

# Parenting Evidence Review Scotland

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**Parenting**  
across Scotland

The  Lines  
Between

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# Executive summary

This report presents a review of research with parents and carers published in Scotland in 2023. The evidence spans research with over 4000 parents and carers across 26 local authorities. It includes the experiences of single parents, black or minority ethnic parents, disabled parents or parents with disabled children, refugees, parents seeking asylum, carers, parents with care experience, parents who have had a child put into the care system and adoptive parents.

Three priority policy areas were evident in the research:

- Financial support and housing services
- Physical and mental health
- Education and childcare

## Financial support and housing services

Poverty and financial hardship were raised as key issues by parents and carers in two thirds of the research reports included in this review, reflecting the context of a cost-of-living crisis and inflation linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, rising energy costs, Brexit and the war in Ukraine. Almost a quarter of children in Scotland live in relative poverty,<sup>1</sup> and research on social security payments noted that parents who receive benefits are struggling to heat their homes and feed their families. This is particularly acute for single parents, those living in more rural areas, and those caring for a disabled child.

Social security benefits do not meet families' needs, and others described difficulties in accessing benefits. However, some of the research provides evidence of the positive impacts of family-focused payments, such as the Best Start Grants, Best Start Food Grants, and the Scottish Child Payment.

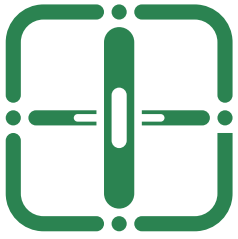
The research found that struggling families are taking on more debt, and this is even greater for single parents and women from ethnic minority communities, who are more likely to experience insecure employment. Public debts and arrears are particularly difficult for low-income families where their benefits are automatically reduced to pay off the debt. This can push a family living at the subsistence level into destitution. Changes to family units, such as parental separation or having a child placed into the care system, can also greatly impact household finances.

Precarious or inappropriate housing was a recurring theme in the evidence, which identified the negative effects of poor housing on physical and mental wellbeing and parents' ability to care for their family. Housing was a particular concern in research with parents of refugee families and families seeking asylum, who often had no choice in their housing. A lack of appropriate housing options also affects parents in rural areas and those who are disabled or have a disabled child.



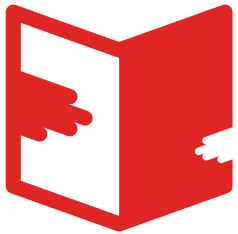
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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.gov.scot/poverty/>



## Physical and mental health

Poverty and external stressors are affecting the health of families in Scotland. Some parents in this review described not being able to afford nutritious food; others were skipping meals to ensure their children were fed. Households with children are more likely than the general population to use food banks, and parents experiencing poverty talked about having to choose between feeding their family or heating their home. A lack of national mental health support and services was also a concern for many parents, both for themselves and their children. The research highlighted that greater access to mental health support was requested by single parents, fathers experiencing poverty, birth parents who have a child placed in the care system, refugees and asylum seekers, and parents raising disabled children, among others. Across several studies, parents described feeling overwhelmed, isolated, under pressure due to external factors, and struggling to find assistance or guidance.



## Education and childcare

Parents wanted to help their children develop and learn but often lacked experience, knowledge and confidence. There are resources to assist parents of very young children in gaining more confidence when interacting with their children, but the evidence demonstrated that many parents lack awareness of the breadth of available support. When families understand and are confident about their role in supporting development, have time to spend with their children, and access to resources, it can positively impact the entire family.

Outside the home, parents talked about their struggles with the cost and accessibility of childcare. Even households with children eligible for the 1140-hour childcare entitlement could find it difficult to use, either due to the lack of locally available childcare or lack of options which align with their working patterns. Cost-of-living increases and the high cost of childcare had far-reaching implications for parents with intersecting characteristics, particularly single parents and disabled mothers. The positive impact of flexible working and supportive employers was emphasised in a few reports.

Parents of primary and secondary school-aged children were concerned about the relevance of the Curriculum for Excellence, and had mixed experiences of inclusive approaches within schools. These parents wanted their children to receive an education that matched the changing priorities of a technologically developing world.

Research with parents, children and staff members who worked with children from refugee or asylum-seeking families emphasised the importance of language and communication between parents and staff in schools for accessibility and inclusion. Qualifications were a concern for parents of older children.

## Recommendations

The evidence shows the need for interconnected policy solutions to address the needs and challenges experienced by families in Scotland. Measures to address poverty and improve access to healthcare, employment, housing, education, family support services and childcare are key themes in the evidence, and are priority issues for families. The review has captured a raft of recommendations for policy makers, funders and service providers to consider.

The Scottish Government has recently improved access to support and services for families. Reviewed research shows that these financial supports are well received and have strong positive impacts. Parents highlighted the value of the Scottish Child Payment and the Scottish Babybox, as well as the Best Start Grants. However, benefit payments are inadequate in the context of increased costs, and limited access to housing support, mental health services, flexible employment and childcare are making it hard for families to thrive and are pulling lower-income families into poverty.

Recommendations identified in the evidence include improved provision for welfare and benefits payments, mental and physical health support and services, and funded childcare placements. Parents also want to access advocacy, legal aid and housing support services when necessary.





# 1.

## Introduction



***I feel like I don't have a voice, so it's great to be able to come to someone and be my voice, and hopefully, try and make a difference. Not just for myself and my little girl but make a difference for other people that are suffering worse than what I am at the moment. It's nice to give people a voice and try and help change things."***

Parent, 1: p.56

Parents have faced a range of unique challenges in the last four years. The pandemic restricted access to pregnancy and post-natal support, disrupted access to childcare and family networks, required parents to educate children at home, changed workplace practices, affected livelihoods, and isolated families. While grappling with the impacts of these challenges, families have also lived through a cost-of-living crisis provoked by sharp increases in the price of food, fuel, childcare, and housing.

Parenting across Scotland (PAS) is a membership organisation which brings the parent voice to policymakers and service providers. Its members work together to realise the PAS vision: a Scotland where all parents and families are valued and supported to give children the best possible start in life.

PAS commissioned The Lines Between to undertake a rapid review of evidence published in Scotland in 2023 to understand the key issues, challenges and priorities faced by parents and those in a parenting role in Scotland today. The review focuses on direct research with parents, carers or those in a parenting role<sup>2</sup> and provides insight into parenting in Scotland in 2023. Core tasks were to:

- Evidence which groups of parents and carers have been involved in Scottish research over the last year and any gaps in who has been included in these activities.
- Provide evidence to inform PAS's policy priorities and influencing activity, and help shape future research priorities.

## Methodology

This evidence review had a defined scope. All publications included in the analysis met the following criteria:

- Involved research with parents, carers, or those in a parenting role. Some larger studies comprised a broad range of participants, including parents; from these we have drawn out any findings that specifically relate to parental experiences.
- Related to parenting or caring and highlighted the experiences of parents, carers, or the role of family lives.
- Published in 2023-2024. This is to capture the current issues, concerns, and struggles facing parents and carers as accurately as possible.
- Based in Scotland. Scotland's legal and justice system, education system, social security system, NHS and local government differ from those in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This means the experiences of parents in Scotland may differ from those elsewhere in the UK. While some important UK-wide research was produced in 2023-2024, it was beyond the scope of this review to include this. However, we included reports where UK-wide data had explicit sections detailing the experiences of Scottish parents.

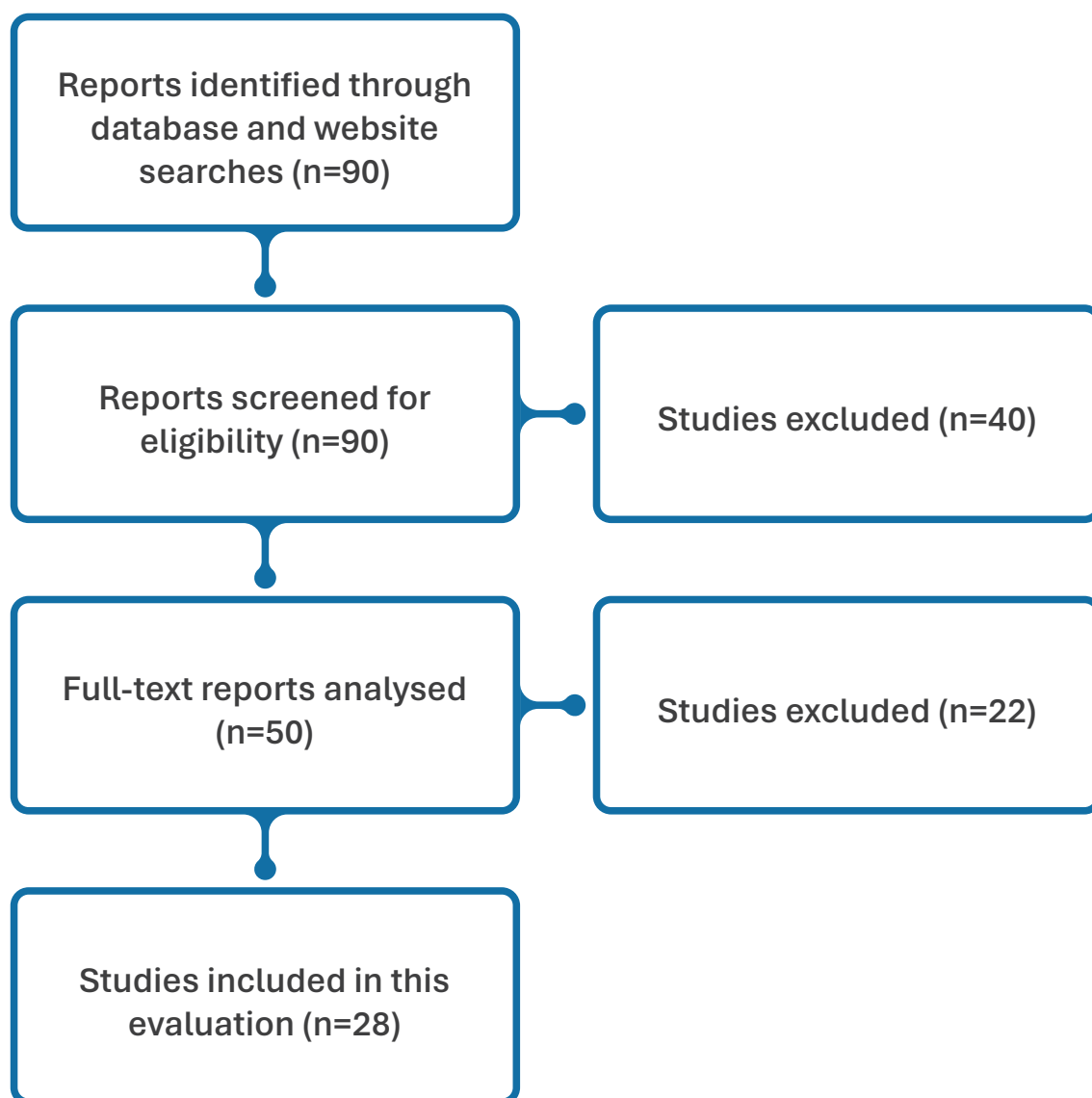
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<sup>2</sup> While the scope of this review spans *parents, carers, or those in a parenting role* we refer simply to research with 'parents' in this report, for brevity. Any specific findings about carers are highlighted.

- Included primary qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method research. This report is based on a review of published primary research.<sup>3</sup> Only reports with clear methodologies and details of participants were included. While different types of evidence were reviewed, the focus was on parents' views and lived experiences.

A range of publications was included in the review, spanning government research (2), grey literature from third-sector organisations (18), academic literature (7) and collaborations between third-sector organisations and government bodies or academic research institutions (3). We used search engines such as Scholar or EBSCO to access academic literature. A wider net was cast to identify grey literature; we asked the Parenting Across Scotland network to share relevant examples with us and reviewed the websites of 70 third-sector organisations and public bodies working with parents, carers, and families in Scotland.

Much of the research we screened fell outside of the timeframe or participant profile scope for the evidence review and was therefore excluded from the analysis. In Appendix B, our 'Continued Reading' section, we signpost other relevant research.



<sup>3</sup> Primary research involves collecting data for the first time. The evidence cited in this review use data that is newly analysed and reported upon. In contrast, this report is an example of secondary research or research based on other people's data collection and analysis.



Our team developed an analysis framework to structure the evidence review. In the analysis, we sought to draw out intersectionality<sup>4</sup> and identify any differences or additional impacts linked to specific parental characteristics. This has enabled us to explore how issues such as the cost-of-living crisis have affected families and any greater impacts experienced by some parent groups due to structural inequalities.

Where possible, we highlight research into parents' experiences with new Scottish Government policies and initiatives such as the Scottish Child Payment, increased funding for Early Learning and Childcare hours, and universal Baby Box provision.

Reflecting the study resources and timeframes, this evidence review is not exhaustive. However, it provides a well-rounded picture of the major themes emerging from the research with parents in Scotland in 2023.

## Participants

We examined 28 reports<sup>5</sup> and articles that explore parenting in Scotland in 2023-2024. They had engagement from over 4000 Scottish parents from at least 26 local authority areas, and worked with single parents, black or minority ethnic parents, disabled parents or parents with disabled children, refugees, parents seeking asylum, carers, parents with care experience, parents who have had a child put into the care system and adoptive parents. While the participant sizes, methodologies and themes varied across the different projects, priorities and areas of concern emerged from an analysis of the research landscape. Financial and housing precarity, mental and physical health, and childcare and education concerns were the key themes across the evidence.

To see specific details of each report, such as participant numbers and geographic spread, please refer to **Appendix A**.

This report draws together the key issues, challenges, and priorities, and each chapter sets out the core recommendations identified in research under that theme. The report is structured as follows:

- This chapter outlines the purpose of the review and the methodology.
- **Chapters Two to Four** present findings linked to the three overarching themes that emerged across the literature: financial support and housing services (Chapter Two); physical and mental health (Chapter Three); and education and childcare (Chapter Four).
- **Chapter Five** presents a discussion of the findings.
- **Chapter Six** sets out works cited within this report.
- **Appendix A** provides an overview of the articles cited, including the number of parent participants and the geographic spread of the research.
- Reading and research that is relevant to the research questions but out of scope of the research parameters is included in **Appendix B**, a continued reading list.

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<sup>4</sup> Intersectionality acknowledges that people are made up of multiple, complex identities, which means that people have unique experiences of hardship, oppression and disadvantage. An intersectional approach to analysis considers these different experiences. This is important when examining how social issues affect different groups of people more acutely.

<sup>5</sup> We cite an additional two reports for background data relating to the cost of childcare and not for their research with parents or parents' perspectives.



## 2.

# Financial support and housing services



This chapter spans research with parents about household income and welfare support, including housing support. It examines:

- Social security and benefits payments, both from Social Security Scotland and the Department of Work and Pensions.
- Impact of debt and arrears on low-income families.
- The financial impact of changing family structures.
- Housing precarity.

20 of the 28 reports cited focused on poverty and financial hardship, reflecting the context of a cost-of-living crisis and inflation linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, rising energy costs, Brexit and the war in Ukraine. These studies identified that many parents and families in Scotland face painful financial decisions.<sup>6</sup> Hardships are more extreme for families already living in poverty and can pull lower-income families newly into poverty (2-5). Families are grappling with dilemmas about how to afford to care for their children.



***People are being forced to choose between feeding their children or paying the rent.”***

Parent, 3: p. 29

Overall, the evidence suggests that more support is needed to ensure that families live in safe and secure environments, are well-fed, have access to basic necessities, and can live with dignity. Childcare concerns and mental and physical health worries are often underscored by financial struggles and low incomes (Chapters 3 and 4 provide further details about these themes).

## Social security payments

Research on social security payments noted that parents who receive benefits are struggling to heat their homes and feed their families. Many benefits that affect families are now administered by Social Security Scotland,<sup>7</sup> including the four Best Start Grants, Scottish Child Payment, Adult Disability Payment, Child Disability Payment, the winter heating payments and carer payments and grants. Parents spoke about having no financial cushion to depend upon until Universal Credit payments are transferred (5).

IPSOS and the Trussell Trust noted that the majority of respondents to their survey who use food banks receive some form of social security payment (3). They found that ‘evidence shows the urgent need for policy change, starting with the introduction of an “Essentials Guarantee” into our UK social security system – a change to legislation which would ensure that the basic rate of Universal Credit is always enough for people to afford the essentials’ (3: p. 15).

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<sup>6</sup> The latest report on poverty and income inequality in Scotland, published by the Scottish Government, noted that 24% of children in Scotland live in relative poverty and 12% of families live without certain basic goods and services. For more information, please find the report here: <https://data.gov.scot/poverty/cpupdate.html>

<sup>7</sup> Universal Credit is still administered by the Department of Work and Pensions.



***This is a huge and increasing problem...A sticking plaster will not improve the ongoing fatigue of managing a household bouncing along the bread line. This needs a complete shift in how single parents are treated. Universal Credit is too unpredictable to rely on and does not provide for basic day-to-day costs. I live rurally and rely on local, more expensive food shops. I have a daughter on a limited diet that I get no financial support for [Autistic, ARFID<sup>8</sup> and Coeliac]. I am spending three times what the cost would be in the city. My fuel is more expensive and my transport options are limited”***

Parent, 5: p. 18

As the above quote illustrates, single parents, those living in more rural areas, and those caring for a child with health and wellbeing needs may face particular challenges.

Some participants noted trouble qualifying for needed support. Aberlour’s research with parents who have accrued public debt highlighted the trouble some parents had in applying for the Scottish Welfare Grants.



***I just remember them saying I didn’t meet the criteria. Same I think, two years ago, I applied for a cooker and a washing machine and got refused. Again, I didn’t meet the criteria. I don’t see why I didn’t meet the criteria, because I had young kids that need feeding, so I need a cooker. I’ve also got young kids that need clothes, I need to wash their clothes. It’s so frustrating. That’s why I’ve not applied. If I need help, I’m really reluctant to go to Scottish Welfare Fund, because you never meet the criteria.”***

Parent, 1: p. 49

Save the Children noted positive experiences of receiving Best Start Grants, Best Start Food Grants, and the Scottish Child Payment among families with children under three years old. These payments were praised by parents for their impact on relieving financial pressures. The Best Start Grant, for instance, helped parents buy baby essentials. Parents used the Best Start Food Grant to support them with weaning and the costs of fresh fruit and vegetables and infant formula. The Scottish Child Payment enabled parents to provide experiences for children they otherwise could not afford or was used for clothing and to meet other basic needs.



***[My Scottish Child Payment] does what it says on the box. It goes directly to the kids whether they need a new pair of shoes or a new jacket, or... they want to do a certain activity that I wouldn’t normally be able to afford for them... It’s been absolutely fantastic. My eldest son will be joining the town’s rugby team in August, and it’s something that I wouldn’t have been able to afford beforehand”***

Parent, 4: p. 28

Payments play an important role in providing financial security for families, especially where income from other benefits does not cover increases in household costs. Cut-off thresholds for receipt of benefits can be problematic; for instance, many working carers do not qualify for the Carer’s support

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<sup>8</sup> Avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID)

payment as their income exceeds this threshold (6).<sup>9</sup> Two-thirds of working carers surveyed by Carers Scotland in their State of Caring Survey (7) felt increasing the threshold for this payment would help them to better balance their work and caring responsibilities.

## Impact of debt and arrears on families

Parents are taking on more debt due to the cost-of-living crisis. This is even greater for single parents and women from ethnic minority communities, who are more likely to experience insecure employment (5). Aberlour's (1) research into the impact of debts and arrears shows the stark impact of debt for low-income families; repaying a public debt, like a Universal Credit advance, can have a knock-on effect, pushing a family living at the subsistence level to destitution. Public debt can be accrued through Universal Credit (UC) advances, Department for Work and Pension (DWP) loans, rent and council tax arrears, sanctions, housing cost top-ups (e.g. for private rentals), and arrears to the local authority for other debts (e.g. for children's school meals). Gas and electric companies are also allowed to deduct debts from benefit payments and were included in the research.

Aberlour's research notes that public debt increased after the 2010 austerity measures were introduced and has worsened since the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis (1). The research spanned those experiencing in-work poverty and others reliant on welfare payments, such as Personal Independence Payment.<sup>10</sup> It found that a small public debt can drive families into arrears with gas and electric companies and force them into private debt. Moreover, debt collection from welfare payments directly impacts a family's ability to purchase food, clothes and toiletries and live in comfort and safety (1).

**“ I get a salary every month, there's, obviously, money coming in my account, so there'll be times through the month where there is enough. When they took that off me, I mean, I owe that money, but that was just awful... I was so worried. I've never been in a great financial position since having [my son] and leaving his dad, so it was just a huge worry how I was going to cope.”**

Parent, 1: p. 18

**“ [My son] will have things that he needs. I have the bare minimum. I'll have a deodorant, a shampoo, a conditioner, but again I'll try and not wash my hair as often as I really should or would like to, because it's too expensive. It's horrible to think like this. It's horrible to feel that I'm actually struggling in this way.”**

Parent, 1: p. 8

## Financial barriers faced by single parents and parents of children in care

Parental separation can have negative financial implications for families, particularly in relation to Child Maintenance payments, which are an important source of financial support for resident parents (1-2). Fife Gingerbread worked with the Poverty Alliance to study the impact of Child Maintenance on families (2). Their research shows systemic failures with the administration of Child Maintenance and highlights that the financial precarity of low-income resident parents has been exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis.

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<sup>9</sup> Not all survey respondents were in a parenting role and a cross-sectional analysis providing characteristics of the respondents attached to survey response percentages was not provided. However, the report details that 37% of respondents who were working were caring for a son/daughter/child in law. One quarter (26%) of working carers also had parental responsibility for an under 18-year-old non-disabled child.

<sup>10</sup> Personal Independence Payment (PIP) was a benefit administered by the Department of Work and Pensions before being devolved to the Scottish Government. Social Security Scotland now administers the Adult Disability Payment, the replacement for PIP.

Domestic abuse and coercive control are also barriers to accessing Child Maintenance for some resident parents (2). Research highlights that Child Maintenance is, at times, used to continue the abuse. Experiences of economic abuse were described, such as conditions or threats being applied to the payment; resident parents who have experienced abuse may avoid interaction to stop continued abuse.

Other parents avoid dealing with Child Maintenance Services (CMS) because of cost, or a fear it may affect relationship dynamics. Some parents noted informal financial arrangements with their ex-partner mean they receive less than they are entitled to through the CMS. This impacts women in particular, who are in most cases the resident parent. One case study highlighted the lasting impact of moving a case from independent discussions to CMS. After a breakdown in communication between parents, CMS required a DNA test as part of the case, which was distressing for both mother and child.

**“ I found that humiliating getting that done, there was no doubt on parentage.... I got it done as it removed that as a card to play with for not paying.... Me and my child had to go through it ... they are still affected by it and have anger issues.”**

Parent, 2: p. 19

Based on their research with parents, Fife Gingerbread and the Poverty Alliance advocate for a move toward a person-centred service, emphasising dignity and respect while recognising the need for a trauma-informed approach to those with experience of domestic abuse or coercive behaviour (2). The need for lowered (or removed) fees for access to CMS and improved communication, compliance and enforcement, alongside local support, were also emphasised. A more efficient system with reduced fees and charges for resident parents would not only provide more financial resources to low-income families but “has implications for gender inequality more generally” (2: p. 1) because resident parents are most often women.

One Parent Family Scotland (OPFS) developed case studies which highlight the financial impact on families when a child becomes looked after (8). They note that families who experience poverty are already more likely to have interactions with the care system. When a child is taken into care, poverty is exacerbated by the reduction in social security benefits. Parents described that the shock, stigma and shame associated with having a child enter care is compounded by a large financial change in circumstances, which can affect their ability to remain in touch with their child. Increased bus fares and travel costs, as well as expensive mobile telephone fees, were some of the increased costs of maintaining relationships with their children.

Other parents of children in care experienced financial barriers to reunification with their children. This included being unable to remain financially stable enough to have their children returned. Another parent spoke about the experience of having their eligibility for social housing change. For example, a single parent will no longer be eligible for a 2-bedroom flat or house, and moving to a smaller flat can complicate the process of getting their child back (8).

**“ When I lost my house, I was put into a bedsit - I think I knew then I would never get my child back and gave up. I didn't want to live there so why would they let my child return? I had nothing other than a black bag full of clothes as I couldn't afford a removal van or to put my stuff into storage.”**

Parent, 8: p. 27

## A lack of access to appropriate housing

Precarious or inappropriate family housing was a recurring theme across the research reviewed in this study (4-5, 9).<sup>11</sup> Families identified the effects of inappropriate housing on physical and mental health, and their ability to provide care for their family. Issues included overcrowding, unsafe living environments, and poor accessibility. Others highlighted a lack of assistance or obvious support for housing concerns.

**“ The place we were living was unsafe.... I cannot leave my pram on the ground floor. I had to get the pram on the third floor ... and it was very heavy, so I was going out maybe just for immunisation ... It was very noisy during the night ... I talked to ... the housing company ... [providing] accommodation for asylum seekers.... They just ignore it.... And then we got like a murder attempt for a neighbour ... the stairs were full of blood.... The [police] ... told me this place is not suitable for having a baby.”**

Parent, 4: p. 10

Housing was a common concern in research with parents in refugee families and families seeking asylum, who often had no choice in where they lived or the type of accommodation and lived in temporary accommodation for long periods of time (10). ScotCen’s review of the New Scot programme highlighted the variability of services around the country (11). For example, some described good relationships with housing officers, while others were unable to connect to services when in need. There was a mix of negative and positive experiences among families housed in the community and those in hotel accommodation. Some parents mentioned the benefit of being a part of a community of refugees but highlighted a lack of cooking facilities or play spaces (11).

A lack of appropriate housing options also affects parents in rural areas and those who are disabled or have a disabled child. Concerns include the difficulties of sourcing appropriate housing to meet the needs of disabled children and extensive waiting lists (9).

Parents expressed concerns about dampness in rented housing, either due to poor quality of housing or the cost of heating.

**“ Our house has dampness and the landlord gave us a dehumidifier which cost a lot to run, and it is really bad in the winter. So I have to move my daughter out her room as this is the worst room in the house, and myself and my partner sleep in the living room.”**

Parent, 9: p. 12

Housing problems compound instability in other areas of parents’ life, impacting employment, nutrition, and wellbeing (4, 9-11). Kerlaff suggests that unstable housing left many refugees unable to become embedded within the community. Housing in rural areas with poor transport links could also limit access to amenities, shops, schools, parks and healthcare facilities (10), something also reflected in research with disabled parents and parents of disabled children (9). As suggested by Save The Children’s research (4), parents who lived in flats on higher floors or who felt unsafe in their neighbourhoods would be hesitant to leave their homes, exacerbating the isolation experienced by having very young children.

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<sup>11</sup> Includem produced a report with extensive detail on the troubles faced by families living in poor housing conditions. It was out of scope for this literature review but is included in our further reading list.

## Collected recommendations

Evidence gathered from parents in 2023 demonstrates that families living on low incomes need greater financial support. Social security payments do not provide enough assistance to cover families' basic needs in the context of increased food and heating costs. Rising costs are forcing families to incur debt, particularly single-family households and ethnic minority families and debt continues the cycle of poverty. Housing precarity compounds the challenges faced by low-income families, affects health and wellbeing, and isolates vulnerable families from community and peer support networks.



The research presented in this chapter included the following recommendations:

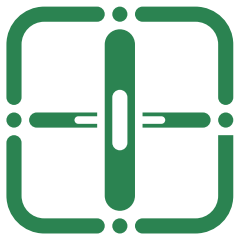
- The Scottish and UK governments must ensure that families' needs are met, both through increased social security and benefits and by ensuring that the amount of money deducted from benefits payments to pay back public debt are capped at a lower amount.
- Benefit payments, particularly Universal Credit, must be paid without delay or wait.
- Transparent and effective communication between statutory services and families is needed to ensure that families are aware of different benefit payments they may qualify for and that their needs are met.
- Benefits and welfare rights assistance must be available.
- Affordability assessments must be standardised across public bodies in relation to benefits and debt recovery processes.
- Person-centred service approaches must be central to all services dealing with families experiencing poverty, housing crises, domestic abuse, and refugees and those seeking asylum.
- Fees and charges associated with the application for Child Maintenance must be reduced or removed.
- Child Maintenance payments must be increased to recognise the cost-of-living crisis.
- Housing placements need to consider family needs and wellbeing.
- Enforcement of minimum living standards needs to be increased for social and private housing rentals.
- Landlords must not prevent families from moving to more suitable accommodations due to outstanding housing arrears.





# 3.

## Physical and mental health



This chapter covers research into parental mental and physical health and wellbeing. These themes intersect with many others in this report. Poverty, financial difficulties, and childcare shortages all affect mental and physical wellbeing. This chapter, however, focuses on 18 studies that explicitly examine mental or physical health, spanning:

- Family food insecurity and nutrition;
- Parental mental health and wellbeing;
- Mental and social care services; and
- Disability services.

The interaction between parent and child wellbeing is a common theme. Treanor and Troncoso (12), for instance, drew on data from the Growing up in Scotland (GUS) study to explore the relationship between parental mental health and children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties. Results found a bi-directional relationship between the wellbeing of parents and children, strongly associated with poverty. They noted that children and parents share many of the same external stressors, often caused by structural inequalities. One key finding from the report emphasises the interconnectedness of poverty and mental health. The authors note that to start assisting with poor mental health in parents and children, it is necessary to first help families move out of poverty (12: p. 476).

### Food insecurity and nutrition

IPSOS and the Trussell Trust found that households with children are more likely to use food banks than the general population (3: p. 29). They note that while only 23% of Scottish households have children under 26 years old, 35% of people referred to a Scottish Trussell Trust foodbank lived with children under 16 years old (3: p. 29). The high costs of a nutritious family diet are also reiterated in a report by Nourish Scotland, where costs of family meals are measured over time and affordability is tracked (13) and in the work conducted by Aberlour, where parents speak about the current struggle to buy nutritious food (1).

**“ I used to do a lot of home cooking and stuff, like fish and fresh stuff. I’ve not been able to do that. I’ve been buying like Asda cheapy cheesy pasta, like 40 pence things, buying them for the kids rather than making it fresh. I mean it’s not as good, I’d rather cook the whole fresh meal than buy the packet stuff.”**

Parent, 1: p. 39

Voucher schemes for pregnant people and infants assist early on with healthy nutrition.<sup>12</sup> Drawing on data from across the UK and Scotland, Dundas et al. evaluated the success of the Healthy Start voucher scheme in improving maternal and infant health, specifically the impact of receipt of vouchers on breastfeeding initiation and duration and on maternal vitamin use during pregnancy (14).

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<sup>12</sup> In 2016, the UK Healthy Start Voucher scheme became a devolved payment to Social Security Scotland. In August 2019, Scotland replaced the Healthy Start Voucher scheme with the Best Start Food grants.

Their qualitative<sup>13</sup> findings suggested that while vouchers were valued, mothers were not convinced of their impact.

Many felt the value of the vouchers needed to be increased. Some explained that the HSVs had supported them by offering their children a healthy diet, with a range of fruits and vegetables, but others reported struggling to provide a healthy diet, despite wanting to do so due to their low income. Other barriers to healthy eating included: children only eating a limited range of foods, the influence and habits of wider family members, and systemic barriers such as the marketing of unhealthy foods (14). A couple also expressed concerns about the nutritional value of free school meals, which they felt hampered their efforts to promote a healthy diet for their children. (4, 14).

## Mental and social care services and support

The shortfall in support throughout Scotland for parents with mental health and wellbeing concerns was raised in several research projects in 2023. Respondents explained how different external stressors, such as the cost-of-living crisis combined with caring duties, negatively impact their health (1, 4-6, 15-17). Alongside increased access to treatment from healthcare professionals, assistance with external stressors, such as housing, poverty or childcare, could help improve wellbeing (1, 4-6, 8-9, 15-17).

Carers Scotland (7) surveyed the mental health and wellbeing of carers;<sup>14</sup> over half of the participants said that caring negatively impacted their physical health, and 41% had delayed healthcare treatment due to their caring role. Over a third reported bad or very bad mental health. The research found:

- 80% were struggling with tiredness/sleeping, low mood and hopelessness.
- 36% had thoughts of suicide or self-harm.
- 50% were too busy with the demands of caring to seek mental health support.
- 24% had to limit their caring role due to their poor mental health.

Mental health was also a concern among fathers who responded to the Fathers Network Scotland annual survey (15). In particular, poor mental wellbeing was the top concern for fathers in SIMD1<sup>15</sup> and fathers with children under one year old (16). Fathers cited poor work-life balance and the pressure of the cost-of-living crisis, as discussed above, as their main sources of stress. This was reflected in a survey conducted by the Scottish Women's Budget Group, where financial pressures and caring duties negatively impacted mothers' wellbeing and health (5, 17). Save The Children (4) also reported that parents of very young children often found it difficult to access support and services for their mental health. All three reports highlighted the need for increased mental healthcare provision for parents.

Research with birth parents whose children have been placed in the care system (18) identified gaps in services offered to parents during the process of separation. This includes a lack of mental

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<sup>13</sup> Dundas et al. used data from across the UK and data from Scotland prior to the devolution of the Healthy Start Voucher scheme. While they used data collected through Growing Up in Scotland, their qualitative data (semi-structured interviews) was conducted with 24 mothers identifying as white Scottish.

<sup>14</sup> Not all survey respondents were in a parenting role and a cross-sectional analysis providing characteristics of the respondents attached to survey response percentages was not provided. However, the report details that 38% of respondents were caring for a son/daughter/child in law. 20% also had parental responsibility for an under 18 year old non-disabled child.

<sup>15</sup> Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is a tool the Scottish Government uses to measure deprivation in Scotland. It ranks small areas from 1 – most deprived – to 5 – least deprived.

health, social care or legal support. This often led research participants to lose hope they would be reunited with their children, which had detrimental effects on them, their children and the social care system. There was also evidence that learning-disabled mothers had not been properly assisted throughout the process.<sup>16</sup> The research highlighted the importance of inclusion, clarity, and respect for mothers in the process of child separation and concluded that advocates, legal representatives and social workers are needed to guide mothers through the system and help them understand what is happening (18).

**“ I still don't know if I ever went to a Children's Hearing. I know she was on the Child Protection Register, but there was never really any meetings after that with me. I got a visit from a social worker who says the plan was they were going to put [daughter] up for adoption, they thought it was the best thing for her. So, after that final meeting ... I never went to any after that ... [there was a] plea deal sort of thing if I gave up trying to get her back then I was guaranteed to see her until she was adopted and then letterbox contact. They were pushing for that.”**

Parent, 18: p. 31

The research by the Association for Fostering, Kinship, and Adoption Scotland (AFKA) and the Scottish Government highlighted a lack of consistency of support for birth parents whose children have been placed in the care system, which led to more confusion (18). This included changing social workers and frequent changes in their child's foster care placement. One Parent Family Scotland (OPFS) also provided examples of birth parents' sense of isolation and confusion when staff and placement changes affect the advice and resources provided (8). OPFS emphasises the shortage of services and supports, noting that interviewees often did not have adequate advocacy or legal and mental health support.<sup>17</sup>

In research with adoptive parents, Cowan notes that those who had experienced placement breakdown described a lack of support and services during periods of crises with their children (19). Removal of children from adoptive households left parents feeling shame, and their children returned to a system of disjointed care. Other parents sought support from online communities when local authorities and statutory services failed to provide greater support (19: p. 165).

Scottish Families Affect by Drugs and Alcohol (SFAD) found that parents at their 'Families on the Frontline' conference (20) felt national supports and services lacked consistency and cohesion and would benefit from a more joined-up approach. They advocated for better collaboration between mental health and substance use teams, with improved communication and information sharing between services. More support, including peer support, for families was called for. The importance of recognising the expertise of families and including them as 'part of the solution', was also highlighted (20).

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<sup>16</sup> Shared Lives Plus produced a report detailing an example of a project that is working to support parents with a learning disability to overcome difficulties and stay together with their child. Parents are supported to care for their child, and maintain parental responsibility, while living in the family home of a Shared Live's carer. The report was out of scope for this literature review but is included in our further reading list.

<sup>17</sup> CELCIS evaluated children's services on behalf of the Scottish Government. The research is not included in this report as there was no primary research with parents. However, their conclusions echo those in this section: the importance of prioritising, facilitating and supporting relationship-based practice and of keeping services and key workers consistent. They also recommend taking a joined-up approach to multi-agency collaboration, which is reflected in other research from this year (SFAD 2023, The Family Fund). For more information, please see our further reading list.



***Don't only listen but hear us also." contact. They were pushing for that."***

Parent 20: p. 12

Long waiting lists and a lack of local provision for mental health support also affected parents who are refugees and asylum seekers, as identified in ScotCen's evaluation of the New Scot Refugee Integration Programme (11). Additional barriers included rules around eligibility, staff shortages, and a lack of training within services. A unique aspect of the experience for refugee families and asylum seekers was a sense of isolation from the community and financial insecurity based on immigration status. The report highlights the importance of integrating children and parents in school communities to combat isolation and misunderstanding for New Scots families (11).

## **Disability services**

The Family Fund (9) undertook research that explored the experiences and priorities of parents raising disabled children in relation to effective planning and support. Transitions from child services to adult care were described as a particularly challenging time. Staff shortages, lack of rural services, and a gatekeeping mentality as barriers to positive transitions were described by parents. A few interviewees mentioned the importance of third-sector support and peer networks in assisting with transitions. The Family Fund recommended greater funding for these supports and policies that facilitate access to 'communities by experience'.



***The transition to adulthood was a time of tension and uncertainty for many families. Not all children's services were matched with a similar adult service. Parent and carers reported having to take on an increasing role in advocating for, and coordinating, their children's support. Transitioning to adulthood also led to the emergence of issues which hadn't been seen during childhood. Legal matters such as guardianship and the need for stable secure housing options emerged. Structural challenges with accessing these services added tension to families' experiences."***

9: p. 20

The cost-of-living crisis is also impacting the wellbeing of parents and carers of disabled children (6-7, 9). It has impacted parents' ability to provide care and afford outside assistance. Parents describe feeling under pressure, overwhelmed and increasingly isolated due to being unable to afford travel or activities. The Family Fund also calls for support from statutory services for families that allows them to feel heard and included. They also note the importance of respite care and flexible working situations.



***We are lonely and isolated. We are cold in our own home. I feel I've failed my daughter. My daughter rarely leaves her bed to keep warm. We are arguing as she wants heat on at all times. Just now it's snowing."***

Parent, 9: p. 17

Brunner (21) conducted interviews with disabled people and parents, which explored positive experiences of social care. These were found to be based on four pre-established principles of independent living (freedom, choice, dignity, and control), and one other (reciprocity). For instance, participants described good social care as being more than supporting people with tasks of daily living; it means supporting them to have control over and choice in the activities they engage in and the ways they are supported to engage in these.



***All too often these young people are getting wheeled about into Primark and all these shops with people because ... the carers, that's all they're doing ... I don't want that for Stevie. I want Stevie to be able to go to something he wants to go to. You know, I want them to go to help at the theatre or ... cinema ... you know, as a volunteer ... something that he wants to do. He's not interested in arts and crafts 'cause he can't use his hands very well ... that's all you tend to get now."***

Parent 20: p. 12

## Collected recommendations



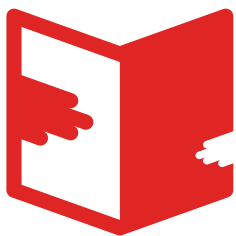
The research presented in this chapter included the following recommendations for improved family wellbeing:

- Improved access to mental health support, such as clinical assistance, peer support groups, and social care.
- Increased funding for statutory services generally as resources were diminished, especially in rural areas, creating a lack of quality health social care services.
- Person-centred approaches that treat parents and families with dignity, clarity and respect. Brunner specifically notes that the National Care Service should ensure its care standards meet the five principles of freedom, choice, dignity, control and reciprocity.
- Consistent service with providers who work with families throughout their journeys.
- Families asked for a joined-up approach to care where teams were created across services.
- Access to advocacy and legal support alongside mental health and social care where needed.



# 4.

## Education and childcare



This chapter examines the evidence of parents' experiences in relation to child learning and education. The 15 reports cited within this chapter span the home learning environment, childcare, caring costs and flexible working patterns, early learning and childcare settings, primary and secondary education, childcare, and a report on the positive impacts of access to extracurricular opportunities for children.

Access is a recurring theme throughout this chapter. Parents are struggling to access:

- The support and services they need to help their children learn and develop.
- Childcare due to costs or the limited availability of options in particular locations.
- School communities, either due to a sense of exclusion based on parenting roles or through language barriers.

## The home learning environment

The evidence demonstrates that parents want to help their children develop and learn. When families understand and are confident about their role in supporting development, have time to spend with their children, and access to resources, it can positively impact the entire family. The opposite also holds true, and lack of access to support, knowledge, resources, and childcare has a lasting impact on learning, income, careers, and parents' mental health, which affects the entire family.

Save the Children<sup>18</sup> published a report on how parents of children under three living in poverty create an enhanced learning environment at home and which supports and services were useful to parents (4). The research demonstrated that some resources were used extensively, such as the Babybox and Book Bug, but there was variation in awareness among families, and parents often turned to familial networks and third-sector supports to aid their understanding of infant and preschool development and learning.

An evaluation of the Children 1st's (22) Oot Playin's Starcatcher programme in South Ayrshire provides an example of the impact of third-sector services on parental confidence and their knowledge about the importance of play and child development. Resources and approaches which empower parents to support their child's learning development were a central enabler identified by Save The Children (4) and reaffirmed by Children 1st (22).

**“ Oot Playin' adopted an ethos of 'holding a mirror up' to parents and carers, showing them the skills they already had and supporting and reassuring them in their capacity as caregivers, rather than instructing or teaching them 'how to play'. Participants felt empowered by seeing what was possible when they could just 'be' with others in Oot Playin's relaxed, non-judgmental space.”**

Professional 22: p. 11

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<sup>18</sup> For transparency, note that The Lines Between undertook this research for Save The Children.



Save The Children's (4) research found that parents also depended on maternity services and health visitors for support with home learning, although to a lesser extent than other types of support. While there was a vast public sector toolkit to provide parents with ideas for enhancing their home learning environment, awareness of those supports and services was limited.

Bookbug, funded by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Book Trust, was highly valued by parents who used the service (4). Many liked attending their local libraries to participate in the in-person sessions, while others appreciated the book gifts provided at different stages of their child's life. The online sessions were used less often. Some parents spoke about this tool as useful in showing them the types of books that were age-appropriate, and others mentioned how it helped them learn and watch how to interact with their children through singing and reading. Services like *Ready, Steady, Baby!*, Play at Home, Parent Club, and Play Talk Read Bus were less well used. Those who were aware of these services mentioned that they found the delivery method, e.g. longer texts of *Ready, Steady, Baby!*, less accessible. Others used TikTok or Facebook groups to find resources, unaware that ParentClub existed (4).

While parents were interested in helping their babies to develop and learn, creating an enhanced home learning environment required greater access to knowledge, advice, ideas, peer support and safe spaces outside the home (4). This was complicated by cost, limited access in rural environments, poor transportation links, fewer interactions with statutory services during the Covid-19 pandemic, ages and schedules of older children and a lack of communication about the many free supports and services available (4). Oot Playin' provides a case study in a rural environment where the direct provision of support for parents in need of more assistance had positive effects (22).

### **Access to childcare, costs, and flexible working patterns**

Through a mixed-method survey, the Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) identified that 30% of mothers do not find childcare manageable (5: p. 3). This is exacerbated by the current cost-of-living crisis, which has raised costs faced by families over the last year. The SWBG study noted that 74% of women found "the increase in other household costs was impacting on their ability to manage childcare costs" (5: p.3). In Scotland, the average cost of childcare was £1079.59 per month in 2023 for children not eligible for the 1140 hours Early Learning and Childcare entitlement (23). According to Coram, this drops to £102.37 per week (or roughly £460.65 per month) for families with children aged 3 or 4 who are using 50 hours of childcare a week and in receipt of 1140 funded hours (24: p. 11-12).<sup>19</sup> While this provides a financial boost once a child is eligible, recent research provides some understanding of the difficulties some face in accessing this.

The SWBG (17) survey highlighted a disconnect between the offered 1140 funded hours and the reality of accessing and using that funded childcare. A minority (16%) of respondents who were eligible for funded childcare lacked the necessary flexibility in provision to use the childcare offered. This included shift workers and families who were offered 'alternate Friday' placements whose jobs were not equally flexible.

**“ We cannot currently afford any extra childcare costs; I have had to decline extra working hours because childcare would not be covered by the extra pay.”**

Parent, 17: p. 4

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<sup>19</sup> In 2021, the Scottish Government introduced the Early Learning and Childcare expansion to provide 30 hours of childcare per week during school term time or 1140 hours over per year. Often, this applies to children aged three and four, but in some cases, younger children can become eligible.

Other professions find it impossible to work around the childcare provision, which impacts their ability to continue working. For example, in research with performers (25) women mentioned needing to organise multiple types of childcare, such as childminders or carers to look after children around nursery hours when their job demands unconventional working patterns.<sup>20</sup>

Carers Scotland found that 37% of respondents to their State of Caring 2023 (7) survey were struggling to afford care services, including childcare, acting as a barrier to them maintaining employment or earning more from their employment.

Cost-of-living increases and the current high cost of childcare had far-reaching implications for parents with intersecting characteristics. For example, the SWGB reports that 81% of single parents found the increases in household costs impacting their ability to pay for childcare, which increased to 93% for disabled women (5: p. 4). Families living in rural areas spoke of even fewer feasible and affordable options.

The aforementioned research by SWBG (5) notes that their survey shows the current system not only does not support parents but penalises women who are more likely than men to change or reduce their working patterns. This has a significant impact on continued earning discrepancies and pension inequalities and affects women's mental wellbeing. This is reflected in research conducted by the University of the West of Scotland and Oxfam (25), where researchers found that mothers who worked in the media and entertainment industry explained the impossibility of juggling work and caring for their children. This was due both to the inflexibility with childcare offerings and workplaces without family-friendly practices.

The Fathers Network Scotland Dads Survey 2023 (15) reiterated the importance of employers and childcare providers in supporting parents with their caring responsibilities. Their survey emphasises the importance of flexible and hybrid working in allowing fathers more time to contribute to childcare around the margins of the nursery or school day.

**“ Working from home with flexi time ... allows me to get the boys out to school and be here for them coming home. I feel I'm getting to see my boys grow up which I don't feel my dad did.”**

Parent, 15: p. 14

Research from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development noted that 16% of respondents to their survey noted caring responsibilities for children affected their ability to do their job (26). They suggested that homeworkers have the best work-life balance, although they do not explicitly note if this is true for those with caring responsibilities (26: p. 12). Again, this benefit can be industry-specific, with key workers, lower-paid employees, and performers (25) finding it difficult or impossible to work hybrid hours.<sup>21</sup>

Some parents schedule their work around available childcare, where that is possible. However, they note that this often comes at the expense of parents spending time together (15). This was discussed in greater detail in the case study by Save The Children (4), where a mother needs to adjust her shift

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<sup>20</sup> While out of scope of this literature review, the Scottish Commission for Learning Disability published research in 2022 about difficulties faced by parents of learning-disabled children in accessing their early learning entitlement, which presents data reviewed by Audit Scotland in 2023 (<https://www.sclcd.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/SCLD-Report-A4.pdf>).

<sup>21</sup> Research by Early Years Scotland, 'Early Years Scotland: Mental Health, Happiness and Wellbeing', included more information about how parents feel about their experiences with early years childcare settings. While out of scope for this research, we have included reference to the article in Appendix B, our continued reading list.

working to times when her partner is not working to account for childcare shortages, leaving her exhausted and unable to parent in the way that she wanted to (4).

**“ Working till 10 o'clock at night and then by the time you get home.... Like last night I was still up at half past 12. And then when you've got two kids to get up and out the door, you know, it's just, yeah, it is a lot... When you're tired, you know, your patience kind of wears thin and you just don't have the brain capacity for any nonsense almost.”**

Parent, 4: p. 45

## **Primary and secondary education and the Scottish Qualifications Authority**

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted all parts of the education system in Scotland. For those in primary and secondary education at-home learning and cancelled exams became a reality for families and teachers for over two years. Following a report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on Scottish education, the Scottish Government commissioned a National Discussion to gather the views of children, parents and staff about different aspects of the education and qualification systems. The consultations provided a varied picture of parents' main concerns and demonstrated that funding, class sizes, and the need for education to respond to contemporary issues were key priorities (27). Other main areas of discussion included the following:

- Some parents wanted a later formal start to education, with children engaging primarily in play-related activities in classrooms until they were seven years old. However, others emphasised the importance of reading, writing and mathematics (27).
- The ethical issues that surround social media worried many parents, and they raised concerns about using technology safely and wisely (27).

Qualifications were a concern for parents of older children, especially after the changes to exam structures during the Covid-19 pandemic. Hayward et al. (28) noted that parents expressed a change in their feelings about the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and their trustworthiness around the pandemic, which may take time to rectify. In contrast, Hayward Review participants felt positive about the communication from the school regarding exams and marking procedures (28).

## **Importance of extracurricular activities on family**

One report identified positive impacts of extracurricular activities on family life, specifically Big Noise, an intensive music programme in targeted communities (29). Research on the impact of Big Noise throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in one economically disadvantaged community in Scotland showed how classes positively impacted the happiness, confidence and learning of children. Parents spoke about how, for some, it offered an alternate community to school, which aided with bullying taking place within the school, and others suggested that it cut down on anti-social behaviour. This in turn, improved parental and overall family wellbeing. Some spoke about how their children 'brought happiness home' (29: p. 10).

## Exclusion from early learning and educational settings

The lack of support, particularly for fathers, was mentioned by the Fathers Network Scotland in their annual survey of people identifying as fathers (16). They noted that while fathers are taking on more responsibility within the home and with their children, they still feel that support and services are geared toward mothers (16: p. 11). Survey responses show low levels of awareness of third-sector support offered to fathers. Fathers also suggested that outreach and interaction with early learning centres and schools is often mother-focused, leaving fathers feeling unequal in their parenting role (16: p. 11).

Research with parents, children and staff members emphasised the importance of language and communication between parents and staff in primary schools. Grazia Imperiale, Fassetta, and Alshobaki (30) worked with refugees who were non-native English speakers. Their research suggests that English-language barriers left parents feeling like they are unable to participate or feel welcome in educational settings, something also reflected in ScotCen's evaluation of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (11). This had less to do with assisting their children in their educational journey, but rather with feeling a part of the school community, such as asking how their children are doing in school or knowing if their children are integrating into the school well.

**“** *When I want to ask about the child, for example, whenever I want to come after work to ask about my kid, how was he during the day, how did he behave every day, so these things are necessary for them [staff] to learn because I, for example, do not know how to speak a language [English], so whenever I want to ask about my son's behaviour daily, I do not know how [to ask in English], so I just walk away [literal translation: carry myself and walk away] without telling them.”*

Parent, 30: p. 377

The authors argue for more diverse language skills training for primary school staff to aid parents of students in their classes who are refugees or from asylum-seeking families (30). They note that integrating the basic language skills of their student's parents within the educational settings is a trauma-informed approach that can support refugee children and families to experience a positive school environment. ScotCen (11) reaffirmed the importance of better refugee family integration and staff language training in schools, asking for more funding to be directed to schools to support refugees and children and families seeking asylum. Moreover, they emphasised the importance of getting children registered quickly with a local school to ensure they are not outside of formal education for too long (11).

## Collected recommendations



Across the research above, the following recommendations were made to address parents' concerns and needs about education and childcare.

- Better communication about the free resources and services available through the Scottish Government and other public bodies for parents of very young children. Providing information to parents in contemporarily accessible formats, such as on TikTok or Instagram, could improve the uptake of NHS and government-approved health and wellbeing advice.
- Improve the Early Learning and Childcare expansion, provision and entitlements.
- Provide free provisions for universal, affordable, high-quality wraparound care for preschool and school-aged children.

- Recognise the different needs of disabled children and the increased cost of their care when designing policies, services and funding.
- Ensure that workplaces and employment practices acknowledge the flexibility needed for caring responsibilities and provide parents with family-friendly flexible workplace policies.
- Increased funding for language training with primary school teachers with refugees or asylum-seeking families in their classes.
- Increased provision for afterschool and extracurricular activities, especially in areas with high levels of deprivation.



# 5.

## Discussion

This rapid review identified a raft of research with parents across Scotland in 2023 undertaken by a range of organisations across the public and third sectors and academia. The research varies in scope, scale, and focus; some solely explore parents' needs and experiences; some evidence was gathered through service evaluations; and other insights from parents were found in wider population studies. Combined, this body of work provides insight into the issues, challenges, and priorities faced by approximately 4000 parents and those in parenting roles in Scotland today.

To be as current as possible, the rapid review focused on recent literature published in Scotland (2023-2024). This is a small window when considering the cost and time needed to produce research, and we acknowledge that relevant research with specific groups in areas around Scotland pre-2023 is not included in this report.

The research we identified with parents in Scotland in 2023 spanned a range of geographies, including nationwide projects and research in multiple sites, including rural and island locations. While some reports did not provide specific details on locations around Scotland, others described engagement with people by local authority. Across the different reports, at least 26 local authorities were represented, showing efforts to gather varied perspectives from around the country.<sup>22</sup>

Some key groups were not represented in the evidence reviewed for this report. For example, there were few references to LGBTQI+ parents, and while specific research with refugees and those seeking asylum was undertaken, only a small number of reports explicitly included Black or minority ethnic perspectives. Similarly, excluding the Fathers Network Scotland survey, fathers were not often represented in the research. In contrast, lone parents, parents living on low incomes, disabled parents or parents with a disabled child participated in more of the research cited.

The review demonstrates that parents want to be heard. They speak to researchers, assist in the co-development of projects, and participate in surveys to share their views and experiences. They are asking for help both for themselves and, as the quote at the start of the report highlights, to benefit other parents and families in similar situations.

Many of the issues covered in the review are not new, and often the evidence shows that situations for parents and families are worsening. However, there are also glimmers of hope and areas to build on, such as the positive evidence of the impact of flexible working practices on family life and the findings on the value of the Scottish Child Payment.

Parents are struggling with rising costs, and insufficient access to services, resources and support. Some of the difficulties experienced by parents are longstanding; others have been exacerbated by the rising cost of living and post-pandemic, post-Brexit changes.

The interconnectedness of challenges experienced by parents is clear. For example, the research on public debt and arrears by Aberlour (1) demonstrates, in parents' own words, how low incomes exacerbate housing precarity, affect families' mental and physical wellbeing, and strain relationships between parents. They show that much-needed services, such as grants and welfare funds and stable housing services, are failing, making a bad financial situation worse. The cyclical effect is difficult, if not impossible, to break without external help.

The expense and limited accessibility of childcare demonstrate the impact of restricted provision (e.g. 4-5, 9, 15-17). With childcare costs so high, women are leaving the workforce, causing family income levels to fall at a time when they need more income than before. As the Scottish Women's Budget

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<sup>22</sup> For further details about the participant profiles and specific geographic areas represented, refer to the table in Appendix A.

Group (5) highlights, this has longstanding impacts on gender equality, with women earning less, saving less and reducing their pensions, impacting their ability to retire.

Intersectional analysis by parental characteristic demonstrates who is most impacted by rising costs, with women, lone parents, BME families, families with disabled members, refugees and those seeking asylum most affected by the shortage of support and services and the cost-of-living crisis.

The research cited in this review also highlights the impact parents have on their children (eg. 4, 8, 12, 18-19, 22). Exhaustion, poor mental health, and long working hours can affect the relationship between parents and child and, in some cases, hamper child development (4). Parents need support if Scotland is truly to become the best place in the world for children to grow up (4, 12, 22).

## Key policy areas

The evidence shows the need for interconnected policy solutions to address the needs and challenges experienced by families in Scotland. Measures to address poverty and improve access to healthcare, employment, housing, education, family support services and childcare are key themes in the evidence, and are priority issues for families. The review has captured a raft of recommendations for policy makers, funders and service providers to consider.

The Scottish Government has recently improved access to support and services for families. Reviewed research shows that these financial supports are well received and have strong positive impacts. Parents highlighted the value of the Scottish Child Payment and the Scottish Babybox, as well as the Best Start Grants. However, benefit payments are inadequate in the context of increased costs, and limited access to housing support, mental health services, flexible employment and childcare are making it hard for families to thrive and are pulling lower-income families into poverty.

While free early learning and childcare support has been expanded, and is valued by those who can access it, some parents, especially in rural areas or those with shifting work schedules, could not use the provision. Similarly, increased access to specialist support, including information hubs like Parent Club, was less used, often due to a lack of provision or a lack of awareness on behalf of parents.

Parents who were able to use third-sector support to assist with their baby's or child's development, such as Big Noise or Oot Playin's Starcatcher, reported higher levels of overall familial satisfaction.

To ensure parents have the capacity, resources, knowledge, time, health and energy required to give their children the best possible start in life, families need:

- Improved reach and greater communication about existing policies, funds, support services and provision for families, to ensure parents are aware of all the benefits and support they qualify for.
- Increased capacity among services to support the growing number of Scottish families living with low incomes or experiencing poverty.
- Wider consideration of ways to address resource shortages for family support services, to increase accessibility and provide universal service provision where possible.
- Enhanced income support for families who struggle to access food, heating, healthcare, childcare, employment, and housing.



# 6.

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# 7.

## Appendix A: Research profiles

	Author	Title	Type of research/ methodology	Geographical area of research	Number of participating parents or carers	Characteristics of participants	Key research themes
1	<b>Aberlour</b>	How public debt and arrears are experienced by low-income families	Qualitative	Scotland	8 parents	Low-income families, Single-parent households	Poverty
2	<b>Poverty Alliance and Fife Gingerbread</b>	Child Maintenance During a Cost-of-Living Crisis A System of Support?	Mixed-method	Fife, Scotland	270 parents	Single-parent households, BME participants, Households with disabled members	Poverty, mental and physical health, housing, justice
3	<b>Ipsos and The Trussell Trust</b>	Hunger in Scotland	Mixed-method	Scotland and wider UK	835* respondents in Scotland	General references to parents; no specific characteristics identified	Poverty, childcare, mental and physical health
4	<b>Save the Children and The Lines Between</b>	Parents' experiences and views on supporting early learning and development (at home)	Qualitative	Shetland, Highlands, Moray, Aberdeenshire, Aberdeen City, North	50 parents or carers	Low-income families, Single-parent households, BME participants, Households with disabled members,	Poverty, childcare, mental and physical health, housing, transport, disability, rural affairs, education

	Author	Title	Type of research/ methodology	Geographical area of research	Number of participating parents or carers	Characteristics of participants	Key research themes
				Lanarkshire, Argyll and Bute, Dundee, Fife, Falkirk, Edinburgh, East Lothian, Glasgow, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire, Dumfries & Galloway, Borders		Families with young parents	
5 & 17	<b>Scottish Women's Budget Group</b>	Women's Survey 2023' and 'Policy Briefing: Childcare Survey' 2023	Mixed-method	26 Local Authorities (unspecified)	216 mothers	Low-income families, Single-parent households, BME participants, Households with disabled members	Poverty, disability, childcare, physical and mental health
6	<b>Carers Scotland</b>	State of Caring 2023- A health and social care crisis for unpaid carers in Scotland	Mixed-method	Scotland	1771 carers*	Households with disabled members	Poverty, physical and mental health, disability
7	<b>Carers Scotland</b>	Juggling paid employment and unpaid care A State of Caring in Scotland Report 'Caring is a second full-time job'	Mixed-method	Scotland	10 parents or kinship carers	Care-experienced parents	Poverty, physical and mental health, disability

	Author	Title	Type of research/ methodology	Geographical area of research	Number of participating parents or carers	Characteristics of participants	Key research themes
8	<b>One Parent Family Scotland</b>	Poverty-proofing for families in or on the edges of care	Mixed-method	Dundee and Falkirk	10 parents or kinship carers	Care-experienced parents	Poverty, physical and mental health, disability
9	<b>The Family Fund</b>	Seen, heard, included – Family Fund full project report	Mixed-method	Rural Scotland (unspecified)	4 families interviewed and 2012 in the survey	Households with disabled members	Poverty, physical and mental health, disability, rural affairs, transport
10	<b>L Kerlaff</b>	Now we start to make it like home”: reunited refugee families negotiating integration and belonging.	Qualitative	Glasgow and Birmingham	21 parents, although not all were lived in Scotland	Refugee and asylum seeking families	Housing, poverty, immigration
11	<b>ScotCen</b>	Evaluation of New Scots Refugee Integration Programme	Mixed-method	Scotland-wide	Interviews with 21 refugees and people seeking asylum*	Refugee families	Housing, poverty, childcare, transport, physical and mental health, immigration
12	<b>Treanor, M and Troncoso, P</b>	The Indivisibility of Parental and Child Mental Health and Why Poverty Matters	Quantitative	Scotland	5,217 families from the Growing Up in Scotland data set	General references to parents; no specific characteristics identified	Physical and mental health, poverty
13	<b>Nourish Scotland</b>	Our Right to Food: Affording to Eat Well in a Good Food Nation	Quantitative	Scotland	4 women with experience of shopping	General references to parents; no specific characteristics identified	Physical and mental health, poverty

	Author	Title	Type of research/ methodology	Geographical area of research	Number of participating parents or carers	Characteristics of participants	Key research themes
					for, preparing and sharing meals in small and large families		
14	<b>R Dundas, M Boroujerdi, S Browne, M Deidda, P Bradshaw, P Craig, et al.</b>	Evaluation of the Healthy Start voucher scheme on maternal vitamin use and child breastfeeding: a natural experiment using data linkage	Mixed-method	Scotland	40 interviewed parents and 2240 from Growing Up in Scotland data sample, alongside data from another non-Scotland specific sample	Low-income families	Physical and mental health, poverty
15 & 16	<b>Father's Network Scotland</b>	Dads' Survey Report 2023' and 'Supporting a Quiet Childcare Revolution'	Mixed-method	Ayrshire & Arran, Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, Western Isles, Fife, Forth Valley, Grampian, Glasgow City Council, Highland, Lanarkshire, Lothian, Orkney, Shetland and Tayside	1054 fathers	Low-income families Single-parent households, Fathers, Households with more than 3 children	Physical and mental health, childcare, poverty

	Author	Title	Type of research/ methodology	Geographical area of research	Number of participating parents or carers	Characteristics of participants	Key research themes
18	<b>Association for Fostering, Kinship and Adoption with the Scottish Government</b>	Final Report: Supporting Roots	Qualitative	Scotland	10 mothers	Households with disabled members	Physical and mental health, justice, disability, poverty
19	<b>P Cowan</b>	“Forever Home? The Complexity of Adoption Breakdown in Scotland.”	Mixed-method	Scotland	15 adoptive parents	General references to parents; no specific characteristics identified	Physical and mental health
20	<b>Scottish Families Affected by Drugs and Alcohol</b>	Report from Families on the Frontline Conference	Qualitative	Scotland	288 families	General references to parents; no specific characteristics identified	Physical and mental health
21	<b>R Brunner</b>	What works in community- based adult social care in Scotland? Research report October 2023	Qualitative	Scotland	2 parents of a larger sample of carers	Households with disabled members	Disability
22	<b>Children 1st and Starcatchers</b>	Oot Playin Report	Qualitative	South Ayrshire	24 parents	General references to parents; no specific characteristics identified	Education, childcare, poverty
25	<b>University of West Scotland Oxfam</b>	Juggling childcare and work The challenges facing mothers-performers in Scotland	Qualitative	Scotland	10 mothers	Single-parents	Childcare



	Author	Title	Type of research/ methodology	Geographical area of research	Number of participating parents or carers	Characteristics of participants	Key research themes
26	<b>Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development</b>	Working lives Scotland	Mixed-method	Scotland	1010 participants*	General references to parents; no specific characteristics identified	Childcare
27	<b>C Campbell, and A Harris</b>	All Learners in Scotland Matter: The National Discussion on Education	Mixed-method	Scotland	5600 consultation respondents*	General references to parents; no specific characteristics identified	Education
28	<b>L Hayward, J Baird, S Allan, T Godfrey-Faussett, C Hutchinson, E MacIntosh, A Randhawa, E Spencer, ML Wiseman-Orr</b>	National qualifications in Scotland: A lightning rod for public concern about equity during the pandemic	Mixed-method	Scotland	13 parents and carers interviewed and a larger sample of 918 respondents to survey*	General references to parents; no specific characteristics identified	Education
29	<b>A Robb, D Jindal-Snape, D Asi, A Barrable, E Ross, H Austin &amp; C Murray</b>	Supporting children's wellbeing through music participation during the COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from Scotland	Mixed-method	Dundee	16 parents (among a larger group of participants)	Low-income families	Education, poverty
30	<b>M Grazia Imperiale, G Fassetta &amp; S Alshobaki</b>	I need to know what to say when children are crying': a language needs analysis of Scottish primary educators learning Arabic	Qualitative	Glasgow	26 parents (among a larger group of participants)	Refugee families	Education, physical and mental health, immigration

# 8.

## Appendix B: Continued reading

- **Audit Scotland. Early learning and childcare: Progress on delivery of the 1,140 hours expansion.** <https://audit.scot/publications/early-learning-and-childcare-progress-on-delivery-of-the-1140-hours-expansion#:~:text=Publication%3A%20Early%20learning%20and%20childcare,of%20the%201%2C140%20hours%20expansion&text=The%20Scottish%20Government%2C%20councils%20and,But%20the%20sector%20remains%20fragile> [Accessed 2 April 2024].
- **CELCIS. Children’s Services Reform Report: Learning and Implications for Scotland.** [https://www.celcis.org/application/files/6117/0245/9620/CSRR\\_Concluding\\_Report\\_-\\_CELCIS\\_-\\_13\\_December\\_2023.pdf](https://www.celcis.org/application/files/6117/0245/9620/CSRR_Concluding_Report_-_CELCIS_-_13_December_2023.pdf) [Accessed 15 April 2024].
- **Close the Gap and One Parent Family Scotland. A childcare system for all: A vision that puts gender equality at the centre of Scotland’s childcare strategy.** <https://earlyyearsscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/MHWH-Report.pdf> [Accessed 2 April 2024].
- **Early Years Scotland. Mental Health, Happiness and Wellbeing Report.** <https://earlyyearsscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/MHWH-Report.pdf> [Accessed 15 April 2024].
- **Equality Alliance. Lesbian, and Bi+ Women’s Experiences of Reproductive Health and Fertility Services in Scotland** [Accessed 28 March 2024].
- **Equality Alliance. Trans People’s Experiences of Reproductive Health and Fertility Services in Scotland** [Accessed 28 March 2024].
- **Includem. Lack: Housing, Care & Isolation.** <https://includem.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Lack-Housing-Report.pdf> [Accessed 15 April 2024].
- **One Parent Family Scotland. Scottish Government Debate: Supporting Scotland with Cost of Living and Reducing Child Poverty.** <https://opfs.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/policy-research/single-parent-families-and-poverty-in-scotland/scottish-government-debate-cost-of-living-and-reducing-child-poverty-briefing/> [Accessed 2 April 2024]
- **Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities. Exploring the barriers and facilitators to early learning and childcare provision for children with learning disabilities in Scotland.** <https://www.sclld.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/SCLD-Report-A4.pdf> [Accessed 2 April 2024].
- **Shared Lives Plus. Shared Lives Parenting project in Scotland.** <https://sharedlivesplus.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Evaluation-Supported-Parenting-in-Shared-Lives-Scotland.pdf> [Accessed 15 April 2024].
- **The Why Not Trust. Births to care-experienced teenagers and women aged 14-24 in Scotland: an estimation.** [https://www.celcis.org/application/files/2116/7604/8031/Care\\_Experienced\\_Teenagers\\_and\\_Mothers\\_V1\\_Feb\\_2023.pdf](https://www.celcis.org/application/files/2116/7604/8031/Care_Experienced_Teenagers_and_Mothers_V1_Feb_2023.pdf) [Accessed 28 March 2024].



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