

Keeping nurseries open helps in the fight against inequality but ignores a low-paid and anxious workforce

14 January 2021, by Kate Hoskins



Nurseries provide support to children and families living in poverty. Credit: [MNStudio/Shutterstock](#)

The current lockdown in England has seen schools closed, but—in a notable shift from the first lockdown in March 2020—nurseries and other venues looking after young children have been told by the government to keep their doors open. To understand this decision, we need to look at the role and status of the sector.

Early years education has long been associated with [low pay](#) and extended working hours for its staff. Early years staff hold [diverse qualifications](#) that reflect piecemeal policy attempts to professionalize the sector. The sector is still perceived as overwhelmingly vocational, low-skilled work.

Ongoing challenges

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, early years employees described a sector adversely affected by [long-term funding insecurity](#). They pointed to an increase in the number of families experiencing

[economic hardship](#) and a range of associated complex needs. This includes supporting [children](#) whose first language is not English and those with special educational needs and disabilities.

The decision to keep early years providers open was made by central government. The lack of consultation with [early years education providers](#) on this decision has been a [source of disappointment](#) and frustration to staff.

They point to a tired, anxious and overlooked workforce, unsure how to safely navigate their daily work and nervous of the risks their employment poses to [their own families](#). It is impossible to socially distance from babies and toddlers, and they cannot socially distance themselves from each other.

But nurseries play a very important role in local communities. The decision to send children to [nursery](#) during lockdown is often the result of inequality. A suitable learning environment may simply not be available in the homes of many [economically disadvantaged families](#), who may struggle with providing heating [and technology](#) and often live in cramped and overcrowded conditions.

The part played by early years settings in reducing the impacts of socio-economic disadvantage has been widely recognized, [including by MPs](#). Nurseries support families in a multitude of ways, ranging from providing clothing to children to supporting parents with completing benefits paperwork.

Parents have met the news of nurseries staying open with mixed feelings and very different personal circumstances. Some have chosen to keep their children at home, while others have resolved to send their children in for economic

reasons. Those parents in paid employment will be only too aware of the difficulties of home working and home schooling [preschool age children](#) from their experiences during the first lockdown. This age group requires a lot of hands-on care and supervision, as well as [educational input and stimulation](#).

A point of contention

Whether or not to keep nurseries open remains a point of debate, with Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer suggesting that they should ["probably be closed"](#). But if nurseries close for all but [vulnerable children](#) and the children of key workers, the impact on parents and families is likely to be significant.

During the first lockdown, many of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable families were unable to access the valuable services that educational [settings provide](#). The consequences of this are rising levels of inequality—not just in economic terms but [socially and educationally](#). The [impact of inequality](#) exacerbated by the pandemic may be felt for generations to come.

For working parents, the difficulty of [managing childcare](#) alongside paid employment heaps pressure on to struggling families, affecting the affluent as well as those in poverty. But the effects have been, and will be, felt more keenly by poorer families.

For staff, keeping early years education open requires them to make significant personal sacrifices, so closing these settings is arguably the fairest option for them. But this requires [financial support](#) to furlough the staff and provide more structural economic support to families.

The question of whether to keep early years settings open or to close them is one with significant consequences and no easy answer.

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