

'It takes a village': parents' perspectives on raising healthy children.

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Executive summary

- Discussions with nearly 50 parents from up and down the country – and from all walks of life - give us rarely seen insights into the real ‘frontline’ in the nation’s mission to improve children’s health.
- These conversations highlighted quite how much of the healthcare children receive is provided at home, by parents and carers, and in communities.
- This appeared as both an inherent part of a nurturing childhood, and a response to the pressure on formal services, leaving families taking on an increasing share of the burden and left to ‘figure things out’ on their own.

Executive summary

- For parents, a healthy childhood was as much – if not more – about emotional and social wellbeing as physical health, built on balance, variety and positive human relationships.
- This was in sharp contrast to the indoor, sedentary, screen-time dominated childhoods they feared were becoming the norm – and which they often compared unfavourably to their own childhoods.
- Notably, a healthy childhood had little to do with healthcare services, and much more to do with the home environment, informal support and activities in the community, and broader societal pressures (especially technology, food and the economy)

Executive summary

- While parents framed their child's health as primarily their responsibility, certain things made this harder than it needed to be – and than it had been for previous generations. In particular:
 - Costs – especially of healthy food and activities.
 - Time and energy, with the 'juggle' of work, childcare and their child's needs harder to keep in balance.
 - Technological change, generating 'information overload' for parents and a whole new dimension of their children's lives to monitor and manage.

Executive summary

- Parents' experiences of formal services compounded their challenges, with support described as hard to access, inconsistent, and too often leaving families to battle for help – or go it alone.
- Long waits were pushing families to stretch their budgets pay privately, craft their own 'DIY' package of support, or simply leave issues unaddressed.
- Encounters with professionals were mixed: some felt rushed, transactional or judgmental, while a few exceptional individuals stood out for care and compassion.
- This is a worrying sign of the strain on public services, but there were also signs of under-utilisation due to poor signposting, with parents 'stumbling upon' support rather than being guided to it.

Executive summary

- Ultimately, parents accepted that services would never be able to replace their role in their child's health, especially not under current pressures. They simply asked for modest changes to enable them to perform that role. In particular:
 - More human, personal relationships with professionals, reminding them 'your everyday is my once in a lifetime'.
 - Protection against pressures that they could not manage alone, especially the ubiquity of unhealthy food and marketing, and the ease with which children could access devices and harmful online content.
 - Better preparation and guidance for the realities of raising children – more thoroughgoing antenatal classes, and ongoing, informal support in communities.

Methodology

Methodology

- 6 x 90 min focus groups with 43 parents and carers of children 0-18.
- 3 sessions thematically focused on early years (0-5) and 3 on adolescence (11-18) as particularly critical periods for development and creating the foundations for lifelong health.
- Participants primarily recruited via local children's services from across England, and one by specialist recruiters to top up the sample.
- Sampling to ensure as diverse a range of perspective as possible by SES, working status and ethnicity, and a reasonable spread by gender and location. (*See Appendix: some sample biases which we correct for via nationally representative poll*).

Methodology

- All groups asked:
 - *What makes a ‘healthy childhood’? What are the most important ingredients?*
 - *What makes it difficult for you to provide a healthy childhood for your children?*
 - *What services or other forms of support have you used to keep your children healthy? What has been helpful / not?*
 - *What types of support or changes to existing support would make the biggest difference to parents and carers like you?*

Defining a healthy childhood

When asked what a 'healthy childhood' looked like, parents emphasised:

- Social and emotional aspects more than physical ones.
 - Being exposed to varied experiences and opportunities, with an emphasis on 'balance' and avoiding excess screen time.
 - Feeling safe, loved and having strong relationships with caregivers.
 - Consistency, routine and boundaries.
- NB emphasis on caregivers and their community rather than formal services.

Parents tended to think of their children's health holistically, mentioning both mental and physical aspects of health.

So I suppose for me, a healthy childhood is about covering all bases, being quite holistic. So mental health, physical health, healthy eating, socialising well and preparing a healthy child for a healthy adulthood as well.

Parent of 7 month old, Plymouth. Focus Group 3.

And also the balance of things as well. So trying to sort of balance, like physical health needs with being active and making sure that my children, have you know, like, eaten, well, slept, well been out, done lots of things, and balancing those physical and mental health needs, making sure it's all nice and level.

Parent of 6 and 11 year old, Lincoln. Focus Group 5.

[A healthy childhood is] providing an environment that will enable the child to grow physically... good food, good rest - and yeah, also their soul, in terms of the emotions them being be able to express themselves, being able to be free, and, you know, just to talk... So it's being able to cater for all those aspects.

Parent of 10 and 12 year old, Surrey. Focus Group 6.

This said, social and emotional aspects were noticeably more prominent than physical ones.

For me, a healthy child really is a happy child, a very well-rounded child that thinks about the future in a positive way, sleeps well and, yeah, communicates with you well and and has hopes and desires for the future. And yeah, so a well-rounded child that is very healthy, emotionally, physically and mentally.

Parent of 18, 16, 14, 12 and 2 year old, London. Focus Group 5.

Personally, it comes down to happiness... So, like, not just in terms of diet – like, we can give them fruit, we can give them veg, we can try and make them eat all these things that they might not necessarily eat when we hand them to them - but I do think a lot of it is like their home. Like, have they got the right toys to develop different things. And I think a lot of that comes down to them being happy. I think that creates a healthy child.

Parent of 0 and 2 year old, Kent. Focus Group 2

I just think... if they're mentally happy, they're brought up to be respectful, and they're grounded... that's what you really want for your kids .

Parent of 7, 9 and 13 year old, London. Focus Group 6

By far the most common responses centred on exposure to a variety of different people and experiences.

For us, it's just exposing them to all kinds of things, so different kinds of foods, different kinds of ways to play different kinds of ways to use their brains, you know, playing inside, playing outside, yeah, just exposing them to all kinds of things, so they can see the world around them.

Parent of 5 and 7 year old, London, Focus Group 1

I think a healthy child should be one that is really inquisitive, naturally... I think that means they are aware of their world, but also want to understand it. And I think that comes from nourishment and nourished mind and nourished body, and not nourishment just from a diet point of view, but actually from a familial point of view, having the right kind of input from friendship groups, from family.

Parent of 2 and 4 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 2

We've always tried to do different stuff with them... We've taken them places, whether it be the seaside, whether it be different parks... different places... Just a bit of a mixture of everything, really.

Parent of 16, 18 and 21 year old, Kingston-on-Thames. Focus Group 6

This was often contrasted with a sedentary childhood spent indoors and dominated by devices.

I think for me, it's mainly giving them the opportunities... finding out what's on in the local area, whether it's sports activities or, when they were younger, taking them to the park, Sure starts, and things like that. But now they're getting older, it's trying to find things that they can still do now in the local gym, finding things for them to do, because otherwise they'd be happy just stuck at home and on the devices.

Parent of 10, 11 and 14 year old, Rochdale. Focus Group 4.

Stimulating them in a positive way. So for me, it looks like puzzles. It looks like being active. It looks like doing reading and just a wide variety of things available. It's not screen time, basically, which is a really easy thing to fall into.

Parent of 4 year old, London. Focus Group 1.

I try to encourage a healthy balance. It's hard with teenage boys... it can be quite difficult to get them up and out doing stuff.... So he's allowed to do his gaming and his computer activities, but he has to counteract it with some kind of physical exercise... I've had to instil that, because if it was up to him, he would literally rot in his room every day on the Xbox.

Parent of 6 and 13 year old, London. Focus Group 6.

It was also compared (unfavourably) to previous generations' childhoods, described as freer, simpler and spent outdoors.

At the risk of sounding completely ancient, I think back to when I was a young person, and I used to go to youth clubs, and I had a community of friends that I was out face-to-face with, doing things. You know... I was never indoors. I was out on my bike, I was up a tree, all those sorts of things. And I know that sounds pretty idealistic, and I know not everybody's childhood is the same, but I think the more and more that young people are staying indoors and their communication with other people is being solely behind a screen, or mostly behind a screen until they're back in school with their friends.

Parent of 7 and 13 year old, Plymouth, Focus Group 5.

When we grew up, we just went knocking on friends' doors... Unfortunately, that's not there anymore. I mean, on our street, our kids are probably the youngest on the street, everybody else is pretty old, so the whole friendship aspect is gone.... So you find that the only thing that's left to entertain them is social media or talking on Tiktok or Snapchat or whatever, which is not really very healthy.

Parent of 10 and 12 year old, Surrey, Focus Group 6.

Parents - especially of older children - emphasised the need for 'balance': between health and other considerations; their priorities as parents and their child's independence.

I'm thinking about balance at the moment, because my son, he goes to a grammar school, there's quite a lot of pressure around exams and things, and so you almost kind of want to say to him, "that's great that you're studying all the time, but have a bit of a night off every now and then".

Parent of 4 17, 21, 23, 25 year old, Kent. Focus Group 4.

So we try and do lots of family activities... we all choose an activity, so we'll take it in turn, so we've got a balance of what they want to do and what we want to.

Parent of 10 and 12 year old, Manchester, Focus Group 6

A a good mix of everything you know... stuff that they want to do, stuff that we want them to do, like, you know, we allow them to game, but then they have to do something active and not in front of the TV. Do you know what I mean?

Parent of 18 and 22 year old, Essex. Focus Group 6.

Children also needed to feel safe and loved, with caregivers' unconditional support.

I think a big thing as well is showing them love and making them feel cared about and making them feel safe. I think that's a big thing that we've tried to show our little one.

Parent of 1 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 1.

I think it's about them trusting their environment, that they can express themselves, that they're willing to explore and try things because they know they're supported by family, friends and everyone else around them, right?

Parent of 4 month old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 3.

For me, it's always been about, do they feel safe? Do they feel loved? Are they able to be themselves as much as they can be in front of their dad?

Parent of 13 and 17 year old, Liverpool, Focus Group 6.

This depended on parents being 'present', engaged and creating predictability through routine and boundaries.

Being present. So when they're doing something, not sitting on your phone or watching the telly, yeah, communicating with them, even if they're just sat eating their dinner, talking to them, saying what they're eating. I know they can't say anything yet, but it's nice for them to hear you and be there with them.

Parent of 1 year old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 1

I think for me, routine is very good for the kids... I mean getting all the basics right, like making sure they eat their three meals a day... and get a good night's sleep, but also kind of having that kind of schedule most days, like, obviously, school dictates that to a certain extent, but then having certain activities on the same days every week, knowing roughly what time meals are... I think that's good for the kids, because it kind of gives them a bit of constancy in their life.

Parent of 12, 14 and 8 year old, London, Focus Group 5.

Being consistent with kind of rules and establishing those boundaries so that within that they can kind of work out, you know, where the limits are.

Parent of 1, 4 and 4 year olds, London, Focus Group 3.

But parents were not the only part of the equation – positive relationships with other children and adults were also key.

It's really important to like for children to have access to things in the community that help them to be healthy... I'm really lucky that my daughter accesses, like, a scout group, and that's been really positive for her mental health, and her ability to, like build... healthy relationships. She's got some really good, healthy relationships with other adults through that community and also other children.

Parent of 7 and 13 year old, Plymouth, Focus Group 5.

I really think being outside and socialising, being around people and just being outside is so important.

Parent of 5, 7 and 8 year old, Kent. Focus Group 3.

Socialising with other kids [is so important]. With Covid, these children have missed out on a lot of that... and it's the whole point isn't it? Building relationships and stuff. That's what the future holds for them.

Parent of 4, 17, 21, 24 and 25 year old, Kent. Focus Group 1.

Additional insights:

- Covid often referred to almost as a 'natural experiment' in demonstrating why relationships and varied, stimulating experiences were so important to children's wellbeing.
- Services barely mentioned as part of a 'healthy childhood', which seemed to pertain more to families and communities, upstream of formal intervention.
- Prominence of social and emotional development – does this reflect the zeitgeist – with better awareness and acceptance of mental health – or else the scale of the mental health crisis amongst children and young people?

Barriers and challenges

When asked what made it difficult to give their children a healthy childhood, the key barriers were felt to be:

- Money and the cost of living
- Time and the ‘juggle’ of work, childcare and home maintenance
- Too much, often conflicting advice (e.g. social media, other parents)
- Lack of control over their children’s environment (especially in relation to food, technology and other children/parents)
- Waiting lists and trouble accessing appropriate services – or these services being poorly designed to meet their children’s needs.

Cost was one of the most immediate barriers cited by parents, especially in relation to healthy food and activities.

I'd say cost... shopping to buy strawberries is, I don't know, five pounds, but I can go and buy a whole pack of Jammie Dodgers, which I could give her for a whole week for one pound 90, which is just crazy.

Parent of 0 and 2 year old, Kent. Focus Group 3.

Financial restraints at the moment, with cost of living just being the way it is... even with foods, I know everyone is trying to get them healthy food, it is easier just to buy the cheaper snacks in the lunch boxes. I try my best to try to get them, but it's dearer to buy the healthier things.

Parent of 10, 11 and 14 year old, Rochdale. Focus Group 4.

When my older three children were younger, they used to have free swimming sessions we could go to. There was free boxing, even gym sessions that you could go to at certain leisure centres... But number four and five... there's not really anything... So we've we're paying for his gym, but it's so expensive

Parent of 4, 17, 21, 24 and 25 year old, Kent. Focus Group 4.

This was compounded by a shortage of time and energy, as well as older children's own preferences.

Think it's money, and just ease of access. Sometimes I think it's just easier, especially if you are working, to chuck something in from the oven. It's not that there's anything wrong with it, but it might not be what is classed as nutritionally balanced.

Parent of 5, 7 and 8 year old, Kent. Focus Group 3.

I think sometimes it's money, like these things that the kids want to do cost a lot, you know, like summer holidays, like football clubs, extra things that are going on, like, if you're a single parent, like them, things sometimes you just can't really afford. And so, yeah, I think sometimes, like that, you want to do everything with them, but not always possible if you don't have the finances.

Parent of 7, 14 and 18+ year old, Kent. Focus Group 5.

It's sometimes just easier to buy the snacks and the crisps... and that's what they want, and it's just easier. And then also, like mine, before lockdown, we were doing Muay Thai. I was paying for all three of them, and they were doing classes, just the cost of that. Now I can't afford to do that, so that's why I was saying. I'm trying to look for things that are free... You stick to the parks, but they don't want to do that anymore.

Parent of 10, 11 and 14 year old, Rochdale. Focus Group 4.

Ideals around raising healthy children also felt incompatible with the 'juggle' of work, childcare and home maintenance.

Time, lack of time, especially when you go back to work, it seems, you know, impossible, even you know, with nursery care, to do everything you want to do for your child in a week while working 37 hours.

Parent of 3 year old and 4 month old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 2.

We are living in a world at the moment where you are expected to go to work, earn money, have a great career, raise fantastic children, feed them, nourish them, nourish their minds, nourish their bodies, take them on holidays, give them experiences, be at home, be a stay at home Mum, and you try to do all of these things, and it gets the point where you're just you can't.

Parent of 2 and 4 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 2.

I'm a single mum, so my time then after work is spent trying to entertain my child, feed my child, make sure my child's going to all these activities, but also maintain a home as well, because I've not got that second person to do that.

Parent of 3 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 3.

Work and energy levels were felt to conflict especially with the need to be emotionally available to their children.

Being busy and tired. So I know that when I come back from work and it's, you know, 5/6 o'clock, I mean, I'm lucky enough to finish work quite early, but I know I'm not doing my A standard parenting at five. I need a bit of time to charge myself up before I can do the next shift. And that time's not usually there.

Parent of 4 year old, London. Focus Group 1.

The parent guilt is always there. The working hours, I'll drop them off the morning, but the evening, by the time I come in, I'm straight away, cooking, cleaning, and then it's eight, nine o'clock, and I'm tired and not having that time with them, so definitely working full time, but you try your best, and you do. In South Asian culture... the first generation parent that came here, they were working. They didn't really have that relationship with the children. But I think with myself, we're trying to break that barrier.

Parent of 10, 11 and 14 year old. Focus Group 4.

Parents also felt that raising healthy children was more demanding now than for previous generations.

My mum was a parent of four kids at the tail end of lots of single earner households, stay at home mums. And it feels like expectations on us has actually, if anything, gotten higher. I was allowed cycle to school by myself in like, year three. And my kids' school have a policy that every child means picking up physically in the school until year five... Like there's a kind of increased expectation of parental involvement and presence... like, you're meant to be helping them cook with you in the kitchen, so that they learn healthy eating skills, while also like encouraging independent play, like a million different things... and yet we've actually got work to fit in as well. So yeah, it feels impossible.

Parent of 3 and 5 year old, London, Focus Group 2.

I think the definition of a healthy child has changed quite a bit too... there's so much more to it. For my parents, it was basically, like, just keep me alive and take me to school, and that's it, you know. Now it's like... you have to be eating the right food, but also wearing the right clothes to certain things, and, you know, doing the right activities, and make sure that the activities are well rounded. There's just so much more to it than what it was when I was growing up. Like, my parents look at what I do, and they are exhausted.

Parent of 5 and 7 year old, London, Focus Group 1

Supervision of children's social media and technology use was particularly felt to add to the complexity of modern parenting.

I take my son's phone off him. He's 13. His phone has to be handed in every night for nine o'clock. He hates me for it, you know, but it's just something I've had to do to make sure that he's got that healthy balance. And then there's all these kind of things. We had an incident a few months ago where there's all these scams and schemes, and like fake people on WhatsApp that are, like, befriending these, like teens and saying that they're like, 13 year old girls when they're not, and all these kind of things that are going around that.... And there's all these kind of different things that you have to be aware of... it's just like another layer of like parenting that you've got to be aware of, on top of the nutrition, the health, the general growing up, and the fun and all those things. It's just like an added layer of stress.

Parent of 6 and 13 year old, London, Focus Group 6.

For one of my girls, my eldest, I guess we were still kind of learning the way with all of this, the pressure of kind of keeping up this online presence was immense. She'd have to post every day: "I have to post several times a day. Otherwise I lose my whatever it is." And just kind of because it was so alien to us, we really didn't know how to deal with it. And there was a lot of arguments, which then kind of made things worse.

Parent of 10, 11 and 14 year old. Focus Group 4

Many also felt they were bombarded with conflicting advice about how to keep their children healthy.

[It's] complete overload, all the different information from so many different people and companies and everything like that... advertising, social media, just people that you're around, things that you hear, things you're seeing... it's a lot of opinions.

Parent of 5, 7 and 8 year old, Kent. Focus Group 3.

You get a lot of social media bombarding you with the glamorous side of how parenting looks like. And you're like, 'Nope, I don't feel like that.' And then you also get your relatives giving you a piece of like, Oh, why did you do that? Why don't you do this? Why don't you buy this? Why don't you do that?

Parent of 4 month old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 3.

There's so many different ways of parenting that are out there, and you get this, and then you get a different camp, and then you get another group that says something else, you know, and it's just like, what is the right thing for my child at this stage in their lives?

Parent of 5 year old, London. Focus Group 3.

Others clearly felt societal influences - especially food marketing and technology - made it very difficult for them to influence their children's health.

How readily accessible everything is... So I'm quite restrictive around things like social media, for example, because I want my daughter to have a good sense of self esteem, and I don't think it's conducive to that, but it's really hard when everybody else has access to it... And likewise, like, even in terms of, like, healthy food, like, I might be able to provide healthy food at home. But that doesn't mean that she won't choose to eat, like, bad food when she's with her friends or in school, or, you know, those sorts of things.... I think in the society we live in at the moment, it can be quite hard to regulate that when everything's so easily on tap.

Parent of 7 and 13 year old, Plymouth, Focus Group 5.

There's so much out there that feels, to the younger generation, that that's how it should be: extravagant cars, extravagant gear. And not only that, but like the vast amount of choice in food. Us as parents, we try and give them the most nutritious food and stuff like that. But the amount of chicken shops, the amount of fast food joints that are out there. When they're out with their friends, we can't control what they eat. There's a chicken shop down there, or there's another chip shop down the road. It's just so tempting for them... There's just too much variety out there, if anything, that's accessible to them.

Parent of 18 and 22 year old, Essex, Focus Group 6.

Parents also raised waiting lists and access to services as a key barrier, but there was so much in this that it merits its own section...

Barriers and challenges: access to services

When discussing how access to support and services made it difficult to give their child a healthy childhood, parents emphasised:

- Waiting times or resource constraints forcing them to:
 - Seek out expensive, private alternatives
 - ‘Push’ or ‘fight’ for support
 - Cope on their own with informal, ‘DIY’ solutions

Many parents had sought out private solutions because they felt NHS waiting times were incompatible with their child's wellbeing.

I had to pay for my daughter to have her tongue tie cut because the NHS wouldn't do it. It was going to be a two-month wait, which was obviously a massive issue with breastfeeding. So day three after a traumatic birth, I had to drive 80 miles to get her tongue tie cut.

Parent of 2 year old, Plymouth, Focus Group 1.

My son, the school thought that he had dyslexia, which we agreed with, and they needed to get support in place for him for the exams, but they said there was no time. Waiting lists were really long, so they suggested that we paid privately, which we then felt like we had no choice but to do... because when you're just about to take your GCSEs, it isn't the time that you want to be kind of looking at, okay, are you dyslexic and throw a big extra thing in the mix.

Parent of 4, 17, 21, 24 and 25 year old, Kent. Focus Group 4

[The NHS] are quite good when we've had emergencies, and you go in, I can't knock them there, but for more complex things, we just couldn't get the help we needed. And it was just too slow with the NHS, so we ended up going private, which is a lot of money.

Parent of 7. 9 and 13 year old. London, Focus Group 6.

Others had sought out private solutions because the NHS offer was too narrow to meet the needs of their child.

My 11 year old had a particularly difficult time a couple of years ago. She ended up having two and a half years where she wasn't able to attend school at all. She had horrific anxiety, and the right decision was just to not to force that on her. We found that the NHS services that would have been available to her were completely not fit for purpose. She was assigned a mental health support worker, and she wasn't actually able to get through the questionnaire which she needed to complete in order to access the therapy from them. So we ended up using services that we funded privately through like things like play therapy, equine therapy, Forest School and things like that. You know, things were that were more holistic, more therapeutic, taking her away from the sort of talking therapies approach, there was absolutely nothing that was suitable for her needs at that time. So these other things were great, but it's just unfortunate that they're not sort of more universally available for children that are going to need them.

Parent of 6 and 11 year old, Lincoln.

In response to resource rationing, parents felt they had to ‘push’ or ‘fight’ for support.

[One of my children] who's 11, she does have a heart problem. So we do yearly hospital appointments, but it is a struggle, just trying to get the appointments. But once we're there, I found them okay. So it's special consultant we see yearly. I have to kind of chase them, but she's on the waiting list, so then I have to always ring up just to make sure they've given her the appointment.

Parent of 10, 11 and 14 year old, Rochdale. Focus Group 4.

I did the birth after thought service... which was really useful to deal with the birth trauma side and to work out what happened. But I had to really, really, really push for that... This was, like, four or five months down the line, and there was a long wait for it

Parent of 1 year old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 1.

We had an issue with one of our children who got PTSD... but to try and get him to be to be dealt with and put in a proper provision for schooling, we ended up having to get in touch with our MP, who was a cabinet member at the time to pretty much bash some heads together in the local authority before anything got done... it was really quite horrendous.

Parent of 16. 18 and 21 year old, Surrey, Focus Group 3.

NHS services were often framed as a service of last resort, for narrow, high-threshold, 'medical' needs (in contrast with parent's own holistic definition of childhood health).

It takes a lot for me to access, even my GP, for my children... it takes a lot for me to sort of take my child to the GP if I genuinely think something's wrong. I don't think I've had a necessarily bad experiences. However, what I do find is that you've, you've really got to fight sometimes for just just basic things.

Parent of 4 and 12 year old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 5.

I'm talking about the NHS as in for any medical needs. I mean, I've used them for if the kids have a real, so if there's anything's wrong with them, sore throats, things like that.

Parent of 10, 11 and 14 year old, Rochdale. Focus Group 4.

I don't particularly have great experiences with NHS services right back from birth onwards, so I've kind of just always avoided it unless you absolutely need it... Obviously, if they're really poorly and, you know, you need antibiotics or something like that. We will try and do that, but even then accessing a GP appointment, for example, is really tricky. So there's a lot of batting back and forth. You know, go to A and E and A and E will say, No, go back to GP. And you just kind of think, yeah, we'll leave that to the absolute last resort.

Parent of 4, 17, 21, 24 and 25 year old, Kent. Focus Group 4

And in the absence of ready access to NHS services, parents were forced to find ways to 'make do' without help.

Because of the waiting times, you know, in the end, you're just sort of like "You know what? I'm just going to do it myself". Do you know what I mean? So, like, if we have a sick child at home, we'll just take care of that child ourselves, rather than calling the doctors, like, like we used to do. It's like, okay, well, it's going to take ages to get an appointment anyway. So what's the point? By the time I've got an appointment, the kids already well and better and going back to school. So it's not that we don't appreciate the healthcare system. It's just that it can take such a long time to be seen or be dealt with, so we just tend to do what's right for our kids our way.

Parent of 18 and 22 year old, Essex, Focus Group 6.

Both our kids were actually born prematurely, so they received a tremendous a lot of help and and support very early on, but since then, we haven't really had a need to access healthcare systems. But the one opportunity that we did have with my son was when he had an enlarged lymph node on his neck... So you take him to the GP, they see him, and you don't get a referral letter for, like, three months. By then, I think, the situation resolved itself. But in that three month period, you're tearing yourself into bits thinking, what if? What if it's this? What if it's that? How come it's not quicker?

Parent of 10 and 12 year old, Surrey, Focus Group 6.

Or else to craft their own package of support, using their own research and resources.

One of our children had to be referred to the gender identity services, and it was a two-year waiting list. And then for one of our girls for mental health, it was even longer, and by the time that appointment came out, we'd already had to figure it out ourselves... which isn't the best. We did okay, but it felt like it was really luck... With the gender situation, for example, that was completely new to us, lots of research, reaching out to different children, to school, the council even, and just sort of accidentally stumbling across, like a support group, and then meeting somebody and kind of just piecing things together, the mental health side of it. I don't really know... it was a bit trial and error and seeing what helped and what didn't.

Parent of 4, 17, 21, 24 and 25 year old, Kent. Focus Group 4.

So I'm still waiting now for the private clinic as well. So I think one of the main things about in terms of CAMHS and waiting for services, is that waiting time. Other than that, when you get the service, it's really good... I have one child where everything was diagnosed and everything, and then after that, they were brilliant... And then then they kind of just leave you in the lurch... They're like, oh, there's this parenting group, there's this parenting group, but there's nothing very concrete... You're kind of just on your own to deal with it, and you have to, kind of like, search around to find what are the next steps which you have to do.... I always

feel like I'm doing things on my own and using Google a lot.
Parent of 18, 16, 14, 12 and 2 year old, London. Focus Group 5.

Parents of young children were particularly surprised at how little support or preparation they received at such a high-stakes time.

So my youngest he got sent to the NICU. He got quite poorly... and they were amazing. They went through making bottles and everything at the actual NICU, they have so much. And they teach you how to bathe your baby, dress your baby, because I found... on the first child, you're sat there with this baby in a towel or blanket, and you're like, do I feed him to do I dress him? Do I put a nappy on that? You know, someone comes and tells you a couple hours later: well, why have not dressed him yet? Why have you not put a nappy on? And it's like, well, no one's told me to... I don't know what am I meant to be doing? ...There's not any support at all for that.

There's nothing. They just sort of go off and leave you.

Parent of 5, 7 and 8 year old, Kent. Focus Group 3.

It was very much a you left the hospital, and I was like, I don't really know if I'm doing the right thing. I don't know who to talk to or where to go to. And it wasn't until we went to the Children's Centre that we kind of stumbled upon, oh, actually, there's a group that speaks about this, but without that... you kind of leave the hospital with a baby and then you're kind of just winging it.

Parent of 1 year old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 1.

While parents of older children felt support was much more readily available in the earlier years.

It feels a little bit like they're very interested initially, and then after that you have what health visitor check. Is it like at one and like two years four months or something? And then there's not, like, a lot of support. So I think you kind of organise the whole health thing from your new parent friends and maybe from your childcare... it feels like it's the health of your child is much more owned by you.

Parent of 3 and 5 year old, London. Focus Group 2

I think about when my daughter was younger, you know, like baby, toddler sort of age, there was lots of support in place... as they get older, I think that actually things get more complex. You've got to navigate hormonal changes, puberty, social media, going to secondary school like you know that all of these huge, huge, huge parts of their life which have huge impacts on them for the rest of their life, potentially. And there's none of that support that you had in those, like, earlier days, you know, when you could call the health visitor and say, I'm not sure about this. You know, could you advise me or something like that? There is nothing like that, really.

Parent of 6 and 11 year old, Plymouth. Focus Group 5.

**Services and support: parents'
experiences and preferences.**

Besides access, we also asked parents about their experiences with services and other forms of support when navigating their children's health.

Key themes:

- Significant variability between areas and individual practitioners.
- Greater reliance on informal support (e.g. friends, family) than formal services.
- Formal services often experienced as transactional or judgmental.
- Poor signposting, with parents often 'stumbling' upon services by chance.
- Poor quality or non-existent education on taking care of their children's health.

When asked what forms of support they had accessed and found helpful, parents had very variable experiences.

NB same
group,
similar
age range

The GP near me, contrary to some of the people here, we're actually really lucky. We've got fantastic GP surgery local to us, not just for the child's health, but also someone who we care for. They're just brilliant. Parent of 0 and 3 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 2.

It's so hard sometimes to get [GP] appointments. And when you do get appointments, and then you go, they were always a bit like, they're fine, they're fine. They shrug you off and shrug you off. Parent of 0 and 2 year old, Kent. Focus Group 2.

Same
parent,
different
pregnancy.

So with my youngest, I had a completely different health visiting experience this time around compared to my first time. The first time they I only saw them once, and then they rang me for each appointment, and were just like, are you okay? And I was like, yep. And they were like, 'Okay'. That was it. Nothing... whereas this time around... she's been very on the ball. She's, like, texted me. She's checked in on emails and she's been very like, 'I just want to double check that everything is okay. I know you're hitting the four month mark and that can be sometimes a bit tricky with sleep... Just want to make sure that you're okay.

Parent of 0 and 2 year old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 2.

This was both between services in different areas and within services (i.e. differences between individual practitioners).

But I would say my midwife was incredible. She was really, yeah, really helpful... Health visitors. I saw three different ones in sort of the first eight weeks. And the last one was actually really lovely. She was, yeah, really nice. But the other two wouldn't say were very helpful at all, and sort of made me - I mean, I had quite bad, sort of postpartum anxiety anyway - but on top of sort of the feeding and weight issues, they didn't make me feel like I was being a very good mom.

Parent of 11 month old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 1.

We've had dealings with four SENCOs. Three of those were not very good. Let's say one of them was - I mean, who knows why she was a SENCO. We told her, "You know what, he has been prone to kick off". And she said, "the very second he misbehaves, he'll be out". And I remember saying something along the lines of, if a child was in a wheelchair, you wouldn't say they have to go to a class on the third floor if there's no lifts, if a child has got PTSD in a in a school environment, you don't treat them like she was going to... but that was one. Another one was just useless. Another one, I don't think, cared. And then at the last school he was at, they were really good. They helped.

Parent of 16, 18 and 21 year old, Surrey, Focus Group 6.

In practice, parents leant much more on informal forms of support than formal services: friends, family, community groups and online.

At first, the health visitor would tell you where to go, but there's also the family hubs. But after that, you get to connect with other moms, and you kind of form a network... But barring that, I was always on just the Facebook groups... of all moms, or first time moms... just to get some sense of I'm going through this. Is anyone else doing this? Going through this? To just sense check like: 'Am I doing it right?'

Parent of 4 month old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 3.

I speak to my friends. I've got three children at very different age ranges, so the struggles are very, very different... So whoever you've got around you that may be able to relate to what you're talking about, whether that be work colleague, a friend, family member, yeah, so whoever's gonna listen to me, basically.

Parent of 6 and 13 year old, London, Focus Group 6.

I think the most helpful has been parent WhatsApp groups... that has given me pretty much everything I need. We have this really amazing group where I live, and you know, people are asking about SEND provision, what to do with EHCPs... things about food... Because just when I think, like, I might not have someone to turn to, or if I'm just like, 'What should I do with this?' They're the first people that I'll go to.

Parent of 5 and 7 year old, London, Focus Group 1.

This was as much a preference as a necessity, with parents appreciating the empathy and reassurance that comes from more informal relationships.

I actually got an awful lot of support from Facebook groups, from other parents, because I because of my daughter's [mental health] struggles, I found I was struggling, I was blaming myself a lot, and I wasn't the best person I could be to support her. And I found it really helpful to talk to other parents who could say, 'actually, you're doing all right', or to say, 'Have you thought of this?'. Other people who've genuinely been there to help me with ideas for supporting my child, but also for supporting me so that I could be the best version of myself to help my child... that's where I found all my my best support, and from friends.

Parent of 3 children (youngest 15), Plymouth. Focus Group 5.

[Talking about navigating information online] when you talk, when you get to talk to other people about it, you get that confidence from another human that's, like, 'in it'. Like, they're not, they're not dictated to by guidelines or waiting lists. It's just empathy.

Parent of 4, 17, 21, 24 and 25 year old, Kent. Focus Group 1.

Informality and reassurance were contrasted with interactions with formal services, which could feel escalatory and impersonal.

I'm quite fortunate in the fact that my mum is SENCO trained... which then also then puts us in touch with different people that she's got connections with... It helps when I can speak to those people, but different, because they're like family friends. I'm not really using their services, so to speak. But because I can sit with them an evening, have a cup of tea, I feel like I benefit so much more. And if that was available for parents actively, even if it was like a Family Hub situation, I think that would relieve a lot of stress and pressure of people trying to get hold of certain services, because I don't want assessments. I don't want, like to go to the doctors and them to assume instantly there's something wrong, or, you know, I'm trying to go down one path.

Parent of 0 and 2 year old, Kent. Focus Group 2.

My four year old, she pinches under her armpits to the point where she's made a skin sag and stretch... And so I went to the doctors to see get some kind of help, and they asked me if I'm looking for an autism diagnosis. I just thought, oh my gosh... is this the world we're in?... It almost felt quite insulting that the GP just assumed that I was there to find a diagnosis, rather than 'No, I just need help so she doesn't permanently deform and disfigure her body'. Do you know what I mean?... So I've walked away from that now and just thought, I'll just figure something out on my own.

Parent of 2 and 4 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 2.

As well as resource constraints meaning certain thresholds needed to be met for support, parents seemed to link this to risk-aversion and a focus on safeguarding.

I had a nursery that reported us to social essentially because my son was had loads of accident reports, but also because they told me that he didn't have very good balance, and I should go get an ear and eye test for him...

Like, these two things fit together, bad balance, lots of accident reports. But then those two things ended up being weaponized against me in a really, like, weird way. I was like, this is entirely consistent. And actually, we have a biological explanation, which is that I have Ehlers Danlos syndrome. He probably has it too, so he's more clumsy. It's part of the syndrome.... Like, why are we making parents feel like they have to explain every single bruise? And obviously I understand why... to try to look for abuse, but there are other ways to do that that aren't so kind of aggressive... like, it's about the child and having that kind of good relationship with them.

Parent of 3 and 5 year old, London, Focus Group 2.

I ended up co sleeping with [my daughter] because she slept better. And it's almost like I couldn't admit every time the health visitors came around, she was like, are you practising safe sleep? And I was thinking, she's in my bed with me, but if I tell you that, I know you're going to report me somewhere, probably. But so it's a bit like... you can't feel like you can't be 100% honest, because you're worried about any backlash.

Parent of 0 and 2 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 2.

Many participants reported experiences of feeling judged or dismissed by practitioners, or simply treated as a 'tick in a box'.

When I was really struggling breastfeeding, I rang my health visitor because I didn't really know where else to ask. And she said to me on the phone, 'well, I don't really know what else to suggest' and just left it there. And that was it.

Parent of 1 year old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 1

My sister in law experienced it a lot. Whenever she took her kid to the doctors, they were always like, 'they're fine, they're fine'. Shrug them off and shrug them off. And until she said to her other half, you need to take him... And as soon as the dad walked in with him, they were like, 'Okay, there's an issue'.

. Parent of 0 and 2 year old, Kent. Focus Group 2

One of the things I struggle with is you're not able to talk to anyone at our doctor's... They don't want you to phone... There's no personal service... It feels like everything is ticking boxes, and they forget that that we are real people, and as parents, we have genuine concerns about our children, just because they may see from what you've sent them: 'Oh yeah, that's nothing to worry about'. As parents, we still deserve a bit of a bit of reassurance... and to be treated as, as real people, as individuals, not just to be this faceless person on the other end of the computer.

Parent of 4 children, youngest 15, Plymouth. Focus Group 5.

Parents were also frustrated that support was poorly advertised and that they often 'stumbled across' the most helpful services.

We did have to, we did, ask for some extra advice on potty training with our first... We came across [the healthy families] stall at like... one of those summer play day things. And they ended up coming to the house and giving us a bit of advice on, you know potty training, just, you know, the good reassurance. And it was, I suppose my point was that we come across them quite randomly at the right time, but they were always there and then, once we had them in our house, they told us about other stuff that we could have asked them about.

Parent of 0 and 3 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 2

You get these hyper specialised teams, especially in postpartum care, that if your person you're speaking to doesn't know about that... then accessing it is impossible because you don't know it exists. I think I'd been to like, three outpatient physio appointments at my hospital until I was randomly at a mental health appointment, and they happen to have a poster saying there's a specialised pelvic pain team that covers the whole of Devon... that nobody that I touched points with along the way of birth and post birth knew about.

Parent of 7 month old, Plymouth. Focus Group 3

Finally, parents felt let down by their preparation for parenthood, with antenatal education either expensive, unavailable or poor quality.

So I did the NHS antenatal class, but I actually found they told me less information than I already knew.

Parent of 5, 7 and 8 year old, Kent. Focus Group 3

The antenatal support you have is very focused on the first few days, you know, the very basics.

Parent of 0 and 3 year old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 2.

So much was focused on birth, so little focused on the stuff afterwards. And obviously, like when you're pregnant for the first time, being pregnant like birth is like a black hole in your diary, and it's hard to imagine anything after that. But obviously, actually, the parenting is so much more all encompassing than the, you know, one to three days you might spend in labour and stuff... And yeah, so I felt like the actual parenting stuff was just, yeah, not prepared for and like, things like weaning.

Parent of 3 and 5 year old, London, Focus Group 2.

Unfortunately for me, my antenatal class was on a Saturday. They only do it twice in one month and it was crazy, overbooked... so oversubscribed given the many people needing the service.

Parent of 4 month old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 3.

This left parents vulnerable to unreliable sources of information, e.g. via social media or Google searches.

The amount of bad stuff there I - you know, second page of Google, or, you know that some of those, we call them, mummy forums, you know, the apps that have, like, forums after child is born - and some of the opinions that are on there, just sometimes downright dangerous occasionally.

Parent of 0 and 3 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 2.

There's so much information out there, but it's all contradictory. I think 'I'm going to go on the internet and get my advice there'... You could read something and think, right, I know what I'm doing, I've read this, and then someone go, Well, have you read this? And it's complete contradiction... it's completely saturated with information. So whether it's true or not, it's still there, and it has the same space... it just creates anxiety.

Parent of 4, 17, 21, 24 and 25 year old, Kent, Focus Group 1

[In the absence of better information] you have to rely on, if you, you know, if you're lucky enough to have, like, a village of support and good friends, good family, that sort of thing around you... But not everybody has that. For some people, they're just, you know, figuring it out, and yet it's looking to social media or looking to Google and and you just don't always know how reliable that is to say.

Parent of 6 and 11 year old, Plymouth. Focus Group 5.

Recommendations: parents' hopes and suggestions for change.

There was remarkable consistency across the six focus groups in what parents wanted to change:

- More personal, 'human' relationships with practitioners.
- Investment in more informal, community-oriented forms of support (e.g. Children's Centres, Family Hubs, free and fun alternatives to screens).
- A single place to understand the support available to them and their child in their local area.
- Better preparation for parenthood (e.g. through ante- and post-natal education) and ongoing support for their role in child health.
- An emphasis on life and social skills, confidence and resilience in schools and other services for young people.
- Stronger protections from the harms of social media and technology.

By far the strongest and most consistent sentiment from the focus groups was a desire for more personalised, human services.

We all know the NHS is under pressure... and I think we all appreciate that, so we don't want to push too much.

But I think ultimately, what I feel a lot of people feel is that it's not like personalised enough, which I get, obviously, time and money and everything, but that's what, because you kind of clump together, and they just try and do the best for the most. I feel like that's where it lets most, or a lot of people, down.

Parent of 5,7 and 8 year old, Kent, Focus Group 3.

I don't think the people that are working in CAMHS know the children well enough so they're not building them relationships, and I think that's really important for working with a child, building that trust, just understanding them better. And I feel that they don't have the time for that. And so then they they're so busy, they've got so many referrals coming in, they just don't really know what to do.

Parent of 7, 14 and 18+ year old, Kent. Focus Group 5.

I don't dislike the NHS. They are amazing, and it's just life-saving moments... They've always been there and fixed it and done it... it's just the extra bit that everyone would like, the nice bit... I think that's the most important, you know, having that whole 'it takes a village to raise your child', thing.

Parent of 5, 7 and 8 year old. Focus Group 3.

In practice, this looked like continuity of carer – or at the very least more effort to engage interpersonally with children and their families.

[When asked what a more personal service might look like] Like the same midwife, or the same doctors, the same person that would actually notice you and have some sort of relationship, so they're not there relying on notes that sometimes aren't filled in fully, or, you know, like your wishes of what you do or don't want, but just some sort of advocate that would be there... and actually know you or what you want and what's best for you.

Parent of 5,7 and 8 year old, Kent. Focus Group 3.

Staff that are respectful and make you feel listened to and heard. Just kindness, really.

Parent of 4, 17, 21, 24 and 25 year old, Kent, Focus Group 4

Something that I said to each of my consultants... was to remind them that their every day is my literal once in a lifetime, and to remind them of that... They have to see the person behind the message. They have to remember that we are people.

Parent of 7 month old, Plymouth. Focus Group 3

Parents wanted more informal, low-pressure forms of support, best encapsulated by Children's Centres, Sure Starts or Family Hubs.

We found the Children's Centre like a huge, huge help... probably the non-clinical nature of the children's centre, that often there are a lot of mums actually running the children's centres involved and, and that's just, I mean, they've withdrawn one service locally to me. So it's a travesty, really, because, again, when I speak of community, that's where it should be.

Parent of 4, 17, 21, 24 and 25 year old, Kent, Focus Group 1.

But I do think in terms of that preparation for being a mom and what to do and what to expect wasn't there, but the Sure Start centres were an absolute godsend. They really, really were. And they're for everyone and all walks of life and. I'm really pleased to say that all walks of life were there. People who are really affluent attended every week to chat. People who were the other end of the spectrum were there to chat, and everyone just chipped in, had a voice, had a space and felt safe, and honestly, they were brilliant, really good.

Parent of 2 and 4 year old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 2.

Parents also just wanted it to be easier to figure out what support was available to them – including in advance - e.g via an online ‘one stop shop’.

My experience is, once you link with one thing... you sort of start and dip a toe in, it opens up more, but you are kind of just left after that health visitor visit, you know, whatever it is, at two months, just left at “call us if you need us”. But then over time, you know, you're tired and you forget what you can call them for, so I think there needs to be just more regular visibility of what is available... You know, emails maybe to the all the parents of three years in the area. You know, do you need help with this? ...Without causing any undue worrying, but, you know, sort of just a nudge. You know, ‘we're here still’.
Parent of 0 and 3 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 2.

Like, the children's centres, maybe more advertisements, maybe midwives pushing that. ‘There's these things available’. You know, before you have the baby. Once you've had the baby, you know, you're tired, you don't know what to do. You know, having it before to think oh, actually, yeah, there was some support there for this. There was some support there for that.
Parent of 1 year old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 1.

➔ NB this was part of what the Government's ‘Start for Life Offer’ was meant to achieve – announced in 2022 – but it seems not yet to be cutting through.

Parents also wanted better health education which: started earlier, lasted longer, and related more to lived experiences of parenting.

Me and my friend have had this conversation: we'd love to set up as some sort of like charity. A group of mums that run it, and it's like a course that you sign up from maybe when you first find out when you're pregnant, till the child's like two or three years old. And we have the same group of people – maybe monthly - and you get together, it's a couple of hours, you know, you do, like a box with questions, so people feel embarrassed by asking staff and then just have mum's real stories, advice, tips, things that the NHS don't tell you or can't tell you or and just to have that and build up that community around someone.

Parent of 5, 7 and 8 year old, Kent. Focus Group 3

The antenatal support you have is very focused on the first few days, you know, the very basics. So I do think there needs to be more available - from perhaps the NHS or, you know, like a central source. But if it was up to me, I'd prefer it to be in, like, a repeatable format – you know, like webinars or videos - because I don't think I would have really understood much more before I actually had a kid.

Parent of 0 and 3 year old, Nottinghamshire, Focus Group 2.

Many parents also described a missing service, where they received more timely information and support for the ongoing care they were providing at home.

If I could change something, I would like - maybe even emails or a letter or something - to say, you know, "You're at this age now, you know, these might be the kind of things that you're experiencing, and they're normal"... We've potty trained my two year old, but I didn't know where to start. I just started completely blind. I thought, well, I'll just do it... But what would have been helpful if maybe after a year, they said to you, okay, what we'll do is we'll link in at 18 months and just say to you know, some people start potty training now, but these are what you potentially want to look out for.... Or you're at six months, this is the weaning stage. These are all the things that we can do for you for weaning.. Then actually you might just be a bit like, "oh, okay, yeah, I'll come along to that."

Parent of 2 and 4 month old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 3.

I My experience is, once you link with one thing... you sort of start and dip a toe in, it opens up more, but you are kind of just left after that health visitor visit at "call us if you need us". But then over time, you're tired and you forget what you can call them for so I think there needs to be just more regular visibility of what is available. ... Emails maybe to the all the parents of three years in the area? You know, do you need help with this? You know, at this time, without causing any undue worrying, but, you know, sort of just a nudge. You know, we're here still. Parent of 0 and 3 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 2.

Parents clearly felt responsible for their child's wellbeing overall, but wanted their job made easier / powers strengthened by other actors. For example: action on social media and food companies.

I also think again, like social media companies and food companies should be held accountable as well, with stringent rules to make sure what they're putting out is beneficial to our children. ... It also comes down to us as parents to manage our children and what they are looking at. But governments should step in... because if we can do both government and at home, then, you know, the waiting list maybe will come down and the need for professionals won't be so great anymore.

Parent of 10 and 12 year old, Surrey, Focus Group 6.

Last time I looked a lot of these companies like meta, who own, you know, WhatsApp, I think doing all right for money, so they can probably fork out a bit of cash to sort themselves out... It should be relatively light touch from the government, because we don't want to end up being like, you know, East Germany in the 1970s, but they need to be told to get their act together.

Parent of 16, 18 and 21 year old, Surrey, Focus Group 6.

And they also wanted schools to take a firmer, more consistent line on technology and make family life less reliant on smart devices.

Well, my son's secondary school, they've just banned smartphones for this year. So they've all got Nokia brick phones again, which I think is pretty good, to be honest. I mean, they don't need them at school... So I think it's really good that they've done that.

Parent of 7, 9 and 13 year old, London, Focus Group 6.

My son's school has banned [phones]. It's a completely smartphone free school.. And they've got no tolerance at all. But I do find it a bit of a contradiction at times, when you're then setting homework on the apps and all these kind of things. So he's got Sparks, and he can join up to his after school activities on the on the apps.... So now you're now relying on these children having like, laptops at home, which is not always the case.

Parent of 6 and 13 year old, London, Focus Group 6.

Not having everything, like accessible through your phone... because everything's on there, and I'm constantly feeling like I've got to keep checking emails, my daughter's homework. my son's messages, because it's all on apps on my phone. You then have WhatsApp groups. You've got parents that might be inviting you to something. It is non stop.... So for me, I just think, reducing how much is online. I think that that would make the world a better place.

Parent of 4 and 12 year old, Nottinghamshire. Focus Group 5.

Finally, parents wanted to ‘go back to basics’ on the foundations for a healthy childhood. For example, more free, appealing, healthy alternatives to screen-time.

When we talk about CAMHS and we think about how overwhelmed that service is... we're all in agreement that is completely overwhelmed... But also, we've got so many young people with such poor mental health, and I really think that it would be helpful if we started to address that back at the root, like, what is it that these young people are missing? At the risk of sounding completely ancient, I think back to when I was a young person, and I used to go to youth clubs, and I was had a community of friends that I was out face to face with, doing things. You know, as a younger child, I was never indoors. I was out on my bike, I was up a tree... all those sorts of things. And I know that sounds pretty idealistic... but I think that more and more that young people are staying indoors and their communication with other people is solely behind a screen... I just think I wonder if young people are losing their sense of community, and whether it would be really helpful to have more you know, more sports clubs, more community groups, more opportunities that are free, cheap, for young people to get together without the pressure of social media.

Parent of 7 and 13 year old, Plymouth. Focus Group 5.

And an education system that prioritised life and social skills, resilience and confidence over narrow academic success.

I wonder about whether the education system needs to be changed... even when I was coming out of school you felt you knew more about history than how to change a light bulb... but I feel now there's an even bigger challenge facing kids and teenagers are spending maybe more and more time indoors, on phones, who aren't developing those kind of social skills, or who are developing a lot of mental health problems. And I kind of think even if they can navigate themselves through school or get good grades, I'm not convinced that a lot of these kids are being built to be resilient human beings who can interact in a world and look after themselves and have relationships you know, and deal with others you know, and for all the wonderful information academically they learn at school, I sometimes think there's a lot of you know, real life skills that more and more kids are lacking.

Parent of 8, 12 and 14 year old, London. Focus Group 5.

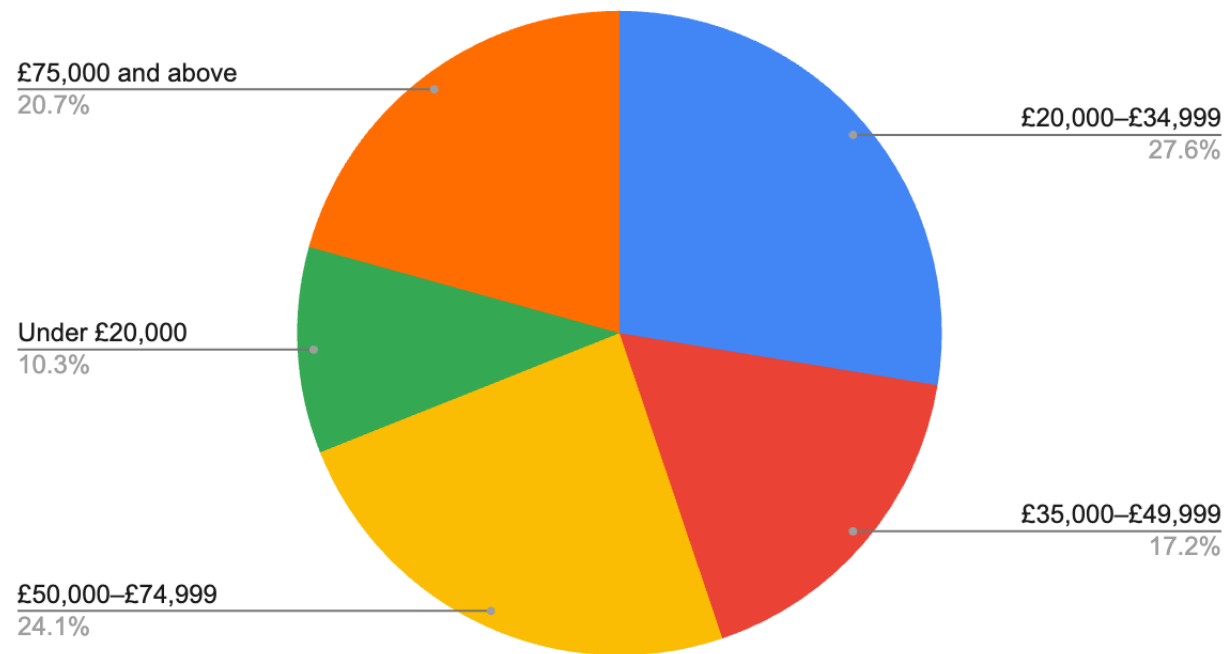
During Covid I worked in a school... and we had the vulnerable and key workers' children in... And children that maybe before that didn't like coming to school were thriving in that environment. They were doing Forest School, they were cooking, they would paint, we bought loads of bikes... they were outside all the time. And we were told, 'When we all go back, we're going to be more holistic, and it's going to be more nurturing... and then within the first week, all the like, the assessments were happening... it was like nothing was learned from that whole time

Parent of 7, 14 and 18+ year old, Kent. Focus Group 5.

APPENDIX

Sample

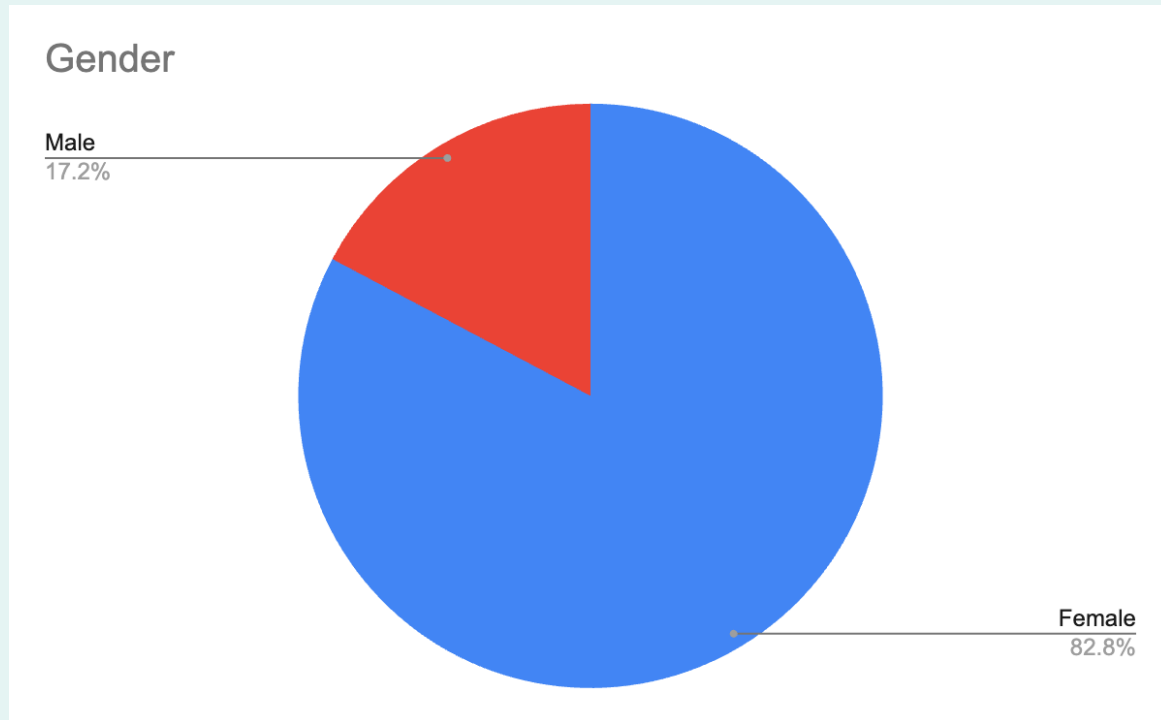
Income



- A broad spread of parents and carers from different income brackets.
- Underrepresentation of lowest income group (<£20k – approx. national distribution – 18.8% of households).
- Overrepresentation of higher income brackets (£50k–£74,999 – approx. national distribution – 16.7% of households; >£75k – approx. national distribution – 9.4% of households), consistent with recruitment for participants in other research.¹

¹See for example: Sydor, A. (2013) 'Conducting research into hidden or hard-to-reach populations', Nurse Researcher, 20(3), pp. 33-37. doi: 10.7748/nr2013.01.20.3.33.c9495.

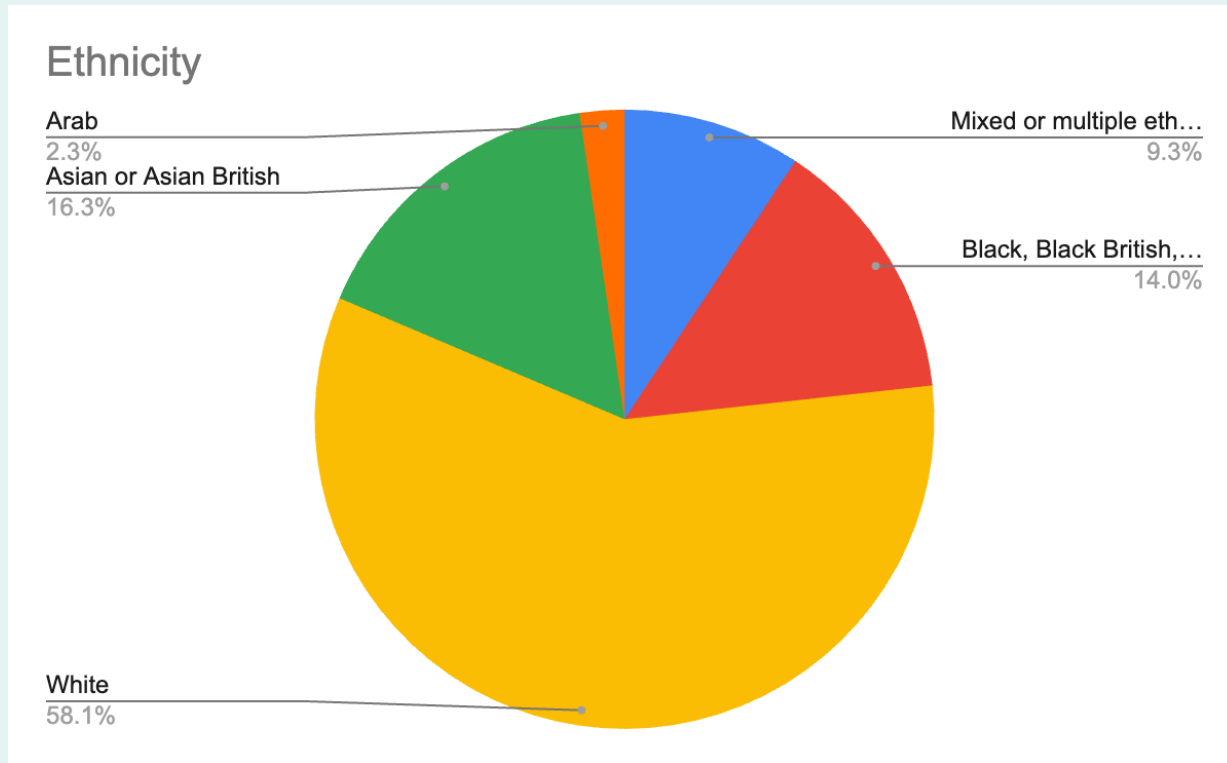
Sample



- Much higher representation of female parents over male.
- This reflects the gender bias within parents signing up for the study in the first place, and is consistent with recruitment for parents in other qualitative research².

²See for example: Phares, V et al. (2005) 'Are fathers involved in pediatric psychology research and treatment?', *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 30(8), pp. 631 – 643. doi: 10.1093/jpepsy/jsi050; Davison K. K et al. (2017) 'Fathers' Perceived Reasons for Their Underrepresentation in Child Health Research and Strategies to Increase Their Involvement', *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 21(2), pp. 267–274. doi: 10.1007/s10995-016-2157-z.

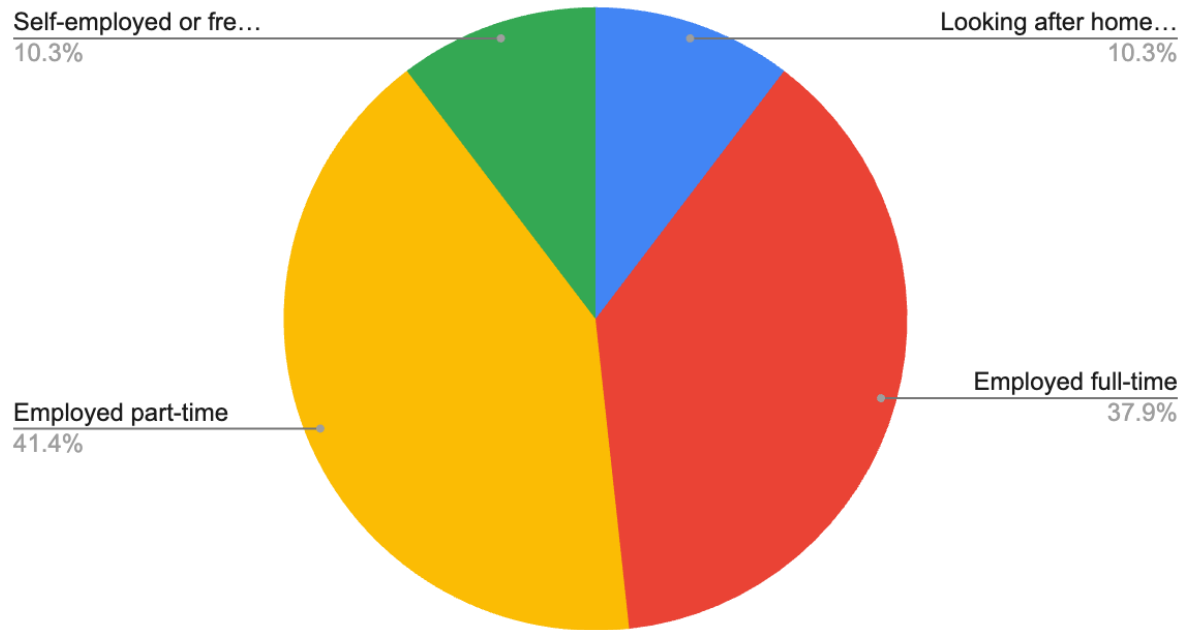
Sample



- A broad spread of parents and carers from different ethnic groups.
- Overrepresentation of non-White groups (nat. pop.: 82%)

Sample

Employment



- A broad spread of parents and carers with different working patterns.
- Similar share of participants in work compared to national population of parents: c. 84%

Sample



- A broad geographical spread of parents and carers across England.
- Clusters of parents in similar areas owing to recruitment approach via children's services, with certain local authorities supporting the study but not others.

Skew towards parents and carers living in urban vs. rural areas.