



It Takes a Village...

Parents' perspectives on raising children in the Early Years: insights from across the Liverpool City Region

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Introduction

The Foundation Years Trust delivered the Liverpool City Region's (LCR) First Five Festival in the summer of 2022 across all six local authorities alongside our First Five Collective partners*. The Festival targeted parents of children in the early years around two key themes: parent & infant mental health and early language & communication.

The First Five Festival was an opportunity to provide parents with information about the services available to them and their young children in their local area – as well as providing a day of fun and play. Festival events ran over a full week and were accompanied by a targeted social media campaign illustrating the key messages.

During the Festival we ran an online survey and spoke to as many parents as possible about their experience of raising children in the early years in the LCR. Parents provided some fascinating insights that can help us ensure we are providing services that meet the needs of our families.

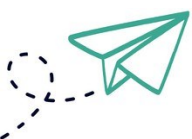
The research investigated three strands:

- Parents' experience of the first five years of their child's life
- Support networks that families lean on
- Parents' priorities for their children

We hope that the information gathered will be useful for all professionals working alongside families with children in the early years, for example:

- Charities working with families
- Health visitors, Midwives and Peri-natal mental health teams
- Children's Centre staff
- GPs
- Children's Services
- Nursery staff

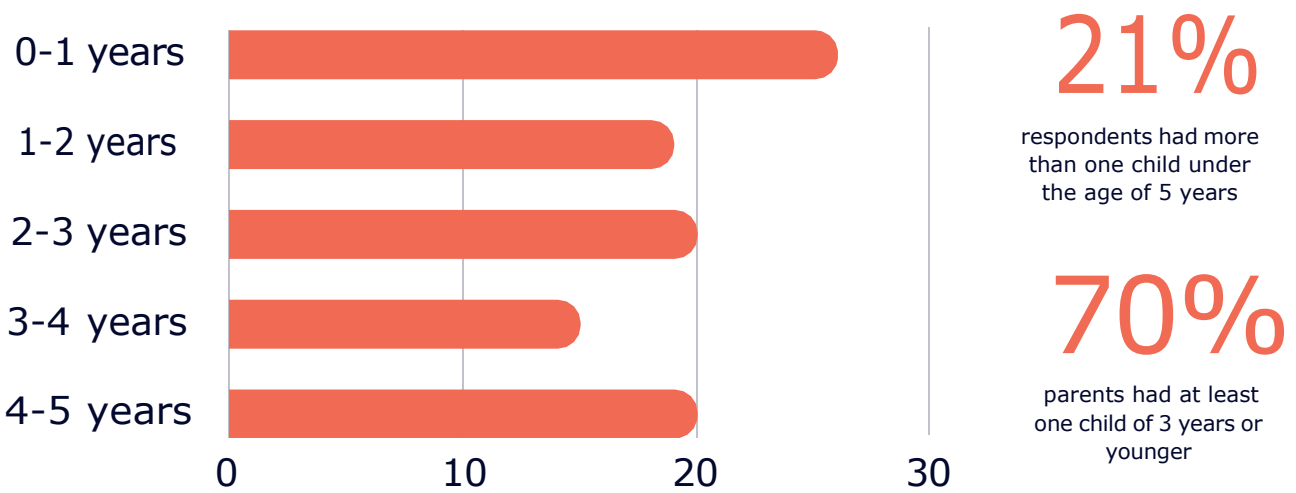
*Partners are listed at the end of the report.



Who did we talk to?

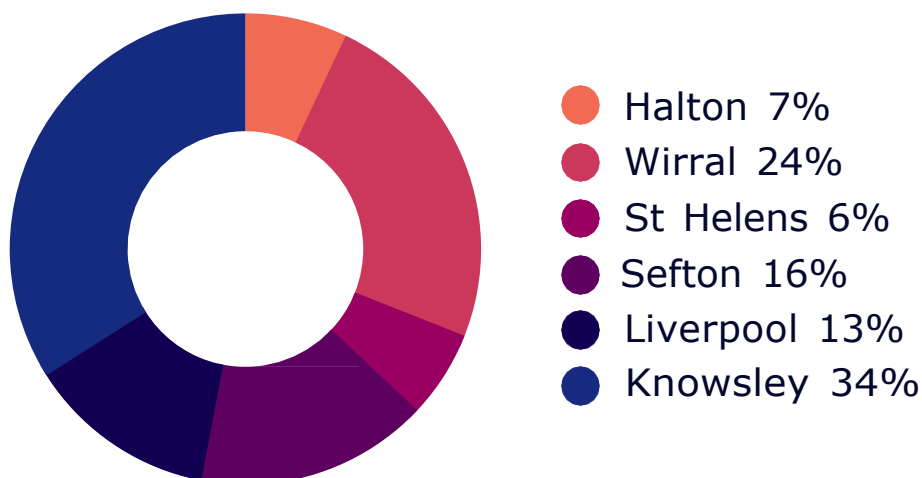
232 valid responses were received from the online survey, with 90% of respondents being mums, and 9% dads (the remainder being grandparents). Children between the ages of 0 – 2 years, born during the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, made up 45% of those represented in the survey and 21% of respondents had more than one child under the age of 5 years. In addition to the online surveys, we also interviewed 60 mums with children of 5 years or younger.

Percentage of children by group age represented in the online survey



The largest proportion of online survey respondents live in Knowsley, with Halton and St Helen’s less represented in the online survey. Of those interviewed, 20 people live in Sefton, 18 in Wirral, 12 in St Helen’s, 8 in Halton and 2 in Liverpool.

Online survey respondents by local authority



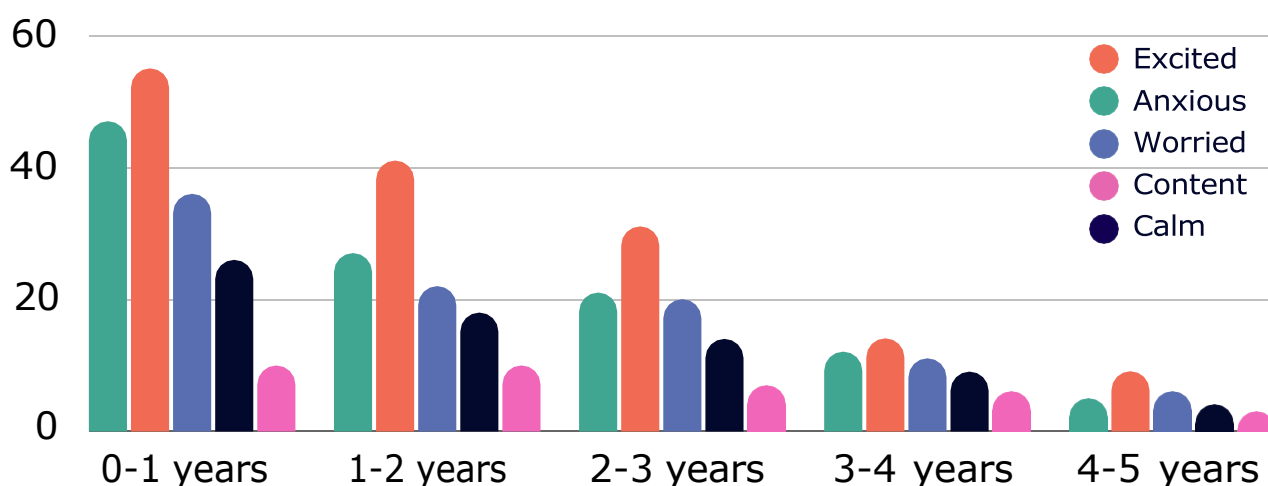
Theme 1:

Being a parent of children under five years in the Liverpool City Region

We wanted to understand more about how parents feel in bringing up children under the age of five and to get more insight into the highlights and the challenges.

We asked parents "what words best describes how you felt when your baby was born?". Respondents were able to choose as many words as applied to them.

How did you feel when your baby was born? - by age group of child.



For each age grouping, parents felt "excited" about the arrival of their new baby. But emotions of "anxiety" or "worry" also dominated, with 36% of respondents selecting the two negative emotions and only one positive emotion, and 24% choosing only "worried" and/or "anxious" in their response. Of the mums that were interviewed, over 40% described their initial emotion in negative terms only. The word "overwhelmed" was used repeatedly, and reference to "mental health struggles" came up frequently.

36%

respondents felt more negative emotion than positive when their baby was born

“ In terms of mental health, I don't know. The whole thing was so centred on almost trying to take the children off me, I don't know how to describe it. Like they turn it round into making you feel you're unfit as a parent. What you want is the help and support so that you can get better so you can be a great parent. But instead, they're basically going, are the children safe with you? And it's like, all I've done is ask for help because I'm low and need support. ”

“ Everything is keyed into us around the children and rightly so, they're obviously extremely important, they're very needy. But you can't pour from an empty cup. And I think the problem is that there's no support really for mothers. And mothers are drained, completely... As soon as you become pregnant, you're not even a human being anymore. You're just a womb.. I'm sorry I don't mean to be harsh about it, but it really is so centred that way. Like, I've never felt so dehumanised really, as to when I had children. And, you know, everything is so focused [on the child] that nobody cares about the mother's mental health. ”

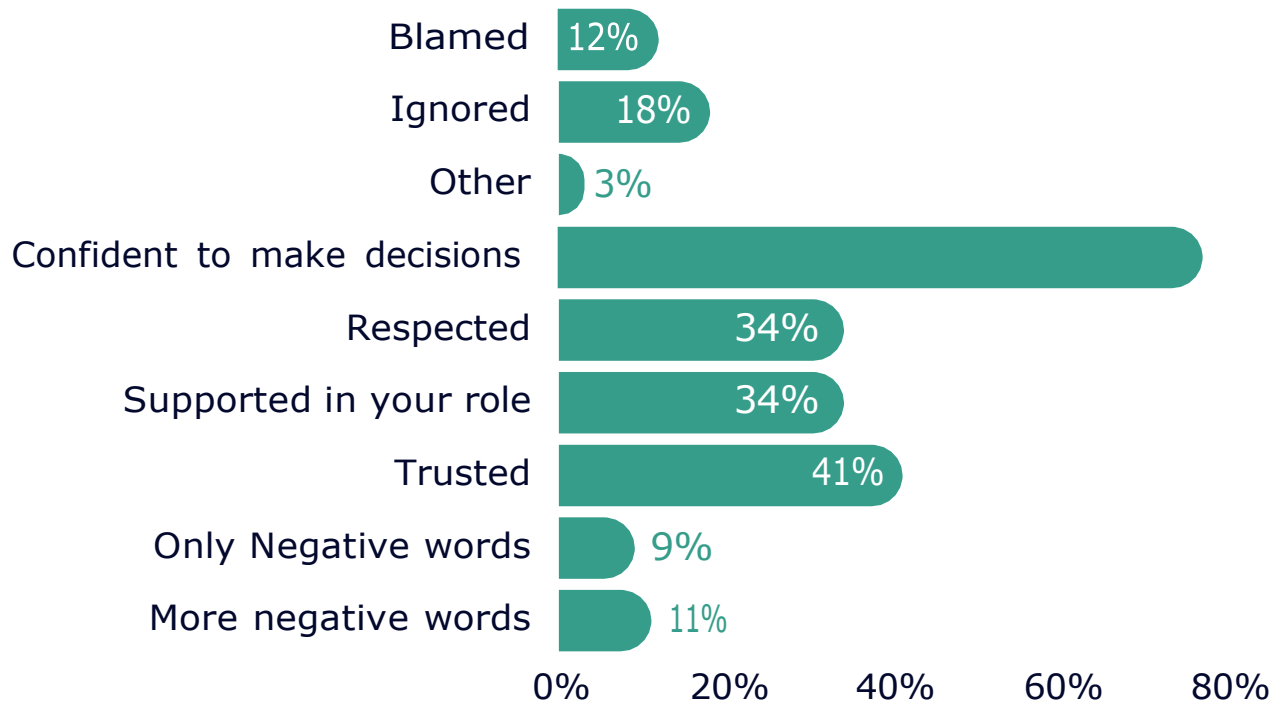
Other interviewees expressed either a mixture of positive or negative emotions or positive emotions only. A sense of being “overwhelmed” frequently accompanied words such as “happy” or “excited”.

“ [When the baby was born] I was happy and sad at the same time. I had perinatal mental health problems. ”

“ I was happy, scared and anxious at the same time ”

We also asked "how do you feel as a parent overall?", with a range of positive and negative options, from which respondents could chose as many as were relevant.

As a parent do you feel?



The largest proportion of responses were positive emotions of confidence to make decisions, respected, supported and trusted. Those who were interviewed also confirmed that they felt confident to make decisions about their children, sometimes with the caveat that it was learned confidence and wasn't always easy.



Initially I did not feel confident, [I] just felt isolated, judged, and criticised.



Do I feel confident? Well, yes, and no, really. Because you don't really know if I'm doing the right thing or not. Its hard to find help isn't it? Especially for his age now. When they're babies you know you can get a lot more help. But when they're at this age you're kind of just left to it.



Of those that indicated they felt “ignored” as a parent ...

55%

also said they felt **confident** to make decisions about their child

36%

said they felt **blamed**

14%

said they felt **supported** in their role about their child

31%

said they felt **trusted**

The highest proportion of respondents that felt “blamed” had children between 0 – 1 years old.

11%

Only 11% of respondents gave mostly negative responses, showing that there is a clear mixture of emotions which probably depends on the context or as one mum put it, “**I feel all the emotions all the time!**”.



Insight

A significant number of parents surveyed look back at the birth of their children and remember feelings of worry, anxiety and being overwhelmed as dominant emotions and even in the cases where the parent also felt positive, these emotions were still prevalent. While there is no doubt that mixed feelings are typical when a new baby is born, normalising and addressing the struggles can help parents to understand their feelings are not unusual:

its ok to not always be ok.

It is positive to see how many parents feel confident to make decisions about their child, even among parents of the youngest children. Those that admitted feeling both confident and blamed/ignored, perhaps have something to teach us, as professionals, about trusting parents' knowledge and expertise in their children.

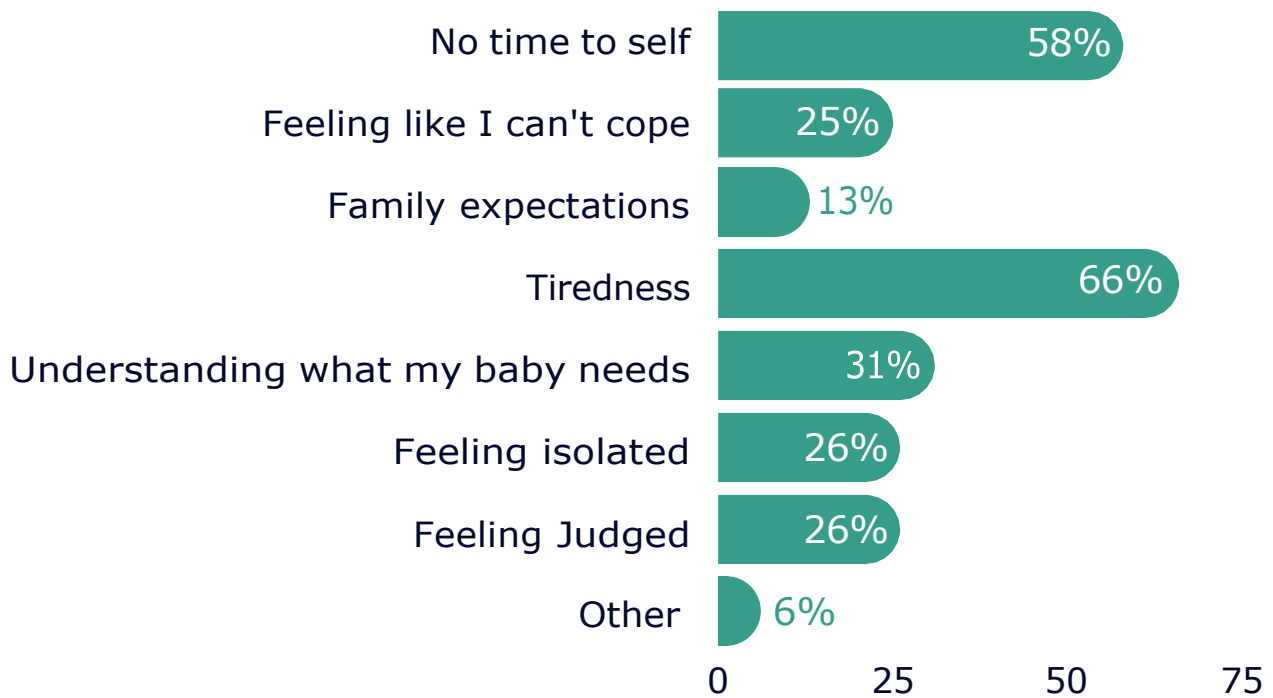
Actions for professionals:

- Use contact points and messaging, via social media for example, to normalise and address the struggles of being a new parent.
- Target these messages to partners, family and friends as well.
- Talk to your staff about how to respond to those mixed emotions, about how to reassure parents and about trusting their instincts.
- Ensure parents know where to go with their anxiety and help them to identify and build their support network.



We asked parents "what is the most difficult thing about being the parent of a 0 – 5 year old?". Respondents were able to choose up to three responses that were most relevant to them.

Whats the most difficult thing about being the parent of a 0 – 5 year old ?



“Tiredness”, and “lack of time to yourself” were, unsurprisingly, dominant feelings among parents, with 66% and 58% of respondents choosing these two words respectively. Across the age groupings, similar percentages of parents related to these feelings, demonstrating that this is a common challenge throughout the first five years of their child’s life. This was echoed in the interviews with over 40% of parents commenting on lack of time and tiredness.

31%

Of note is the fact that 31% of respondents also highlighted their concern in “understanding what their child needs”, followed closely by feelings of “isolation”, “feeling judged” and of “not being able to cope”.

Those interviewed frequently talked about feeling “guilty” about not spending enough time with their children due to other demands such as work, or because they questioned whether they were doing the right thing with, and for, their children.

“ [One of the hardest things is] giving up so much of yourself and not realising how much until they are born. ”

“ Sometimes I don't feel like me any more. ”

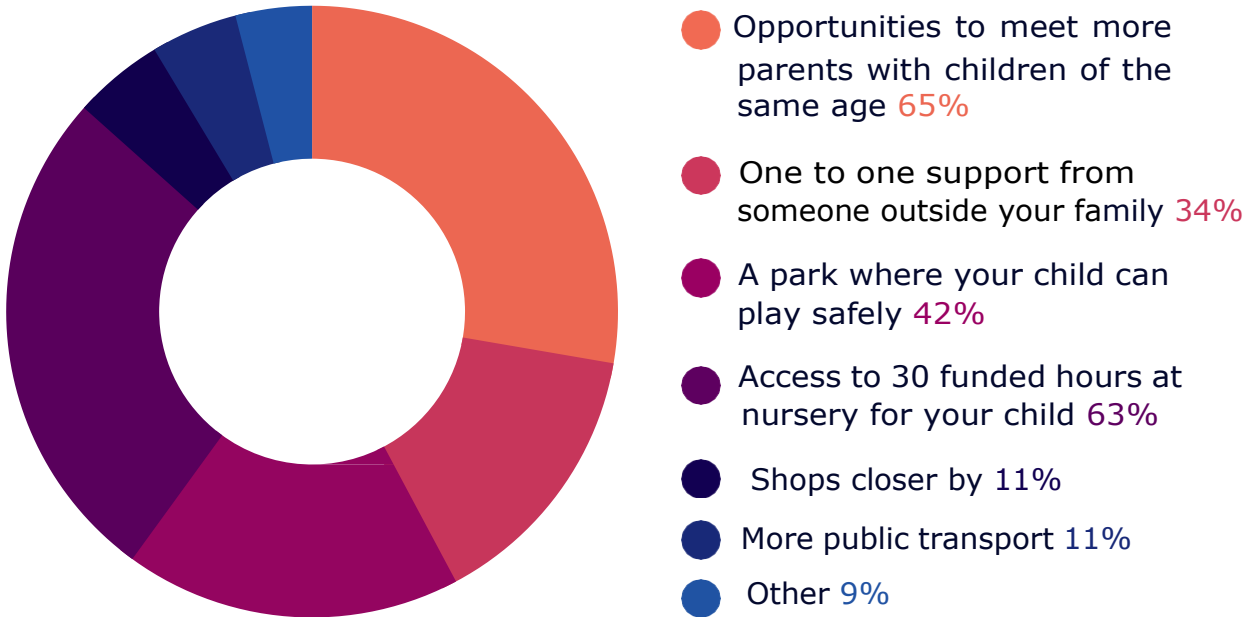
“ I think that's the hardest thing is actually not understanding what [my children] fully need all the time. ”

“ The First five years so important - and that's on your shoulders. ”

“ I felt like I was being judged, watched, and I felt like I'd let myself down. ”

We also asked "what would make you feel less stressed as a parent", with respondents able to select up to 3 options.

What would make you feel less stressed as a parent?



“Opportunities to meet parents of the same age” was a clear need, and of the parents with 0 – 1 year olds, 74% expressed this as a priority. As children got older the importance of this decreased, with around 40% of parents of 1 – 3 year olds selecting this option, down to 13% of parents with 4 – 5 year olds (when most children are in a nursery settings). The need for peer support also came up frequently in the interviews.

“ So it would have been nice to have someone, a group for relationship breakdowns and stuff. It was all about the baby. ”

“ Baby groups [make me less stressed]. Just so you can talk to someone similar. ”

“ Just help. More of a support network or just knowing where you can go when you need help or who can you turn to. Because you know it's very isolating. Like a lot of the groups that you can go to stop or only up until a certain age ”

Access to more funded hours at nursery was the second most popular choice, with 76% of parents with 0 – 1 year olds expressing this as a priority, down to 13% of parents of 4 – 5 year olds.

Affordable childcare was directly mentioned by parents who selected 'other' reasons for the source of their stress and was frequently mentioned in interviews

“ You want to work because you want to then set a good example for your child. But then some people can't work because it's an extraordinary amount of money ”

Of those that prioritised professional/one to one support, 35% of respondents are parents of 0 – 1 year olds, around 20% of 1 – 3 year olds, reducing to 14% of parents of 3 – 5 year olds.

“ Having somebody else to talk to, that's not your family or your friends, just having someone else to talk to that's not going to judge you for whatever you say as well. It's always good to talk to someone that you don't know. ”

Those parents that described "other" things that could help them feel less stressed also emphasised additional support of some kind, be that from family, other parents or professionals.

“ Consistent support from health visitors or any group of people to feel less isolated. ”

“ Being supported when discussing children’s needs with an educational setting. ”

“ A support network of parents that could help look after the children and share responsibilities for free and offer each other support and guidance. ”

“ More involvement from health visitors/groups as sometimes I google a lot to check if I’m doing something right, as [its] difficult to speak to the health visitor. ”



Insight

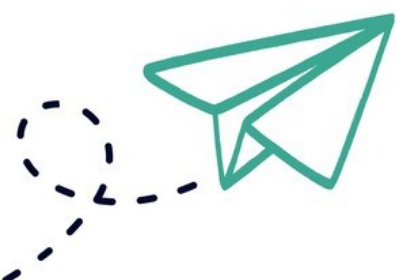
Lack of time and tiredness are interrelated challenges. While there is no easy solution to persistent sleep deprivation and the multiple demands on parents of young children, we can take time to acknowledge these struggles and the impact it has on parents' well-being. Feelings of not being able to cope are often a consequence of exhaustion and should be acknowledged as such. Concerns of being judged can be counteracted with support to help parents feel more confident in their decisions and in their 'gut feelings' about what their children need.

Both online and interview responses veered heavily towards forms of support: from professionals; other parents; and access to groups. Access to more/cheaper childcare followed in close second place, which is also a form of support to manage bringing up children in the early years.

The need for support was dominant for parents of the youngest children which is likely to be a result of limited options during the pandemic. The survey was carried out when Covid restrictions had been lifted but perhaps there is a continued disengagement with the support networks on offer.

Actions for professionals:

- Affordable childcare is difficult to influence at local level, but where we cannot make the changes, our role is to advocate on behalf of our families.
- Services should promote the value of time and space for access to professionals and to peer support.
- The new Family Hubs should facilitate ad-hoc, wrap around support to families which is coordinated between statutory and VCSE providers and promote both targeted and universal services to decrease any stigma.
- Ask parents about perceived or actual barriers to support networks and integrate learning across the whole early years system.



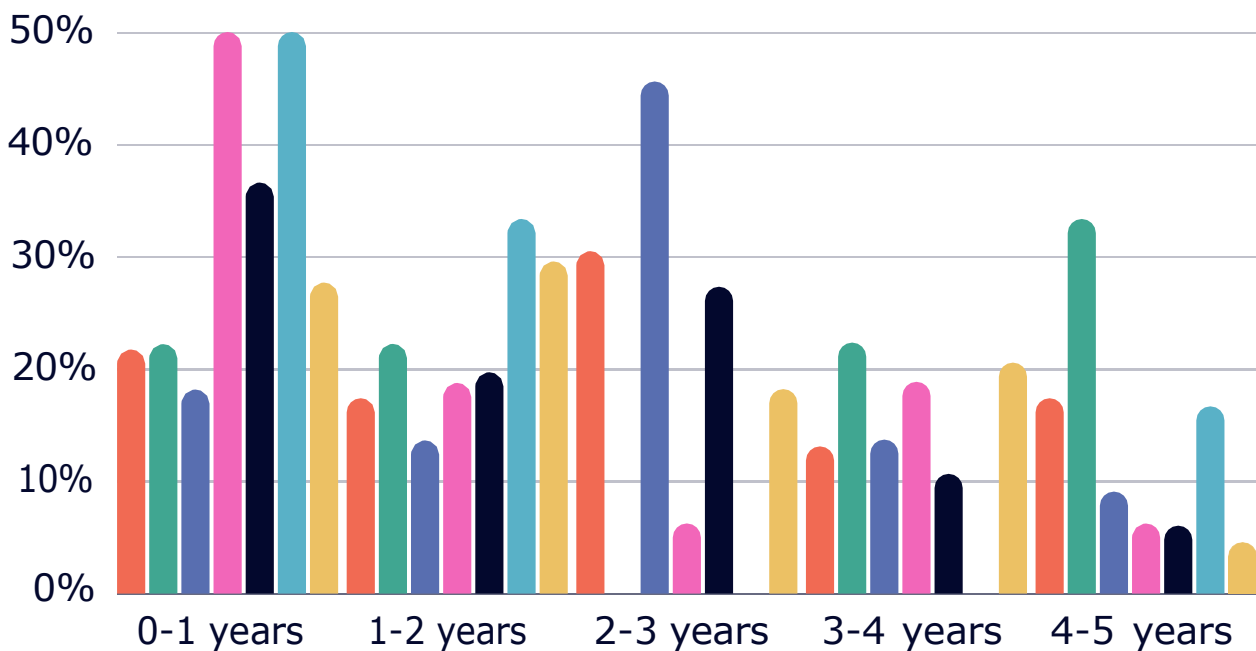
Theme 2:

Support networks

Understanding who parents reach out to for support and what barriers might exist that prevent parents seeking help, can inform the way that we shape services and ensure that we are reaching out to those that need help. We asked: "Who was the most important source of support for parents when your baby was born?" with respondents able to select one answer.

Who was the most important source of support when your baby was born?

- Childrens centre
- Friends
- Health Visitor
- Other
- Partner
- Voluntary/Charity
- Wider family



For children under 2 years, the voluntary sector and wider family were important sources of support for far more parents than other sources – perhaps due to the services that were available while pandemic restrictions remained in place. This is also illustrated by health visitors and children’s centres featuring as more important sources for older children who were born before lockdowns started.



Insight

We know that a range of providers and different types of services are important to offer to families, and where they go may relate to families' needs in that moment. The importance of partners, friends and wider family can teach us something about the way we offer services for parents – and that those peripheral support networks should be welcomed to participate in groups and activities along with parents to enhance the support around them.

Asked why the support of those selected was important, the most common response was 'because they were there when I needed them' (76% of respondents), followed by 'made sure I didn't feel isolated' (49%) and 'Helped me to feel confident and in control' (44%). These answers came significantly ahead of 'gave me useful information about my baby' (28%), which indicates that around the birth of the child, parents are thinking about having someone there to fall back on and feeling in control, even if they were also receiving information at the same time.

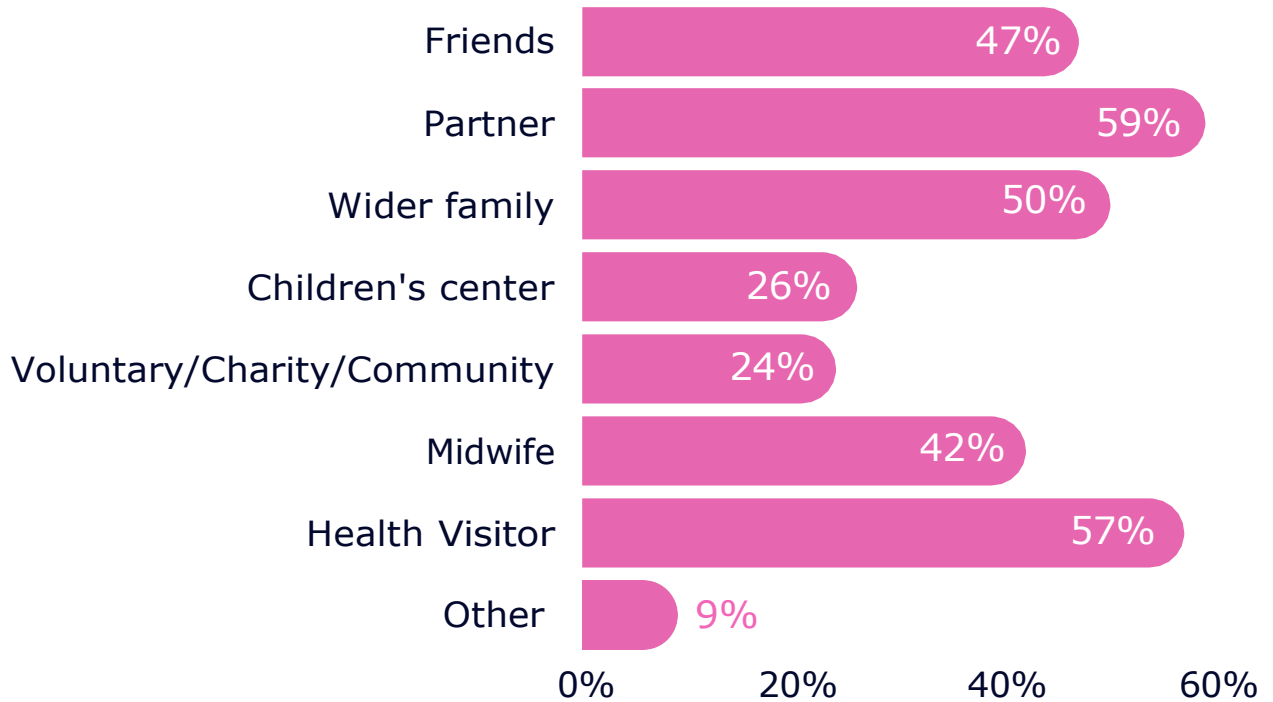
Actions for professionals:

- Consider putting support networks in place for secondary carers like dads, grandparents, kinship carers to support the network around the parents.
- Create space to welcome secondary carers along to your groups and other services as well the parents.
- Target messaging to the wider network as well, raising awareness of the importance and challenges of the early years.
- Highlight the 'support' aspects of your service, even when there are other reasons for parents to come along.



We asked parents "who have you asked for help?". Partners and health visitors were the most popular sources of information and help across the age ranges.

Have you ever asked any of the following for help?



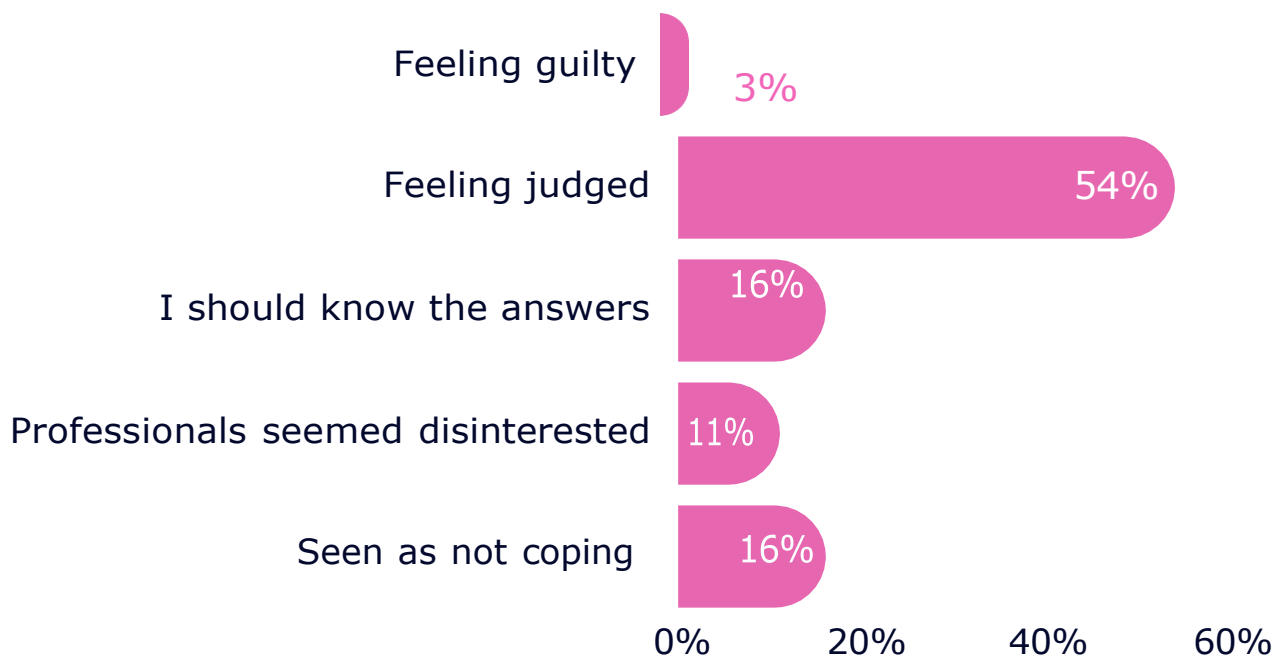
For parents of 0 – 1 year olds, turning to the voluntary sector for help was a more common response than for older children, again reflecting the services that were available during the pandemic. Wider family was also a more predominant response amongst parents of 0 - 2 year olds than other age groups. Those parents that selected 'other' mentioned other medical professionals as sources of support. The majority of parents agreed that those they turned to were able to help resolve the issue, with 34% saying 'sometimes' and 4% saying 'no'.

58%

of respondents indicated that they ask for help from their partner and/or health visitor

We asked parents "were you worried about asking for help?" and 16% of parents agreed they had been. It is positive that this is a small percentage but still important to understand why parents felt this way.

if you were worried about asking for help, why?



While parents could give a free response to this question, it was easy to group the responses into categories, as there were clear trends in the comments:

- Feeling judged (54%)
- Feeling I should already know the answers (16%)
- Worried to be seen as not coping (16%)
- Professionals seem disinterested (11%)

Of those interviewed, 21% said they were worried to ask for help. This question generated a lot of feedback and some mums revealed experiences they felt were particularly bad.

Talking about post-natal depression, one mum told us:



I had limited support, [but] I didn't want to admit to the Health Visitor. No one offered support after initial visits. It felt like a box ticking exercise. I had a bad experience with sleep routines. I felt like I was cracking up..



Another mum who had problems with her little boy's learning difficulties told us:

“ I've been scared to just try and reach out and get help, your own head gets involved too much and you're scared of what people are going to say, like 'oh, you should be able to cope with your own kids.' ”

One mum had felt her mental health dipping just before the baby's birth and told us:

“ I felt completely let down when I asked for help during Covid. I got no support. The peri-natal team were useless. ”

“ [I was worried about asking for help] because of my mental health, and obviously if I said anything wrong, that social workers would come in and take my children off me. ”

“ I was always asked to call social services to ask for help by my GP as they suggested I wasn't coping as a lone parent with no family support. ”

“ I've had all services involved and not one says the same as the other. They're all giving different advice. I don't feel supported. They don't support my needs; I don't get help preparing for meetings. ”

Some responses were more circumspect and suggested that some of those interviewed had overcome initial fears about reaching out for help.

“ I used to feel dumb about asking - now I know I can ask for help. ”

“ At first, I was worried about asking for help in case people thought that I was weak and couldn't cope. I had made some bad choices in the past and was worried that people would judge me and didn't think that I deserved to have any support. ”

“ In baby groups, people can put a positive spin on their child, but I think sometimes we need a bit more of reality in a lot of these situations. Like, you know, it is tough and it's okay that you feel like it's tough. ”

“ I think a lot of parents do find it difficult to open up. People just judge instantly. as soon as you say anything you get judged. ”

“ Miscommunication, is the main ailment. Assumptions are made about the parents. I feel they don't understand the issues parents are facing. ”

“ II think there's a lot of pressure on mums to be everything to everyone. And it's at the expense of yourself. ”



Insight

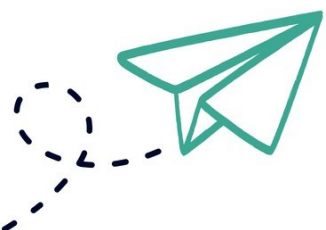
Along with partners, health visitors are a hugely important source of support, and it is recognised that they are a workforce under pressure, with limited resources. An early years system that collaborates effectively can help to create an environment where health visitors are confident to introduce parents to partner agencies who can help to provide some of that support. Parents who have a trusting relationship with the health visitor are more likely to be open to alternative support if they perceive the trust between health visitors and partner agencies.

Where barriers to asking for help are concerned, overcoming bad experiences can be hard. If parents are aware of alternative support within the system, they may be more motivated to reach out to someone else if the first contact doesn't provide what they need.

Those parents who are worried about asking for support are a priority and the fact that the concern of "feeling judged" came up repeatedly, is a reason for professionals to reflect on our practice and consider our approach and ability to relate to parents' concerns.

Actions for professionals:

- Provide universal spaces and events that families can attend. The First Five Festival attracted a range of families with varying levels of need and was an ideal setting for services to be promoted without stigma.
- We know that most professionals do not mean to make parents feel judged and sometimes day to day pressures can lead to black and white decisions. Making sure our own staff are sufficiently supported can help prevent pressures being passed onto parents.
- Working collaboratively as a system can also reduce pressures on individual services. We know partnership takes time to nurture but it is an investment and ensures we offer families what they need. And if a family does have a bad experience, a collaborative system can continue to provide a safety net.
- Feeling judged can also be addressed through simple shared messaging, acknowledging people's strengths and their worries.



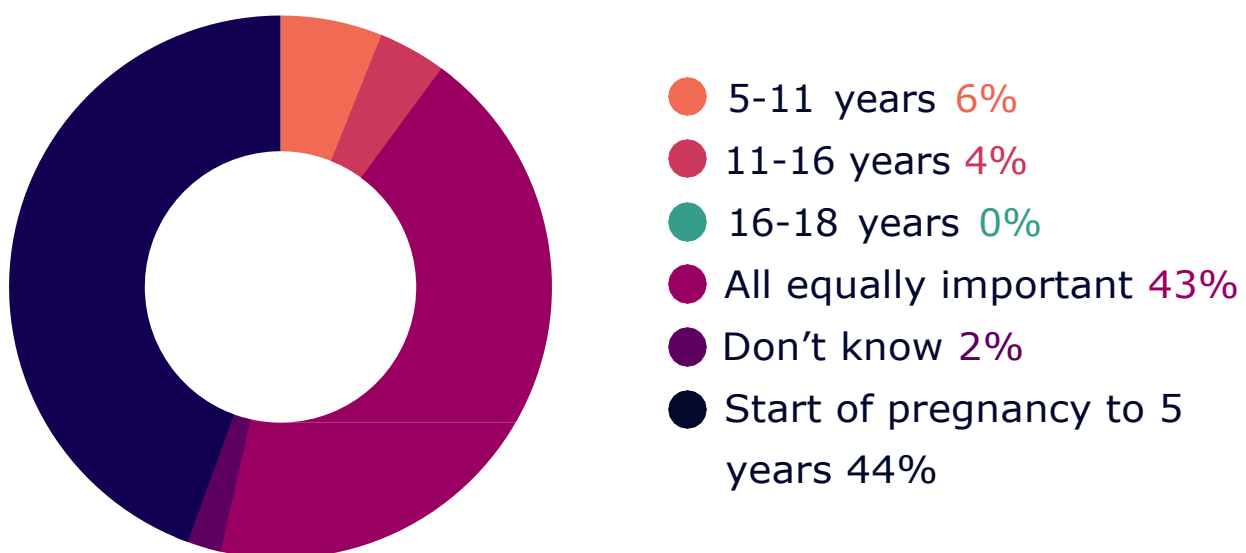
Theme 3:

Parents' priorities for their children

Our final questions asked parents what was important to them for their children's upbringing.

We asked parents for their view on "what is the most important stage of a child's life for their future health and happiness?".

What was the most important stage of a child's life?



We asked parents what they believed their children should be able to do before they start Year 1 in school, with respondents able to choose up to three answers each.

The most popular responses were that their child would be 'able to talk' (23% of all responses) and able to 'use the toilet independently' (24%), with 'confident to ask for help' coming in close behind (20%).

44%

of parents identified the early years as the most important with an almost equal percentage (43%) saying all stages were equally important.

We asked "what is the most important for your child when they are older?", with parents able to choose up to three answers each.

Good mental health (26%) and good physical health (24%) were the top priorities for parents when thinking about their children in the future. Parents also prioritised having choices about what they want to do with their lives (21%). This was reflected in interviews, where parents spoke repeatedly about happiness, confidence and being healthy.

“ I want them to be happy and to be able to make sound decisions, obviously sometimes that they're not going to do that because they'll be young teenagers. But I hope that they can make good decisions for themselves, like safe decisions. ”

“ I want him to enjoy life. I want him to do well but I want him to live his life. So, when he gets to 18, he doesn't have to know what he wants to do or what his life plans are. I just want him to be happy. ”

Ranked as the next most important priorities, but with significantly lower percentages:

8%

said **financial security**

9%

said **good employment opportunities**

6%

said **doing well at school**

And 'having lots of friends' (3%) and 'having a family of their own' (2%) were far lower in importance for parents.



Insight

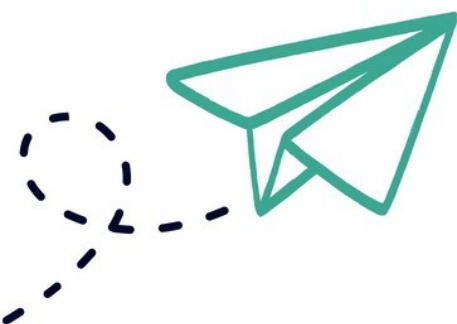
It's great to see that so many respondents identified the first five years as a key stage for the future. When the same question was asked in the Royal Foundation's Five Big Questions*, only 25% of parents identified the early years as the most important stage. Given that most of the respondents to the survey and certainly all the interviewees, either visited the Festival or were already involved with partners' services, it is a credit to us all that people identified so strongly with the importance of this period and is a message that we will want to continue to share with parents, along with the simple ways that they can promote that period through playing, chatting and reading together.

The way parents interpret school readiness, may differ to the priorities prioritised by professionals in some cases (where we may see more emphasis on children being able to dress themselves and be independent, for example). Taken together with parents' priorities for children as they grow older, we can learn how we promote our services and engage effectively with parents' concerns.

Actions for professionals:

- Continue to share messages on the importance of the early years and the value of parents' roles in this period.
- Use parents' priorities when promoting your services to them - we don't need to use the term 'school readiness' outside of professional spheres, maybe we should talk about 'building your child's confidence' for example.

*<https://royalfoundation.com/the-duchess-of-cambridge-unveils-five-big-insights-research-early-years/>



Closing comments

The First Five Festival provided an ideal opportunity to discover more about parents' experiences in bringing up their young children.

The First Five Collective of partners hope that the insights we gained can help us to further develop our early years services so that they become more and more effective in meeting families' needs.

As professionals, we can use the evidence to reflect and ask ourselves, "what are my priorities for action?" and "how can I use my influence to affect change?".

We believe that we have an opportunity to share learning across the Liverpool City Region and to contribute to making sure that all our children, no matter what their background, are able to have the best start in life.

We would like this report to be the start of the conversation, and that together we can tap into the skilled work force that cares passionately about the early years, and the potential for this period to make a life time of difference for our children.

If you would like more information on the First Five Collective or to be involved in the next First Five Festival please contact us at info@foundationyearstrust.org.uk

First Five Collective Partners

BSFL Network Groups
Building Attachment and Bonds service
Centre 56
Centre 63
Creative Spaces Co
Diverse Active
Equilibrium North West
Everton FC
Family Toolbox Wirral
Feelgood Factory
Home Start Southport and Formby
Home Start St Helen's
Home-Start Knowsley
Hope 4 children
Kids planet day nurseries
Kinship Carers
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