



ROYAL FOUNDATION
Centre for
Early Childhood

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The First Five Years:

A Parent Perspective



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We also thank the expert contributors from across early childhood, health, and education whose perspectives helped contextualise the findings.

Executive summary

The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood focuses on the unique importance of the early years in shaping lifelong outcomes and building a happier, healthier, and more connected society. Babies born today will grow up in a world that is changing at an extraordinary pace. In such a moment, there is a rare opportunity: by focusing on the earliest years of life, we can help lay the foundations for a stronger future for both children and society.

Early childhood – from pregnancy to age five – is a period of unparalleled development. During this time, the brain develops at remarkable speed and children begin to form the social and emotional foundations that shape how they understand themselves, manage emotions, build relationships, and engage with the world. These capabilities are built through warm, responsive relationships, and the everyday moments of care between babies, young children, and the adults around them.

At the same time, the context in which families are raising young children is evolving. The lasting impacts of the pandemic, cost-of-living pressures, changing social norms, and the rapid growth of digital technology are shaping modern family life. Many parents are navigating increased stress, economic pressure, and reduced social support, which can make it harder to provide the nurturing environments that support healthy early development.

Against this backdrop, in 2024, the Centre commissioned a twelve-month research project to better understand parents' experiences of early parenthood, how they access information and support, and how early years practitioners can most effectively engage with them. The research also explored opportunities to strengthen support for parents and address gaps that may limit their ability to nurture their child's development.

Overall, the research found that while parents are deeply motivated to support their child's development, many struggle to access clear, consistent, and personalised guidance – particularly amid the pressures of modern family life and the overwhelming volume of information available online.

The research highlighted several important insights about how parents experience support for their child's social and emotional development:

- **Parents place high importance on social and emotional development during early childhood**, and more than 4 in 5 (>86%) of the general public recognise its role in shaping wellbeing, relationships, and mental health across the life course.
- **However, parents tend to focus on their child's everyday behaviour, milestones and concerns**, rather than using the language of 'social and emotional development'.

- **Support is often sought reactively when social and emotional development becomes more obvious**, particularly in toddlerhood (around age 2) when behaviours such as meltdowns or difficulties with sharing emerge. Parents often want information earlier, but the day-to-day demands of parenting can make it difficult to look ahead to future needs.
- **Parents draw on a wide range of sources for information, including health professionals, early education settings, family members, peers, and social media.** In the last year almost 9 in 10 parents (87%) have sought out information, advice or support relating to their child. Of those, more than 9 in 10 (93%) approached a formal source of information such as an early years educator, health professional or the NHS website for advice, which they typically find reliable and are likely to act on.
- **Parents value opportunities to speak with knowledgeable practitioners**, particularly when guidance is personalised and grounded in an understanding of their individual child and the wider context of family life, including cultural background, financial pressures, and concerns about neurodivergence.
- **Parents consistently say they want authoritative, clearly communicated information** that helps them understand their child's behaviour and development in everyday terms, and to make confident, well-informed decisions.
- **When professional support is limited or brief, parents often turn to other sources**, such as friends, family or online communities. The digital world, in particular, allows constant access to information, which can be highly relatable.
- **Yet parents find the volume of information and advice overwhelming**, and can expose them to conflicting messages or unhelpful comparisons. These mixed messages can create uncertainty and confusion, and – for some – can erode trust in all sources of information.

Early years practitioners, especially across health, education, and the voluntary sector, play a vital role supporting babies, young children and those caring for them in communities across the country. These dedicated, passionate professionals and volunteers are often a lifeline for people during a life-changing period, working in challenging circumstances and doing all that they can to support this golden opportunity of early childhood.

As we look ahead, this report highlights a significant opportunity to do even more to strengthen the knowledge, confidence, and consistency of the early childhood workforce, which will ultimately enable them to provide the support that parents want and need. Parents trust practitioners and want more opportunities to engage with them. Supporting practitioners across health, early education, and family support to communicate clearly and consistently about early social and emotional development will help families navigate uncertainty and support children to thrive. In doing so, we can help build the strong social and emotional foundations that shape children's lifelong outcomes and underpin a healthier, happier, and more connected society.

Introduction

Established in 2021 by HRH The Princess of Wales, The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood recognises the unique importance of the early years in shaping lifelong outcomes and in building a happy, healthy, and more connected society. Its work focuses on strengthening the social and emotional skills set out in the ***Shaping Us Framework***, recognising that children develop these skills through warm, responsive relationships with the adults around them.

Early childhood – the period from pregnancy and when a child turns five – is a period of unparalleled development. During this time, babies and young children lay the foundations for the social and emotional skills that shape how they will go on to manage their emotions, build relationships with others, and engage with the world. These foundations are formed through everyday interactions: the relationships with the adults around them, the environments they grow up in, and their experiences. When these are nurturing and responsive, we can give every child the best opportunities to thrive and to create a loving, caring society.

Modern family life is, however, being shaped by the lingering effects of the pandemic, the concerns about the cost of living, shifting social norms, and the rapid growth of technology in daily life. As such, many babies and young children today are growing up in stressed, economically challenged, and socially isolated families, where parents struggle to provide the nurturing and stimulating care that supports healthy social and emotional development.

In this context, in 2024, The Centre for Early Childhood commissioned new research to:

- deepen our understanding of parents' experiences of pregnancy and early parenthood, how they prepared for/managed parenthood, how they engaged with information and support, their perceived understanding of early childhood development, and how early years practitioners can most effectively engage and support them with this.
- identify key opportunities to improve support for parents to increase their capacity and capability to nurture their baby or child's early development, and where gaps exist.

This research reinforces the Centre's commitment to elevating the voices of families, ensuring that its work to improve early childhood outcomes is shaped by what parents and carers say they need most.

Drawing on mixed-methods research with parents and carers of 0–5s across the UK, this report explores parents' help-seeking journeys and their experiences of support across early childhood. The findings will be of interest to practitioners, service leaders, decision-makers, researchers, and others committed to improving early childhood experiences and outcomes, and to strengthening the conditions in which babies and young children can thrive.

Methodology

The research used a mixed methods approach, starting with a review of existing literature followed by interviews with parents to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences. This qualitative work was complemented by a survey with a representative sample of UK parents, allowing the study to combine rich, nuanced insights with wider perspective and reach.

Qualitative research

Good Innovation, a social research agency, was commissioned in July 2024 to undertake in-depth research to gather insights from parents and carers of 0-5s. A qualitative approach was designed to allow for a depth of understanding of parents' experiences. The methods comprised:

- Secondary research and a literature review to identify existing knowledge, pinpoint critical research gaps, understand the current support ecosystem, and explore what matters to parents about the early childhood workforce. This informed the development of the initial lines of enquiry for the interviews.
- In-depth interviews (60 minutes) with 30 parents recruited through an external recruitment specialist. Participants were segmented based on the child's age: Pregnancy-24 months (n=6), Toddlers (2-3 years, n=9), Pre-school (3-4 years, n=9), and Starting School (Age 5, n=6). Recruitment deliberately over-indexed on the toddler and pre-school segments (ages 2-4) due to identified gaps in existing research and support for this age group. Within each segment, recruitment focused on achieving socioeconomic diversity, alongside ethnic diversity, representation of primary caregivers (including fathers), and a geographical spread across the UK's four nations.
- Six half-day in-home ethnographic interviews with parents in their homes. This allowed for deeper observation and understanding of parenting practices, challenges, and environments within the natural context of family life.
- Ten interviews were conducted with eleven experts in relevant fields such as child development, parenting support, and healthcare to supplement and contextualise the findings from the parent research.

The research took place between October and November 2024.

Public perceptions survey

The Centre for Early Childhood has commissioned **Ipsos**, a market research agency, to undertake an annual public perceptions survey since 2021. In 2025, additional questions were added to the survey to test findings from the qualitative research conducted by Good Innovation with a nationally representative sample of parents and carers. This report draws on data from three years of the Centre's public perceptions survey, and the more in-depth targeted work from 2025.

- For the overall public perceptions survey, Ipsos interviewed 5,352 adults aged 16+ across the UK through the online Ipsos i-Say panel from 30th April –13th May 2025. This included boosts in Scotland (568), Wales (525) and Northern Ireland (310). From these responses, we present nationally representative results from interviews with the general population based on 4,672 interviews.
- Interviews were conducted with a nationally representative sample of 1,202 parents of children aged 0-5, comprising:
 - 522 parents of children aged 0-5 drawn from a general population sample of 5,352 adults aged 16+ across the UK through the online Ipsos i-Say panel from 30th April –13th May 2025. This included boosts in Scotland (568), Wales (525) and Northern Ireland (310).
 - A further 680 parents of children aged 0-5 that were recruited through the online Ipsos i-Say panel.
- 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.
- Previous years' public perceptions surveys have had a minimum of 4,000 interviews with members of the general public aged 16+, and a minimum of 1,000 interviews with parents of 0-5s. Boosts for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have been applied since 2024. The survey takes place at a similar time each year, i.e. late April/early May.

Collectively, we gathered a wide range of data through these methods. The findings will be published across a number of publications that align with different aspects of The Centre for Early Childhood's work. In this report, we pull out key messages about the information and support families need to support their child's social and emotional development.

Parent insights

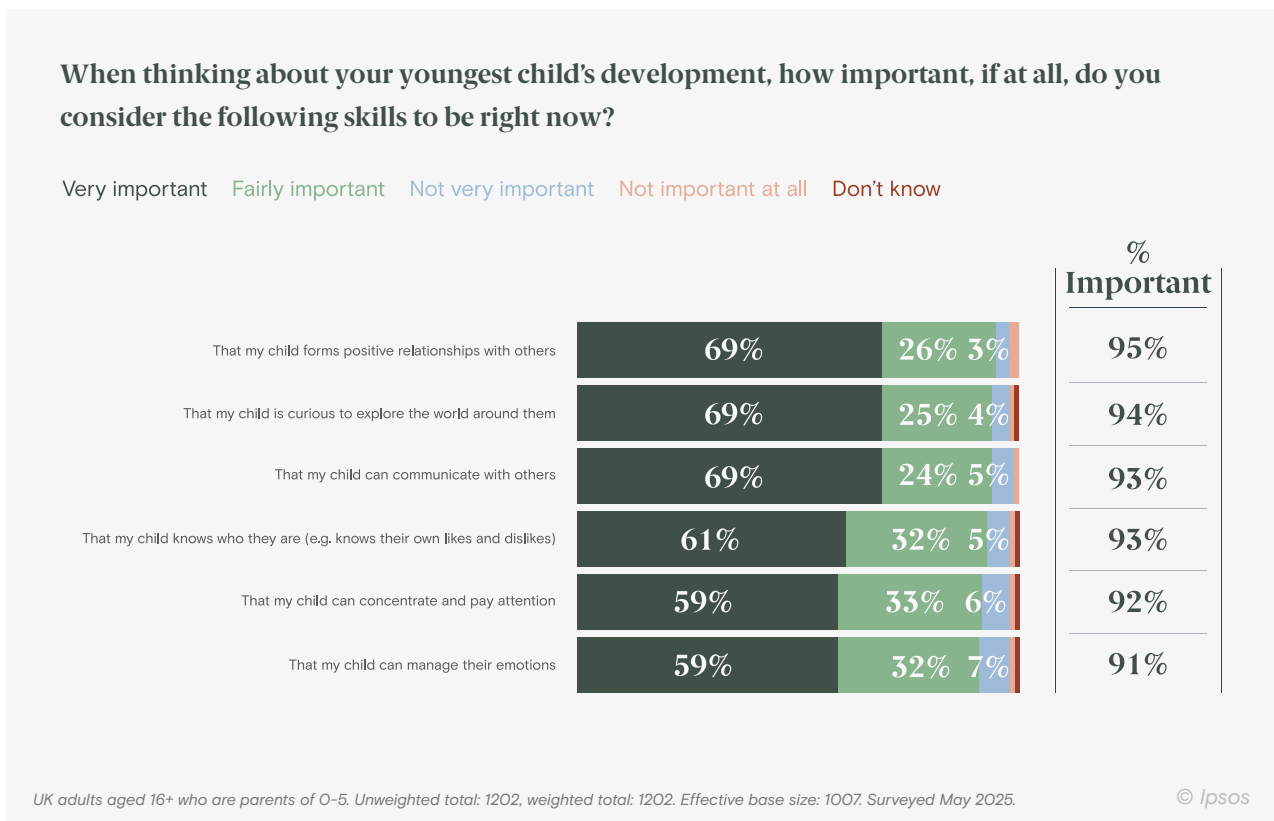
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Parents understand the importance of social and emotional development

Parents’ understanding of social and emotional development forms the foundation of this report. Survey data shows that the vast majority recognise the importance of developing social and emotional skills, both in early childhood and for lifelong wellbeing, and that awareness of the long-term impact of these skills has increased over time.

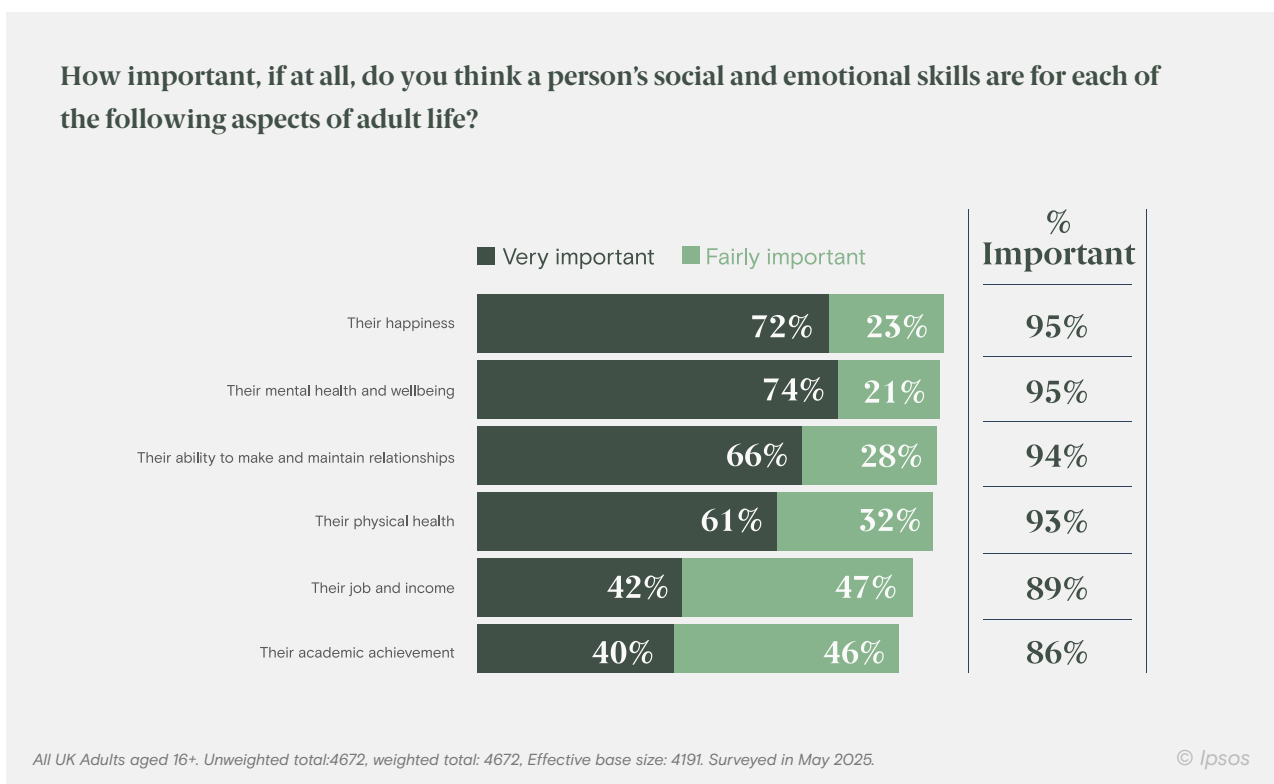
Most parents who took part in the survey stated that it is very or fairly important for their child to develop different types of social and emotional skills in the immediate term (Figure 1). There were few differences between parents with children of different ages – among those who only have one child, parents of a child aged 4–5 years were more likely to place importance on their child being able to concentrate and pay attention (93% versus 89% of parents who have a 2–3 year old) and to manage their emotions (94% and 91% respectively). This is understandable given typical developmental trajectories – parents of 2-year-olds do not necessarily expect them to manage emotions or be able to concentrate.

Figure 1. Importance parents of 0–5-year-olds place on different areas of their child’s social and emotional development



Over eight in ten parents (86% - 95%) also said that early social and emotional development is very or fairly important for a wide range of lifelong outcomes. Since the Centre first asked this question in 2023, this strong awareness has remained consistent, with especially high recognition of the link between early social and emotional development to a person’s mental health (with 95% stating it is important) and interpersonal relationships (96%) as they go through life. While slightly fewer people make a direct connection between social and emotional development and outcomes such as academic achievement (89%) or career success (90%), these figures are still high and reflect a solid level of parental understanding (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Importance the public place on social and emotional development for a person’s later life outcomes



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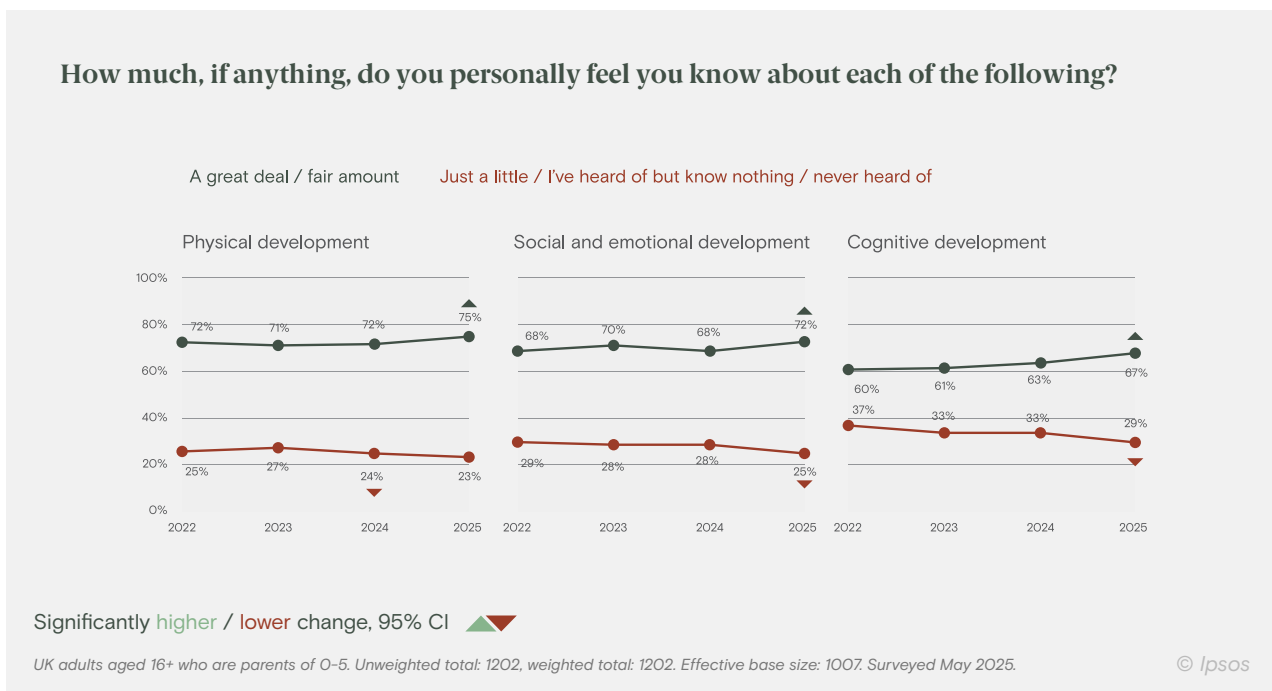
Parents’ knowledge and confidence varies

Parents offered a mixed picture of their knowledge and confidence about supporting their child’s social and emotional development. While the survey suggested that most parents feel knowledgeable and confident, conversations with families reveal a more complex reality. Many parents said they know less than they would like about early social and emotional development, and they feel it receives far less attention than other aspects of child development. Their strong emphasis on wanting more information and support indicates that confidence is often fragile. Beneath the surface, many parents are still unsure whether they truly understand what their child needs and how best to support their development.

Parental knowledge is growing

Parents of 0–5s report increasing knowledge of key areas of child development. We have been tracking parents of 0–5s’ reported knowledge of physical, social and emotional, and cognitive development since 2022 and across each area, there has been a statistically significant increase over the past four years. Almost three out of four parents (72%) now report knowing a great deal or a fair amount about children’s social and emotional development (up from 68% in 2022) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Parents of 0–5s self-reported knowledge of different areas of child development



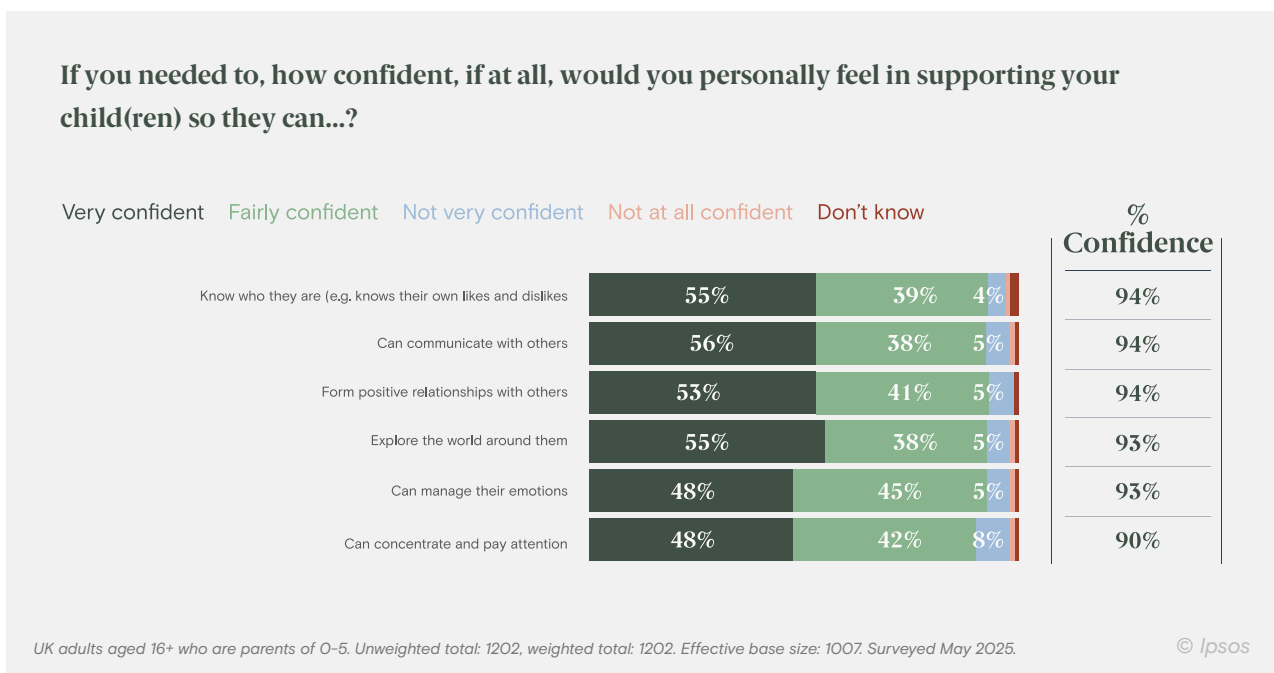
In the qualitative research, parents also demonstrated an understanding of social and emotional development. They spoke, for example, of issues relating to social and emotional development such as managing babies’ crying, managing emotional overwhelm, supporting young children to develop the skills that allow them to interact with others. However, they did not use the term ‘social and emotional development’ but were more likely to talk about their child’s mental health, typical or atypical development, and behavioural concerns.

Parental confidence is mixed

Following a similar pattern to knowledge about social and emotional development, parents reveal a complex picture of their confidence in supporting their child’s social and emotional development.

More than 9 in 10 parents reported feeling very or fairly confident about nurturing all aspects of their child’s social and emotional development, from helping them to communicate and form relationships with others (94%) to supporting their ability to concentrate (90%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Parents’ confidence in supporting different aspects of their child’s social and emotional development



At the same time, the qualitative research revealed that, although parents did not typically describe themselves as lacking confidence, they demonstrated a strong desire for more support, information and advice. Parents emphasised a need for clear developmental milestones and information on how to support their child’s development, and for reassurance from practitioners. They also mentioned the stress caused by inconsistent and conflicting information and advice. Together, this suggested a general lack of confidence in being able to determine what was the right thing to do for their own child and family.

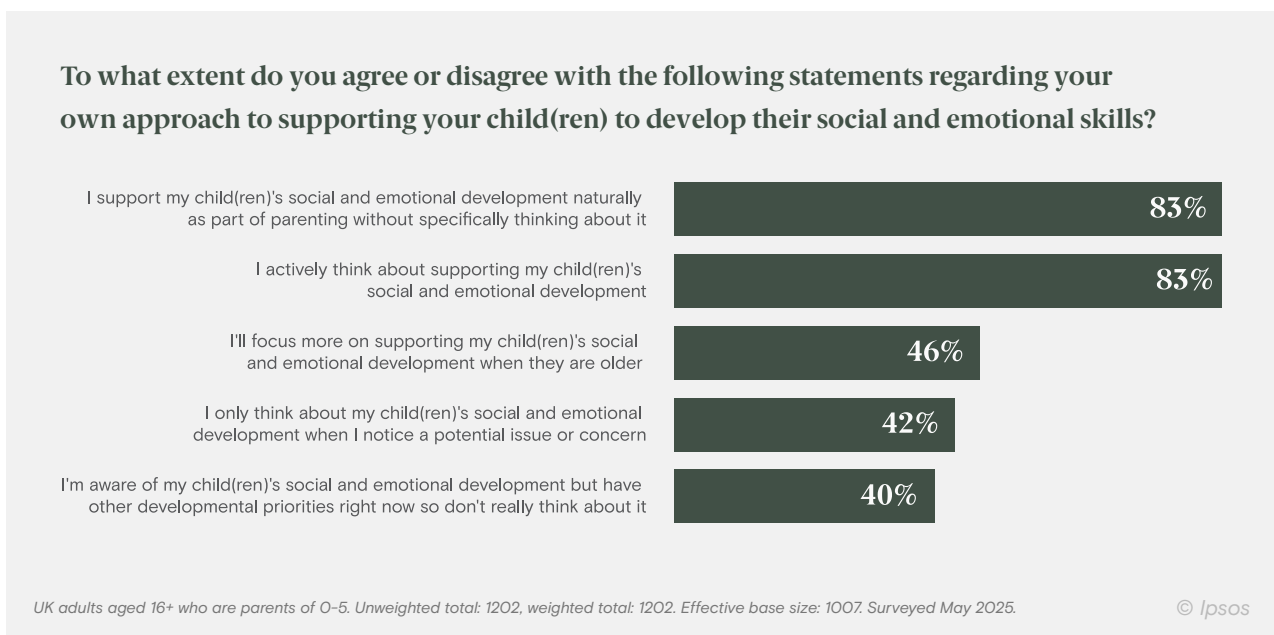
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Parents’ engagement with social and emotional development increases as their child grows

Parents’ focus on social and emotional development in the very early days often appears limited, with many placing greater emphasis on meeting immediate needs during the first weeks and months. This was supported in the qualitative research where parents shared how they typically pay more attention to social and emotional development once their child reaches toddlerhood and associated behaviours such as not wanting to share or struggling to manage strong emotions become more visible. Many only sought guidance when concerns arose, leaving some unsure about what their child needed and how best to respond.

Most parents (83%) indicated they are actively thinking about supporting their child’s social and emotional development. At the same time, many parents indicated they currently had other developmental priorities (40%) and a greater proportion suggested that supporting their child’s social and emotional development was something they would focus on more when their child was older (46%) (Figure 5). This pattern was consistent across parents of children of different ages. This suggests that, while parents generally recognise the importance of social and emotional development, it may not always feel like an immediate priority amid the many practical demands of day-to-day parenting. For some, it may also be perceived as becoming more relevant as children grow older.

Figure 5. Parents of 0-5s’ views on their approach to supporting their child’s social and emotional development



These findings were borne out in the qualitative research where parents indicated they did not immediately prioritise social and emotional development in infancy. In fact, a distinct shift was noted when children reached two years of age, at which point social and emotional development gained importance and visibility in parents' and their child's lives. For example, one parent expressed:

- *"In the first year, you're just trying to survive... you're just trying to get from one day to the next and keep your baby alive and healthy." Mum of 1 year old*

Similarly, in the survey (Figure 5), just under half of parents (42%) reported that they tended to think about their child's social and emotional development mainly when a concern arose. In the qualitative research, parents described this as often occurring around toddlerhood when their child began displaying developmentally typical behaviours, such as finding it difficult to share, struggling to play cooperatively, or becoming overwhelmed by emotions, that were perceived as problems to be addressed. Supporting their child to manage their emotions appeared to be the area parents found most challenging and felt least confident about.

- *"If you're a first-time mum, you wouldn't even know how to encourage it [social and emotional development]." Mum of children aged 4, 3 and 2 years, and 4 months*
- *"My little boy is struggling with a lot of emotional regulation at the moment" Mum of children aged 5, 3 and 2*
- *"He's not sharing, and he's hitting kids at nursery." Mum of children aged 5 and 3*

Some parents reflected that, in their experience, social and emotional development was not always felt to be a prominent focus in their interactions with early years practitioners. In reality, many health visiting and family hub services consistently address these issues with families, and many parents are receiving this information. Differences in parents' experiences may therefore reflect variation in how information is introduced, framed or recognised, as well as when it feels most relevant to families. Parents may not always encounter the term 'social and emotional development' explicitly, or they may not connect it with their day-to-day experiences of their child's behaviour and development. Equally, in those early months and even years, when attention is understandably focussed on a baby's immediate physical needs, information about social and emotional development may not feel salient at this point in their child's life.

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Parents want information, advice and support they can trust

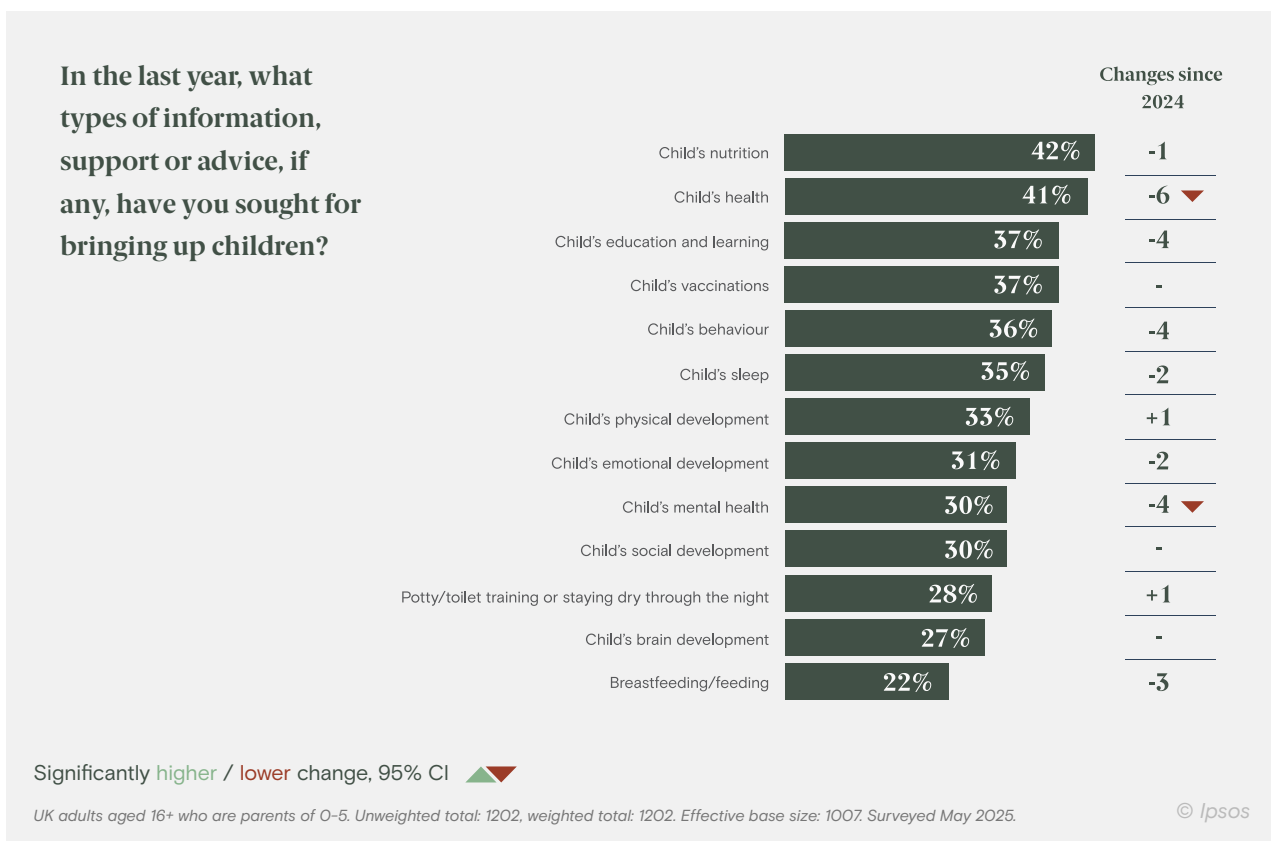
Parents told us that they want clear information and support to help them nurture their child’s early development. While they draw on a wide range of sources, parents are most likely to trust and act on guidance from formal services such as the NHS and early education settings. In this section, we explore how parents seek help: the types of information they look for, which sources feel reliable and usable, and how they prefer support to be offered. Together, these insights highlight factors that can make guidance and support easier to access and more meaningful for families.

Parents consistently seek information, advice and support

Parents’ patterns of seeking information, advice, and support about raising their child have remained largely consistent in recent years. Almost 9 in 10 parents (87%) said they have sought information, advice and support in the past year and this proportion has remained relatively stable since 2022. Whilst interest in specific topics has fluctuated slightly year on year, these differences have not always been statistically significant (see Figure 6).

Within this broader pattern, the proportion of parents who have looked for information about social and emotional development – or related topics such as a child’s behaviour – has also remained stable at around one in three (30% for social development, 31% for emotional development, and 36% for children’s behaviour). Parents are typically less likely to seek information about their child’s social and emotional development compared with topics such as nutrition, health and education (Figure 6).

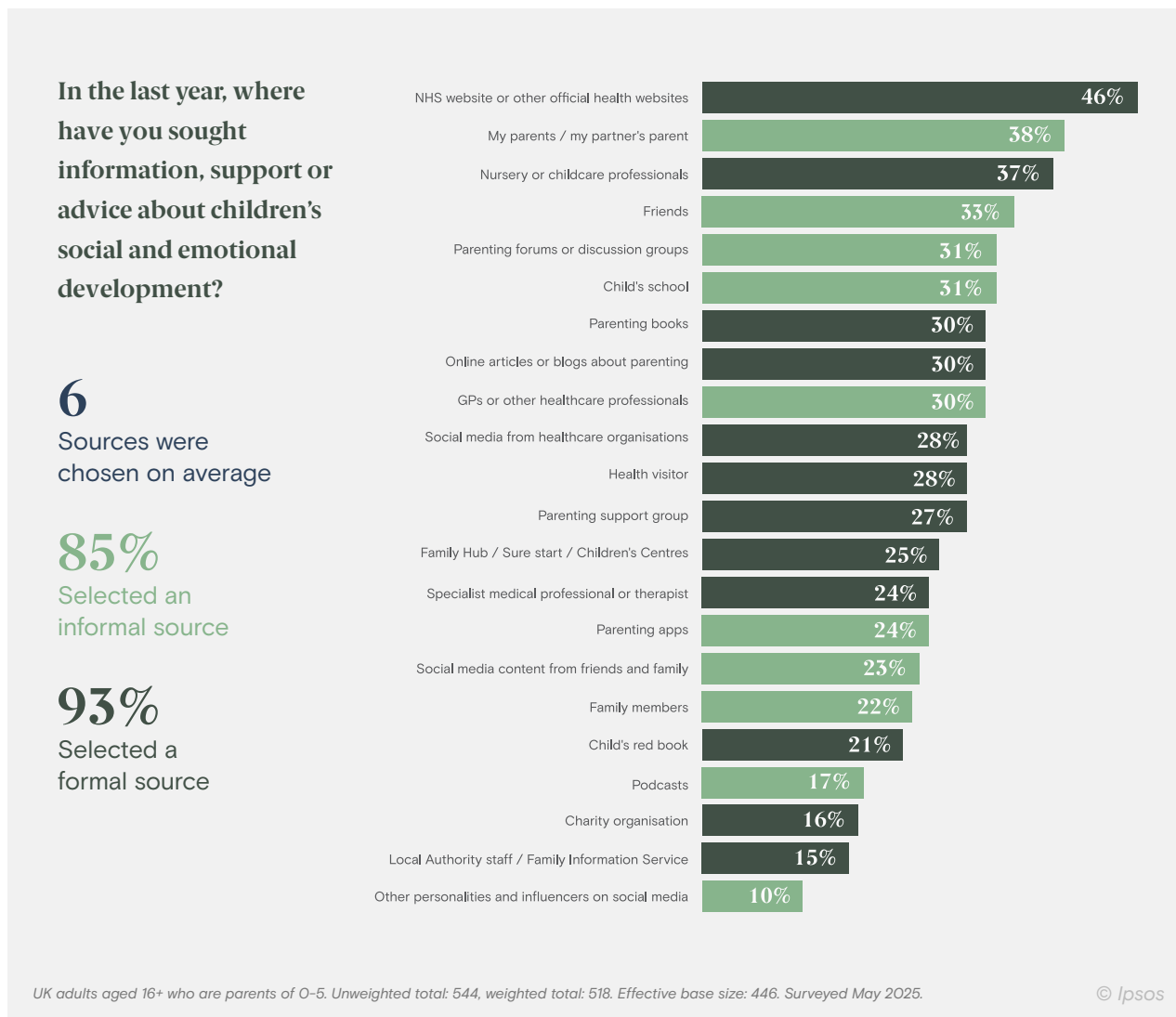
Figure 6. Proportion of parents seeking information, advice or support for bringing up their child in the last year



● **Parents seek support from a range of sources**

Parents draw on a wide range of sources of information, advice and support, with the survey indicating that, on average, parents seek support from six sources (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Proportion of parents accessing formal and informal sources of information, advice and support



Survey findings also revealed a preference for formal sources, i.e. from practitioners or service-based organisations¹. Overall, 94% of parents reported using at least one formal source of information, advice and support, whilst 83% turned to an informal source, such as family and friends. The NHS website was, by a considerable lead, the most frequently accessed source, with 46% of parents using it, and this has remained consistent with previous years². Early years settings and schools also ranked highly among formal sources (37% and 36%, respectively). In contrast, the most common informal source was the parent’s own or their partner’s parents, cited by 38% of parents of under 5s.

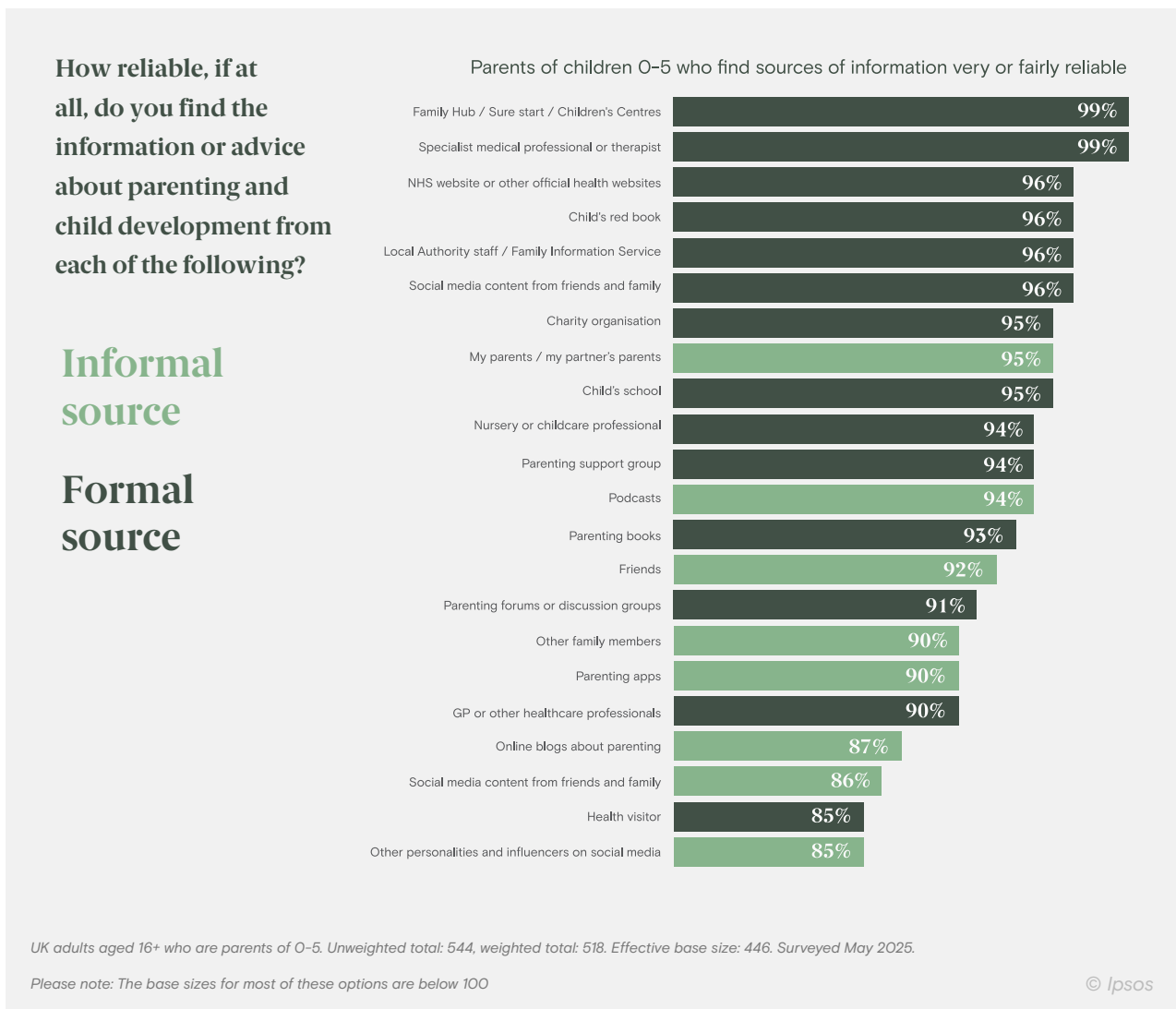
¹For the purposes of this paper, sources such as blogs, apps and podcasts are categorised as “informal” in contrast to practitioner or service-based provision. However, some of these platforms are produced or curated by qualified practitioners. The distinction therefore reflects mode of delivery and governance rather than solely expertise.

²Please note that in previous years, the survey only asked about ‘the NHS’ but this was expanded to ‘the NHS and other official health websites so is not directly comparable.

● **Parents find formal information sources more reliable and usable**

Parents reported accessing a wide range of information and advice sources (Figure 7), and most of those they used were perceived as reliable: for every source rated, at least 85% of parents described it as fairly or very reliable (Figure 8). While this shows that parents draw on a diverse mix of support and tend to trust what they use, the sources they viewed as most reliable were predominantly formal or statutory – such as Children’s Centres, NHS or other medical websites and specialists, and early years educators or schools (Figure 8).

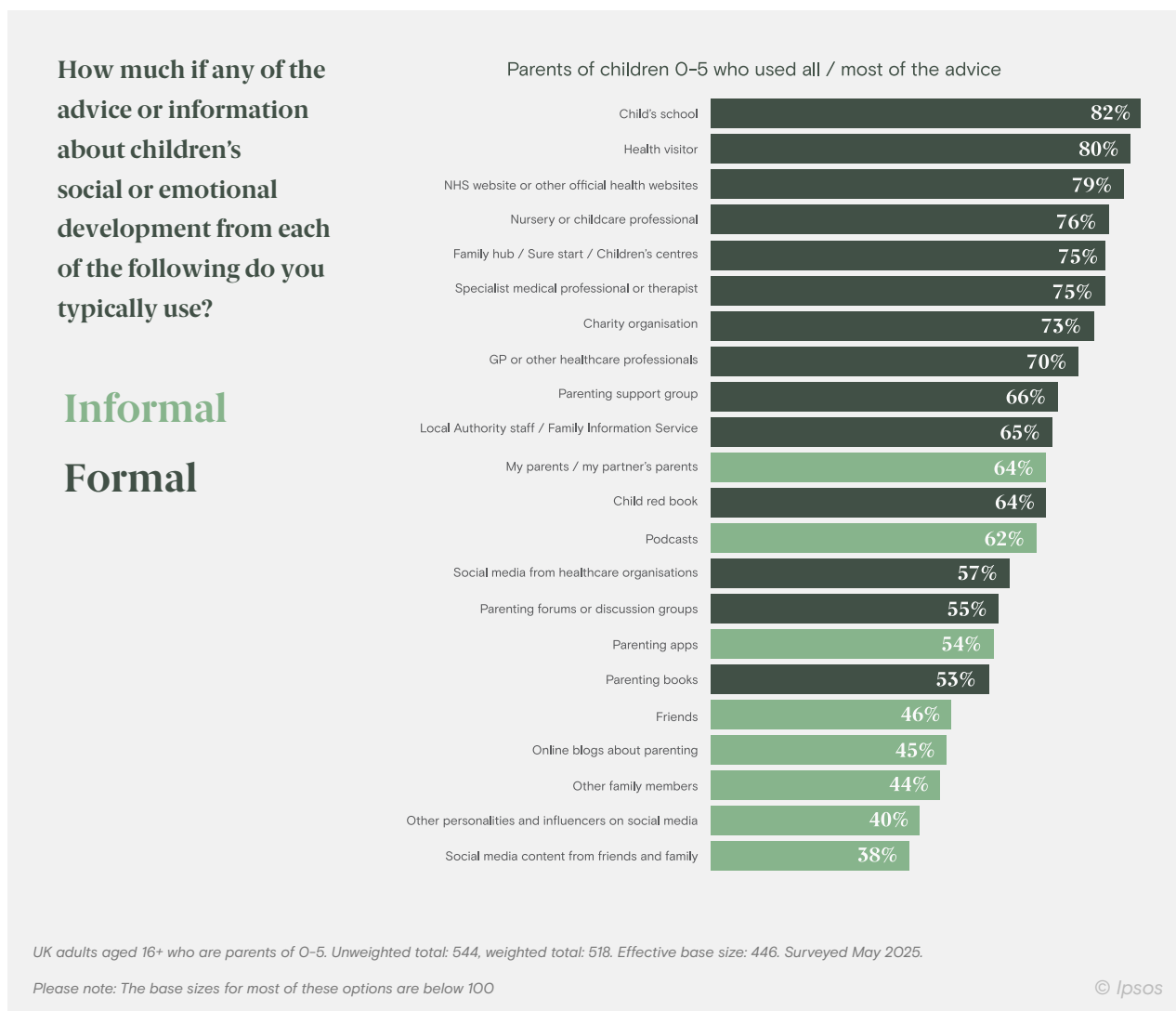
Figure 8. Parents’ perception of the reliability of different sources of support



Health visitors were perceived positively – with 85% of parents reporting them to provide reliable information and advice about parenting and child development – although many other sources of advice and support ranked highly across the early years. This finding is notable when combined with the data from a follow-up question about the extent to which parents use advice from different sources (see Figure 9). Health visitors were among the sources most commonly used by parents, ranking second overall with 80% of parents reporting they use most or all of the advice received.

Across other sources, the extent which parents reported using the information and advice they received varied considerably. At one end of the spectrum, 82% of parents reported using most or all advice from their child’s school compared with 38% of parents doing so for social media content shared by family members (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Parents use of advice and information from different sources



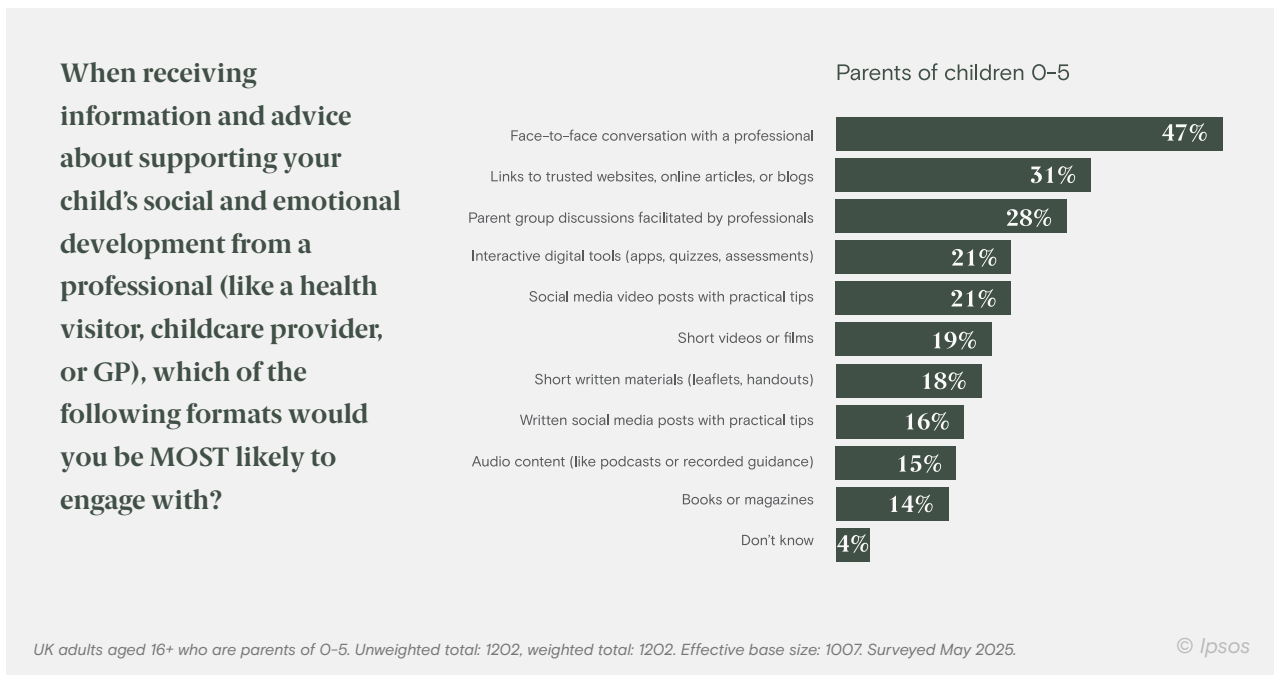
The survey findings reinforce the qualitative research which highlighted that schools, nurseries, and other childcare professionals were rated highly. Parents spoke of turning to nursery staff for observations, insights, and reassurance, commenting that “nursery really helped” with social development or noting that they relied on key workers for support. For those with older children (i.e. school age), teachers were often the “first port of call” for parents.

Taken together, the survey findings suggest a mismatch between the support parents find most reliable and helpful and the support they are most likely to access. While universal services such as GPs and health visitors exist and parents are an important part of the support landscape and are available in all communities, that nature of these services often means contact is often limited in frequency or duration, which can make it harder for parents to access the sustained support they value most. This theme is explored in section 5.

● **Parents want a variety of models of information and advice**

Across all elements of the research, parents had varied preferences for the format of support. In the survey, the most commonly preferred format was a face-to-face conversation with a professional (47%) followed by links to trusted websites (31%) and practitioner-led parenting groups (28%) (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Parents preferred formats for information and advice about social and emotional development



In the qualitative research, parents highlighted the particular value of in person interactions with practitioners: face-to-face conversations were seen as fundamental for building meaningful trusting relationships, and for giving parents the space to fully explain what is going on with the baby and with them. Parents also noted that digital interactions with practitioners did not allow for the same level of active listening or empathy that helped them to feel seen and understood.

- *“I wouldn’t class online as support.” Mum of children aged 5 and 2 years, and 18 months*
- *“Phone or WhatsApp messages...don’t even mean much.” Mum of children aged 2 years and 5 months*

At a time when parents are balancing an increasing number of priorities and often feeling more isolated from even family, friends and peers, they were clear about the benefits of improved access to formal support systems. Ensuring early childhood practitioners have the knowledge, skills and capacity to meet and spend time with parents – in ways that allows for human connection – is vital. While many practitioners already provide highly skilled and compassionate support, ensuring this level of connection is consistently available to all parents remains important. This kind of support will go a long way in helping parents to feel more supported and will ultimately contribute towards improved outcomes for babies, young children and families.

5

When parents seek help, support can be hard to find

Parents often seek information and support about social and emotional development in response to concerns about possible behavioural or development difficulties. Yet navigating the range of available information and advice can feel complex and overwhelming, and is being exacerbated by increased online content. As a result, parents in our research consistently expressed a desire for authoritative, clearly communicated information that helps them make confident, well-informed decisions. In the qualitative research, many parents described being unsure about which advice to follow or where to turn for further support. Even when they trust the practitioners they see, contact often feels too infrequent to meet their needs. This uncertainty, coupled with concerns about unreliable or contradictory advice from peers or online, drives parents' desire for high-quality, evidence-based information from trusted sources, rather than "some random mum" on social media.

• Parents often seek help in reaction to social and emotional behavioural challenges

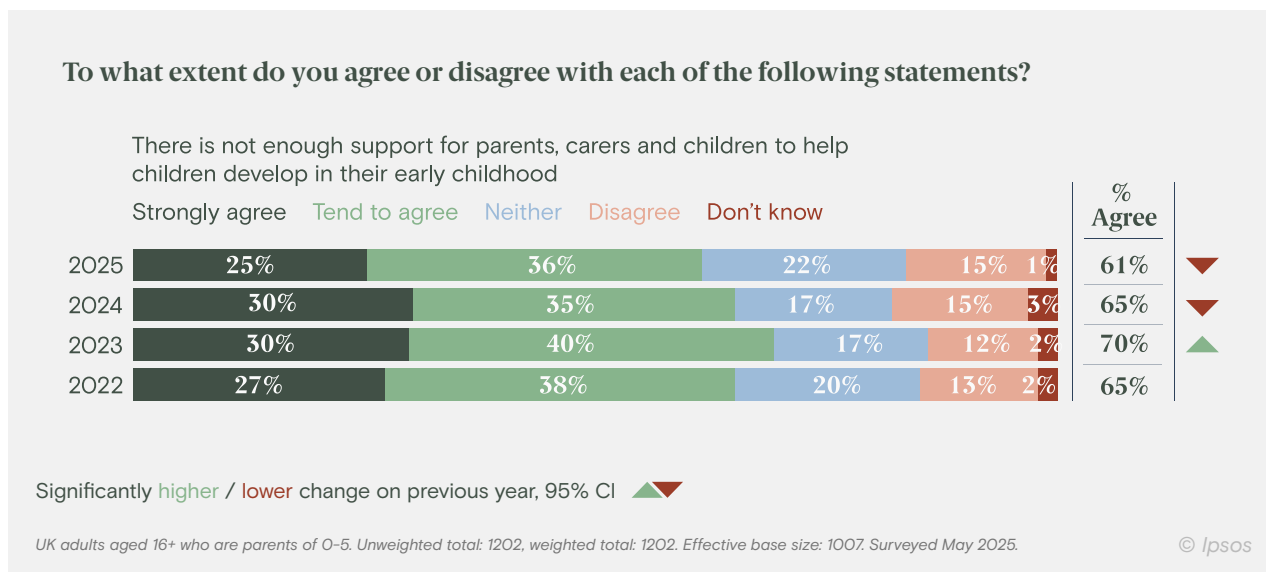
As set out in section 3, parents typically start to engage with social and emotional development as their child reaches toddlerhood (around the age of 2 years). Conversations with parents highlighted that help-seeking at this stage was often in response to specific challenges, – “targeting if something is wrong.” Many parents felt they were “fighting fires rather than preventing them” and expressed a desire to receive information earlier, ideally before challenges arise. However, a key barrier is that parents often “don’t know what they don’t know” and are focused on managing the immediate demands of everyday parenting rather than preparing for what may come next.

• Parents find it hard to get formal support they need

Parents reported that support in pregnancy and the first weeks after birth can be excellent, being described by some as “amazing” and “handed to you”. Beyond the newborn stage, however, many felt that opportunities to connect with health professionals become less frequent. Parents commented on the gap between interactions, particularly the period between the early postnatal visits and the 2.5-year review. By this point, parents of toddlers and pre-school children are typically more likely to have contact with early years educators such as childminders or staff in nurseries, but these interactions rarely provide enough time for meaningful conversations.

Survey data reflects this experience; three in five parents of 0–5s (61%) feel there is insufficient support available to families to nurture early development (Figure 11). Although this perception has improved over the past two years, it continues to reflect parents’ day-to-day experience of capacity constraints across the early childhood system.

Figure 11. Parent perception of the levels of support for parents of children aged 0-5



● **Peer advice and support is welcomed, but has its challenges**

At the stage where parents most want advice and support around their child’s social and emotional development, health pathways have typically become more limited and contact with early educators is often brief. As a result, many parents talked of turning elsewhere for guidance. This often involved drawing more heavily on peer networks, creating a complex mix of informal advice and support which parents experienced as helpful, but also inconsistent.

Parents frequently described asking their own parents for advice, though this often introduced new challenges. They noted that advice from parents can feel out of date or out of step with modern child-centred approaches to parenting. There was an observed “gap in philosophy on how to parent,” with one father explaining that concepts like gentle parenting “aren’t something that comes to my 60-year-old parents so I stopped asking them.”

Fellow parents and friends formed another crucial source of informal support. Parents routinely spoke with peers or sought advice from online forums and parent-focused social media accounts, on everything from navigating daily routines to dealing with meltdowns. WhatsApp groups were often described as “a safe space” among likeminded parents. These conversations offered emotional reassurance and sometimes practical support. At the same time, parents reported that such spaces could result in unhelpful comparisons between children, sometimes increasing anxiety. For example, one parent talked about feeling anxiety when she saw how other children are developing: “You just look at other kids as well... I think she’s doing well.”

- **Online information is accessible, but can be confusing**

In the absence of formal support and feeling as though they have been left to “find out everything for yourself” about crucial aspects of child development, many parents frequently spoke of turning to the internet as their primary source of information about social and emotional development. The digital world allows constant access to content: parents scroll through Instagram and TikTok, search Google or ask ChatGPT, and participate in public online forums for specific advice on challenges or broader information related to parenting approaches and brain development.

- *“I would look online... Instagram or TikTok, or talking to other parents. How do they deal with it?” Mum of children aged 4 years and 9 months*

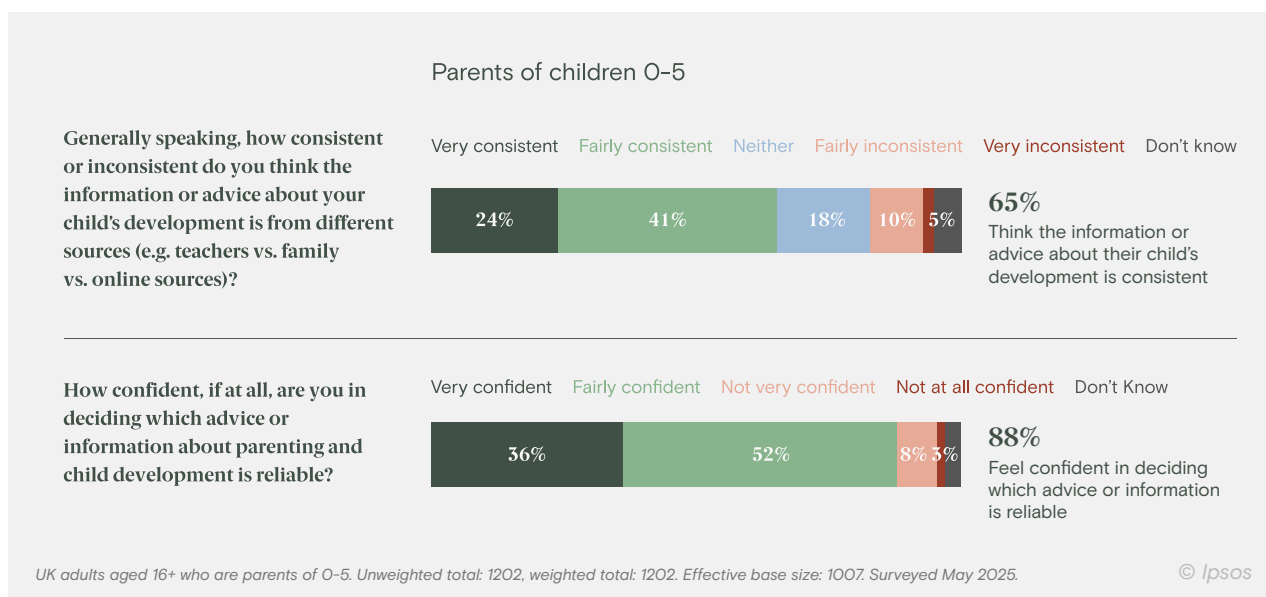
The internet enables parents to locate very specific information relevant to their own situation and to hear from others parenting similar experiences. However, parents also described the downsides: the sheer volume of information can quickly become overwhelming. Some noted conflicting messages, for example how “five influencers can be saying different things” on the same topic. Coupled with a perceived lack of quality control, parents found it difficult to “filter through the noise” or to “trust their instincts”. At best, the inconsistent information leaves parents feeling confused and overwhelmed; at worst, it adds to the anxiety and stress that many associate with caring for a baby or young child:

- *“The worries and anxiety and pressure from reading articles or seeing things on TikTok is a lot. All the information online is overwhelming, it made me feel like I was doing a bad job.” Mum of 10 month old*

- **The challenge of accessing consistent information, advice and support**

Overall, the research made clear that parents struggle to find consistent information and advice on parenting. This was reflected in the survey where only one in four (24%) felt the information they receive is very consistent, while a further four in ten (41%) describe it as fairly consistent (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Parents’ perceptions of i) the consistency of information they receive about child development and ii) their confidence in ascertaining the reliability of information and advice about child development



This finding was echoed in the qualitative research, where parents described inconsistencies not only between online influencers they follow, but across all the sources they encountered. Many struggled to reconcile information from practitioners with what they heard from friends or family members. These mixed messages created ongoing uncertainty and confusion, and in some cases began to erode trust in all sources of information, leaving parents unsure when and how to act.

- “[At nursery] they said he’s showing signs of autism. But my mum is saying boys will be boys. I don’t know who to trust...I wish there was somewhere I could check if there’s something I need to worry about.” *Mum of children aged 5 and 3*

In the survey, parents reported feeling very or fairly confident (36% and 52%, respectively) in their ability to judge whether information is reliable. Some parents in the qualitative research expressed similar confidence, noting they instinctively trusted established sources like the NHS over content on Instagram. However, others talked about anxiously cross-referencing advice from social media posts with official websites, becoming caught in a cycle that fuelled further anxiety and decision-making paralysis.

Finally, parents highlighted that navigating this increasingly complex information environment is made harder by wider pressures – economic strain, competing demands on their time, and the ongoing “mental load” of parenting. Parents spoke of feeling trapped on a “continuous hamster wheel,” overwhelmed by the volume of information and trying to make the right decision for their child or family.

6

Parents want information and support that is relevant to them

Many parents seek information and support about their baby and child's development. With increasing interest in early social and emotional development – awareness of signs of atypical behaviour increases – more parents are seeking information that feels tailored to their individual child. While professional sources remain the most trusted, parents often turn to other parents or online content to find more personalised guidance that reflects their child's specific needs, particularly when time with practitioners is limited. This section highlights that meeting this need for personalised support requires a highly knowledgeable early childhood workforce that understands babies, children and families within the context of their wider lives.

• Parents ask that practitioners understand their individual child and family

As highlighted in our survey, parents tend to gravitate towards formal sources of information and support, which they view as reliable and trustworthy (see Section 4). However, parents also told us that one reason they often seek informal advice from other parents or online was a desire for guidance that feels specific to their own child, their behaviour, and their needs.

A key issue raised in the qualitative research was how parents value the opportunity to talk with early years educators about their child and family life. However, brief appointments and busy drop-off and pick-up times can sometimes make these conversations difficult to have in depth. As a result, the support they receive can feel general rather than tailored. In contrast, parents described being able to search extensively online and find examples of children whose behaviour closely mirrors their own child's, along with numerous strategies other parents have tried. Parents implied that this level of specificity was often challenging for practitioners to match in routine interactions, even when they know the child well.

This dynamic highlights an important point for practice. Parents value practitioner expertise in early childhood development, yet often turn to online sources because they appear to offer more personalised content. At the same time, they remain cautious about solely relying on online sources of information and frequently cross-reference what they find with trusted formal sources such as the NHS website or educators in nurseries or schools.

All of this underlines a critical requirement: practitioners need the time, capacity and a supportive environment to build relationships with babies, children and families, so they can understand the wider context and tailor their advice and support accordingly. Without this, the gap between generic guidance and the personalised support parents seek will persist.

- **Practitioner knowledge of typical and atypical development is increasingly important to parents**

One of the most acute needs parents described was access to more responsive advice and guidance when they are worried about potential behavioural or developmental difficulties. Parents want contact with early childhood practitioners who can identify developmental needs early, and help them to understand what is typical and what might warrant assessment or support.

- *“I wish someone would tell me whether [his behaviour] is related to neurodivergence or whether you should just sit it out.” Mum of children aged 5, 3 and 2*

There has been a significant increase in awareness of atypical development in recent years, and parents are increasingly alert to signs that may indicate autism, ADHD, and other neurodevelopment differences. Many of these signs – such as challenges with social interaction, communication, and emotional regulation – are closely associated with early social and emotional development, making early years and school educators critical observers.

Parents often shared how they valued the role of early years educators in supporting their child’s development. At the same time, some described occasions where observations about behaviour – for example when a child might be “showing signs of autism” – were shared without enough context to help them fully understand what this might mean. In instances where these comments conflicted with other perspectives, such as those of other practitioners or family members, parents were left uncertain about how seriously to take them. These experiences underline the need for consistent, reliable guidance from practitioners who have strong knowledge of child development, and the time to understand each child and their wider context.

- **Parents want professionals who understand their family’s cultural context**

Parents also told us that they value professionals who recognise and respect the cultural background that shapes their family life. This is especially important for parents from ethnic minority communities or those who have grown up in different cultural contexts, where cultural norms influenced their approach to parenting.

- *“Our parents didn’t understand nurturing to be successful in this country... I’ve got multicultural friends now, but it took me 12 years to do that. I want my kids to be confident in different spaces.” Mum of children aged 6 years and 8 months*
- *“I’m the first generation to be British-born...I didn’t want [my children] to miss out... I’ve brought them up to break cultural expectations.” Mum of 5 year old*

Parents described how cultural expectations can act as barriers. One parent from a Caribbean background spoke of pressure “to be strong and not complain,” which made it hard to open up to family, and highlighted the importance of finding support from others with shared cultural understanding.

- *“The understanding in other cultures and races makes a huge difference. My therapist is black, and I don’t have to over explain things to her.” Mum of 2 year old*

Overall, parents appreciated practitioners who helped them feel understood and offered support that reflected their lived experience of being a parent.

● **Parents need support that sees the whole family context**

Early social and emotional development is nurtured through the relationships that babies and children have with those around them – especially their parents and caregivers. When parents are stretched for time and resources, their capacity to support their child’s emotional regulation is diminished. As such, for practitioners this often means that supporting babies and children, starts with supporting the adults who care for them.

In the qualitative research, many parents described how financial pressures, changing working patterns, and the rising expectations placed on parents can create a sense of being “completely overwhelmed”. They spoke about juggling paid work with caring responsibilities “in between meetings”, making difficult decisions about childcare and managing on limited time. For some, these pressures were compounded by traumatic birth experiences, limited sources of support, leaving parents feeling they had “no day off” or that “no one explained” what to expect in the early days. Several parents reflected that, over time, these cumulative pressures contributed to, or intensified mental health difficulties, with some recognising in hindsight that their mental health had “plummeted” during the first few years of their baby’s life or that they had experienced challenges they did not fully understand at the time.

Single parents highlighted the particular challenges of balancing work and childcare, noting how understanding and flexibility from early childhood care and education settings made a meaningful difference. Fathers also reflected on their experiences of seeking support, with one dad explicitly stating, “dads are forgotten too”. He described how he sought connection with others, including through dads-only groups and online communities.

Parents were clear that they value practitioners who recognise their individual circumstances and offer guidance that fits with their everyday realities. When advice is well-aligned to their context, parents feel more confident and supported. When it does not, some said that the guidance could feel difficult to act on and, at times, discouraged further help-seeking. These experiences underline the importance of relationship-based practice, where early years practitioners have the time and resources to build trust, understand families’ lived experiences, and provide tailored advice and support.

Conclusion

The parents we heard from through this project shared a clear picture of the importance they place on their baby or child's social and emotional development, and the complexity of "getting it right" amid the realities of modern family life. Many spoke of wanting more information to help them understand what their child is experiencing and how best to support them, while also struggling to navigate inconsistent advice and mixed messages. Parents are deeply committed and motivated, yet this lack of clarity can leave them feeling unsure and without the reassurance they need.

Across all the experiences, one message came through most strongly: the early childhood workforce plays a pivotal role in shaping parents' confidence and day-to-day experiences. Parents consistently value practitioners who are knowledgeable, who can explain what a child's behaviour might mean, and who can offer clear, grounded guidance. When practitioners can do this consistently, parents feel better equipped to nurture their child's social and emotional development and to respond to challenges before they escalate.

These findings point to a significant opportunity; supporting all early childhood practitioners to develop and share a robust understanding of social and emotional development. Strengthening the shared language, confidence, and clarity that practitioners bring to their work with families can help reduce the uncertainty parents described and ensure that the advice they receive feels consistent, coherent, and grounded as their child grows.

At a time when parents are actively seeking trusted guidance and reassurance, enabling practitioners across the early childhood workforce to offer clear, confident, and consistent support on social and emotional development represents a powerful way to strengthen families' experiences. In doing so, it supports something larger: helping children to build the social and emotional foundations that contribute to a happier, more loving and connected society in the years to come.

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