

The burden placed on parents



Modern parents are under pressure with long working hours, childcare dilemmas and family break-ups. But what is the impact on children and what can be done about it?

I've got three young children and a full-on job. I'd always thought that these early years were the hardest and now would be the time when I should be around the most.

But in fact I'm quickly learning that the older kids get the more they need you.

My children who are six, five and three want me to take them to school and collect them afterwards. They want me to listen to them reading, help with their drawings, go on school trips and turn up at their plays.

In short they want my time and attention, something that the childcare expert, Penelope Leach, says will continue all the way through the teenage years.



"Would you be surprised to hear that children left on their own regularly until parents get home from work do less homework, are more likely to drink alcohol and tend to get themselves into inappropriate sexual situations? It's not rocket science," says Leach.

For millions of families trying to make ends meet, being around a lot can be difficult. Stay-at-home mothers are now in a minority because up to 70% of women with children under the age of one go

back to work. When both parents work, you need childcare and that is rarely simple to sort out.

When I had my first child nearly seven years ago, I couldn't bear the idea of leaving her when my maternity leave was over. When I was pregnant, I'd planned to send my baby to a local daycare centre, but once Ella was born, I couldn't do it. I wanted her to be in her own home.

So like thousands of other working mothers, I relied on my parents and in laws until I stumbled across a nursery school teacher who has worked as our nanny ever since. But I know I am very lucky - that kind of childcare is expensive.



Many parents do not realise that the demands for quality time never decrease

For a lot of working parents, childminders and daycare are the cheapest and only option. But some academics have been sounding warnings about the downside of nursery care.

Philippa Brewer-Dalziel went back to work full-time when her first child, Keane, turned two. Her hours were long and it meant Keane was at nursery from 7.30am until 6pm five days a week. She noticed a big change in her son's behaviour.

"He didn't want to start coming home with me. I think it was just because he wasn't spending enough time with me. Even though I was his mum, I almost became a stranger to him," she says.

In the end Philippa became so concerned that she reduced the number of hours she was working. Keane's now five and is at school. But she's still worried about his behaviour and thinks that the amount time he spent in daycare may have had a role to play.

" "Keane became quite aggressive and quite angry towards myself and my partner Darrell. And it flowed over into school and it came to a point where the school were concerned."

Keane's behaviour is getting better now. It's been suggested for some time that spending too much time in nursery care can make children more aggressive and badly behaved. But now experts are worried about what happens when these daycare kids start school.

The child development specialist, Prof Jay Belsky, says that bad behaviour can spread through the classroom 'like a virus'.

"What you see is a kind of contagion effect. So that the more kids there are in the room with more childcare experience, the more aggressive and disobedient all the children in the room are."

Other experts disagree. Prof Edward Melhuish, a psychologist from the University of London, believes daycare can be a positive experience but what's key is the quality of the care. He says children sent to good nurseries can be up to six months ahead of other kids when they reach school age.

"High quality pre-school education does all children a lot of good and the consequences for disadvantaged children are particularly important," Prof Melhuish says.



Shannon Sommarsby and Alastair Swaffer believe daycare has been nothing but a positive experience for their two-year-old twins.

Charlotte and Fraser have been going to nursery from eight in the morning until five in the afternoon since they were four months old. But Shannon says they love it, they get to meet other children, they learn to interact.

"Nothing winds me up more than when someone tells me how to raise my own kids because no-one knows our kids apart from us," Shannon says.

The problem is that no-one seems to be able to tell you conclusively if daycare is good or bad for our children. There seem to be so many ifs and buts. In the end you do just have to make your own choice.

Even at home, spending quality time with your children can be quite difficult. With long working hours, mobile phones, computers, television and so much else going on, it's easy for parents to be distracted.

Some schools are becoming increasingly aware of this problem, and the effect it has on some pupils' behaviour. Fairlight School in Brighton is one of 40 around the country taking part in a new American scheme called Fast - families and schools together.

Electronic distractions

It's about parents learning to enjoy proper time with their children. Once a week they spend a few hours in school, when lessons are over, cooking tea for the kids and chatting as families.

One of the tasks during the session requires parents to spend 15 minutes focusing all their attention on the child as they play and letting them lead the way - they can't tell their child what to do, tell them off or criticise.

I gave it a go the next day at home with one of my kids at the kitchen table. My computer kept flashing in the background, my mobile beeped in my bag with texts and e-mails. My other two children wanted my attention. Suddenly 15 minutes without moving seemed like rather a long time.

The head teacher at Fairlight School, Damien Jordan, says parents, despite their best intentions, often don't give their children enough proper time.

"If you ask children what they want, it's time with their parents. They don't have to be taken off on all these fantastic trips and go to places that cost money. They actually want to spend time enjoying themselves, laughing with their parents, cooking with their parents, things that don't cost a fortune."

My trip to Fairlight school did make me think. When I got back I banished my laptop from the kitchen and I do now try to put my phone away when I'm playing with the kids. These are small gestures, but I can see how they can make a difference.

Ultimately it's not lots of toys, trips and techniques that my children want, it's me.

Sophie Raworth - BBC