



**Anna Freud**  
National Centre for  
Children and Families

# Their challenges are our challenges

A summary report of the  
experiences facing nursery  
workers in the UK in 2020

February 2021



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## Acknowledgments

With thanks to the early years workers who took the time to complete our survey and who support children and their families on a daily basis.

**Published: February 2021**

## Join our Early Years in Mind learning network

The Anna Freud Centres **Early Years in Mind** is a free online learning network for early years practitioners.

The 9,000-strong network provides easy-to-read and easy-to-use guidance on supporting the mental health of babies, young children and their families.

The network was developed by mental health experts and shares practical and clinical expertise, and advice on using attachment-informed practice.

You can join our free **Early Years in Mind** learning network today.

## Background

The early years of a child's life are uniquely important in terms of their development. We know that the first five years are the building blocks for a child's wellbeing and ability to thrive. The early years can have a direct influence on how brain architecture is formed and how our young children start to develop their understanding of how to interact with the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that the significance of early years mental health is becoming increasingly recognised in both scientific research and policy setting.

Mental health problems in children under 5 are often under-recognised, under identified, under researched and their parents and carers are, as a result, often undersupported.<sup>1</sup> In fact 1 in 20 pre-school-aged children in England have been found to have signs and symptoms of a mental health difficulty. As young children are reliant on their caregivers, such as parents and nursery workers, it's essential that they have the tools to recognise a child's emotional needs and can respond to them appropriately.

It is estimated that there are over 364,400 childcare workers<sup>2</sup> in the UK that are working with around 1.7 million children every year. As nursery workers are often the adults that spend most time with children apart from their parents or carers, it is clear that they will play a significant role in helping support children's wellbeing. Childcare workers are the gateway to acquiring language and learning social skills, and their role involves ensuring that a child's emotional needs are met.

While the recognition of their importance should be growing, nursery workers are regularly facing challenges including a lack of support and training, particularly in terms of how to support the mental health needs of young children.



<sup>1</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370\(19\)30181-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370(19)30181-6/fulltext)

<sup>2</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/845080/SCEYP\\_2019](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/845080/SCEYP_2019)

# Summary of findings



**900+**

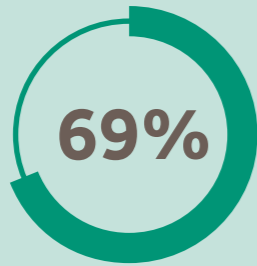
UK nursery workers took part in a survey of their experiences

## Coronavirus



42% had noticed signs that children in their care had had their emotional wellbeing affected by the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown.

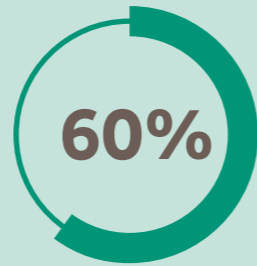
## Nursery staff said:



had experienced working with babies or children affected by trauma or abuse.



had worked with babies and children affected by domestic violence.



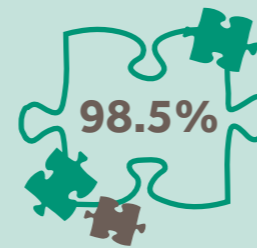
had worked with babies or children from families affected by substance use.



Almost half (48%) had worked with children who had experienced the bereavement of either a parent or sibling.



Three quarters (75%) of staff said they had looked after young children who displayed unusually aggressive or violent behaviour.

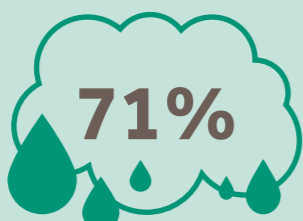


98.5% believe they have a key role in supporting the mental health of babies and young children.

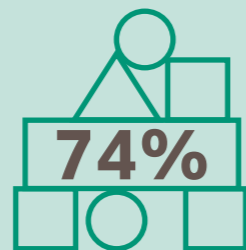
## Dealing with difficult situations and training



of staff had dealt with challenging situations that involved children who potentially had mental health issues, or social or emotional difficulties.



of staff said they had become stressed or upset when dealing with difficult situations.



said they felt confused and unsure of best way to deal with them.



Over half said they had not received any additional training, alongside their standard training, that related to early years mental health.

# Aims and method of survey

The aim of the project was to understand more about the kinds of experiences nursery workers were facing with the babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers in their care in the UK.

To achieve this we developed an online survey that was sent out via email to every nursery across the UK and promoted via our Early Years in Mind learning network and on social media. The survey was open between 20th October – 8th December 2020. This means that the survey is based on self-selecting respondents and the findings should be understood with this in mind.

The survey contained 28 questions which explored what difficulties the nursery workers face in their work, and whether they feel sufficiently equipped to support young children with their emotional struggles and challenging behaviours. The survey also looked into nursery workers' experiences regarding the effects of the pandemic on children's mental health.



## Findings

905 nursery workers responded to the survey. Respondents included those from local authority (15%), private settings (58%) and voluntary settings (25%).

The survey indicated that 98.5% of nursery workers believe they have a key role in supporting the mental health of babies and young children. They also believe they play a pivotal role in helping parents and carers to do the same (98%).

The survey also highlighted that nursery workers regularly care for babies and young children living in families facing adversity. The majority of nursery workers reported having experience of caring for babies and young children from families affected by domestic abuse and substance use. More than two thirds of nursery workers (69%) had cared for babies and young children that were affected by trauma (including child abuse, neglect, the witnessing of violence or involvement in an accident or natural disaster).

Almost half (49%) said they had cared for children who have experienced the death of a parent or sibling, and 43% reported having looked after children whose family were involved with the criminal justice system.



Dealing with mental health issues of children and their parents or carers is a significant part of the role of being a nursery worker, according to the survey.

When asked how often they encounter parents or carers who they feel are struggling to manage the emotional, social or mental health needs of their children, 73% said 'sometimes' or 'often'. 91% of nursery workers said they had faced challenging situations at work with young children who they felt were experiencing mental health problems or social or emotional difficulties. 86% of nursery workers said they had cared for young children whose behaviour they found particularly challenging, for instance children who were unusually disruptive, disobedient, or hard to control.

Almost half of nursery workers said they had looked after young children who presented 'unusually aggressive' or 'violent' behaviour - in the last two years.

Of the 91% of nursery workers who said they had faced challenging situations at work with young children, over 70% said they felt stressed or upset by these situations and didn't know how best to respond.

Over half of respondents to the survey (53%) said they haven't received any additional training on how to support children's mental health or social and emotional development. The vast majority of respondents said it would be helpful to learn more about on how to manage the different mental health, social and emotional development needs experienced by the children they work with (93%).

These findings have a particular relevance in the current pandemic: 42% of respondents said that they had noticed signs that the children they were working with had had their emotional wellbeing affected by the coronavirus pandemic or the lockdowns. 12% said they had worked with a child who had lost a family member during the pandemic.



## Discussion

The findings from this survey highlight the complexity of the work carried out by nursery workers daily. They work with families facing a range of adversities, as well as caring for children with disruptive behaviours, which they report can feel upsetting and difficult to manage. It seems as if nursery workers are eager to support the mental health of the babies and young children in their care. However, many do not have access to the training and information required to enable them to fulfil this part of their role, to the best of their abilities.

Training can support staff to promote good mental health and identify problems at an early stage in a child's life, preventing problems from escalating and reducing suffering and hardship. If staff feel underprepared for the complex work they are doing, the cost may be measured in longer term problems for the child and families. It is also important that some of the situations that early years staff face may be related to safeguarding concerns.

The current pandemic has been a challenging time for all working in early years. Research shows that behavioural and restless or attention difficulties increase through the lockdown from March to June and this was especially the case for young children aged 4-10<sup>3</sup>. An Ofsted briefing in October 2020 reported that almost all early years providers said that the pandemic had "significantly impacted the learning and development of children who had left and subsequently returned" and that they were "particularly concerned about children's personal, social and emotional development"<sup>4</sup>. The stresses that children, young people and their families have experienced need and deserve the full support that the training that early years staff are asking for could provide.

At time when policy is rightfully focusing on early intervention, the need to support early years staff feels more important than ever.



<sup>3</sup> <http://cospaceoxford.org/findings/changes-in-children-mental-health-symptoms-from-march-to-october-2020/>

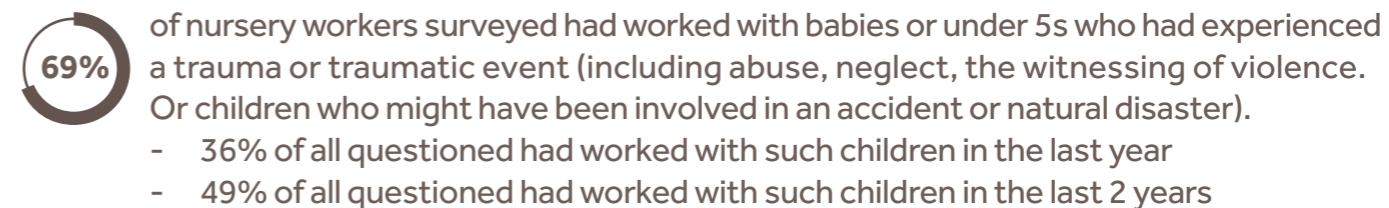
<sup>4</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/933836/COVID-19\\_series\\_briefing\\_on\\_early\\_years\\_October\\_2020.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/933836/COVID-19_series_briefing_on_early_years_October_2020.pdf)

## Appendix: breakdown of results by subject

By 'children' we referred to those of early years age – this included babies, toddlers, and all under 5s.

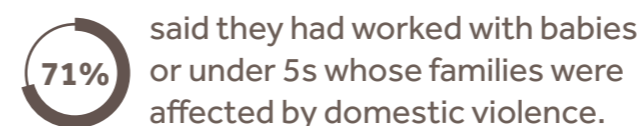
### Experiences working with babies or children under 5 who had experienced trauma, difficult family backgrounds or other challenges

#### Children affected by trauma or abuse



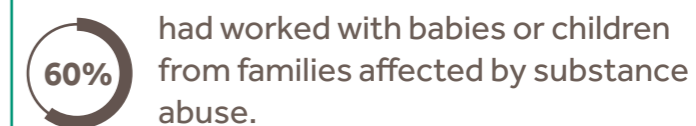
Total responses: 895

#### Children from families affected by domestic abuse



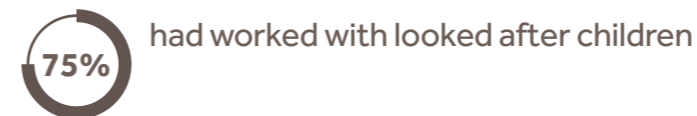
Total responses: 886

#### Children from families affected by substance use



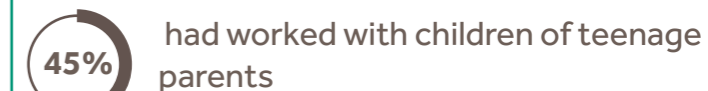
Total responses: 886

#### Working with looked after children



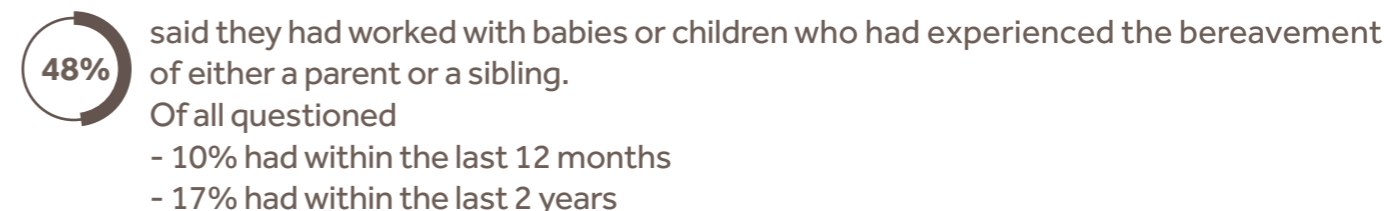
Total responses: 886

#### Children with teenage parents



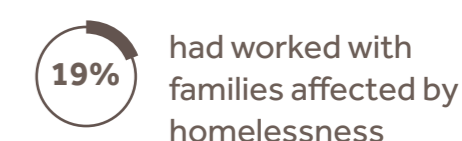
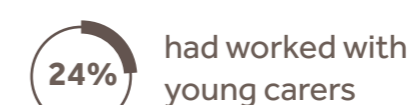
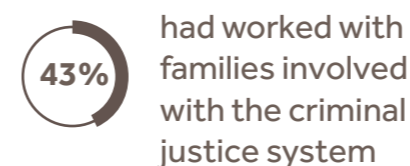
Total responses: 886

#### Bereavement of a key family member



Total responses: 904

#### Children from families affected by the criminal justice system, homelessness, and also young carers



We asked how often they encounter parents or carers who they feel are struggling to manage the emotional, social or mental health needs of their children.

**53%** said sometimes

**20%** said often

**23%** said not often

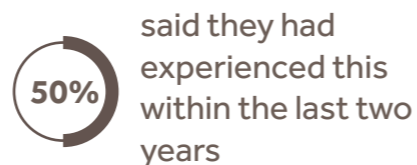
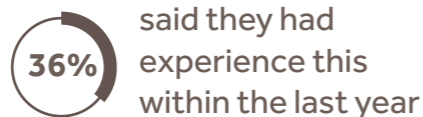
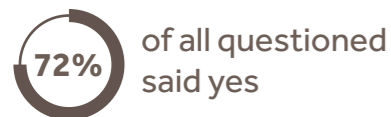
**5%** said very often

Total responses: 886

## Challenging behaviour

### Experiences managing violent or aggressive behaviour

Staff were asked if they had worked with under 5s who had exhibited unusually aggressive or violent behaviour. For instance, children who had, on more than one occasion, deliberately tried to hurt another child or adult, or threatened to - in a way that didn't feel like standard child behaviour.



Of those that had replied yes (649 responses)\*:

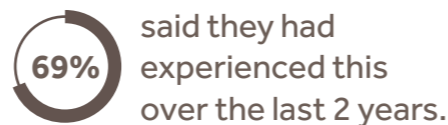
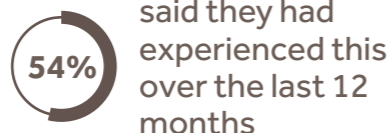
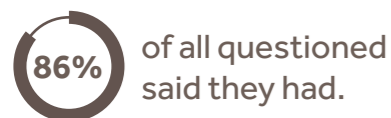
- 88 % said this behaviour was directed towards other children
- 70% said the behaviour was directed towards other staff
- 47% said this behaviour was directed towards the respondent themselves
- 42% said this behaviour was directed towards the child's parent or carer
- 22% said this behaviour was directed towards the child's sibling

(\*Respondents were asked to tick as many boxes as applied)

Total responses: 900

### Experiences managing challenging behaviour

We asked if they had worked with any children whose behaviour they found particularly challenging, for instance who were unusually disruptive, disobedient, or hard to control.



Of those who said yes (775 responses)\*:

- 83% said the behaviour was directed towards other staff
- 55% said this behaviour was directed towards the respondent themselves
- 60% said this behaviour was directed towards the child's parent or carer

(\*Respondents were asked to tick as many boxes as applied)

Total responses: 904

## Experiences dealing with situations involving children with potential mental health issues and social and emotional development needs

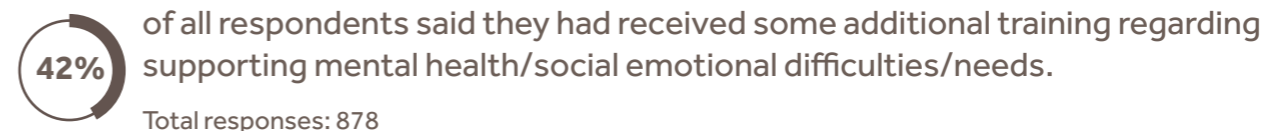
We asked if they had dealt with any challenging situations that involved children who had, what they considered could be mental health issues, or social or emotional difficulties.



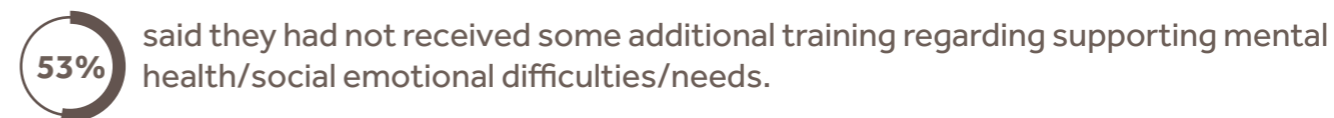
Of these:

- 71% said they had become stressed or upset when dealing with these situations
- 74% said they felt confused and unsure of best way to deal with them

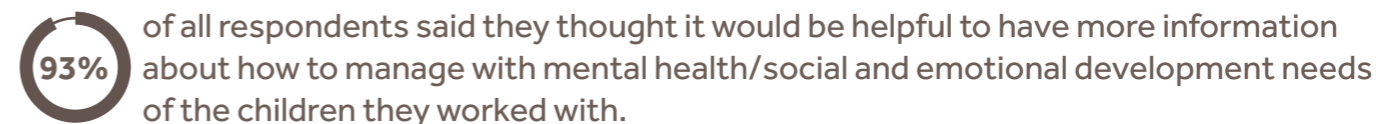
Total responses: 890



Total responses: 878



Total responses: 878



Total responses: 884

## Coronavirus

We asked if any had noticed any signs that the children they were currently working with had had their emotional wellbeing affected by coronavirus pandemic or the lockdowns.



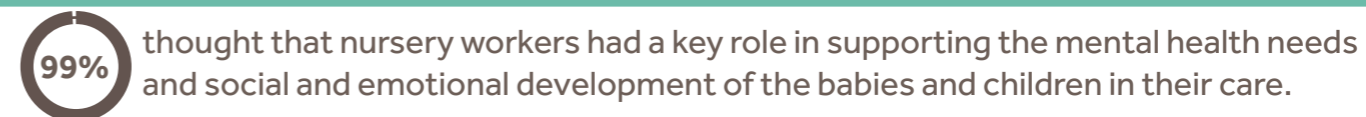
Total responses: 889

We asked if any child they worked with had lost a family member to the coronavirus.

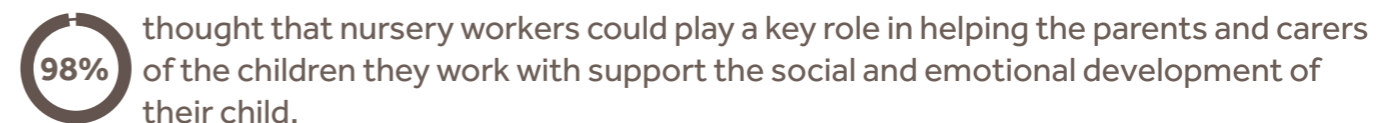


Total responses: 884

## Their views regarding their role and its significance with regard to the mental health needs of children and families



Total responses: 883



Total responses: 885

## Rundown of kinds of settings where the surveyed nursery staff said they worked

58%	15%	25%	2%
worked in a private nursery	worked in a local authority nursery	voluntary sector setting	were unsure as to how to answer

## About the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has developed and delivered pioneering mental health care for over 60 years. Our aim is to transform current mental health provision in the UK by improving the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of treatment. We believe that every child and their family should be at the heart of the care they receive, working in partnership with professionals.

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