

# Ensuring Equality in childcare for black and minority ethnic families: a summary paper



## Introduction

A substantial body of evidence points to the positive benefits of childcare and early years education. In spite of multiple developments in childcare policy over recent years, research from Daycare Trust confirms that black and minority ethnic (BME) families are less likely to be accessing good quality childcare which can help support them in overcoming disadvantage and poverty.

This is the final paper from Daycare Trust's Ensuring Equality project, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, which aims to:

- explore the use of childcare services among black and minority ethnic families;
- raise awareness of the specific needs of different ethnic minority families; and
- make the voices of these families heard.

## The Ensuring Equality project

This paper summarises the findings from the research undertaken during the project.<sup>1</sup>

### Reports from the Ensuring Equality project

*Ensuring Equality: black and minority ethnic families' views on childcare* (June 2006) contains two papers, the first draws on a series of focus groups with parents and carers on their experiences of accessing childcare and the gaps in provision. The second paper, by the National Centre for Social Research, includes secondary analysis of the Parents' Childcare Survey series to investigate the take-up of childcare and other related issues.

*Listening to black and minority ethnic parents about childcare* (August 2007) reports on eight focus groups and a small-scale questionnaire with BME parents. The research explored BME families' use of, views on, and needs for childcare.

## Policy developments since 2004

Three over-arching policy developments in recent years encompass the Government's approach to childcare for all parents, including those from BME groups.

### The childcare strategy

The Ten-Year Strategy for childcare in England, published in December 2004, set out the Government's vision of childcare to *"ensure that every child gets the best start in life and to give parents more choice about how to balance work and family life."*<sup>1</sup> The key strategies aimed at delivering this vision are the entitlement to free part-time early years education; wraparound care and extended schools; delivering full daycare for under-threes; developing 3,500 children's centres; and improving the affordability of childcare. The Ten-Year Strategy highlighted the low take-up of childcare among some ethnic minorities communities and outlined the steps local authorities should take in meeting the needs of BME communities.

*The black and minority ethnic childcare workforce* (March 2008) presented findings from a series of focus groups with BME childcare workers on their experiences of and views on providing childcare to families from BME communities.

*Local approaches to ensuring childcare for black and minority ethnic families* (May 2008), examines what is being done at a local level to monitor ethnicity within childcare settings and how this data is used to increase the take-up of childcare by BME families.

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**1. All the reports are available from Daycare Trust. Please contact us for details 020 7840 3350 or visit our website: [www.daycaretrust.org.uk](http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk)**



## The Childcare Act 2006

The Ten-Year Strategy announced that, from 2008, local authorities would have a duty to secure sufficient provision to meet local childcare needs. This country's first ever Childcare Act was passed in July 2006 and sets the legal framework for local authorities in surveying local need, ensuring sufficient childcare places are available locally and raising the quality of services.

The Act places a duty on local authorities to assess the sufficiency of childcare in their area at least every three years. The first of these 'Childcare Sufficiency Assessments' was due for completion prior to April 2008 when the duty to ensure sufficiency came into force. When completed, the assessments may provide for a better understanding of the trends of childcare take-up among various ethnic groups. As there is no legal requirement for local authorities to conduct ethnic analysis however, the strength of the data may vary from area to area.

Section 6 of the Act gives local authorities a new duty of securing sufficient childcare. In relation to ethnicity, it places the following duties on local authorities:

- To work with providers to secure childcare that is suitable for, and inclusive of children at risk of exclusion, such as...children from ethnic minority groups, and refugees and asylum seekers.
- To secure childcare, including out of school care, for older children that is inclusive and that pays particular regard to the needs of children at risk of exclusion. They may place conditions on providers they support to promote childcare that is appropriate and inclusive, such as providing relevant training in equality and diversity issues.

Other sections of the Act relate to the duty to provide information, advice and training to childcare providers and practitioners and also the duty to secure prescribed early years provision for three- and four-year olds.

***For a full analysis of the progress made on the childcare strategy, see [Childcare nation? Progress on the childcare strategy and priorities for the future by Daycare Trust and the National Centre for Social Research.](#)***

## The PSA target

Since the 2004 Spending Review, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have been jointly responsible for a Public Service Agreement (PSA) target to increase the take-up of childcare among disadvantaged groups.

*“As a contribution to reducing the proportion of children living in households where no one is working, by 2008, increase the number of children in lower-income working families using formal childcare by 120,000.”*

The target will be achieved if the number of children in lower-income working families using childcare increases from the 2005 baseline of 615,000 to 735,000 by March 2008. Progress will be assessed using the Parents' Childcare Survey, which is now expected to be published in summer 2008 after some delay.

The PSA target illustrates the Government's commitment to the issues which the Ensuring Equality project is addressing. As BME families are more likely to come from low-income groups, the DCSF has initiated work at both a national and local level to examine means by which these families can be encouraged to use childcare. This has included a national take-up campaign that ran between March and November 2007 and included tailored information for BME families. In addition, DCSF has worked with local authorities to improve the quality of information available to parents and other government departments to raise awareness of issues such as financial support for parents to enable childcare use. A useful report of local initiatives is shortly to be published by the DCSF.<sup>2</sup>

2. Oppenheim, C (2008) *Increasing the take-up of formal childcare among Black and Minority Ethnic Families and families with a disabled child.* (DCSF)

## Use of childcare

*"I think this community we live in needs a lot of stuff like (play buses). That's how I first got started, ten months after I first actually realised Sure Start even existed – that was the first thing I accessed."*

**Pakistani mother, Rotherham**

Childcare use varies substantially between different ethnic groups. The 2006 Ensuring Equality report (analysing the 2004 Parents Childcare Survey<sup>3</sup>) showed that overall, families from ethnic minority groups were less likely to have used childcare (including both formal and informal) over the previous year than white families (74 per cent compared to 88 per cent). But levels of usage varied significantly between different minority ethnic groups with Black Caribbean families having similar levels to white families (84 per cent) whereas this figure drops to 68 per cent for Bangladeshi families. Rates of take up of formal childcare used in the previous week showed Black Caribbean families most likely to have used formal care (54 per cent) compared to just 34 per cent of Bangladeshi families, with the figure for white families standing at 41 per cent.<sup>4</sup> It had been hoped that these figures would be updated for this paper using the 2007 Parents' Childcare Survey. However, delays to the publication date of the survey have prevented this being possible.

Reflecting the quantitative data, the focus groups conducted with parents as part of Ensuring Equality found that there was considerable variety in the use of childcare services. Many of the Black Caribbean parents had used childcare, and all the Black African parents wanted to use childcare. On the other hand, many Bangladeshi parents appeared never to have considered childcare as an option for them and had low levels of awareness of services.

For many BME families, childcare is an option they might not have previously considered and making that first step can be challenging. A very strong finding from the Ensuring Equality focus groups was that many BME parents required outreach work to get them engaged with childcare. New migrants in particular often need reassurance about the quality of childcare and about the potential benefits for themselves and their children. Services such as 'playbuses' and 'stay and play' sessions

were identified by parents as particularly useful. Other appropriate ways of engaging new migrant families with childcare settings – and of increasing their confidence in childcare – may be through free taster sessions, or providing services tailored to the parents' interests, such as English lessons while the child is cared for.

## Experiences of and views on childcare

*"My daughter's the only family I've got – I'm not going to send her to someone I don't trust."*

**Black African mother, Sheffield**

Minority ethnic families are more likely to be living below the poverty line, to have larger families and lower levels of educational qualifications, skills and experience. Consequently children from these families have a higher risk of poor outcomes in the future. A considerable body of evidence has shown the substantial benefits of early years education and care for children – such as improved cognitive and language skills.<sup>5</sup> The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study also highlights that disadvantaged children are likely to benefit significantly from good quality pre-school experiences.<sup>6</sup> Therefore access to, and use of, high quality childcare among ethnic minority families may be effective in helping to improve overall outcomes for these families.

The majority of parents who took part in the Ensuring Equality focus groups felt very positively about the benefits that the right childcare can have for their children and families. Benefits to themselves include the opportunities it provides them to work or study, to attend English classes, and to socialise. Many of the parents emphasised the benefits of childcare for preparing their children for school, giving opportunities to play and to socialise with other children. For those for whom English was not their first language, childcare was seen as an opportunity to learn English. Some parents spoke of the need to convince other family members of the benefits of childcare for the child and blamed the media and government policies for focusing too much on getting mothers into paid work rather than the benefits of childcare for children.





While some parents spoke of negative experiences of childcare, these were generally in reference to one-off events or encounters with individual childcare workers, and did not have long-term impacts on their use of childcare. For the majority of parents the safety and security of their children was their primary concern. Some parents felt reassured by police checks being carried out on staff and others judged the experience, maturity, qualifications and turnover of the workforce as key indicators of quality.

Some parents preferred group care (nurseries) rather than childminders, feeling that it was safer, of higher quality, and more education-based than childminders. This is also reflected in other research with Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers who felt that nurseries have more rigorous procedures and trained staff than childminders.<sup>7</sup> Although some parents in the Ensuring Equality focus groups did feel that childminders could be more appropriate for younger children, particularly those aged under one.

Virtually all parents spoken to agreed that having consistent staff that they could communicate with, trust, and get to know over time is essential in order for them to feel comfortable using childcare.

## Gaps and needs/barriers

*“They are used to having their mother language so it is really a shock when you know someone is talking to them in English and they don’t know a word...when my daughter was here, there were staff who would speak in Urdu...so it was very comfortable for her to settle in.”*

**Pakistani mother, Sheffield**

A literature review published in 2005 highlighted that childcare providers in the UK in the main have a high awareness and responsiveness of cultural issues compared to countries which employ a ‘colour blind’ approach (such as Australia).<sup>8</sup> However, families from BME communities in the UK still encounter numerous barriers to accessing childcare including: accessing information, costs, location of services, as identified by previous research by Daycare Trust.<sup>9</sup> Work by Box et al identified some potential additional barriers such as workforce, communication, language and cultural considerations.<sup>10</sup>

Language continues to be a particularly difficult barrier for some BME communities. Services designed to overcome communication issues, whilst improving, are still variable in many parts of the country: A recent report from Ofsted commented:

*“Support in children’s centres for children from minority ethnic groups was sometimes patchy, particularly for children who used English as an additional language.”<sup>11</sup>*

Many BME parents in the Ensuring Equality focus groups preferred a mix of cultures at a childcare setting and some felt that they could only feel comfortable leaving their children in childcare if there was a childcare worker of the same ethnicity. However, some parents felt that awareness of their cultural and religious needs was more important than the culture of the carers. For some parents whose first language was not English, the ability to communicate with at least one worker at the setting was preferred.

Cost was identified by all BME parents in the Ensuring Equality focus groups as a key barrier to using childcare. Those who were claiming the childcare element of Working Tax Credit felt it wasn’t enough and for some BME parents in low or no income households even heavily subsidised childcare costs can pose a barrier. Families who were claiming Income Support also commented on the difficulties of affording childcare.

3. The Parents’ Childcare Survey is run by the National Centre for Social Research on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families. A baseline survey was conducted in 1999, and repeated in 2001. In 2004 this survey was combined with another survey series focusing on three- and four-year olds.

4. Daycare Trust and National Centre for Social Research (2006) *Ensuring Equality: black and minority ethnic families’ views on childcare*

5. See, for example, Sylva K, et al (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project: Findings from the Early Primary Years*, DfES

6. Sylva K, Melhuish M, Sammons P, Siraj-Blatchford I, Taggart B (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project: final report* DfES

7. Aston, Hooker, Page, Willison (2007) – *Pakistani and Bangladeshi women’s attitudes to work and family* (DWP)

8. Bell A, Bryson C, Barnes M & O’Shea R (2005) *Use of Childcare Among Families from Minority Ethnic Backgrounds* (DfES)

9. Daycare Trust (2004) *Parents Eye: Building a vision of equality and inclusion in childcare services*.

10. Box L, Bignall T, Butt J (2001) *Supporting parents through provision of childcare*, Discussion Paper 2 Black and Minority Families Policy Forum (REU)

11. Ofsted (2008) *How well are they doing? The impact of children’s centres and extended schools*

Parents in the Ensuring Equality focus groups identified a number of other gaps in the childcare service that impact on their uptake of childcare and also their employment prospects. A lack of flexible hours of childcare provision in the evening, night-time and weekend and also when children are sick, mean that many BME parents – and especially lone parents – are restricted to training and jobs that fit the hours that childcare is available. Although many white parents struggle with finding childcare at atypical times if they need it, there is evidence that BME communities are more likely to be working at the weekends or late at night.<sup>12</sup> The Ensuring Equality focus groups also found that BME parents felt there is a need for more varied and inclusive types of childcare such as parent and toddler groups, more inclusive provision for fathers, and services for older children.

## Information provision and consultation/ parental input

*“People tend to rely on friends for information. Many don’t know about the Sure Start even though it’s very local. Services are not seen as very relevant.”*

**Worker speaking on behalf of group of Somali women, Greenwich, London**

The Ensuring Equality research found that, similar to a large proportion of white parents, many BME parents had a general lack of awareness about childcare services or where to get information from. However, Bangladeshi families, asylum seekers and refugees had particularly low levels of awareness of childcare services and where to access information.

A report from the Department for Work and Pensions found a similarly low level of awareness about local childcare services among Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers, mainly because they hadn’t looked into it. A few had been contact with their local Sure Start office which was spoken of very highly.<sup>13</sup> This is particularly relevant because for many ethnic minority families settling in the UK, formal childcare can be a completely new cultural concept. Some families may not be looking for childcare simply because they do not know it exists.

In the Ensuring Equality focus groups conducted in 2006, few families had heard of Sure Start, Children’s Information Services and the early education entitlement. Many parents were reliant on specific services and settings they were already accessing to provide links to other services they might require and many suggested health centres and health visitors as good sources of information.

Outreach and verbal information provision was identified by parents during the Ensuring Equality project as most appropriate to engage BME parents in services. Face to face childcare information provision, preferably in the parent’s first language, is more likely to be understood and acted on. Many parents recalled their first exposure to childcare and information on childcare as being through outreach activities such as ‘playbuses’ and health visitors. There is still progress to be made in this area though – as recently as January 2008 an Ofsted report highlighted that some children’s centres were still weak in reaching out to minority ethnic families:

*“In one in 10 children’s centres, families from minority ethnic groups were not accessing services fully, partly because the centre had not identified them. Some staff attributed this to their lack of confidence and experience of working with diverse communities. In some cases, due to insufficient communication with the local authorities, the centres were not always aware of existing and newly arrived groups, such as asylum seekers.”*

Most BME parents consulted with during the Ensuring Equality project wanted a say in how their childcare setting is run and many wanted input into how childcare is developed more generally. Some refugees and asylum seekers spoke of their reluctance to complain to childcare workers for fear of them taking it out on their child and/or jeopardising their immigration status. Other parents spoke of the importance of open communication with setting staff and of their preference for group consultation such as through parent boards.

12. Bell et al (2005) Op cit

13. Aston, Hooker, Page, Willison (2007) – *Pakistani and Bangladeshi women’s attitudes to work and family* (DWP)

14. Kinnaird et al (2007) *Childcare and Early Years Providers Survey 2006: Overview report*, DfES



## Workforce

*“We try and tackle all of those [cultural requirements] possibly at contract stage. We spend an hour, possibly more, doing contracts with them when we’re offering them a nursery place. So we’d ask them how they want us to manage their child, what their religious beliefs are, what their child can or cannot eat, what activities or what festivities their child can or cannot take part in? So in the first instant we would like to cover all of that.”*

**Children’s Centre manager, Lambeth**

In 2006, 9 per cent of full day care staff and 6 per cent of childminders were from BME groups. The total number of BME staff in the early childcare workforce grew slightly between 2001 and 2006 from 15,600 to 16,600. However this 6 per cent increase was substantially below the 22 per cent increase in the childcare workforce as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

Findings from earlier Ensuring Equality research which found that while many parents preferred childcare workers of the same ethnicity as them, the majority prioritised workers who understood their culture and that they could communicate with. In response to this, later work for the Ensuring Equality project, using focus groups and in-depth individual interviews, explored the views of the BME childcare workforce on the effective engagement of BME families; issues around recruiting and retaining childcare workers from BME groups and the extent to which this addresses the question of how to increase uptake among ethnic minorities currently less inclined to use childcare.

Participants felt that despite efforts, some of the most vulnerable ethnic minority families remain disengaged with childcare services and perceive that childcare is not meant for people like them. Participants suggested a number of ways to improve engagement of BME families with childcare services such as: the promotion of childcare to BME families by members of the same ethnic communities and the creation of familiar and comfortable childcare environments, suitable for a diverse range of needs.

The BME workforce interviewed for Ensuring Equality identified a range of pro-active ways to address the various cultural and ethnic needs of the families they serve. For instance, they felt that individual needs and

cultural requirements can and should be addressed when a family first makes contact with a setting – in this way an open dialogue is created with parents, ensuring their needs are met and enhancing their level of familiarity with the setting. Language difficulties can be addressed through good communication skills and attentiveness. In cases where parents had little or no English, interpreters can be used. Participants also spoke of the need to build a rapport with BME families and to embrace cultural differences within the childcare setting.

Participants generally felt that the childcare workforce is sufficiently ethnically diverse, although some gaps were identified – in particular the lack of male BME childcare workers. They argued that ethnically ‘matching’ the childcare workforce to the local community is not practical or necessary. Two important reasons for this were: that the ethnic composition of communities in England is in constant flux, making it difficult to maintain an ethnic ‘match’ between childcare workers and local families; and that the ethnicity of a childcare worker is less important than their ability to provide high quality care and education. Participants did believe however that having an ethnically diverse childcare workforce is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it gives the right messages to BME families considering taking up childcare, enhancing feelings of belonging. Secondly, it is beneficial for children to be exposed to a range of ethnicities and cultures in their early years, increasing tolerance and acceptance. Finally, it is beneficial for race relations generally, creating a situation where different ethnicities interact and establish relationships.

Participants were very proud and passionate about their chosen career and many of them expressed frustration that the childcare profession is often misunderstood and seen as having a low status. They also believed that this lack of understanding of the role and qualifications of childcare workers impacts on recruitment and retention into the workforce. Improving the terms and conditions of childcare workers and increasing awareness of what their role involves are seen as crucial steps to recruiting and retaining childcare workers. These concerns extend beyond just the BME members of the workforce, and form part of the focus of a recent IPPR report, *For Love or Money: pay, progression and professionalisation in the ‘early years’ workforce*.



## National and local monitoring

*“It’s not that it should or shouldn’t be compulsory – but why wouldn’t you do it?”*

**Local Authority information manager talking about monitoring of ethnicity**

The third and final phase of Ensuring Equality was informed by the earlier work. The 2006 Ensuring Equality report contained a recommendation that a higher level of monitoring of ethnicity in childcare services should be carried out by local authorities.

The report *Local approaches to ensuring childcare for BME families* expanded on this recommendation looking at how ethnicity in childcare services is being monitored at both a local and national level, and also at how this can link directly to encouraging more families from BME communities to take-up childcare and increasing the number of people from BME backgrounds entering the childcare workforce. The report was compiled from a range of interviews, survey findings and meetings with local authorities and national government, as well as a broad analysis of eight Childcare Sufficiency Assessments.

Key findings of the report include:

- Local authorities are not currently under any obligation to monitor the ethnicity of childcare service users or childcare workforce within their area. Consequently the amount and nature of data collected across the country about the ethnicity within childcare varies from authority to authority.
- Obtaining data about ethnicity in childcare – particularly baseline data – can be challenging. Local authorities that linked strategically to share information with other local services – eg PCTs, community development teams – were better able to obtain more accurate data.
- Monitoring of ethnicity is most effective when conducted at a local level within the context of local demographics. The most useful monitoring data reflected the practical needs of those conducting outreach and take-up. Some authorities commented on qualitative data being just as important as quantitative data in this regard.

Monitoring of ethnicity in childcare services is improving in many areas, but there is still more to do. For example

recent research has highlighted the need to better monitor engagement with minority ethnic parents and the difficulties this presents:

*“...if engaging parents in services is to become a priority nationally, then it will be essential to find more robust ways of measuring and validating how effectively this is being undertaken.”<sup>15</sup>*

## Conclusion

Childcare and early years services have benefited from a wealth of policy developments since the Ensuring Equality project started in 2004. The Government is undoubtedly committed to increasing the take-up of childcare by disadvantaged families, including those from BME groups, as demonstrated by the specific PSA target. Whether the raised interest in BME families and childcare translates into inclusive services remains to be seen. We await the publication of DCSF’s Parents’ Childcare Survey with interest to gauge whether BME families have been able to benefit from the services provided as a result of the Government’s childcare strategy.

15. Page, J and Whiting G (2007) *Engaging Effectively with Black and Minority Ethnic Parents in Children’s and Parental Services* (DCSF)

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