions. While a lack of places, age restrictions, location disparities continue to limit formal childcare uptake, parents and families also face significant administrative challenges. Confusion around eligibility, inconsistent communication, and burdensome application processes contribute to delayed or forgone use of childcare, especially among disadvantaged families.

These findings suggest that improving access is not solely about increasing provision, but also about simplifying systems, clarifying funded childcare entitlements, and ensuring that families are supported through the process of navigating childcare. Without these improvements, decisions about whether and when to use formal childcare will remain shaped more by structural barriers than by parental choice.

### **3.3. Parental values, beliefs and preferences**

While practical needs such as cost and availability of childcare remain dominant in parental decision making, another body of literature reveals that parents of young children also consider the developmental benefits of choosing formal childcare. These benefits are typically framed around early socialisation, emotional growth and foundational cognitive development, even when infants are not engaged in structured learning (Berlinski et al 2020; Sollars 2016).

#### **3.3.1. Perceived developmental benefits**

Most recent data from the Department of Education's (2024) childcare survey of parents in England reveals that 56% of parents with children aged 0 to 4 years, cited educational and social development reasons as the main motivation for using formal childcare. This suggests a growing recognition among parents of the role that early childcare plays in shaping long-term developmental outcomes.

Following on from this, Berlinski et al (2020) provide empirical support for early formal childcare as a development tool. Using administrative data from Denmark, the study found that earlier entry into childcare was associated with reduced likelihood of inadequate language skills at age 5, especially among boys. The absence of long-term negative health

effects reinforces the development case for early enrolment, suggesting that structured language-rich environments can yield cognitive benefits well before school age. Although the study does not specifically explore parental motivations, it does provide an important empirical backdrop to understand when many parents seek formal childcare as a means of supporting their child's development.

Other qualitative studies have also indicated that parents of infants and toddlers often hold strong beliefs about the developments and advantages of formal childcare. For example, Sollars (2016) found that while employment was the primary motivator for parents choosing formal childcare, for children under the age of 3, parents cited social development as their top reason for enrolment. Parents in this study hoped formal childcare settings would encourage early learning, communication and peer interaction. Importantly, even for children under the age of 2, parents in this study valued play-based activities like singing and craft, which suggest that socialisation was seen as a developmental goal.

Degotardi et al (2018) offer further insight into how parents of very young children frame their childcare decisions around developmental factors. In their study of Australian families using long day care for children aged under 3, 68% reported peer interaction as a key motivator, while 44% emphasised the value of educational environments. Parents in this study expressed strong preferences for nurturing play-based settings that support emotional and social development, often rating these factors more highly than logistical concerns such as convenience or affordability. The study challenges assumptions that parents of infants choose formal childcare purely for work related reasons instead, showing that many actively seek environments they believe will nurture developmental progress from an early age for their children.

In addition to this, Ferguson et al (2020) highlight how social development emerged as a consistent and salient theme for parents' decision making in their study. Drawing on open-ended responses from US parents (many with children under the age of 3), they found that socialisation was the most frequently cited reason for enrolling in centre-based care, with parents describing wanting their children to "make friends" and "have the company of other children" (p. 373). These findings align with more recent research conducted by Crossfield et al (2023) who found that day nurseries were perceived not only as childcare facilities, but also as "the first steps of education" (p. 9), supporting communication, independence and emotional resilience. While the majority of Crossfield et al's (2023) sample included preschool age children, parental perceptions of childcare development were consistent across groups.

Other studies have explored how cultural and linguistic values shape perceptions of developmental benefits in childcare. Mhathúna and Fhionnlaioich (2020), while studying Irish medium emerging preschools found that even for children as young as 2 years and 8 months old, parents strongly valued social and cognitive development alongside bilingual language acquisition. Many parents in this study praised the child centred, play-based pedagogical approach as developmentally appropriate and emotionally supportive. Although the age range of children included in the study slightly exceed 2-year-olds, the findings suggest that developmental motivations such as social bonding and cultural identity are central to childcare decisions, even in culturally specific settings.

While Mhathúna and Fhionnlaoich's (2020) study is situated within an Irish context, its findings offer a valuable lens through which to consider potential parallels in Wales. Given the Welsh Government's strategic commitments to promoting bilingualism from the earliest stages of childhood, as outlined in the [Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Plan \(2024\)](#), it is plausible that Welsh parents may similarly perceive bilingual childcare as developmentally beneficial. While the empirical research on parental motivations for choosing Welsh medium childcare as a developmental benefit remains limited, the policy direction indicates growing emphasis on bilingualism as a core component of early years childcare. Research conducted by [Hughes and Jones \(2021\)](#) highlights this and shows that Welsh parents with children under the age of 3, often viewed Welsh medium formal childcare as a means of supporting not only bilingual language acquisition, but also broader development goals such as social integration and emotional wellbeing. This suggests that, even in the early years, linguistic and cultural identity can be central to parental decision-making in Wales.

Taken together, the findings outlined above illustrate that developmental motivations, including socialisation, emotional well-being and early language acquisition, are increasingly central to parental decision-making, even for children under the age of 3. While much of the existing literature focusses on contexts outside of Wales, emerging evidence suggests that similar patterns may be present among Welsh families, particularly in relation to Welsh-medium provision. The alignment between parental aspirations and national policy goals (such as Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) and [Cymraeg 2050](#)), points to fertile areas for further research

### **3.3.2. Trust, culture and connection in childcare settings**

In the context of ECPLC, parents have also emphasised the importance of trust, cultural alignment, and meaningful relationships when evaluating and selecting childcare settings. The term "cultural" here refers to the degree to which services respect and reflect the beliefs, values and languages and lived experiences of the families choosing to use their service. A growing body of research indicates how these relational and cultural dimensions act as factors influencing parental engagement and decision-making for ECPLC.

Bosire et al (2025), in their qualitative study with under-resourced parents in the US Midwest with children aged 0 to 5, found that parents place high value on relational and cultural fit within childcare settings. Through focus groups with 118 parents, their study revealed that detailed communication, caregiver patience and consistent staffing were key to fostering trust and secure attachments. Cultural competence was equally important with many parents preferring caregivers who shared their cultural backgrounds. Notably, some families avoided formal childcare altogether due to fears of cultural insensitivity or

discrimination opting instead for community-based care <sup>[Footnote 4]</sup><sup>[Footnote 5]</sup>. This suggests that beyond structural concerns such as cost and availability, relational trust and cultural alignment also shape parental decision making.

Similarly, Crossfield et al (2023) identify trust and emotional safety as core parental concerns especially for families with children under 3. Parents valued continuity of staff, warmth and emotional attentiveness, all of which helped children develop secure relationships. Moreover, staff retention was frequently cited as a marker of quality with one parent commenting “you don't want a new face every time thinking who is this that's looking after my child”, emphasising that parents take notice of relational factors when engaging with formal childcare provision. This underscores how emotional security for both parent and child is fundamental to the perceived quality and potential uptake of formal childcare.

Wilson-Smith et al (2022) further emphasised the significance of staff characteristics such as warmth, professionalism and approachability in establishing trust. In their in-depth interviews with 39 parents and carers in Scotland, parents frequently cited long term relationships with known and dependable staff as a basis for confidence in ECPLC services. Conversely, negative experiences such as inattentiveness to a child's additional needs, resulted in significant trust issues for some families. These findings highlight how emotional connection and consistent caregiver child relationships are not merely desirable qualities, but crucial criterion in parental decision making about formal childcare use.

The cultural dimension of quality is foregrounded in Mhathúna and Fhionnlaioich's (2021) study, which discovered that cultural identity and language preservation was central to parental motivations for selecting Irish medium preschool. Even when parents were not fluent in Irish, many viewed Irish medium education as a way to connect children with national heritage and foster a sense of belonging. Most parents (81%) indicated they wanted their children to speak Irish and 74% expressed personal interest in the language. This study highlights how cultural and linguistic values can be powerful drivers known early educational choices beyond purely educational or logistical considerations.

In Wales, [Hughes and Jones \(2021\)](#) examined why some eligible families sometimes do not take up formal funded childcare provision, such as the childcare offer for Wales. Their findings highlight the interplay between trust, cultural familiarity and structural fit. Some families do not take up formal childcare due to a lack of Welsh medium options, misalignment with religious or personal values, or perceptions of impersonal care compared to family-based alternatives. For families of children with suspected or diagnosed additional learning needs, such as autism, trust in provider's ability to accommodate their child's specific needs was paramount. One parent in their report chose not to use the full entitlement of the childcare offer for Wales because their child required a predictable routine

---

#### Footnotes

[4] Bosire et al (2025) do not define 'community-based care', but they do describe it through examples. They refer to informal care provided by family, trusted friends, neighbours or members of the same ethnic or religious community.

[5] Examples from Bosire et al (2025) include Somali parents expressing discomfort with childcare settings that did not accommodate their religious practices, non-English speaking parents feeling excluded from school engagement, and concerns about racial bias in how children of colour are treated in group settings.

and struggled with transitions. These insights underscore the emotional considerations parents make, which shape their engagement with formal care.

Furthermore, Skattebol's (2016) study outlines the longstanding nature of these concerns and factors. Exploring the perspectives of low-income and refugee families across 6 research sites across inner-city, outer-ring, and rural locations in Australia., the study found that culturally respectful environments were deeply valued, not only for cost and accessibility, but for how they aligned with communal child-rearing norms. Family daycare was often preferred by some for its cultural familiarity and reciprocity. As families stabilised, many transitioned to more formal settings that still respected emotional autonomy and family traditions. One parent appreciated that her child was allowed to choose whether to nap saying "they respect the child's feeling". Indigenous families, meanwhile, favoured play-based models that allowed for service access without surveillance, preserving parenting agency and community connection. Across these diverse groups, the relational cultural aspects of ECEC were seen as not secondary but foundational.

Collectively these studies illustrate that for many families, particularly those from marginalised or culturally diverse backgrounds, trust, cultural alignment and emotional connection are core determinants of formal childcare quality and uptake. While structural features such as cost or opening hours matter, they are often evaluated through relational lens. Families seek not just access to care, but access to care that respects who they are, their values and their traditions and builds trusting relationships with their children. These studies allow us to keep in mind how future policy and practice in formal childcare should attend to these dimensions of services to be truly inclusive and responsive to the communities they aim to serve.

### **3.3.3. Preference for informal childcare**

Another consistent theme across the literature is parental preference for informal childcare, particularly provided by grandparents and other trusted relatives. This preference is not simply a response to limited access to formal childcare, but often reflects deeper values related to trust, emotional security and family bonding. Additionally, where formal childcare is not accessible or fully available to families with children under 2, parents may rely more heavily on informal care, particularly from grandparents (Biegel et al 2021).

Building on the argument that informal childcare is not just a fallback option, Gambaro et al (2024) highlight that even in contexts where formal childcare services have expanded significantly, parents still rely on informal care, often combining it with formal childcare provision. Their longitudinal study in Germany found that such preferences were driven by unique benefits of informal arrangements, such as trust and flexibility, which are qualities that formal systems may not fully be able to provide. Ferguson et al (2022) discovered similar responses in their quantitative survey of 123 U.S parents with children aged one to five, exploring their top childcare choices. They found that parents often chose relatives to provide childcare because of the safety and trust they provide, and emotional safety of leaving their children with "someone they know".

Similar findings have been reported in Wales by Dallimore (2016). In this qualitative thesis, Dallimore (2016) highlights that informal childcare is most prevalent during the earliest stage of the child's life, especially the first year. Drawing in findings from interviews with parents, he found that parents felt that babies are most vulnerable, and they are not willing to trust "strangers" with them, suggesting that the familiarity of informal childcare is central to parental decisions on early childcare use. These findings reinforce the idea that informal childcare choices are not naïve, but a deliberate and valued choice for their children.

Other studies have also found that grandparents are a specific choice for informal childcare, especially for the child's early years. Cross-national research conducted by DiGessa et al (2016) highlights that grandparental childcare was most prevalent in contexts where formal childcare provision was limited and where both mothers and grandmothers had lower labour force participation. They conclude that "preferences for within-family childcare are strong" in countries where maternal employment is not the norm and formal childcare options are scarce. This suggests that in such settings, informal care is not only a practical necessity but also a culturally endorsed choice. These findings align with Dallimore's (2016) study of Wales, which similarly found that informal care is often a deliberate and valued decision, shaped by trust, cultural norms, and social capital rather than purely economic constraints. Together, these studies highlight the importance of recognising informal childcare as a legitimate and often preferred component of family life, particularly in contexts where formal systems are either inaccessible or culturally less accepted.

However, other researchers have found that grandparents actually offer childcare themselves as they believe that children, especially young children should be raised by family to ensure familial bonding. Qualitative insights from 55 grandparental interviews across England and Scotland from Airey et al's (2020) study offers valuable insight into the motivations of grandparents who offer informal care. To these grandparents, providing childcare was often framed as a positive and voluntary choice, rooted in emotional bonds, moral values and a sense of intergenerational solidarity. Grandparents frequently described offering to care for their grandchildren as a natural extension of their familial role, with some referring to it as "natural". This proactive stance was particularly evident amongst grandmothers who often viewed family-based care as superior to formal childcare, especially for very young children. While the study focuses on grandparents' perspectives, it indirectly reflects parental preferences for informal care, as many grandparents reported that their adult children felt more comfortable leaving their children with trusted family members. These findings suggest that informal care is not only a practical solution but also a culturally and emotionally valued arrangement, shaped by shared family norms and expectations.

Research conducted by Rutigliano (2020) strengthens this point, by highlighting that informal childcare, particularly from grandparents, plays a significant role in shaping family decisions around early childhood care. Using a 2-step analysis of data from the Survey of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), Rutigliano (2020) examined how expectations around grandparental childcare influenced first-birth transitions among adult children. From their analysis, they found that adult children across several European countries were more likely to enter parenthood when they anticipate grandparental childcare

support. However, they also found that in pro-traditional countries, such as Italy where informal care is expected but public, formal childcare is limited, this dynamic can also lead to the postponement of parenthood. The study notes that excessive reliance on family support and social pressure may cause prospective delay or forgo having children altogether. Although this study does not explore grandparents' preferences directly, it highlights the perceived value of informal care and its influence on fertility decisions, reinforcing the centrality of grandparental support in early childcare strategies.

Furthermore, research conducted by Hutchinson (2019) emphasises that grandparental care is increasingly recognised as a preferred and valued arrangement, shaped by emotional bonds, trust, and intergenerational solidarity. Hutchinson (2019), in her qualitative study of Scottish grandparent-carers, found that grandparents were "proactive in making the arrangements to care for their grandchildren," motivated not only by practical needs but by a desire to "build and nurture their families as a whole". Trust and emotional closeness were central, with grandparents describing the joy of reciprocal relationships with grandchildren and the satisfaction of being trusted by their adult children. Again, drawing comparisons to Dallimore (2016) which found that informal care in Wales was often a deliberate choice, transcending economic necessity. He noted that "stronger predictions of informal childcare use were more likely to be related to indicators of social and cultural capital than economic rationalities," and that parents valued the emotional security and cultural continuity offered by family carers.

DiGessa et al (2016) adds a structural dimension, showing that in countries with limited formal childcare and lower female labour force participation, grandparental care was not only common but culturally embedded. They concluded that preferences for within-family childcare are strong in such contexts, especially where formal alternatives are scarce or culturally less accepted. Together, these studies highlight that informal childcare is not merely a fallback but a deeply relational and often preferred form of care, rooted in trust, identity, and intergenerational connection.

Finally, other studies have shown that cultural background and social position also shape how families engage with informal childcare. For example, Bordone et al (2020) found that White British families in the UK were more likely to rely on grandparents, while Black Asian Minority Ethnic families <sup>[Footnote 6]</sup> were less likely to do so, even when other factors like income and proximity were similar. This points to the influence of cultural norms and migration experiences on childcare decisions. In contrast, Skattebol (2016) found that many low-income and marginalised families in Australia actively chose informal care because it offered emotional safety, cultural familiarity, and community connection. Together, these studies show that informal care is shaped not only by practical access, but also by trust, values, and cultural belonging.

---

Footnotes

[6] The term 'BME' is used in Bordone et al (2020) and reflects the authors' terminology. In line with the Welsh Government's [Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan](#), this report uses the full phrase "Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic", or "ethnic minority" for short

## 4. Limitations and future research

While this rapid evidence review provides a thematic insight into the factors that influence parental decision making on childcare, several limitations must be considered.

Firstly, the literature search identified a mix of peer-reviewed academic studies and grey literature in this area. Some sources identified offered valuable insight into parental decision making and the various contextual landscapes behind those choices, however, they lacked detailed methodological transparency. For this reason, their findings have not been included in this report.

Secondly, the review focussed on literature published within the past ten years. This timeframe aligned with a rapid evidence review design and ensured relevance to current policy and practice. However, it is likely that this 10-year timeframe excluded earlier studies that could have offered historical or longitudinal perspectives on childcare decision-making.

Thirdly, although the review prioritised evidence related to the Welsh context, many of the reviewed studies were conducted in other UK nations and internationally. While these studies did offer useful comparisons, and even parallels (for example [Hughes and Jones \(2021\)](#) and Bosire, Daro, Gallagher and Caddell (2025)), differences in policy frameworks, funding models and cultural contexts limit the direct applicability to Wales childcare landscape.

Finally, the age ranges covered in this literature were often broader than the review's initial focus. Many studies included children aged 0 to 4 or 0 to 5, and some with even larger ranges such as 0 to 15. This required a process of combing through studies to extract age specific insights, if available. In some cases, data were not disaggregated by age, which may affect the precision and relevance of conclusions drawn.

These limitations reflect the constraints of the available evidence base and the rapid review methodology. Nonetheless, the thematic findings offer a foundation for understanding the key factors shaping parental decision-making and identifying areas for future research. Future research should explore how parents in Wales navigate these themes, especially in relation to newer entitlements and bilingual provision (Flying Start expansion and Cymraeg 2050). Additionally, more targeted studies focusing specifically on the 9 months to 2 years age group would help clarify how early childcare decisions are made, and how policy can better support families during this stage.

## 5. Conclusions

This rapid evidence review synthesises current UK and international research on the factors that shape parental decision-making around formal childcare use for children aged 9 months to 2 years. While the evidence base varies in scope and methodological strength, several consistent themes emerged across the literature reviewed. Among these, access and availability stood out as the most consistently evidenced and structurally significant factors with multiple studies highlighting how limited provision, age restrictions, and administrative complexity constrain parental choices. Other key themes such as affordability, perceived developmental benefits, trust and cultural alignment, with preferences for informal care also featuring prominently.

The findings reveal that parental decision-making is rarely shaped by a singular factor. Instead, they reflect a complex interplay between structural constraints and relational considerations. For example, affordability and accessibility of childcare are often intertwined, even when childcare is available, its high costs make it inaccessible for some families. Similarly, accessibility and parental values highlight how even though formal childcare provision is available to parents and families, parental values and trust in formal childcare provisions sometimes override the availability of a space.

Importantly, this review highlights that barriers to formal childcare use are not only logistical but also informational and emotional. Parents frequently report confusion around eligibility, inconsistent communication and burdensome application processes. These issues are especially pronounced for disadvantaged families who face additional challenges such as digital exclusion, language barriers and limited social networks. In such cases, informal care, particularly grandparental care, often becomes a preferred and trusted alternative, not simply due to convenience but because it aligns with familial values and its emotional safety.

Taken together the evidence indicates that improving access to formal childcare requires more than expanding provision. It demands attention to system design, including simplifying administration processes, clarifying funded childcare entitlements and ensuring culturally responsive and emotionally supportive environments. Without these improvements decisions about whether and when to use formal childcare will continue to be shaped by more systemic limitations than by genuine parental choice.

## 6. Reference section

Airey, L., Lain, D., Jandrić, J. and Loretto, W. (2020). [‘A selfish generation? ‘Baby boomers’, values, and the provision of childcare for grandchildren.’](#), *The Sociological Review*, Volume 69, Issue 4, pages 812 to 829.

Anderson, E.S., Jackson, A., Wailoo, M.P. and Peterson, S.A. (2002). [‘Childcare decisions: parental choice or chance?’](#), *Childcare Health and Development*, Volume 28, Issue 5, pages 391 to 401.

Arad Research (2021). [‘A review of the childcare support available for parents in education, training or returning to work’](#), Cardiff: Welsh Government (Accessed 26 July 2025).

Benison, T. and Sin, I. (2023). [‘The wage cost of a lack of access to affordable childcare in Aotearoa New Zealand’](#), *New Zealand Economic Papers*. Volume 58, Issue 1, pages 40 to 73.

Berlinski, S., Ferreyra, M.M., Flabbi, L. and Martin, J.D. (2020). [‘Child Care Markets, Parental Labor Supply, and Child Development’](#) (Accessed on 30 July 2025).

Biegel, N., Neels, K. & Van den Berg, L. (2021). [‘Uptake of childcare arrangements—Grandparental availability and availability of formal childcare’](#), *Social Sciences*, Volume 10, Issue 2.

Bordone, V., Evandrou, M. and Vlachantoni, A. (2020). [‘Ethnicity and grandparental child care in the United Kingdom’](#), *Ageing and Society*, Volume 40, Issue 4, pages 713 to 734.

Bosire, J.P., Daro, A.M., Gallagher, K.C. & Caddell, K.D. (2025). [‘Expanding the childcare table of influence: Reaching under-resourced families to understand their needs and barriers to accessing early childhood care and education’](#), *Children and Youth Services Review*, Volume 168, Article 108056.

Bouchard, I., Cheung, L. and Pacheco, G. (2021). [‘Evaluating the impact of 20 hours free early childhood education on mothers’ labour force participation and earnings’](#). *New Zealand Economic Papers*, Volume 55, Issue 2, pages 188 to 202 (Accessed 2 July 2025).

Brewer, M., Cattan, S., Crawford, C. and Rabe, B. (2022). [‘Does more free childcare help parents work more?’](#). *Labour Economics*, Volume 74, Article 102100.

Bucelli, I. and McKnight, A. (2022). [‘Poverty and social exclusion: review of international evidence on early childhood education and care’](#) (Accessed 26th June 2025).

Chadwick, T., Chidley, S., Jones, H. and Husain, F. (2018). [‘Low and middle-income parents’ understanding of childcare entitlements: A qualitative study’](#) (Accessed 27 June 2025).

Chapman, A., and Fitzpatrick, C. (2025). [‘Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy: A Work in Progress?’](#), *Social Policy and Society*, pages 1 to 14.

Chen, H. and Bradbury, A. (2019). '[Parental choice of childcare in England: Choosing in phases and the split market](#)', British Educational Research Journal, Volume 46, Issue 2, pages 281 to 300 (Accessed 2 July 2025).

Collischon, M., Kuehnle, D., and Oberfichtner, M. (2024) '[Who Benefits from Cash-for-Care? Effects of a Home Care Subsidy on Maternal Employment, Childcare Choices, and Children's Development](#)', Journal of Human Resources, Volume 59, Issue 4, pages 1011 to 1051.

Crossfield, J., Zatterin, G. and Berkley, M. (2023). '[Childcare in England: parental motivations for use, decision-making and perceptions of quality - A qualitative study](#)' (Accessed 26th June 2025).

Dallimore, D. (2016). '[Informal Childcare and Childcare Choice in Wales](#)' (Accessed 26th June 2025).

Degotardi, S., Sweller, N., Fenech., M. and Beath, A. (2018). '[Influences on parents' childcare choices: A comparative analysis of preschool and long day care users](#)', Child & Youth Care Forum, Volume 47, pages 683 to 700.

Department for Education (2024). '[Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents: Reporting year 2023](#)' (Accessed on 30 July 2025).

Department for Education (2025). '[Childcare and early years survey of parents: Reporting year 2024](#)' (Accessed on 30 July 2025).

Di Gessa, G., Glaser, K., Price, D., Ribe, E. and Tinker, A. (2016). '[What Drives National Differences in Intensive Grandparental Childcare in Europe?](#)', The Journals of Gerontology: Series B, Volume 71, Issue 1, pages 141 to 153.

Doorley K, Tuda D, McTague A, Regan M (2023), '[Childcare in Ireland: Usage, Affordability and Incentives to Work](#)', Economic and Social Review, Volume 54, Issue 4, pages 247 to 283.

Etherington, D., Gray, M., and Buckner, L. (2025). '[Still Digging Deeper: The Impact of Austerity on Inequalities and Deprivation in the Coalfield Areas](#)' (Accessed on 30 July 2025).

Ferguson. J., Lampkins, C., Moody, B. and Shpancer, N. (2022). '[Careful Choices: Parents Reflect on their Childcare Decisions](#)', Child Care in Practice, Volume 28, Issue 3, pages 368 to 380.

Gambaro, L., Schäper, C. and Spiess, C.K. (2024). '[Crowded-out? Changes in informal childcare during the expansion of formal services in Germany](#)', Social Policy and Administration, Volume 59, Issue 3, pages 383 to 398.

Garritty, C., Gartlehner, G., Nussbaumer-Streit, B., King, V. J., Hamel, C., Kamel, C., Affengruber, L. and Stevens, A. (2021). '[Cochrane Rapid Reviews Methods Group offers evidence-informed guidance to conduct rapid reviews](#)', Journal of Clinical Epidemiology, Volume 130, pages 13 to 22.

Hamel, C., Michaud, A., Thuku, M., Skidmore, B., Stevens, A., Nussbaumer-Streit, B. and Garritty, C. (2021). '[Defining rapid reviews: a systematic scoping review and thematic analysis of definitions and defining characteristics of rapid reviews](#)', Journal of Clinical Epidemiology, Volume 129, pages 74 to 85.

HM Treasury. (2020). '[The Magenta Book: Central Government guidance on evaluation](#)' (Accessed 25 June 2025).

Hughes, B. and Jones, K. (2021). '[Welsh Centre for Language Planning: Qualitative study of beliefs, behaviours and barriers affecting parental decisions regarding childcare and early education](#)', Cardiff: Welsh Government (Accessed 26 July 2025).

Hutchinson, J.C. (2019). '[Learning for Life Through Building Families: Grandparents' Care for Babies and Toddlers in Scotland](#)' (Accessed 2 July 2025).

La Valle, I., Lewis, J., Crawford, C., Hodges, L., Castellanos, P., and Outhwaite, L. (2024). '[Early education for disadvantaged children: How local action can support take-up of the 15 hours entitlement](#)' (Accessed on 30 July 2025).

Lane, J. and Lewis, S. (2023). '[Overview of key themes in the 2022-2027 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment](#)', Cardiff: Welsh Government (Accessed on 30 July 2025).

Maes, J., Neels, K., Biegel, N. and Wood, J. (2023). '[Uptake of formal childcare among second generation and native mothers in Belgium: can increasing local childcare availability narrow migrant-native gaps?](#)', Journal of Population Sciences, Volume 79, Article number 7.

McLean, C., Naumann, I. and Koslowski, A. (2017). '[Access to Childcare in Europe: Parents' Logistical Challenges in Cross-national Perspective](#)', Social Policy & Administration, Volume 51, Issue 7, pages 1367 to 1385 (Accessed 2 July 2025).

Mendizabal-Espinosa, R., Bonhote, K., Ko, S.Y and Dickson, K. (2024). '[Increasing Access to Childcare for Ethnic Minority and Disadvantaged Communities: A Rapid Evidence Review](#)' (Accessed 26 June 2025).

Mhic Mhathúna, M. & Nic Fhionnlaoich, F. (2021) '[Why parents chose to send their children to Irish-medium immersion preschools: Learning from parental choice strategies in Celtic countries](#)', European Early Childhood Education Research Journal. Volume 29, Issue 3, pages 441 to 454.

Mollidor, C., Mason, E. and Zatterin, G. (2022). '[Childcare in England: Parental perceptions of availability, flexibility and affordability: A qualitative study](#)' (Accessed 26th June 2025).

Mumford, K., A., Pena-Boquete, Y. and Parera-Nicolau, A. (2020). '[Labour supply and childcare: Allowing both parents to choose](#)', Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics, Volume 82, Issue 3, pages 577 to 602.

Ni Luanaigh, A., Agur, M., Webb, C., Woods, D. & Harvey-Rich, S, (2024). '[Research into the Childcare Offer for Wales Additional Support Grant: Final report](#)', Cardiff: Welsh Government (Accessed on 30 July 2025).

- Outhwaite, L., La Valle, I. and Crawford, C. (2023). [‘Briefing Note: Who uses government-funded early education in England, and what explains the variation in take-up?’](#) (Accessed 26 June 2025).
- Pungello, E.P. and Kurtz-Costes, B. (1999). [‘Why and how working women choose childcare: a review with a focus on infancy’](#), *Developmental Review*, Volume 19, Issue 1, pages 31 to 96.
- Rutigliano, R. (2020). [‘Counting on Potential Grandparents? Adult Children's Entry Into Parenthood Across European Countries’](#), *Demography*, Volume 57, Issue 4, pages 1393 to 1414.
- Simon, A., Owen, C. and Hollingworth, K. (2017). [‘Is Targeting Formal Childcare the Best Way to Meet the Needs of Families in Britain?’](#), *American Journal of Educational Research*, Volume 5, Issue 7, pages 794 to 800.
- Skattebol, J. (2016). [‘Taking advantage of early childhood education and care: the priorities of low-income families in their children's early years’](#), *Families, Relationships and Societies*, Volume 5, Issue 1, pages 109 to 125.
- Sollars, V. (2016). [‘Parents’ expectations about early years services’](#), *Early Years*, Volume 37, Issue 3, pages 285 to 299.
- Wheelock, J. and Jones, K. (2002). [‘Grandparents are the next best thing: informal childcare for working parents in urban Britain’](#), *Journal of Social Policy*, Volume 31, Issue 3, pages 441 to 463.
- White-Tennant, G. (2021). [‘Disturbed by the Dissonance: A Phenomenological Study of Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care’](#), Doctoral thesis, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Wilson-Smith, E., Skellington, Orr, K. and Barry, M. (2022). [‘Decisions influencing early learning and childcare use: understanding social policies and social contexts’](#), Scottish Government (Accessed 26 June 2025).
- Zangger, C. and Widmer, J. (2020). [‘Choosing what is best for one's children? Experimental evidence on parents' responsiveness to childcare subsidies and their preferences for different childcare arrangements’](#), *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Volume 51, pages 110 to 123.