

Nurseries forced to support families in poverty through coronavirus crisis, research shows

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Nursery staff are having to provide food and help families with benefit claims as the coronavirus pandemic impacts parents with young children, according to new research by the University of Sheffield and Early Education, an early years providers' membership body.

Early Education surveyed 123 providers, mainly maintained nursery schools, in April 2020. It found that staff were concerned about the most [vulnerable children](#) and families, as many have stopped going to nursery or fallen out of touch with providers altogether, despite being eligible to keep attending. Nursery workers were also worried about families who have faced challenges such as loss of employment, financial difficulties or bereavement, and may not have been picked up as newly vulnerable by [local authorities](#).

Providers reported that younger children not yet eligible for free school meals have not had the same safety net as older pupils, despite living in similar circumstances. With some parents struggling to access Universal Credit, waiting for payments to arrive, or having no recourse to [public funds](#), nurseries have sought to provide meals from [food banks](#) or paid for by workers.

A previous survey of 92 providers was conducted by Early Education and the University of Sheffield in May 2019 in response to growing concerns from Early Education members about children and their

families living in poverty. It found that 55 percent of respondents were providing families with free food, clothing, washing facilities and other practical support and services. One in three providers reported paying for school meals from school budgets, while 31 percent had staff qualified to dispense food bank vouchers.

Families were supported to make benefit claims by 70 percent of nurseries, while 34 percent gave practical support with housing and provided essential furniture such as beds for children. Some respondents highlighted that the reduction in local and nationally funded public services—including housing, the NHS and social services—was contributing to the effects of poverty.

Professor Cathy Nutbrown, Professor of Education at the University of Sheffield and President of Early Education, said: "The pandemic has highlighted the critical role that early years settings and services play in supporting families and their young children. But it also raises questions about why they are being asked to step in and stop families from falling through the cracks in the welfare state. We know this is happening throughout the [education](#) sector.

"Early years providers and schools must be properly resourced to continue supporting our most vulnerable children, and the government needs to take a stronger role in eradicating poverty, and addressing the reasons why so many families do not have the income they need to give their [children](#) the basics."

Provided by University of Sheffield

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