

Childminding in the 1990s

Childminders are a major provider of non-parental childcare, offering a valuable service to families. As such, they have a significant role to play in the National Childcare Strategy, one aim of which is to increase the number of childcare places. Childminding is also a major source of employment in the childcare field. Yet, the number of childminders has fallen over recent years. This study, by researchers at Thomas Coram Research Unit, looked at childminding as an occupation and its role in the provision of childcare. Using data from secondary analysis, a large-scale survey and case studies, the study found that:

- f** Childminders are the main providers of formal childcare accounting for nearly a quarter of children receiving non-parental care.
- f** Childminding is mainly undertaken by women when their children are young, because it enables them to combine paid work and care for their own children.
- f** A substantial number of childminders see childminding as a long-term career, while others see it as a passing phase in their employment.
- f** Childminders clearly define themselves as professional childcare workers, but less strongly feel the need for training and qualifications. Personal experience of motherhood was for some an important requirement.
- f** Childminding demands a variety of skills, not least of which are working within a private market and negotiating relationships with parents. There was a tension between being a carer, with its emphasis on commitment and close personal relationships, and operating as a small business in a private childcare market.
- f** Although working conditions are poor, childminders recorded a high level of satisfaction and commitment to their work.
- f** Childminders expressed dissatisfaction with what they saw as the low value placed on their work by society. This affected the views of childminders and parents about childminding as an occupation.
- f** Changes in demographic and employment patterns, regulation, and the work of childminders are contributing to the fall in the number of childminders.

Background

Much of the research on childminding occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, the environment within which childminders work has changed considerably. The Children Act 1989, for example, introduced a modernised system of regulation. More recently, the National Childcare Strategy set out the Government's intention to ensure good quality, affordable childcare for children aged 0-14 in every neighbourhood. The demand for, and supply of, childcare has also changed. Employment amongst women with a child under five has increased significantly. Other forms of childcare, particularly private day nurseries, have grown in number leading potentially to increased competition in the childcare market. Further change is imminent. National standards for childminders, nursery and pre-school playgroup providers will soon come into effect. The transfer of the regulation of childcare from Social Services to the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) will take place later this year. Against this backdrop, the study was undertaken to find out what it means to be a childminder at the end of the 1990s.

Childminding as part of the childcare landscape

The study revealed a picture of childcare arrangements similar to that reported in previous research. Care by relatives is still the most common form of childcare for children whose parents work. Childminders, however, are the major providers of formal childcare, accounting for nearly a quarter of children receiving non-parental care.

Childcare arrangements varied substantially between socio-economic groups. Parents using childminders and day nurseries were much more likely to be working full-time and be working in professional and managerial jobs. Parents using relatives or friends were less likely to work in professional and managerial jobs and more likely to be working part-time.

Reasons for becoming a childminder

Most childminders in this study were women with a partner in full-time employment. Women enter childminding usually at a time in their life when they have young children at home. When they started childminding over 90 per cent had their own children, of whom three-quarters were under the age of five. The main motivation for entering the work was expressed by this childminder:

"Childminding is an excellent job for a parent who wishes to stay at home with their own children yet still contribute to the family budget."

Although a preference to stay at home and care for their children was a reason for childminding, the intrinsic and financial reward that alternative employment could offer was also a decision-making factor. Since women consider childminding once they themselves have had children, most have been in previous employment before starting a family. Whilst many stop working when they have children, a third had worked outside the home and used non-maternal childcare before becoming a childminder. Previous employment tended not to be professional or managerial and therefore less likely to command high salaries.

"By the time I'd paid for travel and childcare costs, I was bringing in less than I earn now, working two and a half days from home as a childminder."

In the past, there has been a notion that women working as childminders are doing so for 'pin' money and are not therefore dependent on the income. However, case study childminders said that their childminding income was essential to their household income.

Working as a childminder

On average, childminders had been childminding for six years, though not always working continuously. A quarter had taken a break from childminding, but remained registered. Although registered on average for 4.8 children, they were caring on average for 3.5 children and one half had vacancies. Places actually in use at registered childminders therefore appear to be substantially less than those recorded as available.

Working hours averaged 34 a week, but a third worked between 41 and 50 hours a week. Three-quarters did not get paid when they took a holiday. Home workers are some of the lowest paid workers in the labour force and childminders are no exception. The average gross weekly income was £103. Although often considering themselves low paid, they find it difficult to increase their fees.

"You can't charge too much, because you price yourself out of the market. So you're not earning enough to be fully independent, but at the same time you can't afford to ask for more, because then you'll have no work at all."

Furthermore, the work is not necessarily continuous or reliable. New childminders often had difficulty breaking into the market, which meant a delay in starting work. When arrangements ended, or changed, childminders did not know when they would find new business. A former childminder explains the effect of a parent suddenly announcing they were reducing their hours:

"It's only a couple of pounds an hour, but it makes such a difference ... but even when you've got quite close to people, it was hard to get across that, well, actually I was banking on that tenner."

The majority of childminders recorded a high level of satisfaction despite these poor working conditions. Being able to combine paid work with being at home was one of the most satisfying aspects of childminding. Another source of satisfaction came from finding children enjoyable to be with and helping in their development.

How childminders view their work

Commitment to their work was very high. Asked about their current employment preferences, more than half said they wanted to be childminding. The majority of those preferring another job wanted to remain working with children. More than half either saw childminding as their chosen career or as a stepping-stone to related work. Two-fifths, however, saw childminding as convenient while their children were young and still at home.

Childminders view themselves as professional childcare workers, but feel less strongly that a childcare qualification is important. Only a third think it very important that they attend training courses. Finding time and money to attend training courses was in any case seen as problematical. Nevertheless, around three-quarters had undertaken some non-qualification training related to their work. Since there is no requirement for childminders to be trained or qualified, it is perhaps understandable that childminders may not consider it important.

Lack of career progression and the fact that childcare experience gains little recognition within the wider labour market contributed to the problems that some childminders had in seeing childminding as a career. The low value accorded to childcare by our society, which - together with poor working conditions - was a major cause of dissatisfaction

among childminders, also makes it difficult to view childminding as a career or even as a 'proper' job.

Differentiating the care provided as a mother and as a childminder could be difficult, particularly when both took place in the childminder's home and what was done for her own children was often done too for the child being looked after on a professional basis. Opinion was divided on the importance of childminders being parents themselves. Childminders wanted to emphasise the close relationship that can develop between themselves and the children in their care.

"You're like mum, but you're not mum - you're more like an auntie, rather than just the childminder."

Childminders and parents were often of the view that people who were childminding should be primarily motivated by a desire to work with children, not for financial reasons. Behind this view appears to lie the belief that caring and earning money from caring are incompatible. This can mean that viewing childminding as a business is difficult, despite the fact that a business transaction takes place. A tension exists between being committed to childcare and wanting to earn a reasonable income from it, which can result in a difficult relationship between parent and childminder.

The childminder-parent relationship

Although childminding is subject to greater regulation, it is still very much a private arrangement between parent and provider. Consequently, it is largely left to these two parties to decide what their respective role and relationship will be.

The success of the childminding arrangement appeared to rest largely on the personal relationship between childminders and parents. The fact that both parents and childminders expressed satisfaction with their current arrangements suggests how skilled they were in negotiating a relationship, which is governed both by the norms of social exchange and the norms of a business.

Childminders did recount experiences of past arrangements that had been problematical. Difficulties centred on time-keeping, payment and caring for sick children.

Decreasing numbers of childminders

Over the last few years, the number of childminders leaving childminding has not been matched by new

childminder registrations. Reasons for this situation may include:

- changing demographics resulting in a shrinking supply of prospective childminders;
- increased employment opportunities offering flexible working patterns;
- a lack of support for childminding at the local authority level;
- the low pay and poor status of the work;
- the changing nature of the work;
- increased regulatory demands, although childminders endorsed regulation.

The increased number of places in other types of provision has also been put forward as a reason childminders are leaving, though analysis of government statistics at local government level did not provide support for this view.

Conclusions

The supply of labour for care work such as childminding has depended on a particular group – women with low levels of education, low levels of relevant training or none at all, and prepared or needing to work for low wages. This might be considered unacceptable, for its devaluation of important work and its exploitation of those doing this work. It is unlikely to be sustainable in the future, as demand for care work of all kinds increases, while the supply of labour for this work shrinks.

The researchers conclude that all care work, not just childminding, needs rethinking. It is currently understood as something essentially female, at which women are naturally competent, needing little or no skill or training. As we enter the twenty-first century with a greater emphasis on standards and quality, new understandings of care work are called for. This needs innovative thinking and a holistic approach linking care to other important areas such as learning and health. A new understanding of care work will lead to new occupational structures and training, and matching employment conditions.

About the study

The study was undertaken by Peter Moss, Ann Mooney, Charlie Owen and Abigail Knight. The research involved: 1) secondary analysis of the Family Resource Survey; 2) a questionnaire survey of a

nationally representative sample of 1050 childminders drawn from eight English authorities; 3) case studies of 10 new, 10 established and 10 former childminders from two contrasting English authorities. Parents using the 20 active case study childminders were interviewed by telephone. The work on the decrease in the number of childminders was an extension to the original study. It involved secondary analysis of government statistics, a survey of Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships and interviews with key officers from the National Childminding Association and ten local authorities showing a significant drop in the number of registered childminders. All the work was undertaken between 1999 and 2000.

How to get further information

The full report, *Who cares? Childminding in the 1990s* by Ann Mooney, Abigail Knight, Peter Moss and Charlie Owen, is published for the Foundation by the Family Policy Studies Centre in association with the Industrial Society (ISBN 1 901455 62 9, price £13.95).