

Understanding public attitudes towards early childhood

Report produced by Ipsos on behalf of the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood

November 2024



ROYAL FOUNDATION
Centre for
Early Childhood

Methodology

- Ipsos interviewed 5,353 adults aged 16+ across the UK through the online Ipsos i-Say panel from the 7- 21 May 2024. This included boosts in Scotland (500), Wales (500) and Northern Ireland (300).
- From these responses, we present nationally representative results from interviews with the **general population based on 4,673 interviews**. This includes parents, grandparents, adults with no children, and those saying they are likely to have children in the near future. Data were weighted by gender and age within region, working status and ethnicity. Boosts were weighted to make the sample nationally representative.
- Separately, we present results from interviews with **parents of children aged 0-5 based on 1,230 interviews**. This includes 550 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.
- As this is a sample of the population, all results are subject to a ‘margin of error’, which means small differences may not be statistically significant. Where results do not sum to 100%, this may be due to computer rounding, multiple responses, or the exclusion of “don’t know” categories.
- Please note, for the purpose of this study, the ‘early years’ or ‘early childhood’ was defined within the survey as: **“the period between the start of pregnancy and the age of 5”**.
- This is the third wave of the Annual Perceptions Survey. Where appropriate, we have shown differences compared to the 2023 survey which followed a similar methodology.

Background to the research

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

The research presented in this report builds upon two previous studies about early childhood which the Royal Foundation and Ipsos ran in [2022](#) and [2023](#).

We identified core trackers questions from these waves and repeated them this year to see how understanding has changed in the intervening period. Alongside these trackers, new questions were developed to explore key areas in more depth. This report is the first in a series to be generated from the research.



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General attitudes and trends towards early childhood

Key findings

1.

The public strongly believe that childhood is important in shaping a person's future life. **Over nine in ten (94%) say it is important.**

However, **there is still relatively low recognition relating to the importance of early childhood compared with other life stages.**

Only one in five (19%) believe that the period from the start of pregnancy to five is the most important period in childhood, which is in line with last year.

2.

There has been a small **increase in the proportion of the public who believe the development of early childhood is currently a top priority** for wider society, up 3 ppts to 45%.

However, there is still a lack of consensus on the issue. Over seven in ten (72%) believe it should be more of a priority; while nearly a quarter (24%) believe it shouldn't be a priority, due to other problems facing the UK.

3.

Children living healthy happy childhoods remains the most appealing reason for investing in childhood development. And there are signs that people are also starting to understand how investing in early childhood development helps to reduce inequalities.

Social and emotional skills are linked to future wellbeing and happiness but less so to academic achievement or employment.

Key findings

4.

Knowledge relating to how children's early experiences reflect their later life (+2ppts) and how children develop during early childhood (+2ppts) has increased. However, like last year, around three in ten state that they know little or nothing relating to child development.

5.

There has been an **increase in knowledge about the role of childhood development in all areas.**

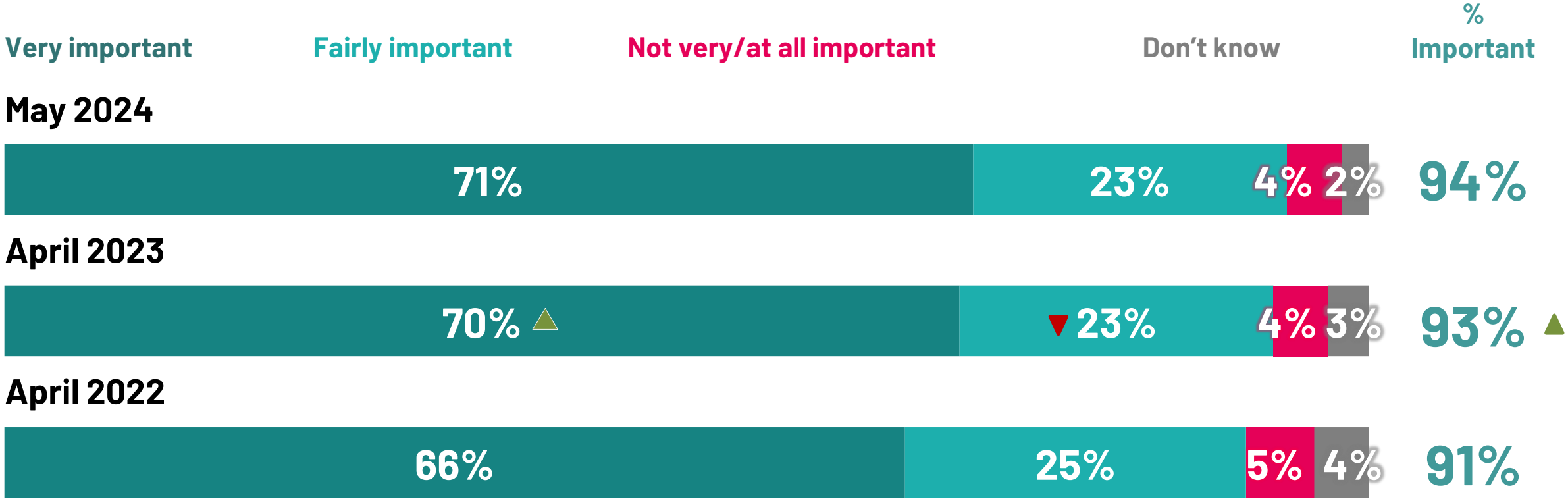
However, while the public unanimously (94%) believe that social and emotional skills are important to happiness in adult life, over two in five still have little or no idea how these skills develop during early childhood.

6.

There has been increased levels of knowledge among parents of 0-5s relating to the role wider society can play in providing support to families – including midwives, businesses and school nurses. However, among all adults, knowledge remains broadly in line with previous years.

Similar to last year, over nine in ten recognise the importance of early childhood in shaping a person's later life

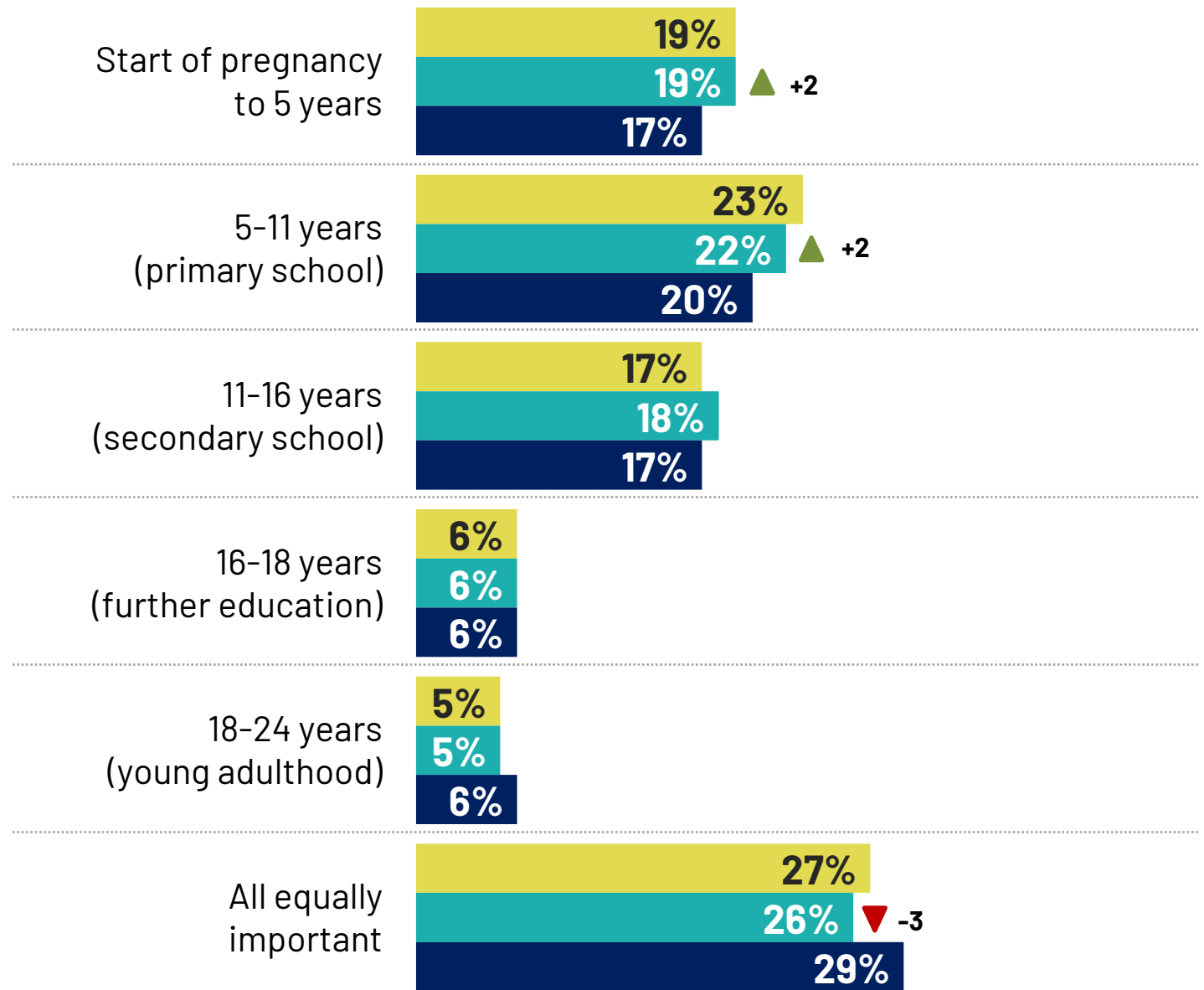
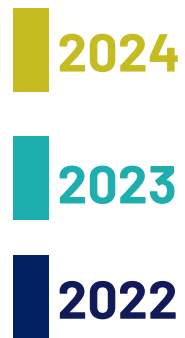
Q How important, if at all, do you feel the period of early childhood is in shaping a person's future life?



Base: 4,673 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in May 2024.

One in five say the start of pregnancy to age five is the most important period of childhood – comparable to other periods and stable since last year

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



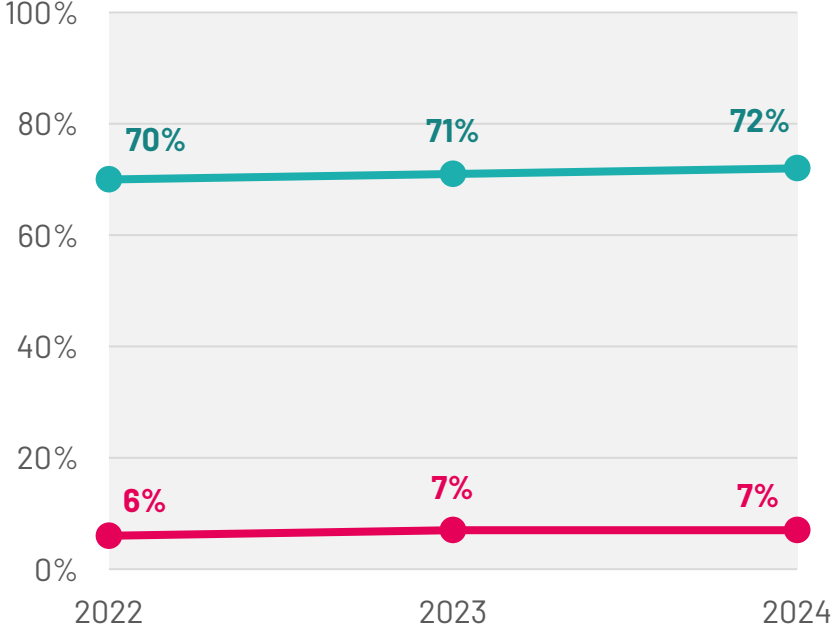
Base: 4,673 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in May 2024.

▲ ▼ Significantly higher/lower change based on previous year, 95% CI

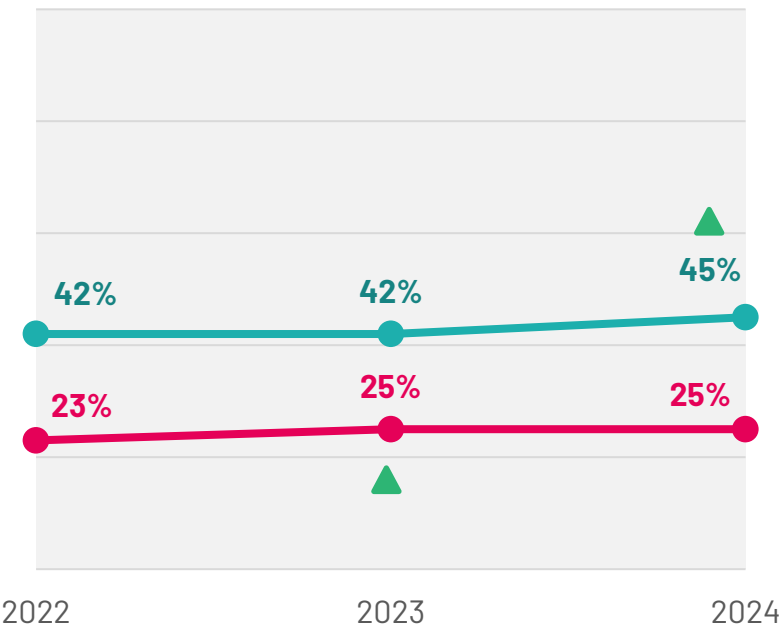
There has been a small uplift in the belief that the development of children in early childhood is a top priority, but over seven in ten think it should be prioritised further

Q To what extent do you **agree** or **disagree** with each of the following statements...?

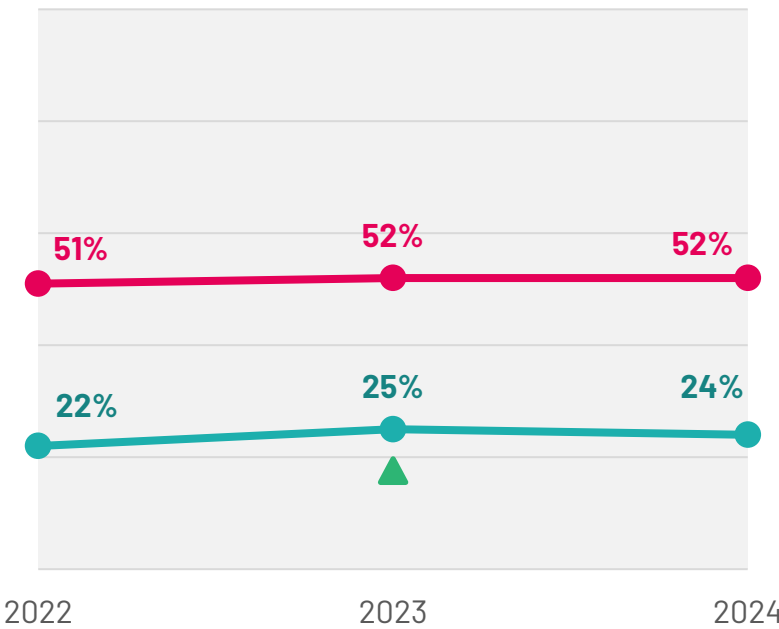
The development of children in early childhood should be more of a priority for wider society



The development of children in early childhood is currently a top priority for wider society



The development of children in their early childhood should not be a priority given the other problems facing society in the UK



Base: 4,673 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in May 2024.

The public continue to be motivated most to invest in early childhood by wanting to see children living healthy, happy childhoods. Short term reasoning continues to be more appealing than longer term.

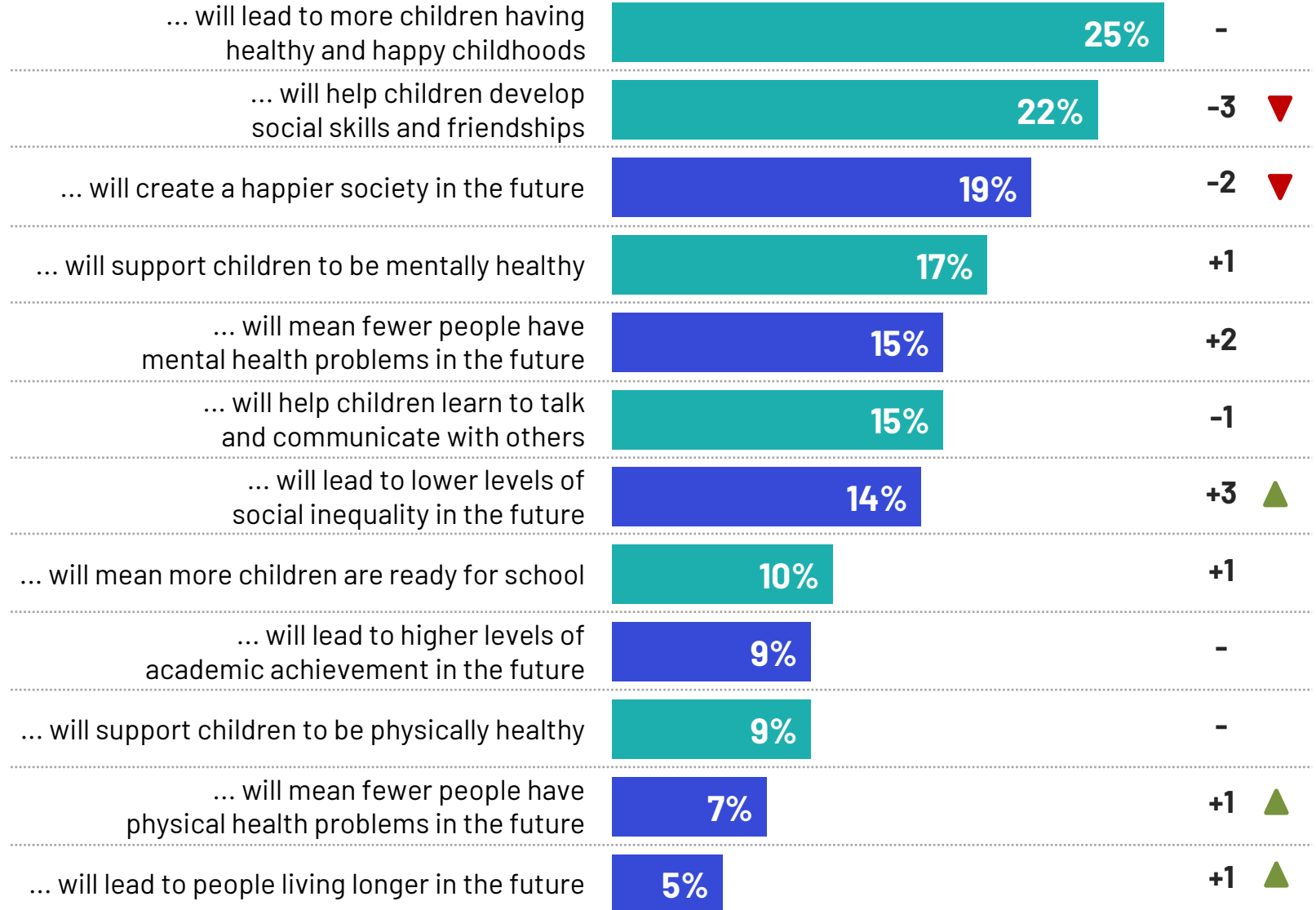
Q I'm now going to show you a list of things some people say are important reasons for investing in early childhood. Which, if any, of the following statements MOST appeal to you?

69% selected a short-term reason

56% selected a long-term reason

Focusing greater attention and investment on helping children develop in early childhood today...

Change since 2023



Base: 4,673 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in May 2024.

▲ ▼ Significantly higher/lower change based on previous year, 95% CI

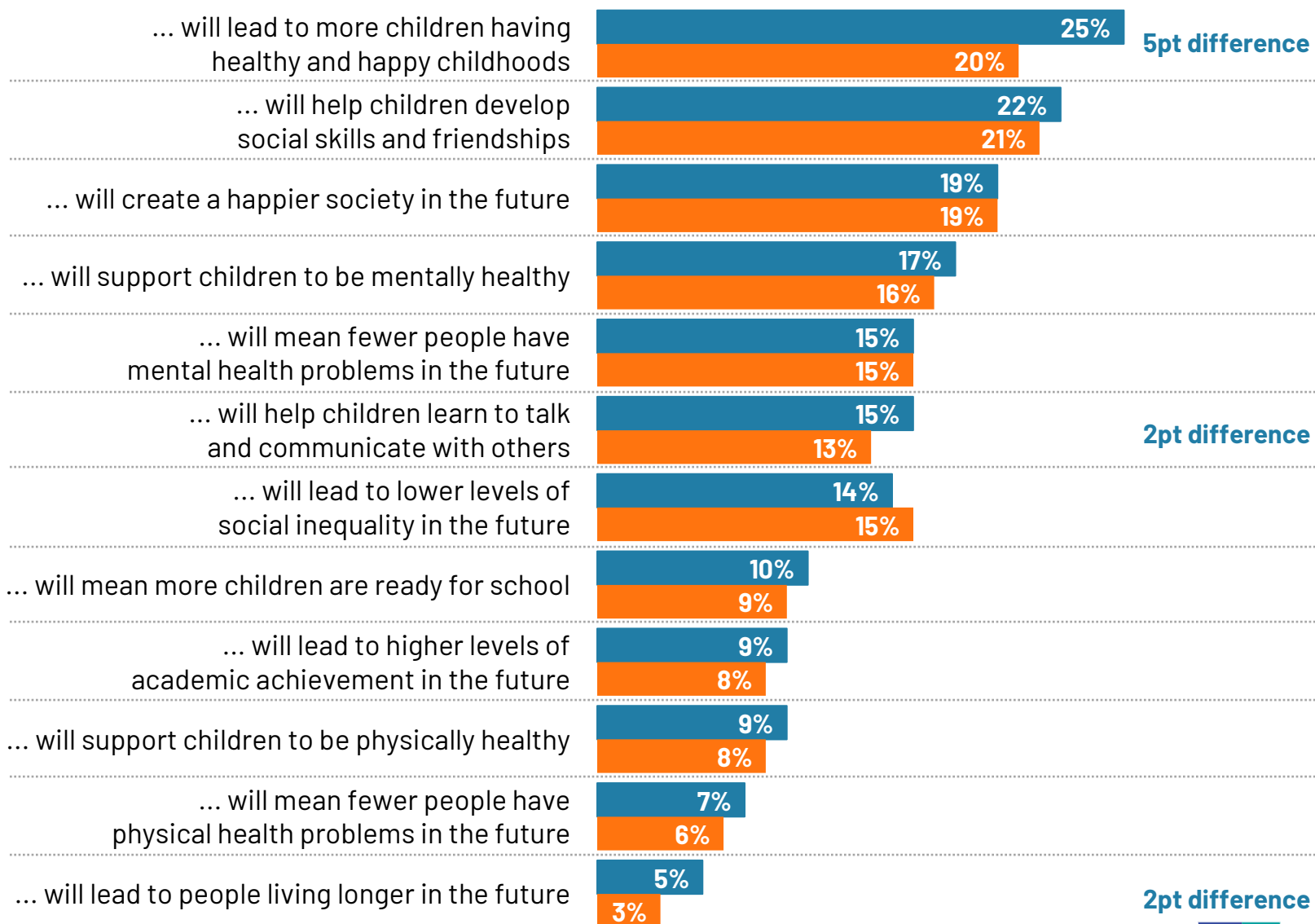
There are few differences in what motivates the public as a whole and non-parents to invest in early childhood

I'm now going to show you a list of things some people say are important reasons for investing in early childhood. Which, if any, of the following statements MOST appeal to you?

General public

Non-parents

Focusing greater attention and investment on helping children develop in early childhood today...



Base: 4,673 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in May 2024/. Only significant differences are highlighted with text.

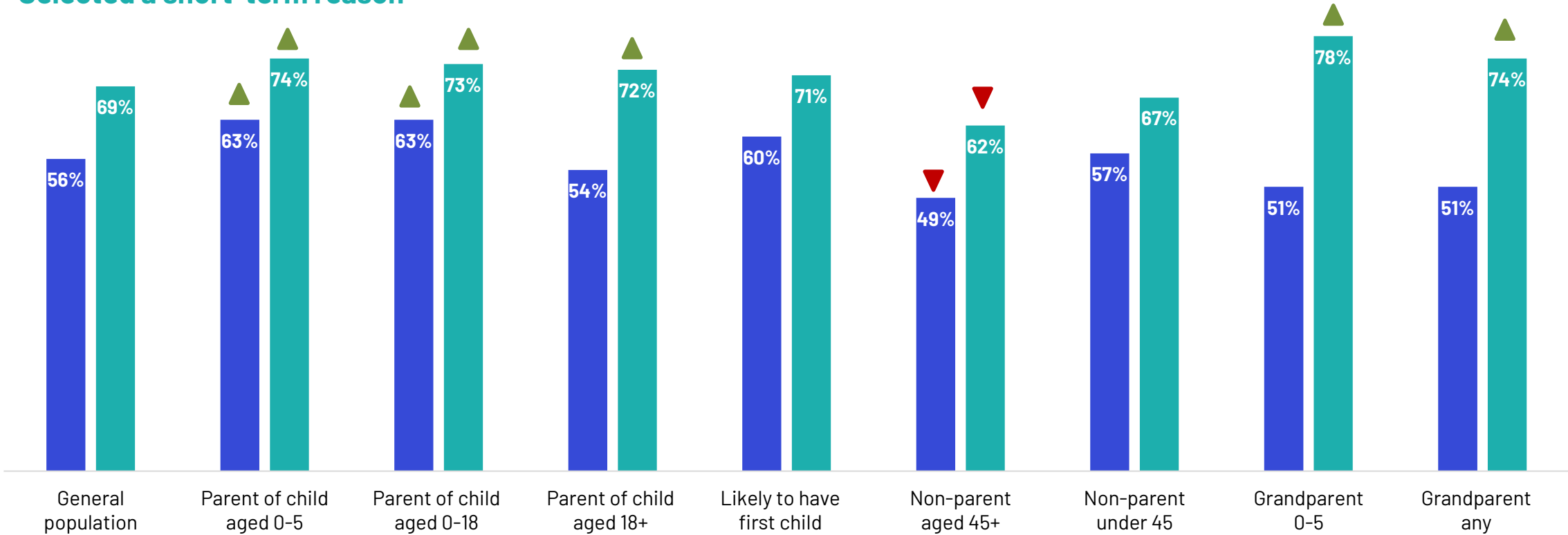


Short term motivations are more popular across different demographic groups, but especially amongst grandparents and parents with children aged 18+

Q I'm now going to show you a list of things some people say are important reasons for investing in early childhood. Which, if any, of the following statements MOST appeal to you?

Selected a long-term reason

Selected a short-term reason

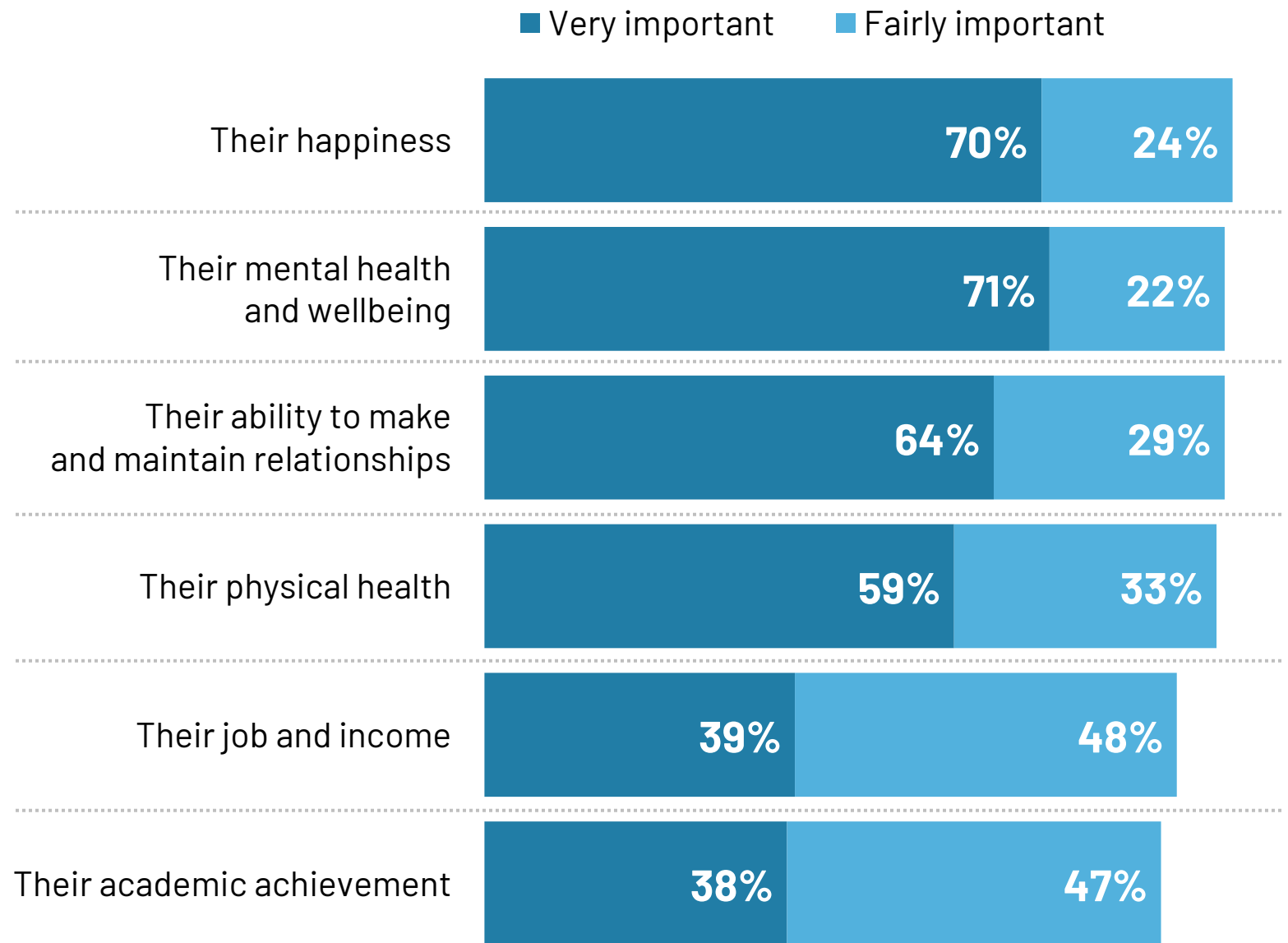


Base: 4,673 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in May 2024.

Social and emotional skills are seen as very important for numerous aspects of adult life, but particularly in determining happiness and mental health



How important, if at all, do you think a person's social and emotional skills are for each of the following aspects of adult life?



Base: 4,673 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in May 2024

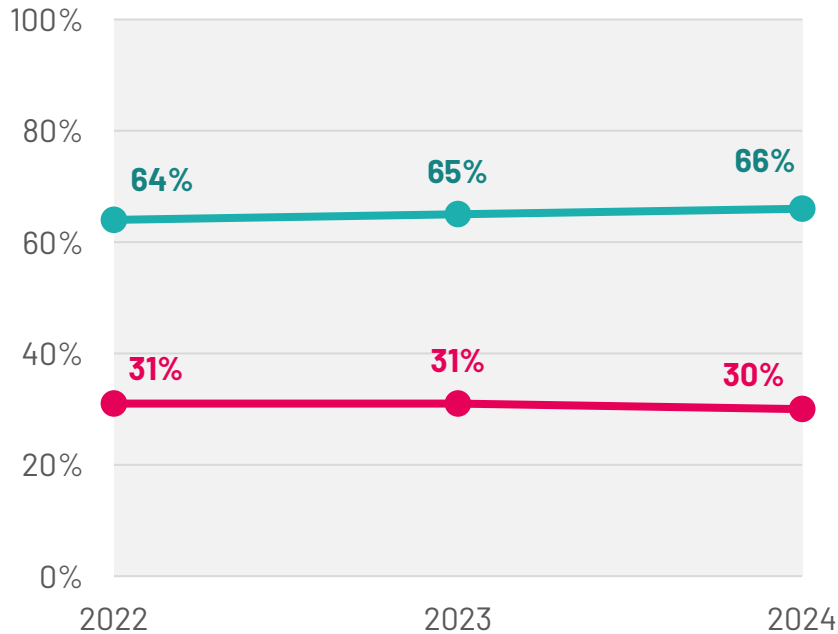
Reported knowledge relating to child development and impact on adult life has increased slightly; however, roughly a third still know just a little or nothing

Q How much, if anything, do you personally feel you know about each of the following?

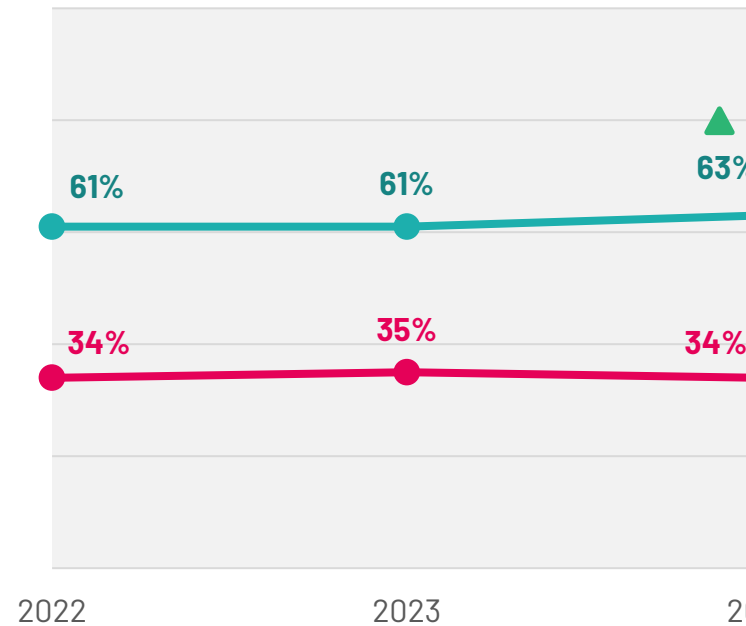
A great deal / fair amount

Just a little / don't know anything

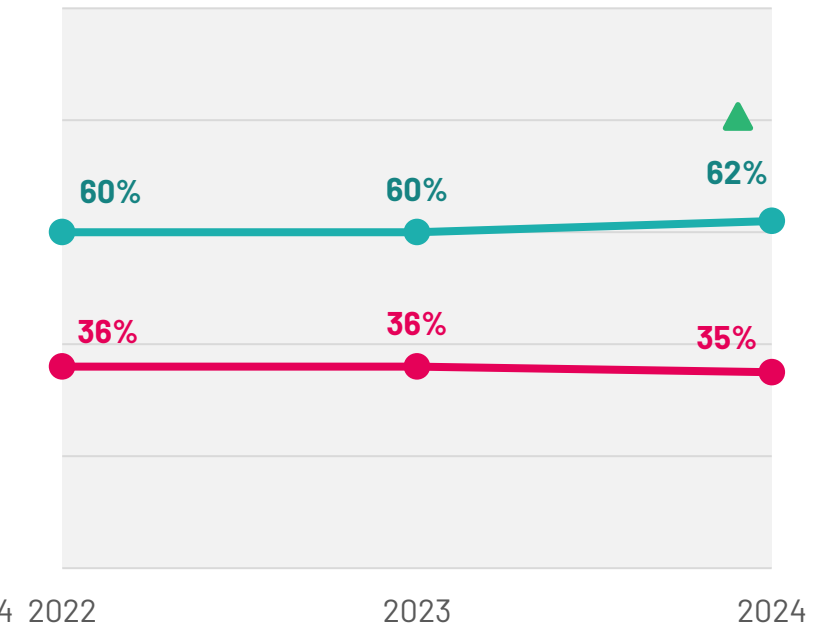
How parents, carers, family and friends can help a child develop during their early childhood...?



How a child's early experiences affect their later adult life...?



How children develop during their early childhood...?



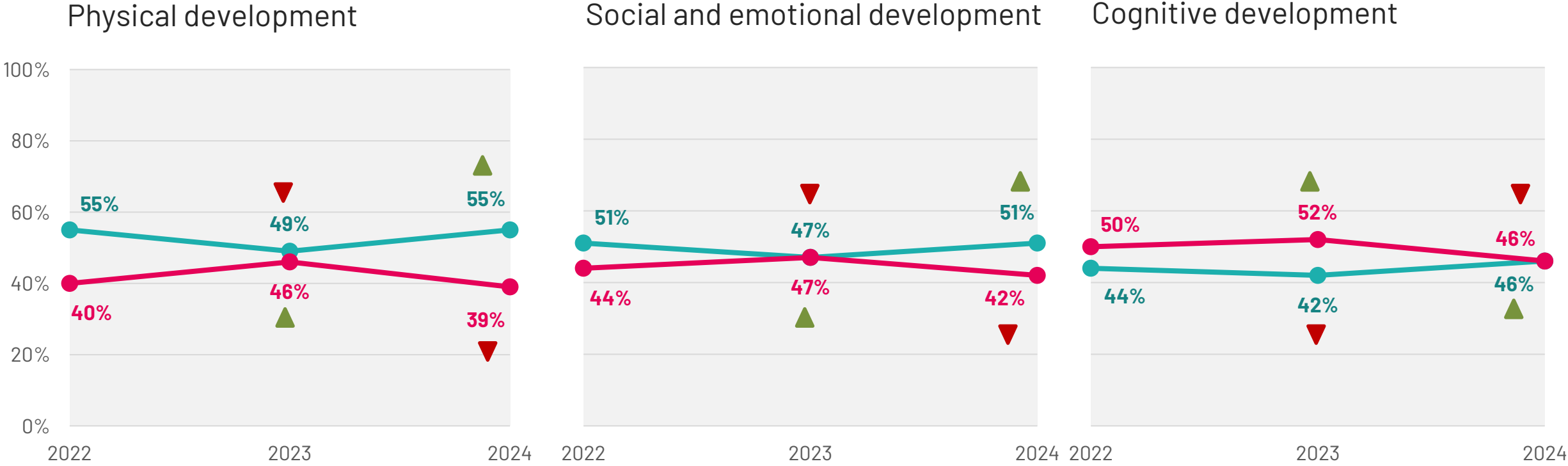
Base: 4,673 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in May 2024.

Around half report to have some knowledge about physical, social and emotional and cognitive development during early childhood – all have seen a slight uplift

Q How much, if anything, do you personally feel you know about each of the following?

A great deal / fair amount

Just a little / I've heard of but know nothing / never heard of



Base: 4,673 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in May 2024.



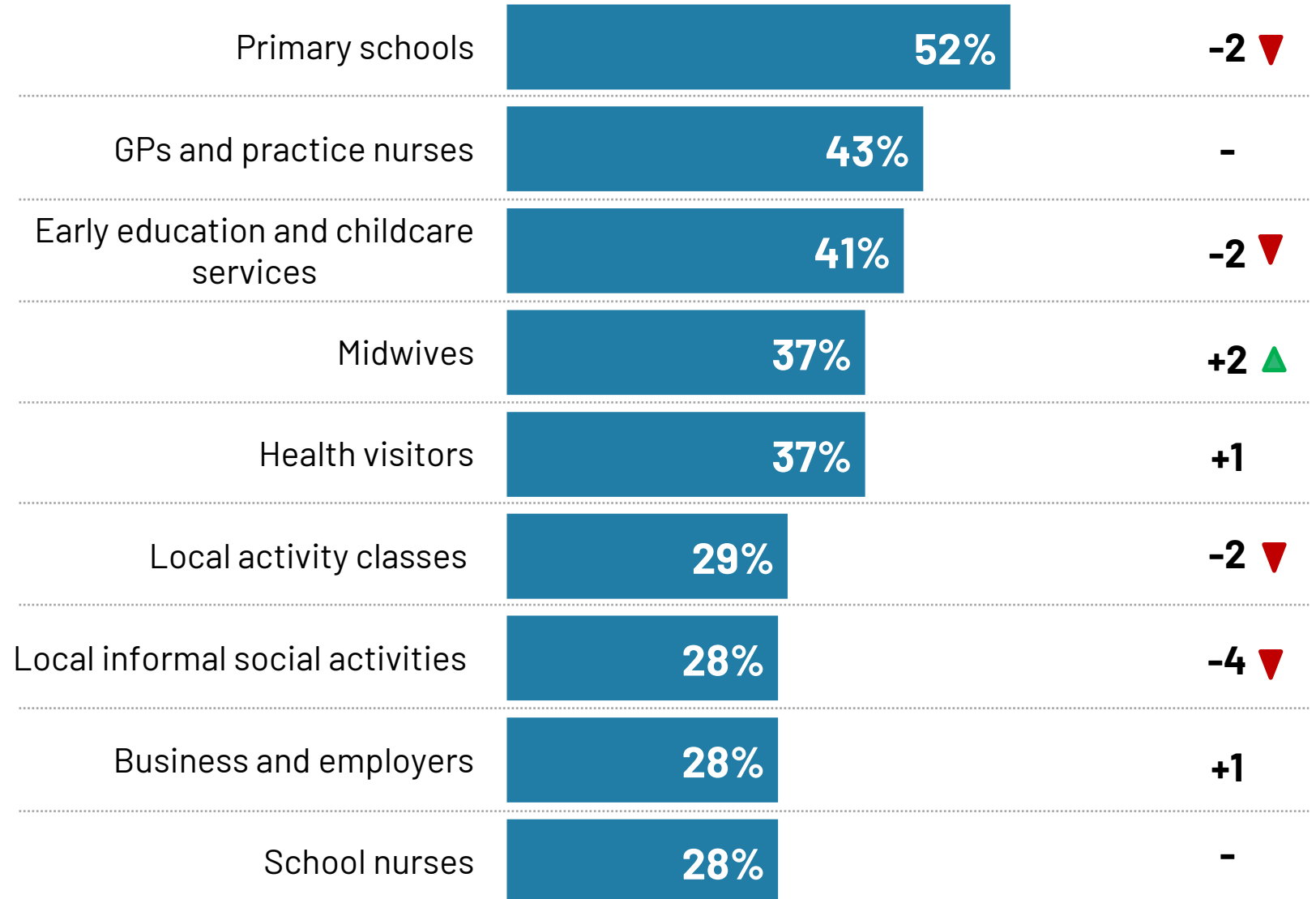
Beyond primary schools, the public still have a limited awareness of how key actors support early childhood

Q How much, if anything, do you feel you know about the role each of the following play in supporting children, parents and carers during early childhood?

Among general public

% saying they **know a great deal or fair amount about** the role each of the following play in supporting children, parents + carers during early childhood

Change since 2023



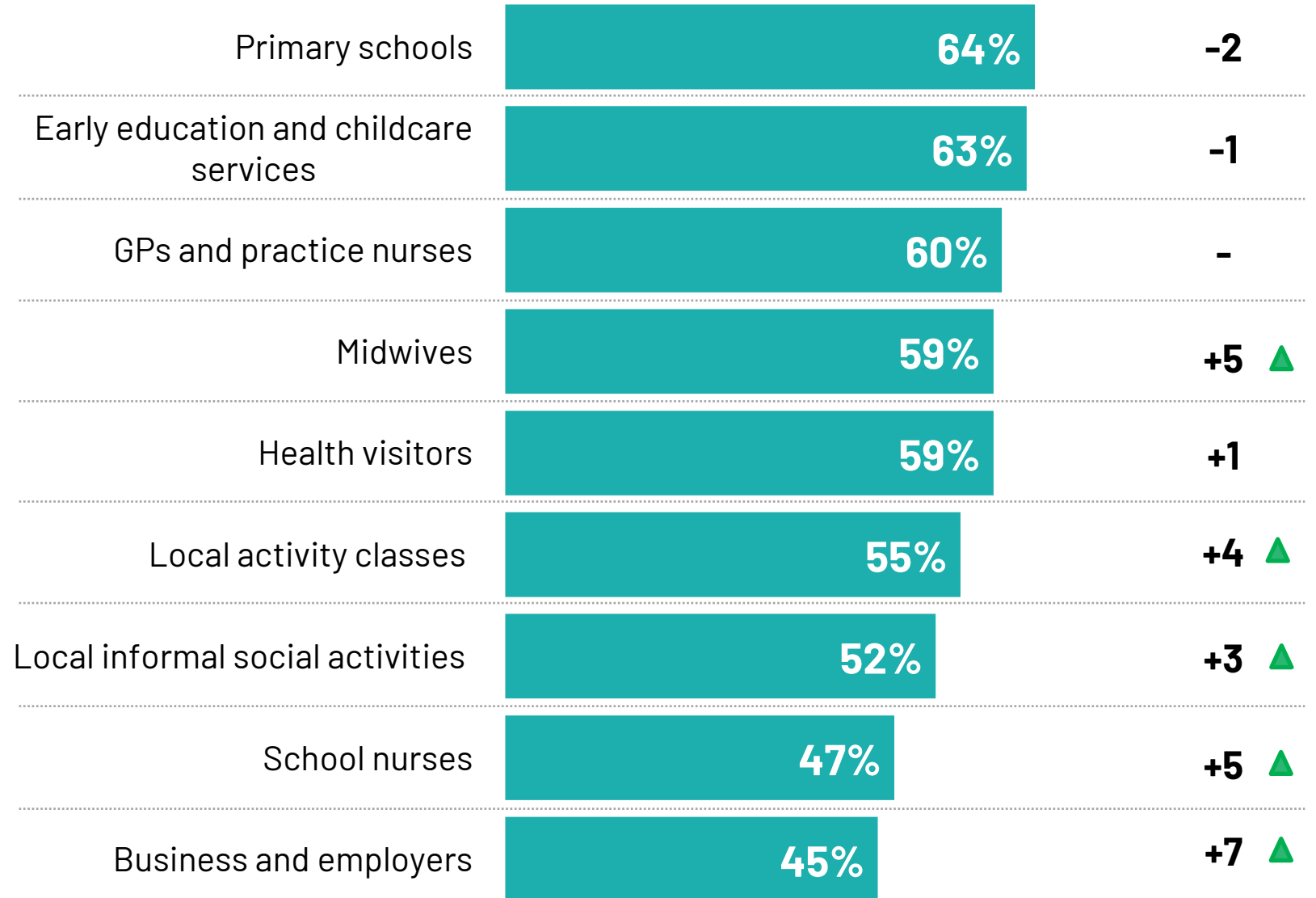
Base: 4,673 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in May 2024.

Among parents of children aged 0-5, knowledge of the role key actors play has generally increased since last year—particularly when looking at businesses and employers

Q How much, if anything, do you feel you know about the role each of the following play in supporting children, parents and carers during early childhood?

Among parent of children aged 0-5.

% saying they **know a great deal or fair amount about** the role each of the following play in supporting children, parents + carers during early childhood Change since 2023



Base: 1,230 Parent of child aged 0-5, surveyed in May 2024.

▲ ▼ Significantly higher/lower change based on previous year, 95% CI

Knowledge of key actors is consistently higher among parents in general, and lowest among non-parents, particularly those aged 45+ (and falling)

+/- Numbers are significant changes since 2023

% Saying they know a great deal / fair amount	General Population	Parents of 0-5-year-olds	Parents of 0-18-year-olds	Parents of 18+	Likely to have first child	No children aged 45+	No children aged under 45	Grand-parent of 0-5-year-olds	Grand-parent any
Primary schools	52% ⁻²	64%	66% ⁻³	58% ⁻⁴	47%	28% ⁻⁵	44%	59%	55% ⁻⁵
Early education and childcare services	41% ⁻²	63%	59% ⁻⁴	44% ⁻⁷	43%	14% ⁻⁶	35% ⁻⁵	46%	42% ⁻⁷
GPs and practice nurses	43%	60%	58%	47% ⁻³	45%	23%	35%	50%	46%
Health visitors	37%	59%	55%	43%	34%	13%	26% ⁺⁶	43%	40%
Midwives	37% ⁺²	59% ⁺⁵	53%	42%	36%	17%	26%	39%	37%
Informal social activities	28% ⁻⁴	52% ⁺³	48%	29% ⁻¹¹	33%	6% ⁻⁹	24%	27% ⁻⁷	25% ⁻¹⁰
Local activity classes	29% ⁻²	55% ⁺⁴	49%	29% ⁻⁵	33%	9%	25%	26%	24% ⁻⁵
School nurses	28%	47% ⁺⁵	44%	29% ⁻⁴	32%	11%	24%	21%	22% ⁻⁶
Business and employers	28%	45% ⁺⁷	43%	28%	36%	15%	26% ⁻⁷	23%	21%

Q: How much, if anything, do you feel you know about the role each of the following play in supporting children, parents and carers during early childhood?

Colour coding used to illustrate difference between the highest (dark green 66%) and the lowest (dark red 6%) figures between subgroups

IPSOS

The Royal Foundation Annual Perceptions Survey 2024

For more information

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