



Family Fund

Helping disabled children

Locked Out of Childcare

What families raising disabled children need from childcare reform

October 2026

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We are Family Fund

Our mission

We're here to make life better for families raising disabled and seriously ill children.

Too often, the support available is limited, inconsistent and difficult to access, and does not keep pace with families' changing circumstances. This can leave families facing financial pressure, stress and isolation, while too many children miss out on learning, play and laughter – opportunities every child deserves.



Our approach

For more than 50 years, we've worked alongside families, listening to their experiences and helping lift the pressure from their day-to-day lives.

We do this by providing families with:

- **grants** for essential items to meet their children's needs
- **information**, connections and confidence in digital skills
- **opportunities** to have input on policies and services that shape their lives.

We're the largest UK charity providing more than 300,000 instances of support to families last year alone.

But too many still face barriers that should not exist. With evidence, lived experience and the support of our amazing partners, we're working for a society where every family has what they need to live well and thrive.

300,000

instances of support to families
by Family Fund in 2026/27
(including 114,000 in grants)



Executive summary

Access to affordable, inclusive and high-quality childcare can provide important support for families raising disabled and seriously ill children.

Our research highlights a clear demand for childcare, and the benefits it can bring for employment, wellbeing and family resilience. However, families continue to face barriers in access, particularly around affordability and finding suitable provision.

As the UK Government and devolved governments look at expanding childcare support, there is an important opportunity to ensure disabled children and their families can fully benefit from childcare reform.

Simply expanding childcare hours and places will not be enough. Improving access to inclusive childcare available throughout childhood, investing in the workforce, reducing financial barriers and improving accountability will be essential if childcare reform is to work for disabled children and their families.

**Simply expanding
childcare hours and
places will not be enough.**



Key findings

Paid childcare is needed

There is a clear demand for paid childcare among families.

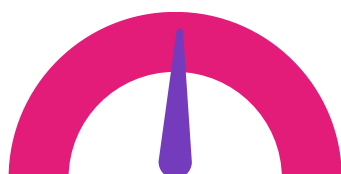
Over 1 in 5 families (21%) would like more paid childcare than they currently receive.



Increasing employment

Access to suitable childcare could help more parent carers enter or increase employment.

More than half (51%) of full-time carers who responded to our poll said they would work more if suitable childcare hours became available to them.



Improve family wellbeing

Getting childcare right could improve family wellbeing and give parent carers a break from caring responsibilities.

Parents described how access to childcare that met their child's needs could reduce stress and help them spend time with other family members.

Barriers to childcare

Too many families continue to face barriers accessing childcare.

Of those who would like more childcare, more than a third of families (38%) said childcare was too expensive, while 29% reported a lack of suitable provision.



Making childcare work for disabled children

The UK Government and devolved governments are investing heavily in expanding access to childcare and are recognising its role in supporting economic participation, child development and family wellbeing.

The policy challenge is no longer whether governments are willing to expand childcare, but whether expansion can be delivered in a way that is genuinely inclusive for disabled children and their families.

Navigating childcare can be particularly complex for families raising disabled children. We know from our Cost of Caring (2025) research that some families do not currently see childcare as an option for them; they may feel they are best suited as a parent to look after their child, or may not trust that the current system would sufficiently support their child.

All families should be able to access suitable help when they might want or need it. Parents who choose to provide care themselves should be supported to do so, and families who want or need childcare should be able to access provision.

A childcare system that is affordable and capable of meeting disabled children's needs gives families genuine choice over how care is provided. It will also help families who currently feel childcare is not an option for them to see it as a realistic possibility, either now or in the future.

Getting it right is essential not only for disabled children themselves, but for achieving the wider government aims of childcare policy. When families can access childcare that they can rely on to provide the right support, parents are better able to participate in work, education and training, manage their caring responsibilities and maintain their own wellbeing.

This can help reduce pressures on parent carers, improve mental health and make caring responsibilities more sustainable over the longer term. It also presents a significant opportunity for the UK Government and nation governments to support parents whose caring responsibilities currently limit their participation in employment, helping more families access work where they want and are able to do so.

Families want more childcare support

There is clear and significant demand for additional childcare among families raising disabled children.

Many families are actively looking for additional support. Families cannot always rely on informal support networks for childcare, and so ensuring families can access suitable paid childcare is essential.

However, parents need childcare that they know will deliver the right support and be available at the times they need it. Parents are not necessarily looking for separate services, but for inclusive childcare that enables disabled children to participate alongside their peers whilst receiving the additional support when they need it.

27%

of families would like access to more informal childcare.

21%

of families would like more paid childcare than they currently receive.

39%

of families who would like more childcare say friends or family either do not have availability to help or live too far away.

Childcare also does not end once children leave early years settings. Demand among families with older children highlights the importance of ensuring childcare expansion includes wraparound and holiday childcare alongside standard early years provision.

For many families raising disabled children, support is needed throughout childhood and into the teenage years, and accessible wraparound and holiday care can play an important role in enabling parents to work and managing their caring responsibilities.

- 40% of families wanting more childcare would prefer mainstream childcare with SEND provision available within it.
- Demand for more childcare was evident among both with children aged 0-10 (28%) and older children aged 10-18 (17%).

Families raising disabled children would welcome greater childcare support than is currently available to them, and ensuring childcare expansion responds to this demand is essential. However, families need more than simply an increase in funded hours or places; they need childcare that works for them and their child. This means childcare that is inclusive, available beyond the early years, and reliable.

"We have no close family or support network locally, and due to financial constraints paid childcare is simply not an option."

Parent of a disabled child

Childcare for disabled children is an economic and social investment

Supporting employment

For many parent carers, access to suitable childcare could create economic opportunities that may otherwise not be available to them.

Parents told us that access to childcare that meets their child's needs would create **opportunities to increase participation in work, education or training**, while also supporting longer-term financial stability.

These findings highlight a significant opportunity for policymakers. Many of the families identifying employment opportunities from increased access to childcare are those who are currently unable to participate fully in the labour market because they are caring for their disabled child. The strong response particularly from full-time carers and lower-income families suggests that improving access to suitable childcare for disabled children could help support a group of parents who are often excluded from employment, despite wanting to work.

Parents of younger children also identified opportunities to return to employment, highlighting the important role childcare can play in supporting families during key stages of childhood when caring demands can have a particularly significant impact on parents' ability to participate in work.

The opportunities created by childcare also extend beyond immediate access to work. Quality, accessible childcare could open up opportunities for skills development, qualifications and longer-term career progression, helping families build greater financial security over time. This could be particularly significant for families who have spent extended periods outside the labour market because of caring, and who may need support to re-enter employment.

“Right now nothing is suitable or reliable enough to allow me to have a job.”

Parent of a disabled child

If suitable childcare was available:

- More than a quarter (26%) of all parents raising disabled children would work more.
- 51% of full-time carers who responded to our poll would work more.
- Around a third (31%) of families earning less than £30,000 a year caring for a disabled child would work more hours.
- 39% of parent carers of young children (aged 0-10) would work more.
- Over half of all families wanting more childcare (51%) said they would work more hours, look for paid employment, or undertake education or training if additional childcare were available to them.

“I would be able to get a job. The benefits as a family would be we may be better off, depending on how much the childcare would cost. I would also like to work.”

Parent of a disabled child

Ensuring childcare works for disabled children is therefore not only about supporting those already in work, but also about creating opportunities for families who would like to participate in employment, education and training but are currently unable to do so due to their caring responsibilities.



Supporting family wellbeing

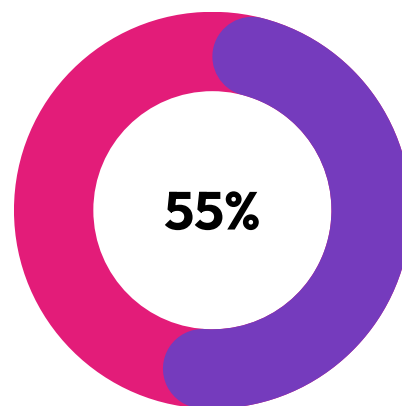
Suitable childcare can provide more than practical support for families. While childcare alone cannot address all the challenges families face, ensuring families can access it when they want and need it can be an important source of support.

Policymakers should therefore **recognise childcare as a key part of the wider support package** that enables families to care sustainably.

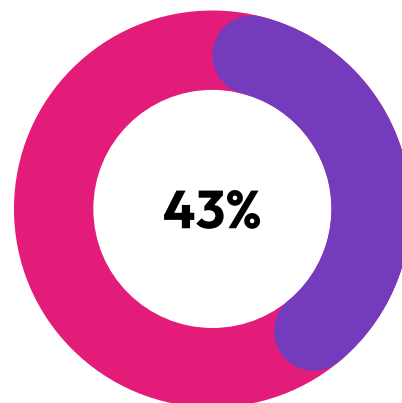
When childcare does not provide the support a child needs, the impact can extend to the wellbeing of both children and their parents. Suitable childcare and family wellbeing is closely connected, with many families describing the reassurance that comes from knowing their child is receiving the right support.

“It would be a welcome break for us as parents and would allow us to spend more time focussing on our other child who often gets overlooked.”

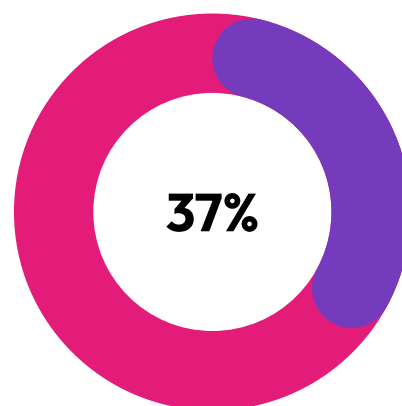
Parent of a disabled child



of respondents whose childcare provision did not meet any of their child's needs reported negative impacts on their own wellbeing.



of parents raising a child with both a physical and learning disability were more likely to report negative wellbeing impacts.



of respondents whose childcare provision did not meet any of their child's needs reported negative impacts on their child's wellbeing.

Suitable and reliable childcare could create time and space that is often difficult to find whilst managing intensive caring responsibilities.

This could include time with other family members, opportunities to maintain family relationships, and time to step away from caring for a short period.

Parents described how this could help reduce stress and provide an opportunity to recuperate from the pressures of caring. These experiences highlight the importance of getting childcare right for families with disabled children, and how it can support families to prioritise their mental health and continue caring over the long-term.

“Would give us all a little time and space to recuperate and therefore maintain more emotional and psychological resilience.”

Parent of a disabled child



Families are currently locked out of childcare

Despite clear demand for childcare and the significant benefits it can bring, many families continue to face barriers accessing suitable support.

For families raising disabled children, access to childcare is often shaped by the combined challenge of finding provision that is right for their child and that they can also afford to use. Addressing one without the other is unlikely to deliver meaningful improvements for families.

Gaps in provision

For many families, finding a place that can appropriately support their child is a major barrier to access.

Families whose childcare needs were not fully met specifically raised concerns about the availability of appropriate support, including whether staff had the skills and training to support their child effectively.

29%

of parents raising disabled children who would like more childcare reported a lack of suitable provision to meet their child's needs.

“There are no childcare options available to us at all... no childcare provision would accept him as he would need full-time one-to-one support and the cost of that was massive.”

Parent of a disabled child

Families also highlighted the difficulties of finding provision able to deliver the more specialised support some children require, including one-to-one assistance. This often relies on providers having staff with the training and confidence to support a range of additional needs, from administering medication to supporting communication needs, or managing behaviours associated with a child's condition.

Finding suitable provision is even harder when families do not have clear information about local provision and what support it provides. Without this information, families struggle to identify childcare that is suitable for their child.

Poor data is hindering better provision

In March 2026, Family Fund undertook a Freedom of Information request with local authorities and public bodies responsible for childcare sufficiency and planning across the UK, in order to better understand how information about childcare provision for disabled children is collected and reported. A total of 144 local authorities across England, Wales and Scotland, and relevant bodies in Northern Ireland responded to the request, a 71% response rate.



As of September 2026:

- Just 44% of those who responded were able to provide detailed analysis of childcare provision for disabled children, covering factors such as accessibility, parent satisfaction and staff capacity.
- The remaining 56% either provided only headline figures on the number of disabled children accessing childcare in the area, or were unable to provide any relevant information on childcare provision for disabled children.

Our Freedom of Information research suggests there is no consistent approach to how information on childcare provision for disabled children is collected and published across local areas. Even among the 44% who were able to provide analysis of childcare provision, the type of information collected, how it was presented, the factors considered and the level of detail provided varied considerably.

This inconsistent data seriously limits the ability of local authorities and national governments to assess whether existing provision is meeting the needs of disabled children, and identify the areas in which gaps still remain. It also makes it more difficult for families to understand what support is available to them locally, and to identify childcare that might be suitable for their child.

It is essential that consistent data collection and reporting on childcare provision for disabled children is introduced to improve transparency and accountability.

Without a clearer evidence base, it is **difficult to identify where inclusive provision is lacking, or to hold local providers accountable** for improving access for disabled children.

When families are unable to find childcare that can reliably provide the right support, it becomes **harder for them to feel confident in using childcare** and reduces the choices available to them.

Affordability

Even where supportive childcare is available, families often find that it is unaffordable.

Affordability challenges can be particularly significant for families raising disabled children, where many families face additional costs related to their child's disability alongside the everyday costs of family life.

This could include higher food, energy and cleaning bills, increased spending on clothing and bedding, and specialist equipment or adaptations to meet their children's additional needs. As a result, childcare expenses are often being paid from an already stretched budget, making it more challenging for families to access childcare.

Although financial support is available to help with childcare costs, families may still be required to meet childcare costs upfront before receiving this support through Universal Credit, for example. For families already under financial pressure, finding these funds in advance can create an additional barrier to accessing childcare, and an additional pressure that could be relieved.

38%

of families wanting more childcare said childcare was too expensive.

These barriers can also limit the wider benefits childcare is intended to provide. Wider opportunities are not always realised when the cost of childcare reduces or outweighs the financial gains associated with doing so. For some families, childcare can only support employment where it is both suitable for their child and financially worthwhile to use.

Childcare that is available but unaffordable is unlikely to improve access, just as childcare that is affordable but unable to provide the right support is unlikely to work for families.

These barriers are therefore closely interconnected, and meaningful improvements in access will require both to be addressed together.

“We can’t rely on family as they live too far away and still work. There are no breakfast/after school clubs that can accommodate my child due to his needs. Any other childcare is expensive. There is then very little time left in the day for basic errands or hobbies. If there was an available childcare provision it would be a major benefit.”

Parent of a disabled child

How can we ensure childcare works for families with disabled children?

Getting childcare right for disabled children has the potential to improve many aspects of family life, including supporting employment and improving family wellbeing.

For some families, particularly those on a low-income with high caring demands, access to suitable childcare could unlock opportunities to participate in employment, education and training that are currently out of reach. It could also provide an important source of support for families also experiencing the emotional and mental pressures associated with caring. These are outcomes that not only matter to families themselves, but also sit at the heart of the wider social and economic ambitions that underpin childcare policy.

The clear demand identified in this research highlights that families raising disabled children must be recognised within childcare reform. Many families are actively seeking additional childcare support, but continue to face barriers accessing provision that is reliable and affordable. The UK and nation governments therefore risk excluding a significant group of families if these barriers are not addressed.

Simply increasing the number of funded hours will not be enough. Families need access to provision that can provide the right support throughout childhood, including mainstream, specialist, wraparound and holiday care when needed. This requires a workforce with the skills and training to support disabled people and their additional needs effectively. Childcare also needs to be affordable to use, with support arrangements that recognise the extra cost of disability, and that do not create further barriers through upfront costs.

There must also be a clearer understanding of where suitable childcare is available, and where gaps in provision remain. This will not only give parents greater confidence in choosing a childcare place, but will also allow local authorities and policymakers to target investment effectively and plan for increased provision and further staff training.

Families themselves should also be directly involved in any reform in childcare to ensure that their experiences are fully recognised and reflected in practice. Only then can families have confidence that paid childcare will provide the support they need when they need it, enabling more families to access the wider opportunities and outcomes childcare policy is intended to support.

Recommendations

To ensure childcare works for disabled children and their families, Family Fund recommends the UK and devolved governments:

Increase provision

Increase provision of childcare for disabled children and children with additional needs.

Invest in the workforce

Invest in workforce recruitment, retention and specialist training so staff can support disabled children safely and confidently.

Improve access to wraparound & holiday care

Improve access to affordable wraparound and holiday childcare for disabled children and their families, including subsidised support for low-income families.

Reduce upfront cost

Reduce upfront childcare costs and ensure childcare support reflects the additional costs faced by families raising disabled children.

Improve accountability

Improve accountability and monitoring of childcare provision for children with additional needs.

Co-produce

Co-produce childcare expansions with disabled children and their families.



About the research

Data collection

We carried out a nationally representative YouGov poll of parents/carers raising disabled children and young people across the UK. It aimed to understand the experiences, needs and challenges faced by them accessing and using childcare provision.

The poll included families from a range of income backgrounds, and with children of different ages from the early years through to age 18. Where families had more than one disabled child, they were asked to answer in relation to their eldest disabled child. In total, 1,001 parents and carers took part.

In March 2026, Family Fund undertook a Freedom of Information request with local authorities and public bodies responsible for childcare sufficiency and planning across the UK. A total of 144 local authorities across England, Wales and Scotland, and relevant bodies in Northern Ireland responded to the request.

For further information about the methodology or findings, please contact [**research@familyfund.org.uk**](mailto:research@familyfund.org.uk).

Information and support

Family Fund supports families raising disabled and seriously ill children and young people through grants, practical support and information on topics including maximising income and navigating digital barriers.

We also provide information about wider sources of support that may be available to families.

If you are looking for support as a family raising disabled children, you can contact Family Fund's helpline or look on our website. The team can provide information about the grants and services available through Family Fund and signpost you to other relevant sources of support.

Website: [**www.familyfund.org.uk/support**](http://www.familyfund.org.uk/support)

Helpline: 01904 55005

Email: [**info@familyfund.org.uk**](mailto:info@familyfund.org.uk)

Family Fund

We're here to make life better for families raising disabled and seriously ill children.

Find us:

Family Fund
3 Alpha Court Monks
Cross Drive Huntington
York YO32 9WN

Talk to us:

Phone: 01904 550055
Fax: 01904 652625
Email: info@familyfund.org.uk

Join our community:

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Helping disabled children

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