

Omnibus surveys of parents of 0 to 4 year old children.

Methodology

The National Audit Office commissioned Carrick James Market Research to undertake two national omnibus surveys of parents of 0 to 4 years olds. The first – the pilot survey - took place between 28 November and 16 December 2002. 379 face-to-face interviews were completed across the 75 randomly selected sampling points around Great Britain. The second survey ran from 21 March to 8 April 2003. 524 parents were interviewed from the 45 randomly selected sampling points also around Great Britain. For both surveys the sampling frame was based on statistics from the Office of National Statistics Population Estimates for mid-2000. Table 1 shows a break down of the parents interviewed by age of child and ‘social grade’ of parent.

The pilot survey asked how many hours the respondent's child spent in nursery education or childcare services in a typical week; what kind of financial assistance respondents received if any; what the three most important factors were that helped them to select their provider; what sources of information they looked at about providers; and whether this information helped them to choose their current provider.

As a result of piloting, the second survey used amended questions and, in addition, asked parents whose children stayed at home or with family, why their child did not attend a childcare or early years settings; and, also of those parents using childcare or early years provision, what they believed their child gained most from attending the setting. The results presented here only include both surveys where identical questions were asked.

Table 1: The sample for each omnibus

	By age of child						By social grade of parents				
	0-12 mths	1 year	2 year	3 year	4 year	Total	AB	C1	C2	DE	Total
Omnibus 1	83 (22)	69 (18)	80 (21)	83 (22)	64 (17)	379	54 (14)	107 (28)	109 (29)	103 (27)	373
Omnibus 2	116 (22)	110 (21)	100 (19)	108 (21)	90 (17)	524	71 (14)	122 (23)	139 (27)	175 (33)	507

() percentages

Summary of findings

~ Accessibility / availability

- Few parents reported that lack of available provision prevented them from using childcare. However, some 14 per cent of parents said the setting they used was the only one available locally, suggesting there was restricted choice, but very few said a lack of suitable settings prevented them using childcare. (Paragraphs 8 and 2.16 of the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report)
- 77 per cent of parents said that information they accessed helped them to decide which provide to choose. (Paragraph 2.14)

~ Cost and affordability

- One fifth of parents told us that cost was an important factor, but location, reputation, the quality of staff and facilities and the availability of provision at suitable hours were more important. Very few parents of children who did not use early years provision said this was because it was too expensive. The most common reasons were that the child was too young or that they preferred to look after them at home. (Paragraph 13)
- Families from social grades D and E were much less likely to use formal childcares of all kinds, especially paid childminders. However, state support for childcare costs was also having an impact. Using these grades as a proxy for low income, this suggests that some 65 per cent of parents with low incomes who used early years

provision said they got it free or that the state paid for it. On the other hand, 20 per cent of low income parents said they received no financial assistance and paid all costs. (Paragraph 3.5)

- Only a small proportion of parents identified cost as one of the three most important factors in their choice of nursery or childcare provider. (Paragraph 3.13 and figure 20)
- In the second omnibus survey, 22 per cent of parents said cost was a factor that helped them to select their childcare provider. However, when asked to select the three most important influencing factors, only 4 per cent mentioned cost. (Paragraph 3.13)

~ Reasons for not using early years or childcare providers

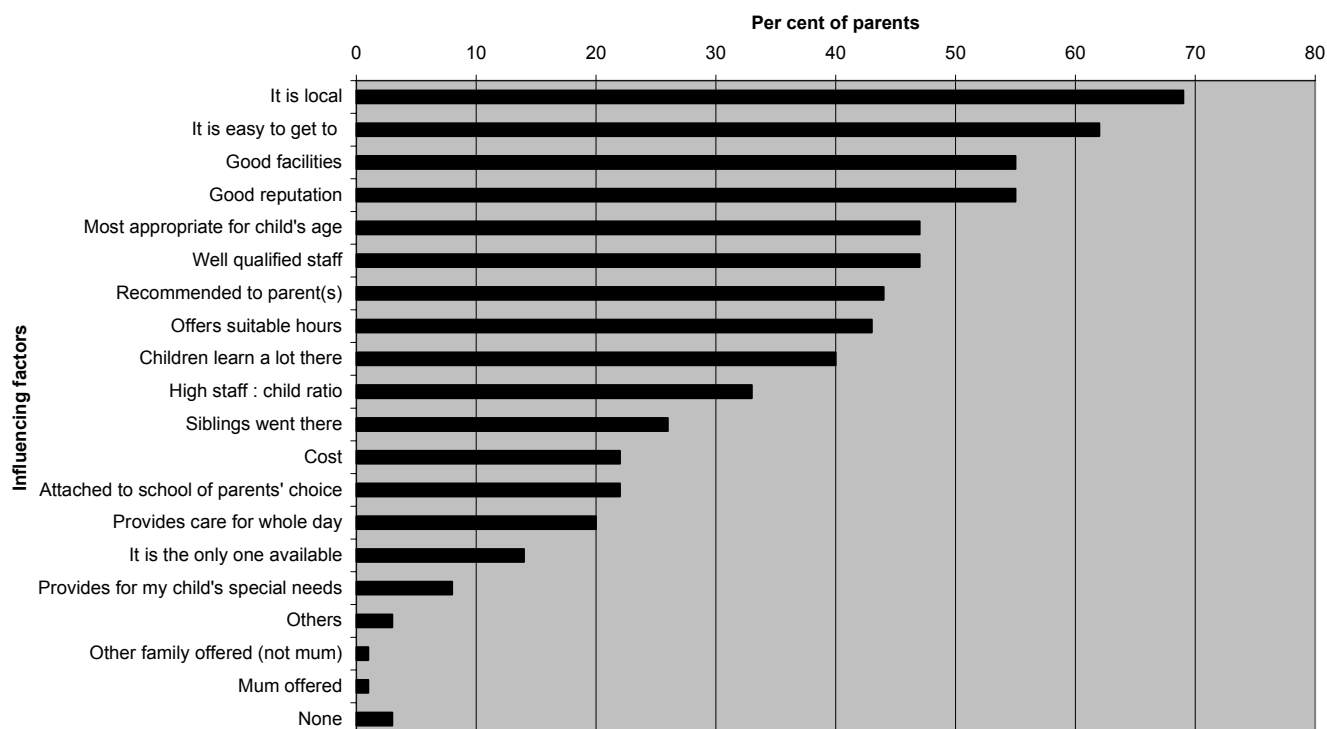
- 57 per cent of parents of pre-school children regularly used formal early years provision, while 30 per cent of parents did not use any form of childcare regularly. (Paragraph 2.17)
- Of the 177 parents in our second omnibus survey *not* using nursery, early years or another childcare setting, 2 per cent said it was because it was too expensive, which may be indicative of government assistance with costs. Instead, 32 per cent of parents not using provision felt their child was too young for the local provider; and 24 per cent preferred to look after them at home. Ten per cent also said that the child was not yet developed enough to benefit from attendance (Paragraph 3.15).

Key data

~ Accessibility and availability of provision

Few parents reported that lack of available provision prevented them from using childcare. However, as reported in paragraphs 8 and 2.16 of our report, 14 per cent of parents stated in our second survey that a key factor in their selection of provider was that there was only one available (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Factors helping parents select current childcare provider (based on showcard prompt)



Fifty percent of parents in survey 1 and thirty per cent in survey 2 did *not* send their child to a childcare, nursery or early years setting. This is broken down in **Table 2** according to the age of the child.

Table 2: Percentage of parents not using childcare or other settings		
Age of child	Omnibus 1	Omnibus 2
0-12 months	88	66
1 year	77	41
2 year	54	29
3 year	16	12
4 year	17	3
All ages	50	30

Survey 2 went on to ask parents why their child did not attend a childcare, nursery or other early years setting. The main reason for all children aged 0 to 4 not attending a setting was that parents felt they were too young for the local provider (32 per cent). This was the main reason for parents of children aged 0 to 12 months and for parents of one year old children. However, most parents of two and three year old children stated the reason was that they preferred to look after them at home, but the fact they were too young was also an important factor (**See Table 3**).

Lack of available places with local providers was only a reason for not attending a setting in the North of England & Scotland (3 per cent of parents). No parents reported this reason in the other regions. There was generally a higher percentage of parents in the North and Scotland whose children did not attend a childcare or other setting. This represented 36 per cent, compared 32 per cent of children in the Midlands, 31 per cent in London and the South East, and 32 per cent in Wales and the West of England.

Table 3: Reasons why children do not attend setting, by age				
Age of child	Main reason for child not attending	%	Second reason for child not attending	%
0-12 months	Too young	31	Prefer at home	22
1 year	Too young	47	Prefer at home	18
2 year	Prefer at home	30	Too young	21
3 year	Prefer at home	47	Too young	30

Lack of information on childcare can limit parents' choice of suitable providers (see paragraph 2.13 in the report). In omnibus 2 we asked parents what the main sources of information they accessed were on childcare, nursery or early years providers. The four main source used by parents were:

Friends, family and neighbours	45%
Word of mouth	28%
Local Authority, Local Council or Social Services	19%
Other children already use the provider	15%

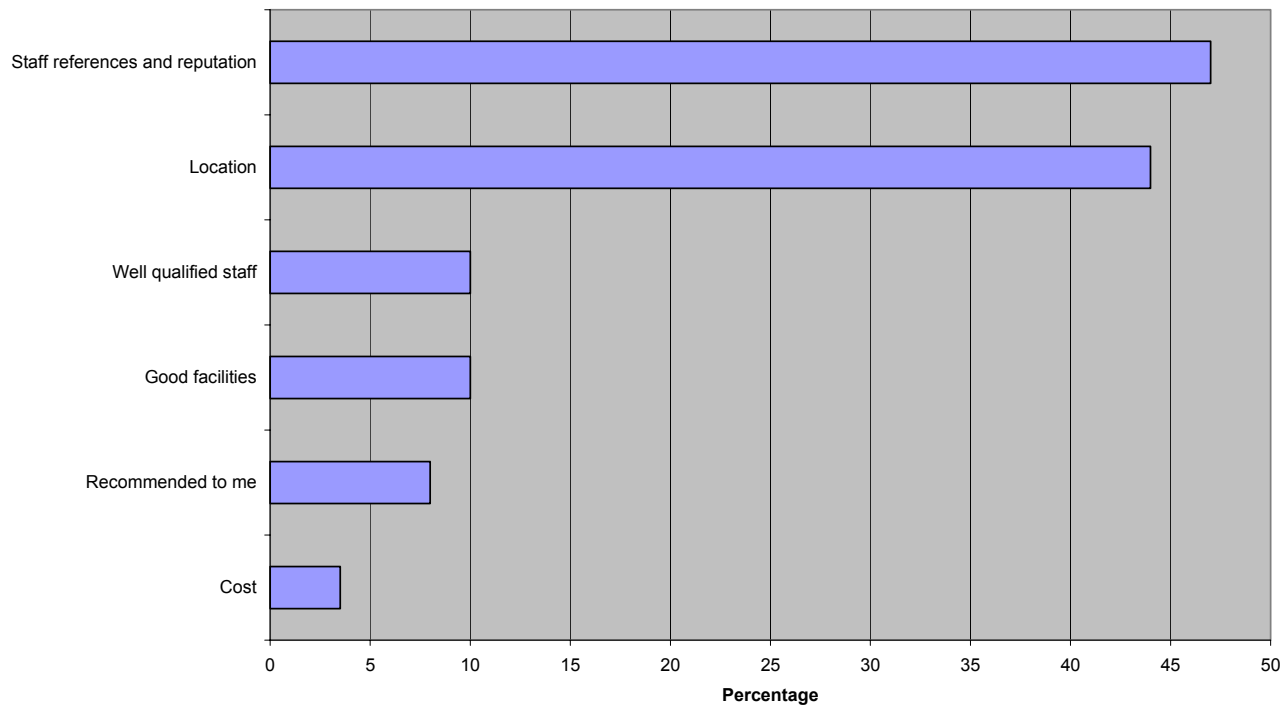
Only 4 per cent of parents stated that advertising was a source and only 2 per cent of parents said they used the internet to find information about local childcare, nursery or early years providers.

When asked whether the information they received helped them to decide which provider to use, the response on the whole was positive. 37 per cent of parents replied "yes, a lot" and 40 per cent responded "yes, to some extent". Only 8 per cent responded that the information did not help them in their decision.

~ **Cost and affordability**

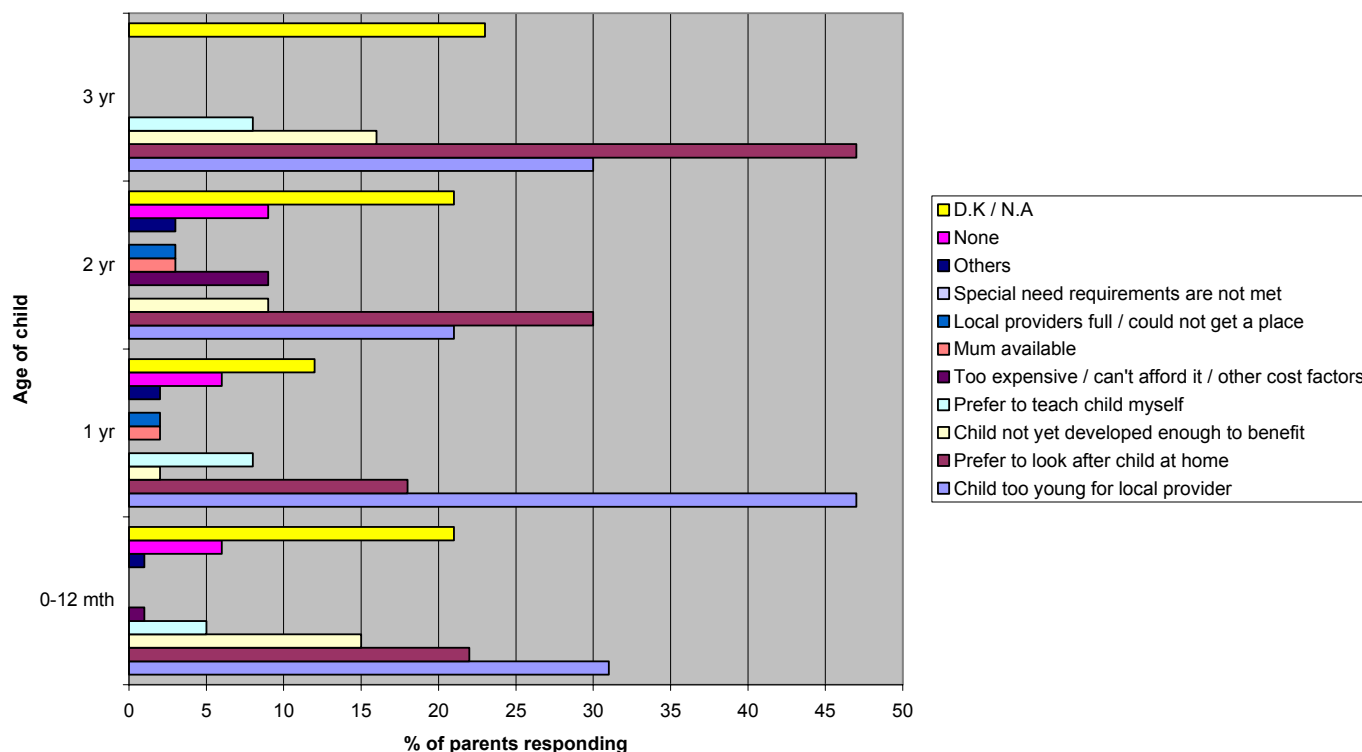
One fifth of parents told us that cost was an important factor influencing parents' selection of childcare provider. However both of our omnibus surveys found that the quality of staff and facilities, the provider being easy to get to, the providers’ reputation, and availability at suitable hours were more important than cost (see figure 2 for the combined results from the two surveys). In both omnibus surveys, only a small proportion of parents identified cost as one of the three most important factors in their choice of nursery or childcare provider. In the second omnibus survey, 22 per cent of parents said cost was a factor that helped them to select their childcare provider. However, when asked to select the three most important influencing factors, only 4 per cent mentioned cost.

Figure 2: The most important factors influencing parents' selection of nursery or childcare providers



Very few parents of children who did not use early years provision said this was because it was too expensive. Instead the most common reasons were that the child was too young or that they preferred to look after them at home (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Main reasons why child does not attend childcare, by age of child (up to 3 years only)



We also found that families in social grades D and E were much less likely to use formal childcare of all kinds, especially paid childminders. However, some 65 per cent of parents in those grades who used early years provision said they got it free or that the state paid for it. On the other hand, we found that 20 per cent still said they received no financial assistance and paid all costs (see figure 4).

One third of all parents interviewed reported that they received no financial assistance and covered the costs of their childcare provision in full. Almost a quarter of parents of children aged 0 to 12 months relied upon family or friends to look after their children at no cost, although this does not apply to any parents from social grade AB.

Table 4: Types of financial assistance, by age of child						
Type of financial assistance, if any (survey 2)	Total %	Age of child				
		0-12 mths	1 yr	2 yr	3 yr	4 yr
No financial assistance, parents cover costs	34	31	35	55	32	21
None, childcare is free	27	8	20	10	32	45
State / government pays	20	5	10	10	24	32
None, family or friends look after children	6	23	8	9	1	1
Employer pays part costs	1	3	3	0	0	0
Not applicable, don't use child care	4	5	6	8	2	2
D.K / N.A	11	26	8	9	9	4

Forty per cent of parents (see Table 5) from social grades D and E responded that their childcare was free, compared to 27 per cent of C2's, 22 per cent of C1's and 21 per cent AB's.

Table 5: Types of financial assistance, by social grade of parent				
Type of financial assistance, if any	Social grade of parent (%)			
	AB	C1	C2	DE
No financial assistance, parents cover costs	51	36	37	20
None, childcare is free	21	22	27	40
State / government pays	9	23	14	26
None, family or friends look after children	0	10	6	6
Employer pays part costs	3	1	0	0
Not applicable, don't use child care	5	3	6	3
D.K / N.A	12	10	9	8

~ On what children gain most from attending childcare, nursery or early years places

Forty three per cent of parents (see Figure 4), when asked what their child gains most from attending a childcare, nursery or early years place, commented upon their child's interaction with other children. This factor was remarked upon by far the most following an open-ended question (ie. no prompts were given). 17 per cent of parents also remarked that 'socialising' was something their children gained most, which may be grouped alongside the previous response (– ie. interaction). Overall 61 per cent of parents mentioned socialising of some kind.

18 per cent of all parents whose children attended a childcare or other setting, responded that developing skills and learning were important gains for their children and a further 12 per cent commented on 'basic education'.

Figure 4: What parents think child gains most from attending childcare, nursery or early education place

