Research Findings
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GUS
GROWING UP IN SCOTLAND

Sweep 1 – Topic Research Findings

Use of childcare by parents of young children

The Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) is an important new longitudinal research project aimed at tracking the lives of a cohort of Scottish children from the early years, through childhood and beyond. Its principal aim is to provide information to support policy-making, but it is also intended to be a broader resource that can be drawn on by academics, voluntary sector organisations and other interested parties. Focusing initially on a cohort of 5,217 children aged 0-1 years old and a cohort of 2,859 children aged 2-3 years old, the first wave of fieldwork began in April 2005. This document is one of a series that summarise key findings from the first sweep of the survey.

Methods

GUS is based on a cohort or longitudinal design involving the recruitment of a 'panel' of children (and their families) who will be revisited on a number of occasions over an extended period of time. Members of the panel were identified in the first instance from Child Benefit records. For the first year of the study, interviewers sought to contact the 'main carer' of the child named in the Child Benefit records. In virtually all cases (99%), this proved to be the child's natural mother. The interview covered a wide range of topics including pregnancy, birth and early parenting, formal and informal sources of support for parents, childcare, child health and development and parental health.

The expansion of childcare support and service provision has been an important component of several key Government social policies, such as social inclusion, elimination of child poverty, welfare to work and work/life balance policies. This Research Findings examines the use of childcare for both the baby and toddler cohorts, and how cost, type, mix of formal and informal provision, duration and childcare preferences vary according to parents' socioeconomic circumstances. Differences in attitudes towards employment and childcare are also explored.

Main Findings

- Overall, 65% of respondents were using childcare at the time of the interview. Parents of children in the toddler cohort were more likely to be using childcare than parents of babies (76% versus 60%).
- Use of childcare was intrinsically linked to employment status of household adults. The proportion of families using childcare was higher in cases where at least one of the child's carers was employed and particularly high when the child's mother was working.
- Overall, informal childcare provision was found to be more commonly used than formal provision, particularly amongst families in the baby cohort. Lone parent and lower income households were most likely to be using informal provision.
- The child's grandparents were the single most common type of childcare provider being used. Two-thirds of baby families and 50% of toddler families were using the child's grandparents for regular childcare.

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- The prevalence and characteristics of childcare use varied by area urban/rural classifications. Families living in remote areas were less likely to be using childcare and those who did were more likely to be using playgroups and childminders than families in other areas. Childcare was also found to be less expensive in remote and rural areas.

- One quarter (27%) of respondents reported some difficulty in coping with the costs of childcare. Unsurprisingly, level of household income clearly affected the ease at which families coped with childcare costs so that those with lower incomes found childcare costs hardest to meet.

- Few families felt they had a 'great deal of choice' when arranging childcare provision although many reported having 'quite a lot' of choice. Around 1 in 5 respondents indicated a desire to change their childcare provider.

- Over half of respondents (58%) working full-time and using childcare indicated that if they could afford it they would prefer to stay at home and look after their child(ren). Around 3 in ten (30%) said they would not.

- Almost three-quarters (72%) of those working full or part-time indicated that if they could afford it they would work fewer hours. Around 1 in 10 (12%) respondents working full or part-time reported that they would work more hours if they could afford good quality childcare which was reliable and convenient.

- Over half (55%) of unemployed respondents indicated they would prefer to work or study if they could afford good quality reliable and convenient childcare.

Use of childcare

Overall, 65% of respondents were using childcare on a regular basis at the time of the interview. Parents of children in the toddler cohort were more likely than parents of babies to be using childcare (76% versus 60%).

Childcare use was higher in households where the cohort child was the first born than in households where there were older children. There was little difference in overall childcare use between lone parent families and couple families.

Employment status of household adults had a clear and significant impact on whether or not regular childcare arrangements were in place - almost three-quarters (73%) of households where at least one parent was employed full-time had some form of childcare arrangement in place compared with 55% of households where no parent was employed. Maternal employment had an even more significant impact – in 92% of toddler households where the mother was employed full-time, some form of childcare provision was in place at the time of the interview.

Households in the highest income quartile were far more likely than those in the lowest income quartile to have childcare arrangements in place (including paid and unpaid childcare) even when parental employment status was controlled for. This suggests that the cost of childcare and the availability of affordable childcare were important for a significant number of families within the sample.

Childcare use varied according to the Scottish Executive 6-fold Urban Rural Classification. The proportion of families in the baby cohort using childcare in small, remote towns and remote rural areas was lower than in all other areas. Level of neighbourhood deprivation generated more stark area differences. Around three-quarters (74%) of families in the least deprived areas indicated that they had a regular childcare arrangement in place compared with 58% of families in the most deprived areas.

Types of childcare used

Around two-thirds (69%) of families using childcare used one childcare arrangement, 28% used two providers and just 3% used three or more. Toddlers' families were more likely than babies' families to have multiple arrangements in place.

Overall, two-thirds of those with regular childcare arrangements had at least one informal arrangement in place.[1] Baby families were more likely than toddler families to be using an informal arrangement (74% versus 59%). Use of a formal childcare provider was less common; around 52% of childcare users had at least one formal arrangement in place. This was more common in toddler families than in baby families (69% versus 41%).

Across both cohorts, lone parents and those in lower income households were more likely to be using informal care and less likely to be using formal care than were couple families and those in higher income households. In the baby sample, 82% of lone parent families who used childcare were using at least one informal arrangement compared with 73% of couple families. In contrast, 43% of couple families in the baby cohort were using at least one formal provider compared with 26% of lone parents.

The most common type of childcare provider used was the child's grandparents. Around two-thirds of baby families and half of toddler families using childcare reported some arrangement with the child's grandparents. Nurseries were the second most common provider type used. These were used more often by toddler families than baby families (42% versus 27%).

Grandparents were more commonly relied on by families living in the most deprived areas. These families also reported significantly lower use of nurseries, playgroups and childminders. Use of playgroups and childminders was significantly higher in remote areas than in other areas. This may be explained in part by a lack of nursery provision in these areas due to small numbers of age-appropriate children within the surrounding locality. Playgroup and childminding provision, which can function on smaller numbers of children, may be more appropriate in these locations.

Number of hours and days per week

Half of all families using regular childcare had arrangements for between 17 and 40 hours per week for the cohort child. Around a quarter (23%) of families using childcare had arrangements for 8 hours or less per week, and a further one in five for between 9 and 16 hours per week. A small proportion (8%) of families used childcare for over 40 hours per week. The majority of families (52%) using childcare had an arrangement with their main provider which extended over 2 or 3 days, although, around one in five were using their main provider over 5 days. The employment status of adults in the household significantly impacted on the duration of childcare arrangements which were in place.

Age at which child first placed in childcare

The majority of children in the baby cohort first received regular childcare between the ages of 6 and 12 months - a range which ties in with a return to work or the end of maternity leave for a large number of mothers. However, a significant proportion of babies first received childcare earlier than this, including 23% who were in a regular arrangement before they reached 3 months old.

Children from lone parent families and those in lower income households were significantly more likely to be getting regular care from someone other than a parent before they were 3 months old. Earlier childcare arrangements were more likely to be with informal providers, particularly the child's grandparents, than with formal providers.

[1] 'Informal' providers included, for example, the child's grandparents, other relatives and friends and neighbours. 'Formal' providers predominantly included nurseries, playgroups and childminders.

Cost of childcare

In all, 52% percent of families were paying for the childcare that they were using. Childcare was free for the vast majority of the remainder. Only a small number of families were in a situation where someone else was paying for the care.

The average cost of childcare for the cohort child for a family using any form of childcare was £66 per week. The average cost for babies was £75 per week compared with £58 for toddlers. These amounts varied considerably amongst the sample reflecting the wide mix of providers and arrangements that were in place.

Families living in urban areas paid more on average for childcare than families in any other type of area. Families living in accessible rural areas were likely to be paying the least for childcare. Parents in remote towns also had relatively low childcare costs for toddlers. Whilst variations in the type of provision available in these areas may explain some of these cost differences, there is still some indication that childcare is on the whole less expensive in remote or rural areas than in urban areas.

A little over four in ten respondents (43%) said they found it either 'easy' or 'very easy' to pay for their childcare, 30% found it neither easy nor difficult and a quarter (27%) found it difficult or very difficult. Lone parent families, those in lower income households and respondents who were unemployed were most likely to report difficulty with childcare costs. For example, 39% of families in the lowest income group found it difficult to pay for childcare compared with 17% of those in the highest income group.

Degree of choice and childcare preferences

Around one in ten families using childcare felt that they had a 'great deal' of choice when choosing who to use as their 'main' childcare provider. A further 26% reported 'quite a lot of choice'. and one fifth felt they had 'no choice at all'. The most common response chosen was 'not very much' choice (40%).

Around a fifth of respondents using childcare indicated that, if it was available and they could afford it, they would use a different main childcare provider for the cohort child. Families using only informal provision were significantly more likely than families using only formal care or a mixture of both to indicate that they would prefer to be using a different main childcare provider. For example, a quarter (26%) of toddlers' parents using only informal care indicated a desire for a different main provider compared with 13% using only formal care.

The childcare and employment balance

Over half of respondents (58%) working full-time and using childcare indicated that, if they could afford it, they would prefer to stay at home and look after their child(ren). Around 3 in ten (30%) said they would not. Almost three-quarters (72%) of those working full or part-time indicated that if they could afford it they would work fewer hours. Only around 1 in 10 (12%) respondents working full or part-time reported that they would work more hours if they could afford good quality childcare which was reliable and convenient. Over half (55%) of unemployed respondents indicated they would prefer to work or study if they could afford good quality, reliable and convenient childcare.

Amongst those respondents who were employed, 60% reported that their employer offered at least one family friendly working arrangement. Flexible working was by far the most common arrangement available - a little over half (53%) mentioned this policy. Only one in ten respondents' employers offered subsidised childcare and even fewer (7%) had a workplace crèche or nursery available.

Overall, 63% of employed respondents rated their employer as 'good' or 'very good' in terms of allowing family friendly working. Employer ratings were highest amongst respondents in intermediate occupations and lowest amongst respondents in semi-routine and routine occupations.

Conclusion

Most parents used childcare of some kind on a regular basis for their babies or toddlers. The prevalence of childcare use, the types of provision used, and the mix of providers varied according to families' circumstances. Informal childcare was central to almost all families' childcare arrangements but particularly so for families in more economically deprived circumstances.

Two factors that may explain at least some of the differences found are the cost and availability of affordable childcare. The data show childcare costs varied considerably and that a quarter of parents found meeting those costs either difficult or very difficult. Furthermore, most parents did not think they had much choice of childcare providers and those who indicated a desire to change their provision saw formal provision as the ideal. This suggests that the demand for affordable and available formal childcare has not been met.

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