

# Despite pressures facing young families, parents take precious moments to play with their babies

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Four in five primary caregivers of nine-month-old babies reported cuddling, talking and playing with their little one several times a day, in

England's first national long-term study of babies in over two decades, led by UCL (University College London).

More than half engaged in physical or turn-taking play, singing, pretend games, and noisy play with their babies several times a day—activities that were linked to improved early language development. Around three-quarters showed their babies picture books or took them outside at least once daily.

For just over one in 14 (7.4%) of these babies, most of those daily interactions will be with their father, who is their primary caregiver. Just 20 years ago, only one in 1,000 (0.11%) of nine-month-olds were cared for primarily by their dad at this age.

The first report from the Children of the 2020s study, published today by the UK Department for Education (DfE) and led by UCL in partnership with Ipsos and the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, and Birkbeck, University of London, revealed that these home activities are having positive effects on babies' understanding of common words, like 'ball,' 'bye-bye' and 'mummy,' as babies that played more with caregivers understood more words at this age.

Overall, nine-month-olds understood an average of 14 out of 51 common words. This was similar to pre-pandemic norms despite added pressure on today's families.

The findings also showed that [parents](#) are navigating significant challenges in their babies' first months, with a quarter facing at least some financial strain and around a fifth reporting seeking help from a doctor for feelings of depression since the birth of their child.

Commissioned by the DfE, Children of the 2020s is following more than 8,500 families and their babies, born in England between September and

November 2021. It is the first long-term, nationally representative study of babies since the UK Millennium Cohort Study was launched more than 20 years ago.

Children of the 2020s will follow families for at least the first five years of their children's lives, shedding new light on the factors that can influence early years development. The first survey took place when the babies were, on average, nine and a half months old.

The first findings from the study paint a picture of a new generation of infants and their families.

### **Today's parents**

- 32% of today's primary caregivers were on parental leave from their job when their child was nine months old, compared to just 2.5% of primary caregivers 20 years ago.
- Compared to parents raising children two decades ago, today's caregivers are more likely to be educated to degree level or higher (50% v 33%), and employed (71% v 51%).

### **Family finances**

- 25% of families with nine-month-olds had experienced significant financial strain, such as having difficulties managing finances, not keeping up with bills, being unable to afford essential baby items, and having to skip or cut the size of meals.
- Today's parents are less likely to own their home (50% v 64%) and more likely to rent (42% v 31%) than parents two decades ago.
- 47% of today's parents own their home with the help of a loan or mortgage, and 3% of families own their home outright. Among those renting when their babies were nine months, 24% rented

from a private landlord, 10% from a local authority, and 8% from a housing association.

## **Childcare**

- 43% of families were using some form of regular childcare when their babies were nine months. Of these families, most were using informal childcare provided by relatives or friends. However, one in eight were using formal childcare such as day nurseries or childminders.
- Parents on the highest incomes were almost six times as likely to use formal childcare (23% v 4%) than those from the most disadvantaged homes.
- They were also more likely to use informal childcare (40% v 31%), mainly from grandparents and other relatives and friends.

## **Screen use**

- 72% of parents said their nine-month-olds spent some time watching television, videos or screens every day. On average, children who watched screens typically did so for an average of 41 minutes a day, however 7% of babies had more than two hours of screen time per day and 28% had none at all.
- Children of the 2020s is one of the first and largest studies to measure screen time in infancy.

## **Play and language development**

- At nine months, those who often played turn-taking games, like peek-a-boo, with their caregivers understood five more words, on average, than babies who did these things least. Similarly, those who were read to several times a day understood four more

words, and babies who engaged in frequent physical play understood three more words, on average.

- While the researchers caution they do not yet know whether these babies that understand more words at nine months will continue to progress more quickly, the findings are in line with other evidence that play in infancy and early childhood can improve long term language and cognitive development.

### **Access to health care services**

- 24% of parents reported they had had trouble getting an appointment with a GP in the past 12 months, and 19% had had problems accessing a health visitor.
- More than a quarter of mothers (26%) had used breastfeeding support services since their baby was born, with 13% paying for breastfeeding support.

### **COVID-19**

- 14% of mothers had had a confirmed or suspected COVID-19 infection during their pregnancy. Between birth and age nine months, two in five babies (41%) and more than half of their parents/caregivers (57%) had been infected with COVID-19.
- 74% of primary caregivers had at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, and 37% of mothers had had a dose during pregnancy.

Study director, Professor Pasco Fearon (UCL Psychology & Language Sciences and the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge), said, "We are extremely excited to unveil these first findings from the landmark Children of the 2020s study, the first new national study of babies to be launched since the millennium. These vital new insights reveal the dramatic shifts in our society over that time, with fathers taking a greater role in parenting and parents more likely to be

balancing caring responsibilities with work and [parental leave](#)."

"As the first post-COVID study of families with babies, Children of the 2020s shows the many challenges parents are now facing as they deal with rising costs, health and mental health difficulties, and issues accessing public services. There are, however, very encouraging signs of resilience, with parents showing how engaged they are with creating a healthy home learning environment for their children, spending a substantial amount of time interacting positively with their babies, and helping to develop their early language skills."

A Department for Education spokesperson said, "The department commissioned this research to better understand early childhood development factors, which will help shape policy decisions. We are encouraged by many parents engaging in activities like reading and play, recognizing its importance in early development."

"Understanding the pressures many households are under, we've expanded free school meal eligibility several times since 2010 to more groups of [children](#) than any other Government over the past century. This is in addition to offering record financial support averaging £3,300 per household, implementing our transformational childcare reforms, increasing the National Living Wage, and providing help for households with food, energy, and other essential costs."

Children of the 2020s is the latest in the UK's rich portfolio of national cohort studies, joining long-running studies of people born in 1946, 1958, 1970, 1989-90 and 2000-02, all of which are based at UCL.

**More information:** Findings from wave 1 of the Children of the 2020s (Cot20s) longitudinal study, published by the Department for Education: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-of-the-2020s-wave-1-findings](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-of-the-2020s-wave-1-findings)

Provided by University College London

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