

Choice for parents,
the best start for children:
a ten year strategy for childcare



Choice for parents, the best start for children

We want to ensure that every child has the best start in life. We also want to give parents more choice about how they balance work and family life.

This leaflet sets out our ten year strategy for childcare and asks for your views at the end.

Since 1997, we have made a lot of progress in increasing the range of choices available to families. For example:

- all families with children get more money through higher Child Benefit and tax credits
- maternity and paternity pay and leave have been increased
- parents get help with childcare costs through tax credits
- all three and four year olds get free part-time early education
- there are over 500,000 more registered childcare places
- local Sure Start programmes support families and children in more than 500 areas around the country
- parents of young or disabled children have the right to request flexible working
- parents can get help with training or returning to work

However, parents still say they find it hard to balance work and family life. Some of the biggest problems are that:

- childcare can be very expensive
- some mothers feel they have to return to work too soon after their child is born
- it can be difficult to find the right kind of childcare
- new parents can feel isolated
- fathers aren't able to spend as much time with their children as they would like
- parents are worried about the quality of childcare

The ten year strategy for childcare sets out how we will tackle these problems. Some of these policies will come into effect in the next couple of years, while others will take longer.

These new policies are explained in more detail in this leaflet. They will mean that:

- parents will have greater choice about balancing work and family life
- parents will be able to find an affordable, flexible and high quality childcare place for children up to the age of 14 that meets their needs
- the childcare available will be among the best in the world, with a highly skilled workforce
- families will be able to afford high quality childcare



Choice for parents

Many families find it hard to juggle work and family life. This can put pressure on both parents and children. Many parents who work would like to be able to spend more time with their children, but cannot do so because of their jobs. Mothers often want to spend longer at home with a new baby, rather than returning to work so soon. Fathers often feel they miss out on time with their children.

We want to give parents greater choice about balancing work and family life. In this ten year strategy for childcare we are announcing new

policies to help working parents with home and work responsibilities. These new policies include:

- extending paid maternity leave to nine months from April 2007 with a goal of 12 months by the end of the next Parliament
- a new right for mothers to transfer some of their maternity pay and leave to fathers
- extending the right to request flexible working arrangements (currently available to parents of young children) to parents of older children

Available childcare

Some parents have problems finding a childcare place. For parents of three and four year olds, it can be difficult to fit work or training around the free 12.5 hours of early education that they are entitled to each week. Parents of older children are often unable to get the before or after school care that their children need. Some parents can have trouble finding information about childcare.

An affordable, flexible, high quality childcare place will be available for all families who need one.

Looking ahead, we have the following goals:

- by 2010, affordable before and after school care all year round for children aged between three and fourteen
- by 2010, a Sure Start children's centre in every community. Children's centres offer services for under fives and their families,

bringing together health, early education, childcare and advice and support for parents. Children's centres build on the successful Sure Start approach and are responsive to the needs of the local population

- more hours of free early education and care for three and four year olds so that
 - from 2006 all three and four year olds will get 12.5 hours free for 38 weeks a year, up from 33 weeks now
 - starting in 2007 this will be extended to 15 free hours a week
 - in the longer term, it will be increased to 20 free hours a week
 - parents will be able to spread their free childcare entitlement flexibly over a minimum of three days



Choice



Availability

Improving the quality of childcare

Parents need to have confidence in the quality of childcare. There have been reports that some kinds of childcare can be bad for some children. It is hard to find out how good a particular provider is, and parents are not happy leaving their child in the care of people they don't know.

We are committed to guaranteeing high quality childcare for all children. The ten year strategy for childcare sets out the following measures to make sure that our childcare is among the best in the world:

- investment to ensure quality, sustainable, affordable provision
- a better qualified workforce, with a reformed career and training structure
- professional support for childminders and other home based childcarers
- reforms to childcare regulation and inspection, including more clear information for parents on the quality of providers

Making childcare more affordable

Childcare can be too expensive for some families. Families with pre-school children can face particularly high bills, as do larger families and those who live in high cost areas like London and the South East.

We want all families to be able to afford high quality childcare that meets their needs. In this ten year strategy for childcare we are announcing:

- more free hours of early education and care for all three and four year olds
- our commitment to reducing the proportion of childcare costs paid by a typical family over time
- improvements to the childcare part of the Working Tax Credit to help low and middle income families with their childcare costs
 - an increase in the maximum eligible costs that parents can claim from £200 a week (£135 for one child) to £300 a week (£175 for one child) from April 2005
 - an increase in the proportion of childcare costs that parents can claim from 70% to 80% from April 2006



Quality



Affordability

Getting involved

We want to hear your views on this ten year strategy for childcare. We want to be sure that it fully reflects the needs and priorities of families.

This is part of a consultation process with parents, childcare providers, the voluntary sector, childcare experts, employers and other interested groups.

For more details of the consultation process see www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/childcare .

Your views

Please send us your views, if possible by the end of February 2005. You can write to us at:

Childcare Strategy
HM Treasury
1 Horse Guards Road
London SW1A 2HQ

Email:

childcare.consultation@hm-treasury.gov.uk

We look forward to hearing from you.

Finding out more

Children's Information Service (CIS) has information on all local childcare, early education and other care and support services for children and parents in your local community. Visit www.childcarelink.gov.uk or call 0800 096 0296 to find out about your nearest Children's Information Service.

For more information about Government support for children, parents and communities and details of Sure Start programmes, visit www.surestart.gov.uk or call 0870 001 2345.

For more information about Child Tax Credit or Working Tax Credit, call the Tax Credit Helpline on 0845 300 3900 or visit www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/taxcredits .

For more information about entitlements to maternity and paternity pay and leave, flexible working and other employment rights, visit www.tiger.gov.uk or call 08457 474747.

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