

Understanding public attitudes to early childhood



Summary of Key findings

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The Centre for Early Childhood was established within The Royal Foundation in June 2021 to drive awareness and action on the impact of the early years. In support of this mission, The Centre commissioned Ipsos to conduct research into public perceptions and knowledge of the early years (the period from pregnancy to age five).

The research builds on the growing body of evidence already established by The Centre, including an initial assessment of public opinion in State of Nation Survey from 2020.

The specific objectives of this research were to:

- Provide a baseline level of understanding of perceived importance of early years, which can be tracked over time
- Help inform the development of future activity that seeks to help raise the importance of the early years, by identifying levels of awareness, key gaps in knowledge, any strong associations with early years, and differences by key subgroups

The findings will be used to help monitor progress against The Centre's core mission, and to inform future research and campaign activity.

1 Methodology

Ipsos interviewed 4,682 adults aged 16+ across the UK through the online Ipsos i-Say panel from the 21st April – 5th May 2022.

From these responses, we present two datasets:

1. nationally representative results from interviews with the general population based on 4,002 interviews. This includes grandparents, adults with no children, and those likely to have children in the near future. Data were weighted by gender, age, region, working status and ethnicity.

2. Separately, we present results from interviews with parents of children aged 0-5 based on 1,114 interviews. This includes 434 parents of children aged 0-5 from the general population sample, and a boost of a further 680 interviews. Data were weighted by gender, age and ethnicity.

2 Key findings

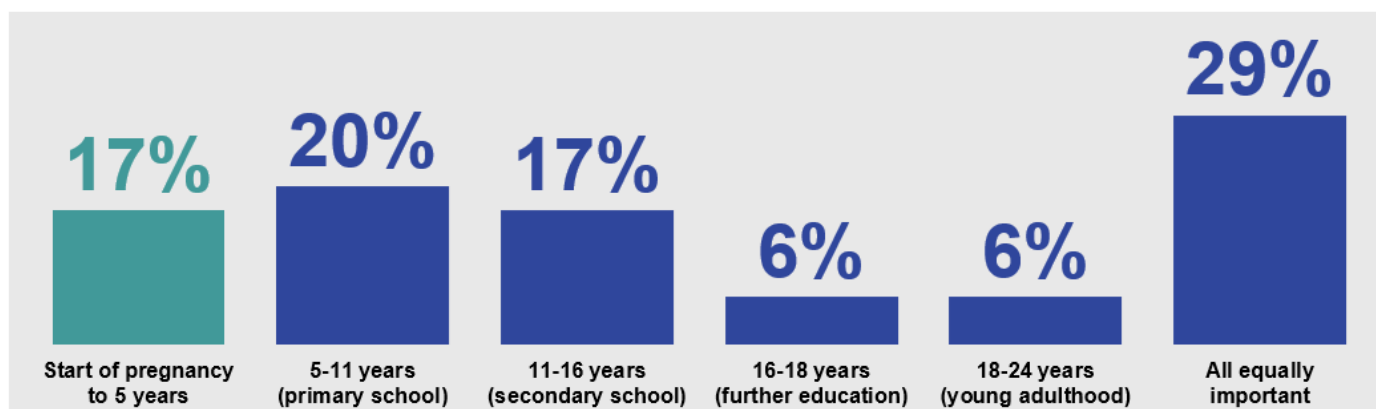
Awareness of importance of early years

1. **The early years (from pregnancy to age five) are seen as important, but not uniquely so.** An overwhelming majority of the public agree that the early years are important in shaping a person's future life (91%). However, only 17% identify the early years as the most important stage of childhood development.
2. **Parents and Grandparents of children aged 0-5 are the biggest advocates.** These groups are the most likely to believe that early childhood is the most important stage of a child's life. Conversely, younger adults without children, males, and those from ethnic minority groups are the least likely groups to believe this is the case.
3. **There is clear appetite for greater action.** Seven in ten believe that early childhood should be a greater priority for society (70%).

Support to prioritise the early years holds among the other challenges facing the UK today – just 22% think that development of children should not be a priority given the other problems facing society. The call for greater action is universal across all groups, including those less likely to identify the early years as being the most important stage of child development.

There is relatively low recognition of the importance of early childhood compared with other life stages

Which period of a child and young person's life do you think is the most important for shaping their future lives?



Base: 4,002 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2022.

Knowledge of early years

- Self-reported levels of knowledge about development in the early years are mixed.** Though 60% report having a great deal/fair amount of knowledge of how children develop in their early childhood, 36% report knowing just a little or nothing. Around half (51%) say they have a great deal/fair amount of knowledge about 'social and emotional development' specifically. However, those without children, males, and those with lower incomes have lower levels of knowledge.
- Most have a good understanding of social and emotional development.** More than six in ten (63%) believe that social and emotional development is driven by relationships and environment, rather than by genes (6%). Furthermore, familiarity is high for different aspects of social and emotional development – this is lowest, but still relatively high, for 'self regulation' (67% are familiar).
- However, not everyone has the same depth of knowledge about social and emotional development.** Social and emotional development is most commonly described as ability to express or manage feelings; or ability to interact, socialise and form relationships with others. However, a third (31%) of the public said they didn't know or were not sure how best to describe social and emotional development.

- Knowledge of how children develop is somewhat associated with the importance an individual places on the early years.** However, this association is limited, and the pattern is not replicated across all groups. This suggests that any efforts to increase awareness of the importance of the early years need to do more than explain how children develop in early childhood, but also convince individuals of the need for greater attention and action.

Motivation for greater investment in early years

- Mental health, happiness and fairness are the three most appealing reasons for increasing investment in the early years.** These are universally popular. They work best among the biggest advocates of the early years, but are also appealing to those who are currently less likely to believe early years are the most important stage of child development. This is likely in part due to overwhelming perception that development during the early years is likely to have the biggest impact on future adult mental health and happiness.

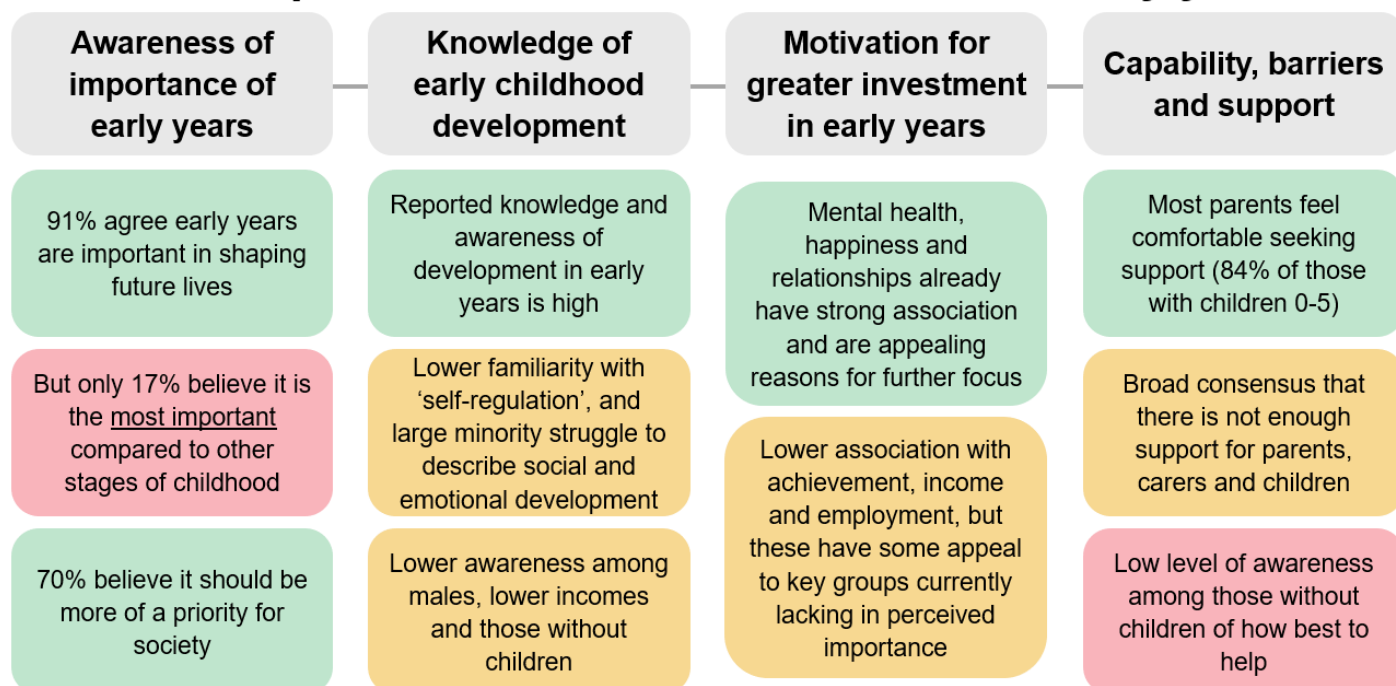
9. **Fewer associate the early years with better outcomes in academic achievements, income, and employment.** There is additional interest in academic achievement among males and employment among younger adults, and people from ethnic minority groups. These groups are all less likely to say the early years are important. There may therefore be merit in raising awareness of this narrative – especially given low association on how the early years can shape these future outcomes.

Capability, barriers and support

10. **Most people think more needs to be done to support parents with their children's development during the early years.** In particular, parents from ethnic minority groups and parents facing financial challenges feel the need for more support. However, few parents are able to name the existing barriers to supporting their children's development; one in four say they don't know (27%) or nothing (24%).
11. **There is a need to empower wider support networks.** Those without children are less clear on how they can help support parents and children – 48% say they know just a little/nothing about how they can do this.

12. **There is little support being sought for social and emotional development.** Overall, the majority of parents of 0-5s (85%) have sought information, support or advice when it comes to bringing up their children. However, parents are more likely to seek information on topics relating to physical wellbeing than social (23%) or emotional (21%) development.
13. **Parents of children aged 0-5 seek advice on social and emotional development from a wide range of sources.** Many parents report seeking advice and support from family (39%) and friends (35%). However, there is also a clear role for the red book. Almost two in three (62%) used it a great deal or a fair amount, with 20% using it as a source of information on social and emotional development.

Overview of public attitudes and awareness of early years



The full research report, which contains detailed findings and full methodological details, can be accessed [here](#).