

parents' views of

pre
-school

making choices

Caroline Sharp
and
Claudia Davis

nfer

PARENTS' VIEWS OF PRE-SCHOOL MAKING CHOICES

Caroline Sharp and Claudia Davis

nfer



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Published in July 1997
by the National Foundation for Educational Research,
The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ

© National Foundation for Educational Research 1997
Registered Charity No. 313392
ISBN 0 7005 1458 9

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Summary of main findings	1
Introduction	3
Scope of the study	3
How parents find out what is available	4
Influences on parental choice	5
Accessibility	6
Limitations on choice	10
Features of pre-schools	10
Differences in priorities according to the age and sex of the child	12
Differences in priorities according to the type of setting	13
Parents' pre-school visits	15
What parents are looking for when they visit a pre-school	15
Who chooses?	18
When do parents make their choice?	18
Which type of pre-school would parents prefer?	19
Parents' views on broader issues	20
Parents' views on the Nursery Education Voucher Scheme	21
Conclusion	23
Implications and recommendations	24
Implications for parents	24
Implications for pre-school staff	26
Implications for local and national government	27
Bibliography	28
Appendix: About the research	29
Different types of pre-school	29
Research methods	30
Statistical methods of analysis	31
Visits to pre-schools	32

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to all the pre-school staff and parents, local authority staff and representatives from pre-school organisations who contributed to this research.

We wish to acknowledge the contribution of the following members of NFER staff:

Wendy Keys, for her direction of the research

David Hewitt, for undertaking the statistical work

John Harland, Kay Kinder, Anne Wilkin, Helen Moor and Sheila Sudworth for helping to carry out the pre-school visits

Effie De Souza, for helping to administer the questionnaire survey

Marian Sainsbury and Kay Kinder for commenting on the draft manuscript

David Upton for technical editing.

Thanks are also due to the three- and four-year-olds who provided the illustrations for this report.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

The research

- ◆ This research is based on the responses of 953 parents of three- and four-year-olds attending 37 pre-school settings based in six areas of England. The survey was backed up with visits to 12 pre-schools and interviews with parents, staff and others involved in pre-school education.
- ◆ The research included six different types of pre-school setting in the public, private and voluntary sectors. The settings were selected as examples of good practice.

Information sources used by parents

- ◆ Most parents found out about pre-schools from other parents, friends, family and neighbours. Relatively few parents used other sources of information such as directories, posters and adverts, although this varied according to the type of pre-school they had chosen.

Why parents choose a particular pre-school

- ◆ Parents choosing a pre-school are much more concerned about its reputation and the happiness of the children than about practical issues, such as nearness to home, opening hours and cost (although these were important factors for some parents).
- ◆ If choosing between two similar pre-schools, most parents would choose

the one with caring staff, good security and good facilities. Over half of the parents said that a wide range of play activities and good staff-child ratios would be important factors when making such a choice.

- ◆ Just under half of parents said that the teaching of reading and mathematics would be an important factor in their choice.
- ◆ Just under a third of parents prioritised a good outdoor play area, and over a quarter said it would be important to choose a pre-school providing information and advice to parents.
- ◆ Other factors of less importance to most parents were: a multicultural approach; and including children with special educational needs.
- ◆ Parents differed in their priorities according to their child's age group and sex, and the type of setting they had chosen.

Visits and written information

- ◆ Almost all parents had visited their child's pre-school before he or she started to attend.
- ◆ Just over a third of parents had visited at least one other pre-school setting before reaching a decision.
- ◆ Information from the interviews with parents and pre-school staff indicated that individual parents are looking for different things when they visit a pre-school, and that some parents are unsure what to look for.

Who decides?

- ◆ The interviews revealed that mothers usually took the lead in choosing a pre-school for their child: they found out what was available and visited pre-schools. About half of the mothers interviewed said that the final choice had been a joint decision with their husband or partner.

When do parents make their choice?

- ◆ Over two-thirds of the parents interviewed had chosen their child's current pre-school before the child's third birthday.

Which type of pre-school would parents prefer?

- ◆ The majority of the parents interviewed said that they would prefer their child to attend a pre-school that was part of a school (i.e. a school nursery class or a reception class). Parents said they wanted to avoid the disruption caused to children by transferring from one institution to another at such an early age.

Parents' views on broader issues

- ◆ Over half of the 953 parents surveyed responded to a question asking for any further comments. Many parents took the opportunity to praise their child's current pre-school.
- ◆ Many of the parents' concerns focused on the need for an expansion of pre-school provision, particularly for working parents.
- ◆ A minority of parents used this question to comment on the *Nursery Education Voucher Scheme*. Most of those who commented expressed negative views, and some admitted to being confused about aspects of the scheme.
- ◆ The 34 parents we interviewed expressed a mixture of views on the voucher scheme. Just under half held negative views, and a similar proportion were unable to comment. A few expressed positive views.
- ◆ Some parents objected to the scheme's subsidy of private nursery fees. On the whole, parents felt that the scheme would lead to a reduction, rather than an expansion, of choice.
- ◆ Positive views were expressed by parents of children attending private nurseries, who appreciated the voucher's contribution to their finances.

Introduction

This is a report about parents' views of pre-school. It looks at how and why parents choose a particular pre-school for their child. Parents' views of the quality of the pre-school education on offer are reported in a separate publication, also available from the NFER.

Issues of parental choice, liaison and involvement have always been important in pre-school education. However, our research took place at a time when parental choice of pre-school came under the spotlight, with the introduction the *Nursery Education Voucher Scheme*. The scheme had two main aims: to ensure high standards of education for four-year-olds; and to promote parental choice by giving vouchers to parents, providing them with information and by causing the pre-school 'market' to expand.

It was these themes of information, choice, diversity and quality of pre-school provision that we followed up in our survey of parents' views and in our visits to pre-school settings. Although the change of government in May 1997 brought about the ending of the voucher scheme, these themes remain of key importance in the creation of a strong partnership between parents and pre-school providers.

Scope of the study

This report is based on the following sources of information.

- A survey of 953 parents of three- and four-year-olds attending 37

pre-school settings based in six areas of England.

- Visits to 12 pre-schools that parents rated highly, including: interviews with 28 members of staff and 34 parents.
- Interviews with people responsible for state pre-school provision in the six local authority areas and with representatives of national pre-school organisations.

For further details of the research see the Appendix on page 29.

We were interested in parents' views of the pre-schools attended by their three- and four-year-old children. There are many different types of pre-school for children of this age-group, and we focused on six of the most common.

- Local education authority (LEA) nursery schools.
- Nursery classes in LEA primary schools.
- Reception classes in LEA primary schools.
- Local authority day nurseries.
- Private day nurseries (including workplace nurseries).
- Pre-school playgroups.

Some of the key characteristics of these different types of pre-school are described in the Appendix.

The pre-schools studied were selected from recommendations by local authority officers and pre-school organisations. We sent questionnaires to parents in October 1996. The 953 parents who sent back their completed questionnaires comprised 52 per cent of the parents of three- and four-year-olds included in the survey.

How parents find out what is available

Our first point of interest was how parents who are looking for a pre-school find out what is available in their area. Do parents rely on word-of-mouth recommendations, and how many parents use other sources of information such as directories of pre-schools, posters and advertisements?

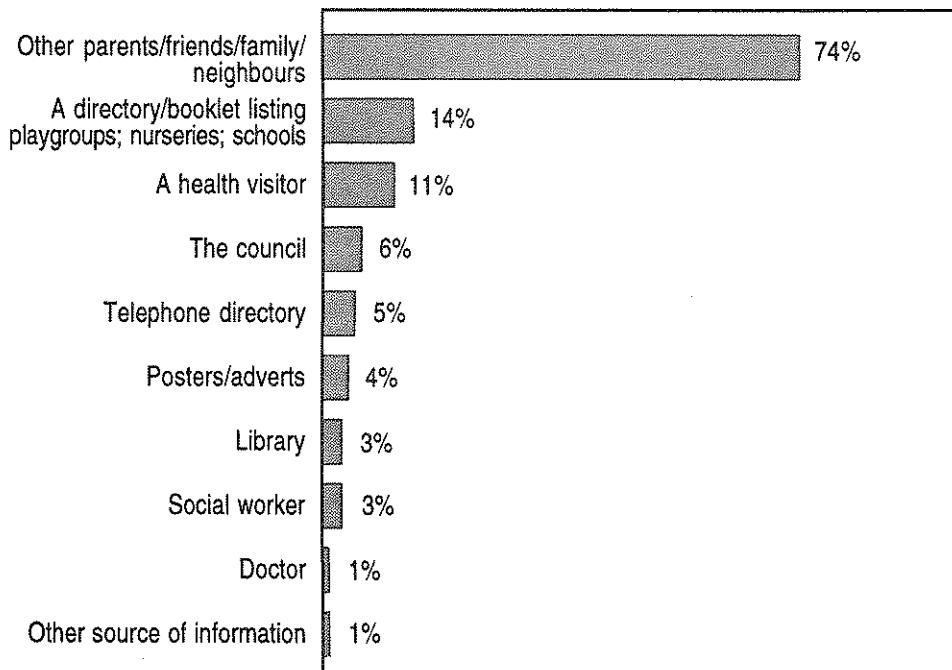
The parents' questionnaire listed various sources of information about pre-schools (such as from other parents, friends and family; directories; health and social service representatives) and asked parents to tick any that they had used.

The diagram shows that word-of-mouth was by far the most important source of information: almost three-quarters of parents had found out about the pre-schools in their area from other parents, friends, family and neighbours.

Despite the fact that four of the six LEAs and most of the national pre-school organisations compile directories of pre-schools, only 14 per cent of parents had used such a directory. Relatively few parents had used any of the other sources of information we listed.

We wanted to know whether particular information sources were used by parents who had chosen different types of setting. We carried out statistical

1. Information sources used by parents



Based on the responses of 953 parents from six types of pre-school.

tests of significance to see if this was the case (some further details of the statistical methods used are given in the Appendix). The differences noted below were statistically significant.

- Parents of children attending a **local authority day nursery** were more likely to have obtained information about pre-schools from a social worker, health visitor or doctor, and less likely to have obtained information from other parents/friends/family or from a directory/booklet.
- Parents of children attending a **private day nursery** were more likely to have obtained information on pre-schools from the telephone directory or a directory/booklet. They were less likely to have obtained information from other parents, friends and/or family members.
- Parents of children attending a **playgroup** were more likely to have obtained information on pre-schools from posters and adverts.

Some of these differences are perhaps predictable. For example, you might expect parents of children attending local authority day nurseries (a type of pre-school which focuses on the needs of families under stress) to be more likely than other parents to have found out about their child's pre-school from a social worker, health visitor, or doctor. The greater reliance of private nursery parents on a telephone directory indicates that parents interested in private nurseries can find them listed in the *Yellow Pages*. The fact that more parents of children attending a playgroup had found out about pre-schools via posters and advertisements

is perhaps a reflection of the way in which playgroups advertise their presence in a local community (for example, through leaflets to homes or advertisements in neighbourhood shops).

Influences on parental choice

A key area of interest for the research concerned the way in which parents choose a pre-school for their three- or four-year-old. We wanted to know which factors parents consider when making their choice and which are the most important factors. We also wanted to know whether parents who choose different types of pre-school are looking for different things.

The factors we included were influenced by the findings of other research into parents' choice of school (see the bibliography for further details). Most of this research has focused on parental choice of secondary school, so we were interested to see whether the same factors were important to parents at pre-school level.

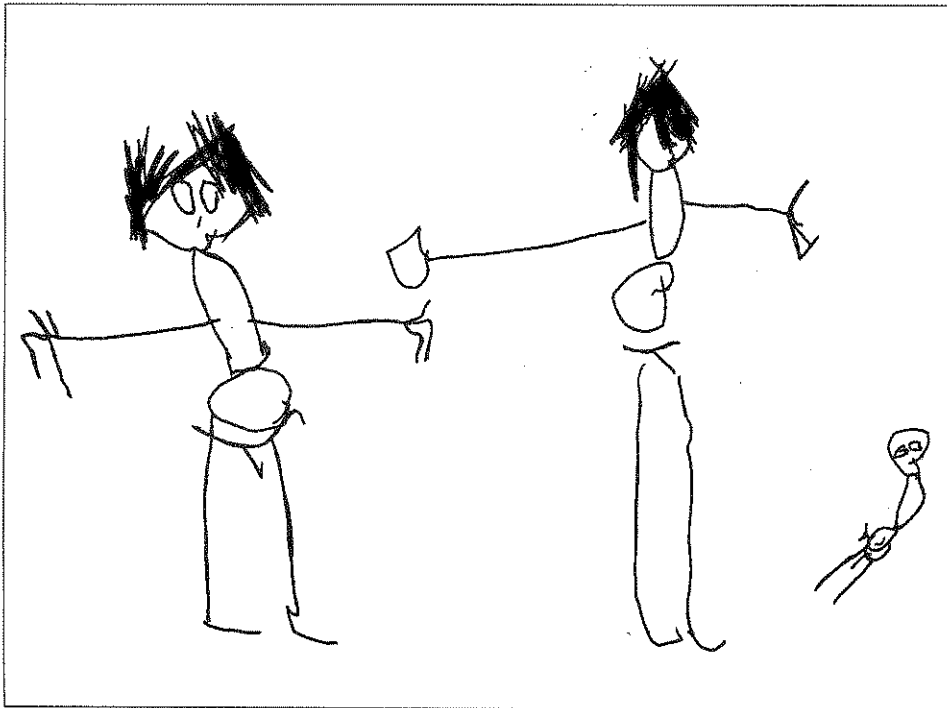
We did not include questions on parental choice in the questionnaire sent to parents of children attending local authority day nurseries. We excluded the questions from this version of the questionnaire on the advice of local authority officers, day nursery staff and parents involved in the piloting of the questionnaire. They pointed out that many of the parents whose children attend local authority day nurseries are advised or even required by social services to place their child in day care

(for example, as the result of a court order). In these circumstances, parents do not have the same freedom to choose a pre-school for their child as do other parents.

The questionnaires sent to parents of children in the remaining five types of pre-school asked two questions about their choice of pre-school. The first of the questions focused on accessibility and the second asked about the importance of particular features of pre-school. The information in the following sections is based on the responses of 838 parents in LEA nursery schools and classes, reception classes, private nurseries and playgroups.

Accessibility

Previous research (see bibliography on page 28) has shown that choice of school is influenced by its distance from the child's home and whether the school is attended by another child in the same family. These were listed in the questionnaire together with other factors affecting access, such as cost, the convenience of the opening hours, the pre-school's willingness to accept children under the age of three and the ability of a pre-school to cater for a child's special needs.

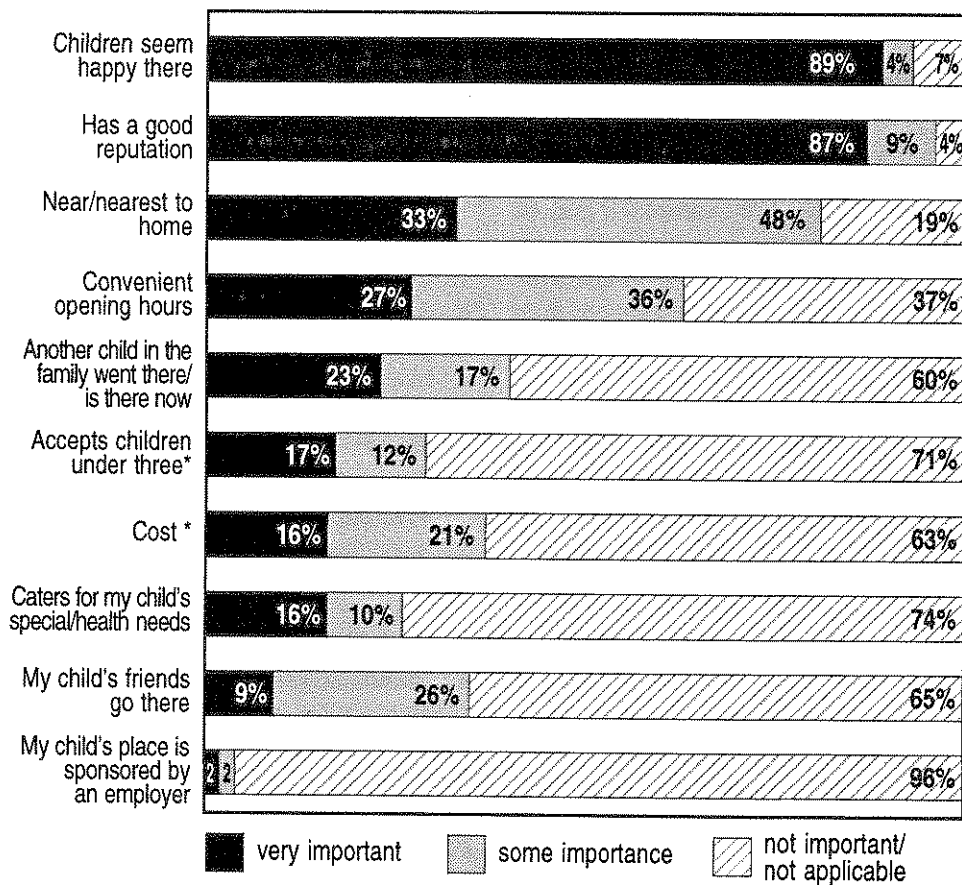


Me and my parents by Sam

We decided to add two further items that strictly speaking are not accessibility issues. The two additional factors were: 'Children seem happy there' and 'Has a good reputation'. These were felt to be of such importance by the parents who took part in the questionnaire trial that any list of key considerations would be incomplete without them.

We were interested in the relative importance of these factors. We therefore asked parents to rate the importance of each factor in their decision to send their child to a particular pre-school. The ratings were made on a three-point scale (very important, some importance, not important/not applicable). Parents' ratings of the importance of each factor are given below. The statements are listed in order of number of people marking each statement 'very important'.

2. How important were each of the following in your decision to send your child to this setting?



Based on the responses of 838 parents from LEA nursery schools and classes, reception classes, private nurseries and playgroups.

*These two factors were not included on the version of the questionnaire sent to parents whose children attended a reception class, because reception classes do not accept children under three, nor do they charge for admission.

Parents indicated that a number of factors contributed to the choice of their child's pre-school. However, the diagram shows that two factors stand out: the happiness of the children already attending the pre-school (rated very important by 89 per cent of parents) and the setting's reputation (rated very important by 87 per cent). Clearly, these factors were seen as overriding the more practical considerations listed in the questionnaire.

Parents' ratings indicated that the other factors we listed were much less important to them, although distance from home and convenient opening hours were of at least some importance to the majority of parents in their choice of setting.

The importance of some of the factors is obviously dependent on family circumstances. For example, it may be very important for families with older children to send younger siblings to the same school, and for parents of children with special educational or health needs it is vital that they find a pre-school willing to cater for their child.

We wanted to know whether certain factors were more or less important to parents who had chosen each of the five different types of setting, so we carried out statistical tests of significance to see if this was the case. The analysis showed that the happiness of the children at the pre-school and the pre-school's reputation were of equal importance to parents attending the different types of pre-school. However, there were several points of difference among parents who had chosen different types of pre-school for their child. The differences noted opposite were statistically significant.

- Parents of children attending an **LEA nursery school** were more likely to say that the fact that it catered for their child's special/health needs was a very important factor in their choice of setting.
- Parents of children attending an **LEA nursery class** were more likely to rate attendance by another child in the family as very important.
- Parents of children attending a **school reception class** were more likely to rate attendance by another child in the family as very important. These parents were less likely to rate convenient opening hours as a very important factor in their choice of pre-school.
- Parents of children attending a **playgroup** were more likely to rate nearness to home as very important, and cost as of some importance. They were less likely to rate the setting's reputation as very important.
- Parents of children attending a **private day nursery** were more likely to rate three factors as very important: convenient opening hours; accepting children under three; and that their child's place was sponsored by an employer. They were more likely to rate cost as of some importance. These parents were less likely to rate nearness to home or attendance by their child's friends as very important factors in their choice of pre-school.

Some of these differences are related to features of particular types of pre-school. For example, pre-schools attached to primary schools accommodate children from a wide age range and all the children in a family are likely to attend

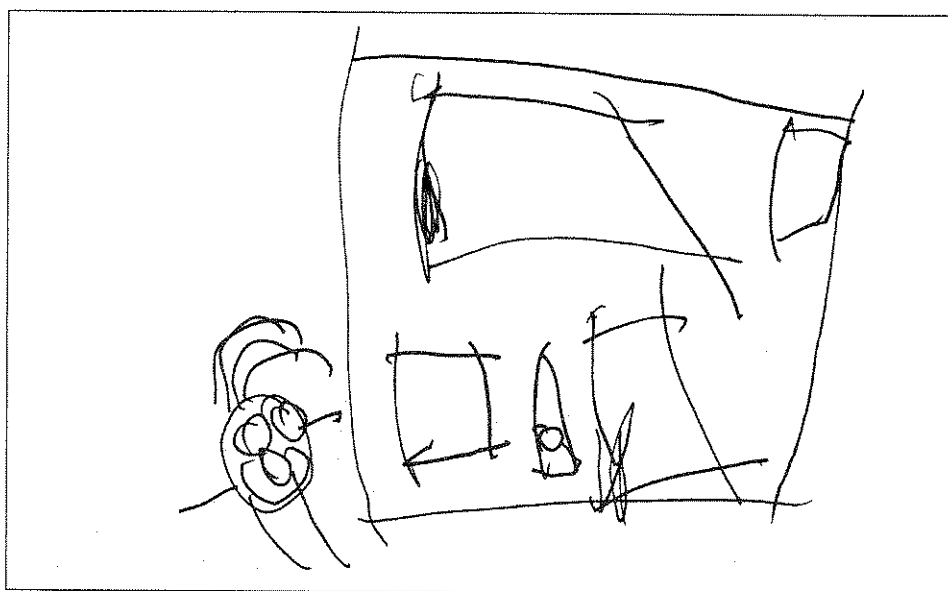
the same primary school. This may well be the explanation for the finding that parents of children in school nursery and reception classes were more likely to rate attendance by another child in the family as an important factor.

Playgroups usually offer shorter sessions than other types of pre-school; parents are invited to help with activities and are charged a small fee for their child's attendance. These features help to explain why nearness to home is very important and cost is of some importance for parents of children attending playgroups.

The fact that acceptance of children with special needs was more important to parents of children attending a nursery school is likely to be a reflection of differences in the sample. Elsewhere in the questionnaire we asked parents whether their child had any special needs, including health or development problems. A significantly higher proportion of parents of children in nursery schools indicated that their child

had special needs (although parents of children attending local authority day nurseries had the highest proportion of children with special needs).

The responses of parents from private nurseries may reflect both the working patterns of these parents and their greater affluence. For example, the importance of convenient opening hours, accepting young children and employer sponsorship of places may well be linked to the needs of working parents (one of the private nurseries in the sample was a workplace nursery). The cost of their child's place is a matter of some importance to these parents. However, parents who have chosen a private nursery are less concerned than other parents about the nursery's nearness to home. This may be because their choice of private education means that they have to look further afield than other parents. They are also more likely than other parents to be able to afford one or more cars, thus enabling them to transport their child a greater distance to their nursery.



My school by Tanya

Limitations on choice

The interviews with parents of children attending 12 of the pre-school settings provided insights into the limitations on parental choice. Although the majority of the 34 parents we spoke to said they had got a place at their preferred pre-school, some explained that they had difficulty finding a pre-school which catered for their needs. For example, parents who lacked access to transport were restricted to a choice of pre-schools near to home; those in rural areas had few pre-schools within reach; less affluent parents could not afford to pay for a private nursery; and working parents needed pre-schools offering particular opening hours.

One mother explained how a combination of practical issues contributed to her choice of pre-school:

There weren't many play schools to choose from and a private nursery would have been too expensive. As I don't drive I was limited to those within walking distance, so there were really only three or four to choose from. I decided to send her to this playgroup because it's reasonably near, though not the nearest. The hours being offered suited me.

In some cases, parents could not gain entry to the pre-school of their choice. One of the mothers explained that she had been unable to get her child into a particular LEA nursery class because she lived outside the catchment area for the school.

I put Peter's name down to go to a nursery but he didn't get in. It was a bit silly really because we live nearer to the nursery than to the

playgroup, but we live on the wrong side of the road from the boundary apparently, so he didn't get in.

Another mother living in a rural area described the complicated arrangements she had to make to get her child to his nursery school, involving four bus journeys a day.

I look after a little boy and I have to drop him off at his school for nine o'clock and then get Jimmy to the next village for half past nine. There is a nearer nursery, but I'm out of the catchment area for it. It's a big rush because I haven't got transport so I have to bus it.

The interviews demonstrated how a complex range of factors such as poverty, family composition, working patterns, living in a rural area and the local availability of pre-school places can curtail parents' choice of pre-school.

Features of pre-schools

When we designed the questionnaire, we were well aware of the fact that not all parents have a wide choice of pre-schools and parents may not be able to find one which is close to their ideal choice. However, we were interested in finding out about some of the features of a pre-school that might be influential if parents had a free choice. For this reason we included the following hypothetical question in the questionnaire: 'If you had a choice between two pre-schools which were similar in distance, opening hours and cost, which factors would be most important to you when choosing between them?'

We drew up a list of factors, based on previous research into choice of school and influenced by the literature on important features of pre-school education (see the bibliography for further details). The list touched on a number of issues, including: the physical environment (buildings and equipment, security system, outdoor play area); the staffing (caring staff, staff-child ratios); the curriculum (play activities, teaching of reading and mathematics); equal opportunities (multicultural approach, inclusion with children with special educational needs); and parental information/advice.

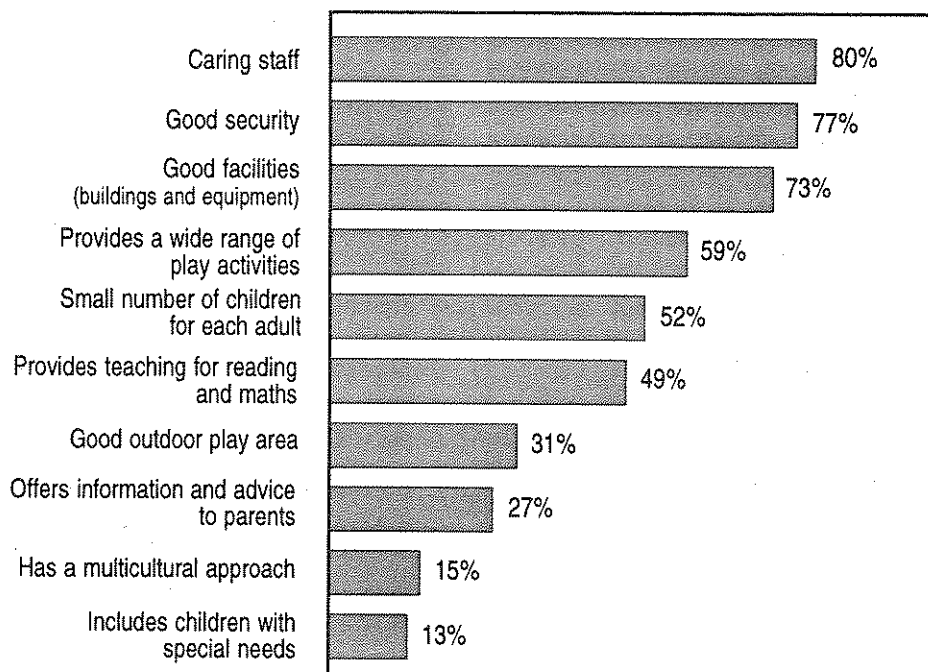
The questionnaire asked parents to tick the five most important things they would look for when making their choice of pre-school. The results are shown in

Diagram 3 (items are listed in order of the percentage of parents ticking each feature as important).

The diagram shows that the factor of importance to most parents was that their child's pre-school should have 'caring staff'. This is consistent with the priority given to the child's happiness at pre-school, which was also apparent in parents' answers to the previous question.

Security was clearly an important issue for most parents. Over three-quarters of the parents indicated that they would look for a pre-school with good security arrangements. That parents are concerned about the security of their child's pre-school is not surprising in the year following two well-publicised

3. Most important factors in choosing between two similar pre-school settings

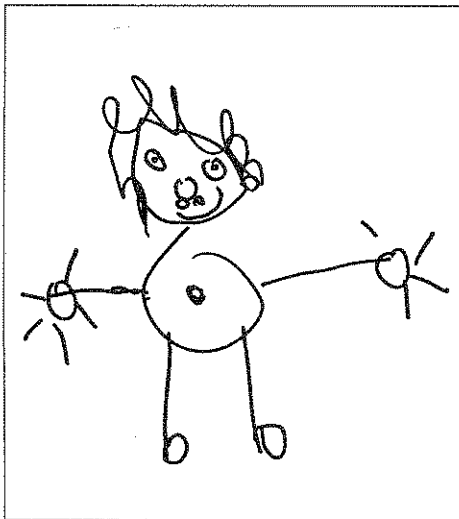


Based on the responses of 838 parents in LEA nursery schools and classes, reception classes, private nurseries and playgroups. Parents were asked to choose their five most important factors.

incidents where intruders attacked school children (resulting in the deaths of children at Dunblane Primary School in March 1996, and injuries to young children at a Walsall infant school in July of the same year). The fact that security was rated so highly by the parents we surveyed in October 1996 indicates the high level of anxiety among parents about the ability of pre-schools to protect their young children.

The buildings and equipment were another key factor. Just under three-quarters of parents prioritised a pleasant, well-maintained and well-equipped environment.

The diagram shows that features of the curriculum and staffing levels were next in order of importance. Over half of the parents said they would choose the pre-school offering a wide range of play activities. (Interestingly, a higher response than for 'provides teaching for reading and maths'.) Half of the parents indicated that the ratio of staff to children would be an important factor in their choice.



My teacher by Victoria

Four features were of much less importance to the majority of parents. A good outdoor play area was considered important by just under a third of parents and the provision of information and advice to parents was prioritised by over a quarter. Fewer than a quarter of parents indicated that either a multicultural approach or a policy of including children with special needs would influence their choice of pre-school.

Differences in priorities according to the age and sex of the child

We thought that there might be differences of opinion among parents according to certain characteristics of their child, such as age and sex. (The questionnaire asked parents to provide this information.) To check on age differences, we divided the parents into two groups according to whether their child was aged three or four at the beginning of the autumn term. There were three significant differences between parents of three- and four-year-olds and one significant difference between parents of boys and girls in the answers to this question.

- Parents of **three-year-olds** were more likely to indicate that a good outdoor play area would be an important factor in their choice of pre-school.
- Parents of **four-year-olds** were more likely to indicate that the inclusion of children with special needs would be an important factor in their choice of pre-school.

- Parents of **four-year-olds** were more likely to indicate that the teaching of reading and mathematics would be important in their choice of pre-school.
- Parents of **girls** were more likely to indicate that security would be an important factor in their choice between two similar pre-schools.

These findings show that parents of three- and four-year-olds are interested in pre-school settings offering slightly different things. The fact that parents of three-year-olds are more interested in their child's access to outdoor play, and that parents of four-year-olds are more likely to want their child to be taught reading and maths is perhaps a reflection of parents' interpretation of the developmental needs of their child. It may also reflect the type of pre-school attended by children of different age groups (see below).

More of the parents of four-year-olds felt it to be important that a pre-school should include children with special needs. Rather than showing a true difference of opinion between parents of older and younger children, this is probably a reflection of the composition of our sample. A significantly higher proportion of parents of four-year-olds in our sample considered their child to have special needs (including health or development problems).

Despite the differences listed above, there are many features on which parents of three- and four-year-olds agreed. For example, they were equally concerned about the importance of caring staff, good facilities, security and adult-child ratios. Before we saw the results of these analyses we had predicted that

parents of four-year-olds would place less priority on their child's pre-school providing a wide range of play activities, and were surprised to find that this was not the case. There was no significant difference between parents of three- and four-year-olds on this issue.

It is also worth noting that parents of boys and girls held very similar opinions, with the exception of the greater priority given to good security by parents of girls.

Differences in priorities according to the type of setting

We wanted to know whether parents of children attending the five types of setting would prioritise different things. Our analyses revealed that there were several statistically significant differences of opinion between parents of children attending different types of pre-school setting.

- Parents of children attending an **LEA nursery school** were more likely to say that a good outdoor play area would influence their choice of pre-school.
- Parents of children attending a **school reception class** were more likely to prioritise the teaching of reading and maths, and the provision of information and advice to parents. These parents were less likely to feel that a wide range of play activities or a good outdoor play area would influence their choice.
- Parents of children attending a **private day nursery** were more likely to indicate that good adult-child ratios would influence their choice. They were less likely than other parents to say they would look

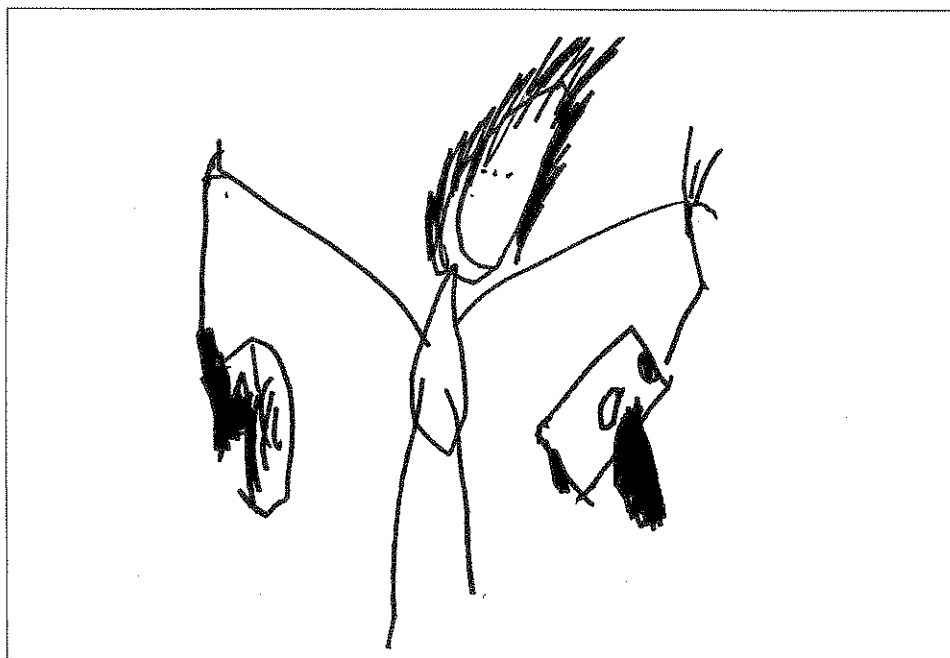
for a pre-school offering information and advice to parents, or one catering for children with special needs.

- Parents of children attending a **playgroup** were more likely to say that they would look for a setting offering a wide range of play activities.
- The views of parents of children attending an **LEA nursery class** did not differ markedly from those of parents whose children attended the other types of pre-school setting.

Again, the analyses by type of pre-school revealed some differences of opinion between parents. One of these may be related to the age-group of the children as well as the type of setting. The emphasis placed on the teaching of reading and mathematics by parents of children in reception classes may be due in part to the fact that reception classes do not cater for three-year-olds

(whose parents are less likely to consider this an important factor), and in part to the expectation of parents that children will be taught to read when they start 'proper school'.

Some of the differences in parents' answers to the question reflect particular features of different types of setting. For example, most LEA nursery schools have good facilities for outdoor play, and our analysis showed that this feature was considered to be important by a higher proportion of parents of children attending LEA nursery schools. Similarly, playgroups offer a wide range of play activities and private nurseries tend to have high ratios of adults to children. Each of these features was felt to be important by more parents of children attending playgroups and private nurseries respectively.



I like playing with the cars by Mark

Parents' pre-school visits

Although most parents find out about pre-schools by word of mouth, parents are unlikely to enrol their child without some further information. Perhaps the best way for parents to judge the suitability of a pre-school is to arrange a visit. We wanted to know how many parents had visited their child's pre-school before their child began to attend and whether parents visited more than one pre-school before reaching a decision.

The questionnaires sent to all parents asked whether the parents had visited their child's pre-school before their child started to attend. The responses revealed that the vast majority of parents (92 per cent) had done so. Although most of parents in all six types of setting said they had visited the pre-school, there was a significant difference according to the type of pre-school their child attended.

- Parents of children attending a **playgroup** or a **local authority day nursery** were less likely than other parents to have visited their child's pre-school before they made their choice. In fact, 75 per cent of playgroup parents and 86 per cent of local authority day nursery parents said they had visited their child's pre-school before their child started to attend.

We had predicted that fewer parents of children attending a local authority day nursery would visit before their child started there, because places are often allocated on the basis of referral rather than parent choice. However, we did not expect the finding that fewer parents

had visited their child's playgroup. Perhaps this reflects the more 'informal' nature of playgroup organisation.

In addition to visiting the pre-school they selected, just over a third (35 per cent) of parents had visited at least one other pre-school setting before reaching a decision. Although most of these parents had visited two or three pre-schools in total, a few reported that they had visited up to ten pre-schools before deciding which one to choose. There was a significant difference in the number of pre-schools parents had visited according to the type of pre-school they selected.

- Parents of children attending a **private day nursery** made more visits to pre-schools than other parents (55 per cent of these parents said they had visited at least one other pre-school, including 21 per cent who had visited four or more pre-school settings before reaching a decision).

For parents who send their child to a private nursery there is an obvious financial incentive to satisfy themselves that a state funded pre-school could not offer equivalent provision. The finding that parents of children attending a private nursery visited more pre-schools before making a choice indicates that affluent parents are particularly active in finding out what the pre-school 'market' has to offer.

What parents are looking for when they visit a pre-school

The interviews with staff and parents provided an opportunity to find out more about parents' visits to pre-schools. The 34 parents we interviewed said they had

found such visits useful, but there was little consensus on what they were looking for during their visits to pre-schools.

For example, a mother whose daughter attended a playgroup explained that she was trying to gain a general impression:

I found the visit quite useful because you could tell straightaway what the atmosphere was like.

In contrast, the mother of a child attending a nursery school was looking for specific things:

I wanted to know that it was nice and clean and there was plenty of stuff there to play with to keep him amused until I pick him up.

However, the mother of a child attending the same nursery school was interested in different aspects:

I wanted to know what they did, what was the security and if there was a nice outside play area.

Interviews with 28 pre-school staff confirmed that parents who visited them were interested in a variety of aspects, including the attitude of the staff, the happiness of the children and the range of activities on offer.

The head of a local authority day nursery explained that parents in social need may not be in a position to judge the quality of provision.

Because the majority of our families are referred they don't know what they want, all they know is they want someone to look after their children because the family's under stress.

The head of a nursery school commented:

I think different people are looking for different things; it depends on whether they've had any experience of nursery education. When parents haven't got any experience of nursery school, one of the most common things they say to me is: 'I want to get him ready for the big school'.

Some staff said they took the opportunity of an initial visit to explain to parents what their pre-school had to offer. For example, in one nursery school, parents wishing to look round the nursery were given an individual appointment and taken round by the head. As the head explained:

Parents tend to equate busyness with learning, which might not necessarily be the case, so that's why I talk through what's going on.

Staff in other pre-schools agreed that part of their role was to help parents focus on important aspects of pre-school education and to deal with any misconceptions parents might have (especially regarding teaching of reading and mathematics). A nursery class teacher said:

I think they [parents] don't know what to look for, and that's why I tend to take the lead, pointing out the different areas of experience that we have available.

The head of this school added:

I think parents ought to be able to see that the children are not only happy, but they are learning. Now

learning to us could mean social development, whereas to some parents it tends to be whether children can write or count. We are preparing a document which explains that we are doing reading, writing and number, but it's not in a formalised way that isn't appropriate for a young child.

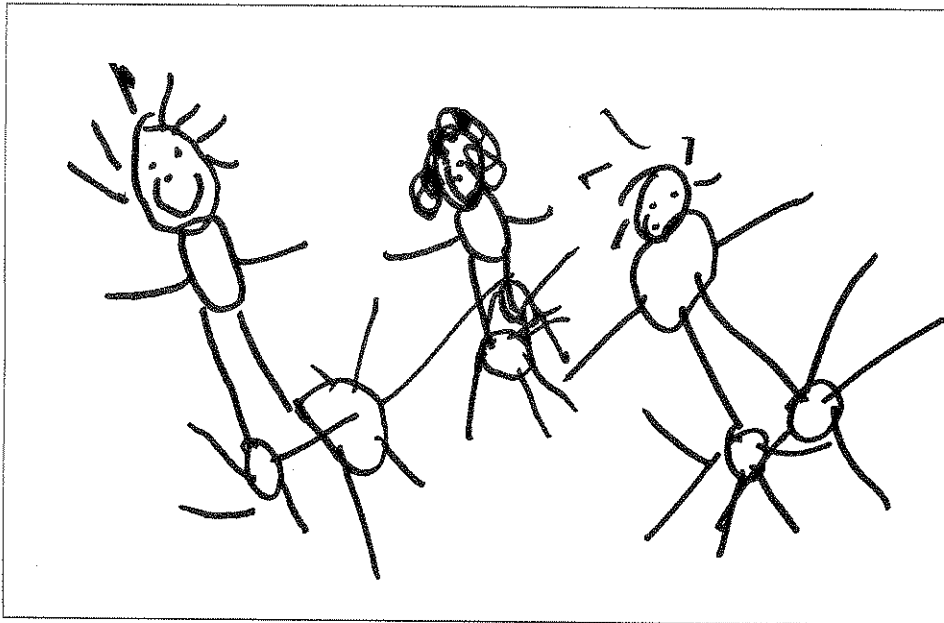
The parents we spoke to appreciated the opportunity to talk to staff and ask questions. As one mother explained:

We had a talk from the headteacher, who gave us all the information about the lessons and what they did. You could ask lots of questions and she answered every single question that we asked.

Another parent who attended this session said simply:

They put my mind at rest.

Since we carried out the research, a useful booklet has been published to help parents choose a pre-school for their child. The booklet was prepared by the National Early Years Network and was made available to parents of four-year-olds as part of the *Nursery Education Voucher Scheme* (see the bibliography for details). Parents are advised to visit pre-schools and to look for: 'A combination of care, education, enthusiastic staff, good resources and equipment, and an approach that will meet the needs of your child.' The authors provide a checklist of points for parents to consider, including: the information given to parents; the welcome they receive; the relationships between staff and children and between staff and parents; the books, equipment and materials; the meals and snacks provided; and the safety and security of the premises.



Me and my parents by Sally

Who chooses?

According to the parents we interviewed (33 mothers and one father) it emerged that choice of a child's pre-school was primarily the mother's decision, although fathers were involved in the discussions in just under half the cases. Typically, mothers were the ones who found out about pre-school options, gathered information and visited the pre-schools. Some mothers then discussed their preferences with their husbands or partners before making a final decision.

One mother explained that the choice of her child's local authority nursery was almost entirely her decision:

My husband wasn't involved much. I went home and told him I'd seen this place. He said 'Yeah, whatever'. He leaves it to me!

Similarly, another explained:

We both decided that we wanted our son to go to some sort of playschool, but the final decision was mine. I called in to have a look round and put his name down then and there.

In contrast, one mother described how her partner was involved in both the research and decision-making:

My partner was very much involved. We visited the schools together and we went through why we liked this one the best.

When do parents make their choice?

We asked the parents we interviewed how old their child had been when they made their pre-school choice. The 'timing' of pre-school choice was of particular interest in relation to the *Nursery Education Voucher Scheme*, because parents received the vouchers and associated information (including a list of settings registered to accept vouchers) a few months before their child's fourth birthday.

Over two-thirds of the 34 parents we interviewed had decided to send their child to the current pre-school before the child's third birthday. A few decided soon after the child was born, particularly in families where they wanted a younger child to attend the same pre-school as his or her older siblings, or where parents had to get their child's name down early in order to secure a place. However, the majority of parents made the decision when the child was nearly three years old.

Of course children may attend more than one setting before the age of five: for example, a child could start at a playgroup at two-and-a-half, move to nursery at three and then to reception class when she reaches the age of four. We were asking parents of three- and four-year-olds about the pre-school the child was currently attending, so in some cases the child would be moving to another setting when they were four. However, our findings indicate that parents choose a pre-school several months, or even years before the child is old enough to attend.

Which type of pre-school would parents prefer?

We were interested to know which type of pre-school parents would choose if given a free choice of all the different types. We therefore asked the 34 parents we interviewed the following question.

'As you probably know, there are lots of different kinds of places parents can send their three- and four-year-olds, such as LEA nurseries, day nurseries, playgroups and school reception classes for four-year-olds. If you had a choice of all the different types for your child, which would you choose and why?'

There was a range of answers to this question, with many parents expressing their satisfaction with their child's current pre-school. However, the majority of parents (20 of the 34 interviewed) said that, if given a free choice, they would choose a pre-school attached to a school (e.g. a school nursery class). The most common reason given for this was that they did not want their child to face the disruption of moving from one institution to another at such a young age. In addition, some parents felt that schools were better equipped than other types of pre-school, that their child would get a good introduction to the National Curriculum, or that they would benefit from the opportunity to attend the same school as their older brothers and sisters. The following quotations are typical of parents expressing this view.

I would like Stuart to go to an LEA nursery in the school he was going to. It's a shame for them to make friends [in a pre-school] and then maybe not see them, and it will take him time to settle in at school because he won't be with the people he's been with before.

I would have preferred a nursery in the primary school because it keeps the continuity. I think for some children to change school at the age of four it's a big upheaval.

I would like an educational nursery attached to a school. It's nice when they go right through, right up to 11. It gives them a better start, puts them on the right road for the National Curriculum.

However, a few of the parents expressed concern about the suitability of a reception class environment for a four-year-old. One mother of a child at a nursery said:

I've got reservations about mixing four-year-olds in reception classes. Younger children have got different needs from older children.

Another mother said:

I would choose a dedicated place which caters for three- and four-year-olds and which has a teacher-child ratio appropriate for that, rather than reception classes where they've got 32 kids.

The parents of children attending a private day nursery were convinced that they had made the best choice for their child. They gave two main reasons for this: the perceived emphasis on

education and the individual attention available (due to high ratios of adults to children). As one mother said:

In a private nursery you know you're going to get an excellent level of education, an all-round education, along with individual attention.

Another commented:

Children need the one-to-one attention they get at home.

One mother of a child at a private nursery suggested that social reasons were important in her preference for a private nursery:

It's the type of person you get in a day nursery...In the local state school every boy has his ears pierced by the age of ten and the way they speak...I don't want Emily speaking like that!

Parents' views on broader issues

The last question on the questionnaire invited parents to add any comments about their child's pre-school or about provision for under fives in general. Just over half of the parents responded to this question, most of whom took the opportunity to praise their child's pre-school. Typical comments are given below:

The nursery is doing a wonderful job. They are very good with the parents as well as the children. It is a pleasure to visit them and the staff are always pleased to see us.

Our nursery is well run. We like the school, but more importantly, so do the children. They are happy so we are happy.

This nursery is the best in the area.

One issue that concerned many of the parents who commented was the lack of pre-school provision in their area. One parent wrote:

I cannot accept that the availability of state nursery provision is not adjusted according to local demand.

Another commented:

I think ALL children should have the opportunity to go to nursery prior to going to school as it prepares them for what lies ahead.

The lack of affordable childcare was of particular concern to working parents. Parents wanted to have access to care throughout the working day. As one parent said:

I use this [private] nursery because the state provision was on a part-time basis. I was unable to make the necessary arrangements for additional care.

Some parents of children attending private nurseries wanted childcare to be subsidised or made tax-deductible:

An allowance should be provided by the government to help with the costs of private nurseries. Also help should be provided once the child starts school as many parents work and will find it difficult arranging childcare out of school hours.

A mother of a child attending a local authority nursery expressed her frustration at being unable to afford childcare if she got a job:

I am a single parent on income support. I want to return to work but I cannot get a job that will pay sufficient to support me and my son. I didn't choose to be a single mum, I was forced to due to violence.

Parents' views on the Nursery Education Voucher Scheme

Among the additional remarks made by parents responding to the questionnaire, a minority concerned the introduction of the *Nursery Education Voucher Scheme*. Of the parents who commented on the scheme, almost all expressed negative views. A few admitted to being confused about the workings of the scheme.

We followed this up in our interviews with parents. We asked the 34 parents we spoke to for their views of the scheme and whether they thought it would lead to an expansion in parental choice.

The parents we spoke to had mixed views on the voucher scheme. Just under half held negative views, and a similar proportion were unable to comment. A few parents held positive views.

The main point made by those opposed to nursery vouchers was that the scheme would largely benefit more affluent parents who could afford to send their child to a private nursery. One parent said:

All it seems to be doing is putting money into the pockets of those who can already afford to pay for their child's nursery.

Another commented:

I disagree with the nursery voucher scheme. For parents who would have gone to a private nursery anyway, their parents are given £1,000, or 'a free skiing trip' as one parent was heard to say!

When asked if it would increase parental choice of school, most parents felt that it would not, at least in the short-term.

As one parent of a child at a private nursery said:

If parents cannot afford to send their child to a private school, I'm not sure the voucher will make all that much difference. I would hope it would give some parents an opportunity [to afford private fees] but if they call up most nurseries around here they will find out that they're already full.

In fact, parents predicted that the scheme would restrict parental choice, because of its effects on the existing provision. In some cases, parents had been told that state-funded provision for three-year-olds was under threat because money was being taken from the local authority's budget to contribute to vouchers for four-year-olds.

Parents of children attending playgroups were worried about the continued viability of their pre-schools, because local schools were planning to expand in order to take 'voucher-bearing' children. One of the playgroups in our study was threatened with closure as a direct result of the voucher scheme. The playgroup was well established in a temporary classroom on a school site. The school head had told the playgroup manager that because of the voucher scheme she wanted the classroom back, to accommodate a new reception class for voucher bearing four-year-olds.

Although many parents wanted their child to be able to start school at an early age, some were concerned about the standard of provision available to young children in school reception classes. One parent said:

What I don't agree with at all is that some schools are having to take children at the age of four and they

are mixing the four-year-olds in with the reception year. Some schools have got the resources to have separate classes with a different teacher, but some schools won't have the resources.

The minority of parents in favour of the voucher scheme were almost exclusively those who had chosen a private nursery. One said:

It's excellent, it's like a present!

Another commented dryly:

We're hardly likely to say no to a gift of money.

However, one parent felt uneasy about accepting the voucher:

I think it's wonderful that people are being helped, great for others, but we don't need it. I will discuss it with my husband but I think we should give the money to charity.



I like dressing up as Spider Man by Mark

Conclusion

This research has provided information on how and why parents choose their child's pre-school. It has produced evidence of the powerful effect of a pre-school's local reputation. We found that parents relied heavily on recommendations from friends, family, neighbours and other parents in finding out about the pre-schools in their area. When choosing a pre-school for their child, parents were strongly influenced by the reputation of the pre-school and the happiness of the children there. Although some parents were taking account of practical considerations, such as nearness to home and opening hours, such considerations were of less importance to most parents when choosing a pre-school for their child.

These findings are very similar to those of research into parents' choice of secondary school (see bibliography), which have found that parents want their child to be happy at school, and are likely to apply for a place at a school with a good local reputation. However the research into choice of secondary school indicates that for older children the school's academic success (e.g. the school's position in the educational 'league tables') and the child's own preferences also come into play.

Some of our findings on the features parents would look for when choosing between two similar pre-schools provide interesting food for thought. The fact that most parents want a pre-school with caring staff fits with parents' concern for their child's happiness. The very high priority given to good security was not expected, but it is understandable in the

light of recent well-publicised attacks on schoolchildren by intruders.

We had thought that favourable adult-child ratios might be given a high priority by parents, because this issue has been highlighted in recent political debate. In fact, although it was thought to be an important factor by just over half of parents, other factors (namely caring staff, good security, good facilities and the range of play activities on offer) were prioritised by a higher proportion of the parents we surveyed.

It has been suggested that parents nowadays are very concerned that their children should learn reading and mathematics from an early age. Our findings confirmed that this was of interest to parents. However, the results also indicated that it was not the top priority: if choosing between two similar pre-schools, parents would be more likely to prioritise the provision of a wide range of play activities than the teaching of reading and mathematics. There was a difference between parents of three- and four-year-olds on this point, with parents of older children more likely to rate teaching of reading and mathematics as an important factor in their choice. Even so, parents of four-year-olds indicated that they would attach a similar importance to both a wide range of play activities and to more formal learning, when choosing between two similar pre-school settings.

Some of the differences between parents who have chosen different types of pre-school are informative. One group in particular stands out: parents of children attending a private nursery. Our findings indicate that parents who choose a private nursery are more interested than

other parents in finding a nursery accepting children under three, offering convenient opening hours and providing good adult-child ratios. They are more willing to choose a pre-school that is not near to their home, and they visit more pre-schools, on average, than do parents of children attending other types of pre-school. These findings would seem to reflect the working patterns and greater affluence of parents who can afford to pay for a private nursery place for their child.

A consistent theme that comes through from our findings is parents' overriding concern for the happiness of their child. When choosing a pre-school, parents are looking for a place where the staff are caring and the children are happy. This also related to parents' preference for a pre-school attached to a school. Although the parents we interviewed were satisfied with the education and care provided in their child's current pre-school, the majority would prefer a place in a school nursery or reception class so that their son or daughter would not have to face the disruption of moving from one environment to another at such an early age.

Parents wanted an expansion in provision for under fives, but were doubtful that the *Nursery Education Voucher Scheme* would bring this about. They wanted more provision and a greater availability for good quality, affordable childcare for children of working parents.

This research has surveyed nearly a thousand parents from a range of backgrounds, living in different areas of England, who have chosen different types of pre-school for their children. The findings provide insights into

parents' choice of pre-school, their concerns about their child's education and their need for information and guidance. We hope the research will prove interesting and useful for all those involved in providing education and care for young children.

Implications and recommendations

The findings of this research have some important implications for parents, pre-school staff and policy makers at local and national levels. These are outlined in the following sections. Other important aspects of pre-school, including the information provided on children's progress, parental involvement and parents' views of the quality of their child's pre-school, are discussed in a second report: *Parents' Views of Pre-school: Quality Matters*.

Implications for parents

The research identified issues relating to parents' access to information and their decision-making process.

Getting information

The research found that parents relied heavily on information about pre-schools from other parents, friends, family and neighbours. Very few used other forms of information to find out about the pre-schools in their area.

- Finding out about pre-schools by using informal networks is a good starting point. However,

the information you get from local contacts may not alert you to all the possibilities.

- The social services department of your local authority has to produce information for parents on all early years services. The local education authority will have information about local schools. Contact your local town hall, library or health clinic for further information.

Finding out what pre-schools have to offer

A setting's local reputation is very important to parents, but most parents would wish to visit at least one pre-school before making a decision.

- Local reputation is a useful guide, but remember that some pre-schools can get an undeserved reputation and that what suits one child may not suit another.
- The best way for parents to find out about a pre-school is to arrange a visit. Visit more than one pre-school if possible, and try to make an appointment so your partner is able to attend.
- Arrange to visit during the day, so you can gain an impression of the happiness of the children and the quality of relationships between staff and children.
- Look for the appropriateness of the buildings and equipment: do children have access to outdoor play?

- Check security arrangements: could an intruder easily gain access?
- Is there a good range of play activities? Ask staff to explain how children benefit from the activities provided.
- Ask staff to outline their aims for the children in their care. Find out if they have had a recent inspection and ask to see a copy of the report.
- Find out where most of the children at the pre-school go when they leave, and ask how pre-school staff prepare the children for their next stage of education.
- Ask staff about their entry criteria. There is no point applying to a school if they have a catchment area and you live outside it. Find out how places are allocated, so you can weigh up your chances of getting a place and let staff know of anything that might help your case.
- Most pre-schools have some written information for parents. Get hold of a copy and read it at home. If you still have questions, phone the pre-school for an answer or arrange another visit.

Implications for pre-school staff

The following points are designed to help pre-school staff to think about particular aspects of their relationship with parents.

How parents find out about pre-schools

The research found that most parents find out about pre-schools by word-of-mouth recommendations.

- How do parents find out about your pre-school? Are there parents in your immediate area who do not approach you? Is this because they are not aware that you exist?
- Consider whether there are any ways in which you could help inform local parents of your presence.
- What kind of local reputation does your pre-school have? Consider ways in which you could influence your standing in the community.

Entry criteria

All pre-schools have some kind of entry criteria, but these are not always clear to parents. Pre-schools need to be aware of the consequences of their entry criteria.

- What are your entry criteria? Ensure that these are logical and coherent.
- Check whether your criteria exclude certain groups of parents and children (e.g. if you require all children to be toilet trained or to be able to feed

themselves this may exclude some children with special educational needs).

- Consider how best to communicate your criteria clearly to staff and parents. Parents need to know whether it is worthwhile applying to your pre-school.
- Ensure that you are consistent in applying your entry criteria. If you have to refuse places to parents, the reasons for doing so need to be fully explained.

Visits

If parents are to make an informed choice, they must have an opportunity to visit one or more pre-schools. Staff can help by encouraging parents to visit and by guiding them round.

- Consider how to encourage all parents to visit your pre-school before their child begins to attend.
- Devise strategies for encouraging particular parents to visit (e.g. fathers/partners as well as mothers, people from ethnic minorities, families with more than one young child, working parents).
- Think about the kind of information parents want. Decide how best to explain your aims (including your approach towards learning through play and towards the teaching of early reading and number skills).
- Make sure a member of staff is available to guide parents round.

First impressions

The research demonstrated the importance to parents of particular aspects of a pre-school. Staff can help reassure parents if they address these aspects when communicating with them.

- Consider how best to assure parents that their child's happiness is of utmost importance to staff.
- Keep security under review and explain to parents how your procedures operate.
- Are there any ways in which you can improve your existing buildings and equipment?

Implications for local and national government

The research has some important implications for local and national policy-makers. Parents can only make effective choices if there is sufficient provision available and if they have sound information on which to base their decisions.

- There is an urgent need to address the lack of pre-school provision. Any expansion should take into account the needs of working parents.
- The booklet *Choosing What's Best for Your Child* (National Early Years Network, 1997) contains useful information and advice for parents.

Consideration should be given to re-drafting this publication in the light of the demise of the voucher scheme and making it widely available to parents.

- The content of initial and in-service training for early childhood workers should raise awareness of parents' concerns and include guidance on how to form effective partnerships with parents.
- There is continued need for inter-agency collaboration in planning pre-school provision. This should include health, social services and education as well as private and voluntary sector providers. Any future development should be coherent whilst preserving diversity: not all parents want or need the same type of pre-school provision.
- Parents need information and guidance on the different types of pre-school available in their area (including provision by the state, private and voluntary sectors). Local authorities should consider how best to make this information accessible to parents and should take an active role in promoting its use.

Bibliography

Nursery Education Voucher Scheme

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT (1996). *Nursery Education Scheme: the Next Steps*. London: DFEE.

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT and SCHOOL CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT AUTHORITY (1996). *Nursery Education: Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education*. London: DFEE.

NATIONAL EARLY YEARS NETWORK (1997). *Choosing What's Best for Your Child: a Guide to Education for Four-year-olds*. London: DFEE.

OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (1997). *The Quality of Education in Nursery Voucher Settings*. London: DFEE.

Early childhood education

BALL, C. (Ed) (1994). *Start Right: the Importance of Early Learning*. London: Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce.

BRUCE, T. (1987). *Early Childhood Education*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

LABOUR PARTY (1996). *Early Excellence: a Head Start for Every Child*. London: Labour Party.

PASCAL, C., BERTRAM, A., RAMSDEN, F., GEORGESON, J., SAUNDERS, M. and MOULD, C. (1996). *Evaluating and Developing Quality in Early Childhood Settings: a Professional Development Programme*. Effective Early Learning Project. Worcester: Amber Publishing Company.

RUMBOLD REPORT. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE. COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO THE QUALITY OF THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OFFERED TO 3- AND 4-YEAR OLDS (1990). *Starting with Quality*. London: HMSO.

SYLVA, K. and MOSS, P. (1992). *Learning Before School* (NCE Briefing No. 8). London: National Commission on Education.

Research into choice of school

ADLER, M. (1993). *An Alternative Approach to Parental Choice* (NCE Briefing No. 13). London: National Commission on Education.

ADLER, M., PETCH, A. and TWEEDIE, J. (1989). *Parental Choice and Educational Policy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

COLDRON, J. and BOULTON, P. (1991). "'Happiness" as a criterion of parents' choice of school', *Journal of Education Policy*, 6, 2, 169-78.

GLATTER, R., WOODS, P. and BAGLEY, C. (1995). 'Diversity, differentiation and hierarchy: school choice and parental preferences.' Paper presented at an ESRC Seminar, Milton Keynes, June.

GEWIRTZ, S., BALL, S. J. and BOWE, R. (1995). *Markets, Choice and Equity in Education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

JOWETT, S. (1995). *Allocating Secondary School Places: a Study of Policy and Practice*. Slough: NFER.

Statistics on the UK population

GREAT BRITAIN. CENTRAL STATISTICAL OFFICE (1994). *Social Focus on Children 94*. London: HMSO.

Appendix: About the research

Different types of pre-school

There are many different types of group provision for children aged three and four. We chose to focus on six of the most common.

LEA nursery schools have their own headteachers and normally offer part-time places to children aged three to four, although some offer full-time places and may open for extended hours (e.g. from 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.). Staff are qualified teachers and assistants. There is a minimum of one staff member for each 13 children.

LEA nursery classes are part of an infant, first or primary school serving a wider age-range (e.g. three to seven, four to eleven). Their opening hours are similar to those of a nursery school, although most do not offer extended day care. Staff qualifications and staffing ratios are the same as for LEA nursery schools.

School reception classes take children aged between four and five. There has been a recent trend towards creating more reception classes and to taking children into school at a younger age, effectively lowering the school entry age so that children can start school at the beginning of the academic year in which they become five. In smaller schools, four-year-olds may be in a mixed age class (in some cases, accommodating children up to the age of seven). Children usually attend for the whole of the school day (typically 9.00 a.m. to 3.15 p.m.), although some

attend part-time at first. Staff are qualified teachers and assistants. At the time of the research, there were no restrictions on the number of children per adult in school reception classes.

Local authority day nurseries offer mainly full-time and often extended day care (e.g. from 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.). They may accommodate a wide age-range, from babies to four-year-olds. These nurseries commonly allocate places on the basis of family need. Staff are usually qualified (e.g. in teaching, social work or childcare). There must be one adult for every eight children in the three- to five-year-old age-group.

Private day nurseries offer part-time, full-time and/or extended day care to children under five. Typically, private day nurseries are open from 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. They may accommodate babies as well as older children. Parents pay a fee for their child's attendance. There is usually a majority of trained staff and there must be one adult for every eight children in the three- to five-year-old age-group.

Pre-school playgroups (also known as pre-schools) offer play-based learning opportunities for young children. Playgroups are commonly attended by children aged three, although some have four-year-olds and some accept two-year-olds. Parents are encouraged to participate in the playgroup's activities. Children normally attend for a session of a few hours up to five times a week. Parents pay a nominal fee for their child's attendance. There is usually a majority of trained staff and there must be one member of staff for every eight children in the three- to five-year-old age-group.

Research methods

The research formed part of the NFER's Membership Programme, which is funded by the local authorities in England and Wales. The project took place from January 1996 to March 1997. We started by identifying local authority areas with a wide range of different types of provision. We selected six areas in different parts of England, covering a range of inner city, urban and rural areas. Because the *Nursery Education Voucher Scheme* was such an important innovation for pre-school provision, we included in our sample one of the four authorities taking part in Phase 1 of the voucher scheme.

We spoke to the people with responsibility for publicly funded pre-school provision in each authority. We asked them a series of questions about the population of their area and how pre-school provision was organised. We also asked them to nominate the pre-schools (nurseries, playgroups and reception classes in schools) that they thought were providing a good service for children and their parents. In some cases, the people we spoke to had strong links with the private and voluntary sector providers and were able to nominate good examples: where this was not the case, we contacted the national and local organisations representing private nurseries and playgroups to ask for nominations.

We wrote to the person in charge of each of the nominated pre-schools to ask if they would be willing to take part in the research. Almost all of them agreed to do so. Our sample was made up of six different types of pre-schools nominated for their good practice and located in six different areas of England (one of each type in each area). Because we predicted that we might get a lower

response from parents of children attending local authority day nurseries, we included an extra example of this type of setting.

We designed a questionnaire for parents of three- and four-year-olds and trialled it with parents and pre-school experts. The questionnaire was redrafted in the light of the comments received

Three versions of the parents' questionnaire were developed: one for reception classes; one for local authority day nurseries; and one for LEA nursery schools, nursery classes, private day nurseries and playgroups. The three versions were similar, although there were slight differences in the wording of the questions (e.g. substituting 'reception class' for 'nursery/playgroup'). Some questions regarding parental choice were not included in the questionnaire sent to parents of children attending local authority day nurseries.

After checking with the pre-schools about the languages spoken by their parents, versions of the questionnaires were translated into four community languages: Urdu, Gujarati, Punjabi and Bengali.

Parcels of questionnaires were sent to 37 pre-schools in October 1996. The person in charge of each pre-school was asked to fill in a short form, giving details of the number of children attending, their opening hours and staffing.

Although the pre-schools handed out the questionnaires, the parents posted them back to the research team using the pre-paid envelopes provided. We received replies from 953 parents of three- and four-year-olds attending the different types of pre-school (see Table A1).

Table A1. Parents' questionnaire sample

	No. of parents	% of sample
LEA nursery schools	305	32
Nursery classes in LEA primary schools	217	23
Reception classes in LEA primary schools	124	13
Local authority day nurseries	115	12
Private day nurseries	91	9
Pre-school playgroups	101	11
Total	953	100

Replies were received from 52 per cent of the parents we surveyed. There was a similar response rate from parents in the different types of setting, although, as we had predicted, a slightly lower proportion of local authority day nursery parents replied (47 per cent).

The sample had more parents of three-year-olds (62 per cent) than of four-year-olds (38 per cent) and slightly more parents of boys (52 per cent) than of girls (48 per cent). Eleven per cent of the parents reported that their child had some kind of special need (including health and development problems). In terms of ethnic group, 76 per cent of the parents in our sample indicated that their child's ethnic group could be described as 'White European', 12 per cent described their child's background as 'Pakistani' and five per cent as 'Mixed Race'. The remaining seven per cent of the sample was made up of parents of children from a variety of ethnic groups, including: Indian, Black Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Black African.

Statistical methods of analysis

The questionnaire contained mainly 'closed' questions (i.e. where parents were asked to respond to a range of answers printed on the questionnaire), although we did provide space for parents to add comments on particular issues. Information from answers to the closed questions was entered on to a computer. The analyses were carried out by a statistician, who used chi-squared tests to look for differences between groups. The differences reported as 'statistically significant' were significant at the .05 level. This means that there is a less than one-in-20 chance that these results would occur if there was really no difference between the groups.

Interpreting the results

Although we did our best to obtain a sample that would reflect the views of parents living in different areas of the country and from a range of backgrounds, we would not wish to claim that it is representative of the views of parents as a whole. There are some important features of the sample that may affect the results.

First, we selected authorities with a wide range of different types of provision (state, private and voluntary funded). These authorities represented both urban and rural areas and had parents from a variety of backgrounds, but they are not necessarily typical of the country as a whole.

Second, we asked local authority staff and pre-school organisations for nominations of pre-schools that they considered to be offering high-quality education and care. This means that the study has a focus on good practice.

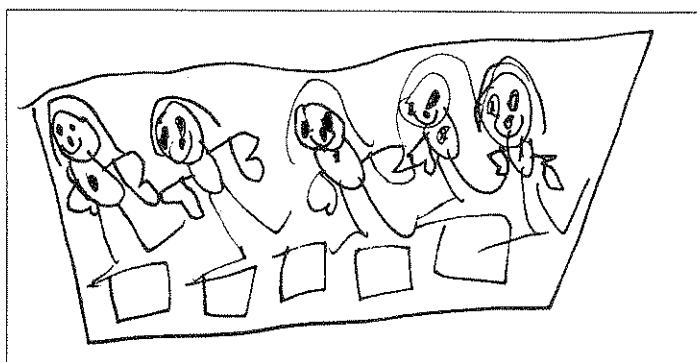
Third, our overall sample does not comprise equal numbers of parents from each type of pre-school. Almost a third of the responses to the parents' questionnaire came from nursery schools and just under a quarter were from nursery classes in LEA schools. The rest of the sample is spread fairly evenly between parents of children attending the other types of pre-school. It is important to bear this in mind when looking at the results from all parents, because the views of parents whose children attend an LEA nursery school or class are over-represented. Also, 24 per cent of the parents in our sample indicated that their children were from ethnic minority backgrounds. This is a much higher proportion than in the general population. In 1991, nine per

cent of the under five age group of Great Britain was made up of children from ethnic minority groups (Central Statistical Office, 1994).

Finally, it should be noted that comparisons by type of pre-school setting are based on just six settings of each type (or seven, in the case of local authority day nurseries).

Visits to pre-schools

We arranged to visit the pre-schools that parents rated most highly, to observe activities and talk to parents and staff. Twelve pre-school settings (two of each type) were visited by trained and experienced researchers for a period of two days each between November 1996 and February 1997. Interviews were held with 28 members of staff (heads, teachers and nursery assistants) at the pre-schools. We contacted parents in the 12 settings who had indicated that they were willing to take part in an interview (44 per cent of all parents who returned a questionnaire said they would be willing to be interviewed). In total, 34 parents were interviewed about their child's pre-school. Some interviews were carried out at the pre-schools and some by telephone, to fit in with parents' work patterns and other commitments.



My school by Daniella

nfer

parents' views of pre-school: making choices

- * What are parents looking for when choosing a pre-school for their three- or four-year-old?
- * How do they find out what is available in their area?
- * How important are practical issues, such as distance, opening hours and cost?
- * What other factors come into play, and what are parents looking for when they visit a pre-school?

These are some of the questions addressed in this book, which reports the findings of a major research project. The research entailed a survey of nearly a thousand parents whose children attended pre-schools in the state, private and voluntary sectors. The survey findings are illustrated by quotations from interviews with parents and pre-school staff.

The book contains a series of practical action points for consideration by parents, pre-school staff and policy-makers. It should be of interest and practical use to all those involved in the education and care of young children.

ISBN 0 7005 1458 9

£5.00