



COMMUNITY CHILDMINDING



Community childminding services offer short-term, part-time placements with a specially selected childminder. The majority of children cared for by community childminders are under three years of age. Families are referred, usually by a health visitor, because of illness, family crisis, isolation, lack of alternative support or children's specific needs. The Scottish Childminding Association (SCMA) has gathered evidence of the positive influence this intervention can have on aspects of young children's development and well-being. However, there has been no detailed investigation of the ways in which community childminders work to achieve these outcomes and the kind of professional development that enhances the service.

This study was designed to explore:

- community childminders' everyday activities and practices
- the attitudes and values which shaped their practices
- the aspects of a community childminding placement that are valued by parents and those who manage and commission the services.

Research Processes

Nine community childminders in three areas in Scotland volunteered to take part in the study. We obtained the informed consent of all involved in the research process, including the parents of children being cared for under private arrangements on the days when the researchers were present, and have taken care to ensure confidentiality and anonymity as we report the findings.

Exploring community childminders' practices and perspectives

As there are no ready made measures of good quality childminding we developed a range of methods for use in this study.

- *Interviews* In the course of two interviews with each community childminder we collected information about structural features, such as length of experience, training and adult: child ratios. We also asked about the way in which participants thought about their role as community childminders.
- *Observations* To look directly at the everyday experiences of community childminders and the children in their care we carried out two sessions of systematic observation, each lasting two-three hours. We observed in the childminder's home, accompanied her and the children on visits to community facilities and when taking children to and from home and school. To structure the observations we selected a number of items from the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS) and the Home Learning Environment Index and sampled the frequency of particular childminder behaviours.
- *Text Diaries* To sample the variability of their work and the experiences they provide we asked the participating childminders to complete a text diary. Each community childminder responded to a text prompt asking what she and the children were doing at three points during the day for three consecutive days.

Exploring stakeholder perspectives

Ten parents of children being cared for on a community childminding placement by the childminders participating in the study took part in telephone interviews. To complete the overview of the service we interviewed the Childminding Development Officer (CDO) and a representative of the local authority commissioning the service in each of the three areas involved in the research. It was beyond the scope of this study to attempt to articulate directly the perspectives of the children involved.

1. Community childminders are well prepared to offer high quality experiences for children

We were interested in a number of specific structural factors which earlier studies had identified as being associated with positive outcomes for children attending home-based day care. The evidence from this study gives a positive picture of the structural arrangements for community childminding in Scotland. Most participants had more than four years experience as a private childminder before they began to work as a community childminder. They had completed initial childminder training, a further induction course when they began to offer community childminding places and had attended a range of continuing professional development opportunities. Some had specific formal qualifications in early education and childcare. All of the community childminders taking part in the study had active support networks and contacts. Group size was low for most of the time that children were attending on a community childminding placement (although in some cases the numbers rose at the beginning and end of the day) and adult: child ratios (usually 1:2 or 1:3) were regulated and appropriate for solo carers.

2. The community childminders participating offered a broad range of activities at home and in the community. They paid particular attention to helping the young children with a community childminding place develop their language, communication and social skills and build secure relationships

The evidence which we gathered from observations and text diaries suggested that for children aged from 0 to 3 years time spent with a community childminder gave access to a broad range of play opportunities and to actions and interactions that support the development of language and communication skills and behaviours that build positive relationships with adults and peers.

From the text diaries we found that children

- played indoors with a range of age-appropriate resources e.g. Lego, toy cars and garage, toy kitchen and groceries, jigsaws
- spent time outside in the garden e.g. riding bikes, building a den, looking for snails
- went on outings and visited community facilities from playgroups to soft play, country parks and shopping centres.

From the observations we found that the community childminders were rated more highly on items associated with

- helping children understand language
- helping children use language
- positive provider-child interactions and peer interactions
- responsive supervision and discipline
- opportunities for free play.

Sand and water play and activities associated with art and creativity, mathematics and science were seen much less often and were less well rated. We looked for examples of activities on each of the five indicators associated with a positive home learning environment for children in the early years. Some childminders read stories or encouraged children to look at books but only two made regular trips to the library. Drawing was a part of the daily activities at about half of the settings. Some childminders sang with the children at playgroup or in the car but sharing songs and rhymes was not in the repertoire of every participant. Playing games with letters and numbers was seldom observed, although we did see some examples of counting.

3. The behaviour of community childminders was warm and positive and they were responsive to children's emotions and interests

In their interactions with children the behaviour of community childminders was overwhelmingly positive. They were often observed reinforcing what was said with smiles and adopting a caring tone in conversation. There was frequent warm physical contact between the childminder and child on a community childminding placement (e.g. cuddles or stroking a child's back) and responsive communication such as responding to and commenting on a child's actions and asking questions about likes and preferences. The childminders praised and reassured children and reminded them how to use resources and engage with others. The community childminders' capacity to interact positively and to shape children's behaviour through constructive and positive conversations and interventions is a significant feature of their expertise.

Community childminders offered child-centred provision. They made plans for school holidays and regular events but on the whole they preferred to 'play it by ear'. This allowed them to tailor what was happening to the children's preferences and needs, to the weather and to the mix of children attending.

4. Community childminders think about their role as caring for and nurturing children to give their parents essential respite or support. They focus on ensuring the children's comfort and emotional security and understand that child-centred provision fosters development

When they were asked about the key elements of their job community childminders talked about what they wanted to achieve for parents and children. They wanted parents to feel confident about the service they provided and to offer the mothers of children attending on a community childminding placement support and respite, knowing that their child was well cared for.

"[They need] stability, love and attention which they may lack at home. The need to be able to sit on your knee and be reassured."

Gillian, Community Childminder

They wanted to offer children care, nurture, enjoyment and comfort.

“[I want them to be] relaxed and comfortable. It’s a safe, fun and a loving environment. They get lots of cuddles, a home away from home.”

Mary, Community Childminder

The community childminders focused on the children as individuals and on the need for flexibility and sensitivity. They wanted children with a community childminding placement to enjoy time in a relaxed, warm environment, where they got attention, were well looked after and had opportunities to socialise.

Although the childminders acknowledged that they helped the children referred under the community childminding scheme to acquire social skills and to begin to sort and count and develop language skills most did not see themselves as ‘educators’ and they did not set particular educational goals. Their focus was on care and being responsive to children. They talked about children learning through play but also through the rich range of experiences they offered, ranging from family mealtimes to caring for animals and trips to the woods or sea, and through the explanations and conversations in which they engaged the children.

“Everything is a learning activity. As you drive along [with the children] you look at the fields, the cows, the colours of the flowers – [you ask] what colour is that?”

Debbie, Community Childminder.



- 5. Parents and those who manage and commission community childminding services valued the speedy referral systems in operation, the respite a placement offered parents and the opportunities it extended to children. All these stakeholders saw the personal characteristics of community childminders as a vital feature of this service which can make a difference to family life.**

All the stakeholders praised the efficiency and speed of the referral process and it was clear that quick and caring responses to referrals was important for the success of the

community childminding schemes. Parents valued getting help quickly when they needed it and the care that was taken to introduce them to the scheme and their prospective childminder. The local authority representatives recognised that the ability of the CDOs to respond rapidly was a key element in the effectiveness of the community childminding service as a critical intervention measure.

“The community childminding service responds very promptly . . . you always know that the referral has been received and is being processed and that makes a big difference.”

LA representative 1

Mothers welcomed the respite community childminding gave them, typically describing the outcome of their referral in terms of relief and gratitude for the benefits which followed from having time alone or with a partner, secure in the knowledge that their child was being well looked after. The mothers valued the opportunities that their community childminder arranged for their children to go to the park, for walks, to soft play, to see animals or even just to play in a well-resourced garden, particularly when they found such things challenging because of the demands of their other children or anxieties over the way the child being cared for might behave. They talked positively about activities such as craft work, drawing and baking but, like the childminders, they were not concerned with what might be regarded as more explicitly educational activities. Nevertheless, it was the nurturing and personal qualities of their childminder that were of particular value to parents. They praised the childminders as approachable, capable and continuingly available to care for children and to support parents. They appreciated the warm and individualised responses of their community childminder and the structured but homely environment they created for the children in their care.

“She is so approachable, nothing is too much trouble . . . it is a homely house . . . nothing is too immaculate.”

Ruth, Mother

“She starts from what the mother does and the child needs. She doesn’t tell you what to do.”

Anthea, Mother

The important contribution of the relationships the childminder formed with children and families was also identified by the local authority representatives. They argued that recruiting the right people to be community childminders and offering them appropriate training and guidance was crucial to the success of the service in their area and that this was an important role for the CDOs and a key feature of SCMA’s contribution.

“We are asking community childminders to engage in a more specialised job than was first envisaged. . . . They need sensitivity to understand the parents and child and to know how to get involved without taking over.”

LA representative 3

Having a community childminding placement made a difference to family life. Parents were more likely to mention their own specific needs or family circumstances than any particular problems with their child as the reason for referral, although in some cases they described the impact that the child's behaviour had on their own ability to cope. Whatever their reason for referral the mothers we talked to were clear that the community childminding placement had made a difference to their lives and to the lives of other family members.

“Having time on Monday and Tuesday when Edward is with the community childminder gives me time to recharge and be prepared for the rest of the week and the other days with Edward are lovely.”

Alish, Mother

Some positive advances in children's development during the course of the placement were mentioned, including improving communication skills and the changes that followed from having a positive relationship with someone other than their mother. When mothers' levels of stress were reduced they felt able to be 'a better mother' and experienced the relationship with their child as more rewarding. As the child being cared for became more confident with others and less 'clingy' relationships with family and friends became easier too, reducing isolation for some mothers. Importantly for young children living in sometimes challenging circumstances, there were many mentions of them looking forward to going to their childminder and of their evident pleasure while there.

“Eloise loves going to the childminder's now. She puts her arms up to be picked up when Debbie arrives. She wants to get her coat and boots on to be ready... You can see now she is happy.”

Roberta, Mother

The CDOs and local authority representatives were enthusiastic about the benefits that community childminding offered to children and their parents and confident that the service offered timely and appropriate interventions which made a difference to the sustainability of family life. Community childminding had become an established part of the package of preventative measures in each of the local authorities taking part in this study.

“sometimes [community childminding] is intervention in a crisis and sometimes it is early intervention or prevention. It stops a potential crisis becoming an absolute crisis.”

LA representative 2

6. SCMA's leadership and administration of community childminding services was praised. Local authority representatives were keen for SCMA to continue to play a central role in developing community childminding provision.

The CDOs and local authority representatives saw SCMA as playing a key role in initiating and administering community childminding provision and ensuring its position as an effective intervention method. Both groups of respondents argued that SCMA should take a leading role in developing practice guidance for community childminding.

SCMA are a strong partner. They bring expertise, time and energy for recruiting and running the [community childminding] programme.

LA representative 2

Further Research and Development

- Identify and evaluate the distinctive features of the support for children's well-being and development that community childminders offer.
- Investigate the advantages that time with a childminder offers children under three years old from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Develop a childminder care and learning environment observation tool for use in professional development.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all those who took part in this study and particularly to the community childminders who welcomed us into their homes, allowed us to observe their practices and found time for the interviews.

This study was commissioned by Scottish Childminding Association (www.childminding.org)

Research Team: Dr Christine Stephen and Dr Pauline Duncan, School of Education, University of Stirling.

Contact: christine.stephen@stir.ac.uk

<http://www.stir.ac.uk/education/staff-directory/academic/christine-stephen/>