FLEXIBILITY IN CHILDCARE

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Flexibility in Childcare

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PREFACE

For sixty young families in our city of Mechelen, the future looks a lot brighter today than it did two years ago. They have been receiving professional help from 38 Volt, a project that I started as a coordinator and that, as Alderman for Welfare and Family from 1 October 2020, I plan to make part of a broader urban policy, possibly in collaboration with supra-local partners.

The European Interreg 2 Seas programme project PACE (Providing Access to Childcare and Employment) has given our city a major boost comparable to a power surge, which is why we've named our local project after the unit for electrical potential: the volt.

With this holistic approach to childcare, we are providing support in multiple dimensions of family life. The extent to which parents of young children have access to the labour market is often crucial for the further development of both children and parents, and the relationship of trust that develops between family support workers and parents is a vital element of this process. The question of what young families and young parents really need is always central. This personalised way of working helps build trust and often motivates young parents to seize opportunities more actively, be better informed and develop a more extensive social network. This unique project has given us a new, emancipatory way of looking at young families and their chances of participating fully in the community.

Thirteen partners in Europe experimented with a new, more accessible and flexible form of high-quality childcare, family support and individual support into training and employment for young parents.

Within their different contexts, these partners came up with methodologies to support and reinforce socially vulnerable families in the first three years after the birth of their child. Obstacles were surmounted and successes achieved. There were failures too, of course, but you learn through failure – this is almost an article of faith in Silicon Valley. Be that as it may, any attempt, whether successful or not, is worth investigating, as it provides us with information that will enable us to achieve further successes in the fight against the key injustice in our wealthy European region: child poverty.

We all have a responsibility to share with each other and with other interested partners the expertise we have gained in carrying out this wonderful project.
I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to all the partners who made this project possible. I am convinced that sharing what we have learned more widely will have an enormous multiplier effect on our social well-being.
I am committed to giving this seminal project a future.
With best wishes,

Gabriella De Francesco
Alderman for Social Affairs and Welfare, Poverty Alleviation, Family, Childcare, Equal Opportunities, Accessibility and Diversity, City of Mechelen

PREFACE

Providing Access to Childcare and Employment (PACE) is a European project in the Interreg 2 Seas Social Innovation programme. This programme promotes social innovation applications to increase the inclusion of young families, as well as more effective and efficient social provisions to tackle youth and adult unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.

European research has shown that a lack of available and affordable childcare is often an obstacle in the search for work, and that high-quality preschool care has a positive impact on children's subsequent school career. The current forms of childcare rarely offer a response to the flexibility that parents are required to show in the labour market.

Specifically, the PACE project supported job-seeking parents, some of them in vulnerable situations, as they looked for work by facilitating their access to childcare. With childcare as its starting point and parental involvement as its basis, the project aimed to support parents so that they could learn, develop and progress towards finding the kind of work they dreamt of.

Together with twelve other European partners, the project started in 2016, with the city of Mechelen as the lead partner. The project ran in Belgium (the City of Ghent, the City of Turnhout, the City of Mechelen and Sociaal Huis Mechelen), the Netherlands (Stichting voor de Haagse Jeugd Clubhuizen De Mussen), France (Association des Centres Sociaux de Wattrelos, Community in Arques et Centre Social Eclaté in Saint-Martin-Boulogne), and the United Kingdom (Brighton & Hove City Council, Kent County Council and The Education People).

It received scientific and pedagogical support from Artevelde University of Applied Sciences in Ghent and the Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Antwerp. In addition, the partners were able to draw on the expertise of observer partners. In Belgium, these were Kind en Gezin, the Province of Antwerp Assimilation and Civic Integration Agency, the Mechelen office of the Flemish Public Employment Service, and Samenlevingsopbouw Antwerpen provincie. In the Netherlands, they were the Community Outreach Office in the Public Affairs Department of the city authorities of The Hague, and in France the Association Nationale pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes, Colline ACEPP Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Tous Parrains in Boulogne-Sur-Mer, Le plan local pour l'insertion et l'emploi, Maison de l'Emploi du Roubaisis and the City of Wattrelos.

Learning from one another was the starting point, and adapting the rules was the objective. Each partner completed the project in his own way, and information was shared with a view to transnational cooperation and the exchange of best practices. You can read about this transnational cooperation in connection with flexible and occasional childcare in this handbook.

Our aim in this handbook is to show that thought needs to be given to making childcare provision more adaptable, and to offer some concrete suggestions on how to do so. The book outlines why such flexibility is necessary and how it can be achieved and at the same time provides stories and real-life testimonials; it is thus ready for use.

As project coordinator and employee of the City of Mechelen, I am proud to be part of this partnership. I would like to thank Interreg, the City of Mechelen and all other partners, employees, parents and children who have made PACE a success by working together.

Liesbeth Keppens
PACE project coordinator
March 2020

This book would not have been possible without the efforts of many people, each of whom had his or her own role to play. We wish to thank each and every one of them:

- **all the parents who were willing to share their experiences;**
- **all the researchers: Jan Naert, Katrien Van den Bosch, Wendy Eerdekens, Tim Vanhove;**
- **the providers of pedagogical support, Els Biessen and Mieke Jacomen;**
- **all employees of the PACE project partners, specifically in the areas of project management, childcare, family support and employment;**
- **all childcare settings that did not participate in the project but were willing to share their knowledge and experience;**
- **all students on the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education programme at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences and the Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts who were involved in parts of the project;**
- **all colleagues from Artevelde University of Applied Sciences and Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts who provided information, inspiration and feedback.**
- **the proofreaders of the English and French versions: Fiona Ricci, Tracy Howard, Maddy Thaon and Agathe Jenffer.**

An Raes, An Piessens, Dietlinde Willockx

In this book, we mainly speak of Flanders, not Belgium, because the project only ran in the Dutch-speaking northern part of the country and the situation in childcare differs between Flanders and the other parts of Belgium. For similar reasons, we mainly mention England instead of the United Kingdom.

Official agencies – the nature of which differs from country to country – are mentioned at various points in the book. A list of these agencies in Flanders, England, France and the Netherlands and their precise functions can be found at the back of the book.

CONTENT PART I.

CONTENT PART II.

CONTENT PART III.

FLEXIBILITY IN CHILDCARE

PART I.

1.
INTRODUCTION
FLEXIBLE LIVES, FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE?

1.1 Flexible lives

How do parents organise the balancing act between work and looking after the family? Most parents just get on with it, but it is no easy task: family and work have their own expectations and rhythms, and fitting these two areas of life together is a tricky puzzle. This is illustrated by the following example.

> The Bouazza family consists of two parents and three children. The two older children go to school, while the youngest attends nursery. Both parents have paid work: the father works as a nurse and has varying schedules, while the mother works as a shop assistant and has to be at work at 8.30 am. The family's day starts at 6.30 am: the lunches are made and all the children are prepared for the day. The mother usually drops off the children. They leave the house at 7.45 am, going first to the nursery and then to school. The oldest children go to breakfast club before school starts.

This 'normal' morning can be disrupted in various ways.

> Imagine...
> - the baby was sick in the night, and the nursery doesn't want children to come in if their temperature is higher than 38 °C;
> - one of the older children exclaims in panic in the morning: 'I was supposed to collect some twigs to make things with today!';
> - the mother's employer asks her to start early that day in order to do a stock-take.

There's a need for flexibility at such times. Usually, the family adapts to deal with these situations: by finding an at home childcarer for sick children, by gathering some twigs in double-quick time or writing in the child's class diary that the twigs will come later, or by arranging to swap shifts with a colleague, for instance. Most families take a flexible approach to their usual ways of doing things and schedules in order to cope. Often, this works fine.
However, not everyone is able to show such flexibility.

> Kyra from Brighton has been offered a new job. She has found a nursery for her daughter that's near home. Kyra regards this as important, as it means her daughter can get to know children in the local area. This will be an advantage later on when she goes to school.
>
> However, the strict funding guidelines for childcare throw a spanner in the works. Kyra would like to use the hours of funded care to which the English system entitles her, as otherwise the childcare will become unaffordable for her. Her job starts in September. If she wants a place, she must apply for the funded hours by the end of August; however, she has to prove that she is working in order to apply. Because her job will start after the funding deadline, she will have to wait until January to reapply for funded hours. This will make working an expensive business for Kyra.
>
> Another difficulty is that the nursery doesn't open until 8 am, whereas Kyra needs to be able to drop off her daughter at 7.30 am. Otherwise, she will be late for work. Kyra's mother had originally promised to cover that half-hour, but she pulled out at the last minute because it was going to be too difficult. Kyra contacted childminders, but they were unable to look after a child for half an hour, and babysitters and at home carers couldn't commit to being there every day. Nothing came of Kyra's request for help from the local authority either.
>
> In the end, Kyra has to turn down the new job. It is too difficult to arrange childcare for her daughter. (*Kyra, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

As this example shows, working and looking after the family are not always easy to combine. This mother faces these difficulties on her own. She has to take account of the requirements of her work, the opening hours of the nursery, the needs of her daughter and what she can afford.

Childcare is crucial in enabling many families with young children to combine work and family, but usually it is insufficient, which is why families combine formal care provision with informal care from family and friends.[1] Both types of childcare are far from universally accessible: formal care is sometimes too expensive or difficult to access, while informal care depends on the family's network and specific needs among other things. In some cases, parents contend with a Catch-22 situation: it is harder for them to find work because suitable childcare is unavailable, and it is harder for them to access childcare because they are out of work.

1.2 Care: necessary and invisible?

Talking in terms of combining work and family, or of work-life balance, often over-simplifies a complex reality. Families make all kinds of choices in response to that complexity, but they do not do so in a vacuum. Government policy on different areas of life affects their daily lives, as do the organisations and environments that family members interact with throughout the day. These policymakers and organisations often take little account of the complexities of daily life in families.[2]

> 'Recently I started a training program but I've had trouble getting regular daycare and I miss days when my daughter is sick. My worker questioned my commitment to the training program and I said, 'They call me and tell me I'm not committed. How encouraging is this? I feel like quitting. My girl is small and she's still breast-feeding.' (*From a study on unpaid work by mothers on social assistance.*)[3]

Families sometimes find themselves in impossible situations that leave them reliant on the goodwill of others.

> The Nzeogwu family has been registered for an integration programme. Both parents have been invited to start a course the following week. Together. They have one week to find childcare for their two children, a baby and a toddler. They don't know if one of them can postpone the course in case they cannot find childcare on time. (*Turnhout, 2018*)

It was unclear to these parents whether they could tell the official who had asked them to attend the course that they were unable to find suitable childcare. They did not know what their rights and obligations were. Sometimes those rights and obligations have not even been defined. Likewise, the official may not have known whether a childcare problem was a valid reason to postpone a course. If this was unclear, the parents were dependent on the goodwill of the official who invited them to attend. If parents in such a situation lack the instinct to check whether the course times can be changed, this family faces a serious problem which is not easy to solve in today's childcare landscape.

1.3 Caringscapes

The literature in this field uses the term 'caringscapes' in order to impart a concrete character to the abstract discussion about how people combine work and family life, including any use they make of informal care. Everyone has their own caringscape, bringing together different areas of life in which different types of care are required. All these types of care have specific characteristics:

- **space: in what spaces is care provided? What physical distances have to be covered to get from one space to another, how many locations does a person have to go to, and what forms of support does he or she have for this?**
- **time: how much time does each activity take? Can the person plan the activity him- or herself, or does a schedule have to be kept to? Are the different schedules easy to combine?**
- **social expectations: what expectations does a person's close and distant social environment have? Are those expectations coloured by the person's gender, education or social status?**
- **social constructs, such as duties and rights: to what extent do those around the person regard care as a duty and self-development as a right?**

People move through this caringscape every day, from one care task to another. They try to devise suitable routes for these movements, to make it possible for them to combine the various forms of care. The caringscape changes constantly throughout a person's life. Every area of life has its own rhythm: parenting changes as children grow up, a career is subject to the rhythms of the regional and global economy.[2]

Many aspects of this caringscape approach receive little attention from policymakers. In addition, different policy areas overlook the fact that rhythms and expectations in one part of life may clash with those in another. Employment market policy seldom takes the changing rhythm of a person's life into account, while care institutions show little interest in the rhythms of a career.[2]

Rhythms and timetables are often imposed. Parents may have some time available, but not when a specific situation requires it. For example, a parent may have time to attend a course, but not after 5.30 pm, as childcare settings will be closed by then. This phenomenon is called 'space-time fixity'[4,5], and for parents it is often coupled with logistical problems, for example to do with transport. Naturally these increase the challenges faced by parents.[3]

Policymakers also lack interest in the specific characteristics of care provision. To some extent, childcare can be planned, but unexpected things come up: children get sick and need to be looked after, the school organises an extra meeting with the parents, the childcare setting closes for the day for training purposes, the oldest child's bicycle breaks and needs repairing, and so on.

Parents must simultaneously operate the daily routines, plan for the longer term and be prepared for the unexpected. In addition, each organisation and practice that they encounter has its own way of doing things, which they must take into account. This is often a one-sided process, requiring adjustment from the families and not from the organisations.
Not all parents struggle equally as they navigate their way through the caring-scape. Some families manage to synchronise the various clocks: the clocks in different contexts such as work and childcare keep time with one another, or one of the parents puts more time into a caregiving role. A gender imbalance is often apparent here. Although it is increasingly taken for granted that parents should share the looking after of their children equally, the task often falls on the mother.[1,2,6]

1.4 Vulnerability and combining work and family

Combining work and family is often even harder for families living in vulnerable circumstances.

The difficulties arise first from the area of work. In some cases, parents in these families have had difficult working lives, especially if they live in a region where employment has declined. Or again, they may have to look for work after a long period of unemployment. Others are forced to take a job with working hours that are hard to combine with family life. Care problems arise in such circumstances.[7]

It certainly makes a difference whether you have a job during office hours or a more irregular job. This latter type of job occurs in many sectors: cleaning, care, security, catering and sales. More and more people have atypical working hours[8], which sometimes differ from week to week, while others are forced to work part-time. In addition, more jobs are being created in the gig economy – for example in courier services – which usually offer weak employment protection. Government policy is often geared to the conventional working day and the conventional employment contract, when a growing group of employees do not have conventional working days and experience insecure employment conditions.

Second, the area of family raises issues for families in vulnerable circumstances. This book examines how families organise care for their toddlers and children, and the choices they do or can make in this respect. Broadly speaking, families have three options: the parents can take care of their children themselves, they can use informal help, or they can use formal childcare.

It remains to be seen whether families can really choose between these options. First, social, economic and cultural expectations and policies play a role in the choices parents can make.[9] In countries where policymakers use a 'one and a half income model', parents' options are not the same as in countries where there is hardly any formal childcare.[1,10] In addition, social and cultural expectations may differ, so that paid work is out of the question for some mothers. Second, practical circumstances play a role. In some families only one parent is present, parents have poorly paid work or there is no social network in the area.
Third, formal childcare is not equally accessible to everyone.[11] Sometimes there is a shortage of nursery places. Equally, the existing provision may not be intelligible and usable for everyone. For example, some parents fear the judgment of early years practitioners, and find they have to justify their use of time.[12] Others see too many differences between their own upbringing and the way children are treated in early years settings,[13] or have the feeling that childcare is not 'for them'.

This complexity in the combination between work and family was the reason for the Interreg 2Seas project PACE (Providing Access to Childcare and Employment). In this social innovation project, project partners in four European countries explored how both work and childcare can be made more accessible for families living in vulnerable circumstances.

1.5 Flexible and occasional childcare

The core contention of this book is that families in vulnerable circumstances need more flexible childcare. It is perfectly conceivable that all families would find greater flexibility useful, but this book deliberately focuses on families in vulnerable circumstances. Childcare policies and practices are not usually geared to this group, but they should be.

Flexibility in this book mainly means flexibility relative to the current regularity of childcare, and flexibility in the organisation and planning of childcare that is currently unable to respond to sudden requests for help. France is the only country in which the term 'regular childcare' is even used in legal texts; the other countries only use terms for the exceptions.
In what follows, we consider how much room for flexibility is possible in the day-to-day operation of childcare settings, given that such flexibility can help to meet families' needs. We deliberately choose to ask a relatively broad and vague question: how and under what circumstances can childcare be more flexible? We also explore the accessibility that can be created within what we call 'regular childcare'.

Occasional and flexible childcare requires a lot of energy, because it deviates from the regular pattern. Does it make sense to put so much energy into it in a particular region when there is a shortage of places?
If more childcare places are created, this does not necessarily mean that vulnerable groups will take them up. The picture is different for occasional and flexible places. Vulnerable families are more likely to need these than regular places, which are hard for them to access, especially when they have no previous experience of childcare.

There is a legal definition of ‘flexible childcare’, namely: childcare at times outside the usual working day. ‘Occasional childcare’, on the other hand, offers a response to sudden, short-term needs. Both forms of childcare are important here, as an employment market based around flexible labour input has implications for families and the care they have to organise. However, this is not to say that childcare has to follow absolutely every development on the job market. The plea for flexibility in this book is a limited one. In essence, the following point is being made: families need to find solutions to the expectations they encounter in different areas of life, and take suitable routes through their caringscape. Where the balance between work and family is concerned, they have to take at least three areas into account, and usually four: work (a job or an activation programme), childcare, school and cultural views on parenting and childcare. This requires more than just good planning: these areas of life have different, sometimes contradictory, rhythms and expectations.[1,2] It may help if policies and practices in these areas take account of the realities of family life. Our limited plea for flexibility in childcare concerns one element of this.

1.6 The structure of the book

Part 1 of this book looks in more detail at *why* there is a need for greater flexibility in childcare. This first chapter has outlined social developments and cultural norms that influence families’ lives. Chapter 2 asks a number of moral questions about these developments. Chapter 3 considers flexibility and stability from a pedagogical viewpoint. Chapter 4 outlines developments in policy on the employment market, families and welfare. Chapter 5 focuses on parents’ perspectives.

How should childcare be made more flexible? This is the question addressed in detail in Part 2 of the book. What forms of flexibility are possible in childcare, and how do these models differ from ‘regular’ childcare? We outline some prototypes for more flexible care and describe a number of practices from the PACE project.

Part 3 examines *what* exactly is needed to make childcare more flexible. Our guiding question here is: how can childcare make life easier for children and their parents? That question cannot be answered without considering how providers operate their services and the perspective of early years practitioners and external partners.

This book contains many testimonials. They are all genuine and were collected during the PACE project. To preserve anonymity, we use fictitious names for the providers of testimonials.

2. A CONTRIBUTION TO THE GOOD LIFE?

In this book we make a plea for flexible childcare. We refer to it as ‘a limited plea’. Our aim is to help families to reconcile expectations from different areas of life. At the same time, we realise that questions have been raised about and opposition expressed to certain developments in various areas of life. Are zero-hour contracts, under which people never know in advance whether they will have work and therefore an income, justified? Is having a job really always a good thing for a parent with young children? Do we want a society where childcare is available day and night? We do not wish to ignore such questions.

At their root lie debates about values such as productivity, profit and taking care of others. Policy choices and societal expectations are also based on values, and more broadly on ideas about the good life and the good society. Sometimes policy texts or opinions state these values and ideas explicitly, but more often they remain implicit.

In this chapter we explore a number of values and ideas that influence our view of work, family and childcare.
The core value is freedom – a concept that has always played an important role in thinking about ethics, the study of the good life for individuals and communities.

Since antiquity, freedom has been associated with responsibility, on the basis that if you act freely, you are responsible for your actions. This idea plays a major role today. In addition, there is debate about specific forms of freedom: freedom of expression, freedom of movement and residence, the freedom to wear a hijab.
In this sense, freedom is closely intertwined with rights. At the core of these freedom-based rights is the right to self-determination, meaning that people are free to do whatever they want. This idea has a prominent place in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, from its very first article: ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.’
But freedom of movement and residence is no use if you cannot afford to move. To really take advantage of the right to self-determination, you thus need resources. Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights therefore states that everyone has the right to own property. This is supplemented by Article 23, which

states that anyone who works has the right to 'just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity'. This ensures that people can create a solid foundation on which to build a life for themselves and their families.
Human rights state that every person must have these two freedoms: freedom of self-determination and freedom of means. Governments are supposed to ensure these things, but not everyone is able to use these freedoms in the same way. All kinds of factors lie behind this: a person's learning ability and physical strength, their background, the region where they were born. Many of these differences cannot be eradicated, and often it would not even be desirable to do so – in the case of innate differences such as hair colour, for instance. However, thinkers and policymakers are constantly looking for ways to treat people fairly, acknowledging that they are 'equal in dignity', so that their freedoms – either of self-determination or of means – are not compromised. Because the contexts in which people live are changing all the time, this quest is never over. The PACE project illustrated this truth.

ETHICAL DISCUSSIONS IN THE PACE PROJECT

During the PACE project, both the partners on the ground and the researchers were confronted with moral questions and dilemmas. These prompted a number of group discussions during partner meetings. The various concerns and differences of opinion that emerged are addressed in this chapter.

2.1 Work and the good life

In 1930, economist John Maynard Keynes[1] predicted that by the end of the century there would be enough prosperity to make work a matter of free choice. His prediction has not come true. We have an apparently insatiable desire for more, according to Robert and Edward Skidelsky,[2] so we carry on working. Furthermore, working embodies values that many strongly support: responsibility, commitment and perseverance, but also self-development and growth. In this value framework, work becomes a right, but also a duty; those who do not work seem to be evading their responsibility. Such thinking lies behind calls to require some effort to be made in exchange for benefits, such as compulsory community service for the unemployed.

When we see work as a duty rather than as a right, we start curbing people's freedom, yet even according to this line of thinking, some people seemingly have the freedom not to work. Those who avail themselves of the freedom not to work, but who do not claim benefits, encounter little opposition. In such cases, the value of the freedom to organise your life the way you want overrides the values associated with work. For those who lack such means, the judgment is usually stricter. They are deemed either to be evading their responsibilities or living at the taxpayer's expense. Even when someone decides not to work in order to take care of someone else full-time, the response is still hesitant. Within an existing system of leave from work, such a choice is acceptable: someone then stays away from work for a while in order to take on care duties. But giving up work, or not looking for it? Such a decision elicits harsher reactions – unless the person in question has the means to not work, in which case he or she is free to choose how to spend his or her time. How the person in question obtained the necessary money is not usually a factor in this judgment; and yet those who inherit great wealth have required no effort or perseverance to do so.
This way of thinking affords some people greater freedom of choice than others, because they have sufficient means, even if they have not actually worked for those means. This creates inequality, which is why proposals are occasionally made to revise the laws on inheritance, and calls are even made for a universal income. So far, however, such proposals have received little attention. For the time being, work appears to be a duty rather than a right for most people, and the relationship between work and freedom is complex.

In the context of childcare, the complex relationship between work and freedom arises in two areas of tension. The first is the tension between paid and unpaid work, while the second has to do with flexible work.

PAID AND UNPAID WORK

In fact, the term 'work' should be replaced with 'paid work' in the above discussion. Many people perform unpaid work, such as household chores, home and vehicle maintenance, or looking after relatives or children. In some cases, this unpaid work may be a reason why paid work is not taken on. It is unclear whether this is a right or not. Some believe that this is only permissible if a family has sufficient means and does not draw on public funds by claiming benefits. Others consider it a duty to take care of one's fellow human beings, even if this prevents a paid job being taken.

Views on this differ, including between governments. Some governments provide benefits in the form of care leave schemes. While this approach shows that care work is valued, activity of this kind is never rewarded as generously as paid work. Those who do such work professionally also earn significantly less than those working in the financial or IT sector, for example. Because of this, it is easier to exercise the freedom not to perform care duties and opt for paid work than to refrain from paid work and provide care instead. To take the second option, you need money; you also need courage, to go against the prevailing norms. These norms are discernible in people's views and reactions, and in policy choices. Government

policies encourage care with systems of leave for care responsibilities and parenthood, as well as laying stress on new ways of organising care such as informal care provided by family members and neighbours. At the same time, such systems of leave and care solutions provide so little money for the carers that only those with sufficient means can choose them.

In this way, current policy choices put forward paid work as the logical option, without actually saying as much.

This preference for paid work is also evident from activation policies: almost all governments try to help as many citizens as possible into paid work, thus giving the impression that paid work is one of the most important duties for a citizen. However, that duty is not expressed in any constitution; nor does the Universal Declaration of Human Rights mention paid work as a basic right. What the Declaration does recognise, however, is the right to development and education. In the case of many forms of paid work, it is legitimate to ask whether they really offer opportunities for development. With monotonous work, this is often not possible during working hours or in a person's social life. Cleaners, for example, usually work alone, either in private homes while the homeowners are out at work, or in offices, before or after regular working hours. And if the work is physically exhausting, little energy is left afterwards for self-development. This is also the case if the working hours deviate greatly from the normal pattern, making leisure activities inaccessible. Activation policies thus take no account of whether work gives those who do it opportunities to develop, evolve and rise beyond their current situation and build a career. As one PACE personnel member put it: 'Not every job is good for your future'.

FLEXIBLE WORK

Flexible work takes many forms: from portfolio work to precarious work, with and without acceptable social protection.[3] For all types of flexible work, the pros and cons revolve around freedom. Its advocates believe that flexible working hours give employees greater freedom: they can choose whether or not to work, or at what times and during what periods. Ideally, this allows them to fit their work around their private life. Its critics lay particular stress on the employer's freedom: flexible jobs give employers the opportunity to organise work in such a way that the activity yields the highest returns, even at the expense of the employees' quality of life. In such a system, employees may suddenly be called in to work, or be sent home if there is not enough work. Supporters respond that flexible contracts with reasonable social protection give workers the freedom to say no.
Two interpretations of freedom clash here: freedom of self-determination and freedom of means. Employees with material and financial means behind them, who do not have to fight for every penny, can afford to make their working hours fit their other activities. Those with fewer means cannot afford to do so. An example from the gig economy may make the difference clearer. Many bicycle couriers say that they are happy with their flexible working arrangements because they can choose when to work. However, a journalist observed that at certain times the only couriers working are riding rickety bicycles and have a poor command of the language.

There is plenty of work at such times, but it is inconvenient because it is very late, or because the weather is terrible.[4] Do these couriers have the freedom not to work at such times? If bills have to be paid, perhaps not. Or again, if they have to prove that they work enough hours per week to rent a home, perhaps not. And then there is the employer's freedom to assign more or fewer jobs to a particular employee in the future: that freedom may prevent the employee from earning enough income in the future.

Anyone whose starting point is that people are free to choose where and when they work is in danger of overlooking the fact that some people live in circumstances that hinder such choices.

Hungry children, overdue bills, creditors, fear of losing benefits… these are just some of the reasons why people take a job they would never choose in better circumstances. The same may also be true of permanent jobs, of course, but with flexible work the risk for the employee increases. For example, he or she may have to be available at all times and to adapt to the whims of whoever assigns the work.
With this in mind, various questions can be raised about the ethics of flexible work. Undoubtedly, some people make a conscious choice in favour of a flexible job, which gives them the opportunity and freedom for self-fulfilment. However, this does not apply to everyone: those in a weak position cannot enjoy such freedom. For them, flexible work is likely to stand in the way of their freedom: they must be permanently available, and never dare to turn down an assignment even if it disrupts their family life. The same flexible job may have completely different meanings for two people: for a student looking for a nice extra source of income, a job in the gig economy gives freedom, whereas for a father who cannot find other work, it may be a stranglehold that means he is permanently on call.
If policymakers consider the freedom to create flexi-jobs important, they should also pay attention to the other side of the coin: the freedom that comes from having the means of subsistence. Someone is only really free to choose when to work and not to work when he or she has a solid financial basis.

2.2 Families and the good society

For a long time, families were left out of thinking about the good life and the good society. Society was all about legally capacitated individuals. At first, that meant men. Women, children, the sick or people with disabilities were excluded. Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the family has been explicitly recognised as the 'natural and fundamental group unit of society', entitled to 'protection by society and the State'. Despite this, thinking about families as an entity remains difficult. The point about families is that different individuals coexist in them. Achieving that coexistence is itself something that takes work. The equilibrium in families also shifts constantly, not least because children grow up and develop

different needs and interests. Moreover, the context to which families must relate is a changing one too.
Norms and values about families, like all norms and values, are context-specific: their starting point is prevailing ideas about the good life and the good society. It is therefore not surprising that the same values come up as in the debate about work: freedom, responsibility, commitment and development. Norms concerning families are also closely related to those concerning child-rearing, given that child-rearing largely takes place in the family.

THE FAMILY AS A CHOICE

For a long time, starting a family was seen as a duty. That idea derived from religious notions, but also from the need to survive. Different generations could support each other or, in wealthier circles, safeguard the family's property and status. Accordingly, many families were started as a social contract rather than through spontaneous volition. These days, a family is a matter of the free choice of two individuals, and this is how it is presented in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This view is in line with the individual interpretation of freedom as self-determination – the interpretation that also influences thinking about work. If starting a family is a choice, then those who make the choice must be responsible for its consequences. That means that parents must take care of their children; they are free to seek help with the task, but that too is a choice that parents have to sort out on their own.

The focus on freedom and responsibility disregards a number of complex issues that affect the family and its members. First, the idea of the family as a free choice assumes that the two people who start it are in an equal relationship and are therefore free to choose how to act on their joint responsibility for the family. Many families clearly lack these free choices. One of the reasons for this is that women often earn less than men: if a family opts for one parent to work fewer hours in order to take on care duties, the choice will tend to fall on the lower earner. Such a choice makes sense, as the family needs a solid financial foundation, but it leaves us asking whether the family can really choose which parent will work less.

Furthermore, in many families the two partners do not have the same freedom. For example, women spend up to an hour and a half more per day on housework and childcare, and they also take on the practical and organisational aspects of that care.[5] Do women freely choose these tasks, or do they decide to take them on as otherwise they just would not get done? A final difference is that women's tasks are often pressing: if the woman does not do the laundry now, there will be no clean clothes; if she does not arrange childcare for the holidays, there will be no places left.[6] On the other hand, men often get the responsibility of providing for the family income, when some would prefer to reverse the roles. Cultural and normative views have a real impact on families in this respect. We can conclude that there are many reasons why the partners in a family cannot be equal. This inequality sometimes affects the whole family, and sometimes one of the partners.

A second factor that can affect a family's freedom is an unexpected event or setback. For example, nobody chooses to lose their partner, but a single parent has less freedom: he or she alone must provide a solid foundation and do the housework. Likewise, nobody chooses for their partner, child or parent to fall ill, but the parent to whom this happens usually accepts his or her responsibility and provides care, no matter how energy-consuming it is to do so.

A third way in which contexts affect the freedom of families is both explicit and implicit. It consists of various forms of parenting advice, as well as social norms and values about children's behaviour. Such advice comes from all sides: from government agencies, research institutes and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but also from magazines, books, TV programmes, social media and posters. Parenting advice often seems neutral, but in practice it is based on an ideal model that takes no account of the context in which a family lives. As a result, it tends to be blind to the impact of circumstances on parenting.[7] It is also predicated on norms of good behaviour in children which are rarely explicitly formulated. If a nursery contacts the parents to tell them that their child is unwilling to stop playing at afternoon snack time, the underlying norm is that children should be obedient and eat at times decided on by adults. In principle, families are free not to follow all the advice or to fit in with the norms and values. For example, they may start toilet training early, when the advice suggests that they should not do so until later, or they may introduce solids later than the recommended age, but those who do not follow the advice tend to be regarded as irresponsible. They may find that adopting their own approach impedes social contacts, but also undermines their right to support if that approach does not work out.[8] A family that toilet-trains a child soon after birth, as is customary in China, risks negative comments if the child has problems with toilet training at nursery school.

Finally, government policy also influences families' freedom. Most governments provide financial allowances for families, such as tax breaks, child benefit or childcare allowances. By doing so, they contribute to the positive freedom of families: their solid foundation. At the same time, it should be noted that some measures are only attractive to those who have enough money. Families with limited income or with debts therefore find it harder to assume their responsibilities; they are less able to afford the time for parenting and for family life.

> **Even if we believe that families are started out of free choice and that those who start them must assume responsibility for them, family members are unlikely to have chosen contextual factors such as income inequality, unaffordable leave systems, rigid views on parenting or misfortunes.**

FAMILIES AND WORK

A family has numerous connections to the world around it. Children go to nursery and to school, have extra music or drama lessons, attend sports clubs, develop friendships, need medical or paramedical attention and so on. Parents facilitate these commitments for many years, taking responsibility for communication, arrangements, material equipment and transport. This requires time, energy and

resources on top of their efforts to provide essentials such as food, heating, clothing and cleaning. Parents too have links with the rest of the world, through leisure activities and contacts with friends, neighbours and family. If they also have full-time jobs, they have a lot on their plates. Often, they seek help from family members or a paid care worker. For the first source of support, they need an extended family network. Many families lack this, for example those that have recently immigrated. For the second solution, a paid care worker, a family needs a guaranteed income. Not every family has that either. Combining family and work is even harder for families without a network and with only a limited income than for families with longstanding links to their local area. On the other hand, work offers parents more security: they are not dependent on benefits and can try to improve their
opportunities on the job market. When both parents work, they are in a stronger position if one of them drops out. Ultimately, these factors mean that parents' choices are more limited than our beliefs about freedom and individual choices suggest.

With all this in mind, we can turn to the subject of flexible work. Is it acceptable for parents to have a job that demands a great deal of flexibility from them, where they only know shortly in advance whether or not they are needed for work and for how many hours? How can they combine a job of this kind with the requirements of the family? Moreover, it is usually uncertain whether such a job will provide them with sufficient income.

2.3 Childcare from an ethical perspective

Childcare allows parents to work or attend training while maintaining the family's status as 'the natural and fundamental group unit of society', as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also gives children the opportunity to develop and to experience the world outside the family. In these ways, childcare contributes to society.

CHILDCARE AS A CHOICE

Many parents who work opt for formal childcare of their own free will, sometimes in combination with informal care provided by the extended family. For families without relatives living locally, that choice does not exist. At the same time, activation policies leave little room for choice, with their assumption that parents are willing to use formal care if they cannot rely on an informal network. In that sense, childcare is not a spontaneous choice for many families. There are also families that are unable to opt for childcare because it does not meet their needs.
The nursery may not be open when they need it.
Again, deciding that a child will go to nursery is one thing, but finding a place is quite another. There are all sorts of providers, with varying approaches to childcare and organisational structures: this gives the impression that families are free to choose a specific form of childcare, but making an informed choice requires

energy, time and general education. In addition, not every early years provider is easily accessible or affordable, and the opening hours may not coincide with the working hours of the parents. Freedom of choice is therefore essentially theoretical in nature. While most governments do want to guarantee the right to good childcare, this can only be achieved by ensuring high quality care provision at every setting, and that costs money; so too does creating enough nursery places. If there is little money available, governments are thus faced with a choice: create enough places or guarantee that all existing places offer quality.

For parents who are not in paid work, childcare may also be a choice, for example in order to give a child the chance to interact with peers and discover the world outside the family. Childcare offers parents some breathing-space without their children around. Because places are scarce and costly for the government, the question often arises whether such a use of childcare is justifiable. In any case, governments tend to prioritise children with working parents, even though many researchers point to the benefits of childcare in terms of poverty reduction. This reduces families' choice whether or not to use childcare.

The question of whether childcare is or should be a matter of free choice is related to the question of whether it is always justified. For very young children, there is widespread doubt about this. Countries make different policy choices in this area: the length of statutory maternity leave varies, and countries also have different activation policies for parents of young children. In England and France, parents with children under the age of two do not have to explain why they are not looking for work, unlike in Belgium and the Netherlands. It is no coincidence that children in Belgium and the Netherlands can start nursery from the age of three months.

In the PACE project, the starting age for childcare turned out to be an ongoing point of discussion. Policy officers from England could scarcely believe that three-month-old babies would go to nursery. It is rare for this to happen in England. Quite a few of the policy officers from Belgium and the Netherlands agreed that children start nursery too young but felt that this practice improves mothers' career prospects. The participants from all countries agreed with this. In England, at least one of the two parents will find it hard to return to work quickly, as childcare for young children is very expensive and no financial support is provided for it. In practice, mothers stay at home.

CHILDCARE AND WORK

It is clear from the previous section that some parents are unable to opt for childcare because it is not open when they need it, or because there are no places when they are suddenly asked to come in to work. The question then arises whether childcare should respond to the flexibility of the employment market. This is a complex issue. For example, there is the danger that childcare workers may themselves end up in a flexible work situation, because it is so difficult to predict how many children will come to the nursery. Governments could assist with this by funding flexible places whether or not they are taken up. Nurseries would then be able to protect their employees, and both parents and childcare workers would benefit. However, this would effectively involve governments supporting employers who organise flexible work, despite the many ethical concerns about it. Another option would be for employers offering flexible work to fund childcare places. Given that they are usually able to find enough candidates without children, and such funding would reduce their profit margins, such a scenario only seems likely in the event of severe labour shortages.

The one thing that participants in the PACE project agreed on was that childcare workers are in a highly responsible position. They look after very young children with little ability to express their needs or give consent verbally, and they are in charge of many children at the same time. That responsibility is not reflected in their wages – the sector pays poorly – and career opportunities are also limited. Many participants in the project regarded this tension between low remuneration and great responsibility as unethical. If it also becomes possible for childcare workers' jobs to be made more flexible, this unethical character is likely to be reinforced. This is only too likely, because work in childcare depends on demand at a particular time in a particular area. Most parents will not travel long distances or pay large amounts for childcare: if they were able to do so, they could simply hire an at home childcarer.

Childcare is vital for the labour market and for parents seeking fulfilling work. Not all parents fall into this category. Activation policies or financial need push some parents into jobs that offer them few development opportunities and above all take up a lot of energy. In addition, simply dropping the children off at the nursery and picking them up again on time can be quite an effort. Often, the income parents earn in their job is not enough to pay for childcare, so the government steps in. The question then arises whether the money that the government puts into childcare is well spent, when it could equally be used to fund parental leave.

2.4 Towards a fair policy on family and work: four pleas

All the questions that have arisen in connection with work, families and childcare are complex in nature and cannot be answered clearly. How then should we cut through the complexity? What action should be taken? We have four pleas to make.

1. The first is our limited plea for occasional and flexible childcare. Although we have doubts about the desirability of the developments on the labour market that create the need for such care, for the time being we believe that sensible practices need to be found that offer flexibility to families. This will enable parents to assume their social responsibility and find work or do the job they have already found. Both children and their parents will then be able to develop their potential and families will be able to organise their lives.

2. The second plea is for care work to be valued more highly. We take it for granted that there is someone who washes the clothes, looks after the garden, prepares meals, does the shopping, provides first aid and offers a listening ear when there are problems, until that person is no longer able to do so. Many of these tasks take place inside the home or on the move between other activities, and are therefore hardly visible. Furthermore, not everyone takes on such tasks. The American political scientist Joan Tronto shows that some people can afford not to assume their responsibility for care tasks. She uses the term 'privileged irresponsibility'.[9] Both the rich and less wealthy people who can count on others enjoy this privilege. Limited appreciation for care is also reflected in the low levels of remuneration for paid care work. This applies both to traditional care professions and to cleaning, catering and other household work. If care is valued more highly, it will become more obvious that everyone should take on such tasks, and the care professions will also be better paid. To put it another way, the care professions will then be remunerated at least on an equivalent footing to other forms of work.

3. A third plea is for attention to be given to the recipients of care. Many forms of professional care take place through fixed procedures that are the same for everyone. In some nurseries, for example, nappies are changed at set times. With such an approach, the recipient of care disappears from view, whether he or she is happy with the care being provided or not. In childcare, care recipients have started to receive considerably more attention in recent years. For example, care providers consistently look at children's well-being and engagement. The idea has gradually developed that the whole family is a care recipient. Early years settings may then make decisions that may not be optimal for a child today, but that offer a better outcome for the family as a whole. If two parents suddenly have to attend an activation programme, the nursery can shorten the child's settling-in period. Having a longer settling-in period may be better for the child, but reducing it in these circumstances is a good decision for the family as a whole.

Our plea is that focusing on the care recipient in this way should be the starting point. He or she should have the freedom to make choices rather than simply accept care in whatever form it is provided, and to take an active role in the care process. All care recipients can do this, including children: it is up to the care provider to see how that child responds, and to recipients to provide care themselves. Even young children can adopt a caring attitude – for each other, for example by handing over a toy, or for adults, by showing empathy if something goes wrong. This understanding of care derives from the ethics of care;[9] it deliberately moves away from the idea that a care recipient should above all be grateful, and advocates a reciprocal, equal relationship between care provider and care recipient.

4. Our final plea is a plea for generous policies. Again, we draw inspiration here from the ethics of care. One of the basic principles of this approach is that people should take account not just of values and principles in complex decisions, but also of the feelings and ideas of people who are close to their hearts and whom they do not want to hurt or disappoint.[10] We contend that government policy should also look at the connections between people. We wish to stress that the idea that people take up care tasks of their own volition overlooks the fact that people live in relation to others and feel a responsibility to take care of them. Even if they do make that choice freely, they might do things differently in other circumstances; and they did not choose the circumstances in which they find themselves. An activation policy could, for example, take account of the different forms of care that an unemployed person provides. At the same time, it could ensure that privileged irresponsibility disappears and that everyone takes on care tasks.

With these four pleas in mind, we can now re-examine flexible and occasional care and look for a meaningful and clear interpretation of the concept.

3. OCCASIONAL AND FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

There is currently no ready-made definition of occasional and flexible childcare. Policy texts use a variety of interpretations, as do the handful of scientific publications about the concept. To arrive at a workable definition, we must first consider all the forms of childcare that are labelled as ‘occasional’ and ‘flexible’. To understand these interpretations, we will first examine the concepts of stability and instability and the concept of continuity.

3.1 Stability and instability

Stability is an important topic in discussions about quality childcare. This has been the case since the early 20th century, when a holy trinity of calmness, cleanliness and regularity was invariably put forward as the best way to raise children, at home and in the nursery.[1] In practice, this meant advocating the use of easily manageable groups:

> ‘Children should be divided into small groups, each of which forms a unit, with classrooms arranged in such a way that they can be isolated if necessary. Such an arrangement not only has a beneficial effect on health, as any infections can be limited, but also on child-rearing.’ (*Hommelen, 1961; quoted in Vandenbroeck, 2012*)[2]

To this day, virtually every childcare manual presents ways to create such stability, such as this 2003 publication:

> ‘Rest and regularity are important for children’s development. In a nursery, this means that children should be able to trust that a regular supervisor will take care of them and comfort them when they are upset. It gives children a firm foundation when they know what their week or day will be like. Childcare on set days and

a number of set routines per day help the children with this. For example, they will then know that a book will be read to them after their drink of milk, or that they will have a nap in the afternoon. If children are always cared for in the same group, they get to know the other children in their group well and friendships can develop. In addition, they will then acquire a permanent place in the group, so that their position does not constantly have to be determined. All these factors ensure that a child experiences rest and regularity, or stability.'[3]

In this description, stability is related to the organisational and pedagogical elements of childcare: care on set childcare days, permanent carers, a set group and rituals.

The focus on stability is based on the idea that instability has negative consequences for children. According to a number of scientific studies, children in an unstable environment can develop behavioural and emotional problems, or even display developmental delays.[4,5,6] But how does the literature define an unstable environment? Various forms of stability are referred to. There is instability during the day, with various different caregivers. Researchers also refer to the combination of different types of childcare as unstable; this happens when a child first goes to an informal carer, then to a formal care setting and then to another informal carer. Finally, switching from one nursery to another is also an unstable situation for a child.[6,7,8] In many texts about unstable care settings, it is unclear exactly what is meant, and this unclear definition makes it difficult to interpret research results.

Texts about the alarming consequences of instability for children usually disregard the motives for setting up stable or unstable care situations, despite the fact that both early years settings and parents have their reasons for opting for stability or its opposite.
Childcare organisations have to comply with a complex set of rules and expectations – for example, they must observe a maximum occupancy rate. At the same time, though, if they look after too few children they will lose funding and go bust. In addition, childcare requires a lot of organisation, all of which – ordering meals, assigning staff, cleaning rooms and so on – goes more smoothly for all parties involved if there are stable arrangements and predictable rhythms. Moreover, early years providers operate in a context of policy and regulation that reflects the prevailing social norms, and these state at present that stability is a good thing. All these factors combine to give stability a major role in childcare.

Parents, on the other hand, sometimes make choices that can lead to instability in the care of their children. That may be a positive choice, for example because the parent thinks another early years setting is better, because he or she is taking parental leave or because the family is moving closer to the parents' workplace. The change may also be imposed, because the early years provider closes, or the parent has to change jobs or has a change of timetable which means that his or her working hours no longer fit with the nursery's opening times. Parents have many factors to consider. The quality of an early years provider is just one of them.[8,9]

The choices that parents make are related to the caringscape in which they operate, and childcare is only one part of this. For instance, a parent may make a choice that produces greater stability in the areas of work and family life, but less so in childcare. Moving house is an example of this. Conversely, childcare may be the unstable factor: parents who cannot count on reliable and affordable care are more likely to change jobs and experience a stressful family life.[10,11] In addition to stability and instability, the flexibility that they experience in each area of life is also an important factor for parents. Those who have a job with fixed hours will need more flexibility in other areas than those with adjustable working hours. In their search for suitable childcare, parents will also try to create flexibility in other areas of life, so as to try to create conditions in which they can find optimal childcare.[12]

Stability and instability can therefore mean different things to early years providers and to parents. For children, these concepts may have still other meanings.

In practice, children at nursery can experience a variety of forms of instability: for example, in a setting with fixed childcare hours, the structure of the day may be unclear or constantly changing, or there may be regular staff changes. Conversely, a child who only comes to nursery occasionally may still experience stability – for example, if the nursery workers make things predictable by using clear transition rituals, saying what they are going to do, or getting children who come more often set an example. This form of stability is consistent with the continuity, predictability and close child-carer relationship that the literature on childcare emphasises as important characteristics.[5,7,13,14] These characteristics are valuable, but can still have a place in a system that departs from the stability of fixed childcare schedules, early reservations and a fixed group of children.

Conclusion
Continuity and regularity are important for children. A lot of research indicates that they ensure stability. Early years providers rightly take these findings into account. The problem, however, is that they have responded by creating a rigid system that focuses on stability on the outside – the form of stability that an outsider can recognise, such as advance reservations, fixed childcare schedules, fixed starting times and fixed groups.
Parents who are unable to plan in advance in this way due to the demands of other areas of life are left out: they are forced to look for different childcare solutions, singly or in combination.[10,15] Paradoxically, the childcare system in fact ends up creating more instability for these families. However, stability on the outside does not necessarily correspond to stability on the inside. That is, the stability that children experience in the structures and information presented to them, the relationships they build, and the stability that enables families to organise family life so that each family member experiences inner peace.

3.2 Flexibility

Parents need flexibility in order to coordinate the different areas of life. Their preference is to find some form of flexibility in each area of life. In the case of childcare, this flexibility might mean that it can be planned shortly in advance, that the schedules are adaptable, and that families make varying use of care – sometimes more, sometimes less. Parents who work shifts may only need childcare in the morning on week one, for three full days on week two, and only on the weekend of week three. Few countries have a solution for this. In Sweden and Finland, parents who work shifts or do night work can count on 24-hour childcare. Their children can be dropped off at a nursery early in the morning, late at night or during the night. This form of childcare is certainly supportive for single parents or those with a limited informal network.

There is no entitlement to childcare outside standard opening hours in any of the PACE project countries, despite the fact that activation policies oblige many parents to work irregular hours. What parents can do is pay for an at home childcarer; only in exceptional cases do businesses or hospitals organise their own childcare provision (during the day or at night).

Furthermore, work is not the only area of life that necessitates flexible childcare. Other children's care needs may also be a reason, as became clear during the PACE project:

> 'I needed the flexibility to take my older child for medical appointments.'
> (*Anissa, Gravesham, 2019*)

Flexibility can take many forms, partly depending on the rules. The table below shows how the regulations in the four PACE countries describe and give shape to flexibility. We compare these interpretations with the everyday reality in these countries.

	Flanders	France	The Netherlands	England
Do the regulations mention flexibility?	Yes, mentioned in legal texts.	Yes, though that term is not used. And only France mentions the opposite concept: accueil regulier (regular childcare).	Yes, mentioned in the Department of Education's statutory guidance for local authorities.	No, not mentioned in legal texts.
Forms of flexibility explicitly mentioned by the regulations	Childcare in a home setting: *Childcare at atypical hours* Childcare in a group setting: *Childcare at atypical hours Extended opening times: before 7am or after 6pm, at weekends or on public holidays.*	The regulations refer to souplesse (adaptability) rather than flexibility: 'Childcare provision shall be adaptable and able to meet occasional childcare needs'.[16]	The regulations link flexibility to the needs of parents: childcare at times which fit with the times that parents need in order to work or increase their hours of work.[17] Flexibility is desirable for the free hours for 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds. Within certain limits, local authorities may require this flexibility.[18]	The government website mentions the term only once.[19] It means childcare on varying days.
How childcare providers provide flexibility	Childcare outside normal opening hours and days. Families with a flexible childcare plan, if the early years provider agrees.	Different forms: short-term childcare, emergency childcare, care on varying days/times or at atypical times. In addition, there is flexibility in regular childcare: parents can reserve 100 hours of childcare without determining in advance when they will use it.	Parents can schedule childcare sessions flexibly. Parents can spread the funded hours over days and weeks.	Children not going to nursery on the same days every week. The interpretation of flexibility is limited, as the quality requirements are predicated on continuity and regularity. There is a fixed-face criterion for children under one year of age.[20]
Can all parents make use of the flexibility?	Parents depend on the local provision of flexible childcare.	Parents depend on the local provision of flexible childcare.	Parents depend on the local provision. Some authorities require wider provision of flexible childcare.	Very limited. Flexible childcare is only possible at the highest prices.

3.3 Occasional childcare

Adapted or varying opening hours are not the solution for all childcare needs. Parents are sometimes confronted with unexpected situations that require a different form of flexibility, in particular a day or longer period of childcare that could not have been foreseen.

> 'I needed to attend an interview and had no childcare.'
> (*Susanna, Gravesham, 2019*)

Most countries call this type of care occasional childcare. Like flexible childcare, occasional childcare is interpreted differently in the regulations and day-to-day reality of childcare in the four PACE countries.

France sees occasional childcare as any form of incidental childcare. Such care is temporary and the need for it is a one-off occurrence and only known about shortly in advance. The regulations contrast this type of childcare with regular childcare, where there is a recurring need that is known about well in advance. This means that France also sees care on varying days as regular childcare, if those days are known about well in advance.[21]

In Flanders, the regulations include a specific interpretation of occasional childcare. This type of care lasts for a maximum of six months and is reserved for families in specific situations:

- The parent is not working and starts training.
- The parent is not working but suddenly finds work.
- The parent attends a job interview.
- The family faces an acute crisis.
- The family needs short-term relief from the burden of childcare.
- The child needs childcare outside the family for social and/or pedagogical reasons.

In the Netherlands and England, the regulations do not mention occasional childcare. This type of care is not prohibited, but the funding system makes it extremely difficult to provide occasional childcare. The pedagogical guidelines also make occasional childcare provision difficult, because they place emphasis on continuity and supporting children's development and learning.

3.4 Flexible and occasional childcare: the PACE definitions

This book has developed definitions of flexible and occasional childcare. These originated in the course of the PACE project and are based on scientific literature and on discussions with the various partners from the four countries.

Occasional childcare refers to forms of childcare that families can use for a limited period of time, in the short term.

This definition allows for various interpretations. These include emergency childcare, which is arranged at very short notice, after a brief registration procedure and often without a settling-in period. In this form, the French haltes-garderies provide this form of occasional childcare for parents in an emergency situation, for example in the event of an unforeseen hospitalisation or a summons to appear in court. In Flanders, childcare settings can reserve crisis places; however, they will only receive funding if they can demonstrate that they have provided a crisis place for at least three children that year. Apart from this, parents are usually dependent on the goodwill of childcare settings making space within their normal operation in response to an emergency.

Another form of occasional childcare is short-term childcare. In Flanders, newcomers to the region are obliged to attend an integration programme, which usually takes six weeks. Two nurseries, Het Lindeke in Turnhout and 38 Volt in Mechelen, provide care for children of parents on this programme. In England, Butterfly Nursery provides occasional childcare for patients at an outpatient clinic, who are on kidney dialysis, for example. Parents who unexpectedly have to go to the hospital can drop off their child at Butterfly, which is next to the hospital. This does not need to be arranged in advance.

Flexible childcare refers to forms of childcare that families with irregular and unpredictable childcare needs can use. The hours and times of day of such care varies.

This definition can lead to different practices, adapted to a local context. In Brighton & Hove (England), the local authorities coordinate a childcare service for families with unpredictable childcare needs. This includes overnight care and care outside the regular opening hours. In the Kent region, a number of private nurseries have experimented by scheduling childcare sessions more flexibly. In Flanders, 38 Volt offers total flexibility with scheduling, but within regular opening hours.

3.5 Flexible and occasional childcare: what about stability?

As stated, stability is a core concept in childcare. Earlier we saw that stability on the outside, in the organisation and scheduling of care, is not the same as stability on the inside, in the experiences of children and parents. One side effect of the emphasis on stability on the outside is that families in vulnerable situations may make less use of childcare. One-parent families, newcomers or low-income families are more likely to have flexible needs; these needs are met by flexible and occasional care.

We would argue that flexible and occasional childcare is no obstacle to stability. Early years providers have plenty of opportunities to work on pedagogical stability. Moreover, in the childcare area of life, flexibility is needed to achieve stability in the experiences of children and parents – otherwise, parents are forced to opt for systems that cannot provide pedagogical stability. Flexible and occasional childcare can help parents find routes through their caringscape, even when certain areas of life, such as work or integration programmes, require great flexibility from them. Furthermore, these forms of childcare help parents to create new stability, for example by earning a steady income.[22]

> **At present, childcare does not permit such flexibility in most places, not because providers are unwilling, but because they are operating in an unstable system.**

Settings depend on the fees that parents pay and on funding. That funding is linked to the number of childcare hours taken up, not the number of hours that are set aside. If parents do not bring their child in for a few days, the nursery has no income. In countries that operate with demand-side funding, it is the parents who experience instability. If they lose their job or start working less, their tax break or funded childcare will be lost. Arguably, this is a form of flexibility too – but on the side of the funding system, not the parents.
This is why we advocate a stable childcare system which allows settings to take a flexible approach to families.

4. POLICY ON FAMILY LIFE AND WORK IN 2020

4.1 Introduction

Every family functions as a caringscape in which different rhythms, expectations and responsibilities converge.[1] In this chapter we look at the policy choices that influence that caringscape. Our starting point is childcare policy – the point at which labour market policy, family policy and demographic changes intersect.
First, we outline childcare policy in the Netherlands, France, England and Flanders. When we talk about childcare, we mean formal care for babies and toddlers under 3 years of age for Flanders and France, under 4 years of age for the Netherlands and under 5 years of age for England. This formal care includes various types, such as nurseries, pre-school, childminders and at home childcarers.
In the rest of the chapter, we then investigate the ways in which childcare policy is consistent or inconsistent with policy choices in other areas. In doing this, we also look at how childcare policy works in practice: which families and parents benefit from it, and which do not. In order to be able to interpret childcare policy, we start with a brief historical overview.

4.2 The way it was: childcare policy from a historical perspective

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, many women worked to feed their families, in factories or on the land. They were usually paid less than their husbands. Childcare was organised not by the government, but by factories and charities, which saw it as a means of combating child mortality or of making up for the 'bad parenting habits' of the working class.[2] The care that was provided had a poor reputation and its quality was generally low.[3]

The Second World War was followed by a period of economic boom, in which governments focused on social interventions such as universal education, employment, healthcare, pensions and social security. Childcare was not part of this, as the male breadwinner model predominated in most Western European countries.[4] Advice on childrearing and parenting in these countries was based on models imported from the US, such as Bowlby's attachment theory, which encouraged

mothers to take responsibility and look after children at home.[2] When parents used childcare, they did so mainly out of economic necessity; it was regarded as a necessary evil.

Gradually, more women started working outside the home, and the number of working women rose spectacularly in France and Flanders in the 1970s and 1980s. Childcare slowly gained in popularity among middle-class families, whose needs therefore played an important role in the way it was organised. They worked full-time, during office hours, and from the 1970s and 1980s onwards childcare was organised accordingly. Regularity and continuity became the norm.[2]

In the Netherlands and England, the government hesitated for a long time to get involved in private matters such as childrearing. Moreover, a 'motherhood ideology'[5] prevailed in these countries, according to which it was morally objectionable for women with young children to go out to work. When women's employment saw a big increase in the Netherlands in the 1980s, it was mainly in part-time work.[6] Policymakers did not take any initiatives to make it easier to combine work and family at that time.[2] To start with, many families in the Netherlands and England succeeded in combining family and work on their own, including by using informal childcare.[4,7] When childcare became necessary, governments mainly focused on part-time provision, with limited opening hours. This part-time childcare stimulated the one-and-a-half breadwinner model, in which mainly mothers worked part-time.[8]

Most European countries only started investing in childcare when so many women were already working that the provision was obviously no longer adequate.[4] Flanders began to do so in the 1970s, after which the number of families using childcare rose sharply;[2] France followed in the 1980s. In the late 1980s, 20% of 0- to 3-year-olds in Belgium and France were already receiving subsidised childcare. The figure in the Netherlands and England was 2%;[9] these countries invested heavily in childcare during the 1990s, however.[4] From then on, government childcare spending rose continuously everywhere, a trend that has persisted in the 21st century.

4.3 The way it is: childcare policy today

THE ORGANISATION OF CHILDCARE IN THE FOUR PACE COUNTRIES

The Barcelona objectives from 2002 represent an important guideline for childcare in Europe. These state that there should be formal childcare for at least 90% of children over 3 years of age, and for 33% of children between 0 and 3 years.[10]

In fact, the Barcelona objectives are not particularly ambitious as regards the care of babies and toddlers, especially in light of employment policies. All PACE countries meet these standards, but a great many differences can be seen in the way they organise and approach childcare.

	Flanders	France	The Netherlands	England
Age at which all children are entitled to a free place	2.5 years preschool in the elementary education system (compulsory from 5 years)	3 years preschool in the elementary education system (compulsory from 3 years)	4 years preschool in the elementary education system (compulsory from 5 years)	3 years 15 hours of childcare per week. Provision starts in the term following the child's third birthday (compulsory primary education starts at 5 years)
System for 0- to 6-year-olds	Separate system for 0- to 3-year-olds and for 3- to 6-year-olds Separate ministries and guidelines. Childcare workers are less highly trained than preschool workers.	Separate system for 0- to 3-year-olds and for 3- to 6-year-olds Separate ministries and guidelines. Childcare workers are as highly trained as preschool workers.	Separate system for 0- to 4-year-olds and for children over the age of 4 Separate ministries. No pedagogical guidelines in childcare. Higher training requirements from preschool education onwards.	Semi-integrated system. One ministry.[11] The guidelines vary according to the setting. Levels of training also vary.
% of 0- to 3-year-olds who attend childcare for at least a few hours per week (figures from 2017). Average number of hours of childcare per week	52.9% (31.1 hours per week)	50.5% (31.1 hours per week)	61.6% (16.7 hours per week)	33.2% (16.5 hours per week)
Average price per month in PPS[12]	258 PPS (285 euros)	121-274 PPS (133-301 euros)	511 PPS (572 euros)	1,090 PPS (1,067 pounds)
Prices regulated?	yes	yes	no	no
Childminder places	Highly developed and regulated 30% of childcare for 0- to 3-year-olds	Highly developed and regulated 57% of childcare for 0- to 3-year-olds	Highly developed and regulated 18% of childcare for 0- to 3-year-olds	Highly developed and regulated 18% of childcare places[13]

	Flanders	France	The Netherlands	England
Staff:child ratio for 2-year-olds in childcare in a group setting	1:9 if several staff members are present, otherwise 1:8; 1:14 during breaks.	1:8	1:8 For children under the age of 1, the ratio was lowered from 1:4 to 1:3 in 2019.	1:4
Staff:child ratio for childminders	*1:8*	*1:4*	*1:4*	*1:3 with max. 1 child under the age of 1.*
Subsidy type: supply side (childcare provider) or demand side (parents)	Supply side plus additional demand side reimbursement through tax system. Parents who do not use income-related childcare receive an additional subsidy on the demand side, the childcare allowance (Growth Package).[14]	Supply side	Demand side (through tax system)	Demand side (through parents: funded childcare hours and tax system)
Proportion of private, unsubsidised child-care places	Around 10% of places are not subsidised or only receive a basic subsidy.	Mainly subsidised places.	Mainly private providers in a market-driven system.	Mainly independent providers of various natures: charities, voluntary organisations.
Measures to increase access for vulnerable families	Children in great need[15] have priority. Children from vulnerable families have priority and pay less.[16]	Children in great need have priority. Children in poverty have priority and pay less.	Price reductions for families with a certain score for risk factors that predict possible educational disadvantage (complex system).	Low-income families can receive 15 hours of funded childcare per week for their 2-year-olds if they submit an application.

A quick look at childcare in the PACE countries shows that the historical differences have persisted; as a result, France and Flanders show many similarities, as do the Netherlands and England. Full-time use of care is highest in Flanders and France, both of which combine well-developed public provision with subsidised private places. Most childcare settings work with prices that take the parents' income and the number of children in the family into account. Furthermore, Flanders and France both have a system of childminder care which accounts for a significant proportion of places.

Childcare in England and the Netherlands is largely run by private businesses. Parents apply for financial support themselves, and receive reimbursements through the tax system.[17] In the Netherlands, parents pay until the children are of school age. In England, parents can apply for funded free entitlement hours. They

are then entitled to a number of free childcare hours a week for children over the age of 3. Childcare is expensive in both countries, and this is the main reason why parents in need of childcare do not use it. The main obstacle in Flanders and France is a lack of places.[18]

> **Continued investment in childcare in all PACE countries has increased the level of use, but not equality of use.[19]**
> **Whereas the first nurseries were aimed to provide relief to working-class families and took a paternalistic approach, it is precisely this group that has found it harder to access childcare since the 1980s. In Belgium and England, there was in fact growing inequality in access to childcare in the period between 2006 and 2011.[20] In 2020, highly educated mothers are much more likely to have their children in full-time childcare than less educated mothers.[21] In France, a child under 3 years with a less educated mother is 55% less likely to be in full-time childcare than a child with a highly educated mother.[20] The equivalent figure for Belgium is 33%, for the Netherlands 44% and for England as much as 76%.**
> **This unequal access arises not from individual preferences or choices, but from structural barriers such as unaffordable childcare, waiting lists, hard-to-understand systems or the inability to reconcile different areas of life.[22]**

ACCESSIBILITY POLICY

The uneven use of childcare is striking because the whole focus of European policy is on accessibility. The European Quality Framework that was drawn up in 2014 for the childcare sector[23] regards accessibility for all families as an aspect of quality. Childcare is supposed to support families in vulnerable situations by offering children development opportunities and allowing parents to work. The good news is that governments can facilitate this, including by working to ensure that every child has an affordable place.[20]
Many European countries had already come to see childcare as having a social function in addition to its economic role. In many cases, support for vulnerable families is informed by economic ideas. It is based on an investment rationale that is concerned about compensation and that is patronising. The thinking goes something like this: we will invest in young children now so that they do well later on and pay a lot of taxes.[24] This investment rationale is clearly visible in the English programmes that have emerged since the late 1990s, such as Sure Start[25].

> **Policymakers see childcare as the ideal setting in which to offer language support and teach social skills to children from vulnerable families, so that they will do well at school later on.[26]**

These social views are associated with the development of a pedagogical approach in childcare. In the four PACE countries, this was neglected for a long time. In Flanders and France, there was a pedagogical programme for nursery education, which was organised there from the late 19th century. Childcare developed independently of this system and was not associated with pedagogical insights,

other than to instruct parents. France, Flanders and England now have a pedagogical programme. These programmes contain guidelines for children's care, development and learning. The pedagogical approaches differ from country to country. England focuses on development and learning, whereas Flanders takes a broader view and has formulated a programme for interacting with children, families and the local area. Only the Netherlands has no binding pedagogical guidelines at present, although a compulsory pedagogical curriculum for childcare was distributed in 2017.

POLICY ON OCCASIONAL AND FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE

Accessibility is related to structural characteristics, one of which is the availability of occasional and flexible places. France and Flanders offer accredited and subsidised flexible and occasional care. In Flanders, some nurseries and childminders offer a number of occasional places in addition to their regular childcare provision. A small number of settings provide night and weekend care and a number of nurseries operate entirely on an occasional basis. In France, families can put their child in a halte-garderie for up to three half-days per week. These settings are mainly intended for families with no or only one working parent. They have a two-fold purpose: they give parents time to take on tasks outside the family, and they offer children the opportunity to become acquainted with the world outside the family. In addition, France has multi-accueils that combine regular and occasional childcare. Together with local residents, they decide what proportions of regular and occasional places to offer. However, France has few settings that provide both occasional and flexible childcare. For example, most halte-garderies have strict opening hours, and some even close at lunchtime. There are also waiting lists, so that parents are unable to arrange care flexibly.

Occasional and flexible childcare is not mentioned in the regulations in the Netherlands and England. In principle, there is nothing to prevent this type of care from being organised, but the emphasis of all the guidelines and funding rules is on continuity, making it difficult to organise occasional childcare. For example, it takes a lot of time and effort to arrange funding, so parents only do so if they know that they will need long-term childcare.

4.4 Labour market policy

Developments in childcare are not unrelated to changes in the rest of society, and have long been linked to employment in families. How do governments respond to this relationship? And what do economic shifts, for example the move towards a 24-hour economy, mean for childcare policy?

The transformation of work

The world of work has changed spectacularly since the 1990s. Increasing numbers of women are going to work. The wave of emancipation in the 1970s gave them a stronger position in the labour market and wider access to education. The service sector, which tends to rely more on women, also expanded. Moreover, household spending patterns often made a second income necessary in order to make ends meet. Finally, government measures such as part-time work, working time reduction and leave schemes contributed to women's increased participation in the labour market.[4]

The globalised economy is playing an increasingly important role in society, while the influence of the nation states is diminishing. As a result of the globalisation and digitisation of the economy, many Western countries are moving towards a knowledge and service economy, and this shift has an impact above all on jobs for the low-skilled.[4] The quality and security of employment are changing in all countries: working full-time for the same organisation for an entire career has become a thing of the past, the labour market is competitive and employees have to be flexible. 'Flexicurity' has replaced job security. Ideally, this concept means flexibility for businesses and employers, and security for employees at the same time; employees can count on sufficient quality work, flexible but reliable contracts and lifelong learning pathways.
The reality, however, is often different: low-skilled workers find little work, and have to make do with zero-hour contracts or daily or weekly contracts through temping agencies, producing a gig economy that consists of short assignments and temporary contracts.

The forms that flexibility takes can be positive or negative for the working person. Some researchers call the positive form 'portfolio work': the worker has a lot of freedom and can determine how, where and when he or she works. This form of flexible work is mainly the preserve of highly educated people. Alongside this, there is 'precarious work'.[27] which is unstable and insecure, gives little satisfaction and offers little or no social protection[28]. Zero-hour contracts in England are an example of precarious work: the employee must be available, but does not know whether or how many hours he or she can work.

> **Precarious work undermines people's health[27] and reduces their chances of getting better paid or finding stable work afterwards. As a result, it is not always better to work, even though active labour market policies encourage large numbers of people to take on precarious work.**

Social developments show a certain trend, but they are not the same everywhere and for everyone. The same was also clearly true in the past: the bourgeois breadwinner model, with the husband as breadwinner and the wife at home, was not feasible for many working-class families in the early 20th century. Working-class women had to work to ensure that the family had sufficient income.
Something similar is now true of the norm of the two-income family. Some families are unable to live up to that norm (or in some cases have chosen not to). There is growing pressure on these families. On the other hand, more and more children are growing up in one-parent families or blended families, which are also unable to conform to the norm. In any case, the norm does not apply in the same way in

every country or region. In the Netherlands, for example, there is more of a 'one-and-a-half income model'.[6]

Policymaking for the labour market has been made increasingly complex by these changes. In addition, the number of older people is increasing and people are living longer, which means that more money is needed for pensions and benefits.[4] Employers are often large multinationals in a strong negotiating position. In response to these contextual factors, similar policies are emerging across North-Western Europe, with two emphases: activation and conditionality.

Activation as the core of labour market policy
Starting in the mid-1990s, North-Western Europe underwent a shift towards a new welfare state model[4] the core of which is paid work. Previously, governments provided a replacement income when someone was without paid work; their aim now is to get people in this position back into work.[29]

Paid work is presented as a social measure: an opportunity to stay out of or escape poverty and to combat social exclusion.[30] Parties on both the left and right use this ideology that working is in the public interest.[4] At all decision-making levels, labour market policy has a single goal: all adults must work or study in order to find work. 'Anyone with ears and legs will have to work,' said a Belgian Minister of Work in 2013. 'It's the only way we can keep the welfare state model affordable.'[31]

Conditionality as the core of rights policy
A different shift occurred at the same time as these active labour market policies. The state no longer saw it as its responsibility to provide everyone with a decent income. That responsibility now lies with citizens themselves.[32] The state creates opportunities that citizens have to take. It ensures equal opportunities,[4] leaving it to the individual to create a good quality of life. This philosophy leads to an individual debt model[33] that places a lot of responsibility on the citizen.

The starting point for this philosophy is that rights are coupled with duties.[34] Governments have also adapted their benefits policy to this idea, with the result that conditions are attached to benefits: the unemployed have to prove that they are looking for work, and are often obliged to attend training courses and programmes. Of the four countries in the PACE project, Belgium is the champion in this respect: 33% of the registered unemployed there are on an activation programme. In France and the Netherlands, the figures are 21.9% and 18.5% of the registered unemployed respectively.[35]

Activation focuses more on citizens' duties than on their rights, and those who fail in these duties can expect sanctions, which are supposed to encourage and galvanise people into looking for work. For the same reason, benefits are limited in time, or decrease rapidly.[36] Measures relating to benefits apply not only to the unemployed, but also to people who work too few hours; they often affect people with disabilities, single parents, the sick and the inactive.[37]

4.5 Childcare as a policy instrument in the active welfare state

In almost all European countries, the changed labour market policy has been coupled with greater investments in childcare. Policymakers increasingly tend to see activation and childcare as belonging together.[4] This is not always a proactive strategy: for example, policymakers will only emphasise the combination of activation and childcare when unemployment expenditure rises, or will create more childcare places when the lack of it becomes a collective problem.[4] History shows that governments tend not to set up childcare to help more women find work, but only do so after women have started working en masse. In this sense, working women are a necessary condition for creating more childcare, but are they also a sufficient condition? The limited provision in England shows that this is not the case.[38] Thus, when politicians focus on childcare, they do so for other reasons: for example, childcare is popular with voters without being too expensive.[4]

A highly developed childcare system supports working parents,[39] but does this apply equally to all parents? Not at present. In the introduction to this part of the book, it was noted that it is hard for vulnerable families to find childcare, and the chapter on ethics revealed great inequality between men and women in terms of work and care duties. In what follows, we examine the way in which policy factors influence these two forms of inequality: unequal support for men and women, and unequal support for families from vulnerable backgrounds.

CHILDCARE AND GENDER EQUALITY

While the breadwinner model was the norm, the balance between work and family was not central to social debate. Housework and care were assigned to women, and paid work to men. When both parents go out to work, this raises the question of how to combine work and family.

Different policy fields offer possible answers to this question at different levels: regional, national and European. The main fields are employment, social and family policy, but education is also relevant, as is childcare policy. Employers also have an influence in terms of how much flexibility they expect from employees, and they can also offer flexibility themselves.

What role does childcare policy actually play? Let us first consider the position of fathers and mothers on the labour market. Men's lives naturally change when they become fathers, but the literature shows that fatherhood has little or no impact on men's employment or pay.[40] Women who are mothers often opt for part-time or less well-paid work. They earn less than both men and women who are not mothers.[41] This phenomenon is more pronounced in countries without extensive public childcare provision,[42] even if parents are able to share leave from work and responsibility for looking after the children however they see fit. The Netherlands illustrates this. The government encourages families to strike their own balance between paid work, household tasks and paid care.[43] Childcare in the Netherlands is mainly run by private providers, and it is too expensive for most families to use

full-time. Many families therefore opt for part-time work. In practice, 75% of women work part-time, but only 25% of men.[44]

A comparative study across 27 countries shows that highly accessible childcare is the best way to help parents experience less conflict between work and family.[40] Employer flexibility and leave systems are also needed,[6] but they often increase the burden on mothers if they are not supplemented by accessible childcare.[40] Price plays a significant role in this. For example, smaller numbers of less educated women have worked in recent years. In Belgium in particular, the employment rate among less educated women fell sharply from 35% in 2005 to 29% in 2017. The limited supply of low-skilled jobs may be one reason for this, and the low pay associated with these jobs, which makes them unattractive if families also have to pay childcare costs.

So it is true that childcare supports parents in working, but it also encourages mothers to start working and to stay in work – provided the childcare is affordable, available and of good quality.[40] However, combining work and family remains more challenging for women than for men. Some countries are slowly evolving towards a 'universal breadwinner model', in which men and women provide equal income, but a 'universal care model', in which men and women perform care tasks and work on an equal footing, is still a long way off.[8]

CHILDCARE AND VULNERABLE FAMILIES

In contemporary policy, activation and childcare go hand in hand. There is nothing new about this – childcare also primarily served an economic purpose in the 19th century – but the way childcare is actually organised is not always consistent with its economic purpose and with the rationale of activation. In fact, some aspects fly in the face of that rationale.

For example, most countries give priority to working parents or parents undergoing vocational training. Parents who are not yet working but wish to do so are therefore side-lined. For parents on an activation programme, childcare is seldom a fixed element of the support they receive. Sometimes employment services buy childcare places for those who wish to attend training, but in practice this is the exception rather than the rule. Employment services also rarely coordinate their hours and appointments with childcare. Conversely, nurseries do not reserve places for those who have to start training or work at short notice.
This leads to desperate situations, with unemployed parents required to be available full-time for the labour market and no exception being made for young children. In Flanders, a 1973 judgment of the Labour Court in Liège unequivocally stated: 'Unemployment benefit, by its very nature, may not serve as a benefit for women at home.'[45] For a long time, unemployed parents with small children could request an 'exemption from availability for work'[46] for a certain period of time, after which their benefit fell to a fixed sum of approximately 320 euros per month. That benefit disappeared altogether in 2015. Since then, the unemployed and parents who receive an 'integration income' have no option but to be available full-time for work – in principle, even if they have just given birth.

Another example of the ineffective coordination between childcare and employment policy can be found in England. There, parents of 3-year-olds can claim fifteen additional hours of free childcare if they work at least sixteen hours a week on the National Living Wage or earn the equivalent of sixteen hours on this wage.[47] In this way, the government links employment to childcare and encourages parents who work few hours to extend their working hours. In practice, parents still encounter problems. For example, the care providers can choose the days on which they offer the funded hours, and they can also decide whether to spread them over the whole year or to confine them to periods outside the school holidays. A parent may need childcare on Tuesdays and Thursdays throughout the year, but find that the funded hours to which he or she is entitled can only be used on Wednesdays and Fridays. Furthermore, he or she will have to look for extra childcare during the holidays, because the nursery is either closed during this period or charges the full price, which is very high in England (see the table on page 50).

In creating more places, childcare is reflecting the increasing employment rate among women. However, it has failed to respond to a number of other changes in the labour market, such as increased flexibility and changing demographics. Currently, 59% of workers in the EU have a full-time permanent contract.[58] This means that there are numerous other contracts, many of which are short-term and for varying hours. In addition, timetables are becoming more flexible, and many people work irregular shifts or hours –sometimes for very short periods and at other times from early morning to late evening. Less educated parents, parents with a migration background and single parents are more likely to have flexible jobs.[48] In most countries, childcare provision has not adapted to the needs of these parents; Finland and Sweden are the exceptions. In Finland, flexible care during the day and at night has existed for 30 years. In Sweden, municipalities have been obliged since 2012 to organise flexible care if parents request it.[49]

For parents with precarious work, however, the opening hours of childcare settings are not the only obstacle: the system's inflexibility also causes them problems.[50] For example, childcare providers often work with fixed childcare days and times, and parents may be obliged to pay for a half-day or full day even if they do not need it completely.[51] Sometimes parents have to schedule care for at least three or four days a week. Nor do childcare settings cater to the many families who have moved to Europe: for example, not all countries provide childcare for parents on an integration programme, and even when they do there are often difficulties in practice, for example because the hours are not properly coordinated. Often, these parents are not familiar with childcare, and there is no time to introduce them to it. Here and there initiatives arise for parents and children together. An example of this is the Flemish project Mama Leert, in which parents with a low level of literacy can find out about childcare during an integration programme while attending classes in the same location.[52] Such a setting makes a big difference to families.[53]

Moreover, only a few childcare settings support vulnerable groups of parents. In Flanders there is less childcare provision in areas where many vulnerable families live,[54] and yet it is clear that it can really make a difference to families if affordable childcare is available nearby. There are also few settings that link childcare to family support; although these exist in every country, they are not systematically present in every city or town. The widespread Children's Centres in England are an exception to this, but they mainly focus on early learning and parenting skills, rather than on the concerns of parents about combining work and family responsibilities.

Finally, many measures relating to childcare and work take little account of the daily reality of families, which often have several children of different ages. Such families have to coordinate childcare, school, out-of-school care and any other activities, all of which tend to have different calendars and rhythms. For example, school closes for a long time during the summer, and there is not always an affordable childcare setting for schoolchildren. Sometimes parents are themselves responsible for providing transport between school and the out-of-school care location. In the Netherlands, integrated childcare centres combine a school, an out-of-school childcare setting and a nursery. This cuts down on parents' journeys and makes it easier to coordinate the use of different forms of care. An at home childcarer[55] can also offer a solution if such a service can be afforded by the family in question.

> **The four organisational problems for vulnerable families that have been mentioned show that childcare is not serving its intended purpose properly for everyone. In most countries, childcare mainly supports families with two working parents, a regular income, predictable working hours and holidays, and a network that can help out with transport, for example. Such families are the norm on which childcare provision is based.**

If extra childcare places are created, these families take them.[56,57] Initiatives are regularly set up to create opportunities for vulnerable families, for example by giving nurseries extra financial support or providing extra affordable places in vulnerable areas. Although such developments are positive, they actually mean that there is unequal access to childcare: the place where you live is the sole determinant of whether you can claim childcare.
If governments' intention with childcare is to help all families to work, they have failed to create an adequate organisational and regulatory framework to achieve that goal.

5. FROM POLICY TO EVERYDAY FAMILY LIFE

Policies do not exist in isolation: they penetrate families' everyday lives and influence the way they organise themselves. If labour market policy is not properly aligned with childcare policy, the effects are felt in the lives of mothers, fathers and children. If a national or local government takes the initiative of investing in childcare in vulnerable areas, or linking childcare with integrated family support, the result can be an improvement in families' quality of life.

This chapter outlines how childcare and labour policies have an impact on the lives of families, particularly those living in vulnerable conditions. The description is not complete or systematic, but it is representative of parents' experiences during the PACE project. The descriptions and stories in this chapter are based on interviews with 157 families conducted by all the project's participating practice partners in 2017. In addition, there are descriptions based on the interviews conducted by the authors of this book and from stories recorded by the front-line workers of the PACE project.

5.1 Financial considerations: where does the money come from and where does it go?

The maths for families with a low work intensity seem simple: start working more and you will have more income. The reality is often far more complex. Paid work generates income but is also associated with loss of benefits and higher costs, including for childcare. This phenomenon is known as the 'unemployment trap'.

> 'Working is more money but also more bills.' (*Melissa, Ghent, 2017*)

The country, or even the city or region where you live, partly determines the costs associated with childcare and work. Is there subsidised childcare provision? Are there additional costs associated with childcare? Are the subsidies certain or uncertain? To what extent does the policy encourage you to stay at home with and for your child? How much work is available for the low-skilled? How easily can you find childcare if you have insecure work?

SUBSIDISING THE SUPPLY OR DEMAND SIDE

The PACE countries all invest in childcare, but make different choices about how to do so. Flanders and France provide funding on the supply side and combine private-sector provision of childcare in a home setting and in a group setting with a fairly well-developed system of public provision. In addition to this supply-side funding, there are also benefits for parents, through the tax system or in the form of a childcare allowance. In the Netherlands and England, the subsidies go to the parents and the childcare is largely privatised. These policy choices affect the decisions taken by parents: in the Netherlands and England, childcare is more expensive and it makes less sense to apply for it if you have a low income. The subsidy rules and systems are strict and complex; parents have to request and complete the right forms at the right time, which can be off-putting.

> 'The costs of childcare are high and the administration is complex. Parents don't understand the administration and are afraid of making mistakes. They generally have no confidence in the tax authorities. They fear the consequences if they make a mistake completing the papers for the partial reimbursement of their costs.' (*PACE worker, The Hague, 2019*)

Parents from England are conscious of the high costs of childcare, which leave them hesitant about working:

> 'I have always thought that childcare is an expensive venture which will amount to paying all you earn to sustain it, so I decided to stay at home and mind my children instead.' (*Sarah, Gravesham, 2017*)

> 'You probably get more money on benefits, than if you work. They are trying to keep us poor.' (*Fiona, Brighton & Hove, 2018*)

> 'Childcare is a huge obstacle [to employment] because of the costs and lack of flexibility around being a mum. You don't want to work just to pay for childcare, so that someone else looks after your children.' (*Iman, Gravesham, 2018*)

CHILDCARE FOR ALL, BUT EXTRA-EXPENSIVE IF YOU'RE NOT WORKING

Finding affordable childcare is tricky for all parents, but it is even harder for non-working parents. Again, policy choices have an impact. Most countries give priority to working parents, which is consistent in itself with the economic function of childcare. What makes less sense, though, is that parents who are not yet working receive little financial support in their search for childcare. Paradoxically, only non-working parents who are well off can therefore make use of childcare. In countries with mainly privatised provision, non-working parents who are less well-off have an even harder time finding a place, as private childcare settings prefer parents who come regularly and pay regularly. Furthermore, in countries with extensive private-sector childcare, the government has less control over the sector. In the Netherlands and England, for example, childcare is more expensive if you are not working. In the Netherlands, families can recover part of the costs of childcare through their tax return, but this only applies to working parents. In England, parents of 3- and 4-year-olds are entitled to 15 hours of funded childcare per week. This can rise to 30 hours, but only if the parents work at least 16 hours per week.[1] An additional difficulty is that the nurseries themselves choose the parts of the day in which they offer these hours.

In Flanders, some nurseries keep places available for parents who are starting a training programme or job, and there are also priority rules for parents in vulnerable situations. However, the number of these reserved places is limited, and not all parents find their way to them. In France, childcare is not more expensive for parents who are not working – the CAF (family assistance fund) pays a large part of the costs for these parents – but parents in this situation also have difficulty finding a place in France, because there are too few available places and working parents have priority.

STARTING WORK IS AN UNCERTAIN STEP

Taking the step into work is a leap in the dark for many parents. How do you afford the costs of childcare if you lose your benefits? And how do you do so when you are single? What if the childcare provider requires a deposit up-front, as many nurseries in Flanders do? What if it asks you to pay in advance before you recover the costs through your taxes? And what if your salary or employment status is also uncertain? And what about the documents you have to complete and the services you have to notify when you start working, which is especially important in England? What if your child finds it hard adjusting to childcare? The combined weight of all these considerations can cause families to choose benefits over uncertain pay combined with childcare costs.

In England, the benefits system, the universal credit system, makes it more financially worthwhile for many parents to work at least part-time than not to work at all, as the system allows you to work part-time and still keep part of your benefits. For some parents, though, it works the other way around: they have to work at least part-time to be entitled to benefits.

> 'Christine is the mother of a girl of 3 and a boy of 4. Her daughter Laura has a disability, so she needs one-on-one support in childcare. Christine is from France and is not entitled to any benefits apart from child benefit, which is not enough to live on. She must work at least 24 hours a week to be entitled to universal credit. The children are already attending childcare, with the funded hours to which every parent is entitled.
>
> Desperate for more income, Christine finds a job: full-time, 35 hours a week, from 9 am to 5 pm. Christine does not dare to discuss childcare with the employer and starts work. Immediately all kinds of problems arise: the nursery does not have a full-time place for both children, Christine is unable to afford either the deposit or the special care for her daughter, and during the summer months the nursery does not offer any funded hours, but Christine does have to work. Childcare for her daughter would cost Christine an estimated £600 per week in the summer.' (*PACE worker, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

Parents from the Netherlands also express their uncertainty about starting work.

> 'If you have a job, you pay for childcare in advance, but you don't have an income yet. I received a bill for 1,600 euros for after-school care for two children. I couldn't pay it.' (*Aylan, The Hague, 2020*)

5.2 Are there jobs and childcare places for everyone? Universal employment?

European member states advocate active labour market policies.[2] Everyone is supposed to work, but is there actually work for everyone? Several parents indicate that there is no work for them, or that they are only eligible for atypical or temporary work. Throughout Europe, an increase has been seen in work that requires great flexibility from the worker, but offers little in return: atypical working hours, little social protection in some cases and often low pay.[3] This type of work is sometimes characterised as a slow-working poison.[4] It seems harmless enough: take a temporary, insecure job to bridge over a difficult period, and something better will come along afterwards. But this usually turns out not to be the case: if you have insecure work, there is a high chance that your next job will also be precarious. What is more, these jobs put wage pressure on the middle-class jobs with permanent contracts, which are increasingly being replaced by precarious work.[5]

In Northern France, families were accustomed to living and working in the same neighbourhood for decades. Many factories are now closed, and the work that is still available is not very stable or attractive. For families without a driving licence or car, travelling a few extra miles for work or childcare is a problem.

In Brighton & Hove, there are many jobs in the tourism sector, but they have irregular or atypical working hours and are also much in demand with students from the city's two universities; and students usually have fewer problems with uncertain status, flexibility or atypical working hours.

> 'We have lots of highly educated baristas in the city.' (*PACE worker, Brighton & Hove, 2017*)

For parents with a migration background, looking for a job is even more complicated. In Flanders, where most parents who took part in the PACE project have a migration background, parents must first follow a compulsory assimilation and integration programme, but even after years of education and training, work is not easy to find. A mother of Kenyan origin talks about her family's difficult search for work.

> 'What I want? Being able to do work that I like, not just working for money. Of course I want to contribute and take responsibility, that is why I do the cleaning work now. But I really dream of doing something I like, so I now have to combine working during the day with a course in the evening. I also want my husband to have proper work. He has done a training and everything, but now he cannot find a job. We do not get good support from the employment agency, they tell him that he has to go to interim bureaus, but he already did. When he calls for job interviews or contacts people, they never contact him back. I think because he is black. And they told our PACE support worker to back off and stay out of it.' (*Amina, Turnhout, 2018*)

So sometimes there is work, but nobody wants to recruit you.

UNIVERSAL CHILDCARE?

There are not places for everyone in childcare either. In France and Flanders in particular, the shortage of places is an obstacle for parents. This is not to say that the number of places is so much better in England and the Netherlands: the places there are so expensive that fewer parents use childcare for young children.[6] A pregnant, working mother from Flanders had just received the news that there was no place for her child in subsidised care.

> 'I got a letter no childcare. No childcare is complete misery, you know. What do I do? Stop working?' (*Alicja, Ghent, 2017*)

Although some settings keep places available for emergency or occasional childcare, it is also common in Flanders to reserve a place in childcare a year in advance. Not all parents are aware of this. Parents who are just trying to survive from day to day or who are not familiar with the system do not think or plan that far ahead.
In France, the public-sector multi-accueils work with a combination of regular and occasional childcare places. There are often waiting lists for the regular places; the date on which parents apply for childcare determines when they will be given a place. The occasional places are available sooner, but they are limited in number and parents cannot be sure of a place. In Saint-Martin-Boulogne in Northern France, the management of the childcare setting ensures that occasional places are always available. The balance between regular and occasional places is decided on three times a year by a local committee of childcare professionals and local residents. Sometimes the number of occasional places increases, at the expense of families that need regular childcare.

5.3 Work and childcare: two worlds with their own rhythms and expectations

As described earlier, families move in a caringscape, through which they have to find routes that will enable them to reconcile different rhythms and expectations. Ideally, your work energises you and your family brings you joy, but even then, combinations of space and time can be difficult: your meeting overruns and your train is delayed, so that you end up getting to the nursery disastrously late in the

evening. Or you can choose when you start work in the morning as long as it is before 9 am, but you have to drop off two children at two different places first. Plus, one of your children has to use a nebuliser for her asthma every morning, which is always a struggle. The puzzle is even more difficult when the rhythms of childcare and work are completely divorced from one another and you cannot rely on outside help to fit the pieces into place.

THE ISSUE OF ATYPICAL HOURS

Flexible jobs are increasingly common in the 24-hour economy. Flexibility is an all-embracing concept with many faces. For one parent, it means picking up the children from school on time and then working more hours in the evening, while for another it means working from home one day a week. This form of flexibility involves give and take. For others, flexibility is above all something that is requested or even imposed: an unpredictable timetable, irregular working hours or varying shifts. This form of flexibility is more common in sectors such as industry, retail, tourism, care and cleaning, in which people with low incomes tend to work. This form of flexibility presents serious problems for parents with young children, as in many areas childcare is not available outside the usual daytime hours. If a parent cannot rely on a partner or an informal network, it is often necessary to quit work – or not to take a job in the first place.

> 'Mr and Mrs Caillau have a 2-year-old son, Loïc. Mr Caillau works nights in a factory. Mrs Caillau has been attending a programme in the PACE project since 2018. She is a nurse and has been offered a job which involves working until 9.30 pm every other week. I forward her requirements to every childminder in the area, and Mrs Caillau makes her own inquiries about at-home childcare, only to find that the hourly childcare rate there is more than she will be paid in her job. "It's not worth starting work," she says. Not a single childminder responds positively to the query on behalf of Ms Caillau. She only needs a total of 24 childcare hours per month, which the childminders say isn't enough. The mother is very keen to start working, so she is bitterly disappointed to find that only very expensive childcare is available. Mrs Caillau eventually decides to turn down the job.' (*PACE worker, Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2019*)

TWO WORLDS, EACH WITH ITS OWN CLOCK

The employment clock rarely stops: it ticks audibly – and sometimes quickly when you are not working. Sometimes the clock does stop, for example if you are on sick leave, or if you have had a child, but it inevitably starts ticking again: your parental leave comes to an end, your employer starts a reintegration programme, or the employment service put you on an activation programme.

Childcare has its own clock too. In Flanders and France, that clock starts ticking as soon as you are pregnant: it is vital to reserve a place in time if you want to prevent the employment clock's alarm from going off without having childcare arranged. There are also various rhythms and calendars when it comes to applying for childcare subsidies.

The following stories from parents show that the work and childcare clocks do not tick in time with one another.

Kyra's story – the childcare clock is slow

We are already familiar with Kyra's story from the first chapter. She is able to get a job through the PACE programme that she would love to do. To take the job she needs childcare from 7.30 am every day. She counts on receiving the 15 (and later 30) funded hours to which working parents in England are entitled. Her daughter already goes to a nursery near the family home for several half-days a week, and the nursery agrees to offer additional hours. These are the funded hours for parents who work at least 16 hours a week, but Kyra must be able to prove that she is working before the end of August, as all applications for funded hours must be received by then. If she fails to do so, the extra childcare hours will lapse or she will have to pay full price for them – even if she starts work just two days later.

> 'They really helped me with planning extra hours and days at the nursery, but they said that I had to start childcare from the start of the new term. I was given an extra two weeks. It was difficult for me: I had no control over the start date for my job, so I didn't know if I could keep to the timing. If I didn't manage I would lose the place or have to pay for it. It was annoying, because without work I wouldn't be able to afford the place anyway. I live on benefits. I was worried that I might lose my place at the nursery.' (*Kyra, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

Samira's story – what if you have to start working NOW?

> I'm single with two children. In June I received a phone call from the employment service and was told that I had to start working. I had to get some kind of a job immediately. The service is very strict – they don't take your situation into account. I asked about childcare and they just said "No, I can't help you with that". It was depressing and I felt under a lot of pressure. I said I wanted to wait until September to start working, as the oldest would be able to go to school then. I was granted the extra time thanks to my PACE key worker. Since I've known her, my contact with the employment service has been better. She mediates and gives me really good support.' (*Samira, Turnhout, 2019*)

Aaina's story – what if your work situation is uncertain and the nursery insists on regularity?

> 'I find the specific days hard. My nursery is not flexible either as they are full for spaces. It is hard for the nursery to organise. One month notice to change days. Buying extra hours is not always possible. Also if I need to start a bit earlier I have to buy the whole morning rather than just an hour. Had to pay £1000 for the month as my daughter was not yet eligible for 3-year-old funding until next term.' (*Aaina, Brighton & Hove, 2020*)

ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS AND SYSTEMS

In order to put your child's name down for childcare, Internet access and a certain amount of digital literacy are often required. If you want to start a course or get an exemption to look for a job, you need an email address. It seems convenient: quickly arrange registration and payment for a summer camp on your smartphone, or scroll through the vacancy database on your iPad. But what if the registration system is only available in a language you do not know, or have a limited grasp of? What if you cannot read or write, or do not have an email address or computer? Many parents come up against administrative and digital obstacles. At best, others may give them help, but sometimes parents do not know who to turn to, or receive little understanding when they ask for help or make mistakes.

'Malika has two children. She has a hairdressing qualification. She would like to start working and is in contact with the employment service. The service asks her to edit her profile online, but Malika lacks the computer skills to do so. She has an email address but she doesn't use it, she is dyslexic and she finds it difficult to follow up on emails. She has no social safety net. During a follow-up interview, the consultant at the service tells her that the motivation interviews will be held on a digital platform from now on. Malika would like to register for a new course, but the digital interviews present a real barrier for her. An online motivation interview is not at all motivating for Malika.' (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2019*)

Registering for childcare also requires a lot of administration, whether digitally or not. In England, for example, there is a maze of possibilities. There are schemes that apply across England, but local authorities can provide additional measures. For example, some cities invest in public childcare provision in vulnerable areas, so they can quickly create more places and easily direct parents to them. In other cities or regions, parents can only get childcare from private providers, who decide for themselves when they are open and whether they offer funded places. Then there are the regulations relating to funded childcare hours, in which the child's age is a factor, as are the number of working hours and income of the parents. On top of this, there is a system of tax-free and universal credit childcare. In addition, schemes may apply all year or only during school terms, and there are strict deadlines for applications. Finally, it is up to the private providers themselves which days and times they choose to set aside for the funded free entitlement. This tangle of rules is frustrating for parents.

'There are so many regulations, they make it so hard.'
(*Bell, Brighton & Hove, 2018*)

Finally, the childcare system focuses primarily on working parents; it is less accessible for parents who do not have a job or are looking for a job. Only wealthy parents in this category have access to it, as they can afford the full price. In each country participating in the PACE project, different priority rules and funding systems have this effect:

- **The Netherlands: only working parents can recover a proportion of the childcare costs. The system for this reimbursement is very complex.**
- **England: only parents who work at least 16 hours a week, or earn the equivalent of working 16 hours on minimum wages, are entitled to 30 hours of free childcare per week. Parents who are not in paid work or who work fewer hours are entitled to 15 hours. These schemes only apply to parents of 3- and 4-year-old children and for some parents of 2-year-old children.[1] The nurseries themselves decide if and when they will offer these funded hours, and whether they will spread them over the year or only offer them during term time.**
- **Flanders: working parents have priority. Places are reserved for parents who suddenly find work or go on a training programme, but they are scarce and are not offered everywhere.**
- **The Netherlands and England: there is no system of occasional or flexible childcare for parents who are in precarious work or not working.**
- **France: working parents have priority in regular childcare. There is a system of occasional childcare, but only in subsidised settings. Parents are not guaranteed a place there. They can indicate their childcare needs two weeks in advance.**

These rules and systems ensure that equal access to childcare is not achieved simply by creating more places,[2,7] as these are quickly taken up by working families.[8] Privatising childcare provision does not help either: as the profit margins in childcare are tight and the quality requirements are high, providers look for a guaranteed income. Working parents with regular and clear childcare requirements and a guaranteed income are therefore an attractive target group,[9] which is why new providers mainly settle in districts where there are plenty of working and hence more prosperous parents, even if they operate on an income-related basis.

5.4 Parents have a life apart from childcare and work ...

Parents' stories show that finding and combining childcare and work can be an obstacle course, in which some families have extra burdens to carry. What if you or your children have health problems, if you are a victim of violence, or if you live in a house that you will soon no longer be able to afford because you are at risk of losing your housing benefit? Childcare and work are just two of the pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of family life. Sometimes those pieces can offer a way forward: a job

plus childcare can ensure that a family can afford a better home. A parent who can rely on childcare may have the energy to tackle problems in the family as a result. Everything is connected in the puzzle of life, and panaceas are rarely found. These parents' stories show that neither work nor childcare offer a universal ticket to a better life.

> Kemzika is a mother of African origin with three children. The family currently lives in a house in poor condition: it has damp, and there is mould on the walls. The children have health problems, which Kemzika says are due to the house. She would like to work in order to increase the family income and find a better home. She must first take language lessons from the employment service, because her Dutch is not good enough. Because of the children's health problems, she often has to go to the doctor and to hospital, and this is causing delays to the language lessons. She cannot start working, the family income is still low and the house remains in poor condition, which means that the children's health problems also continue. (*Kemzika, Mechelen, 2018*)

> Lana is a mother of two, Janis aged 4 and Sofia aged 13. She would like to work: she has completed a training course and is planning voluntary work for several weeks in order to gain extra experience, but she must first find childcare for Janis. In addition, Sofia, who was recently diagnosed with ADHD, has problems at school. Lana now has to go to see doctors with Sofia and there are a lot of meetings with the school. The school is constantly sending Sofia home – Lana does not find it at all supportive. No employer will be okay with Lana having to go home at least once a week because her daughter has been sent home, so she is considering having Sofia change school for the third time. On top of all this, Lana has just split up with her partner, which means that her financial situation is radically changing. (*Lana, Brighton & Hove, 2018*)

The parents who took part in the PACE project often face challenges in various areas of life. They experience health problems, lack stable relationships and have limited networks. This last challenge means that parents cannot count on grandparents or friends to bring their children to and from the nursery and have no fallback option if a child suddenly falls ill. But even parents who do have a network say that it does not necessarily help.

> 'I do have friends and family, but I don't get any support from them, for example when the kids are sick. And when that happens the nursery leaves you in the lurch too. Just when you want someone to be there for you who knows your child: it could be another parent who has already spent time with your child. Even if you have a network, family and friends also have their own lives... Ultimately, we're responsible for our children ourselves.' (*Ian, Gravesham, 2018*)

On the other hand, parents from the Hague prefer professional, formal childcare to care in an informal network.

> '(Formal) childcare is better because it's safe. Also, you get professionals working there.' (*Naresh, The Hague, 2017*)

> 'I'm more open to formal childcare than to informal care, because in formal childcare professionals treat the children more sensitively and patiently. Neighbours or friends, for example, might lose their temper if they can't cope at some point.' (*Rachida, The Hague, 2017*)

Childcare can open the door to a network, as a mother from Mechelen indicates, but this also has its disadvantages.

> 'I tend to make friends with people who have the same problems as me. When I help them, I forget my own problems. That makes me feel less helpless, but it doesn't actually help me move forward.' (*Anushka, Mechelen, 2018*)

5.5 Policy and reality

Employment is the way out of poverty, is essential for social integration, and creates meaning and connection. This sounds fine, but is it how parents actually perceive work? Our observations in the PACE project confirm the point made by numerous other sources: work only works if some basic conditions are met. It is true that work provides an income, but not necessarily more income or greater security. In fact, recent figures show that measures to get more women into work can have a perverse effect.[10] Women experience numerous barriers: finding childcare that they can use, dealing with prejudice about their performance, combining work with family responsibilities. These barriers mean that they are often only able to work fewer hours, have to work part-time and cannot find such satisfying work. As a result, working women are at greater risk of poverty.

For parents with a migrant background, work can help with integration, but it often takes a long time to start working effectively. Several parents told us of their experience of discrimination on the job market. They have learned the language and have the right qualifications, yet no one wants to take them on. In England, a mother of Algerian origin says that she has felt harassed by the public employment service and social services in turn.

> 'First they complained that I wasn't working. Now, with the help of PACE, I have started my own business, a beauty salon. My resources are limited, so I have started at home. I have cleared out one of the children's rooms for this, in order to have a separate workspace to receive clients. Now I have received a visit from a social worker, who says that I'm not allowed to sleep in one room with my three children. But if I give up my business, I'll have trouble from the employment service again. I just can't win. It's also more difficult as a Muslim: people are

suspicious. They think I oblige my children to wear a headscarf and to fast during Ramadan.' (*Yusra, Brighton & Hove, 2018*)

It is true that work can be motivating and create connections, but is that also the case if you only clean office buildings at night, when you do not even like cleaning? Some parents say they do not care what work they do, as long as they have a steady income, but the vast majority of parents in the PACE project say that the lack of choice gets them down.

'What I would like is to have some initial work experience in a sector I find interesting, or the possibility of receiving training – just the feeling of having more options and opportunities.' (*Céline, Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018*)

'I am qualified to work in childcare, but my diploma isn't valid in Belgium. I've tried so hard to find a job in childcare here, but I haven't succeeded. The employment service is rude and really strict. They said: "Sorry, you'll just have to do cleaning work." If I take a course that would enable me to work in childcare here, they said that I would lose my benefits. My dream is to get my diploma so that I can work with children again. To me, getting a job also means working on my own development. I don't want to sit at home all the time. Right now it feels like my development has just stopped. I think it's important to be able to do something that I enjoy doing and to mean something to other people with my work. I want to work with people.' (*Olenka, Turnhout, 2019*)

Policy promises about childcare are often impressive, and Europe and many member states regard accessibility as a quality criterion for childcare. Despite this, we see that vulnerable families are more likely to have an unmet need for childcare than middle- and upper-class families.[7,11] Nurseries prefer to set up business in more affluent areas, where there are parents with stable work and a stable income.[9]

'The CAF (family assistance fund) tries to achieve a 100% occupancy rate and also links this to opening hours. As a result, settings are especially happy with parents who come often and always at the same times – who are reliable.'
(*Director of a bachelor's programme in pedagogical science, France, 2019*)

We have also seen that, in practice, childcare focuses strongly on what the literature calls its 'pedagogical function'. It takes on the task of contributing to children's social, cognitive, emotional and language development. There is nothing wrong with this, except that in practice the pedagogical function sometimes overshadows other functions. For example, a one-sided or narrow interpretation of pedagogical objectives can hinder childcare's social function. In the survey conducted during the PACE project, it became clear that childcare workers were convinced that occasional and flexible care is not good for children's wellbeing and development.

'If a child starts attending nursery without a settling-in session, or comes irregularly because his or her parents only work occasionally, that can't be good for the child. The best interests of the child are my first consideration.'
(*PACE worker, Gravesham, 2018*)

And yet, occasional and flexible childcare is the kind of care that families in social vulnerability are more likely to need. Because they work irregular hours. Because they cannot predict when and how often they will need childcare. Because they cannot afford to use childcare on a daily basis. Because they cannot plan their days and weeks that long in advance.

5.6 **Juggling**

Parents perform a daily juggling act, and they go through a great deal of trouble. Despite this, they do not always manage to live up to the expectations of their employers, childcare, society or themselves. If they do manage to keep all the balls in the air at the same time, it is often at the expense of their own quality of life. And sometimes parents just give up; everything is too much: too many rules, too many systems, too many waiting lists, too many expectations.

Some families cannot see past the waiting list, lack security in their work, are suddenly called upon to start a job at short notice, have no replacement income, struggle with physical or mental health or both, live in a small space with no time for themselves, do not speak the language, or are in a life situation that combines all of these factors. In interviews, families living in these difficult situations talk about the reality of their lives and their dreams. They all want a stable life: a decent home, an income, time with the children. Almost all of them want to work, and almost all of them say that childcare 'would be good for their child', mentioning its effects on cognitive, emotional and social development. In doing so, they articulate exactly what the European policy texts set out.

These parents need time without their children: so that they can attend an appointment with the doctor, the Public Welfare Centre, the lawyer or the Public Employment Service on their own; so that they can study and think about the future; so that they can look beyond today or tomorrow. Their children have at least as much right as other children to a stimulating, rich environment and contact with peers and the outside world. Childcare can play a major role in this, but the nursery doors must stand open so that these families feel welcome there.

In order for childcare to truly support parents, every child and parent should have the right to childcare at settings where the family feels welcome and is treated as the recipient of care. Every family should be able to decide for itself how and when to use childcare, and for what reasons.

Flexible and occasional childcare can help families access childcare, but because the system is geared to predictable demands, it is not easy for settings to organise care on a flexible and occasional basis. The next two parts of this book are intended to support them in this, taking account of the situation and concerns of every worker in an early years setting. A look is also taken at the policy and system that can support such childcare settings, because occasional and flexible childcare can only thrive in the context of a generous policy.

PART II.

1. INTRODUCTION: LESSONS FROM EXPERIMENTS WITH FLEXIBLE AND OCCASIONAL CARE

The demand for flexible and occasional childcare is not new: it has existed for as long as childcare itself. However, the reasons for that demand are changing. With governments taking the line that everyone should work and more and more families operating according to one-and-a-half- or two-income models, the need to combine family responsibilities with work is usually the underlying reason.

Governments and individual organisations have already experimented with various forms of flexible and occasional childcare. Those experiments have not always succeeded, or have only done so partially, so it is worth seeing what we can learn from them.
We start with the Child Care Flexibility Trials from Australia, as that experiment was monitored scientifically. We then present insights from various occasional and flexible childcare settings.

1.1 The Child Care Flexibility Trials in Australia

In 2013, the Australian government made funds available for a number of flexible childcare trials. The money was used to provide childcare for parents working variable hours or hours outside normal childcare hours. During this project, the government wanted to identify the exact nature of the needs for flexible childcare and test which models of flexible childcare the families found helpful.

The flexibility trials took four different forms:
- at-home childcare: childcare in the home of the families in need of childcare
- childcare with extended hours
- more flexible childcare hours and arrangements
- a more extensive range of wraparound and holiday care[1]

The researchers monitored the trials closely and came to some striking conclusions. To start with, it is not that easy to estimate the need for flexible childcare, and such needs also change regularly within individual families. In addition, flexibility is only one of the care criteria that families look for: for example, they would like flexible and long-term care, or flexible and accessible care. And families do not just look for solutions in formal childcare: they look in other areas of life too, such as in their timetable at work.
As a result, it was impossible to put forward a single solution or flexibility model as ideal. In terms of childcare settings, this means that a range of options needs to be offered. Among the various possibilities, occasional childcare was popular, and parents also found affordable at-home care helpful. This latter form of demand proved to be logistically difficult to meet: at-home childcare services need a lot of staff to provide the requested hours, but workers are also often likely to find themselves without any assignments.

A second finding was that parents sometimes make no use of flexible provision because it only provides one form of flexibility. For example, some nurseries offered extended opening hours, but asked parents to reserve their place well in advance; many parents who worked shifts were unable to do this, as they only knew their working hours shortly in advance.
Finally, the timing of the launch of any new provision of flexible care is very important. Many families plan childcare at the beginning of the school year, but a number of trials were only available later on, by which time most families had already made their arrangements. Because parents also preferred a long-term, less convenient solution to one that was temporary, many families did not make use of the childcare places in the trial.[2]

1.2 Longer-term initiatives for flexible and occasional childcare

A number of the Australian trials kept going and developed as stand-alone settings. Such settings can be found all over the world, and their staff have acquired a great deal of experience and practical knowledge about flexible and occasional childcare over the years. These settings have persevered, although creativity is sometimes needed to adapt their approach to the regulations, which do not always take account of the needs and operational realities of flexible and occasional care.

Below we list a number of characteristics that such settings have in common and that work well in practice. The sources of inspiration were the Gerrard Resource Centre in Canada,[3] a number of Flemish businesses with a relatively longstanding tradition of occasional childcare[4] and Butterfly Nursery in Brighton & Hove, England.[5]

The childcare settings deliberately choose this type of care provision and have a clearly defined vision of it.
The Antwerp OKiDOs offer occasional care in districts and neighbourhoods characterised by high levels of deprivation and a shortage of accessible and flexible childcare.[6] They have a clear vision which is set out in writing. They offer flexible care that meets the needs of parents attending civic integration and employment programmes, give priority to families from disadvantaged groups, focus on neighbourhood-oriented care and encourage ties among local residents and between residents and organisations.

They organise their activities so as to be able to achieve their vision.
In order to provide flexibility, the OKiDOs deviate from the regular planning system. They work with adaptable planning and do not have a waiting list. Families receive a childcare plan which is tailored to their needs; the plan is for a limited time, after which the nursery and the parents review and adjust it. The nurseries may modify the childcare plan if other parents have urgent needs.

> 'If it's super-urgent, we always find a solution.'
> (*Setting manager, OKiDO nursery, Antwerp, 2020*)

They clearly define their target group.
Families can use the Gerrard Resource Centre in Canada, a childcare setting, every day for up to two weeks. The most urgent needs are always given priority.

They are fully committed to high-quality childcare.
OKiDOs provide extra support to families, for example by helping parents choose a school. They work on language stimulation in children, taking account of the language spoken at home.
Butterfly Nursery has a clear vision of the settling-in procedure for children accessing occasional care.

They work with a strong, diverse, well-trained and supervised team.
The Antwerp OKiDOs have a balanced team with a strong emphasis on diversity. The team members speak various languages, which makes contact with families easier.

They develop strong partnerships with welfare and educational organisations.
The Gerrard Resource Centre has strong partnerships with other organisations for local families. These organisations refer the families to the occasional childcare setting.

1.3 Lessons from trials and existing businesses

The Australian trials and other ongoing initiatives reveal a number of points for attention that will be useful for new initiatives for occasional and flexible childcare. These will be presented in the discussion of the PACE experiments later in this part of the book.

Is there a clear choice and vision?
Organising flexible and occasional childcare is a conscious choice. Anyone who launches the provision of such care must carefully consider in advance the approach to be used. The choice that has been made must be reflected in a communication plan to reach the right target group, in the choice of team members and in an employee policy,[7] as well as in the initiative's operational planning and in the partnerships entered into in the local area. This immediately raises the question of whether the initiative is embedded in a strong network.

Is the initiative useful to families?
The Australian trials made it clear that flexibility, though important, is only one of the criteria considered by parents. Given the lengths to which care settings have to go in order to make flexibility possible,[2,8] it is therefore worth ensuring that an initiative will be seen as useful by potential users. Because families need different forms of flexibility, it makes sense to carry out a local or regional analysis.[2]

Is the initiative feasible for employees?
In initiatives that focus on long-term provision of flexible and occasional childcare, an effort is made to get the employees on board with what is being done. Such initiatives also look for ways to employ more staff in each unit within the setting than is legally required, considering that the standards are very strict and that flexible and occasional care entails extra work. This became clear, for example, during the implementation of the Flemish action plan on occasional and flexible childcare in 2007.[9]

Can such an initiative survive financially in the context of the existing regulations? Nurseries are often private or semi-public businesses, which have to finance their operation with subsidies or parental contributions. If the regulations do not take

proper account of the financial or commercial feasibility of an initiative, it will not last for long. Businesses are more durable if the regulations that govern them are geared to the reality of flexible and occasional childcare.

Can the initiative rely on a robust system?
In short, trials involving flexible and occasional childcare do not necessarily produce long-term solutions: that can only happen when they take place within a robust system in which an explicit choice has been made to support parents from vulnerable groups. Such a system starts with a clear vision, defines a clear framework, provides settings with organisational and financial stability and gives staff members the opportunity to receive introductory and refresher training. It takes account of needs in different regions, strives for sustainability in every area and facilitates partnerships. Families must have confidence in the system and all those who work in it.

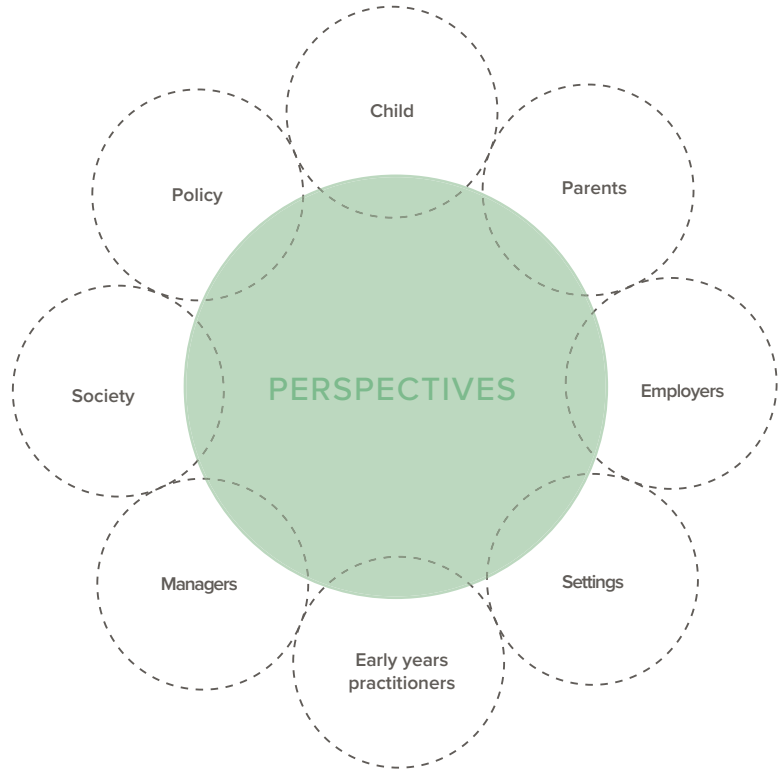
The city of Ghent organised a pop-up nursery during the PACE project. The nursery was transported in a van and could literally be set up and dismantled in a few hours. The childcare met all quality standards: there was space to eat, sleep and play, and attention was paid to communication with parents. There was a pedagogical framework for intake interviews and staff were specifically trained for the pop-up nursery. The nursery was embedded in a large childcare organisation with a lot of experience: the employees were well prepared, their tasks were achievable and there was a clear vision. Despite all this, the experiment did not go as planned.
The organisers were aiming to offer childcare to the parents who were the target group of the PACE project: those who were cut off from both childcare and employment. Starting in 2017, the pop-up nursery appeared at locations where work was definitely available for vulnerable families: at fairs, events and training days, but most of the parents who used it turned out to already be familiar with childcare. The organisers wanted to reach parents to whom the concept of childcare was still new, but these parents failed to take up the offer: they were unwilling to simply leave their child in a temporary nursery with employees they had never seen before, and the fine equipment and trained staff made no difference to this. The experiment failed because parents without any experience of childcare in a temporary setting do not have enough time to build confidence. As a result, the setting was of no use to the parents for whom it was intended.
The city of Ghent redefined the experiment and is now using the pop-up nursery to introduce parents to childcare. Organisations that work with parents in poverty, with recent migrants or with parents who are cut off from the labour market can ‘hire’ the nursery during a training course or event. Parents are given information about childcare and can ask questions; children can then play or sleep there while their parents are nearby. This introduction can make the step to a regular nursery easier to take. The pop-up nursery is of use to families for this purpose.

2.
PRO OR CON? PERSPECTIVES ON FLEXIBLE AND OCCASIONAL CHILDCARE

This book sets out a limited plea for occasional and flexible childcare. The starting point for this plea is that some families have a hard time reconciling expectations from different areas of life, or in finding suitable routes through their caringscape. For these families, the rhythms of different areas of life are hard to combine. Many of them experience at first hand the relentless rise of flexibility on the labour market, which is hard to reconcile with the pressing need to arrange childcare. Such difficulties have serious consequences for these families: for example, they may fail to meet the conditions for allowances or benefits, or they may feel inadequate as parents and as employees. Mothers are particularly likely to suffer the effects.[1,2,3]

Flexibility is one of the factors that determines how accessible or inaccessible childcare is for families. Flexible care can also be beneficial for parents who are not in paid work: if they can access it quickly and easily, without being required to take up several days of care per week, the barrier to childcare is lowered, giving these parents time and space for themselves or to deal with problems.

But what view do the various stakeholders actually take of this? Do parents, employers, policymakers and early years practitioners think flexible or occasional care of this kind is a good idea? And what is it like for the children being in a nursery on this basis? To be frank, flexible and occasional care do not have a particularly good reputation. Three main points are made about it, all of them negative in tone: first, it is not good for children; second, it is a nuisance to organise; and third, childcare should not be designed to slavishly follow trends on the labour market. However, we do more than just air these negative points in this chapter: we look for the reasons behind the reputation by describing experiences with various aspects of flexible and occasional care, so as to find out the reasons why those involved look at this type of care in this way. All voices were heard in the PACE project, and different views were gathered in close collaboration with all thirteen project partners. This has enabled us to present many different perspectives. These stakeholder perspectives provide us with more detailed information about the points for attention set out in the introduction to this second part of the book. They also help to give concrete form to experiments. Do early years practitioners find flexibility difficult to organise in practice at a nursery, for example? If so, we need to pay closer attention to the obstacles they encounter and try to eliminate them.



2.1 What do parents think about occasional and flexible childcare?

Parents are primarily looking for good care for their children. They want to be sure that their child is happy, welcome and safe there.[4,5] This was confirmed during our many conversations with parents during the PACE project.

> 'Good childcare is a clean and caring nursery, polite staff, care for my child as I care for my child.' (*Peter, Gravesham, 2020*)

We did not find flexibility being mentioned as a criterion for good childcare, but parents did indicate that care becomes less useful if it is not flexible. As was clear in the Australian Child Care Flexibility Trials,[4] flexibility can take many forms. The same is also true of childcare itself. In what follows, we outline the different forms of flexibility and care that parents find important in childcare.

FLEXIBILITY: A BROAD CONCEPT

The flexibility that parents look for and need depends on the areas of responsibility they combine. Some forms of flexibility are obvious: those relating to opening hours and availability. But parents are not just looking for organisational flexibility: the employees' attitudes and relational flexibility are also important to them.

Flexibility in opening hours

Parents are above all looking for a form of flexibility that allows them to combine childcare with their work schedules. This may mean their child going to the nursery very early in the morning or staying until late in the evening. Other families are looking for childcare during the weekend or at night. Travel time is a factor for some of them. Sometimes it would be helpful even if the nursery just opened an hour earlier or closed an hour later.

> 'We are working shifts both of us. We need childcare on some days until 8 pm at night. We are trying to earn money but we need to find an at home childcarer.' (*Lynn, Brighton, 2020*)

> 'There are no nurseries with flexible opening hours here. We will be forced to pay for a nanny, which is terribly expensive. People like us who work in care or in factories really need a nursery that adjusts its opening hours to our working hours.' (*Catherine, Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018*)

Flexibility in planning and use of the setting

Parents have varying experiences of childcare planning. In some regions there are not enough places, and parents are especially likely to find less flexibility. Settings have to comply with the rules and cannot take too many children relative to the number of staff or the available space. This creates problems for parents when they want to go to work.

> 'The nursery is not flexible, I can't swap hours or add additional hours as there are waiting lists.' (*Sally, Brighton, 2020*)

Flexibility in availability

When parents' situations change, their needs for childcare change too. When this happens, it is helpful for the nursery to make time promptly to discuss those needs and try to make new arrangements. During the project we spoke to parents who had become single after a divorce, who had started a training course or had begun applying for jobs. It was important to them to be able to rely on their childcare provider.

> 'I got offered an occasional childcare place at the job centre when I needed to attend an interview and had no childcare. It's peace of mind to know that I can get things done whilst the children are taken care of.' (*Naomi, England, 2020*)

> 'It helps that I can take my daughter to the occasional care setting when I have an appointment.' (*Alice, Wattrelos, 2018*)

Parents from the Netherlands talk vividly about how difficult it is not to be able to count on childcare at all when they are looking for work. It is only available to them in theory, being unaffordable for parents living on a low income and not working. In the course of the PACE project, the De Mussen community centre in Schilderswijk, a district of the Hague, started an informal occasional care system in which volunteers looked after children. It took a long time to gain government approval. One of the parents refers to this form of childcare below.

> 'I'm first and foremost a mother, and without care for your child there's no chance of doing a job too. And in any case, without care you can't even find a job. It would be better to have childcare while you're job-hunting. It's only available once you're working, and the bit that comes first has been overlooked.' (*Malti, The Hague, 2020*)

Flexibility in the attitude of the staff

Parents appreciate it if the employees are flexible, for example about the presence of parents in the nursery, about pick-up times or about procedures such as the settling-in period.

> 'You're always welcome here. They give you time with your child here.' (*Yacintha, Mechelen, 2020*)

> 'For today I need to collect my son from nursery at 11.45. They told me it's ok, but for this one time.' (*Holly, Gravesham, 2020*)

Flexibility in tempo

Childcare is an unknown world to many parents. It is helpful to them to be able to get started at their own pace, preferably without having to make commitments such as a childcare plan or contract.

> 'After my training as a healthcare professional, I had a hard time finding a crèche. I also found it difficult leaving my child. I then asked my social worker to apply for a place at 38 Volt. I wanted to be able to say goodbye to my child in my own way. You can do that here. And I don't have to come every day. I'm taking things slowly.' (*Lydia, Mechelen, 2020*)

A mother who had had bad experiences with care for her oldest children did not want to use childcare any more. Because she wanted a job, she joined the PACE project. She attended a ten-week programme, 'Learning Links'. While the parents attended a training session every week, their children stayed in the same building at an occasional setting. As a result, this mother had the opportunity to regain confidence in childcare.

> 'I used childcare only for Learning Links. For my youngest. Alright because it was in the same building. My little boy was very clingy at that stage. So it was important. Was fine as a first start, he got used to being away from me.'
> (*Masha, Gravesham, 2020*)

After this same 'Learning Links' programme, another mother took the step of putting her child in occasional childcare at a regular nursery.

Conclusion: flexibility must be reliable

Parents are looking for different forms of flexibility, but they are all looking for flexibility they can rely on. That flexibility therefore cannot depend on the goodwill of an employee or a nursery. We already saw this in the Australian Child Care Flexibility Trials:

> 'A little while ago they were trying a flexible child care trial. So they were aimed at shift workers to do a pilot program where they were going to offer 24-hour care. But it was only a pilot and it was only for like 6 to 9 months and it's a nightmare to try to find child care. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)'
> (*Baxter et al., 2016:36*)

CHILDREN WHO ARE WELL LOOKED AFTER

Parents' first and most important concern is that their children will be well looked after. They want their children to be happy when they go to an occasional or flexible provider too. Anna's story illustrates this.

> 'Anna is single and has three children. She's looking for care for the youngest child; the other two are already going to school. She is entitled to 15 hours of funded care and would like to return to work. She visits two nurseries that offer times that can be combined with work, but she is concerned that her child is anxious and is not adjusting easily. Later she visits a 'Stay & Play' group with her child, but she doesn't return after the first time. She is now taking her child to a local nursery where she feels comfortable. The prospect of returning to work seems remote again. This shows how important the right childcare is for a parent. Anna did not even want to consider starting work before the childcare was sorted out properly. The story also shows how parents' concern over finding the right care for their children is important if you want to support them.'
> (*PACE worker, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

Maybe some people would say that Anna should not be so silly. After all, childcare was available at the hours she needed. Now she has to start all over again. The employee who recorded Anna's story does not see it that way, and refers to suitable childcare as the key for parents. And care is not suitable if parents and children do not feel comfortable with it.
If it does feel right, though, the story becomes much more positive. Parents notice their own quality of life and that of their children improving; they find that they have some time for themselves and that their children are forming relationships and learning things at nursery.

> 'When I get my childcare free 15 hours, I can spend my time in training. And it's better for my child's development. He is learning more, he learns everything very quickly. I have a good relationship with staff, all the times they inform me what's happening on that day, how he is doing.' (*Malika, Gravesham, 2020*)

But parents also become concerned, for example, about their child spending many hours and long days at nursery. Once their child has become accustomed to a particular setting, they would prefer not to move him or her to another one. Parents often look for solutions in other areas of life by alternating shifts with their partner, or by working fewer hours.

Access to the premises

It helps parents if they feel welcome at the childcare setting and they are usually happy to be allowed into the rooms where the children are playing. In England it is less common for parents to enter the rooms where the children are, but even in other countries there are settings where parents are not welcome anywhere.

> 'You have the feeling that you're barred from going any further (at the door).'
> (*Cynthia, Turnhout, 2020*)
>
> 'There is finger print security so we can only be in reception. One day we had pet day and were invited in.' (*Maggie, Brighton & Hove, 2020*)

Not all parents have a problem with not being allowed into all parts of the nursery. They understand the need for security measures. Some of them also think that the children find it easier to say goodbye when parents do not come into the main room. However, parents often do not know that there are childcare settings that take a different approach; they are unable to compare.

The role of early years practitioners

Early years practitioners are crucial when it comes to putting parents at ease in difficult or new circumstances.

> 'I wanted to work and was looking for a childcare provider. I had had experience of using a childminder, but wasn't happy, as it wasn't clean there. The environment and organisation are different here. I was immediately listened to, they put you at ease here.' (*Binta, Mechelen, 2020*)
>
> 'I don't speak the language, but you can also speak in English or French. There was also a mum from my own country. We were put in touch so she could interpret.'
> (*Aminata, Mechelen, 2020*)

At the same time, some parents wonder what nursery staff think about the option of using childcare occasionally or flexibly. Do they find it difficult? Parents are sometimes concerned that this may have an effect on the way their child is looked after. A Kent mother says that she was afraid of this at first, but that the staff were quickly able to reassure her. For another mother, it took months to feel relaxed:

> 'They did not know the name of my child after three or four months. My son started to hate going to the nursery. I have complained. After, they were extra nice to me.' (*Diara, Gravesham, 2020*)

FLEXIBILITY AND CARE: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Parents want their children to be looked after properly. They want flexibility that meets the family's needs, and they want reassurance that their children will not suffer in the process. Preferably, they also want a choice. That freedom of choice depends on the context. Is flexible childcare something normal that parents are entitled to, as in Finland?[6] Or is it provided as an exception or a special favour? Can parents opt for flexibility because they are confronted with flexibility in other areas of life such as work and their household? Or do they have to conform to one or more mandatory systems?

American research has shown that choices relating to childcare and work are paired decisions for many low-income families, if they can actually be said to have any choice.[7,8,9] Parents with unstable work or unpredictable hours in particular are forced to look for flexible or ad hoc provision, or to piece different forms of care together. But for these parents too, quality of care is the top priority: they seek a setting where their child feels happy and can form meaningful relationships.[9] But what if there is no decent childcare that also offers flexibility?

During the PACE project, some parents had clearly lost their bearings in their caringscape: they were unable to meet expectations in all areas of their lives and could not find a manageable route between home, work and childcare. These parents ended up quitting their training programme out of frustration, turning down an attractive job or taking their children out of nursery.
This happened to Amber.

> 'Amber found employment as a cleaner; however she really struggled with flexible childcare and was never paid on time. She decided to quit her job as the worry of juggling work and family life made her feel anxious. Amber now volunteers in the café at the Children's Centre; she has attended food safety level 2 and Barista training. (*PACE worker, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

2.2 The employers' view: a panacea?

EMPLOYERS

The combination of work and family responsibilities is a pressing issue not just for many families, but for employers too. Parents who are unable to find childcare or work out combinations of informal and formal care will have a less reliable attendance record and experience more stress,[10] with consequences at work. Can flexible and occasional care offer a solution? Are employers not the ideal candidate to support and perhaps even pay for occasional and flexible care? How do employers actually view flexible work and the way it should be combined with family responsibilities? Who is responsible for looking for solutions for the children?

Employers are by definition involved in this issue in the Netherlands. All employers pay a contribution for childcare, even if they do not have any employees with young children. In France, England and Flanders, employers can purchase childcare places or organise childcare themselves. Some hospitals and universities opt to do this. However, little is known about what employers think about childcare. There are very few articles or studies in which their views on the subject are quoted.

FLEMISH EMPLOYERS ON CHILDCARE: A SMALL-SCALE SURVEY

In 2019, second-year students of the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education programme at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences interviewed 18 employers (nine women and nine men) in Flanders about their views on childcare.[11]

The employers regarded flexibility as a matter of give and take. Childcare cannot and should not cover all eventualities: businesses and organisations must also make it possible for their employees to combine work and family.

> 'If you want to hire good, highly motivated employees, you have to ensure as an employer that you offer flexibility and respond to your employees' needs.'

This can be done by making it possible to work from home, by having employees arrange the work rota themselves or by working with flexible hours. Employers acknowledge that combining work and family responsibilities is not straightforward. People working shift systems or late hours face structural difficulties such as the limited opening hours of childcare settings. Employees sometimes also have difficulties with unexpected situations, such as a sick child.

For one-off situations, employers rely on solidarity between employees: for example, people can switch shifts or work from home for a day while a colleague takes over the tasks that can only be done in the workplace. Employers rely on childcare to address the structural problems. Some believe that it is organised too rigidly. The employers who were interviewed broadly agree that childcare is mainly designed for employees with standard working hours and is not adapted

to other work regimes such as shift work or flexible hours. They believe that childcare should offer a better response to parents' work situations: more evening and weekend hours, more adaptable planning.

> 'In Flanders, you virtually have to arrange childcare before you can even think of having children.'

Others understand that childcare cannot fully adapt to the labour market.

> 'It's difficult for childcare settings to adapt to employers, because they are employers themselves.'

Are employers willing to contribute financially to childcare? Some can see that this is a possibility, but do not necessarily have their own organisation in mind. However, they do say that businesses can organise childcare themselves, which has the additional advantage that it will be tailored to the working hours and that parents will not have to spend time travelling to and from the nursery. A number of employers believe that the government should respond more to changes in the labour market by promoting flexible childcare. None of the interviewed employers mentioned the perspective of the children.

In the PACE project, we saw examples of employers who are committed to facilitating the combination of childcare and work for parents. Such businesses make their working hours 'family- friendly', or provide paid childcare during education and training programmes. What has made these employers get on board?
When it is hard to find employees, employers are more inclined to adapt their way of doing things and look for feasible solutions for families. Some employers have developed a clear vision of work and family. A hotel chain from England consistently matches working hours with school and childcare hours. In this way, the chain seeks to give parents, including single parents, the opportunity to continue working. They themselves see many advantages to this: it encourages employee loyalty and is good for the business's reputation.
Not all businesses and organisations are sufficiently in tune with parents' situations; more information in this area can help to convince them of the need to respond. Information about the options for purchasing or organising childcare can also be useful in this respect. In some countries subsidies are available for this, but employers do not always know about them.

PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Public employment services can also help families find their way through their caringscapes. It became clear during the PACE project that these services are generally unaware of the difficulties and concerns that parents experience in their search for childcare. When the reality gets through to them, they quickly prove willing to make changes. Simply adjusting the hours of a training programme to childcare opening hours in the region can make a world of difference for parents. In addition, public employment services showed a willingness to systematically ask parents starting a programme or job whether they need childcare.
Despite this willingness, it was not easy to implement changes sustainably. Staff turnover and lack of resources and time led these agencies to lose sight of considerations of childcare and the caringscape.

In Kent, a close partnership arose during the PACE project with the local employment service, Jobcentre Plus. The employees of this organisation cannot make time to look for childcare with parents, but the PACE worker did so. Because this employee was present at the Jobcentre, awareness grew that childcare is an important factor for families.
The PACE worker coached parents in preparation for applying for jobs. Among other things, she advised them to raise the subject of childcare when employers ask questions about flexibility. This proved to be a valuable tip.

Conclusion

An employee of Jobcentre Plus in Kent summarises the main conclusion:

> 'What do we need to change? Changing the employers' attitude towards flexibility for employees and changing the childcare attitude towards opening hours.'
> (*Jobcentre Plus employee, Gravesham, 2018*)

But this is not enough. In many places in Flanders, France, England and the Netherlands, individual employers and staff at public employment services are willing to help parents as they combine work and childcare. Unfortunately, this willingness is not always underpinned by a systematic attempt to reconcile these two areas of life. Individual employees then end up caught in a rigid system. Conversely, management sometimes has a vision which is not implemented by the individual employees, so that little changes in practice.[12,13] All levels of a system must cooperate, as only then will the adaptations that are made go beyond individual successes.

2.3 What do early years practitioners think?

The demand for occasional and flexible childcare is a complicating factor for early years practitioners. It is suggested they adjust their working practices, yet they themselves are employees who have to combine work with private life. Greater flexibility in childcare has direct consequences for their own family life. At the same time, employees see how flexible and occasional care can work out well for children and parents.
There is little literature to be found on the views of early years practitioners and managers on flexible and occasional care. In the course of the PACE project, we recorded the beliefs of those working in childcare on this subject. We used a questionnaire and interviews, and surveyed both early years practitioners and managers who participated in the PACE project and those who did not.

WHY OCCASIONAL AND FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE?

Childcare staff who have experience of flexible and occasional care are generally positive about it. The main consideration that motivates them is that they can offer added value to families. They generally take an interest in why occasional and flexible childcare is needed, and then look for ways of making such care possible in practice.[14]

Managers who offer occasional places in regular nurseries do so on principle: they believe that all families are entitled to childcare, and that too many families will be left out if they do not offer these places.[15]

> 'Other places fill up very quickly. If there were enough ordinary places, this would not be necessary. Wealthy two-income couples come to reserve a place as soon as they are expecting a baby, but the less highly educated the parents are, the longer they leave it to find childcare, and then they find that they are too late everywhere. Then they're suddenly supposed to go out on a temporary work assignment, but they have no childcare because they were supposed to apply for it a year beforehand. We want to give those people a chance.' (*Setting manager, Flanders, 2019*)

> 'In our district there are many non-native speakers, people with little education or a low income, isolated people, undocumented migrants, refugees. Often these people also live here only for a very short time because they're waiting for a permanent place to live or a social housing allocation. (...) So they need to be able to find childcare during the period that they live here.'
> (*Setting manager, Flanders, 2019*)

> 'It enables them (i.e. parents) to be able to go to interviews and important appointments knowing their child is well looked after and that they have sufficient time to carry out what they need to do.' (*Setting manager, Gravesham, 2020*)

Managers draw motivation from the idea that providing this form of childcare can make a difference for families. This idea is also crucial in getting the entire childcare team involved. When the rationale for a decision or approach is kept constantly in mind, it becomes easier to see past the practical obstacles.

> 'The nursery staff have to be highly motivated and flexible. They must also understand how important this is for the parents and the children. When they are unable to accept this, it's difficult for them to maintain motivation in their work. A good relationship with the parents is also important, so that they can see who they are doing this for.' (*Setting manager, Flanders, 2019*)

> 'If you love children, you are alright to work in childcare. Difference here is "you love the parents". Often a nursery is not there for the convenience for parents. Here they are. Staff have to be responsive for the parents.'
> (*Setting manager, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

A small-scale questionnaire-based survey confirmed the importance of a clear motivation for organising occasional or flexible childcare.

FLEMISH CHILDCARE STAFF ON OCCASIONAL AND FLEXIBLE CARE

In 2018, students on the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education programmes at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences and Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts distributed a questionnaire drawn up by the PACE researchers. We received a total of 112 completed questionnaires back. One of the questions described two concrete examples of occasional childcare and asked the participants if they would be willing to work in an occasional nursery of this kind. Of the 103 people who answered this question, 40 said they would like to do so. Another 40 were also prepared to do so, but with a few conditions, and 23 said that they would not wish to do so.
Analysis of their answers showed that participants who said 'yes' primarily saw the benefits for families. They felt they could make a difference for these families: 'It's good for the family in the longer term', 'Parents can work' and 'Every child has the right to childcare'. A number of participants also regarded occasional childcare as a positive challenge: it would bring something new to their work, provide more variety and provide an opportunity to learn.
The participants who answered 'no' mainly objected on practical grounds such as the workload for staff, the occupancy rate and planning difficulties, or stressed the negative consequences for children: it would be intimidating for them, they would be unable to adjust properly and would not become sufficiently attached. Those who set conditions talked about the importance of a settling-in period, about good agreements, about the adjustment of subsidies and about adapted pedagogical practice.

Vision comes first. Without a clear and compelling reason, a nursery will never introduce occasional and flexible care provision. On the other hand, occasional childcare is never just a practical matter. There must be a manager who is willing and able to steer the nursery in this direction, and who can carry the team along with him or her.

> ‘The manager has a clear vision. (...) The nursery is an example to show the municipality that childcare can be flexible. It needs a team focus and negotiation between staff members.’ (*PACE manager, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

Finnish research among employees in flexible childcare is in line with these findings. Employees who take a positive view of flexible care see fewer negative consequences for the children.[16,17] They stress the importance to the family.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Employees especially see advantages in occasional and flexible childcare for parents, families and society.

> ‘When the parents have the opportunity to sort their lives out, this can only benefit the family.’

> ‘Sometimes a solution is needed to ensure stability in the family.’

> ‘If there was more occasional childcare, more people could start working... People wouldn’t live in so much poverty as a result. Childcare has a great social function.’

Early years practitioners take a more nuanced view of the consequences for children. Occasional and flexible care gives children the opportunity to get used to a group and play with other children, and sometimes they find comfort in a nursery.

> ‘Children receive the necessary attention and care at the nursery if they can’t be looked after at home for various reasons (work, illness, inability to cope).’

But early years practitioners are concerned about the disadvantages: about how happy a child will be who only comes for a short time and what it will be like for the group of children as a whole.

> ‘The child suddenly has to go to nursery without getting used to the caregivers and the new environment. And always for a short period.’

> ‘Group activities and group dynamics are always different with a fixed group of children. Social development takes place at a more profound level, there is more balance and the energy can be put into other things.’

This type of childcare also requires a different mindset from nursery workers.

> ‘They have to be very flexible towards parents and children yet still have good pedagogical and social instincts in order to figure children out in a short time. It’s intensive and you have to have the ability to cope. Not everyone does.’

On an organisational level, early years practitioners see many pitfalls.

> ‘There is no certainty/guarantee of full take-up of the places for occasional care.’

> ‘I think it requires extra work to support the team. The challenge for me would then lie on the organisational side: finding time to do everything properly. But I don’t really see this as a disadvantage.’

HOW DO YOU ORGANISE OCCASIONAL AND FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE?

Questionnaire respondents who mainly see the practical objections to occasional and flexible childcare would not introduce such services of their own accord. The respondents agreed wholeheartedly about the type of obstacles that they expected in organising flexible and occasional childcare. In general, they see the regulations and funding as a possible stumbling block, expect obstacles relating to the ethics of childcare, and see a number of organisational obstacles. The same obstacles are mentioned in the few publications on occasional and flexible childcare.[6,18] This setting manager of an English occasional and flexible childcare setting mentions all three concerns together:

> ‘The pressure arising from the numbers on which the funding depends often plays a major role. Obviously, it’s much easier to accept only full-time children who will stay from the start through to their transition to school. Children of two-income households, who we know will only be absent on regular days off, also provide great security, of course.
>
> In addition, it also involves extra work. In terms of communication and language, and other concerns for the families, such as financial problems or educational concerns. If you’re thinking about the workload, you shouldn’t opt to do this. In addition, the financial aspect can also be an obstacle. If your survival depends on the parental contribution, it’s simply impossible.’
> (*Setting manager, Gravesham, 2020*)

Regulations and funding

How do you achieve the occupancy rate you need for your funding if you do not know how many children will come every day? What activities do you plan at what times and for how many children? In each survey, respondents identify the strict regulations as the biggest obstacle. Some setting managers do not let this hold them back:

> ‘We just give it a try before we say no.’ (*Setting manager, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

Other setting managers say they have to fight, but at the same time they derive satisfaction from the results of that struggle:

> ‘It’s something really wonderful. I’m very happy with what we are doing. We are also trying to fight against the policymakers. It’s also a matter of compromise and looking for solutions for us.’ (*Setting manager, Flanders, 2019*)

For many setting managers, the regulations feel like a straitjacket: they do not want to end up operating illegally. In comparison, the financial objections are less serious. Setting managers take a nuanced view of the financial issues. Some even see opportunities for extra income in occasional and flexible childcare.

> ‘The financial side is important, but even if you solve that, there will still be objections. The mentality is the most important thing.’
> (*PACE worker, Gravesham, 2019*)

> ‘It’s only possible if there are enough subsidies. You also need more staff, and they need to be more highly trained.’ (*Setting manager, Flanders, 2019*)

Questions relating to the ethics of childcare: is it good for the children?
‘Is occasional and flexible care not harmful to children?’ many childcare workers wonder. Does the short-term solution for families outweigh the possible long-term effects? Many professionals see disadvantages for children. Occasional childcare can be overwhelming, the children have trouble adjusting, and constantly changing care days are difficult for them. Employees who have been in an occasional or flexible practice for some time no longer articulate such concerns. They do not wonder whether this type of care is good for children – they wonder how they can make it good for children.
Asking the question differently means that these employees look at things differently. Experienced nurseries have adapted their settling-in procedures, made clear agreements about how to treat a child who is settling-in, and devised systems for communicating with parents.[19,20] They find that children in flexible and occasional care are usually happy, and in addition that children who come to nursery on a regular basis sometimes have a hard time.

Work organisation
Will employees be willing to work atypical hours? How do you ensure that there are always enough staff if the group of children varies in size? How do you bring structure and stability to the group when other children often join it? What extra support does the team need to be able to cope with the many changes? How do you plan the purchase of food, equipment and materials?
Some of the questions raised by employees are undoubtedly valid. Occasional and flexible childcare requires extra administration.

> ‘There’s a load of paperwork for a child who comes for one day.’
> (*Setting manager, Flanders, 2019*)

As well as more administration, occasional and flexible childcare requires sound planning. A good system is needed for this in settings with lots of childcare places. Organisations do not always have the time and experience to develop such a system.

> ‘Often nurseries want to be flexible, but they don’t know how to do it.’
> (*PACE worker, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

The team also has to make the transition to flexible childcare, which can be difficult.

> ‘Staff must be flexible themselves in order to make a start on this. It’s something you have to be able to cope with, because we don’t always have the same kids.’
> (*Setting manager, Flanders, 2019*)

It is easier to switch over to providing occasional and flexible care when nurseries recruit new staff. They can make it clear what flexibility involves and what it means for the job while interviewing applicants. However, even when a childcare setting selects staff carefully, operating on a flexible basis requires additional training, education and coaching of staff. At the same time, a setting manager can organise the work to ensure that employees do not just have to show flexibility, but also receive some flexibility themselves.

> ‘Staff have to be flexible but also get flexibility from us. For instance, for performing on drop ‘n’ go sessions, they will get extra hours off in holidays, these periods are much quieter.’ (*Setting manager, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

2.4 What do policymakers think about flexible and occasional care?

In the first part, we concluded that policymakers see childcare as an important tool in activation labour market policies. However, this is not a proactive strategy: childcare policy is only implemented when it turns out that families are unable to access the job market sufficiently. What do these policy developments mean for policymakers in the fields of employment services and childcare, who are not in charge of macro policy? In the four PACE countries, the project partners organised group discussions with local and supralocal policymakers, from which a general idea was obtained of their views on occasional and flexible childcare.

The context
In each country, participants referred to growing flexibility in the labour market and the pressure on parents to find jobs. They realise that the current childcare system is not helpful for families with low work intensity, for single parents, or for parents with atypical working hours, and they dream of childcare as a basic right for all children. In all the discussion groups, the participants argued for greater flexibility in childcare. At the same time, they set limits: the fact that work is becoming more flexible does not mean that childcare must blindly follow the trend.

> ‘It is not the childcare market’s job to support poor working practice – zero hours contracts and “on call” work.’ (*Policymaker, England, 2019*)

Policymakers in all countries pointed to problems that apply to the entire childcare sector. They recognise that levels of pay are low and that not all programmes provide adequate training to meet the high expectations in a sector that is expected to provide childcare for all working families, support families and also provide a solution to child poverty, at a time when funding is being cut. All the discussion groups believed that the sector should be better funded and valued more highly, and that more attention should be paid to the professionalisation of employees. At times, the Dutch participants saw the limitations of childcare as an advantage, arguing that they gave parents an opportunity to negotiate with employers who asked for too much flexibility. ‘Go and talk to your boss: that’s not the responsibility of the childcare system,’ they advise.

Obstacles
Like us, policymakers make a limited plea for flexibility in childcare. They identify more or less the same obstacles to such flexibility as setting managers and workers:

- There are strict rules about occupancy rates and staff:child ratios in the childcare system, and no subsidies for occasional and flexible care. The Dutch participants talked about a 'patchwork of rules'.
- Occasional and flexible care is not profitable, either for childcare organisations or for governments. Many of the experiments with it have therefore been stopped, such as the flexible childcare action plan in Flanders.[21] In England a clear framework is lacking for business management in childcare.
- All the obstacles in terms of rules and funding present childcare organisers with a psychological hurdle to overcome. Occasional and flexible care is also at odds with important practices in this sector, such as giving children a settling-in period.
- Finally, policymakers mention parenting culture as a barrier. They say that childcare organisations tend to believe that children should be with their parents as much as possible, and they also identify a strong motherhood ideology in families, according to which mothers and their children should spend a lot of time together. The only PACE country where this point did not come up in discussion was Flanders.

Many of the participants in the discussions would like to see these obstacles removed, and dream of more flexible regulations and childcare that every family can afford.

Concern for children
Like those employed in the sector, policymakers spoke in a nuanced way about whether occasional and flexible care is good for children. There was scepticism in Flanders, on the grounds that continuity and attachment are important for children. At the same time, the discussion group participants realised that a combination of formal and informal systems is not ideal either. In France too, participants saw the child's rhythm and well-being as very important. The Dutch policymakers were clearly opposed to occasional and flexible childcare, which they felt was 'not an emotionally safe environment for children'. The English group could see advantages as well as drawbacks:

> 'Children can have really good experiences with using different childcare providers and children can manage this well.' (*Policymaker, England, 2019*)

Perhaps this nuanced concern is one reason why all the discussion groups dreamt of a system of at-home childcare for families with atypical working hours.
Not a single discussion group looked at the issue of continuity and attachment in regular childcare settings. There, too, events such as staff changes can often make it difficult for children to adjust or to form attachments, as we saw in the discussion of stability and flexibility in the third chapter of Part 1. Conversely, flexible childcare, with early or late opening hours or varying days, is capable of paying considerable attention to continuity and attachment.

The role of government
All groups referred to government as an important player, especially the local authorities. The latter can support childcare settings in making flexible and occasional care possible, they can familiarise parents with childcare provision and they can lobby regional or national governments. At the same time, these local authorities are under pressure. In England, funding has been decreasing year after year for the services that take on this type of work. In the Netherlands, the role of local government is limited because the childcare sector is private. However, Dutch municipalities can decide to fund certain forms of childcare more or to provide allowances for some parents.
It is striking how often participants from countries where childcare is largely in the hands of private operators argued in favour of government involvement: there should be a clear and above all accessible and unambiguous system of funding and rules that supports the sector and parents.

> 'Children are not a market.'
> (*Policymaker, The Netherlands, 2019*)

2.5 How do children experience occasional and flexible care?

Parents want their child to feel happy, to be properly looked after and to be treated with love in childcare. Good care provision for children is the primary concern of early years practitioners and setting managers in childcare, and policymakers attach great importance to it too. But what does feeling happy mean? And is it still possible in a context of greater flexibility? The childcare sector has developed methods for assessing whether children are feeling happy: conceptual frameworks for well-being and involvement.

WELL-BEING AND INVOLVEMENT[22]
'When we want to know how each of the children is doing in a setting, we first have to explore the degree in which children do feel at ease, act spontaneously, show vitality and self-confidence.' *(Laevers, 2006: 2)*

Do you want to know if a care setting is good for the children? Look at the children in the here and now. Check whether they feel happy and whether their affective, cognitive and physical needs are being met. How can you tell? Children with a high level of well-being have fun, visibly enjoy themselves, radiate peace and vitality, are spontaneous and are open to interaction. This is the well-being component, and it comes first. If children feel happy, there is also room for a second component: involvement. This is about how intensely engaged they are, how involved they are in an activity. Children with high involvement concentrate on what they are doing, become absorbed in an activity and radiate enthusiasm. This indicates that

the child is exploring his or her possibilities, pushing back his or her boundaries and learning.
In Flanders, England and the Netherlands, the terms 'well-being' and 'involvement' are common in the care sector for babies and toddlers. This conceptual framework is like a pair of glasses that early years practitioners can put on to assess how the children in their group are doing at any moment of the day. They can then adjust their overall provision, way of working, layout and interactions to maximise the well-being and involvement of children in the group.
The framework adds a further nuance: it recognises that no child is highly involved all the time, as that would be exhausting.

Many adults worry about the well-being of children in occasional and flexible childcare, and this holds them back from organising, supporting or using it. We were unable to find studies investigating the effects of these types of care. The research that does exist focuses on the longer-term effects of 'unstable childcare' or unstable solutions for care. However, these studies do not clearly define what stability involves: for example, they make no distinction between stability on the outside, to do with how childcare is organised, and the stability on the inside that children may or may not experience. As a result, it is also unclear whether the instability to which this research refers occurs in occasional or flexible care, and, if it does, in what forms of such care.

A few recent studies of schoolchildren have placed children's experiences at the centre.[23,24] A Finnish study asked early years practitioners to keep a mobile diary about how children were feeling during the day and at night. Children in night care sometimes turned out to feel happier than children who only went to nursery during the day.[25] The researchers were unable to infer from this whether flexible childcare is good or bad. Another study found that schoolchildren in flexible childcare regarded the internal kind of stability as crucial. What was important for them was autonomy and choice, connection with other children and adults, and quality of relationships. They liked to receive clear information about what was happening and why. These are reassuring findings, although they focus on schoolchildren. We cannot draw any conclusions from them about occasional and flexible care for younger children.

In Flanders, a large-scale systematic measurement of well-being and involvement in babies and toddlers in all forms of care was conducted in 2016.[26] The mean scores for well-being and involvement were found to be moderate everywhere; there is thus plenty of room for improvement. The study identified a number of factors in children's well-being and involvement. Group size turned out to be an important factor: when children are in a smaller group, their well-being and involvement are higher. The influence of the number of children per childcare worker was less clear. This study also showed that stability on the outside, of the kind found in fixed groups with large numbers of nursery workers, does not necessarily lead to greater stability in the experience of children.[26]

In the PACE project, students and a pedagogical coach observed the well-being and involvement of children at different times. Generally, both were found to be high. Staff at occasional or flexible care settings also report that children who occasionally attend usually adapt well and quickly, especially if they end up in a group that is partially stable.

> 'Most children who come occasionally do fine when you look at each child as an individual and take their personality into account.'
> *(Setting manager, Brighton & Hove, 2019)*

STEP 1: OBSERVATION SCHEDULE (SCANNING OF WELL-BEING AND INVOLVEMENT) — SICs Form A

GROUP: 38 VOLT NUMBER OF CHILDREN: 7 NUMBER OF SUPERVISORS: 2 DATE: 15/05/... FROM 8.20 TO 8.55 am

	NAME CHILD	OBSERVATION	WELL-BEING INVOLVEMENT		NAME CHILD	OBSERVATION	WELL-BEING/ INVOLVEMENT	
1	Demi	looks outside, then at the table with staff member. Makes noise with instrument. Looks happy.	5 INV	3+ BT	6 AdiL	happily walks around inside, looks outside, is absorbed in play on the slide. Then comes to me and points to markers on the table.	5 INV	5 BT
2	Roxanne	looks around curiously and imitates Demi, then follows Oscar to the entrance.	5 INV	4 BT	7 Nina	A bit shy at first, moves smoothly through the room on the bike, then looks at herself in mirror	5 INV	4 BT
3	Oscar	crawls to the entrance and plays with the flyers and leaflets.	5 INV	3+ BT	8		INV	BT
4	Amara	remains with staff member, plays alone. introverted attitude, plays quietly with focus.	4 INV	3+ BT	9		INV	BT
5	Sarah	sits at the table, eats sandwich and looks around with much interest.	5 INV	4 BT	10		INV	BT

A completed SICS form, with observations of well-being and involvement for seven children in occasional childcare in 38 Volt in Mechelen.[27]

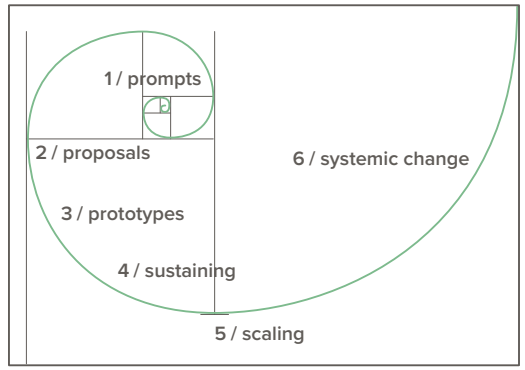
3. PROTOTYPES OF FLEXIBLE AND OCCASIONAL CHILDCARE

All project partners in PACE looked for ways to organise occasional and flexible childcare. In doing so, they wished to support parents who were cut off from both childcare and the labour market. Each partner took the local childcare system and the organisation's possibilities into account. Comparing all experiments, we can distinguish five prototypes for organising occasional and flexible care.
A prototype is an early model of a product or service. The service is thus not yet fully developed, but it is already clear what it will look like; its characteristics will be worked out in detail at a later stage. For a service, a prototype is also a model that can be adapted to the context. The prototypes for occasional and flexible childcare are:

- an exclusively occasional nursery.
- a network of nurseries that supplements its regular provision with occasional childcare.
- at-home childcare.
- childminding.
- a local childcare brokerage service.

PACE was a social innovation project. Such projects are built up in steps: an idea leads to prototypes, which are then piloted; if they are successful, they can 'scale up'.

THE SPIRAL MODEL OF SOCIAL INNOVATION SHOWING THE STAGES



Young Foundation, Social innovation Exchange[1]

The PACE project opted to embed social innovation within existing regular childcare operations. The prototypes can be seen as representing extra functions in childcare.
Each experiment was related to the local and regional context. The prototypes are liberated from these contexts, although we do describe the relation between the prototype and the childcare system. Good care can only thrive in a strong system,[2] and clearly this also applies to occasional and flexible forms of provision. These two forms are not the core of the childcare system: in fact, they challenge some of the main tenets of that system. The current system places limits on flexibility, which is good, because childcare's economic function must remain in balance with its pedagogical and social functions. However, a few system modifications are needed for occasional and flexible childcare to succeed.

A competent system works on four levels, each of which must strengthen the others:

- Individual professionalism: employees in childcare can connect knowledge, practice and values in a critically reflective way. In addition, they can cope with complexity, diversity and changes.[3,4]
- Competences at team and organisational level that support and provide a foundation for individual professionalism.
- Competences at network level that enable organisations to learn from one another and strengthen one another in a network.
- Administrative and policy competences. International, national and regional legal frameworks must support this professionalism. Governments must provide

adequate resources and tools to implement the desired practices, such as the European Quality Framework (EQF).[4]

All these levels of the system feature in the prototypes. In addition, we always highlight the perspective of the families by means of an accessibility check, and we state the prototype's advantages and limitations at different levels of the system.

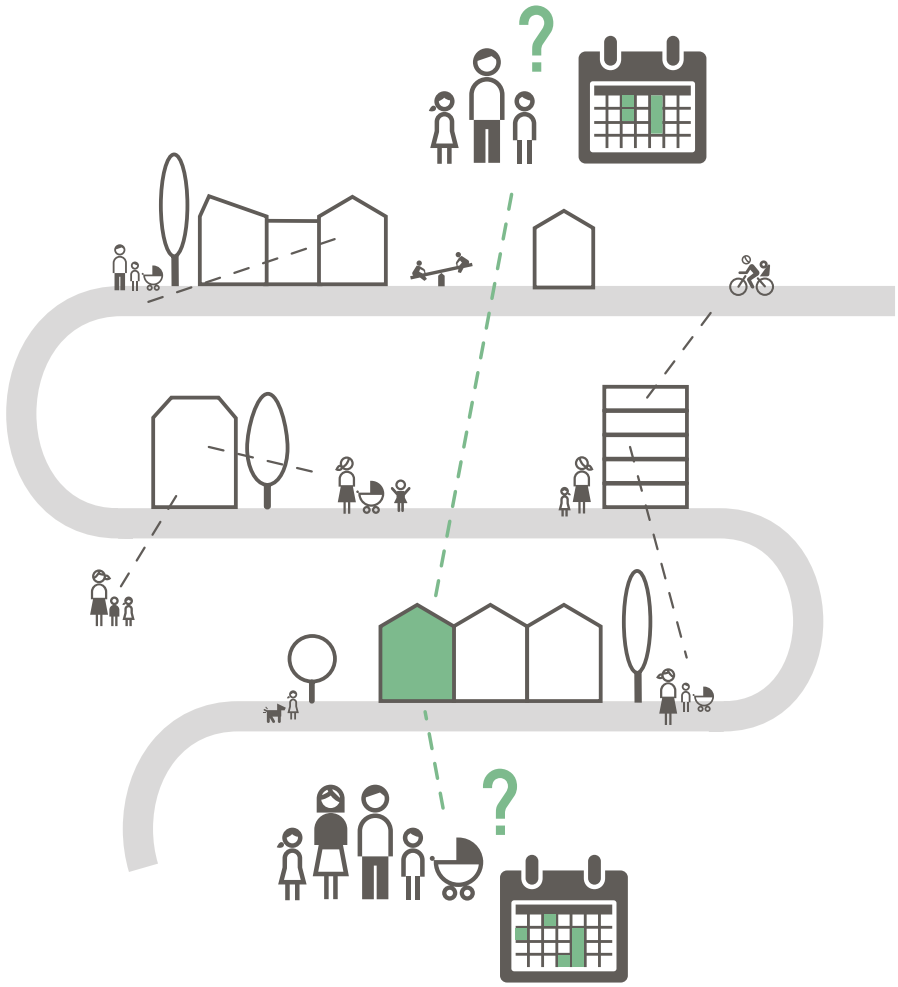
The prototypes remain fairly abstract; anyone who implements one will have to take steps to make it more concrete. How they decide to do this will depend on how their initiative is embedded in an organisation, the regulations, the existing networks, the employees' possibilities, the available resources and other factors that differ between settings. At the end of Part 2, we put forward one prototype ourselves. We describe how to design a setting in practice on the basis of this prototype in Part 3 of this book.

3.1 PROTOTYPE 1 the exclusively occasional nursery

DESCRIPTION

An exclusively occasional nursery offers occasional childcare only, and families can use it at short notice. There is no care plan, or only a short-term one. Families may use the nursery once or several times, and it is up to them how often their children go there and whether the times remain the same or vary. This means that the group of families using the setting is different every day, and that new families may arrive at different times of the day. The setting manager and early years practitioners are prepared for this, both practically and mentally. Families find the nursery by means of referrals from other organisations.

Care provision of this kind already existed here and there among the PACE project partners. In France, a number of exclusively occasional haltes-garderies operate according to this model, supported by the government. In Belgium there are a number of examples, most of which originated in a project or on the initiative of local government. In Turnhout, the city authorities once set up an occasional nursery to provide temporary relief to housewives. Many recent migrants now use this nursery, which optimised its operational approach during the PACE project.



ADVANTAGES

- Such nurseries are a solution for families with unpredictable or greatly varying childcare needs.
- The service is available at very short notice.
- Families only pay for the hours or sessions they use.
- Families can adjust to childcare at their own pace, in whatever way works for them.
- The staff are used to working with changing groups of children and parents – it is all in a day's work for them.
- It is clear to the staff that occasional and flexible care is the premise on which their organisation is based.

LIMITATIONS

For the families

- Parents cannot be sure of a place. Availability depends on the number of occasional places and the diversity of childcare needs in the target group. If all members of the target group want childcare on the same day of the week, not everyone will have a place.
- If the families' needs become regular, they can no longer use their trusted childcare setting, which will refer them to a setting that offers regular childcare.
- The hourly rate at such settings is sometimes higher than that at regular, subsidised care. It often works out cheaper for parents because regular childcare requires children to come for more days, but it becomes expensive once parents need childcare several days a week. However, this only applies to settings that work with a fixed hourly charge, not to occasional settings that always work on an income-related basis, such as the OKiDOs in Flanders.
- It can be hard for children only to go to nursery from time to time. Ensuring a settling-in period is difficult with emergency childcare, for instance.
- Occasional care is flexible in planning and use, but not always in its opening hours. This type of provision does not offer a solution for parents who work in the evening or at the weekend, or who need childcare very early in the morning.

For the employees

- Unpredictable occupancy levels require great flexibility from the employees. Their work rotas often change, including at short notice. Employees sometimes do not know in advance how late they will have to work.
- The group of children and parents changes frequently and is diverse. Employees come into contact with many children and parents and have to say goodbye more often. Not all employees see this as a drawback.
- Employees must offer pedagogical continuity in a setting where things are constantly changing. They therefore need more time for joint reflection on their work and approach.
- Employees need adapted further training, which does not currently exist.

For the organisation

- If every family with atypical childcare needs goes to such a nursery, it will be oversubscribed, and queues or digital waiting lists will arise.
- Childcare settings find it difficult to predict occupancy and income.

In the local context

- There is a danger that regular childcare settings will refer lots of parents to the occasional setting and become less flexible themselves.

ACCESSIBILITY CHECK

Usability	Usability depends on the number of places available and on practical factors such as location and opening hours. A mandatory transition into regular childcare will be off-putting to many parents.
Availability	Availability depends on the number of places, the planning and the priority criteria. If these are not well thought out, the setting will be less available, and parents will no longer be able to rely on a place in occasional childcare.
Intelligibility	Not all parents have a lot of experience of childcare. This form of service is sometimes used as an introduction to childcare.
Reliability	Parents see this form of care as reliable because it is readily available and the entire organisation is set up to provide this type of care. These settings also make an effort to develop a personal relationship with all parents and children and allow the parents to see how their child is looked after.
Affordability	This type of provision is not necessarily financially affordable, especially if parents often need childcare. Its affordability depends on the choices that the nursery and the government make. If an occasional nursery adjusts its rates to the parents' income, it will be affordable. Fast and ready access clearly makes such settings psychologically affordable.

REGULATIONS

Although flexible and occasional childcare is regulated by law in Flanders, there is no framework for settings that want to work exclusively on an occasional basis. Most nurseries that do so do not rely on government subsidies. They are of course licensed, and the government inspects them to ensure quality. The funding for this kind of nursery sometimes comes from local government, or sometimes the nursery may be part of a large childcare organisation that redistributes its income. Sometimes such nurseries receive subsidies from local government: for example, the city of Antwerp subsidises the OKiDOs, which do not yet receive subsidies from the Flemish government.[5]

In **France**, the *haltes-garderies* offer occasional childcare without a care contract. Parents can bring their child there for one or more part-days per week. Financing is on the same basis as for other types of nursery, which makes things challenging, as haltes-garderies cannot rely on children attending on a regular basis as much as other nurseries. A *multi-accueil* (a group care setting) can also combine regular and occasional childcare. Some parental crèches offer occasional childcare too. Employees in occasional care must always be professionally trained.[6]

Although **England** does not explicitly mention occasional childcare in the regulations, this is not to say that it is prohibited. Provided exclusively occasional settings meet all the requirements for childcare, they are possible. However, we do not know of any nursery in England that operates in the same way as the prototype, although a system of crèches exists. These are run in an existing setting and look after children when the parents have an important appointment, are attending training or are looking for work, for example. Such care lasts a maximum of two hours, as there is then no requirement to register. Many Children's Centres offer such crèches during activities for parents.

Occasional childcare is not against the law in **the Netherlands** either, but the rules make it difficult to set up. First, the rules lay stress on continuity for the organiser. Second, parents and nurseries have a lot of administrative work to complete in order to receive the childcare allowance; they are in any case only entitled to such an allowance if they work with a contract. This administrative work can easily take several days, which means that very short-term care is not worth arranging. Parents can pay the full price for occasional childcare, but the cost is so high that hardly anyone can afford it.

SUCCESS FACTORS FOR SCALING UP

Employees

- This type of childcare places heavy demands on early years practitioners, so good personnel selection is important. During recruitment, the nursery should pay close attention to the specific requirements of occasional childcare: because many training programmes for nursery workers scarcely cover this type of care, new staff members will usually know little about it.
- Team members often have to deal with unexpected circumstances at occasional childcare settings, so the workload is high and team members often feel the need for extra training or group reflection. It is therefore important to make time for training and coaching.
- Employees must be given the opportunity to talk to parents, so that they can find out what the childcare they are providing means to parents and adjust their way of working accordingly.

Organisation

- An exclusively occasional nursery requires a relatively large number of staff to support children who are having difficulties.
- A strong pedagogical vision is necessary, to enable early years practitioners to build a practice that ensures stability and continuity in a frequently changing group. This vision should make it clear how the care provision makes children's and parents' lives as easy as possible.
- The setting needs a well thought-out settling-in and intake policy that defines how it responds to sudden childcare needs, how it manages the saying of goodbyes when a parent is dropping off a child, how nursery workers comfort children, when they do and do not contact the parents and how they should support one another in these contexts.
- Exclusively occasional childcare needs sufficient space. It is important to have a space where nursery workers and parents can talk to each other undisturbed; additional conversations will be necessary, as the staff do not know the children so well (if at all).
- On the business side, a nursery of this type must develop a strategy to deal with irregular attendance, and hence irregular income. Some organisations may take on volunteers or trainees in addition to permanent staff, but not every country allows this. Few national governments provide subsidies for this type of care, but sometimes local authorities are willing to invest in it.
- Settings of this kind also need good administration and a planning system, so that it is clear at any given moment whether there is a place and for how long.

- Occasional nurseries may be at risk of making unnecessary purchases, especially food. Some of them ask parents to provide their child's food in order to avoid food surpluses and unnecessary expenditure, but this is not always easy for families to do.
- An exclusively occasional setting needs a well-defined intake and transition policy to determine who it is intended for and at what point parents should start looking for regular childcare. Without such a policy, there is a danger that parents will not wish to leave when their childcare requirements become regular. As a result, fewer occasional places will be available.

Network of organisations

- Exclusively occasional nurseries need a good network of organisations that can refer parents. These include welfare organisations, public employment services, family support agencies, schools and health services. The partners in this network must be sufficiently aware of the nursery's way of working, as otherwise they run the risk of ignoring families' needs.
- Exclusively occasional settings cannot function properly without a strong network in the childcare sector. Nurseries in the area can refer parents who need occasional childcare, and the occasional setting must also be able to refer families requiring regular childcare to other nurseries.
- This kind of childcare works especially well if it is embedded in a larger system. Examples include childcare settings on a hospital campus for children whose parents (or grandparents) are receiving outpatient treatment, nurseries linked to training provision and nurseries linked to a social project or a job market reintegration programme. Being embedded in this way increases the chance that the places will actually be used.

System

- The childcare system currently only gives limited support to this prototype. It is not against the law, but care settings have to work out all the practical details themselves. The existing planning and funding rules also make it hard to organise, although governments in some countries waive certain rules for this type of setting. In France, for example, the haltes-garderies do not need a childcare plan, but the other rules on financing and occupancy still apply.
- Separate funding for this type of childcare would be a supportive measure for exclusively occasional nurseries. A system of childcare vouchers for parents would be a possible approach which would not interfere too much with existing funding. Another possibility is for government to subsidise occasional childcare places without looking at the occupancy rate, which can fluctuate greatly.

- Training for early years practitioners should also cover occasional and flexible childcare. This would make it easier for nurseries to find staff who are prepared for working in this form of childcare.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

1. During the PACE project, the city of Turnhout in Flanders moved the existing occasional nursery Het Lindeke to a building that already housed a regular nursery and a care setting for schoolchildren. The nurseries have one setting manager. If parents' needs become more regular, the family can move on to the regular care setting. This has major advantages: the childcare is all at the same location and the family is already familiar with the setting manager.

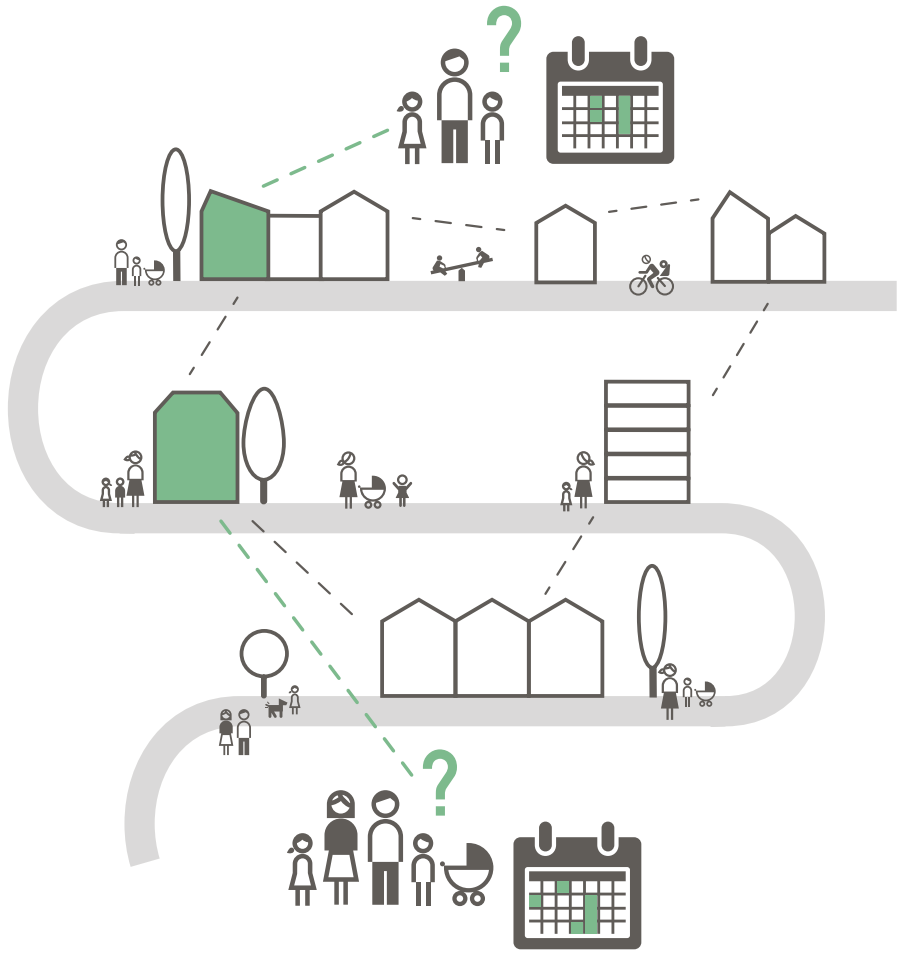
   > 'Thanks to European funding as part of the PACE project, Turnhout can offer four types of childcare under one roof: the occasional nursery Het Lindeke, the regular nursery Slabbers and Co, the group setting for school-aged children Gabbers and Co and the neighbourhood-oriented group setting for school-aged children Sloebers. Parents can meet up in the community space in the renovated building. We also use the space for education, training, parent activities, discussions with the family worker and the provision of services such as the childcare search service or the local childcare desk.' (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2020*)

2. 38 Volt in Mechelen (Flanders) is an exclusively occasional nursery that combines childcare with reintegration services for parents. Two family support officers work in the building. Parents wishing to find short- or long-term work and seeking support with this can go to them, and the children can go to the nursery in the meantime. This is also possible if the parents attend training, apply for a job or gain initial work experience.

3.2 PROTOTYPE 2
a network of nurseries that supplements its regular provision with occasional and flexible places

DESCRIPTION

This prototype involves nurseries in a municipality, city or region also offering occasional childcare places alongside their regular operations. The providers clearly define the target group on the basis of a local area analysis. The different providers work together to reach parents, allocate the places and ensure that they remain available for those most in need of them. All nurseries know who the places are intended for and every provider keeps to the arrangements. Because the nurseries cooperate, they are able to offer various forms of flexibility: emergency care, short-term care or a flexible care plan for parents with shifts or work schedules that are only known shortly in advance. All childcare organisations have a clear pedagogical vision that makes space for the provision of high-quality occasional care.



The two nurseries in the Centre Social Eclaté in Saint-Martin-Boulogne (France) have been offering a combination of regular and occasional childcare places for a few years. The occasional places are for families who urgently need childcare or do not need a regular place. A regular place means childcare on a fixed number of days per week over a longer period. Families indicate their occasional childcare needs two weeks in advance. The setting tries to meet all care requests but cannot guarantee to do so. A local committee keeps an eye on the balance between regular and occasional places, and also decides three times a year which families should be given priority and on what grounds. Separately from the occasional care that parents reserve in advance, the nurseries always keep one place available for emergency childcare.

ADVANTAGES

For the families

- Parents can choose between different settings. They are more likely to find a flexible or occasional care setting that fits their needs or is close to them.
- Childcare is available at short notice.
- If parents' childcare needs become predictable, the children can stay in the same setting on a regular care plan.
- Parents gain an introduction to regular childcare, making the transition easier.
- All the children present experience a mix of continuity and flexibility, as there is a group of children with regular care plans – referred to by one employee as 'cement children'. These children know the ropes and create cohesion.

For the employees

- Team members experience a mix of continuity and flexibility. They work partly with a fixed group of children, whom they know well, and this helps to achieve stability on the inside.

For the childcare settings

- The organisers have a way of completely filling empty places or part-days, enabling them to generate extra income. This can be an advantage for private providers in particular.
- Organisations do not have to completely change their usual way of working to make this model possible.

For the system

- The prototype can be combined with different types of childcare, including childminding. Organisers and authorities can implement and disseminate this model more easily than other prototypes.[7] Sometimes all that is needed is to interpret the existing regulations less strictly and offer some guidance to the participating childcare settings. Other prototypes require additional investments or even changes to the rules.

LIMITATIONS

For the families

- If demand for occasional places is high, there may be times when they are not available.
- If demand exceeds supply, parents are dependent on the places that are left. They will then no longer have much choice, making this childcare model less useful.
- Occasional places may sometimes be taken up by families that have evolved from occasional to predictable care needs. The mixed group sometimes requires rapid settling-in for young children.
- If the employees do not have a strong pedagogical vision to refer to, they will not be able to provide sufficient stability for children who come to the nursery.
- As families evolve towards predictable care needs, it is unclear whether they will be able to remain at the nursery they know and trust. This will only be possible if it happens to have regular places available at that moment.

For the childcare settings

- This form of care requires an investment from the organisations that provide it. They need a good planning system so that they can see quickly how many places are available. The childcare setting also needs a suitable space where conversations can take place with parents.
- This form of childcare also requires energy and time. Workers must be able to take time for conversations with parents. The care team should consider a suitable approach for the settling-in procedure and for activities with the children.

For the network of childcare organisations

- This form of childcare requires close coordination between settings, which can be time-consuming.
- The network should ideally have its own administration. This requires resources that many networks do not have.
- If communication between the network partners is inefficient, frictions can easily arise.

ACCESSIBILITY CHECK

Usability	Usability depends on the number of places available and on practical factors such as location and opening hours. Families that evolve towards permanent care needs can easily move on to a regular place. When referring organisations know the system, usability increases. If the network has a single contact person, the service becomes more usable for parents.
Availability	Availability depends on the number of places, the planning and the prioritisation criteria. If these are not well thought out, the childcare provision will be less available and less reliable.
Intelligibility	Not all parents have a lot of experience of childcare. This form can help parents to become familiar with regular childcare.
Reliability	The childcare is reliable for parents: they can count on their child ending up in a clear structure. The childcare is recognisable as 'normal', good childcare. Reliability increases when parents feel welcomed and every team member functions well in an occasional and flexible care setting.
Affordability	This type of childcare is not necessarily affordable: it depends on the prices charged. A network can help parents apply for funding. The network can contact employers to ask them to fund occasional places.

REGULATIONS

In **Flanders**, providers of childcare in a home setting and in a group setting can apply for subsidies for urgent childcare places from 1 January 2019. This is only possible in certain municipalities, where childcare demand is high. Only the settings at a higher subsidy level can do this, as they can count on broader support. Those who receive the subsidy must keep one place available for a family that needs childcare for a maximum of a month. There are also subsidies for longer opening hours. Settings that receive these subsidies must demonstrate that they actually offer the places.

France recognises *multi-accueils*, centres that offer a combination of regular and occasional care. The regulations and subsidies for *multi-accueils* are no different from those for other group settings for young children. It is up to the *multi-accueils* how they organise their services and how many places they provide in each system (regular, occasional, emergency care). In addition, private settings such as *crèches collectives* or *mini-crèches* can choose to combine regular childcare with occasional places. Most settings do not do this, as the rules on occupancy rates are strict and operational organisation is easier if families use childcare regularly.

In **the Netherlands**, the combination of regular and occasional childcare is difficult to organise. The reasons are the same as for exclusively occasional care.

In **England**, by contrast, this combination of childcare types is quite easy to organise: it is not prohibited and nurseries often cooperate at local level. However, the prototype rarely occurs. One reason for this is to do with the regulations: the required staff:child ratio varies in England according to the age of the children, so if it is unpredictable which children will be present, it can become hard to ensure

that the right number of nursery workers are present. In addition, there are reasons that have more to do with mindset: occasional care is an unfamiliar concept in England, and it is at odds with the prevailing view of childcare, which lays stress on continuity, regularity and safety.

SUCCESS FACTORS FOR SCALING UP

At first glance, a network of nurseries offering occasional places in addition to regular childcare does not require such a big transition as an exclusively occasional nursery. Regular childcare forms the 'cement', with its fixed pattern of attendance (by children and staff) and its day-to-day structure. Even so, careful preparation of the childcare settings is necessary, and running such a prototype will be easier in a system that facilitates this form of childcare.

Employees

- Team members must be convinced that occasional and flexible childcare is beneficial for families and society. Those who are not will probably have more difficulty with this way of working. It is therefore important to pay attention to occasional and flexible care during recruitment.
- Employees must have a strong pedagogical vision to refer to.
- Nurseries that add occasional places to their existing operations should provide further training. Support and coaching are also desirable for the team, even if the occasional and flexible provision has been up and running for some time, as this form of care often creates new and unexpected situations. A system of practical discussions and joint reflection time is therefore helpful.

Organisation

- The network members need good administration and a watertight planning system to plan occupancy and to be able to estimate whether there are still places available at any given moment. Good planning is also necessary for staffing. At the network level, an online overview of occupied and available places is necessary for the system to function smoothly and reliably. This requires sufficient resources.
- Every nursery in the network needs a model in which enough staff are available for when one or more children suddenly make use of the occasional places. Fortunately, the search for such a model can be conducted jointly by the network members. As the legal requirements for staffing differ from country to country and usually also depend on the age category of children too, a universal model cannot be devised.
- The network needs a well thought-out communication strategy to make the care provision known to the right target groups: parents and referring organisations.
- The network needs an admissions policy that determines which families have priority.
- The network should have a joint intake and transition policy. This determines who the occasional places are intended for and when families must move on to regular childcare. Without such a policy, settings are likely to find that the

occasional places are occupied by families who have evolved towards a regular pattern of use.

- Every nursery that combines occasional and regular places should have a robust pedagogical vision that takes the specific situation into account. This vision will give some indication of how to treat children who are new and those with a predictable care plan. For example, working with themes is popular, but how does that work for children who come once? And what does it mean for the group if a child often participates but has not encountered the theme yet?
- Each childcare setting in the network should have a secure settling-in and admissions policy that takes account of families with predictable and sudden care needs. For the latter group, a quick version of the settling-in procedure may offer a solution. Another option is that families who expect sudden childcare needs in the future can put their child through the settling-in procedure free of charge in advance. This makes things less difficult for parents and children when childcare becomes necessary.
- It is worth the effort to obtain additional subsidies in order to limit the financial risk of the occasional places. In many places this will involve some creativity.
- The network makes exchanges of employees possible between the various care settings, enabling them to learn from one another.

Network of organisations

- The childcare system currently only gives limited support to this prototype. It is not against the law, but care settings have to work out all the practical details themselves. Obtaining funding for an employee for the network in particular can be an uphill task. In some countries, however, local or regional authorities provide childcare service centres or brokerage services that monitor availability and inform families. Working with service centres of this kind can embed this prototype more firmly in a system.
- The network should be an extensive network of referring bodies, and of organisations to which the occasional childcare settings can themselves refer children. The former includes welfare organisations, public employment services, family support agencies, schools and health services. A network of nurseries with occasional places can build strong relationships with such organisations.

System

- A network of nurseries works especially well if the system in which it is embedded is open to the idea of occasional care, as only then will more organisations want to contribute to the network. Staff members will also feel supported in their work: the network employee in his or her role of keeping an eye on the occupancy rates and childcare needs and making sure they match up, and the nursery workers in their dealings with families.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

1. In the Gravesham area of Kent in England, the provision of pre-school childcare is run exclusively by private operators. During the PACE project, the local authority organised a network of five nurseries and two childminders who wanted to offer flexible and occasional childcare places. The idea had been around for a while, but getting it off the ground proved to be difficult. The biggest obstacle was the views of nursery staff, regardless of their role in the overall system. They did not believe that occasional and flexible childcare could meet children's needs and could not accept that it might have a high-quality pedagogical outcome. Occasional care was also at odds with the local custom of giving children a lengthy settling-in period.
   It is not surprising that childcare workers think this way in England. The whole national policy is based on the principles of continuity and familiarity for children; even the funding rules are geared towards them. To convince the nurseries, the local authority used two strategies. First, they organised working visits to nurseries operating on an exclusively occasional basis in another country. The calm atmosphere and the structure the setting managers saw there reassured them. Following on from this, the government organised group discussions and reflections, so that the well-being of the family as a whole came into view rather than just that of the child. Second, the government funded the occasional places and helped the participating nurseries to work out a business plan to maintain the places when funding ceased.
   The Kent experiment was successful, but without government help it might have been difficult. The government provided expertise, contacts, practical organisation, support and funding for the process.

2. In England, three nurseries in Brighton & Hove and Crawley offer a combination of regular, flexible and occasional care. The nurseries operate under the guidance of the Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust but are responsible for their own income. Most nurseries in England operate with strictly defined morning and afternoon sessions. The NHS nurseries in Brighton & Hove and Crawley take a different approach: they offer sessions flexibly, and parents use childcare according to their needs and possibilities. The families who come to the nurseries are very diverse. Because the nurseries are located next to hospitals, children of doctors, nurses and patients go to them. Parents who have to make an unexpected trip to hospital for an examination or treatment can leave their children at the nurseries without an appointment, provided there is a place available and enough time to register the child. The nurseries are also used by families from the local area, including recent migrants on integration programmes. Because they all offer occasional places and refer parents to one another, families can easily switch to another nursery when its location is more convenient. The nurseries' operations are coordinated and some of the staff work at more than one nursery, which makes it easier for children to adjust to a different location.

3.3 PROTOTYPE 3
at-home childcare

DESCRIPTION

Prototype 3 takes place in the family home of the family requiring childcare.
An early years professional goes to the house to look after the family's children. This is a formal type of care: we are not referring here to childcare by family members, acquaintances, domestic staff or au pairs. In the following discussion we will call this type of worker an 'at-home childcarer'.
At-home childcare offers an answer to the care needs of parents who work after nursery closing times. It also offers a solution for families who have a hard time helping their child adjust to nursery or school. Some families combine this type of care with regular care in group settings or childminding services. In many countries, it is the only way that sisters and brothers of different ages can be looked after together. Such care may be short-term in nature, or it may last for years.

At-home care can be a miracle solution for families who are unable to use other forms of care. However, it is little known because many families think that only wealthy families can afford it.

> 'A lot of working class people wouldn't think of a nanny being suitable for them. And a babysitter is not considered to be formal professional childcare. Home childcare sits in between those two. A lot of parents do not know it exists.'
> (*Childcare broker, Brighton & Hove, 2020*)

ADVANTAGES

For the families

- For families with unusual working hours and a limited network, this is often the only solution.
- This prototype offers high-quality professional care at times when no other kind of professional care is available.
- At-home care offers a solution if one of the parents is suddenly away, for example due to a hospital stay, to provide informal care or in the event of an unexpected trip abroad.
- Children stay in their familiar environment: they can sleep in their own bed, play with their own toys and do not have to break their daily rhythm.
- All children in a family have the same person looking after them.
- The care is completely customised: family and carer can determine the schedule and the price together, and agree rules on homework, food, sleep and travel.
- In a long-term collaboration, parents, children and carer can build a close relationship; this prototype thus offers stability on the inside.

For the at-home carer

- The carer can work with children of different ages.
- The carer can build a long-term relationship with parents and children, and often derives a lot of job satisfaction from doing so.
- The carer sees the children in their familiar environment and can therefore understand certain behaviour more easily.
- The carer can decide what hours to work.

LIMITATIONS

For the families

- Finding a reliable and available at-home carer is not easy for parents; nor are making arrangements and negotiating a contract.
- Many families cannot afford at-home care.
- The fact that this type of care takes place in the home can be a problem for families with poor-quality or cramped housing.
- The carer and family do not have neutral territory where they can raise concerns about one another's approach. Some parents find it difficult when the carer builds a close relationship with their children.
- The quality of the care depends very much on one person, the carer.
- If the carer is ill or unable to work, the family has no childcare.
- Parents may be concerned about the carer's approach, and unsure where they can raise their concerns.

- It requires a lot of organisation to always assign the same carer to families, especially when their childcare needs are unpredictable or when the carer works many hours or combines the work with other obligations.

For the at-home carer

- Parents may have unrealistic expectations of the at-home carer.
- The carer herself must make clear agreements about the care provided to the different children.
- If the carer is not supported by a service, she will have a lot of administrative work to do.
- The carer must think separately about a (pedagogical) approach for each family.
- In most models, the carer works on a self-employed basis. If childcare demand is limited for a period, the carer will have little income.

ACCESSIBILITY CHECK

Usability	This form of provision is useful for families with care needs for several children. It is the only type of care that can combine different tasks, such as looking after a toddler, taking older children to school or activities, feeding them and so on. This type of care can be combined with school or other types of childcare. It can only be used by vulnerable families if they receive help with recruiting the carer and with the administrative work. The children can stay at home.
Availability	Availability depends on the number of at-home carers in the area and on demand.
Intelligibility	This type of care is very easy to understand. However, families tend to think they cannot afford it.
Reliability	The reliability of this form of care increases if the carer has pedagogical experience with children of different ages. It also depends on the screening, coaching and support of carers. If a family is able to use the same carer over a long period, the care provision becomes very reliable, if it is available often enough.
Affordability	At-home care is only affordable if there is additional funding or if the authorities regulate the pricing.

REGULATIONS

At-home care is not regulated in any country: anyone may provide and organise such care. There are services in every country through which families can hire an at-home carer. Almost without exception, these services are expensive for parents and more or less explicitly aimed at wealthy families.

Flanders has approved a decree on at-home care, which states that organisations and individuals providing such care need a permit and must therefore meet quality criteria. As yet there are no implementing decisions regulating the approach to this.[8] At present there is an affordable range of at-home care in Flanders, which is intended for sick children and organised by the health insurers. This care provision will also need a permit. There are no clear training requirements for an at-home carer for sick children.

In **France**, there is limited provision of at-home care by individual professionals and services, accounting for approximately 1% of total childcare provision.[9] A *garde à domicile* is employed by the family. Families can reclaim part of the costs through the CAF (child benefit fund) or through the tax system, but this type of care is still more expensive than other types.[10] It is possible for several families to arrange a shared at-home carer, a *garde partagée*, which makes the service a lot more affordable. There are no clear quality or training requirements for at-home carers. It is not easy for families to find out about the services on offer. Equally, it is unclear whether at-home carers are mainly hired by families with atypical childcare needs: this type of care may also be replacing other forms of childcare for some families, because it removes the need to travel to nurseries, or because it is cheaper if several families can share the costs. In large cities such as Paris, at-home care provision is more widespread, but is often also expensive and not widely accessible.

In **England** at-home carers work either on a self-employed basis or as the family's employee. Every carer can choose to register with the organisation that monitors the quality of childcare (Ofsted) and must arrange insurance. There is a minimum wage[11] and minimum training requirements.[12] Until recently, it was possible in England for parents to use childcare vouchers (from their employer) for at-home care, but this system no longer exists. Parents can now reclaim costs through Tax-Free Childcare, but the scheme is limited and there are many private providers on the market, with varying conditions and prices. Some local authorities organise an at-home care service themselves, often setting additional rules. They also provide administrative and pedagogical support, and act as a mediator between family and carer, making the service more accessible.

In **the Netherlands**, many childminders offer childcare in families' own homes. The educational requirements are the same for both types of childminder: at least a lower secondary vocational education certificate. As is the case in England, a family pays an overall price rather than an hourly rate per child, and this makes this type of care more affordable for families with several children. Families can also hire an at-home carer through a childcare agency, but this is the most expensive option.[13] If a family hires a carer without the involvement of an agency, there are two possible regimes. If the family uses the carer for a maximum of three days a week, the 'Domestic service providers' regime applies: there are no administrative obligations and the family does not have payroll taxes to pay. If a carer comes for more than three days a week, this will fall under the 'Domestic staff' regime[14]: the family will incur payroll taxes and administrative obligations.

SUCCESS FACTORS FOR SCALING UP

Employees

- Strictly speaking, anyone can work as at-home carer. In Flanders, carers will need a permit in the future, as is already the case in England. Training requirements are not very strict in the Netherlands, England and France. In order to organise this form of care to ensure that it is usable and of high quality, it is recommended that a government agency should be responsible for it.
- The situation of the at-home carer is different from that of nursery workers, whether or not they offer occasional childcare. The room where the carer works is obviously not set up as a childcare setting, and the children's ages can vary greatly. Existing training programmes do provide some guidance, but do not prepare for situations that typically occur in this type of care. An at-home carer should also have the opportunity to look into what additional education or training is needed.
- To safeguard the quality of the at-home care service, a carer should be able to consult a pedagogical support worker to discuss pedagogical approaches together. The carer should also participate in reflection sessions with colleagues at which typical situations from practice are discussed.
- At-home carers should be able to seek help from a reliable service if they are concerned about the situation of a family.

Organisation

- This prototype above all requires a good administrative system that can link childcare needs to the availability of a carer. If the service wants families to be able to use the same carer all or most of the time, an effective system is necessary to ensure this. The service will also need a well-designed questionnaire to identify families' childcare needs and record the availability of each carer.
- The childcare service should preferably provide a number of standard documents that the at-home carer can use.
- If a childcare service arranges at-home care, the costs for families increase still further. To make this type of care affordable for vulnerable families, funding needs to be found. Organisations can also choose to offer this type of childcare alongside others. This reduces logistical and personnel costs and provides a niche service for a specific group of families that have nowhere else to turn.
- Developing a clear pedagogical vision is less easy in this prototype. However, a childcare service would be advised to define a number of pedagogical principles for the at-home carer, despite the individualised nature of the service the carer offers. Such a vision will help carers to determine what expectations on the part of families she can meet.

Network of organisations

To advertise this form of care provision, the individual carer or the at-home childcare service must offer it both directly to families and to a number of referring organisations. They can also work with nurseries and childminders who may also refer families to the service.

System

Due to the high cost per care place and the additional organisational costs, at-home care can only flourish as a supplement to a well-developed system of regular and occasional care. For families who do not find a solution in that system, this form of childcare offers an answer, provided that the system creates sufficient financial possibilities for it to be organised.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

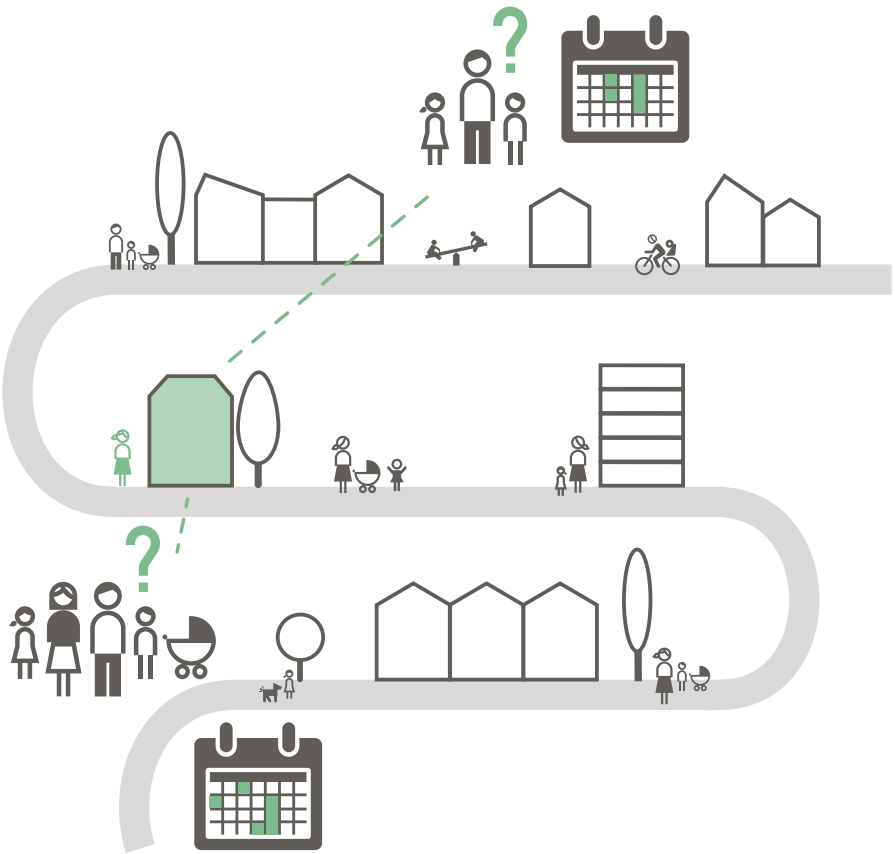
The At Home Childcare Service has existed in Brighton & Hove for more than ten years. The local government set up this service to help parents who are unable to use regular childcare. Thirty-five professional carers with early years practitioner training provide at-home care. They are either self-employed or employed by a family. They mainly work for families with atypical working hours, families facing a sudden emergency and families looking for long-term care at home.
A local government service gives the carers administrative, practical and substantive support, connects families and carers and helps to draw up a schedule, supports parents, explains how families can apply for funding and negotiates with other services for an affordable childcare package for families. The service does not charge anything for this, and thus ensures that at-home childcare remains affordable.
Although the service has been around for a long time and works well, this is a niche provision in Brighton & Hove. However, it provides great support for families unable to find any other solution.

> 'The at home CC service is a very particular and practical piece of the childcare jigsaw puzzle. Overall: it is small scale and a niche, but if it works out it is great!' (*Childcare broker, Brighton & Hove, 2020*)

3.4 PROTOTYPE 4
childminding

DESCRIPTION

This prototype describes childcare in which an early years professional looks after one or more children in his or her own home. In Flanders, the official name for this professional is begeleider in de *gezinsopvang*, but the term *onthaalouder* is more common in everyday speech. In the Netherlands the term *gastouder* is used, in France *assistant(e) maternel(le)*, and in England *childminder*. This care type has existed for a long time. During the PACE project, a number of partners looked for ways to provide an occasional and flexible operation using childminding.
In many places, childminders are affiliated with a service which mediates between families and childminders, takes over administrative tasks such as invoicing, and sometimes provides alternatives if a childminder becomes ill or stops work. Not all childminders are affiliated with such a service: some work independently.



In England, childminders often offer greater flexibility than nurseries. Nurseries do not usually allow changes to the childcare schedule, and many of them also work to strict opening hours. If parents suddenly need extra childcare, childminders can often offer a solution. Some childminders are willing to offer wraparound care before and after opening hours. Sometimes they work with an assistant who picks up children from school; other childminders work together to provide greater flexibility and arrange transport for children.

ADVANTAGES

For the families

- Childminders offer small-scale care in a domestic context.
- Childminders offer professional care. In most countries, childminders are required to undergo training.
- Families can look for a childminder with whom they get on well.
- The childcare is provided by a person with whom the family can develop a long-term relationship.[15]
- Childminding often works with flexible drop-off and pick-up times. It may be possible to arrange unusual childcare hours.
- Some childminders also offer care in the evening, at night or during the weekend.
- Childminding is often more flexible: changes to the care schedule are possible at short notice, and extra days are often easy to arrange too.
- Some childminders take care of children of different ages. Schoolchildren can also go to a childminder after school or on days off, so families can use the same service for all their children.
- When childcare needs become predictable, the child can stay with the same childminder.
- Childminders often work together or know one another. They will sometimes help families with urgent care needs by phoning another childminder.
- Childminding is sometimes cheaper than care in a group setting. This is especially the case in the Netherlands.

For the childminders

- Childminders can decide for themselves what hours they work and how many children they look after. They can organise their work more flexibly than if they worked in a group setting. In many countries, a maximum number of children is specified, however.
- Childminders can take care of their own children at the same time.
- Childminders work in a familiar environment.

LIMITATIONS

For the families

- Families are reliant on the childminder's flexibility and availability. Family or other circumstances may sometimes compel childminders to work less.
- The number of childminders is falling in all European countries.
- Many parents have the impression that childminding is less professional than care in a group setting.

- Families are dependent on one person. If he or she falls sick, they often have no alternative solution.
- Childminders have to adhere to a carer:child ratio, which means that they cannot always respond to sudden requests.
- Families may be reluctant to leave their child in someone else's house.
- The affordability of this type of care varies.
- The number of places with a childminder is limited. This can make it difficult to move on to a regular plan when childcare needs become predictable.

For the childminders

- If childminders are unable to fill a place, this has a serious impact on their income.
- Because childminders cannot look after many children, they have little financial leeway to keep places available.
- The status of childminder is not particularly attractive. Their income is uncertain and depends on the number of parents who use their services.

ACCESSIBILITY CHECK

Usability	Usability depends on the number of childminders in the area. However, their flexibility ensures a high level of usability.
Availability	Availability depends on the number of childminders in the area who are willing to offer occasional or flexible care. If few childminders are working in an area, it can be difficult for a family to find someone with whom they get on well.
Intelligibility	It is not clear to all families that childminders offer professional childcare.
Reliability	The establishment of a personal relationship with a childminder may increase reliability. Reliability may decrease if a childminder is regularly ill or changes his or her hours. Families will then be left without any childcare.
Affordability	Affordability depends on the childcare system. All PACE countries provide parental benefits, including when they use childminding.

REGULATIONS

Childcare is regulated in all PACE project countries. In each country, childminders must be able to present a certificate of good conduct and character and must be able to administer first aid to young children. However, the training requirements, quality control system and carer:child ratio differ from country to country.[16]
In no country do the regulations make it easy for childminders to organise occasional care, given that such care puts pressure on a childminder's income. However, childminders can choose to extend their opening hours and, for example, to also work in the evening or at the weekend.

In **Flanders**, childminding has recently been made subject to the same quality requirements as care in a group setting. All childminders are required to register with a government agency, which monitors their operational quality. Like care in a group setting, childminding is also required to provide pedagogical support. Childminders may apply for subsidies similar to those for group settings. Alternatively, they can opt not to receive subsidies and to set the level of parental contributions themselves.
Childminders in Flanders are allowed to look after a maximum of eight children at the same time. The regulations do not change if childminders organise occasional or flexible childcare.

In **England**, a childminder is allowed to look after a maximum of three children under the age of four, including no more than one baby. However, childminders may combine looking after these three young children with caring for older children. A childminder may never look after more than six children. All childminders register with Ofsted and must adhere to the guidelines of the Early Years Foundation Stage.[17] They are subject to quality inspections in the same way as nurseries.

Childminders in **the Netherlands** are obliged to affiliate with a childminder agency, which is responsible for the financial administration among other matters. Parents pay the childminder agency, which in turn pays the childminders. Like nurseries, childminders must be able to present a pedagogical policy plan in which they work on four basic developmental goals.[18] Childminding is more flexible and affordable than care in group settings in the Netherlands. A childminder can look after a maximum of four children. The educational requirements are lower than those for nursery workers.[19]

In **France**, there are childcare places with childminders for up to 33% of children, although these places are not all taken up.[11] Childminding in France costs about the same for families with an average income as a place in a group setting. For low-income families, it is more expensive, so these families make considerably less use of childminding than high-income families.[22,20] The training requirements for childminders are higher than in the other PACE countries, but only for those working for a childcare service.[21] Childminders are required to undergo 120 hours of training to receive accreditation, which must be renewed every five years. The government organises and finances the training courses for accreditation.[22] An inspectorate organises home visits and observations to check whether childminders meet all quality requirements.[23] Like their Dutch counterparts, French childminders can care for up to four children.

SUCCESS FACTORS FOR SCALING UP

No new structures or organisational forms are needed for this form of occasional and flexible care to succeed. However, a childminder will have to adjust his or her

way of working to make occasional care possible. It will be necessary to earmark places and cooperate with referring organisations to ensure that they are filled. Flexibility can be offered by taking a more relaxed approach to childcare plans and contracts, to the extent that the regulations allow this, or by offering longer opening hours. Elements at different levels of the childcare system require adaptation and consideration.

Employees

- Working on an occasional and more flexible basis requires a considerable extra effort and hence a high level of motivation. Childminders will only be willing to make this effort if they are convinced that such care is useful. Good information about the reasons for organising it and inspiration on the practical organisation side will be important for childminders.
- Childminders offering occasional and flexible childcare are less certain of a steady income. An income guarantee, for example by means of a subsidy or extra funding, could eliminate this concern.
- Childminders have expectations of families that vulnerable families may not be able to meet. Proper support for childminders could help them adjust their expectations. Exchanges of experiences with other childminders could also be helpful here.

> 'There is a need for expectation management: childminders need to know what they can actually expect from flexible and occasional childcare and what it means to take on more vulnerable parents.' (*PACE worker, Gravesham, 2019*)

Organisation

- This is a complex level for the childminding prototype. Some childminders are affiliated with an agency, while others are not; it is only compulsory in the Netherlands. We are therefore talking here about the level of a single childminder as a mini-organisation, but also about childminding agencies with which many childminders are affiliated.
- Such an agency or service is essential for successful and flexible childcare. A network of childminders is an alternative, but is not practical, as someone from the network will need to provide coordination and administrative support – a role that a childminder could find difficult alongside their role as a carer.
- An agency can try to find enough childminders in an area to ensure a wide range of occasional and flexible care provision. The agency can also provide solutions when a childminder is unexpectedly unable to work. Furthermore, it can play a role in the selection of suitable childminders. A childminder may provide excellent childcare but be struggling with a constantly changing group of children. The agency can ensure that a childminder in this situation does not provide occasional childcare.
- Occasional and flexible childcare gives rise to extra administrative work because new families are constantly presenting themselves. This type of care is more feasible for childminders if the agency takes over this administrative work as much as possible. The agency can also play a pedagogical role by developing processes for supporting families who use occasional or flexible childcare. In addition, they can provide support and coaching for childminders.

- Childminders usually work alone in their home and find it difficult to exchange experiences with colleagues. When they work with vulnerable families, they are more likely to face unexpected situations, making the need for such sharing all the more urgent. The agency can organise network gatherings at which childminders reflect on their practice together.
- Finally, the agency can also support families with the administrative side of the childcare they use and with applying for allowances.

Network of organisations

As with every prototype, a network including other organisations in the area is of great importance to make the care provision known to the target group in a suitable way. It is not feasible for a childminder to put a lot of time into developing and maintaining this network: this is another task for a childminder agency.

System

Although childminders take on a significant proportion of care work for very young children, and parents and researchers regard this type of care as valuable and unique, they tend to be overlooked in the childcare system. The scientific literature contains significantly fewer publications about this type of care, and attention is also limited in specialist literature within the sector. This lack of attention is also reflected in the very limited resources and support for this childcare system. If greater attention were paid to it, the benefits of this type of care for occasional and flexible childcare needs could be highlighted. A childminder can remain available for just that half an hour longer than a nursery, and this can make a big difference for families.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

1. It is difficult for childminders to offer occasional or flexible places if they lack financial security. In the Netherlands, employers' organisations or training institutes buy places from childminder agencies. These places are for parents who work for or receive training from them and therefore need childcare. The childminders are paid for these places even if they are not filled.
   When a childminder cannot count on guaranteed income for occasional places, it is unfeasible to offer them. This system therefore seems to be primarily suited to offering more flexible childcare hours.

2. Samira from England was offered a role working 11.30 am to 7 pm four days per week. She got the support she needed to find the right childcare for her 3-year-old thanks to a childminder.
   Samira's daughter was happy at the nursery she attended, where she went for 15 hours per week, thus using her funded hours. However, the nursery closes at 6 pm, like other nurseries in the area. Samira does not have family or friends to help with childcare. Her employer could not offer flexibility around working hours, although Samira did request this. The Family Information Service advised her to look for a childminder. She found one that could offer the hours that she needed.

Samira's daughter still attends the local nursery for her funded 15 hours and then uses the childminder for the additional hours that she needs.
(*Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

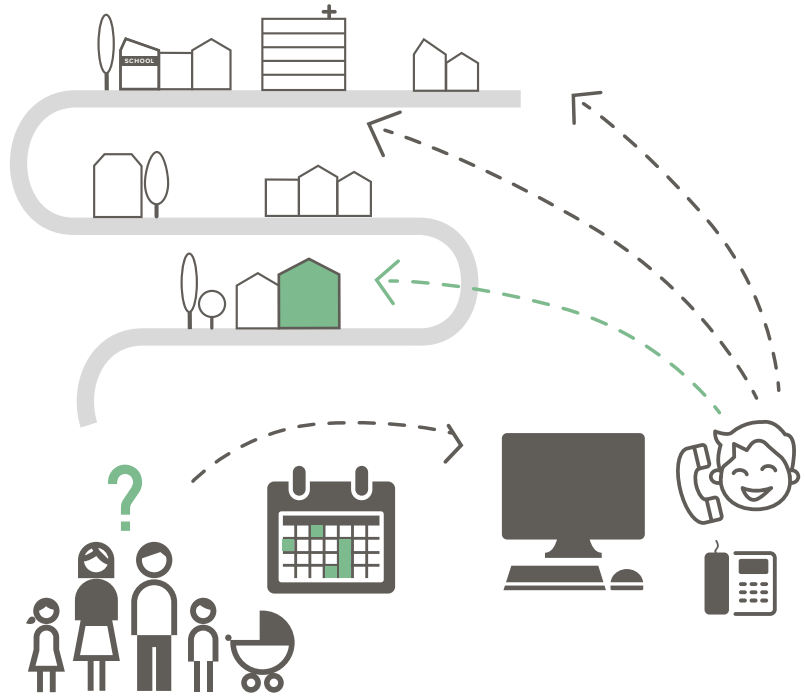
3.5 PROTOTYPE 5
a local childcare brokerage service

DESCRIPTION

A local childcare brokerage service is a service that centralises all information about childcare in a municipality, city or area and helps parents who are looking for or using childcare. To this end, the service has a network of organisations that offer childcare and that support parents; these organisations can themselves contact the service for information and support. The service mediates between parents and childcare and looks for tailor-made solutions for parents. It also regularly surveys the demand for occasional and flexible childcare and encourages providers and settings to coordinate their provision accordingly.
The service's employees play a crucial role in this prototype, acting as brokers of local or regional childcare. They know both the childcare sector and the local area well; they are able to assess which childcare organisation parents will feel comfortable with. Such a service goes much further than a website or a platform where parents themselves have to contact childcare organisations.

'We can make it happen, we have plenty of childcare and lots of different offers, but it is a complex system. The childcare broker is the parents' navigator.'
(*Childcare broker, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

There are practices that are similar to this prototype in many places. For example, many Flemish cities and municipalities have a Lokaal Loket Kinderopvang (Local Childcare Brokerage Service).[24] Such a brokerage service also functions as a central information and support point and builds networks. In principle, it could be very similar to this prototype, although it would have to take on a greater commitment to coordinate supply and demand for childcare. It would also need to pay more attention to occasional and flexible childcare. In England, many local authorities offer a childcare brokerage service, which mainly supports vulnerable parents in their search for affordable childcare.
In France, the Relais Petite Enfance (RPE) are closest to this prototype. Municipalities can set up such a network on their own or together with other municipalities. According to a recently introduced law, it is 'their role to inform families about all types of childcare, both group settings and childminding, and to support them in choosing the care that best suits their needs, taking the applicable guidelines into account…'.[25] The way the service works differs from municipality to municipality. Usually it support families, but also professionals.
In the Netherlands, the childcare sector is completely privatised. Some local authorities provide information and support to parents, but they are the exception rather than the rule.



ADVANTAGES

For the families

- Parents with no experience of childcare have many questions about various aspects: services available in the area, administration, financing, special needs and how to contact settings. Individual childcare organisations cannot always respond, because they do not have all the information, but also because they cannot easily make time for this. A local service can answer such questions.
- For more complex questions, such as benefits or special mobility, it can put parents in touch with specialised services.
- The service can be contacted in many ways: parents can phone, send an email, fill in an online form or pay a visit.
- If the service puts families in contact with a facility, the employee can immediately provide information about the funding options for childcare. In this way, families can be sure that they are not overlooking any funding options.
- More children from vulnerable families can be placed in childcare because the service's employees look for a suitable place for them.

For the childcare settings

- Childcare settings with places available can offer them through the service, and then receive help with filling them.
- Settings that want to offer occasional or flexible childcare can contact the service for the information they need.

- Settings come into contact with other settings through the service and are able to share their knowledge and exchange experiences in this way, or to work together to broaden their service provision.

For society
- More families have access to childcare.
- Such a service can identify all childcare needs and ensure that supply is attuned to demand. This means that more families can make use of childcare that meets their needs.

LIMITATIONS

For the families
- The service cannot create additional childcare places itself and depends on the provision in the area. It therefore cannot guarantee that every family will find suitable childcare.
- The support given to families is very dependent on the knowledge and skills of the service's employees. Those employees must be very knowledgeable about all processes relating to childcare, but also about the area. They must also be able to communicate clearly and to assess families' situations accurately.
- Families cannot use the service until they know it exists; this is only possible if the various professionals with whom families come into contact tell them about the service and if details of the service are on display in different places.
- The range of support provided by the service depends on the mission and vision of the organiser in which the service is embedded. If the local authority or NGO that organises the service lacks the ambition to support vulnerable families, those families will be left out.

For the childcare settings
- Childcare settings will only benefit from the service if its employees have an in-depth knowledge of the sector and of related sectors. They can usually resolve the simple questions themselves.
- The range of support provided by the service depends on the mission and vision of the organiser. If the local authority or NGO that organises the service lacks the ambition to also inform care settings, they will not be able to make use of the service.

ACCESSIBILITY CHECK

Usability	The service can provide a quick overview of available childcare. This saves families time. The service can suggest various childcare options; the provision of choice in this way makes the system very useful.
Availability	The service must have long opening hours and be contactable in various ways. Only then will it be really accessible.
Intelligibility	The service forms a link between families and the complex childcare system, thus increasing intelligibility.
Reliability	Because the service has a good overview of care provision and possibilities, it is very reliable. This reliability may decrease if the service fails to adapt childcare supply to demand.
Affordability	The service can tell parents about funding options for childcare and thus increase affordability.

REGULATIONS

In **Flanders**, every municipality is obliged to organise a Local Childcare Brokerage Service. The decision to do this dates from 2012, but it is unclear what the deadline is for introducing all these services.[26] The idea of these local brokerage services is to make childcare more accessible. The government has not specified how they should organise themselves. In most cases, municipalities take the initiative of setting them up; sometimes they are non-profit organisations which arise out of a local partnership; and sometimes they are part of a larger entity. There are no particular requirements regarding their organisational structure. The umbrella organisation of cities and municipalities recommends combining a digital brokerage service with an office where families can meet support workers.[27] At the beginning of 2020, 150 of the 321 municipalities in Flanders had received or applied for a subsidy for a local brokerage service. It is still unclear how the services will work in practice and whether they will actually increase accessibility for families.

The **English** Childcare Acts from 2006 and 2016[28] give local authorities the task of setting up a service that increases access to childcare for vulnerable families. Such services are intended to provide childcare brokerage to support families encountering obstacles to childcare.[29] They help with administrative requirements or contact childcare organisations if the parents feel insecure or have insufficient command of the language. Not all authorities offer this brokerage service: some only organise an information point,[29] while others only work for specific target groups, such as unemployed parents.

In **the Netherlands**, setting up a local brokerage service is very complicated. Childcare has been privatised there, and the authorities only have limited involvement with childcare.

> 'If you want the municipality to take on a new role in childcare, it will first be necessary to determine at national level that this will be a service in the general interest. Otherwise, as a local authority, there's nothing you can do. In 2005,

the Childcare Act was passed which took this power away from the municipalities and gave it to the national government.' (*Policymaker, The Hague, 2019*)

To find childcare, parents can use the national childcare register[30] or the childcare map.[31] Dutch cities and municipalities are allowed to help parents with this, by providing information about the available childcare in their area, although they usually confine themselves to practical information.[32] In some cities, families can consult an additional service, sometimes only on a specific aspect such as funding. In the Hague, for example, the Childcare Office provides telephone advice on funding on weekdays between 1 pm and 3 pm.

France established the Relais Petite Enfance to give families information and guidance about childcare. Originally, these networks focused exclusively on childminding; they were known as Relais Assistant(e)s Maternel(le)s at that time. The government does not set any rules for such services, leaving local authorities free to provide a service according to their choice and principles, if they are able and willing to earmark a budget for it. As a result, an online information point is interpreted in some cases as also including extensive personal support.

SUCCESS FACTORS FOR SCALING UP

The local brokerage service in this prototype can only function properly if there are enough members of staff, and they are backed up by a robust administrative system. To ensure that sufficient attention is paid to occasional and flexible childcare, the staff must be aware of the specific characteristics of such care. They must also be able to take on and support vulnerable families.

Employees

- The employees of the service must be easy to contact in various ways: by telephone, email or chat or in an office. They must be able to adapt their communication to the parents they support.
- They must have experience of providing individually tailored support. They must be able to give careful consideration to how each family wants to be supported. Thus, families should be able to choose which steps they take themselves and for which ones they ask the employee for help. Do the parents contact a childcare initiative themselves, or does the service do that? Do the parents go to a nursery with or without the employee from the service? Do the parents fill in the forms themselves, or does the service help them with this?
- Employees need clear arrangements with the body that organises the service to guide them in their work. For example, a local authority may decide that it will only support parents for whom the childcare system is too complex; other parents will receive a brochure or a link to a website. Equally, an authority may also make the brokerage service accessible to all parents and allocate more staff and time to it. Employees will be able to do their job better if there is clarity on these matters.
- The service's employees should ideally have some experience of influencing policymaking. For example, this will mean they can ensure that a local or regional authority intervenes if the provision of childcare is insufficiently geared to demand.

Organisation

- The service should have enough resources to hire expert staff and ensure long opening hours for parents.
- It should have sufficient resources to identify and analyse local childcare provision.
- It should build up an operational approach based on a clear vision of childcare in general and on occasional and flexible care in particular.
- The service should have an effective administrative system covering all organisations and available places, so that its employees can see where there are places available at any given moment. The system should also register all childcare requests, as this will enable the employees to analyse care needs.
- The service must have enough time and resources to develop a good communication strategy that makes an active effort to reach vulnerable parents.
- It must have enough time to develop active support for childcare organisations and to give them guidance if they want to offer more occasional or flexible care.
- The service requires a mandate from the local or regional authority to make recommendations on childcare provision.

> 'There is definitely a cost to offering a bespoke service to parents. You need to assign someone who will offer brokerage advice and information. You will need a good administrative system – like the childcare directory we have.' (*Childcare broker, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

Network of organisations

- The service should work closely with local organisations that support vulnerable families so that all types of support for them are coordinated.
- The organisations with which the service cooperates actively will refer vulnerable parents to the service.
- The service must have enough time and resources to contribute to a network of such services; the participants in this network can compare their findings on a regular basis. If they see that regional or national regulations are putting vulnerable families at a disadvantage, they can enter into discussion with the authorities that have drawn up the rules.

System

- The service will only be able to do a good job if other professionals in the system work together to ensure accessible childcare with a particular focus on occasional and flexible childcare.
- If training programmes and employers' organisations also pay attention to these aspects, the entire system will be able to support these types of care. Conversely, the service can share its findings with these other professionals: employees can provide guest lectures within training programmes, give talks to employers' organisations or at an employment service, or present their data on childcare needs to the national government.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

1. In Brighton & Hove, the local council set up a local childcare brokerage service. The childcare broker is familiar with childcare settings and managers in the area, has a thorough knowledge of childcare policy, regulations and funding rules, and is therefore able to find tailor-made solutions for parents. The child-care broker has an online system with data on childcare settings, so she can respond quickly and appropriately to questions from parents. She is also part of a strong team that can step in to ensure that the service is available at all times: if the childcare broker goes on holiday or is sick, the team members can stand in for her. This prevents all the expertise residing with a single person.
   The childcare broker helped many of the parents who took part in the PACE project with their childcare needs. These parents identify the following as the main reasons for contacting the service:

   · unusual working hours or shift work
   · a need for childcare at short notice
   · a need for childcare during an education or training programme
   · a child with a specific care need

   The Brighton & Hove example shows that a committed local brokerage service can lead to childcare organisations changing their approach. For example, one facility decided to stay open later after staff had heard a number of times that parents were unable to find childcare after 6 pm. Again, many nurseries were only offering the funded hours to which parents are entitled at unpopular times.[33]
   The local brokerage service repeatedly argued in favour of providing these hours at times that suited families, until a number of nurseries eventually adjusted their policies.

2. In Mechelen, the local childcare brokerage service offers tailor-made childcare services. It has existed for a long time and has also received government subsidies since April 2019. Parents can make an appointment and drop in, or contact the service by phone or email.
   The childcare broker helps parents to make a choice from the services on offer and weigh up the pros and cons. For example, he can look at whether the lower price charged by a facility that is further away outweighs the extra travel costs and time to get there. In general, he has found that parents have difficulty assessing the differences between the options.
   Sometimes the childcare broker offers extra support, for example by making an appointment with a childcare setting or arranging an interpreter if parents don't understand Dutch well enough.
   The most difficult queries are those from parents who are looking for childcare at very short notice and from parents who don't yet know how many hours of childcare they need and when.

   'Such requests for care are when the parents need to start work at short notice, usually within two weeks, or to go on a programme.'
   (*Manager of Local Childcare Brokerage Service, Mechelen, 2020*)

4. WHAT IS POSSIBLE AND WHAT IS DESIRABLE? OUR POSITION

At the beginning of this book we wrote that we were setting out a limited plea for occasional and flexible childcare. This second part has given an overview of the different forms that such care can assume. For each prototype, we have described the advantages and disadvantages, the success factors and the ways in which this form of care increases accessibility for vulnerable parents.
Four years of project work, with some experiments that succeeded and others that failed, have taught us that not every form of occasional or flexible care is equally desirable or sustainable. In this chapter, after setting out the main concerns and considerations, we express our preference for one of the five prototypes. In doing so, we present the position of the entire PACE partnership.

4.1 A fair policy on family and work

Arguing in favour of more flexible childcare represents part of the broader plea for a fair policy on family and work that was made in the first part of this book. We will briefly recapitulate this here.

First, we believe it is important to look for practices that give families room for manoeuvre. This does not mean that childcare should simply be relied on to solve the problems created by any development on the labour market; but we do want families to be able to find meaningful and feasible routes through their caringscape.
Second, we argue that care work should be valued more highly. At the very least, it is clear that one of the things that enables a society to keep going is people assuming care responsibilities on different fronts. In the context of this book, this means that flexible labour comes at a price in terms of care. At the same time, the flexible organisation of care work has consequences for the people who provide it.
Third, we believe that more attention needs to be paid to those who receive the care. In this book, we argue that the entire family should be regarded as the care recipient in childcare.
Fourth, this book pleads for generous policies that take account of the different contexts and connections in which people's lives take place – and hence also of the different responsibilities that they are willing and able to assume.

4.2 The discussion about stability and flexibility briefly revisited

In childcare, policy, practice and theory all focus on achieving reasonably predictable and regular care for young children. The first part of this book explains why predictability is important for organising the provision of childcare. Regularity is also seen as fundamental to young children's well-being and involvement. On the face of it, flexible and occasional childcare seems to run counter to this priority, being more irregular and less long-term. The PACE project partners were therefore faced with the question: 'Is occasional and flexible childcare good for children?'
No one in the field of childcare questions the importance of stability for relationships and for quality of childcare in practice. Obviously, it is important for children at nursery to be able to form a bond with other children and with the staff. We also agree that the autonomy, competence and connection of children, parents and childcare workers need to be taken into account.[1]
So the question 'Is it good for children?' is essential, but to explore the possibilities of more flexible forms of childcare we need to ask another question, namely: 'How can more flexible childcare make life easier for children and their families?' Asking this question will allow us to explore ways in which more flexible care can ensure that children and their families experience stability in their lives.

STABILITY

Earlier, we made a distinction between stability on the inside, which children and their families experience in their lives, and stability on the outside, in the organisation of childcare. A family may combine different care solutions, for example a nursery and an at-home carer, without stability on the inside being compromised. The parents and childcare workers in such circumstances may need to pay extra attention to the quality of the care provision and the relationships; they cannot relax their attention, because the care situation is more complex than that of many other children.
On the other hand, care organised along strict lines, for example with little or no change for the children, does not always provide stability on the inside. The quality of the relationships can also be poor in such care situations, either because of staff changes or because the care facility confuses stability on the inside with stability on the outside.
A certain amount of stability in the system is needed to keep it running and make sure it is sustainable for organisations and their employees, and we are aware that lots of changes and a lack of continuity are unlikely to be positive for children,[2] but the literature takes insufficient account of the how and why of these changes. Clumsy and complex care solutions are rarely simply the 'fault' of parents making poor choices: most parents make the best of the situation they are in.[3]
Furthermore, the emphasis on stability in the system sometimes leads to a rigid approach in which the distinction between a stable system and a (pedagogically) stable environment seems to vanish.
The participants in the focus group for policymakers in Flanders expressed the tension between the requirements of the system and the need for flexibility as follows:

> 'With the best of intentions, somehow the decree has ended up making flexibility less possible, due to the ratio and the group size. The introduction of quality guarantees has diminished the possibilities for flexibility. We've been asking for years for changes to one of the articles in the decree (Art. 5 §3 $: the total number of children present must never exceed the maximum capacity) to make it possible again, but so far without success. At the moment there's also a bill ready and a sensible arrangement has been made with Kind en Gezin[4] (Child and Family): as long as the quality remains within certain limits (enough employees), Kind en Gezin tolerates infringements of this rule because it supports the idea of flexibility.' (*Policymaker, Flanders, 2019*)

Interestingly, this quotation contrasts quality with flexibility; this is something the system does too. In Part 1 we argued that flexibility and quality are two separate things that are by no means contradictory by definition.[3]

CLAIMS ABOUT FLEXIBILITY

In the course of the PACE project, claims were regularly heard on the subject of flexibility that were shown to be false or were called into question by various considerations that came up during the experiments with flexible care. The table below gives an overview.

Claim	Considerations
Too much flexibility for families puts pressure on the quality of care provision.	Even in a flexible environment you can work on providing care of high pedagogical and general quality for children and families. Without flexibility, care will not be accessible at all to some families, and accessibility is itself a characteristic of high-quality care.
Flexibility in care is not good for children. They cannot form attachments with childcare workers, and lack structure and stability.	Flexibility is not diametrically opposed to stability. Flexible childcare planning can also provide stability, with key persons for children, predictability, challenge and familiarity. It requires an extra effort, but it is precisely this close attention that can ensure that the quality is high.
If we start working flexibly, we will be giving in to labour market trends.	Flexibility is important for many families, and especially for vulnerable parents. This also applies to parents who are not yet in work, so flexibility is not exclusively related to demand created by the labour market. In any case, a setting or sector can set limits to its flexibility. If the sector is too rigid, some parents end up being unable to use childcare. Ironically, they then often turn to less stable solutions.
We cannot be flexible in the current childcare system: the requirements with regard to occupancy rates and subsidies do not permit it.	The current systems certainly do not make flexibility easy, but the rules do leave some leeway in most countries. Settings can even achieve the required occupancy rate or generate extra income when they operate on a flexible basis.

It is clear from both the PACE project and other research[3,5] that flexibility is an indispensable aspect of accessibility. It is closely related to availability and geographical accessibility. A flexible nursery or childminder that is not available or is difficult to reach is obviously of little use to parents. The Child Care Flexibility Trials in Australia also showed that flexibility only works if the provision is also reliable and sustainable – in other words, if it is stable. We are talking here about stability from the parents' perspective: they want to be able to rely on childcare.

4.3 The PACE prototype

Based on our findings during the PACE project, we favour Prototype 2: a network of nurseries that supplements its regular provision with occasional and flexible places.

This prototype involves nurseries in a municipality, city or region also offering occasional childcare places alongside their regular operations. The providers clearly define the target group on the basis of a local area analysis. The different providers work together to reach parents, allocate the places and ensure that they remain available for those most in need of them. All nurseries know who the places are intended for and every provider keeps to the arrangements. Because the nurseries cooperate, they are able to offer various forms of flexibility: emergency care, short-term care or a flexible care plan for parents with shifts or work schedules that are only known shortly in advance. All childcare organisations have a clear pedagogical vision that makes space for the provision of high-quality occasional and flexible care.

ADVANTAGES

After experimenting with various forms of flexible and occasional childcare, the PACE partners can see pedagogical and practical reasons for choosing this prototype.[6] The table below sets out these reasons per stakeholder.

Children	Children end up in a group that is stable and with which they are comfortable. Children can stay in the same nursery if the family's care needs become regular.
Parents	Parents can choose between different settings. They are more likely to find a flexible or occasional care setting that fits their needs. Families can carry on using the same nursery if their care needs become regular. Parents gain an introduction to regular childcare, making the transition easier.
Early years practitioners	Early years practitioners work partly with a fixed group of children, whom they know well, and this helps to achieve stability on the inside.
Settings	The organisers have a way of completely filling empty places or part-days, enabling them to generate extra income. Organisations do not have to completely change their usual way of working to make this model possible.
Childcare organisers and local authorities	Organisers and authorities can implement and disseminate this model more easily. Sometimes all that is needed is to interpret the existing regulations less strictly and offer some guidance to the participating childcare settings. Other prototypes require additional investments or even changes to the rules. The prototype can be combined with different types of childcare, even childminding.[7]

AND IN PRACTICE?

This prototype requires relatively little practical input. No major changes are required at any level of the childcare system, although each level should take account of the specific needs of the children and families who use occasional or flexible childcare.
Thus, at the level of the day-to-day running of a nursery, attention should be paid to offering a warm welcome and to showing understanding for unexpected changes in childcare needs. The setting's pedagogical vision should set out how it reconciles flexibility with stability on the inside. In addition, this type of care only

works if it takes account of the employees whose task it is to provide it. They too need stability, as well as training and coaching.
At local or regional level, different settings will all need to opt for this type of care, so that enough places become available.
The network must also adapt its working methods effectively to vulnerable families. The mere fact that there is a supply of flexible and occasional places does not mean that all other barriers to childcare will automatically disappear – families will not just suddenly start coming forward. The network therefore needs a clear strategy to make these services known to referring organisations and families. Families find it reassuring if the network has a single contact person to help them with their search. This person can also provide support with the transition to regular childcare if this occurs.

> The project partner in Kent launched a pilot project with five nurseries and two childminders. The local authority bought places for families that required occasional or flexible childcare. When a parent with childcare needs entered the employment side of the project, the PACE key worker put the family in touch with a nursery. The contact was personal and the families could rely on extensive support. At the same time, the local authority organised training and peer support for the managers of the childcare settings, who were completely won over by a study visit to other nurseries during which they saw how it was possible to create calm and familiar conditions for children with this type of care.

LIMITATIONS

A number of limitations of this prototype can be eliminated by setting up an efficient administrative system and appointing a contact person for families. Naturally, this requires a considerable investment of time. In some cases, it will be possible to make this time available during a project or by working with a local brokerage or childcare service, or with a referring body. Concrete details can be found in the description of Prototype 2.

4.4 Remaining needs

This prototype is promising: it has the potential to help and support many families without major systemic changes being needed. Rather, it calls for the reinforcement of the system, along with an unremitting focus on the needs of the vulnerable families who form the target group for occasional and flexible childcare.
Even so, this prototype will not be able to offer a solution to all the care needs of families. For example, parents who work on call will always face the risk that there are simply no places available, even if there are occasional childcare settings nearby. Needs also change over time, so that the solutions offered by this prototype cease to be of use.

CHILDREN GROW UP

Childcare needs are not resolved when children go to school: younger schoolchildren cannot be at home on their own before and after school or during the school holidays. In England and France, parents said that their childcare problems actually grow more acute when children go to school, because there is no out-of-school care where they live.

> 'I can't find childcare for my 6-year-old daughter. There's nothing here for schoolchildren, only for the preschoolers. It's difficult at the weekends and on holidays and weekdays when I work.' (*Candice, Wattrelos, 2018*)

Sometimes there is childcare, but it is very expensive. For anyone on a low income, such care is unaffordable. For a mother in Gravesham, this means she cannot work unless she finds a job where she can go home at 3 pm, which is almost impossible.

> 'Breakfast and after school clubs are too expensive. At a low cost, it could be a solution. Nine pounds for a whole session is too much. How do you want me to pay for this?' (*Anne, Gravesham, 2018*)

When schoolchildren reach their teens, the caringscape changes again. Childcare is no longer needed, but this does not automatically make combining work and family easier. Parents sometimes feel the expectation to be available instantly, for example if a child has problems at school. A phone call to say that a child has been sent home can easily cause a lot of stress.

SOCIETY'S EXPECTATIONS REMAIN

Society expects individuals to play their part. One of those expectations is that anyone who is capable of doing so should be in paid work or making a living by other means. This puts a lot of pressure on people, and as childcare becomes more flexible, there is a risk that the pressure on some families will increase. 'But you can go to work because night nurseries are available,' the thinking goes.
This brings us back to the central plea of this book. We wish to draw attention to the situation of parents who are trapped in precarious or non-standard work. As well as coping with that work, they also have to cope with schools and childcare and, if they lose their job, with employment services. Each of these organisations

has its own outlook and approach, which are geared to a standard process. Flexible childcare can provide stability for families in these situations, but it will not change society's expectations.
What we believe flexible and occasional childcare is capable of changing is views on childcare. We therefore call on the childcare sector to take a broader view of its 'economic function' and to also take atypical work into account. However, this plea is a limited one. This economic function only makes sense if it is accompanied by high pedagogical quality and a well thought out social function.
When we also rethink that social function, we conclude that childcare should be a right for children, regardless of their parents' employment situation. And in that case, it will have to be organised in such a way that all families can exercise that right including those whose parents are not working or studying and those who need childcare at atypical moments. During the project, parents told us how occasional and flexible childcare makes a big difference to them. One mother talked about the right to say goodbye to her child at her own pace:

> 'Parents can say goodbye to their child gently here. One mum took a whole day to say goodbye. It's different at other crèches. I also found it tough leaving my child. I wanted to say goodbye gently to her. She doesn't have to come every day either.' (*Meryem, Mechelen, 2020*)

THE CHILDCARE SECTOR IS OVERBURDENED WITH EXPECTATIONS

Governments and policymakers have high expectations of childcare. The sector has an economic, social and pedagogical role to play and a great responsibility towards children, families and society. Despite this, wages are low, and employees receive little social appreciation, given the expectations associated with the job. Many employees also have insufficient training. Organising flexible and occasional childcare does not take away the pressure and responsibility faced by nursery workers: on the contrary, it increases it.
One of the key insights of the PACE project is that care needs to be shown for the early years practitioners too. They need time to reflect together about their vision and practice, they need training and they need enough people to do the work. The experiments with the prototypes led to this finding time after time. The distribution of flexible and occasional childcare can shine an extra spotlight on the difficulties that are visible throughout the sector. In doing so, it can help ensure that we show proper care for the carers.

In 2020, we asked 35 early years practitioners in Flanders and France about their experiences and beliefs regarding occasional and flexible childcare. The survey took the form of an online questionnaire. Six of the respondents stated that occasional and flexible care increased their workload. They also said that it is not as easy to bond with the children and meet their needs in these circumstances. Finally, the early years practitioners reported finding it hard having to say goodbye to children and families more often.

There were also respondents who highlighted the advantages. For example, some childcare workers said that they enjoy having new children coming all the time, and that they learn to deal with different families and their situations.

In the meantime, occasional and flexible childcare has the potential to support many families, but we wish to underline the point that it is impossible without additional resources. Employees need time to adjust and get used to a new way of working, to discuss things with one another. Childcare workers appreciated the coaching and training they received during the PACE project. Occasional care can also be a step too far. In Arques, one early years practitioner left the organisation, because she had trouble accepting a childcare model that explicitly focuses on families and not primarily on children. Other childcare workers clearly articulate the change they have undergone:

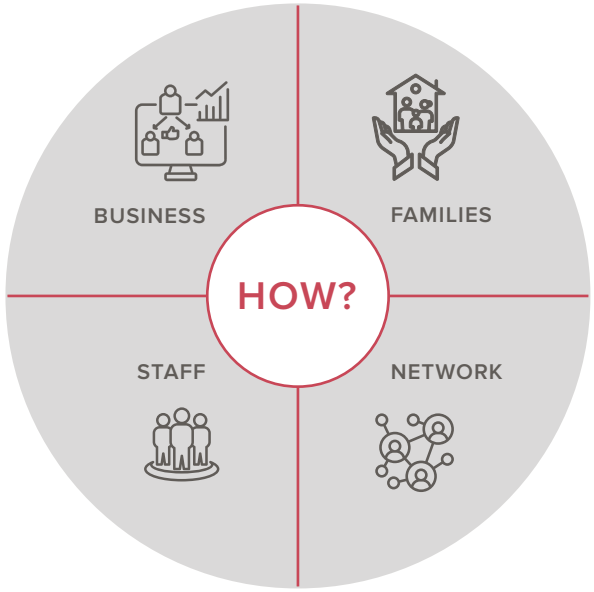
> 'I used to work for the children. Now I also focus on the parents.' (*Nursery worker, Arques, 2020*)

Such a change is definitely supportive for families, but it considerably expands the target group of and strategies in childcare. It cannot be achieved without resources.

PART III.

1. INTRODUCTION TO PART 3

In this book we set out a limited plea for occasional and flexible childcare. We advocate a childcare practice that offers flexibility to families and that takes account of the whole family and its caringscape. We also call for care work to be valued more highly and for flexible work to be organised more considerately. Flexible work has an associated cost in terms of caring needs and requires flexibility from those who have to take on the care responsibilities. Finally, we argue for a generous policy that accounts for the consequences of its decisions in other policy areas and for families. In the PACE project, we see labour market policy, which encourages flexibility, in conflict with childcare policy, which favours stricter organisation. Some families end up caught in the midst of that conflict. It is these families that guide and inform our plea.



At the end of the previous part of the book, we expressed our preference for a particular prototype of occasional and flexible childcare: a network of nurseries that complements regular care with occasional and flexible places. Many organisations can put this prototype into practice without major adjustments or new structures. This may also be a weakness, as there is a risk of the occasional and flexible care disappearing into the background. To prevent this, careful implementation is important. This part of the book fleshes out the concrete implementation of the prototype. How do you turn this prototype into a feasible business plan (Chapter 2)? How does this prototype approach the families who use it (Chapter 3)? How does this type of care support nursery staff (Chapter 4)? And how does it build up a reliable and practicable network (Chapter 5)?
Our starting point for working out the concrete details is always the prototype of our choice, a network of nurseries that combines regular and occasional childcare. Even so, most of the operational methods presented in this chapter can also be used in other forms of occasional and flexible care.

1.1 A logical but not straightforward choice

Bringing greater flexibility to childcare through a network of nurseries that all ‘do their bit’ is a logical answer to the plea for an approach that is more responsive to families’ needs. At the same time, the choice is not a straightforward one, because this form of care cannot count on an adapted supervisory framework for the sector or on more generous policies.
In addition, it requires settings to choose a model that runs counter to the distinctive character of the sector. That character lies in a powerful focus on stability, a typical relationship with the users and a multitude of rules and systems.

ORGANISATIONAL AND PEDAGOGICAL STABILITY

In Part 1, we saw that stability is a constant in the functioning of childcare organisations. They strive for stability in allocation of children to groups, in staff rotas, in income and in expenses. Many aspects of this operational stability are explained on pedagogical grounds. Because children need stability, nurseries try to have fixed groups, fixed staffing in those groups and fixed childcare plans. This close link between pedagogical and operational stability can cause problems for organisations that opt for a less stable operational approach. The danger for them is that this approach will come across as pedagogically less suitable.
This question of the interrelation between organisational and pedagogical quality is difficult, but can be explained logically. Rules and procedures are devised to achieve the essential purpose of childcare: to create a stimulating and welcoming environment for families. The systems are also designed to prevent errors and control quality, and this is a good thing. The only problem is that in the long run, a system can become overbearing, and the original intention of the rules can be lost sight of.[1,2] The system aims to ensure that children feel at ease by advocating regular care. As a result, children whose parents are obliged to attend a four-week programme are left out. Even if settings consider it a legitimate goal, they cannot

organise childcare in such situations, as they risk losing their accreditation or funding if they do so. Nurseries suffer from 'resource dependence'[3]: subsidies, paid sessions and government accreditation are decisive for their survival. If the expectations of funding and accreditation bodies clash with those of families, the latter are likely to lose out.

> 'The pressure arising from the numbers on which the subsidies depend often plays a major role. Obviously, it's much easier to accept only full-time children who will stay from the start through to their transition to school. Children of two-income households, who we know will only be absent on regular days off, also provide great security, of course.' (*Nursery manager, Flanders, 2019*)

In the next few chapters we will explain how nurseries that offer occasional and flexible places can achieve similar goals to regular childcare. This involves adjustments in practice, but at the same time the combination with regular care from the chosen prototype ensures continuity with an existing way of working. In the PACE project, we considered children as the first and most important touchstone in the organisation of pedagogical stability.

EVERYONE WELCOME?

A second essential characteristic of childcare lies in the typical relationship with the users – families. In an occasional and flexible childcare setting, new families will arrive more often and they will be more diverse. The nursery's operational organisation must therefore take account of the considerable differences between the families, each of which has its own caringscape. The organisation must also look for ways to create pedagogical stability for the changing group of families and to create involvement in the care it provides in a way that is compatible with families' caringscape. In the PACE project, we opted for a 'whole family approach',[4,5] that takes account of all areas of parents' lives. For some childcare settings, this means a break with the way they used to look at parents.

STAYING ON YOUR FEET IN A MORASS OF RULES AND PROCEDURES

A third distinctive feature of the sector is that childcare has numerous rules to comply with. There are strict funding rules: in some countries they apply to organisers of care, and in others to the families who use that care. In both cases, the recipients have a lot of rules to comply with, concerning care hours, attendance, holiday arrangements and so on. Furthermore, there are strict hygiene rules and a pedagogical programme which in most countries is compulsory and subject to inspection. How do you set up occasional and flexible places without breaking the rules? How do you avoid financial losses? How do you inspire your team with enthusiasm for occasional and flexible childcare? During the PACE project, it was found to be crucial to involve all early years practitioners in the changes and to take their perspectives into account.

1.2 Understanding why

We have just referred to the straitjacket of rules and procedures that limits the room for movement and the possibilities for occasional and flexible childcare. Even so, there is room to change, and there are settings that choose to approach childcare differently. For them, pedagogical quality and organisational stability are not two sides of the same coin. They know how to adapt the systems to their mission rather than allowing the opposite to happen.[6] Such settings, or networks of settings, have noticed that some families fall through the gaps in the system, and they want to do something about this. They succeed because they know the reason for all their hard work.

> 'As I said, the pressure to hit targets and obtain subsidies is enormous. This makes it much easier to work with strict childcare plans and rules. But then many vulnerable families would be left out.' (*Nursery manager, Flanders, 2019*)

Focusing on the reasons determines all further choices that a childcare setting or network makes: in operational management, in dealing with families and employees and in building a network.
Understanding why is necessary, but the practical realities can be like wading through a morass, and can throw settings off course. This is why there is a need for a powerful vision against which teams can assess their decisions and alternatives, and for a strong leader who guides teams in that process.

> 'We talk about everything. I am nosy but we are also very open. People will know if there is an incident. Everyone feels like they are part of the solution... I am always very clear about why do we do it. Then there is how will we do it? This is what we will discuss together.' (*Manager, Butterfly Nursery, Brighton & Hove, 2020*)

1.3 Great practices and messy realities

Many childcare manuals describe 'good' or 'best' practices. This is brilliant: existing practices provide inspiration and show what's possible. However, best practices set the bar high. They define a standard that may be more daunting than inspiring. Other manuals offer clear guidelines, recipes that an organisation can follow step by step to achieve the desired outcome.
We want to be honest: we did not encounter any best practices during the PACE project. We saw some great practices, to be sure, but they are still very much under development, with room for further growth. What's more, families' realities and caringscapes turn out to be messy, unpredictable and diverse. The tension between these caringscapes, settings and society as a whole differ from country to country and from region to region. Furthermore, what occasional and flexible childcare requires above all is ... flexibility. And that clashes with clear, universally valid guidelines.
While the chapters in this part of the book do formulate advice, that advice should be followed flexibly. We season the advice with examples of concrete practices

from the PACE project. They are courageous examples which are at least good enough. Good enough to help families one or more steps forward in difficult situations. Good enough for listening to and supporting employees, for operational management and for developing a network. And often better than good enough. The realities we depict come from a social innovation project, with experiments that were successful in the sense that we learned lessons from them – and that show that looking for ways to offer flexibility together is perhaps the finest best practice of all, despite messy realities.

2. GETTING THINGS GOING. THE OPERATIONAL SIDE OF OCCASIONAL AND FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE

2.1 Introduction

Organising a childcare setting is no easy matter. A lot of factors come into it: financial management, user satisfaction, networking, marketing and a personnel policy. Existing childcare settings have worked out all these things. What adaptations are needed if they want to organise a number of occasional and flexible places? How can they stay on the right side of the rules? What are the consequences for staffing?

In the introduction to this part of the book, we pointed to the distinctive character of the childcare sector, with its close relationship between operational and pedagogical stability, with its families with young children and the key role of staff in supporting those families, and with its large number of rules that organisations must follow. These features affect the management of a care setting. In what follows, we examine how a setting can shape occasional and flexible childcare on the operational side. We use a template, the Business Model Canvas, to chart all operational aspects.

BUSINESS MODEL CANVAS?

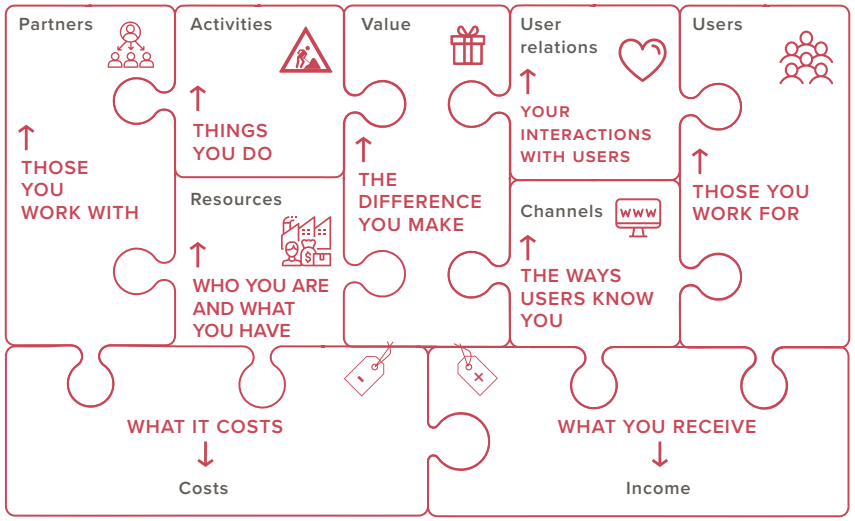


Figure based on the figure developed by Buro Beeldkracht[1]

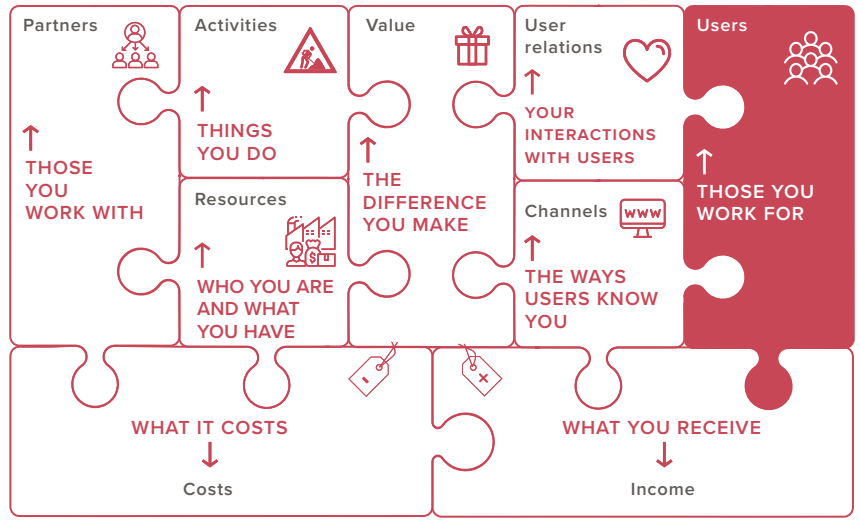
The Business Model Canvas (BMC)[2] is a tool for quickly and easily defining and communicating a business idea or concept. It consists of nine elements that structure the functioning of a product or service. The right side of a BMC shows the external operation (for users) and the left side shows the internal operation (in the organisation).[2] Together, the nine elements offer an at-a-glance view of an organisation's fundamentals.
In the middle of the model is the exchange of 'value' between the organisation and the users. That value is at the heart of all service provision; it is where the internal and external aspects meet. This element shows how an organisation responds to the problems or needs that users experience, the 'customer tasks' as they are called in management models. There are functional needs, such as parents who work at night and need childcare, and emotional needs, such as parents wanting their child to be well looked after.
The BMC model has a number of advantages:

- The responses to users' needs are central.
- The model can be used to describe the entire operation of an organisation.
- The model outlines how you can get from an idea to concrete care provision: for example, from an idea for occasional and flexible childcare to care hours on weekday evenings.

Each element of the model is discussed in this chapter. Our starting point is a BMC from Butterfly Nursery in Brighton & Hove; we supplement that specific model with information and inspiration from many other childcare settings. We are very grateful to all staff at those settings, and in particular to Cara Mitchell, the business manager of Butterfly Nursery, for giving us an insight into the business.

Because families are the starting point for occasional and flexible childcare, we start on the far right side of the model, with the users. Once we know who the users are, we can fill in the other elements correctly. We conclude with the most important element: value.

2.2 Users: Those you work for



FAMILIES ARE THE STARTING POINT

All organisations that offer occasional and flexible childcare mention families as the starting point. They noticed that some families were unable to find care and decided to do something about it.

> 'Because these parents – the ones that do shift work, for example – are also entitled to childcare.'

> 'Parents were telling us that they want to look for work, but that they have no childcare.' (*Nursery coordinators, Flanders, 2019*)[3]

Seeing families' needs is a first step, but you must be able to assess them accurately in order to meet them properly. In other words, you require knowledge about the families in your area: what care needs do they have exactly? Do they have similar care needs, or very different ones? And how do these occasional and flexible needs relate to the needs of families currently using the setting? Two steps can shape this process: a neighbourhood analysis and defining the users.

NEIGHBOURHOOD ANALYSIS

With a thorough neighbourhood analysis, you identify the childcare needs of the families in your area and detect which care settings currently meet a number of those needs and which other organisations in your area are working with and for families. You can seek help from the local authorities with this. They will usually have recent information on the needs of families and on existing initiatives, or will be able to collect such information quickly.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

A neighbourhood analysis for occasional and flexible childcare could consist of the following steps:

Families

- Find out which families have unmet needs: who needs childcare but is not using it?
- Identify the different needs: care at atypical hours, care hours just before and just after the usual opening hours, care available at short notice, easily available care for a short period.
- Identify the obstacles for families: familiarity, intelligibility, availability, accessibility, affordability, reliability and usability. Not all families may experience the same obstacles, so try to identify segments. Knowledge of these obstacles is important: if price is an obstacle, for example, it makes no sense to design care provision that is flexible but expensive.
- What forms of flexibility are useful for a relatively large group of parents?

Childcare settings

- Identify the existing care settings and the flexibility they offer.
- Talk to settings and ask them which aspects of their business they want to improve: occupancy rates, income, flexibility. Find out who is willing to work together on these aspects.

Organisations

- Identify local organisations that work with families in need of childcare: employment services, training centres, employers.
- Talk to them to survey the needs.
- Find out which organisations are willing to work together and in what ways: informing, referring, contributing to financing.

USER SEGMENTS

In order to respond properly to families' needs, you can define a number of user segments. Each segment has its own needs. It may seem harder at first sight to work for different user segments at the same time, as it means you have to meet different needs, and that can be more energy-consuming. However, having these different segments at a nursery can be an advantage: one or more segments can help ensure organisational stability, for example because they have predictable and regular childcare needs, or because they have enough financial resources to enable extra to be charged for flexible services.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

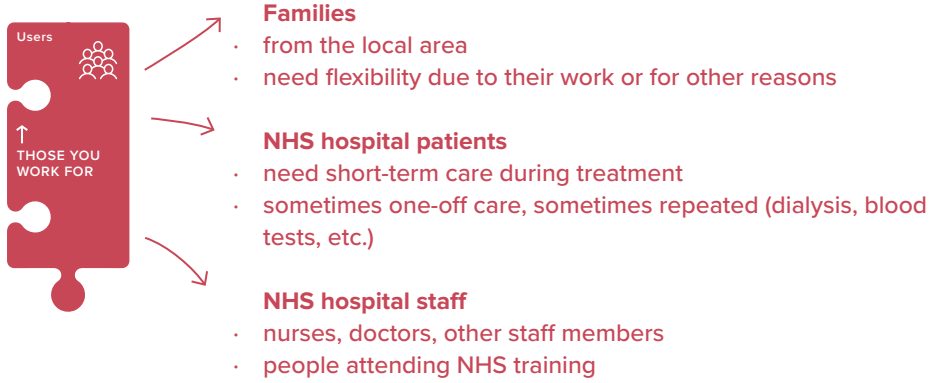
- Take as your starting point the neighbourhood analysis, with the needs of families. Define categories of needs that at least one setting is able or willing to meet.
- Each setting should accurately identify the needs of the user segment, paying particular attention to flexibility. Do the same for the segment that at first sight do not need flexibility: do these parents sometimes have to work overtime? Would they occasionally wish to deviate from the fixed childcare plan?
- Are some users being left out? Look for a solution in the network, possibly with support from local organisations.

Settings that in their regular operations provide a number of places for occasional and flexible care will have at least two types of users. They will need to describe the needs of both segments accurately, and to look for ways to meet both segments' needs as they develop their care provision. Childcare settings which mostly offer occasional and flexible care likewise usually combine different types of users.

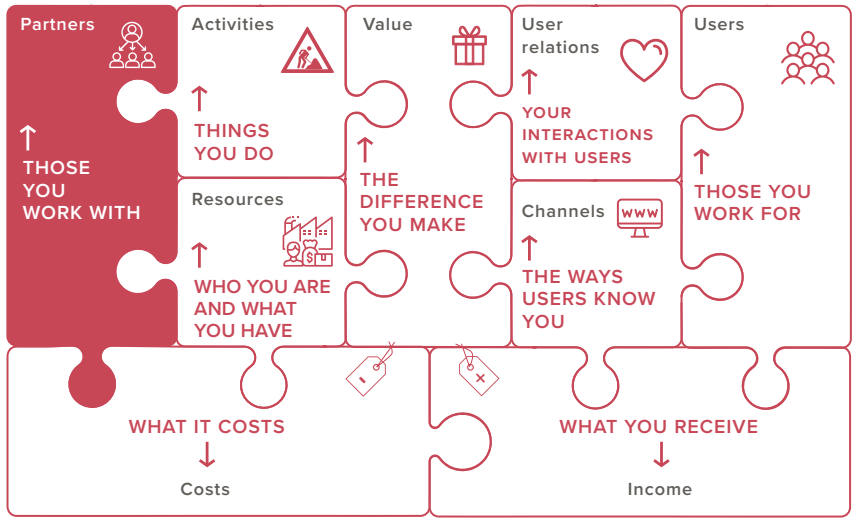
> 'About 50% of the parents are working, primarily with irregular childcare needs, and 50% are following a programme of some kind and are not yet working. It's not black and white: even highly educated and wealthier parents have questions about parenting or irregular childcare needs.' (*OKiDO manager, Flanders, 2019*)

BUTTERFLY NURSERY

Butterfly Nursery has three types of users. Two of these – staff and patients – are related to the location of the nursery, which is next to a hospital. The staff user segment needs flexible childcare, but is otherwise socially strong. Vulnerability is greater among patients and families, the third user segment, although this does not apply to all users from these segments.



2.3 Partners



BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

We will now jump across to the other side of the BMC diagram – to the partnerships. The neighbourhood analysis has also provided an overview of possible partners working with families: employment services, training centres, employers, welfare organisations and local authorities. All these partners can help and support the operation in various ways, but they may not be enough yet. There will be other needs for which partnerships are formed, for example for the purchase of food and care products, for building maintenance and for software. An equally intense partnership does not have to be built in each case. In Chapter 5, we provide more information about partnerships and networks.

Partnerships unquestionably add value for childcare organisations offering occasional and flexible places: in referring parents, in contributing to financing, and for communication. However, building partnerships is very time- and energy-consuming, which is why we advocate the prototype of a network of nurseries with occasional and flexible places, as partnerships can then be constructed for the entire network. Each setting can develop one or more partnerships, or a network employee or local brokerage service can take care of this. In this way, the various partnerships are bundled together.

A PARTNERSHIP IN THE NETWORK OF CARE SETTINGS

This aspect is also discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. The main point we wish to emphasise here is that the network can make things easier for any childcare setting that belongs to it. This is true in many aspects of business management.

- The network can provide a joint financial buffer.
- The network has more power to negotiate with certain partners, for example for purchases.
- The network can jointly bear the salary costs of an administrative employee, as well as the costs of investing in a reliable registration system, for example.
- The network can share information jointly.
- The network can lobby local or regional authorities.
- The network can jointly provide training or education for staff. It can also organise joint reflection, which may even take the form of online gatherings.

A number of points for attention ensure that the network really does make things easier and can function properly.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

› The network works best if there is a central employee who has a mandate to set things up and ensure that they are functioning. That employee must have a good knowledge of the regulations, the financing options and the childcare sector. He or she should preferably be locally based, for example at a local childcare brokerage service, as this makes it easier to build partnerships, and it is clearer to families when childcare information is collected locally.

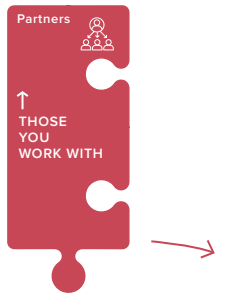
› Make clear agreements about funding. The probability that all settings in a network will operate according to the same principles and funding rules is virtually non-existent. Identify the differences clearly and make mutual agreements.

› The network employee's tasks should also include supporting care settings, for example with drawing up a business plan and funding application, or with looking for sources of financing.

› Give the employee a clear mandate to network, negotiate and form partnerships. Define a clear vision and mission for the network, against which the employee can assess decisions.

In Gravesham, Kent, the local council was able to convince several private settings to start offering occasional and flexible childcare. It set up a network which supported the launch of the scheme by purchasing flexible places for parents on training programmes, so that the settings could be sure of their income. The council also provided support with the development of a business model by making the expertise of one of its employees available. In addition, it provided educational support, among other things by organising joint reflection sessions.

BUTTERFLY NURSERY
— PARTNERS



NHS hospital

- has an accountant who monitors the financial situation;
- provides a lot of users through the hospital and in connection with training programmes;
- supports the mission and vision;
- provides funding for planning and invoicing software;
- is a trusted brand: stands for quality and reliability;
- has an HR service;
- helps with the design of leaflets and publicity;
- adapts the timing of training programmes to availability of places at the nursery.

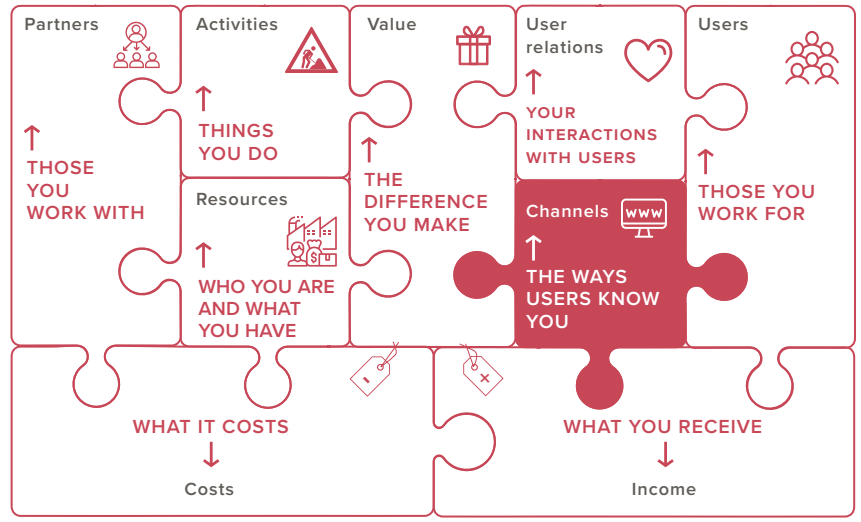
Local council

- refers families with occasional needs;
- promotes the nursery's services, both online and in personal contact with the parents.

Lunch provider (business)

- ensures high quality;
- good for marketing – one nursery won a healthy eating award.

2.4 Channels: the ways users know you



THE WAY FAMILIES KNOW ABOUT CHILDCARE SETTINGS

Many families experience difficulty in finding their way to the available childcare settings, sometimes because they do not know enough, sometimes because they are put off, but mostly for a combination of reasons. It is important to choose the right channels to make the care setting known and to ensure that families are also aware of the occasional and flexible places on offer. Tried and tested channels are:

- written communication: flyers, brochures, website, social media.
- personal information: home visits, attendance at schools, presence at local events.
- through the other organisations in the area and in the network. Organisations may take a different approach for each user segment. At Butterfly Nursery, the hospital refers staff and patients, and the local council reaches other families through the local brokerage service.

BUTTERFLY NURSERY
— CHANNELS

- The local council refers families via the local brokerage service and the PACE project.
- The NHS hospital refers patients and staff.
- Marketing and promotion take place through social media, website, leaflets, newsletters, newspapers and TV.

THE ROLE OF A NETWORK OR BROKERAGE SERVICE

If you take a network-based approach to occasional and flexible childcare places, you can develop a central registration point with that network, as described in Prototype 2. Alternatively, you can use an existing local brokerage service. In Brighton & Hove, the local council's Family Information Service provides this function. This ensures that families and settings have sufficient freedom of choice. If an authority organises a brokerage function of this kind, networks will work with it.
It will make things clear for families if there is only one registration point in an area, and it will also save the settings time.
People can register with a local brokerage service, and if the service provides information about the available settings, parents can contact them themselves. Parents who wish to do so can contact a setting directly. Another possibility is that all families are obliged to register with a registration point. This is mainly of benefit for the settings, which gain a systematic overview of care needs. However, having to register in this way may present an obstacle, which becomes even more insurmountable if families can only register digitally, or only at specific times. Systems with central registration often allocate places automatically. Families' freedom of choice is then limited and a new obstacle arises: families do not know how reliable the place is because they have no contact with the care setting.

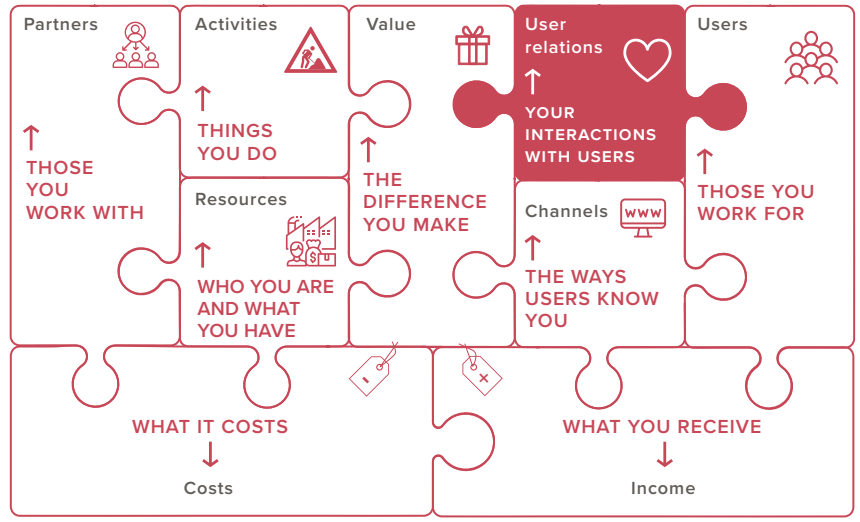
The Brighton & Hove central childcare brokerage service

In Brighton & Hove, the local council organises a central childcare brokerage service, but no system of central notification or allocation of places. Families and settings receive customised support from the service.
Information about it is distributed widely, both online and on paper. There are posters and leaflets in all Children's Centres, where parents come with their children for a mandatory health check.
The information is clear and kept up to date. At each setting, families can check whether there are occasional and flexible places.
Families choose the support they want themselves:

1. self-serve: families find the necessary information online or on paper and use it to look for childcare themselves.
2. basic support: families receive support from the childcare broker, by email or phone. The broker provides information about the available places, possible childcare combinations and funding.
3. brokerage in person: the childcare broker provides personal support. He looks for a place for families and negotiates with settings if necessary.

The service is free for parents, and there is always someone available to support families. Behind the broker is a whole team with expertise in childcare, benefits and funding, which goes to great lengths to ensure that families find a solution to their care needs but remains dependent of the available childcare provision.
Families and settings retain their freedom of choice: if they prefer a solution other than the childcare broker's proposal, they are free to choose it.

2.5 User relations



Particular care is taken to welcome families at every nursery. In the case of occasional and flexible childcare, this need is even greater. The users concerned are often unfamiliar with childcare or have had a difficult time looking for it. Often there is also little time available because the need for care arises suddenly. The nursery therefore needs a team that is ready to welcome families actively and warmly. We explain the basis of this approach in Chapters 3 and 4 on families and on employees.
The important point here is that the nursery should pay attention to all users. Because occasional and flexible care can require a lot of energy, there is a risk that little attention will be paid to families on a regular care plan. These families may be wondering whether occasional and flexible care could undermine their child's stability. Childcare settings can ensure that this does not happen and that these families also benefit from the increased flexibility. They too can enjoy the warm welcome every day. The setting can let these families know that they too can make use of the flexible approach at times when they need it. In this way, they too will experience the nursery as available and reliable.

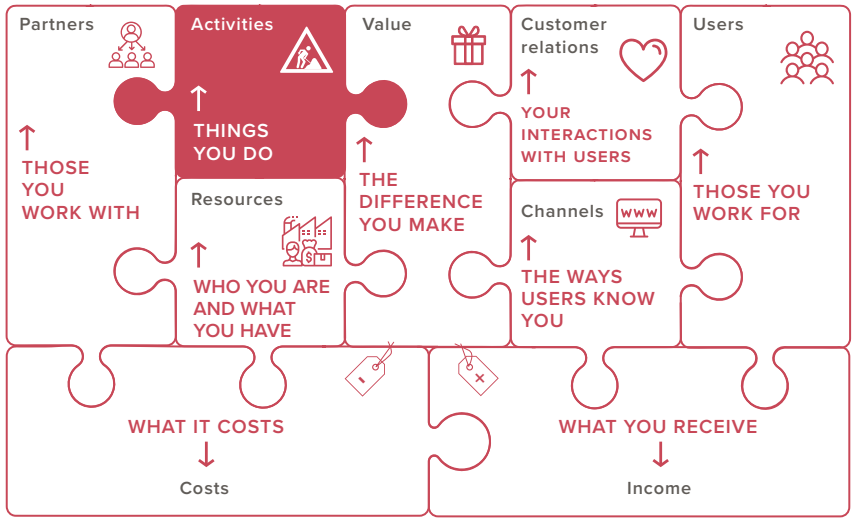
BUTTERFLY NURSERY
— USER RELATIONS

User-focused
- childcare hours: based on families' needs.
- proactive: phoning parents to let them know how things are going; inviting parents to discuss the funding possibilities.

Very welcoming and approachable
- All members of staff actively welcome parents and children.
- Staff are always ready to receive new families.
- Parents can always drop by or phone.
- Putting children and parents at ease is key.

One particular user segment consists of families whose childcare needs evolve into a predictable, regular pattern. It has to be clear to them when they must make the transition to a regular place. They need to be able to count on generous support and a warm transfer to a partner setting, if there is no place in their current nursery.

2.6 Activities: things the nursery does



Every childcare setting must offer pedagogical quality, and this is no different for those that operate on an occasional and flexible basis. Some childcare settings that offer occasional and flexible care support this care provision with additional

parent activities or family support. Others develop a mission and a vision that are closely related to those of many care settings which operate on a completely regular basis.
The hardest quest for any occasional and flexible nursery is for ways to create pedagogical stability in flexible conditions. We discuss how this stability can take shape in Chapter 3. These other forms of stability offer added value for all children and parents, including those from families with a stable childcare plan.

> 'When parents feel happy, that has a positive impact on the children too. We're convinced that flexibility contributes to a good relationship between parents and the facility.' (*Manager, Flanders, 2019*)

Butterfly Nursery makes it clear that an occasional care setting can offer excellent pedagogical quality. Like all nurseries, it regularly undergoes quality inspections. Those public reports are full of praise:

> 'Nurturing and close relationships develop between all children, staff and parents. Staff share high-quality information, which supports children's interests and needs. The consistency of care between home and the nursery is excellent and completely supports children to feel secure.' (*Ofsted inspection report, 2017*)

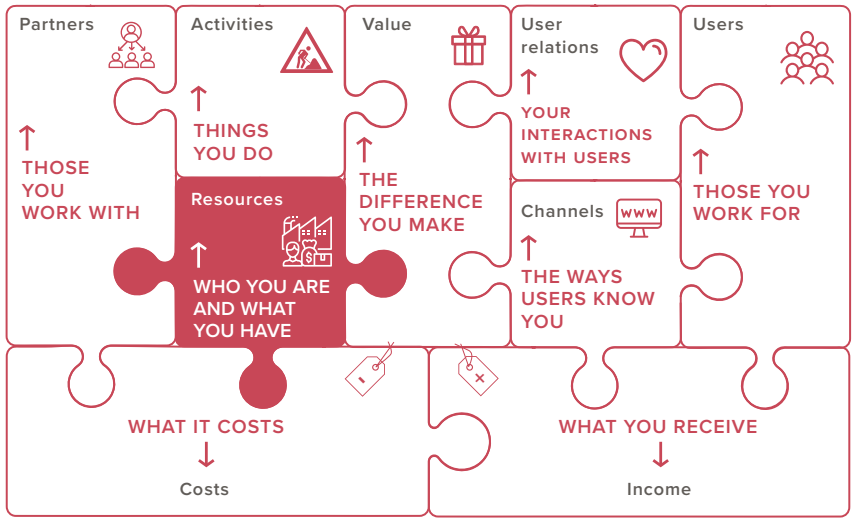
BUTTERFLY NURSERY
— KEY ACTIVITIES

Strong pedagogical practice tailored to occasional/flexible childcare provision
- ample range of activities
- creating sense of safety
- sensitive care

Focus on family involvement
- All practitioners communicate with care with families.
- Every child and every parent gets a warm and enthusiastic welcome.
- Staff ask parents proactively what they need.
- Parents receive support in applying for and spreading out funded hours.

Quality control
- Open communication culture among staff: problems are discussed and resolved together.
- Internal training system for nursery staff: every employee receives extra training and coaching on the job.
- First priority is quality care for and interaction with parents and children. Procedures are supportive, but not binding.

2.7 People and resources



To organise occasional and flexible care, you must be able to rely on highly motivated staff, sound administration, a number of well-thought-out procedures and sufficient available space. This was already apparent in the description of the prototypes, and we explain it further here.

STAFF

People are central to childcare: the staff are crucial to the provision of proper care. It is the managers, early years practitioners and childminders who welcome children and parents on a daily basis. No matter how much a network emphasises the importance of flexibility, if the childcare workers do not radiate this in their approach, little will remain of this view on flexibility. It is therefore essential for the staff to be convinced of the reasons for occasional care.

> 'A lot of people agree with the idea, but the most important thing is that we make it clear that every child should be given every opportunity and that we arouse enthusiasm for that.' (*Manager, Flanders, 2019*)

It is not just highly motivated early years practitioners that are needed in order to organise flexible and occasional care of high quality. A nursery also needs either more staff or a team with a lot of experience in this type of care. This may lead to an increase in wage costs. A mixed workforce could provide a solution: as well as experienced staff members, a setting can employ personnel who are undergoing training or for whom funding is available. This will ensure that there are more staff present than is strictly necessary without the childcare becoming unaffordable, and these extra hands and hearts will reassure children and parents.
Staff members also need additional training and time for reflection; information about this can be found in Chapter 4 .

Ideally, the network of childcare settings can take on an administrative worker to support the planning of childcare places and staff:child ratios.
A good recruitment policy is important: employees must be fully aware of the specific working conditions at a nursery that works with occasional and flexible care.

ADMINISTRATION

Sound administration strengthens your setting in two ways. First, it makes it possible to make places available, and to estimate the number of available places accurately. Second, it makes it easier to avoid breaking the rules, given that childcare settings have staff:child ratios and maximum occupancy rates to adhere to.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

- Invest in a dynamic and watertight planning system that provides a quick overview of available places, matches care requests with those places and shows the staff:child ratio. Link all administration to the system, so that staff planning, invoicing and communication with parents also take place via the system.
- If you work together in a network, you can make this investment jointly. You will then also be able to view all places for the entire network and to distribute care requests evenly.
- Teach the whole team to work with this system: this shares out the administrative workload and increases engagement in occasional and flexible care When a parent phones, any member of staff will be able to see if the nursery can help.
- Part of the program can also be opened up to partners.

The PACE project partner from Saint-Martin-Boulogne developed an add-on to the existing Pôle Emploi application, 'Maintenant!'. The add-on allows potential employers to quickly see where care is available from childminders in the area. Parents who are applying for a job or want to start working can also see where there are available places.
Butterfly Nursery has a system that can show the available places at any time and calculate the staff:child ratio in the different age groups.[4]
The system also makes it possible to look ahead and calculate what time nursery staff need to start work on the basis of the number of children.

PROCEDURES

Clear procedures help employees to organise the work and deal with frequently changing groups and circumstances. Some procedures also help staff to provide clear information to users:

- Ensure a clear intake and registration procedure. This makes it clear which families can make use of the occasional and flexible care, what the conditions are for it and which users take priority.
- Ensure a clear reception procedure. This makes it clear to families how the childcare settings in the network receive families.

The city of Ghent has developed an appropriate framework for receiving families who wish to use occasional childcare. Respect for the family's capacity to cope and for that of the group in which a child will end up is central. This framework has helped the referring organisations to inform families accurately about what they can expect from childcare. The procedure starts from the question: 'How can I ensure that parents who leave their child behind for short-term care are able to walk out of the door feeling positive?'

- Ensure a procedure for families whose care requirements have become predictable. At what point do they switch to regular care? How do you arrange the transition? Where applicable, what about funding?
- Ensure clear procedures for the distribution of tasks. Flexible and occasional care demands flexibility from employees. Clear arrangements are helpful in this context. These can safely start with employees' preferences: one may prefer to start earlier, while another prefers to help out on unexpectedly busy days. Butterfly Nursery also works with back-up workers who live nearby and have the necessary qualifications. These people choose to work a limited number of hours per week and to be free at specific times. Their working hours vary from week to week.

SPACE

In a childcare setting with occasional places, there will be more conversations with parents than in one that operates on a regular basis, because the group of parents is constantly changing, and early years practitioners like to take time to get to know the parent(s) and child. A room that is separate from the main room will ensure sufficient peace and privacy for conversations of this kind, even when time is limited.
During the PACE project, occasional nursery Het Lindeke in Turnhout moved to a building where it has an extra room. Occasional nursery 38 Volt in Mechelen, which was set up during the PACE project, also has a separate room where conversations can take place. Employees and parents find this room very useful.

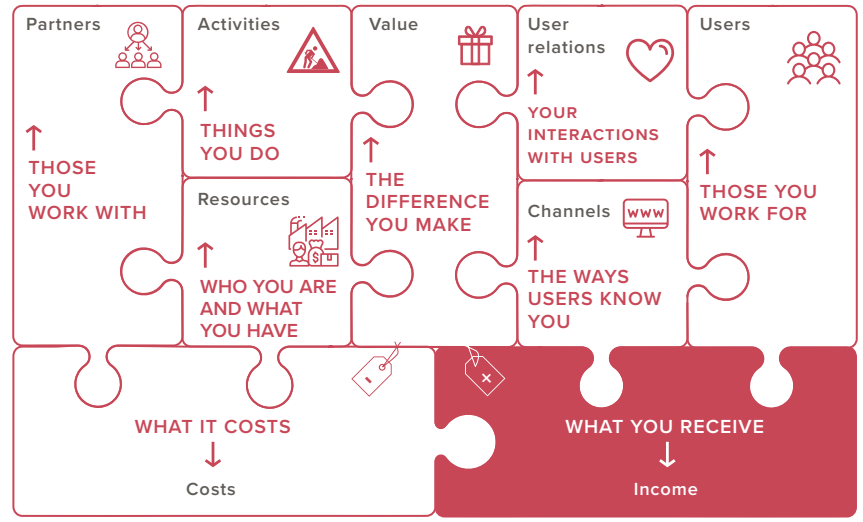
BUTTERFLY NURSERY — PEOPLE AND RESOURCES

Personnel: Clear staff profile
- Well-thought-out recruitment and training policy
- Supported vision and mission
- Back-up staff are available
- Energetic and strong leadership

Supportive procedures and guidelines
(registration, reception, etc.)

Planning and invoicing software
watertight planning system

2.8 Income



A childcare setting cannot survive without enough stable income. If a setting has to close due to financial problems, families in particular will be affected, which is another reason to ensure that it has enough income. The regulations in each country are different, so we do not provide generally applicable guidelines on this matter. However, we can formulate the most important points for attention.

FUNDING

Every childcare setting must follow the rules of the system in which it takes shape. The setting can take a number of steps to generate enough income for occasional and flexible care:
- Look into whether there are specific subsidies (or funding) for occasional and flexible care. Cast the net widely. Sometimes there are no subsidies for flexible and occasional care, but subsidies do exist for outreach work to families from disadvantaged groups.
- Inform other organisations about possibilities. Sometimes employment services or businesses may not realise that they can apply for funding to pay for childcare. Let them know; they can then purchase occasional care places for the families they work with. This will ensure that the flexible places receive stable funding.
- Negotiate with local authorities. If the authorities are convinced of the importance of occasional and flexible childcare, they may be willing to help fund places. If the places are not taken, you will then still have income.
- Negotiate with other organisations in the area. If childcare helps them to fulfil their mission or to find staff, perhaps they will be willing to contribute financially to occasional or flexible places? Think of local authorities, welfare organisations, employment services and employers.

THE RATIO OF REGULAR TO OCCASIONAL OR FLEXIBLE PLACES

Regular places have the advantage that a setting can be sure of the income for a certain period; this makes financial planning easier. As funding is not the same in every country and different funding options exist side by side in some countries, there is no single ideal ratio. However, we can present a number of strategies:

- If there are no subsidies for occasional or flexible places, you can calculate how many permanent places are needed to cover the costs. The income from the occasional and flexible places can then be treated as an extra with which to build up a financial buffer. Butterfly Nursery uses this approach.
- Another strategy is to plan on the basis of the maximum occupancy rate for the regular places. On most days, a number of children will be sick or unexpectedly absent for other reasons. You can then open those places up for occasional care. This way you are already assured of sufficient income through regular childcare.
- You can also plan for under-occupancy: plan half or two-thirds of the places for regular childcare and allocate the remaining places to flexible and occasional care requests. This strategy only works if you are sure that there is a lot of demand for occasional and flexible childcare and that it generates sufficient income. This may be the case, for example, if you have a fixed network of organisations that refer families.
- A final strategy focuses more on expenditure: a network of childcare settings allows you to hire one or more mobile employees, who will work at any setting that has received so many extra requests that the number of staff present is insufficient.

AFFORDABILITY

Does the user segment for occasional and flexible care have little financial capacity? In that case you need to work out a feasible price, which will be affordable for the families and ensure that the setting receives enough income. You can then choose to apply different prices for different circumstances.
In countries with income-related childcare, you can also calculate the prices for occasional and flexible sessions according to that principle.
In countries without pricing controls, you can vary the price according to the user segment or according to the time of day of the care session. If you do this, you must formulate criteria that are clear to all users.
You can also differentiate when families do not take up reserved childcare, passing on the cost to the user segment with financial capacity rather than that with little financial capacity. You can then be more flexible for parents who need that flexibility, while remaining sufficiently confident of your income.
Finally, you can use a differentiated approach for other costs. In some countries, care settings require a deposit; you can only request this from parents who are sufficiently well off. The deposit then becomes a tool for moving towards a fair distribution of childcare: it gives the care organisation a financial foundation, but only those best placed to do so contribute towards it. As a result, more families will be able to use childcare.

FILLING PLACES

If you need the income from occasional and flexible places to cover your costs, you need to make sure the places get filled. Again, various strategies are possible:

- Care settings that form a network together can refer families to each other. Do they have a central contact point, or do they work with a local brokerage service? This can ensure that requests are distributed as evenly as possible among the settings.
- Work with organisations that refer families. Setting up a network of this kind is more effective if there is a collaborative alliance between settings. A local brokerage service can also provide such a network.

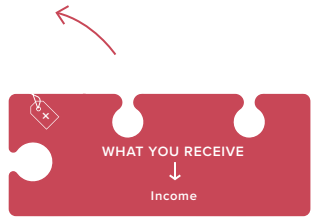
WHAT IF FAMILIES DO NOT PAY?

Parents not paying is a common occurrence – across all users, including the recipients of regular childcare. What distinguishes the user segment for occasional care is that the contact can be short-lived, and this makes it difficult to encourage families to pay. If some of the income for these places does not come from subsidies or external funding, this is a tough problem for nurseries. There is no fail-safe solution, but a number of strategies can help:

- Develop a joint strategy across the network on dealing with bad payers. This is also helpful for the users, as families then know what is expected of them.
- Make arrangements with other support organisations in the area, such as welfare settings. Find out how they can support families with paying, whether by contributing or by helping them to claim benefits.
- Talk to parents. What is their situation? Do they know their rights? Do they need help applying for funding?

BUTTERFLY NURSERY — INCOME

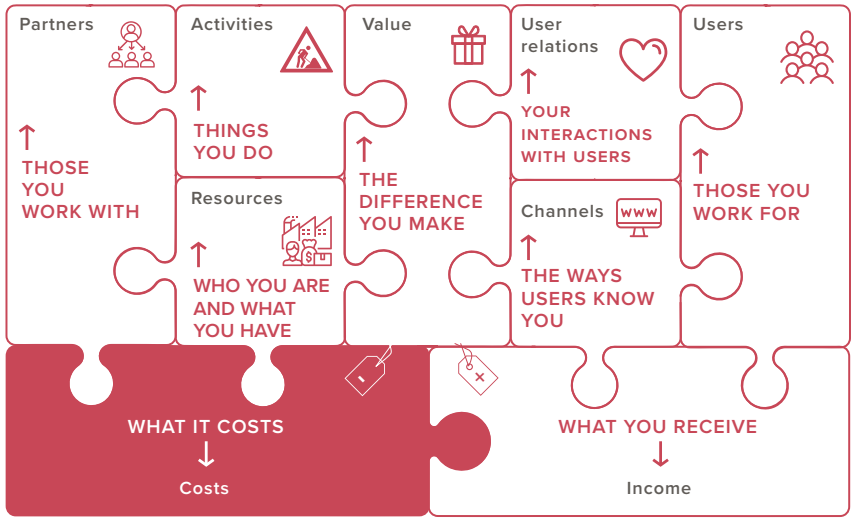
- All types of funding on the demand side (for 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds, including the thirty funded hours of care)
- Extra income through occasional sessions (drop ‘n’ go). Higher rates for early and late sessions. Additional food charges for parents who can afford it.
- Income is higher for children under the age of 2 and for parents of 2-year-olds who are not eligible for funding.
- Early bird, twilight and drop ‘n’ go sessions use unfilled hours and thus generate extra income at little or no cost.



HELPING PARENTS TO RECEIVE FUNDING (FLEXIBLE SUPPORT FUND)

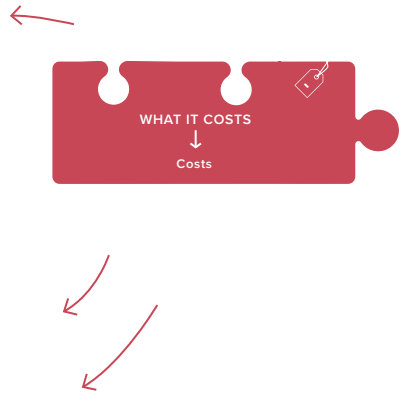
In Brighton & Hove, the Flexible Support Fund helps parents to pay for childcare in advance. However, the system is very challenging administratively. The local council has devised a procedure together with the employment service. In this way it has ensured that parents who are entitled to do so actually receive the benefit. For the nurseries, the Fund increases the chance that parents will pay.

2.9 **Costs**



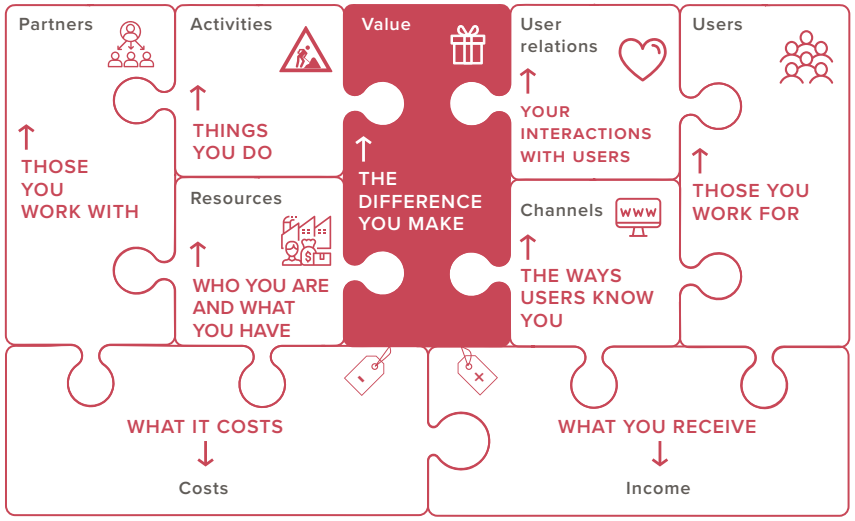
A clear cost structure is important in any business. If an existing setting offers occasional and flexible care in combination with regular care, it is therefore important to know whether this entails additional costs. Do the premises need to expand? Are there higher personnel costs? Are the operating costs increasing? Do you risk incurring costs needlessly if the places are not filled?
If the setting offers the occasional places as part of a network, there may be extra costs for an administrative worker, a room and the maintenance costs for the administrative system. Sharing those costs with the other members of the network makes them manageable.

BUTTERFLY NURSERY
— COSTS



- **Staff:** affordable due to the combination of qualified staff and staff undergoing training. Because of its flexibility, Butterfly Nursery partly works with staff who are more highly trained than average.
  A good software system for payments and planning makes it possible for staff to focus on pedagogical tasks. If the nursery did not have such systems, it would need more staff.
- **Rent** for each of the three NHS nurseries
- **Meals** partly paid for by the parents

2.10 Value



Value is at the heart of every BMC model. It is where the needs of the users and the organisation's activities meet. Ideally, the users will experience added value, as will the organisation's employees. The endeavour to ensure that this is so fits in neatly with our plea for attention to be paid to the recipients of care, but also to the people who provide care.

All users have both practical and emotional needs. Parents will not entrust their children to a nursery if they fear that they will not be looked after properly there. At the same time, parents are looking for solutions to specific childcare needs while they work, go on a training course or have to deal with an unexpected situation. Only when a setting meets these emotional and practical needs will value be created for its users. Value was previously discussed in our examination of the advantages of the various prototypes and in the accessibility checks. We will illustrate this concept here again.
The *centres sociaux* from France that took part in the PACE project combine flexible childcare with strong parental involvement and tailor-made support for families. Nurseries organise activities in which children and parents can participate together. The parents make suggestions for such activities themselves, or organise them together with the childcare workers. In addition, the *centres sociaux* offer various workshops and training courses during the nursery opening hours, ranging from drama or self-care to computer skills or writing CVs. The hours of the nursery and those of the activities for parents are coordinated. Many parents say that the group activities are of great value to them: they meet other parents there, and this helps them to feel less alone. For the *centres sociaux*, the group activities, whether for parents or for parents and children together, are a core activity which makes them distinctive and creates added value for parents.

'What's the most important thing to me? Meeting other parents, and sharing tips. Being able to swap ideas is important, both as a parent and as a woman, including in connection with work. You also see that you're not alone in this situation.' (*Coralie, Arques, 2020*)

BUTTERFLY NURSERY — VALUE

Convenience & accessibility
- long opening hours (early bird & twilight sessions)
- drop 'n' go sessions at £5 per hour
- onsite and available childcare: usable by staff, trainees and patients
- parents can stay & play

Solution-focused
- childcare based on families' needs, not on fixed provision
- no waiting list
- parents do not need to wait for funding: an immediate start is possible
- asking for changes is normal

Additional support
- plenty of communication with parents
- administrative support (if needed)
- looking for the best possible way to use funded hours

PARTNERS

NHS hospital

- has an accountant who monitors the financial situation
- provides a lot of users through the hospital and in connection with training programmes
- supports the mission and vision
- provides funding for planning and invoicing software
- is a trusted brand: stands for quality and reliability
- has an HR service
- helps with the design of leaflets and publicity
- adapts the timing of training programmes to availability of places at the nursery.

Local council

- refers families with occasional needs
- promotes the nursery's services, both online and in personal contact with the parents

Lunch provider (business)

- ensures high quality
- good for marketing – one nursery won a healthy eating award
- good for marketing – one nursery won a healthy eating award

COSTS

Staff

- affordable due to the combination of qualified staff and staff undergoing training. Because of its flexibility, the nursery partly works with staff who are more highly trained than average

A good software system for payments and planning makes it possible for staff to focus on pedagogical tasks. If the nursery didn't have such systems, it would need more staff

Rent

4, 13 and 23% of the full capacity cost for each of the three NHS nurseries

Meals

partly paid for by the parents

ACTIVITIES

Strong pedagogical practice tailored to occasional/flexible childcare provision

- ample range of activities
- creating sense of safety
- sensitive care

Focus on family involvement

- all practitioners communicate with care with families
- every child and every parent gets a warm and enthusiastic welcome
- staff ask parents proactively what they need
- parents receive support in applying for and spreading out funded hours

Quality control

- open communication culture among staff: problems are discussed and resolved together
- Internal training system for nursery staff: every employee receives extra training and coaching on the job
- first priority is quality care for and interaction with parents and children. Procedures are supportive, but not binding
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Additional support

- plenty of communication with parents
- administrative support (if needed)
- looking for the best possible way to use funded hours

PEOPLE AND RESOURCES

Personnel: Clear staff profile

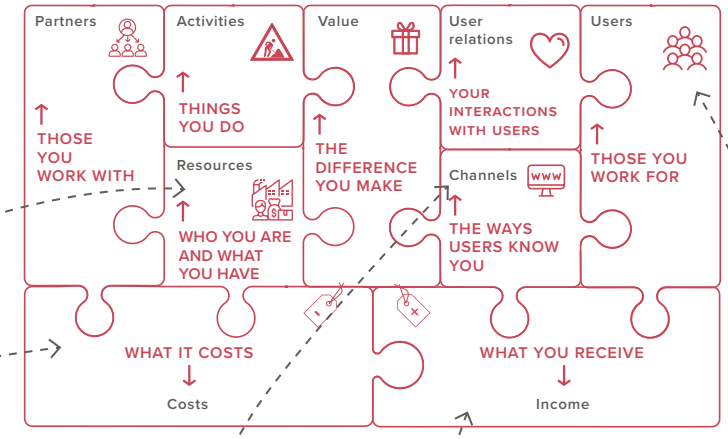
- well-thought-out recruitment and training policy
- supported vision and mission
- back-up staff are available
- energetic and strong leadership

Supportive procedures and guidelines

registration, reception, etc.

Planning and invoicing software

watertight planning system



USER RELATIONS

User-focused

- childcare hours: based on parents' needs
- proactive: phoning parents to let them know how things are going; inviting parents to discuss the funding possibilities

Very welcoming and approachable

- all members of staff actively welcome parents and children
- staff are always ready to receive new families.
- parents can always drop by or phone
- putting children and parents at ease is key

INCOME

- all types of funding on the demand side (for 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds, including the thirty funded hours of care
- extra income through occasional sessions (drop 'n' go). Higher rates for early and late sessions. Additional food charges for parents who can afford it
- income is higher for children under the age of 2 and for parents of 2-year-olds who are not eligible for funding
- early bird, twilight and drop 'n' go sessions use unfilled hours and thus generate extra income at little or no cost

CHANNELS

- the local council refers families via the local brokerage service and the PACE project
- the NHS hospital refers patients and staff
- marketing and promotion take place through social media, website, leaflets, newsletters, newspapers and TV

USERS

Families

- from the local area
- need flexibility due to their work or for other reasons

NHS hospital patients

- need short-term care during treatment
- sometimes one-off care, sometimes repeated (dialysis, blood tests, etc.)

NHS hospital staff

- nurses, doctors, other staff members
- people attending NHS training

3. HOW DOES FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE SUPPORT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES?

3.1 Introduction: back to the essence

Childcare has gradually developed procedures and methods in order to offer children and parents pedagogical stability. These procedures are embedded throughout the childcare system, from funding conditions to quality inspections. However, not every procedure or method is easy to use in an occasional or flexible setting, and this often raises concerns that this type of care lacks quality. We have already shown that this is not the case.
In this chapter we will look for approaches to ensuring that quality. We will do so by taking a fresh look at the goal and essence of each procedure or method: what are nurseries trying to achieve with this procedure? And what is the essence of the approach? We will then examine other approaches by which settings for occasional and flexible care can achieve these goals and offer this essence. We deliberately talk in terms of 'approaches' because we believe there are many ways to achieve these goals.

3.2 How can occasional and flexible childcare be organised to ensure that children feel comfortable at the start of childcare?

Young children who attend childcare are unable to articulate their feelings of comfort or discomfort, which is why the frameworks of well-being and involvement are used. Children with a high level of well-being feel safe, relaxed and at ease in their environment; they show involvement when they are attentive, focused and able to concentrate. It is up to the nursery practitioners to observe the children and check on their levels of well-being and involvement.[1] Well-being and involvement are values at an individual level; some pedagogical frameworks also refer to a collective level. They point to the importance of connectedness, because children develop in relation to others and in relation to an environment.
The table below shows the main points to consider with regard to well-being, involvement and connectedness.

	What should you look out for?
Well-being	Does the child feel safe? Is the child relaxed? Is the child at ease? Is the child crying? What does his/her crying mean?
Involvement	Does the child show interest? Is the child able to become absorbed in anything? Does the child show initiative?
Connectedness	Does the child make contact with other children? Does the child make contact with nursery staff? Does the child show an interest in what is happening around him/her?

It is not always easy to achieve well-being and involvement – not at occasional and flexible childcare settings, and not for children who go to nursery on a regular basis.[1] In fact, the challenges faced by occasional and flexible care have the effect of training a spotlight on the challenges faced by regular care.
Regular childcare takes several approaches to achieving well-being, involvement and connectedness. The first approach is that the care setting makes an effort to ensure that a child's time there gets off to a good start. The second approach consists of methods and procedures that run throughout the care period. In what follows we take a closer look at these two approaches.

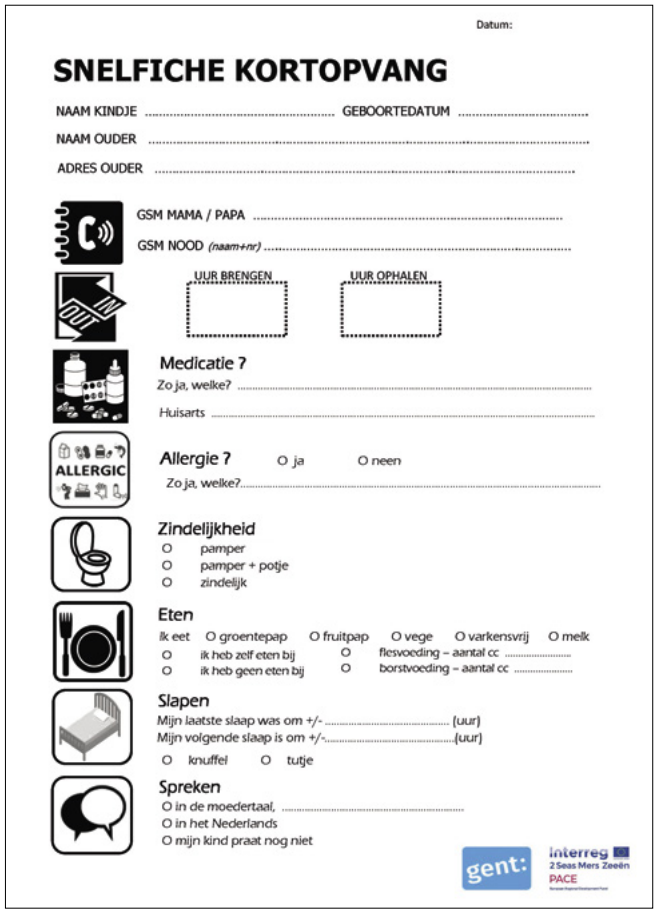
WHAT HAPPENS?

Children going to nursery for the first time experience a transition: from care exclusively within the family to care that is shared by different people and takes place in different places. That transition needs to be managed carefully. The child must be able to get used to the new environment and to the new people – the nursery staff.
The start of childcare may also mean a significant transition for other parties: parents must get used to their new role and to coordinating with the nursery, early years practitioners must get to know the child, and the group of children must adapt to the arrival of a new member.[2,3]

THE APPROACH OF REGULAR CHILDCARE

In order to make the transition manageable for everyone involved, every nursery has a settling-in policy. This usually consists of two basic elements. The first is information: nurseries are required to give parents information about opening hours, payment and so on, and they also need to receive information from parents. Some aspects of this are required by law,[4] and some of the information is contained in a set of rules or a contract in the national language of the nursery, which parents

have to sign. Second, nurseries seek to convey a certain atmosphere and way of doing things out of a desire to put parents and children at their ease. They do both of these things during the intake or introductory meeting and during the settling-in period.



Datum:

SNELFICHE KORTOPVANG

NAAM KINDJE ..... GEBOORTEDATUM .....

NAAM OUDER .....

ADRES OUDER .....

GSM MAMA / PAPA .....

GSM NOOD *(naam+nr)* .....

UUR BRENGEN UUR OPHALEN

Medicatie ?

Zo ja, welke? .....

Huisarts .....

Allergie ? O ja O neen

Zo ja, welke? .....

Zindelijkheid

O pamper
O pamper + potje
O zindelijk

Eten

Ik eet O groentepap O fruitpap O vege O varkensvrij O melk
O ik heb zelf eten bij
O ik heb geen eten bij
O flesvoeding – aantal cc .....
O borstvoeding – aantal cc .....

Slapen

Mijn laatste slaap was om +/- ..... (uur)
Mijn volgende slaap is om +/- ..... (uur)
O knuffel O tutje

Spreken

O in de moedertaal, ...
O in het Nederlands
O mijn kind praat nog niet

gent: interreg 2 Seas Mers Zeeën PACE

Quick information form for short-term care, PACE Ghent, Belgium
This quick information form is only possible because short-term care does not fall under the usual regulations: as a result, less information is needed.

Together, the intake procedure and the settling-in period are fairly time-consuming. An intake meeting can easily take two or three hours, and some settling-in procedures last for two to four weeks, with children staying for longer and longer sessions, first with and later without the parents. It is often mandatory to go through these procedures. This amount of time is rarely available in the case of occasional and flexible care: parents unexpectedly need childcare, or have difficulty finding practicable routes through their caringscape. In addition, the procedures are inaccessible to some vulnerable parents: they cannot understand the information, or are afraid of being judged on their parenting.

Occasional and flexible care settings therefore have the task of identifying the essence of the intake and settling-in processes, and then working out alternatives to them.

> 'We knew that the nurseries were very suspicious of the idea of occasional childcare. They were very concerned about the settling-in process. When we asked what their minimum requirements were, they said: "At least an hour with the parents in which we explain how things work, they give us information about their child and we make the payment arrangements clear.'"
> (*PACE worker, Gravesham, 2019*)

THE INTAKE PROCESS IN OCCASIONAL AND FLEXIBLE CARE

A number of PACE partners re-examined the intake process and succeeded in breaking it down into three essential elements. For each element, the partners looked for a solution that suited occasional and flexible care. The means of communication also turned out to be important: not every subject lends itself to a video and not every question can be asked on paper.

1. Obtaining information about the child

Childcare settings need information about each child, for the children's safety and to enable things to go more smoothly. Some information is mandatory for care settings, for example concerning food allergies.

> The city of Ghent has drawn up guidelines for the introductory meeting for its pop-up nursery. Parents are asked to arrive half an hour early. Employees know how they are supposed to use that half-hour. (*PACE, Ghent*)

2. Providing information about the childcare setting

Practical information about the nursery should be reduced to the essentials: what do parents really need to know to help their child to settle in? This includes opening hours and booking, and food or care products that parents must bring with them. It's best to provide this information on paper, expressed as simply as possible. Even highly educated parents benefit from this: it takes them less time to process the information. Many settings display the most important information in the nursery.[2,5]

If the user group for occasional and flexible care is largely multilingual, it's best to provide a translation. In Gravesham, the childcare brokerage service found out which languages were most common in the user, and then had the information translated.

At Het Lindeke in Turnhout, the early years practitioners simply asked parents at the introductory meeting to write 'welcome' in the language they spoke at home. The parents responded positively to this small gesture, and the staff could see which language was used at home.

3. Showing what the nursery is like

What the nursery is like is another piece of essential information that will reassure children and parents at the outset. The PACE project partner in Ghent made a video about the pop-up setting, which parents can watch beforehand. Other nurseries give a guided tour during the introductory process; this requires little extra effort. Another option is to show how the nursery works with photos on a display board in the reception area, or in a photo booklet in various places in the nursery.[5] There may in fact be time for a brief introduction, during which you can get down to the essentials and hand over a sheet of paper with the rules. But what is the most important factor in offering reassurance and ensuring that interactions are positive? One nursery asks parents how they want to be addressed: childcare workers often address parents as 'mum' or 'dad', but not all parents feel comfortable with this.[6]

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

- Select essential information.
- Think about what you want to convey.
- Check how much time there is.
- For every piece of information and for every aspect of the nursery, choose a means of communication appropriate to the content and the available time.
- Have basic information translated into the home languages of the user segment.
- Make it easy for parents to access essential information whenever they want.

THE SETTLING-IN PROCEDURE IN OCCASIONAL AND FLEXIBLE CARE

Several PACE partners reflected on the essence of the settling-in procedure. Again, three aspects emerged:

1. Building trust

Children, parents and early years practitioners regularly spend time together over the course of one or two weeks, and this enables trust to grow. The time required for this is often lacking with occasional and flexible care. In addition, PACE partners noted that some users had no experience of childcare, while others had had negative experiences. It takes extra time for such families to build trust. However, there are other ways in which trust can arise, for example when a child looks happy.

> 'I was very worried that first time. "My child is going to cry! He is always with me. He doesn't speak the language, he won't be able to explain what he needs." But when I went to collect him in the evening, he was very happy.'
> (*Mary, Gravesham, 2020*)

2. and 3. Exchanging information and creating an atmosphere

Parenting is an 'embodied' practice. It is not always easy for parents to put into words how they comfort their child or put him or her to sleep.[7] Nursery staff can find out some things better by seeing them with their own eyes. For example, a parent may say that she holds and rocks her child when the child is upset, but the nursery worker may see that the parent rests the child's head on her shoulder, not on her arm. There is also a certain mood or atmosphere associated with such actions, which parents and children create together. During the settling-in process, parents also find out what happens at the nursery at times when few parents are present. They immediately sense the atmosphere for themselves, and can thus build confidence.
You can also exchange information and create an atmosphere once childcare is already up and running. A parent may have to leave promptly in the morning to go to work or a training course, but be able to stay a little longer in the evening. The nursery can meet the parents' needs in this way.

> 'I would like to experience how she is playing with others. I want to be part of her nursery experience [and] I don't want to be isolated from her.'
> (*Jada, Brighton & Hove, 2020*)

Instead of mainly observing during the settling-in process, nursery staff can ask specific questions about something they have noticed to do with the child. Het Lindeke in Turnhout produced a 'chat sheet' that staff can use for conversations with parents. It allows staff to see the themes at a glance.

Regular nurseries often work with a key person, who monitors the child closely, initiates formal contacts with parents and communicates with the team. In occasional and flexible care, this practice can offer extra reassurance to children who do not come often.[8] Very young children get used to a new environment more easily if they feel that someone is close to them. The key person can make sure the child stays close and can look for ways to give reassurance. Many nursery staff regard all this as so self-evident that they cannot always put it into words.

Sometimes children are unable to settle in, no matter what care workers try. If the child comes once or for a short period of time, honesty with the parents is important; but staff should also tell the parents how they have tried to help the child settle in. If the child comes to the setting more often, it's best to talk to the family in order to find a solution together: either an extended period of settling-in or another form of childcare.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

The message when it comes to modifying the settling-in process for use in occasional and flexible care is 'return to the essence'. We believe there are a number of factors in making that return successful:

- The care setting must have a clear vision of settling-in, and the approach must be known to and shared by all staff.
- The organisation must have a supported vision of the role of parents and understand the circumstances in which parents use childcare.
- The staff should be given time together to identify the essence of the settling-in process and come up with a 'shared repertoire' of alternatives[2], as it is hard to move away from an established practice without thinking of alternatives together.[9]
- Employees should be given time to jointly determine the limits of flexibility. Which contacts with parents represent the bare minimum? When is a child's level of comfort too low, and how long can this be allowed to last?
- Staff should be given the opportunity to set limits in consultation with families. Parents sometimes have expectations of an early years practitioner working with a group of children that cannot be achieved without that practitioner or other children in the group experiencing discomfort. If staff have thought about this, they can put forward arguments. They can also consider carrying a child a lot to start with and gradually cutting down on this later on.

3.3 How can occasional and flexible childcare be organised to ensure that children feel comfortable throughout the care period?

WELL-BEING, INVOLVEMENT AND CONNECTEDNESS THROUGH STABILITY?

In the first part of this book, we pointed out that the childcare sector sees stability as an important prerequisite for ensuring children's well-being and involvement, on the basis of research identifying negative consequences when children experience insufficient stability. However, that research does not look in detail at the type of instability that children experience. Many practical or popularising publications on looking after young children and on childcare outside the home have taken up this idea of stability.[10,11,12,13]

To gain a better understanding of stability, we worked with two forms of stability in Parts 1 and 2. There is the stability on the outside which is recognisable to an outsider, such as advance bookings, fixed care plans, fixed intake times and fixed groups. In addition, there is stability on the inside: the stability that children experience in the structures and information that are presented to them and the relationships they build, and the stability that enables families to organise family life so that each family member experiences inner peace.

For an occasional and flexible setting, it is important to ensure that children experience stability on the inside. However, the care is by definition sporadic and unpredictable, or takes place at times that most children spend with their family. This makes offering stability with a view to well-being, involvement and connectedness a tall order – perhaps too tall:

> 'Maybe we shouldn't be aiming for such a thing, which can go wrong in so many ways. It calls for great maturity from the sector. If you're going to depart from the standard line in this way, you should also have the courage to ask difficult questions. What do you expect from nursery workers? How highly trained should they be? How often do children need to go to nursery?'
> (*Lecturer in early years pedagogy, Flanders, 2019*)

This is no small task, then. At the same time, we saw in Part 1 that without occasional and flexible childcare, a whole group of families are left out – ones that would benefit greatly from high-quality care. Childcare may make it possible for them to take training, sort out paperwork or start a job, and in the long run, these activities contribute to a family's levels of stability and happiness.
Tough though the task may be, the PACE project demonstrated a number of possibilities for providing stability in an occasional and flexible care setting, through the right combination of stability that is visible on the outside with stability experienced on the inside.

VISIBLE STABILITY IN OCCASIONAL AND FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE

Care settings operate in a system that continuously strives for visible organisational stability as a way of creating pedagogical stability. Managers look for ways to achieve this organisational stability in occasional and flexible care too. Among other things, they do so by means of attention for the nursery staff, the group of children, the space and the daily schedule.

1. The nursery staff

Thanks to the reassuring presence of familiar, permanent staff, children can understand the world and build well-being.

> 'We close at 6 pm. Any children who remain after 6 pm are brought together in a group with one or two staff. Switches are frequent. I had found someone who didn't have children of her own and was willing to work every evening, but after a while it was no longer convenient for her. I then divided the work between two people, but after a while it was no longer convenient for them either. It's now split between everyone. Nursery staff have their own families, and no one likes to work every night until 7.45 pm. It's not ideal for the children.'
> (*Nursery manager, Flanders, 2019*)

Back to the essence of good childcare: nursery staff who can do their work properly. And they can do their work properly when they are able to combine their work with their family responsibilities – and when they are trained, when they are part of a highly motivated team, and when colleagues do not leave or join too frequently. A care setting can work on these aspects, for example by providing extra holidays for staff who start early and by making time for joint reflection, training and relaxation.

2. The group of children

The prototype for occasional and flexible childcare that we advocate combines it with regular care. This means that there is a group of children coming in several days a week, forming an anchor point for newcomers.

> 'The children can join the group of children who come regularly. I call them the cement children: they are the cement of the operation.'
> (*Nursery manager, Antwerp, 2019*)

Obviously, this does not mean that all children settle in quickly with a group of cement children. Every child reacts differently.

> 'A brother and sister are coming for the second time today. They're both finding it difficult. Their well-being is low. Their crying is difficult to stop, and it spreads to the other children. Marie and Sarah try to distract and comfort them, but it's not easy. Sarah is winning the sister's confidence. She's becoming happier and calmer. The brother is still inconsolable.' (*PACE worker, Flanders, 2018*)

When children have trouble adjusting, nursery staff are concerned about the impact on the group of children who come regularly. If things really do not work, the nursery should contact the parents, or nursery staff should look for other solutions.

> 'If we have a child that is upset, we will phone the parents. The parents can choose what they will do. But actually as a nursery worker if you have an unhappy child, you get the bubbles out, the toys out, ... you do many nice things. The other children are happy too.' (*Nursery manager, Brighton & Hove, 2020*)

3. The space

The interior design and use of the space play a major role in children's experience: with good reason Loris Malaguzzi refers to the environment as the 'third teacher'.[14,15,16] A clearly designed space with play areas and corners offers security and safety to children, thus ensuring stability. In the example involving staff schedule switches, the manager mentioned that two groups are combined in the evening. This means that one group moves to another space. If that space has enough similarities with the familiar space, it can give children something to hold on to.

Interior design unit from the pop-up nursery, Ghent, 2019

At the same time, a space can stimulate children. The pop-up nursery organised by the city of Ghent works with some recurring spatial elements.

It's worth taking a closer look at the space from the children's point of view: does the interior design stimulate or impede their well-being and involvement?[17] Can children take the initiative themselves, for example by taking toys out of a cupboard? Are there lots of rules that the children have to learn? Are gates used that are off-putting to children who are unfamiliar with the space because they create barriers? Does the space create opportunities for connectedness? Are the colours relaxing or not?

Of course you cannot expect everything from a space. The way in which the staff use materials in the space also affects the children and the atmosphere.

> 'Sarah and I tidy up with the kids. We encourage the children to throw Duplo into the box. Most of the children help.
> Then Sarah brings out the kitchen. Together with the children, she moves it to the centre of the room – a smart move! It means that the kitchen really comes into its own and the children don't push and shove. Sarah tries to involve all the children in playing in the kitchen. She puts aprons on them and cooks with them. The children enjoy her attention.' (*PACE worker, Flanders, 2018*)

In the example with the staff schedule changes and the groups that merge, the nursery could ensure that all children are familiar with both spaces. This would be done by occasionally 'going exploring' in the other space. Children who go home earlier can also participate in these explorations. It's another way of creating connectedness.

4. The structure of the day

Most childcare settings work with a clearly structured day. This can also be done at a nursery with occasional and flexible places. The structure may be adhered to less strictly because the group changes more often and there are more unexpected events, but it will still offer predictability and calm for children and nursery staff. If there is a more permanent group of children, they know what happens when and are familiar with the repertoire of activities.[7] They can lead and support the others. In this way, the daily structure offers opportunities for connectedness.

A new child who spontaneously goes exploring challenges the permanent group to rediscover a spot.

When the day is less predictable, this is reflected in children's experiences: they show lower well-being, less involvement and less initiative. This is the case everywhere, but staff in an occasional care setting need to be more alert and observant.

> 'There's free play in the morning. It's up to the children to choose what to play with, but they take little or no initiative in taking things out of the open cupboard. A basket of blocks is put out, but the children are reluctant to start playing with them. They do get involved in playing on the swing and slide, though.'
> (*PACE worker, Flanders, 2018*)

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

How do you ensure that you are offering continuity and predictability in a number of visible, organisational elements of your operation? Make an overview of the elements that remain stable in the space, the staffing, the group composition and the structure of the day. The following questions may help:

- Is it clear to the team that these elements provide stability? Why / why not?
- How can you demonstrate this stability to children and parents?
- Which elements do you need to emphasise more?
- How can you use this stability to reassure a child whose well-being is low?
- What do you do if one of the stable elements changes, for example if a staff member is away for a while and has to be replaced?

STABILITY AS A FEELING IN OCCASIONAL AND FLEXIBLE CARE

Stability is not just seen in structures, as we noted in the first part of this book. It can also be experienced and conveyed as a feeling, including in the day-to-day functioning of the nursery. Staff can ensure this happens in two ways. First, they can organise the activities in such a way that children experience stability. Second, they can create stability through their interaction with the children.

1. Activities

If activities such as eating or caring take a predictable course, this has a calming effect on the group of children. The essence here is familiar: nursery staff should clearly announce an activity and say what will happen, make enough time to shape the activity and finish it off clearly.[17] This may seem simple, but in a group with unpredictable occupancy and very young children, achieving it may be challenging at times.

A well-thought-out way of working and daily structure may help. Moments of transition in particular can seem unpredictable to children and create anxiety. For example, during the PACE project, an employee observed the reception process:

> 'The children's level of well-being is low during the reception. This has to do with structure, organisation and communication with the parents.
> The nursery staff are mainly concerned with the practical aspects of the reception process, such as unloading backpacks, fixing on name labels and doing the register. Little attention is paid to the children. They are not offered materials straightaway, comforted or personally welcomed. Every member of staff takes on a practical task and wants to help. They feel as though just sitting on the mat with the kids is like doing nothing. The parents are tense. Every day there's a possibility that there won't be a place for their child at the nursery. That uncertainty causes them stress and the children pick up on this.' (*PACE worker, Flanders, 2018*)

The nursery decided to structure the reception process better. It defined its target group more precisely and ensured that parents were no longer left uncertain whether they would get a place or not. This made the atmosphere during reception calmer. The team also shared out the tasks: welcoming the children and staying with them became a defined task for the workers. Children now felt welcomed and noticed. The member of staff who is with the children tells them what to expect and do.

2. Interacting with the children

The way in which staff interact with children can give them stability. Various aspects of this interaction contribute to this.

The first element is offering recognition, welcoming a child, showing that you know him or her and helping him or her to find a place in the group. Here, too, the essential point is obvious: calling the child by his or her name. However, this can be quite a task at a completely occasional nursery:

> 'What I really appreciate about our early years practitioners is that they immediately know the name of every child, even those who come very sporadically. Many families who are new to Flanders come to our nursery. They come from all over the world and the names of their children can sound very strange to us. Yet the staff remember them all.' (*Nursery manager, Turnhout, 2017*)

In addition, individual interactions with children create a sense of recognition. Even in a busy daily schedule, there are opportunities to talk to children individually: while changing nappies, during meals, at bedtime.[17] Staff will need to strike a balance here between the individual children and the group.

As well as recognition, children need emotional support. All childcare frameworks therefore stress the importance of a sensitive and responsive attitude. Nurseries expect their staff to watch children carefully, and notice, acknowledge and accept, interpret and respond to the signals they give. They also expect them to adjust their approach constantly, so that children will feel reassured even if the staff do not yet know them well and are therefore less able to predict their behaviour.[17]

> 'Rayan cries whenever Youssra leaves the room. Debby has noticed this and tries to do something fun with Rayan when Youssra leaves the room.'
> (*PACE worker, Mechelen, 2018*)

3. Conditions for success

Making activities predictable and adopting a sensitive and responsive attitude may seem straightforward, but in a group of children where the unexpected often happens, it can be very demanding for nursery staff. This is why they need time and space and the opportunity to build a shared repertoire[2.9] of language and actions about well-being and involvement. This can be done, for example, by regularly making time for joint reflection, preferably in response to something specific that has happened with a particular child. Such reflection sessions also provide staff with opportunities to think about alternatives when children are struggling or lacking in involvement. Sometimes they can lead to the reorganisation of an approach or a process, such as the reception process in the example above.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

How do you ensure continuity and predictability through your interactions with children?

- Work out a way to remember the children's names quickly.
- Think together about the moments when the children show a low level of well-being. Is there a staff member available at these moments who can make time to support them emotionally? Is it possible to include emotional support in the division of labour?
- Organise a joint reflection process focusing on the children's well-being. Learn from this to improve the emotional support that is provided.

OFFERING DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN OCCASIONAL AND FLEXIBLE CARE

The frameworks of well-being and involvement have been found to be important in offering children and their parents stability in occasional and flexible care. Of course, this lies at the heart of childcare: ensuring that children and parents feel comfortable and at ease. But childcare aims to achieve more than that: it seeks to ensure that children thrive and have development opportunities.[18,19] This is far from straightforward. A large-scale study of the quality of childcare in Flanders showed that most settings score well on well-being and emotional support from the staff, but less well on educational support and language stimulation.[1]

If regular childcare has difficulties in providing educational support, it will certainly be even harder to do so in occasional and flexible care. For example, the group composition often changes in this type of care, and children attend at atypical hours, which means that they are tired or hungry and there is less opportunity for learning something new. So is the idea of offering development opportunities in this type of care over-ambitious?

Actually, the PACE project showed that occasional and flexible reception settings can offer opportunities for development – again, by identifying the essence and looking out for opportunities that come along. In fact, this is no different from the situation for regular nurseries.

1. Believing that it is possible

Early years practitioners are trained to offer development opportunities, but that training is based on regular childcare. The possibilities for childcare that is organised differently are less obvious. The best starting point, therefore, is the conviction that it is possible. And that conviction can be gained by simply seeing that a child feels happy in occasional care.

> 'Some staff were sceptical and thought that the children would find it hard staying longer and their routines changing, but they now have seen how this has had a positive impact on the child and his development. The new little one had some settling-ins and has really enjoyed coming to nursery so again the staff can see the benefit of this type of childcare.' (*Nursery manager, Gravesham, 2020*)

2. Starting with involvement

In addition to well-being, involvement is an important prerequisite for learning. When children engage in an activity, they concentrate and process new information, so it is important for nursery workers to observe children and think about how to stimulate their involvement.

> 'The staff regularly switch activities to stimulate involvement. They participate actively, but also give the children the opportunity to discover. When the involvement tails off, they respond to this, for example by handing over a doll and calling the child by name. They turn everyday things into an activity. You have the sense that an activity doesn't have to be just the usual painting session.'
> (*PACE worker, Mechelen, 2019*)

The observer describes here how the staff turn everyday things into an activity and invite children to get involved, and of course this is also possible in an occasional and flexible care setting. Daily activities, for example, are a great opportunity to stimulate language development. This can be done by naming actions and asking children questions.

3. The environment as a learning opportunity

For many children, the nursery is their first introduction to life outside the family. All the information they are presented with there is new. There is a lot that can be learnt about household activities, about toys, and about other children in the group, and this environment also offers opportunities for language stimulation. To really seize these opportunities, children need targeted feedback that encourages them to go a step further or discover something new.

> 'Agnes watched some extracts from the video observations. It was noticeable that one girl was showing little involvement. The staff mainly kept an eye on her from a distance and provided general support: "Ooh, you're doing well, ooh, that's brilliant ..." During the video coaching, Agnes discussed these clips and her observation with the staff.' (*PACE worker, Mechelen, 2018*)

3.4 How can occasional and flexible care be organised to ensure that parents feel comfortable?

In the first part of this book, we described the obstacles that many vulnerable parents face when looking for childcare. The prototypes for occasional and flexible care try to remove some of these obstacles so that vulnerable parents can find their way there more easily. That does not mean that everything will go smoothly from then on. Even when parents are already using childcare, they can run into obstacles, arising from the nursery's day-to-day functioning or system, or from what is expected of them by the nursery. For a nursery, it is important not just to offer places, but to ensure that all parents feel comfortable. For that, 'You need to love the parents too,' as a nursery manager in Kent put it.

Parents who use occasional and flexible childcare live in a great variety of circumstances. Some parents have looked after the children at home for years and then have to look for a paid job, others have an unusual work pattern that makes it difficult to find childcare, and still others would rather look after their children themselves but cannot because of circumstances. It's not easy to put such a diverse group of parents at ease at the nursery. In addition, the fact that these parents need occasional or flexible care means that they come into the nursery less often or at less predictable times. In what follows, we describe how PACE project partners developed an approach to ensure that parents feel comfortable.

FEELING COMFORTABLE AS A FORM OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Discussions about interacting with parents in childcare bring up ideas about parental involvement. This is an important concept in childcare, which appears in legislation, in pedagogical frameworks and practices, and in research. The basic idea is that if parents feel involved in childcare, this is good for the well-being and development of their children at nursery and beyond. Parental involvement is therefore an aspect of the pedagogical quality of childcare.[19,20]
Parental involvement starts from a cooperation model: parents can help staff to look after their child, and conversely, staff can help the parents.[21,22] This cooperation model places considerable expectations on parents and staff. Parents are expected to show an interest in their child's day, to share information about the child, to make time for activities at the nursery, and to monitor their child's development at home. For their part, staff are supposed to build a cooperative relationship with a diverse group of parents, welcome parents into the nursery group and ensure that they feel comfortable. In the daily hustle and bustle these are not easy tasks.[23] Furthermore, some expectations are implicit, which can lead to misunderstandings, confusion and a lack of confidence.[20]
By emphasising cooperation, we can easily lose sight of the power imbalance between parents and professionals. What we mean by this is not that early years practitioners want 'power', but that they are professionals and parents are not. The resulting imbalance is more likely to play a role with vulnerable families or families with a migrant background,[24] who have different experiences of power structures. Both high expectations and the power imbalance can complicate parental involvement. A thoughtful approach can make the concept easier for everyone involved.

A WHOLE FAMILY APPROACH

Most models and methodologies of parental involvement focus on the child: cooperation between parents and staff is supposed to promote the child's well-being and development. In fact there is a hidden obstacle in this emphasis. Because if a parent feels too tired to take part in an activity at the nursery, is she failing her child? And how does a parent fit the nursery's expectations into the caringscape she finds herself in? The PACE project therefore shifted the emphasis from the child to the family: it opted for a whole family approach.

> 'Whole family approaches provide a framework for looking at problems and strengths and creating more sustainable solutions – solutions that recognize that what is good for the child is good for the family and vice versa. Moreover, what is good for the family is good for society. They acknowledge that women and children's rights are human rights. Giving children a strong start in life and creating stability for the family require a focus on the whole, and in particular, on children's well-being and on parents (mothers, fathers, grandparents, and other caregivers) as agents of change.'[25]

Based on this whole family approach, the PACE project developed a number of principles for parental involvement that childcare settings then translated into concrete commitments, core values and attitudes.

FOUR PACE PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

- **Childcare is a service that supports families, not just children.**
- **We recognise that looking after their children is just one of the roles parents have in their lives.**
- **We recognise that families are the first educators of their children and should be supported in this.**
- **Childcare settings should proactively build meaningful relationships with all families.**

It can be a relief for parents not to be seen just as parents. Childcare contributes to this, because it gives parents time, and that makes their lives easier.

> 'Your children will grow up. Important to have contacts, to be an adult again. It's important to feel that you're not dead after raising a child. When you start to use your brain (in the course of PACE), you kinda want more. It gives confidence. (*Emma, Gravesham, 2020*)

3.5 A whole family approach in four principles

It is not easy for childcare settings to convert the PACE principles into daily practice. Ultimately, the child is the reason for the collaboration, and they see the children for so much longer and so much more intensively than their parents, including in occasional or flexible care. Furthermore, other parts of the childcare system focus primarily on the children: from training courses for early years practitioners via safety guidelines to methodologies for parental involvement. On the basis of testimonials from parents, we will examine what each principle might mean in practice for an occasional and flexible setting.

CHILDCARE IS A SERVICE THAT SUPPORTS FAMILIES, NOT JUST CHILDREN

This principle may sound obvious, but this is not always the case in practice. If the service supports the whole family, it would make sense for parents to experience every aspect of it and to see what their children do at a time that is convenient for them. It is awkward for parents with irregular working hours if they are only welcome in the main nursery room at certain times, and parents who only bring their

child to the nursery occasionally would rather not wait for a family day to actively experience what goes on at the nursery.

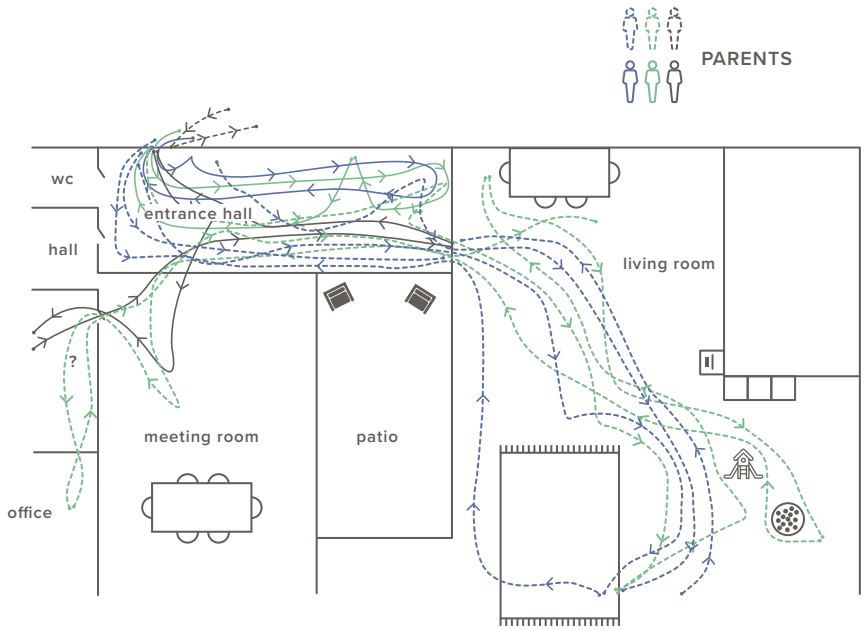
> 'We can only go into the reception area where they change shoes. It's to do with health and safety and safeguarding which makes it difficult to act naturally.' (*Sandra, Brighton & Hove, 2020*)

Parents understand when a nursery asks them not to go everywhere all the time. They see that the group of children becomes restless, and some parents also think it is better from the safety point of view. However, parents appreciate the moments when they are welcome in the daily life of the nursery:

> 'You have the feeling that you're barred from going any further at the door. When they sit down to eat some fruit in the afternoon, you can go in, though. It's nice. It's parental participation, you get a voice, you feel familiar in the space, you're allowed to be there.' (*Sharon, Turnhout, 2020*)

> 'It was personal and they knew our family and we walked in freely and felt comfortable.' (*Verity, Brighton & Hove, 2020*)

Even when parents are welcome, they can still experience barriers in the nursery space. A door can give rise to the idea that they are not allowed to go any further, even if it's there to keep the heat in. A table can block parents' way. Not everyone is deterred by such elements. It is worth observing where parents go one morning and one evening, and mapping out their routes on a plan of the nursery. This gives you a clear view of possible obstacles.



Plan of routes taken by parents at 38 Volt

WE RECOGNISE THAT LOOKING AFTER THEIR CHILDREN IS JUST ONE OF THE ROLES PARENTS HAVE IN THEIR LIVES.

Early years practitioners see only one of the many tasks in parents' caringscape: looking after the child who goes to nursery. Other responsibilities are not visible, but that does not mean that they do not occupy parents. Nursery staff who care for a child for many hours like to share that care with the parent, but on a busy day it can be too much of a burden for a parent. At a group level too, a childcare setting will want to further encourage the bond between children through an activity at which the parents are present. Simply asking a parent to participate may disrupt the routes that he or she had mapped out through the caringscape. In the first place, recognising parents' multiple roles therefore means taking those roles into account in requests and in the provision of activities for parents. Nursery staff and managers should therefore always ask themselves the question: what does this request mean for the other roles that parents have?
Second, the recognition of parents' roles must also be present in nursery workers' basic attitude. That attitude should be free from judgement, even if the parents' behaviour or approach surprises them. The basic assumption in such circumstances should be that parents have good reason for doing what they do.

> 'One mum usually comes to get her child just before closing time. Some of the staff find that challenging, especially because they know that this mum "only" works part-time. In the support sessions we explored the possible (good) reasons why this mum waits until just before closing time. What other demands are there on her time? We also asked whether the childcare workers really need to know why she comes to pick up her child just before closing time. After all, there's no rule against it.' (*PACE worker, Mechelen, 2019*)

Ideologies of parenthood often play a role in connection with judgements that are made, as was clear during the PACE project. Parenthood comes first, and parents' other roles, according to these views, should be less central in the caringscape. This is not seen the same way by every person or in every region.

> The French partners in the PACE project regularly spoke about 'le soin de soi'– looking after yourself in both a mental and a physical sense. They regarded it as completely normal for parents to arrange childcare in order to go to the hairdresser.

When childcare workers take parents' roles into account, parents will feel more recognised as a person, and sense an interest in their specific situation. To convey this feeling may seem easy, but it is not. A mother talks about the differences between two nurseries.

> 'Outstanding nursery but they were distant and then I changed with my third child to one that is friendlier. Some don't care about parents' lives and don't understand at all even if they are outstanding quality for the children.' (*Wilma, Brighton & Hove, 2020*)

WE RECOGNISE THAT FAMILIES ARE THE FIRST EDUCATORS OF THEIR CHILDREN AND SHOULD BE SUPPORTED IN THIS

Childcare workers spend a lot of time with children and play an important role in their upbringing. They get to know the children well. Because children become part of a group at nursery, key persons see aspects of each child that the parents cannot experience in the family setting. From there, it is a small step to giving advice on parenting. However well-intended that advice may be, it is not always welcome to a parent who has rushed to the nursery after a stressful day at work.

> 'If she is being difficult, I would like them to cuddle my child instead of giving advice when you don't ask for it. I also know it is difficult.'
> (*Emily, Gravesham, 2020*)

Advice is meant to be supportive, and early years practitioners recognise that parents should be given support, but they lose sight of the power imbalance between them and the parents. After all, they are childcare professionals. It is up to the nursery to provide support in other ways: by helping parents to find routes through the caringscape, by sharing a photo of the child, by giving guidance on the child's progression to school or another nursery.

CHILDCARE SETTINGS SHOULD PROACTIVELY BUILD MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITH ALL FAMILIES

Some families seek contact more quickly and more often than others. This is not a problem in itself: not every family has the same needs for contact. However, it should not be the case that a family does not feel supported because the parents only go to the nursery by closing time. The nursery can take a proactive approach here.

A first aspect of this is that nurseries should provide clarity from the start about the flexibility they can and cannot offer. If they explain the perspective of the employees, who have a caringscape of their own to negotiate, they will meet with understanding from parents.

The second aspect is respecting the speed at which families want to go. A family that has initiated little contact so far may need time to do so. If staff assume that the family simply wants to keep its distance, they will stop trying to get to know them better. Yet the family will only feel supported if the nursery repeatedly reaches out.

A CHECKLIST

A whole family approach cannot be established overnight. There is a need for a clear vision, a manager who supports that vision and employees who are given the chance to really take the approach on board and develop a shared repertoire of practices.

As an aid to building up this shared practice, we have developed a checklist that describes the experiences that the nursery seeks to offer families. Staff can check whether every parent using the nursery would be able to agree with the statements on the checklist. They can discuss the answers with each other and present the statements to parents.

CHECKLIST OF THE FOUR PACE PRINCIPLES

- Childcare allows me to do other things in my life that I also find important.
- I can clearly understand the nursery's explanation of how it works. I know how my child is looked after and what the nursery expects from me.
- If something unexpected happens at work or with my other children, I can rely on the nursery to take care of my child.
- I am able to find out quickly whether my child can go to the nursery if my schedule changes.
- The staff listen to me when I have a concern about my child.
- I feel supported by the staff on difficult days.
- When my child has a difficult day, the staff contact me to figure out what to do.
- The staff do not judge me.
- The staff treat me as a person, not just as a parent.
- The staff always greet me and my child.
- If there's something I do not understand, the staff will explain it to me again.

3.6 Conclusion

It's not easy to offer occasional and flexible care that makes children and parents feel comfortable. It requires organisational changes and a lot of effort from all staff members. A team must regularly question its approach and consider whether every part of it is really necessary. This is not a neutral question to which there is one objective answer, because families' experiences differ.

Attention and time are the keys: paying attention to the whole family and taking the time to think, exchange, discuss and develop common practices. And for many teams, simply having time is not enough: guidance is needed during discussions and the development of new practices.

4.
WITH THANKS TO THE STAFF

It has become clear in the previous chapters that staff are the key to making a success of occasional and flexible childcare. Without their dedication, no childcare setting can do a good job, but in occasional and flexible care ways of thinking, feeling and doing also need to be significantly adjusted. In fact, staff in such settings need to be constantly swimming against the current. All aspects of the childcare system are designed with predictable, regular care in mind: initial and continuing training for early years practitioners, governments' quality standards, pedagogical frameworks, ideas about parenthood, and the practical organisation of childcare initiatives. Staff need solid support to swim against this current. We describe what such support could be like in the form of four recommendations. As those recommendations cannot be detached from the childcare system, we will first outline a number of core elements of the current against which childcare workers have to swim.

4.1 The 'current' of the childcare system

Like any sector, childcare has a system. It consists of four mutually reinforcing levels. Employees have their individual professionalism (1), which goes together with that of the team and the organisation in which they work (2). Cooperation with other organisations (3) reinforces the system, as does childcare policy (4). At present, two of these levels – policy and other organisations – are entirely geared to predictable childcare needs and a predictable group of children. This is evident from all kinds of aspects of the system, including education and qualification requirements, continuing training, quality frameworks, the pedagogical and practical organisation. Staff at occasional and flexible care settings are therefore confronted with a practice that differs from the frameworks they learned to use during their training, internship and work experience.

EDUCATION AND QUALIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

In Flanders, the Netherlands, France and England there are specific educational programmes for early years practitioners. These differ from country to country. In the four countries, there are professionals with a diploma of secondary education in childcare settings for children under the age of three years, in some cases supplemented with an extra year of specialised training. Staff in a management or coaching position usually have a bachelor's degree.[1] Both secondary education and bachelor's programmes focus on regular childcare – not surprisingly, as it is the most commonly used type of care. Most programmes take account of vulnerable families; inclusiveness and fairness are standard topics, but in a context of regular care with predictable demand.[2]

Specific training for childcare workers is not compulsory everywhere, however, and qualification requirements differ in the different countries. The requirements are usually less strict for the care of children under the age of three.[2] In Flanders, for example, from 2020 childcare workers will not need to obtain a diploma, but will be able to present professional qualifications instead. It is hoped that the many vacancies in childcare can be filled in this way. The requirements for professional qualifications are under development; it is still unclear whether flexible childcare will play a role, although it seems unlikely. These developments are in stark contrast to the recurring calls for more highly qualified childcare workers.[3,4,5] Those making such calls point to the high expectations society, politics and science have of childcare. Good education is an essential building block to achieving this.[5,6]

LIFELONG LEARNING

A diploma or education does not tell the whole story, though. Employees build up additional knowledge and expertise during their careers: in the workplace and in continuing training or other forms of lifelong learning. Continuing training and lifelong learning play an important role in the recommendations for the quality framework for early childhood education and care on which the European Commission is working.[1] The Commission sees participation in professional development initiatives as a prerequisite for continuing to work in the sector for all employees, including the low-skilled. Continuing training is compulsory in Flanders and England, but the government does not say how often it should take place. In France, continuing training is compulsory only for those working with children over the age of three. For those working with younger children, continuing training is a professional obligation, but there is no monitoring system. In the Netherlands there are no rules on continuing training.[3] There are few rules on how long such training should last, and even fewer on its content. The only area which is regulated is safeguarding training, which must be organised regularly. Childcare organisations are also free to choose the subjects in which their staff will receive further training. It is clear from the range of courses on offer that flexibility is scarcely covered, as demand is less here than that for other subjects.

When there is little continuing training in the area of flexible care, childcare initiatives that want to work more flexibly have to look for other ways to support their staff. What is crucial here is the possibility to make time available in which staff can reflect together, discuss an approach or analyse a case. However, such time is rarely available, as childcare organisations do not have the financial margin in any of the PACE countries to pay staff for time not spent with children. Yet time spent on joint reflection is good for all those involved in childcare: staff, children and their families.[7]

The multi-accueil in Saint-Martin-Boulogne organises a training day for all employees twice a year. This always happens on a Saturday, so that the setting doesn't have to close. In addition, every childcare worker attends a one-day life-saving course twice a year. Staff always attend this training in pairs, so that their colleagues can cover for them at the setting.

QUALITY REQUIREMENTS

As indicated in Part Two, Flanders, England and France have a mandatory pedagogical quality framework with which all childcare initiatives must comply. In the Netherlands there is a pedagogical framework, but it is not mandatory. These frameworks do not hinder flexible childcare, but that does not mean that they facilitate it. Given that none of the four frameworks mention flexible or occasional care, creativity is required to comply with them in these types of care: many practices have been developed in and for organisations that offer predictable care.

Early years practicioners in the at-home childcare system in Brighton & Hove, who provide childcare in the family home, do not have to follow the curriculum of the early years foundation stage. They are therefore free to adapt their pedagogical approach to the family context and to the times when they are with the children. On the other hand, they have to make many decisions about their approach on their own, without being able to consult with colleagues.

PEDAGOGICAL VISIONS

Any childcare professional with some experience will be familiar with pedagogical practices that promote children's well-being and involvement. Many of these practices were developed to ensure that many different families feel at home at the nursery. An example of this is a family wall with photos of the families of all the children. Children can find comfort at difficult moments by looking at their family photo. At an occasional care setting, where children may only come once or a few times, it may seem like a non-starter to ask parents to bring in a family photo, yet precisely in this setting, a photo of the family could be helpful when a child is sad. Some nurseries find a way round the problem by photographing the family or one of the parents on the spot and making a colour print. But this practice has its limitations too: if a family is not yet fluent in the language, it is hard to explain why you are taking a photo. Furthermore, not everyone likes being photographed, and photos sometimes arouse suspicion in those who have had bad experiences with official bodies.

There are numerous pedagogical practices. They represent elements of an overarching vision that focuses on children's well-being, on continuity and on familiarity; for early years practitioners, they offer a basis for giving children emotional support and for the practical organisation of the work. In an occasional and flexible setting, these practices are harder to deploy, and will need to be adapted to the context. Sometimes even elementary points require more effort, such as knowing the names of all the children in the group.

The staff at Het Lindeke nursery in Turnhout believe it is important to learn the name of each child immediately, as it is reassuring. In the first three months of 2020, they looked after 92 children. The families at Het Lindeke come from many different backgrounds, and many of the names were initially unfamiliar to the employees. Learning the names is therefore more of an effort for a childcare worker at Het Lindeke than for someone working in a nursery that only offers permanent places.

PRACTICAL ORGANISATION

The fact that the practical arrangements in many childcare settings are mainly designed with a group of children with a fixed care plan in mind can be seen in many small things: a personal tray to store care items for each child, a system for recording the disposable nappies used for each child, meals that must be ordered from a caterer for the whole week. It takes a lot of energy to come up with an alternative approach for each element, especially when people have been organising their work like this for years.

At Het Lindeke nursery, staff used to empty the children's backpacks, but this took a lot of time. They therefore changed the routine: parents now put their child's belongings in a tray. Each tray contains an index card with photos of what the parents should leave in it: there is one card for a whole day of care and one for half a day. The parents attach their child's name card to the tray. The use of a colour system means that the staff can see at a glance which children do and don't have food.

The actual organisation of the work is a bigger stumbling block. In the PACE countries, childcare workers have very little time at work during which they are not looking after children, so they have little room to think about their approach or to coordinate it with colleagues.

During the PACE project, a pedagogical coach worked intensively with the teams of Het Lindeke in Turnhout and 38 Volt in Mechelen. The aim was to jointly develop a form of professionalism adapted to the specific context of occasional and flexible care. The outcome informed the four recommendations.

4.2 Recommendation 1: Start with why

During the PACE project, managers repeatedly stated that if it is not clear why you are organising occasional and flexible childcare, you should not attempt to do so. The first recommendation is therefore Simon Sinek's mantra: start with why.[8] Childcare workers who can see sufficient reasons to offer more flexibility will be motivated to overcome practical difficulties.

'Personally I can manage very well with frequent changes, and I think it's very important for everyone to have a chance to do what's right for their family and their child. This way of working gives parents the opportunity to look for work, to go on a training course or to relax. And for the children themselves, it's also very good for social development. They learn to deal with different situations.'
(*PACE online survey, 2020*)[9]

THREE REASONS FOR STARTING

Because the childcare system is oriented towards predictability and continuity, both pedagogically and organisationally, it is not easy to see and articulate reasons for greater flexibility. Three clear reasons emerged during the PACE project. The first reason is quite simply the difference that this form of childcare can make to the lives of families and children.

'Our attitude. We now look at the family as a whole. We have also brought about an improvement in their lives. They may now be able to find a job because they've been able to go to the job interview, thanks to our support.'
(*Nursery manager, Gravesham, 2020*)

Second, early years practitioners who have had experience of occasional and flexible care can see benefits for the children, even if they are concerned about the possible drawbacks. For example, children who come on an occasional basis have the opportunity to get to know a nursery, can feel relaxed in a predictable environment and have development and growth opportunities through coming into contact with the world outside the family and with other children their age. There are advantages for children who come regularly too: they gain new experiences and benefit from the childcare workers' efforts to put all children at ease. The fact that all children benefit from the approach is an important consideration for most childcare professionals: it became clear during the PACE project that they attach great importance to fairness of treatment.
A third reason lies in the benefits for nursery staff. They find job satisfaction in the variety that flexible care entails, they enjoy the contact with different parents, and they see this type of care as an opportunity to learn and achieve greater expertise – a significant point in a sector with few job mobility opportunities. Finally, childcare workers are proud to be able to contribute to the lives of families and to society.

'Our way of working has helped many people to take opportunities that they don't often get in terms of work, training and confidence in the nursery and staff.'
(*PACE online survey, 2020*)

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

The three reasons described above will still seem rather abstract to anyone who has not experienced the benefits. To allow the 'why' to sink in, you can make the experience tangible in two ways.

- Seeing that it is possible. It makes a big difference when early years practitioners are given the opportunity to see concrete examples with their own eyes. Managers from Gravesham visited settings in Flanders that operate on a flexible and occasional basis. They saw that there was no chaos, that children showed a high level of well-being and involvement and that the staff were enthusiastic. The managers were reassured: flexibility and good quality childcare can be combined.
- Through the eyes of families. Families' experiences may convince childcare workers. When they hear how little changes can mean a world of difference to families, they look at childcare differently. Early years practitioners from a number of PACE experiments report that they have gone through a 'mind shift'. They now look at things from the perspective of the family, not just the children.

'We have learned that there may be much more going on within a family. That they may be carrying a burden, which we can help to take off their shoulders by offering them occasional care for their child.' (*PACE online survey, 2020*)[9]

THE 'HOW' AND THE 'WHAT' FOLLOW ON FROM THE 'WHY'

Without the 'why' you cannot get started. The same is true of the 'how' and 'what', in fact. In Part Two, we discussed the concerns that nursery staff have about occasional childcare: both pedagogical concerns relating to the 'why' and practical objections. Those concerns are legitimate. It is clear from the system outline at the beginning of this chapter where these concerns originate from. In the initial

and continuing training provision for the sector, hardly any attention is paid to occasional and flexible childcare. This is why attention needs to be given to it in the workplace, as this is where teams develop their pedagogical practices, in terms of both content and process.

4.3 Recommendation 2: Make flexibility your strength

While operating on an occasional and flexible basis affects many aspects of childcare, there are many aspects of regular care that remain applicable. Together with a team, you can therefore focus initially on the aspects that define the characteristics of flexibility. The most important of these characteristics are the limits of flexibility, interaction with children and interaction with families.

DEVELOPING A FLEXIBLE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

Every pedagogical practice is flexible by definition. One child is not the same as another, and every child reacts in its own way to different activities and to group dynamics. Childcare workers are constantly showing flexibility, adapting what they do and weighing the needs of a child or member of staff against the needs of the group or of the practical functioning of the nursery. Is Yacine hungry when the group will not be eating for another hour? The staff will find a solution. Are Adeh and Veronica showing no interest in the tray of leaves that Björn has put out? He'll look for another challenge for them: maybe the leaves will make a noise?

However, occasional and flexible care requires more flexibility. For example, some children will only come to the nursery for a short period, or very sporadically. You and a team should therefore think about practices and procedures such as settling in, comforting and the structure of the day. Most of these themes are covered in the chapter on children and families. In what follows, we focus on another essential part of pedagogical practice: the provision of play activities.

A common pedagogical practice relating to play activities is working with a theme. Early years practitioners observe children and then respond to their interests by exploring a theme that they find engaging at that time. If several toddlers are busy with stones and the babies are watching with great interest, practitioners can build on this. Can you arrange the stones from smallest to largest? Can you stack them? Can you paint them? What stones can you find outside? The staff can gradually expand the children's experiential horizons. Such a theme can easily keep a group happy for a few weeks. But what if the group's composition is unpredictable, and staff have no way of knowing beforehand the age of the children who will be there? The challenge is not impossible, but it does differ from the situation that many childcare workers are used to. They will need to look for other forms of continuity and stability in the play activity.[10,11,12]

During the coaching in the PACE project, observation of the children was found to be essential in flexible settings. What are their interests? Which part of the room attracts their attention? Which toys do they pick up spontaneously? Which other materials do they want to see or touch: cushions, care equipment? A second finding was that the environment requires extra attention. There will often be new children who have to find their way around. The room must therefore be both inviting and clearly laid out. The materials must be carefully chosen. Quantities are important: too much colour in a new environment can be overpowering, as can too many toys.

When nursery staff see that the children's well-being is established, they can expand their horizons by suggesting an activity. This can still be done by working with a theme, but the team must bear in mind that the activity will need to be constantly adjusted and tweaked to take account of the well-being and involvement of all children, even if they come to the nursery sporadically. Observation therefore remains important. Other ways to expand the children's range of experience: subtly stimulating the children to play or gradually bringing out new materials or equipment. In this way, a rich and varied range of activities can be provided in an occasional setting that the staff are happy with.

> 'The range of play activities is rich and varied. (...) The team made a boat out of boxes. The blankets made the boat a cosy place to curl up in. There are real pots and pans in the kitchen. Natural materials are provided as extras: conkers, nuts and so on. Anna tips the conkers from one jar to another. Wendy pretends she's cooking and eating a meal.'
> 'Nursery worker Christina discusses the developmental phase of two children with a mum. Together they watch the two children playing. The mum spontaneously starts talking about how her daughter plays at home.'
> (*PACE worker, Mechelen, 2018*)

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

Work out together with the team members how they can use their familiar approach for occasional and flexible care.

- When can staff make time to observe children? Make observing one of the set tasks.
- Regularly look at the space and the materials together, through the eyes of a child who is new to the nursery. Will that child be curious or overwhelmed?
- Make time to regularly discuss observations of children.
- Think about activities that expand the horizon of children's experience without being too overwhelming for new children.
- Pay particular attention to new children during theme-based activities.

A PRACTICE THAT LOOKS AT FAMILIES

Diversity in childcare is not new. Childcare is a pioneering sector that comes into contact day after day with families with diverse backgrounds, living conditions, compositions and parenting ideals.[13,14,15,16] Children come into their own when the nursery is able to adapt its interactions with children and their families to this diversity,[19] and great steps have already been taken to ensure that this happens.
In occasional and flexible care, diversity plays an even greater role: because it is many families' first contact with childcare, because more families use the nursery, and above all because there is less time for coordination with each family.
The limited time available to get to know families makes childcare workers' basic attitude more important. They simply do not have time to adjust any biases or prejudices they may have, so a childcare team needs a judgement-free culture. Establishing and maintaining this is difficult, because early years practitioners face situations that feel strange on a daily basis.

> 'Asra has too much food with her. She eats well, but the mum really gives her too much and expects it to be eaten up. The team members have agreed not to force Asra to eat it all up.' (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2019*)

> In addition, there is a great temptation to measure parents' behaviour against an implicit ideal of parenting that a lot of the media and publications about parenting disseminate: that of the involved parent or the parent who seeks help when necessary.[17]

> 'Kayode has been diagnosed with autism. His mum, Joviale, considers autism a terrible disease. Joviale avoids discussing Kayode. The nursery staff are having a hard time with this and feel that Kayode needs more support from his parents and from professionals.' (*PACE worker, Mechelen, 2019*)

To avoid judgements in such complex situations, it is best for a team to build a culture in which there is room for uneasiness and uncertainty. There is no harm in letting each other know that you have difficulty getting through to the mother even though you want to support her. A pedagogical coach or manager can encourage a culture of this kind by making time for doubts, by formulating them him- or herself and by asking lots of questions. He or she can then assess all considerations against the nursery's vision. Once again, observation is an important skill. It challenges the staff to reflect on what they see and to distinguish between observation and interpretation.
Alongside an open basic attitude and room for uncertainty, open communication forms the basis for a practice that is supportive towards families. The nursery staff who saw how much food Asra was being given had a conversation about nutrition with Asra's mother.
Open communication will only succeed if the staff are not judgemental about the subject being discussed or about the family. Parents quickly sense it if they are, and will then drop out, and this creates a chain reaction. When parents drop out because they feel judged, this undermines staff members' confidence. That lack of confidence can lead to even more judgements or to a reluctance to act.

> 'Mieke recounts how some parents came along who were not yet registered. She gave them a tour and then brought them to the office for the administrative intake. She had felt uncomfortable during the tour: it was difficult because of the language and there had been little response. The team thinks it's great that Mieke took the time to take people around and to show them in detail how the nursery works.' (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2019*)

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

Explore with your team how you want to come across in your interaction with parents.

- Recall a number of things parents have done that have surprised team members. Think about why those actions surprised you. Did you have different expectations? Would you approach it differently?
- As an exercise, list some of the qualities of good parents. Make them as concrete as possible, with an example for each quality. Did you formulate similar qualities or different ones? Now consider whether parents who do not have these qualities are necessarily bad parents.
- Think together of a parent who lacks the qualities that indicate good parenting. How would you deal with that parent? Would the parent sense that you did not think he or she was a good parent? How would the parent notice this?

A PRACTICE THAT LOOKS AT ALL AREAS OF PARENTS' AND FAMILIES' LIVES

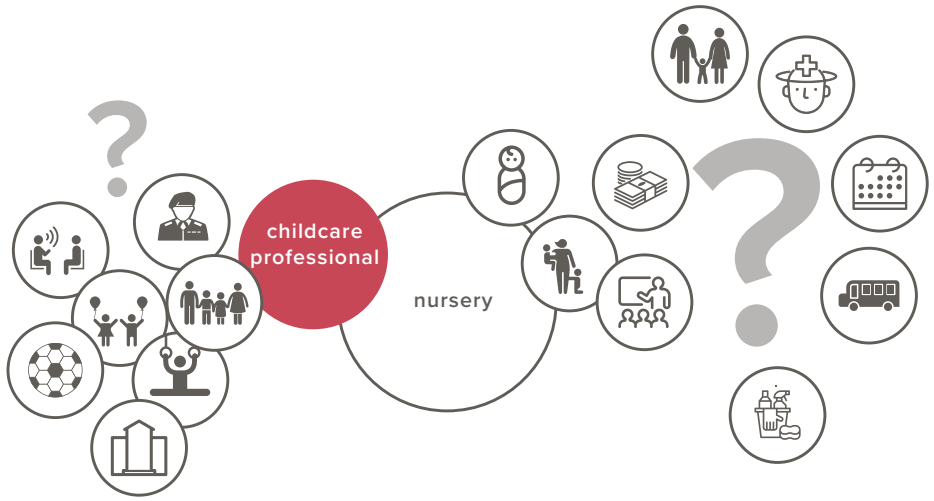
At nursery, the staff mainly see parents in one role, that of parent. Even when they start from a whole family approach, they usually know little about the other areas of parents' lives. Especially in an occasional and flexible setting, there is not always the opportunity to get to know parents or to start conversations. Some parents will spontaneously talk about other aspects of their lives, but others not at all. Yet these other areas of life have an impact on childcare.

> 'Renée has a fever of 40 degrees. A member of staff, Soumaya, contacted the mum, Sylvia, an hour ago and she is still not there. The family lives around the corner from the nursery. When Soumaya calls again, it turns out that Sylvia is at home, but has to start work at 4 pm. She is worried about her employer and says she really cannot stay at home with Renée. Soumaya loses her temper and says that children come before work and that the employer can get lost.'
> (*Observation by PACE worker, Mechelen, 2019*)

In the course of the PACE project, we developed a reflection model for sharing ideas with nursery workers about how the different areas of both parents' and nursery workers' lives play a role in childcare. A team can use the reflection model to analyse a specific event. For example, a staff member, Liesbeth, is annoyed because she has now missed the bus home three Tuesdays in a row, because Sanae

does not pick up her son until just before closing time. Liesbeth knows that Sanae only works until 4 pm.
The reflection model uses pictograms to show what the childcare worker knows about the different areas of the family's life: there is a child who has recently come to the nursery on two days a week; the mother is on a training programme and the family is struggling financially. Liesbeth has two children, who she has to pick up from the after-school club. Then she has to rush to take one son to gymnastics and the other to football training. Liesbeth's husband is a soldier who is often away from home, so she's on her own at such times. It's very annoying for Liesbeth to miss the bus because the life area of work clashes with her obligations in the other areas of her life. The model then considers which areas of life the nursery staff know nothing about. For example, we do not know what means of transport Sanae uses, whether she's doing an extra job of some sort to make money, whether she's experiencing health problems or looking after family members. Those areas of life could explain why Sanae picks up her son so late. Incidentally, the reflection model means not that the team should learn more about parents, but that it should take account of the fact that there are many things it does not know.

The main thing that the reflection model reveals is that childcare is only one of the life areas for parents and for childcare workers. It can therefore also serve to evaluate or shape the childcare setting's family policy. The staff can think of different types of parents and select the pictograms for the areas of life that play a role in their relationship with childcare. The team can then analyse its expectations of families. Is it realistic to expect that all parents should be free on a Saturday for an open day when we look at all the other areas of life? Would it not be better to organise a quick drink just before closing time?
An advantage of this model is that it also takes into account the different areas of life of nursery staff. What do parents know about these? Maybe it would be a good



Example of areas of life reflection model, © Biessen, Piessens & Willockx, 2019

idea to talk openly about obligations the staff have to meet after nursery working hours? This could increase mutual understanding.

> Staff member Maria wants to leave on time on Thursday because she has to take her father to kidney dialysis. Pierre was late to pick up his daughter and noticed that Maria was in a hurry. She talked about the dialysis. The following week, Pierre arrived earlier and asked about the health of Maria's father.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

- Use the reflection model when a staff member has difficulty with something a parent has done. Look together at the parent's possible motives and check whether the situation requires a modification of your working method.
- Use the reflection model regularly to evaluate and adjust the way you interact with parents.

A PRACTICE WITH LIMITED FLEXIBILITY

An occasional and flexible childcare setting tries to build as much flexibility as possible into its way of working, for example by adjusting procedures, adjusting the structure of the day and adjusting activities for the children based on observations. However, unexpected things often happen that raise the question of the limits of flexibility. If the setting decides to turn a blind eye when parents pick up their child a quarter of an hour late, this could eventually cause tension for the other areas of life of the staff members. When parents seem to be abusing the system, this also gives rise to frustration.

> 'Because the demand for childcare in a certain period exceeded the number of available places, Het Lindeke worked with numbers in the queue. Whoever got a number was sure of a place. One day, a parent took the number away and tried to use it again the next day.' (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2018*)

Tensions and frustrations shine a spotlight on two crucial aspects of occasional and flexible care: how far does its flexibility go and how do you organise that flexibility fairly? These questions are closely linked, because the limits that teams want to place on flexibility are related to the desire to treat all families fairly.
Often, teams resolve the demand for a flexibility that is fair by applying its policy strictly, but the consequences of that policy are not the same for everyone. Parents who have to work until 5.30 pm are more affected by a strict closing time of 6 pm than parents who can leave work at 5 pm. Some parents said in focus groups that they had dropped off a training programme because the nursery 'wouldn't even be flexible about a quarter of an hour'.
Teams at occasional and flexible childcare settings therefore need to find other ways to treat all families fairly. We cannot present ready-made solutions here, because they will be different for each setting. The important point is that the team should work out a number of boundaries that it wants to maintain. A framework should then follow that indicates the flexibility of these boundaries, for example a checklist of questions. Does this flexibility affect other areas of staff members'

lives? How do parents who do their best not to cross the boundaries look at this situation?
Situations will change constantly, and if the boundaries of flexibility are proving difficult for large numbers of families, the nursery can respond by making them more flexible. At the urging of the childcare broker, several nurseries in Brighton & Hove were willing to adjust their opening hours.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

- Think together about what is equal and what is fair. If the nursery treats all families equally, is that fair? Are their situations equal?
- What is fair for the staff? Bring ideas about this into the discussion.
- With these concerns about equality and fairness in mind, look at the nursery's arrangements and rules. Do they need to be modified?
- Ensure clarity about how flexible the rules and arrangements are. What are the limits of that flexibility? Make a checklist of questions that indicate the limits of flexibility. These limits will emerge from discussions about fair treatment for families and childcare workers.

4.4 Recommendation 3: Take a long-term approach

A LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE: WHY?

Nurseries are changing all the time: 'Cement children' on a regular childcare plan go to school, new families arrive, employees change jobs or retire, the rules change. This means that work on flexibility as a strength never stops. In order to maintain strengths when the context changes, an effective policy is needed. First, this policy must include a vision of occasional and flexible care and the development of a repertoire of alternative practices. And second, it must include a professionalisation plan. By professionalisation we mean 'all programmes and learning opportunities for childcare workers that supplement, update and consolidate the professional knowledge and skills of individuals and teams'.[18] Professionalisation is necessary to provide ongoing quality care for families.[19]
Good professionalisation requires a competent system, and in particular good working conditions and time for the staff. Such time is not currently available in any PACE country, as we saw in the system analysis at the beginning of this chapter. Despite this, we worked in the PACE project on a long-term perspective for occasional and flexible childcare. We found inspiration in the thinking of the Italian educator Loris Malaguzzi. He sees continuous development in every team and organisation as an essential part of daily practice and of what it means to be an educator.[20] In occasional and flexible care, this development often proceeds at a faster pace. This creates uncertainty, but it also offers opportunities to examine habits, and to arrive at a new understanding of what 'good childcare' can mean.

WORK ON A SHARED REPERTOIRE OF ALTERNATIVES

A shared repertoire of alternatives: why?
Looking after children is something that you think about, but in the first place it is something that you do. In other words, it is an 'embodied practice'.[21] In their work, early years practitioners draw on a shared repertoire of actions and beliefs. You comfort a child who is crying, you ensure that the day has a recognisable structure, you help children and parents to say goodbye to each other, you make sure children get enough rest. This shared repertoire is based on education, on views on childcare,[22] on practitioners' personal childcare history and on the habits that each nursery develops. It is something that already exists in a nursery, but that every member of staff contributes to every day.[23] In one nursery, for example, parents can simply walk into the rooms where the children are looked after, while another nursery is far more protective of those spaces. And the approach may evolve one day, because a parent asks if she can go and sit with her child.
Sometimes the embodied childcare practice no longer fits the changing situation in a nursery; or sometimes the situation changes so often that staff constantly have to make new assessments and minor adjustments. This is what it is like in occasional and flexible childcare. A team may be used to holding new children as they go off to sleep but after the third day they cannot continue to do so. If a child has been crying after attending for ten days because he cannot fall asleep, an adjustment is required. The next week, a new child comes to the nursery, and the parent says that she sings to him until he falls asleep. What do the team do now?
Sometimes a shared repertoire can stand in the way of changes. Who will break with the repertoire by doing something differently? What will the others think?
Early years practitioners may feel insecure when they have to come up with alternatives on their own. This is why a nursery should ensure that the team comes up with a shared repertoire of alternatives together.[10]

Steps towards a shared repertoire of alternatives
The need for alternatives sometimes makes itself keenly felt and is hard to predict.

> 'Staff member Katrien wants clear agreements to be made. At the moment, everyone does whatever they like. It bothers her that it takes a long time for a decision to be made.
> During reception, a colleague notices a rash around the mouth of a child. The team doesn't dare take any action and gets into a protracted argument, so that the whole reception process becomes chaotic. In the end, one of the staff contacts the manager.' (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2019*)

The team has proved ill-prepared for such an event. Its shared repertoire is inadequate; the team will need to develop alternatives.
A first step in the search for a shared repertoire of alternatives is an analysis of a critical event of this kind. Why did the team have a long argument? Does nobody

have the power to make a decision, or does the reception process lack a clear structure? Without this analysis, all that the staff can do is agree on how they would handle exactly the same situation next time – but the same situation is unlikely to happen again. The analysis will make clear what points the team needs to make agreements about: who has what role, who can make decisions, how do we pass on information, how do we keep things going if something unexpected comes up, how much time do we take to welcome every child?
In a second step, the team should examine aspects of the organisational structure that require alternatives. Which elements of the organisation do the aspects that require alternatives concern? How flexible are these elements? What was the purpose of them anyway? With these points in mind, team members can come up with alternatives.
In a third step, the team members should assess the alternatives against the nursery's vision. A shared repertoire of alternatives can be developed meaningfully if a team has a shared vision of the occasional and flexible care it offers. Without this, there is no framework for deciding which alternatives are or are not acceptable, and there is a risk that the choice will come down to employees' personal preferences. In the case of the reception process, the staff may decide that they will allow fifteen minutes per child, so that they can check whether the child is healthy. However, such an approach would be inconsistent with the vision of the nursery, which seeks to cooperate on a basis of trust and to support families. Most parents who use the occasional nursery are on a course that starts at 9 am. The nursery opens at 8.30, so if the reception process takes fifteen minutes, many parents will arrive too late.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

You can think about a shared repertoire of alternatives in response to a particular situation or treat it as a thought experiment. In the latter case, choose a specific procedure or moment, such as organising mealtimes, or look at ways to work on involvement. The three steps still apply:

1. Analysis: on what aspects does the team need new agreements?
2. Structure: how do these aspects relate to the existing structure? What was the purpose of that structure? Can we find alternatives that serve the same purpose?
3. Vision: do the alternatives fit with the vision of the nursery, including its occasional and flexible care section?

PROFESSIONALISATION: PROVIDE LONG-TERM SUPPORT FOR THE ENTIRE TEAM

It demands a lot from a team to make flexibility the strength of the setting and to build a shared repertoire. Teams often have to deviate from existing practices rather than simply take them on board: education and training therefore cannot help. An effective coach who shapes the thinking and working processes can offer an alternative form of professionalisation. This coach could be the nursery manager or a pedagogical coach from the organisation. An external coach could also take on the role.

> 'When the authorities in Kent wanted to start an occasional childcare pilot programme, they provided support material for the early years professionals. They made sure that the managers received training in overseeing peer support sessions.' (*PACE worker, Gravesham, 2019*)

Providing support is not enough to ensure that a long-term perspective is developed and maintained for processes. During the PACE project we identified a number of factors that help ensure that the support provided is genuinely valuable for everyone involved.

1. Acceptance from the team

In chapters 2 and 3 of this part of the book, we saw that the team's acceptance was the most important requirement for the success of occasional and flexible childcare. This is also the case for a coaching process: the team must be open to this form of professionalisation. In many places, the childcare system operates hierarchically, and a manager decides whether or not a support programme will be launched, sometimes without consulting the team. Opinions in the team may be divided. This will mean that the pedagogical coach starts the process in a divided team, which may also turn out to disagree about other aspects of childcare.
In these circumstances, bringing safety in the team will be the pedagogical coach's priority.

2. Time

A support process requires time on the part of the pedagogical coach and the team. If an organisation expects a manager to design a support process, this will have to be defined as a core task; otherwise the organisation is likely to have irregular support sessions because the manager has too much other work.
The pedagogical coach should preferably provide a combination of informal and structured time. The structured time is needed to think together about events that pose a challenge to the nursery's current ways of doing things or that are hard to square with the childcare professionals' educational ideals. Such events give rise to frustration or uncertainty, and these feelings must be aired before team members can look for alternatives. Peer support sessions are a good way to do this.
At the start of the pilot project in Kent, the managers received training in the practice analysis technique Wanda[24].

3. Asking questions

The team members themselves constantly encounter obstacles and opportunities for improvement, but not all questions or issues come up in this way. Regularity is still the norm for a team that has only recently switched to flexible childcare. As a result, some points will be overlooked. It is up to the coach to draw out questions or to question an approach. In this way, the coach creates the opportunity for a shared search for other ways to achieve the same thing.

> ‘A team shows frustration concerning interactions with parents. The staff feel unsure of themselves because the parents hardly speak any Dutch. They are afraid that they won’t understand the parents properly. They also want the parents to be more involved, but know from the past that an information evening doesn’t attract many people. The coach asks what kind of involvement parents already show and produces a diagram together with the childcare workers: where and when do they see parents? This reveals that there are few moments when parents and staff can meet and few things that give rise to a conversation. Staff members and coach look together for ways to show how the nursery works which don’t involve too many words. The staff decide to take more photos and put them up in the reception area. After a while it is clear that parents are responding well to this. Sometimes they ask if they can have a photo of their child.’
> (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2018*)

4. Provide the language

As we have said, childcare is an embodied practice. That often makes it hard for childcare workers to put their actions into words.[10] The pedagogical coach observes and expresses what the childcare workers do, and this helps them to recognise the shared repertoire and find alternatives.

5. Taking the team’s learning style into account

The shared repertoire that a team develops also includes a learning style. This group learning style may differ from the individual learning style of each team member: learning as a team is a different process. The pedagogical coach will gradually get to know the team learning style, sometimes through trial and error. For example, a pedagogical coach during the PACE project found that reflective discussions proceeded with difficulty. When she brought this up with the team, it turned out that the members liked to think about the assignment first. The pedagogical coach started setting assignments a week in advance, and the discussions went a lot more smoothly.

In another team, the nursery workers always completely agreed during group discussions, yet the pedagogical coach noticed disagreements in the workplace. She therefore organised a discussion without words, using the vision of parental involvement. She read out the vision and asked the nursery workers to raise their hands if they heard something they were not doing. This exercise quickly made it clear that the nursery workers had different opinions and that they felt that they were not yet fully putting the vision into practice. There was room for growth.

4.5 A minor recommendation: Make it fun

We have stressed more than once that the transition to more flexible childcare is difficult. But all is not doom and gloom. Some childcare workers crave more variety and challenge, and they will definitely find this at a flexible nursery. And what an opportunity it provides to rethink the frameworks for high-quality childcare! Organisations can make it even more fun for early years practitioners by giving them individual learning opportunities. One enriching option is a working visit to another nursery.

> ‘In Turnhout, Het Lindeke organised an exchange, including job shadowing, with another nursery. The exchange enabled staff from another nursery to see the challenges of occasional childcare, and the staff at Het Lindeke received recognition for their work, as the other childcare workers were able to form a good idea of the modifications they had made. The staff from Het Lindeke were in turn inspired by the activities they saw, and realised that this should also be possible in flexible childcare!’ (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2018*)

We would like to conclude with this thought: childcare workers have roles in different areas of life, just like parents. They will be more able to provide flexibility if they are given flexibility themselves. This point was emphasised by the manager from Butterfly Nursery in Brighton & Hove.

5. SUPPORTING THROUGH COOPERATION

5.1 Introduction

Families are confronted with a multitude of expectations: from employers, schools, childcare, the family or neighbourhood, welfare organisations and society as a whole. These expectations are diverse and not necessarily consistent. They sometimes combine in ways that make them hard for families to live up to. Occasional and flexible childcare can help with this. It offers flexibility in one area of life, and thus makes it easier to meet expectations in other areas.
Childcare can give families additional support in other areas of life. When it does so, it operates more intensively on the basis of the whole family model, supporting families holistically in different areas of life.
The PACE project experimented with different ways to provide such support. No childcare setting can do this alone: cooperation is necessary. This chapter examines how childcare can achieve this cooperation in a qualitative way. We start with cooperation in or close to the childcare organisation. We then take a look at cooperation that refers families to suitable organisations. Finally, we consider the policy level: what can childcare mean for families at this level?
We do not treat cooperation and networking as goals in themselves, but as a means of supporting families in finding routes through the caringscape and combining different areas of life. We pay attention to the constraints and risks associated with cooperation at every level. We will mention one constraint immediately, because it plays a role in all forms of cooperation: the underfunding of childcare, which means that staff have little time to develop cooperative partnerships.

5.2 Childcare plus?

WHY MIGHT CHILDCARE PROVIDE MORE THAN JUST CHILDCARE?

Most of the families that participated in the PACE project were experiencing problems in various areas of life: family and work, but also relationships, health, housing and transport. Their needs were diverse, individual and changing. Urgent problems sometimes came up; one mother suddenly stopped coming to appointments, and it turned out afterwards that her relationship had ended.
In addition, families often feel cut off: from themselves and their future, from others and from society.[1] That lack of connection is often already there before parenthood. In many cases, there has been a hope that parenthood will offer opportunities to connect more with others and with the world, but many parents find that the opposite happens: having a child sometimes reinforces the isolation of those living in a vulnerable situation. Day-to-day survival with children becomes more complex and there is little time left to connect with other interests. In time, people become completely taken over by their role as parents.

> 'You've been at home, all you've seen is little people calling you "mom".' (*Eleanor, Gravesham, 2020*)

> 'When I was still at home, I didn't feel good. Some people call it depression, but you don't feel good, you're out of place.' (*Iris, The Hague, 2020*)

Parenthood also sometimes makes connecting with society harder. Looking for a job, social contacts and leisure activities does not get any easier.

> 'I was very close to my daughter. We lived together in isolation and were together 24 hours a day. For me it was like "I'm all alone and I've got to figure everything out by myself, for example about benefits".' (*Fiona, Mechelen, 2018*)

Because the 'children' life area often hampers parents' development in other areas of life, childcare can offer support. How do you get into conversations with others when looking after your children takes up all your time? How do you look for a job with a toddler on your lap? How do you find the right training programme if you do not know if you can leave your child safely somewhere? In addition, families need a lot of practical information in order to navigate through their caringscape: which benefits are they entitled to? How can they pay for childcare? Can you postpone an integration programme if you do not yet have a childcare place? In the PACE project, childcare workers helped families find solutions to all these questions.

> 'I didn't know what I was entitled to. It turned out that I was entitled to a start-up premium in my new rental home, but they never told me that at the Public Welfare Centre. I now know better what my rights are.' (*Hilde, Mechelen, 2008*)

For many parents, childcare is essential to their ability to develop in other areas. And if that development starts with childcare, childcare is well placed to guide parents as they take the next steps.

HOW CAN CHILDCARE SUPPORT PARENTS IN FORMING AMBITIONS AND CONNECTING WITH OTHERS?

To connect with others, you need to feel comfortable with yourself and worthwhile. Childcare can contribute to this, as we saw in Chapter 3.

> 'My needs are legitimate. I've become more confident and I also take care of myself now, not just my daughter.' (*Adèle, Mechelen, 2018*)

Giving parents the opportunity to tell their story is the next step. It's not easy.

> 'It takes a lot of courage to let know that you have lost confidence in parenting or that your financial situation is bad.' (*Christina, Brighton & Hove, 2018*)

In addition, childcare can create easy social opportunities for parents, allowing parents to develop new friendships that give them support. Parents can learn from each other and see what other parents are able to achieve, and this gives them perspective.

> 'We have a connection here with other women. It encourages you to make progress. The PACE parents are like a second family. Our network is being expanded. Friendship is important and it helps us. It also shows you that you're not alone.' (*Jane, Wattrelos, 2020*)

It's important for parents who are meeting like this to be able to be themselves without sensing any judgement of their personality or situation.[2,3]

> 'There is a difference in the way they treat you here. There is no judgement.' (*Remy, Gravesham, 2020*)

HOW CAN CHILDCARE SUPPORT PARENTS IN CONNECTING WITH SOCIETY?

The step into childcare is a big one for some families. If the parents then have to find another organisation for support in other life areas, that may be a hurdle that they are unable or unwilling to overcome. The PACE project therefore experimented with key persons who are present in the childcare setting. This key person is easily approachable, actively seeks contact with parents and phones them if he or she has not heard anything for a while. The key person also makes contact with other organisations if he or she thinks they may be able to support the families.

> At 38 Volt in Mechelen, the nursery and the family support officer work under the same roof. Parents bring their children to the nursery and can speak to the family support officer in a separate room. The city of Turnhout set up the occasional nursery in the same building as a group care setting for babies and toddlers and an out-of-school care setting. The building also has a space where parents can speak quietly with a family support officer.

If the barriers to finding individual support are high for parents, they are often even higher for gaining access to training courses or leisure activities. Getting there may be a problem, or the hours may clash with those of the nursery or the older children's school. The psychological step involved in entering an unfamiliar environment where you do not know anyone is also considerable. A number of PACE project partners therefore organised the provision of such services at the nursery. Parents were able to go on training courses that were useful for their search for employment, such as computer skills, job interview practice or giving presentations. In addition, partners organised a reading club, sewing workshops and drama classes. This helped parents to connect with others and with society more generally, if only by putting aside their day-to-day worries for a moment or getting back in touch with their own interests. Parents say that this brought future possibilities into view.

> 'I'm motivated now; I have a larger network. I now have a clear view of what my options are.' (*Maddy, Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018*)

The three French project partners are *centres sociaux* – accessible community centres that combine opportunities for socialising, individual guidance and group activities. All ages are welcome: a nursery for young children, out-of-school care and children's workshops are all available. Parents can go there to drink coffee, attend a creative workshop or do some cooking together. There are sports activities and courses for learning new skills. A key person is also present.

The recommendation to provide more than just childcare at a nursery is not new.[2] Projects were already in progress here and there. In Flanders, for example, the Koala projects combine childcare with activities for parents.[4] Combining services in this way is not easy, because the childcare sector is not set up for multifunctional operations of this kind.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

Offering more than just childcare is not done lightly. It requires a different approach from the employees, organisational efforts and a strong network. There are a number of crucial points that it is best not to lose sight of.

1. **Involve the parents**

› Creating services and activities that appeal to parents takes time and effort. Involve parents and listen to their needs. Respect the speed at which families want to go and their individual choices.
› Let parents know clearly how you deal with the information they give you and with their personal data.

'They talk to me here, not about me.' (*Cécile, Mechelen, 2018*)

2. **Adapt your organisational structure**

› Can you join forces with a network of childcare organisations to invest in a key person? Or can you work with a welfare organisation that sends a key person to your nursery a few times a week?
› You need a separate room for conversations with a key person. Making a space available is the first step.
› Make clear agreements about cooperation with a key person. Define the rules on professional secrecy and the duty of discretion. Agree what information childcare workers and the key person will and will not share. Consider thoroughly what information you will keep.

3. **Do this together with all staff members.**

› According to the PACE project partners, childcare workers are the key. When they spontaneously started talking to parents about the available range of services and activities, this extra provision was a success.
› It is crucial for the entire team to have a shared vision. Examine the options for having all staff receive training about the situation many families live in, about poverty or diversity.

'Thanks to PACE, the attitude at the nursery is more open. The staff are less judgemental, for example about unemployed parents. They have less of a problem with it now. It is important to designate someone at the nursery who is responsible [for this broader, more open viewpoint], otherwise it will be forgotten.' (*PACE worker, Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2019*)

› When nursery staff work more closely with parents, they are sometimes presented with complex situations. They would like to resolve these situations, but often this is not possible.

'The danger is that employees sometimes take over. They have a "superhero complex". They should remember that parents need to learn things for after the PACE project.' (*PACE worker, Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2019*)

Not all parents carry on participating, and this too can be hard for the staff.

'This story is significant to me as I feel I have put a lot of hours into helping Alicia and I felt we were turning a corner and now I am feeling quite frustrated and am not sure what to do next. I am also worried about there being other things that are going on for her that she is not disclosing to me.' (*PACE worker, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

Invest in time for joint reflection on how the team handles such situations.

4. **Look for a network**

If small-scale cooperation with a welfare organisation is not possible, you may be able to work with larger centres such as Children's Centres (England), centres sociaux, LAEP (France), kindcentra (Netherlands) or Huizen van het Kind (Flanders). Can someone from their teams come to the nursery regularly? Or can you point families in their direction?

5.3 Childcare as a link in a network

WHY WOULD A NURSERY JOIN A NETWORK?

Parents who are looking for viable routes through their caringscape can get help from many organisations and social welfare officers. The problem is that they are often unaware of this. As stated, childcare can form the first contact by providing support to parents and by appointing a key person. However, this will not work for every question or every area of life. In those cases, the nursery can refer parents to other organisations, such as doctors, parenting support services, schools, training centres or shelters.

For some parents, all that's needed is a referral; they then find their own way. For others, that step is too big for them to take. The nursery can support them in their first contacts with an organisation and ensure a friendly transfer. This works better if the nursery has good relationships with other organisations. Some nurseries are embedded in a wider range of services; this is the case, for example, with the French centres sociaux. It is then important to ensure that internal cooperation is sufficiently close for staff to refer parents to the partner service with confidence.

In spite of every effort, contacts with other services for parents do not always go smoothly. Parents may encounter more than one obstacle.

First, services usually split up the different areas of life, and an employee will tend to focus exclusively on his or her assigned area. A childcare worker will make children's time at nursery as pleasant as possible; contacts with parents are also based on this goal. An employment service will make every effort to find work for its users and expects their full cooperation. For parents, though, these areas of

life are intertwined: one area affects another. Employees of different organisations take little account of this fact. Sometimes, the actions they take even work against each other and actually create additional obstacles for families.

> 'Maria, a single mother, is asked by the VDAB to start a training programme in Brussels. The training starts at 8 am, and Maria doesn't have a car, so if she wants to get to Brussels by public transport in time, she needs to be able to leave by 6 am. The nursery doesn't open until 7.30 am. The VDAB thinks that Maria just has to sort things out, or that the nursery should adapt.'
> (*PACE worker, Mechelen, 2018*)

During the PACE project, many parents talked about how they had experienced this segmentation. It was even encountered in organisations that are really doing their best to tailor their work to families' needs. Parents often sense interest and willingness, but also high expectations. Schools, for example, would like to have meetings to discuss a child's development and organise parent evenings and social activities. If every child in the family attends a different school and parents work full-time, they cannot meet these expectations.

> 'There are a lot of school holidays. And my oldest child is having a hard time, there are a lot of meetings at school... You can't manage them when you have to work.'
> (*Chris, Brighton & Hove, 2018*)

Second, government agencies often tie the right to financial support to the obligation to participate in a specific activity such as an integration programme. There are often strict rules regarding such activities: the start date is fixed, the timetable is set in stone, all participants must register digitally, a meeting may not last longer than ten minutes. The purpose of such services sometimes becomes secondary to the procedures and administrative requirements. The employees can sometimes only see the system, not the goal,[5] and eventually lose sight of the users' experience.[6]

> 'I had to come in [to the Job Centre] when my child was only a couple of months old. They didn't know why. "It's just the system," they said.'
> (*Sophie, Gravesham, 2020*)

Third, services often have little sense of what it is like for users to interact with them. It is also difficult for users to predict what decision these services will make, as there is a lot of room for interpretation.

> 'The children go to pre-school childcare very early and they are also in after-school care in the afternoon. I sometimes come to pick them up when they're asleep there. Now they don't even like going to school any more. It's also starting to take its toll on me, I'm really finished. I've tried to hang on, but the combination of full-time work with two little ones is really too hard. Now tomorrow is my last day and I've received documents to fill in for the National Employment Office and the reason I've put on them is "lack of balance between work and private life". Is that enough for them, or will they refuse to accept it? I'd like to know what I should do now, because I really can't afford to go without unemployment benefit.'
> (*Naaima, Turnhout, 2019*)

Fourth, several employees in the PACE project reported that parents received disrespectful or racist treatment from organisations to which they were referred.

HOW CAN THE NURSERY SUPPORT THE FAMILIES WHO USE THE NETWORK?

Childcare settings can support parents in two ways to make the transition to other organisations and to form good contact. First, they can assist the parents during the process. Second, they can make sure that families' perspectives can be known, seen and discussed in different organisations.

Supporting parents

Parents who hesitate to take the step to other organisations can use a little help, and a childcare setting can provide that help relatively easily, especially if it has built up partnerships. Establishing contact, making a preliminary phone call, working out how to get there – these are actions that require relatively little effort. Some parents are approached by organisations themselves, for example because they are required to attend classes. They can also use support in this context: many parents experience such services as powerful institutions, and therefore feel unable to say if they have trouble meeting an obligation.

> 'The manager of the flexible childcare setting Het Lindeke in Turnhout works closely with the training centres for Dutch and Civic Integration classes. "I try to stay in regular contact with these childcare referral bodies about the childcare plans of the parents who have to go to Dutch and Civic Integration classes. I indicate what's possible, and the training partners often adjust a parent's class timetable or delay the start time to allow a parent to get to the nursery. In addition, we have a certificate of absence for the Dutch or Civic Integration class (though not for compulsory civic integration) that we issue when we don't have a place for a child. This really reduces the stress for the parents. Sometimes both parents have to go to class at the same time. Again, I try to arrange with the training providers for the parents to go to class according to a staggered timetable (morning or afternoon). Parents sometimes also have a tough programme to attend: Dutch and Civic Integration together. Naturally this increases the pressure on the family when it comes to childcare. I try to find out from the key person at the training centre whether it's really necessary for the two programmes to be taken simultaneously or whether they could be done one after the other. This also makes the parent's life easier and takes the stress away," she says.'
> (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2020*)

The actions of this childcare manager also have advantages for the centres that organise language and integration classes: the childcare is sorted out, so the students come to class more often. And they are less stressed out.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

- The key person makes the first contact with the organisation. He or she can also go along to the first appointment.
- For some parents, the journey will be a new one. They are not used to cycling or taking the bus. Planning the route with them can be a great help: 'Thanks to PACE, I now feel able to take the metro.' (*Patricia, Arques, 2020*)
- Invite the external organisation to your nursery. Several PACE partners organised a consultation hour with someone from the employment service. This made the service more accessible to parents.
- If parents are obliged to accept an offer which takes no account of other areas of life, you can contact the organisation that imposes the obligation. You can explain the situation and argue for a different arrangement to be made. This is of great help to parents who have little experience with such bodies.

Presenting the parents' perspective

As mentioned, many services are segmented, meaning that they are specialised and separate from what other services offer in other areas of life. Childcare settings can counteract this segmentation by informing other organisations about their sector and how they operate. For example, by no means do all organisations know whether there is enough childcare in the area or how expensive it is for parents.

> A PACE key person is present on one day every week at the Job Centre (Gravesham, England). Parents who need childcare can go directly to her for information or can join a tailor-made programme that combines childcare and job search support. In addition, the family support worker provides the Job Centre staff with information about childcare. They are now more aware of the obstacles in the current system.

Sometimes a childcare setting will do both things: put across the parents' perspective and actively support them and defend their rights. Childcare can also take on this mediation work, so that services become more aware of parents' caringscape over time.

> 'After a lot of mediation by the key person, the employment service (VDAB) realised that the training would not be feasible for Maria. This was not achieved without a struggle. The instructor of the training programme in question insisted that it must be possible to find a nursery where you can drop off your children at 5 am, because she had done so before. Maria had opted to put her unemployment benefit on hold because she no longer wanted to report to the VDAB: she wanted to start work. The key person who is associated with the 38 Volt nursery in Mechelen helped her with applying. Maria found a job: at first with a fixed-term contract, but she still works there. She works 30.4 hours a week, with decent hours that can be combined with a family.' (*PACE worker, Mechelen, 2020*)

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

- Make yourself known in existing networks of organisations. Let them know which areas you want to cooperate in. Also let them know that they can advertise their services in your nursery.
- Visit as many organisations as possible.
  1. Explain how the childcare system works and how it sometimes clashes with other systems.
  2. Tell them about the experiences of some of the families who come to your nursery. Identify the obstacles they encounter.
  3. Emphasise the areas of life that families have to combine.

HOW CAN CHILDCARE HELP BUILD A NETWORK?

A network has many advantages for families, as the PACE project showed. Staff also get more satisfaction from their job if it is embedded in a good network.

> 'The project provides local opportunities for better coordination and cooperation, between the regular services that help people into employment and support social integration and the services that provide childcare. The local needs and gaps have been identified more accurately. The network ensures that access for vulnerable parents has increased.' (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2020*)

Objectives, visions and rules that are inevitably divergent come together in a partnership between organisations that offer different services. There is therefore a risk that the network will only function because a few people are making the effort.

> 'In general, cooperation is difficult. Everyone operates in parallel, and there are few bridges to one another. It's too dependent on people: if a particular person disappears, the cooperation sometimes disappears too.'
> (*PACE worker, Mechelen, 2020*)

In order for cooperation to succeed and to ensure continuity, it is important to introduce a systematic approach. This can initially be done by taking a step back and looking at how the network started: did it develop bottom-up, on the initiative of one or more organisations, or is it part of an official structure, such as a government or large NGO? In the first case, the network may get stuck in concrete situations without anything substantial changing in the approach of the partner organisations. In the second case, the network may focus too much on internal organisation and lose sight of the families.[7] With this in mind, the network can set clear goals for cooperation. This in itself can be quite a task. Naming the different goals of each organisation is a good starting point for such a process. In principle, a network should create more opportunities for each partner to achieve its goals,[8] and this is a reason for occasional and flexible childcare settings to invest time and energy in a network even though they have little capacity: it will help them to accomplish their mission and vision.

The network can then make agreements on cooperation: organise a meeting, exchange ideas, make cooperation agreements.

> 'Our recommendation: create a network and meet each other frequently. And keep that contact alive. We have the Employment Network that meets every 4 months for services who support with employment.' (*PACE worker, Brighton & Hove, 2019*)

By meeting regularly and making agreements, employees from different organisations will be better informed about each other's services and the needs of parents. Greater mutual trust will also develop. The PACE project partners report that strong links have developed between organisations that previously had little contact with each other.

Ultimately, cooperation can ensure that changes no longer have to be made on an improvised basis to help a specific family, but are built into the system. This has happened in Gravesham, for example.

> The Job Centre in Gravesham now systematically takes the issue of childcare into account. A PACE worker was personally present in the Job Centre during the project. She helped individual parents with childcare questions, but also increased awareness among employees. The Job Centre has now appointed a childcare lead who will be responsible for this issue internally.

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

- Take time to get to know each other and each other's way of working. Agree how often meetings will be held.
- Identify the differences between the goals and visions of the partners. Consider how the partners can help each other. Then define shared goals and a shared vision.[9] What are you willing and able to achieve together for families?
- Do not forget the families. How do you ensure that their voice is heard in the network?
- Make operational agreements that are both feasible for employees and adapted to families' needs.
- Discuss how the network will handle personnel changes. Who passes on what information? Who monitors the shared vision and ensures that the cooperation stays alive?
- Draw up agreements on families' privacy. Who keeps what data? What information do you pass on, and what information do you not pass on? How do you ask the families for their views on this?
- Design the cooperation at different levels. It is helpful for families if the employees with whom they are in contact are able to cooperate. However, this cooperation will only work if there are good agreements between the organisations, endorsed by the managers.

5.4 Working together for a better policy

PINPOINTING THE CONSTRAINTS

When different organisations work together in a local network, obstacles sometimes emerge of which the individual organisations were unaware. This was seen during the PACE project, when networks developed at the interface between childcare, welfare and employment.

First, the structure of many organisations made partnerships difficult.

> 'Making agreements at management level is very difficult in these organisations (employment and welfare services – ed.) because of the regulations and the scale. This slows things down. And because of the hierarchical structure of these services and the personnel turnover, many one-to-one contacts are fragile.' (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2020*)

Second, the cooperation may make it clear that the rules in different areas work against each other. The PACE project quickly revealed that the activation sought by employment services is at odds with the growing professionalisation and structuring in the area of childcare, because the latter stands in the way of the flexibility that parents need because of activation policies. The rules on availability for the job market are also inconsistent with the small steps that welfare organisations try to take.

> 'At first, the employment service didn't want to grant an exemption because the training programme wasn't for enough hours. I was only going to college on one day a week. And then there's the coaching via VDAB itself... They're not doing their job properly. I got a call asking me to tell them a little more about myself, even though they already knew everything. And then they decided not to grant me an exemption. At that point my key person stepped in on my behalf, and I got an exemption. After that I had to send in documentary evidence every four or eight weeks.' (*Agathe, Turnhout, 2020*)

Conflicting rules also show that coordination between different departments is needed at the macro level. In addition, there is a need for flexible procedures, for example in connection with benefits which are subject to conditions and checks. The tighter these procedures are, the more likely it is that vulnerable people will fall through the net. An example: England and the Netherlands link financial sup-

port to employment, but the procedure takes no account of efforts to find a job. This makes it harder for vulnerable families to find work.

PROMOTING CHANGE

A local network is ideally placed to identify constraints, but it does not have to stop there. By raising these constraints as a topic for discussion, the network can bring about change. First, this change can take place in the network itself, in ongoing cooperation between the organisations. It is important here always to keep the goal in mind: supporting families. In Brighton & Hove, the partnership managed to change the approach of the Job Centre, but parents continued to distrust it, so the network had to try to overcome that distrust.

> 'It went from one-off (because we have a problem), job fairs/job lists... to systematic collaboration – changing the system, looking at how we can work best around the parent. We also need to understand the system really good to be able to get the VSDCs [key persons – ed.] a step-by-step list so they know how they can support parents. We have a very good relationship with the Job Centre, parents are often not so positive. It is really hard work to change the parents' mindset – tackle the fear factor.' (*PACE worker, Brighton & Hove, 2020*)

In Ghent and Turnhout, the PACE networks managed to go a step further and influence local policy, which now takes account of flexible and occasional childcare systematically. And through local policy, the national level has also been reached.

> 'In Turnhout, the authorities have "greater insight than ever before" into the constraints in childcare. This is because the PACE staff from childcare have consistently put the constraints on the agenda at every consultation opportunity. But they have also shown how it is possible to receive families in vulnerable circumstances on a flexible and occasional basis. (...) There is now an eagerness to provide childcare for vulnerable families in Turnhout. This is now also being brought to the minister's attention, which is unprecedented. Now that PACE has been put in the spotlight, policymakers feel that there are not enough places for parents with occasional and flexible childcare needs.' (*PACE worker, Turnhout, 2020*)

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

- Map the constraints in the systems in a concrete, clear and concise manner. A fact sheet with figures and parents' stories is the best way to convince policymakers.
- Stick to your guns. Be prepared to draw attention to constraints repeatedly. Be aware that change takes time.
- Bring relevant actors together. Your network can cooperate with other networks and draw up a combined list of constraints.
- Be creative. The childcare workers from Brighton & Hove asked the representatives of the Job Centre for coffee to discuss a specific problem. They got the problem sorted out together.
- Organise an informal meeting, such as a party or a network event, and invite policymakers. That way you can tell the story personally.

6. CONCLUSION: WHAT DO YOU NEED TO DO?

In this book, we have shown how families struggle to find viable routes through their caringscape, and how occasional and flexible childcare can support them in this. Families can find a job, combine it with caring for young children and feel reassured when they see how their children are flourishing at nursery. The book has also shown that it is not easy to put such childcare into practice. This is because the childcare system is not set up for occasional and flexible care. It is also because policy in various areas means that families lose their way in the caringscape. And because policy makes occasional and flexible childcare harder to provide. The wonderful practices included in the book have therefore often arisen despite the system and the policies, not because of them.

Developing generous policies

In the first part of the book, we set out a plea not just for occasional and flexible childcare, but for generous policies on families and childcare. That included valuing care providers more highly and paying more attention to the families who receive childcare services. By way of conclusion to this book, we can now spell out how generous policies can take shape. We have six recommendations to make: five on childcare policy and one on synergy between policy areas.

1. Cut the bureaucracy.[1] Simplify the administrative obligations for childcare. Create a simplified system for occasional and urgent care, possibly in two steps: minimal administration at time of first use, and more extensive administration if families start using care more regularly.[2]
2. Increase the funding and enable flexible use of financial resources. A network of childcare settings can decide for itself whether to recruit a key person or administrative worker, or to purchase a planning system.
3. Provide local authorities with the resources, strength and mandate to organise flexible care that meets the needs of families in the area. Do this also in areas where childcare is only provided by private organisations.
4. In the quality requirements for care, address not just the way children are treated, but the way families are treated too. The Flemish pedagogical framework is an example of this: it looks at what childcare does for children, for parents and for society.[3]
5. Value all staff, especially the early years practitioners:
   - Work on the social status of educational programmes for early years practitioners.
   - Actively promote the influx of students, including men, into educational programmes for early years practitioners.
   - Improve employment conditions for early years practitioners: higher pay, fair holiday arrangements, compensation for flexibility.
   - Provide and fund structural, long-term support in the workplace.
6. Connect childcare policy with policy in other areas. Assess decisions in relation to parental leave (welfare), schools (education), general welfare, housing and employment. Do this at all levels: local, regional, national and European.

Go for it!

Generous policies are important. They set the parameters within which all childcare takes shape, including occasional and flexible care. Change is clearly important, but in the meantime you do not have to sit still. The PACE partners proved that. Each and every one of them tried a different way of working, all with the same goal: to make childcare possible for families who are currently falling through the net. Sometimes the modifications are more limited than a setting would like, but for families they can still make a big difference.

> 'Aline came to our multi-accueil "Les 3 Petits Pas" in 2019 to ask for an occasional childcare place. She was looking for work and needed time to plan appointments. After the nursery manager had talked to her about her plans, she spoke to Aline about PACE and introduced her to the key persons at the centre social. Aline had a degree in graphic design, and this profile was new to the PACE key persons. Her CV found its way to the general manager of the centre, who happened to have arranged a tennis match with a friend. The friend mentioned that he was urgently looking for a graphic designer, and Aline was invited to an interview in no time at all. In the meantime, her daughter was able to go to the multi-accueil. A week later, Aline was able to start work as a graphic designer. She still works there now.' (*PACE worker, Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2020*)

Aline was lucky, of course, but the system helped her to be lucky: there is close cooperation between the childcare manager and the key person.
The childcare manager systematically asks parents about their situation and aspirations in other areas of life. It's not much, but it can work. So go for it.

NOTES PART I.

Chapter 1

1 Stier, Lewin-Epstein, & Braun, 2012
2 McKie, Gregory, & Bowlby, 2002
3 Hanson & Hanson, 2010: 191
4 Hubers, Schwanen, & Dijst, 2011
5 McLean, Naumann, & Koslowski, 2017; Hochschild & Machung, 2012
6 Hanson & Hanson, 2010
7 Le Bihan & Martin, 2004: p. 567
8 Le Bihan & Martin, 2004; Wreyford, 2013
9 Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019
10 Knijn & Da Roit, 2013
11 Vandenbroeck et al., 2008
12 Piessens, Raes, & Van den Bosch, 2017
13 Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Snoeck, 2009

Chapter 2

1 Keynes, 1930, in Keynes, 1963
2 Skidelsky & Skidelsky, 2013
3 Vosko 2010; Van Aerden, Gadeyne, & Vanroelen, 2017; Kalleberg, 2018
4 Delbeke, 2019; Goethals & Delbeke, 2019
5 Hochschild & Machung, 2012
6 Glorieux & Van Tienoven 2016
7 Gillies, 2006; Gabb 2010
8 Geinger, Vandenbroeck, & Roets, 2013
9 Tronto, 2013
10 Gilligan, 1982

Chapter 3

1 Bakker et al., 2010; Vandenbroeck, 2012. It is worth noting that the purpose of raising children in conditions of calmness, cleanliness and regularity was to teach them obedience and self-control.
2 Vandenbroeck, 2012
3 de Schipper et al., 2003a
4 de Schipper, van Ijzendoorn, & Tavecchio, 2004
5 Pilarz & Hill, 2014
6 Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013
7 de Schipper et al., 2003b
8 Speirs, Visely, & Roy, 2015
9 Emlen, 2010
10 Sandstrom, Giesen & Chaudry, 2012
11 Scott & Abelson, 2013
12 Emlen, 2010: 75
13 Loeb et al., 2004
14 Morrissey, 2009
15 Carrillo et al., 2017; Harknett, Schneider, & Luhr, 2019
16 From a practical guide to childcare – a secondary text published by the government. Accessed at https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Accueil_de_la_petite_enfance.pdf
17 'Children are able to take up their full entitlement to a free place at times that best support their learning and development, and at times which fit with the needs of parents to enable them to work or increase their hours of work if they wish to do so.' Department for Education, 2018: 15
18 The flexibility requirement can be imposed by means of brokerage. The limits are as follows: a maximum of two sites for a child in a single day, no session to be longer than 10 hours, no minimum session length, not before 6.00 am or after 8.00 pm. The aim is to guarantee as much stability as possible for providers, while at the same time offering maximum flexibility to parents. Statutory guidelines for local authorities, accessed at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-education-and-childcare--2
19 The term is mentioned in a section on childcare quality requirements. The new requirements state that every child must have a personal mentor. This is an employee who monitors the child closely. The requirements contain the following phrase: 'children who go to childcare on varying days (flexible childcare)' – accessed at https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/kinderopvang/kwaliteitseisen-kinderopvang-en-peuterspeelzalen
20 'Children under the age of one year must have at least two permanent employees who supervise them at the child-care setting. This is called the fixed-face criterion. A permanent employee knows how a child is developing, what causes it stress and what it needs.' – accessed at https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/kinderopvang/kwaliteitseisen-kinderopvang-en-peuterspeelzalen
21 Under the August 2000 decree (Decree 2000-762 of 1 August 2000) of the Public Health Code.
22 Grobe et al., 2017

Chapter 4

1 McKie et al., 2002
2 Vandenbroeck, 2012
3 In many countries, other initiatives with a pedagogical character (Fröbel, Montessori) also developed, primarily for children of mothers who did not have to work. These forms of childcare are not considered here.
4 Bonoli, 2013
5 Lewis, 1980
6 Knijn & Da Roit, 2013
7 Kremer, 2007
8 Ciccia & Bleijenbergh, 2014
9 Kamerman, 2006
10 Barcelona European Council, 2002; in European Commission, 2018a
11 The Department of Education gives local authorities funding for childcare, sets the curriculum and oversees childcare qualifications.
12 PPS = purchasing power standard. PPS is a common currency unit used to compare prices in a way which is not distorted by price level differences between countries.
13 Ofsted, 2019
14 A detailed explanation can be found on the website of Kind en Gezin [Child and Family]: https://www.kindengezin.be/kinderopvang/ouder/kinderopvangtoeslag-groeipakket/
15 Children in foster care, or children of whom the parents are temporarily unable to look after them.
16 Early years settings must either prioritise vulnerable families or reach out to them proactively. The nature of the obligation depends on the subsidies received. The more a setting does to reach vulnerable families, the more subsidies it can receive. In Flanders, the category of vulnerable families is broadly defined. It includes single parents and parents with a low income or without a secondary education certificate. See the Kind & Gezin website for more information, e.g. https://www.kindengezin.be/kinderopvang/sector-babys-en-peuters/subsidies-en-financieel/plussubsidie/
17 Lloyd & Penn, 2010
18 EU-SILC dataset 2016 on access to services
19 Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016
20 Van Lancker, 2018
21 The purpose of talking here about the mother's level of education is not to emphasise the influence or role of the mother, but because the research to which we refer to uses the mother's education as a proxy for vulnerability/social inequality.
22 Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018
23 Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014
24 Vandenbroucke, Hemerijck, & Palier, 2011
25 Lewis, 2003
26 Heckman, 2006
27 Van Aerden et al., 2017
28 Kalleberg, 2018; Vosko, 2010
29 Bonoli, 2010
30 Cantillon & De Maesschalck, 2012
31 Quotation from the then Flemish Minister of Work, Monika De Coninck, accessed at https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20130905_00726670 ; Het Nieuwsblad [newspaper], 2013
32 Taylor-Gooby, 2008
33 Vranken, Geldhof, & Van Menxel, 1998
34 Giddens, 1998

35 No data available for the UK. Percentages from the Labour Market Policy dataset, with figures from 2018 for Belgium and the Netherlands, and from 2017 for France; European Commission, 2019
36 Immervol & Knotz, 2018
37 Dwyer & Wright, 2014
38 Cf. the description of Kremer, 2007
39 Stier et al., 2012
40 Sweet, 2012
41 This effect is known as 'the motherhood penalty', and is described, for example, in Gash, 2009.
42 Budig, Misra, & Böckmann, 2010; Gash, 2009
43 Plantenga, 2002
44 Eurostat, 2010; in Ciccia & Bleijenbergh, 2014
45 Liège Labour Court, 3rd chamber, 9 May 1973, A.R. 2589/73, unpublished
46 Article 90 of the Royal Decree of 25 November 1991 setting out unemployment regulations relating to the exemption for unemployed persons in a situation causing social and family difficulties.
47 From the term following their third birthday, all children are entitled to fifteen hours of free childcare, each week term-time only or 570 hours per year, regardless of their parents' employment status. Some 2-year-old children are also entitled to this if their parents receive specific benefits. Some 3-year-olds are entitled to thirty free hours of childcare if their parents earn the equivalent of working sixteen hours a week on the minimum wage. If the parents earn more per hour, they can work less than sixteen hours a week. See https://www.gov.uk/30-hours-free-childcare for more information
48 Lindbeck & Snower, 2001; McGinnity, 2004
49 Rönkä et al., 2017
50 Brady, 2017; Campbell-Barr, 2009
51 In England, a parent who needs childcare between 11 am and 2 pm may have to pay the full daily charge, because he or she has used both the morning and afternoon sessions.
52 An AMIF project from 2016 focusing on the integration of women with low literacy skills with young children: see https://www.expoo.be/amif
53 https://www.kindengezin.be/cijfers-en-rapporten/jaar-verslag/verhaal-3/default.jsp
54 Van Lancker & Vandenbroeck, 2019
55 As offered by the at home childcare service in Brighton; described as a practice later in this book.
56 Havnes & Mogstad 2011
57 Bettendorf, Jongen, & Muller, 2015
58 European Commission, 2018b

Chapter 5

1 For 3- and 4-year-olds only: https://www.gov.uk/30-hours-free-childcare. For parents of a 3-year-old, only if they work 16 hours or more per week or earn the equivalent of 16 hours on the National Minimum Wage. In addition, 15 hours per week of free childcare is offered to parents of 2-year-olds who meet certain conditions (parents must receive certain benefits) and who register for the scheme. See https://www.gov.uk/help-with-childcare-costs/free-childcare-2-year-olds for details.
2 Bonoli, 2013
3 European Commission, 2018b
4 Pulignano, 2019
5 Green & Livanos, 2015; Hipp, Bernhardt & Allmendinger, 2015
6 European Commission, 2019
7 Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016
8 Bettendorf et al., 2015; Havnes & Mogstad, 2011; Nollenberger & Rodriguez-Planas, 2011
9 Van Lancker & Vandenbroeck, 2019
10 Filandri & Struffolino, 2019
11 Tepper, Schepers, & Van Regenmortel, 2019

NOTES PART II.

Chapter 1

1 Baxter, Hand, & Sweid, 2016
2 Baxter & Hand, 2016
3 https://www.ryerson.ca/gerrard-resource-centre/emergency-childcare/
4 Elmer in Brussels, Speelhuis Elief in Berchem (Antwerp), and the OKiDO nurseries run by Ferm Kinderopvang in Antwerp.
5 Butterfly Nursery is one of a set of three nurseries that combine regular care with occasional and flexible care under the umbrella of the Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust. Parents taking part in the PACE project in Brighton & Hove were able to use these nurseries.
6 Opportunities and challenges for the OKiDO's, 2018
7 De Weyer, 2008
8 Emlen, 2010
9 Commission for Welfare, Public Health, Family and Poverty Policy (23/03/2010)

Chapter 2

1 Hochschild & Machung, 2012
2 Knijn & Da Roit, 2013
3 Stier, Lewin-Epstein, & Braun, 2012
4 Baxter & Hand, 2016
5 Vandenbroeck et al., 2008
6 Rönkä et al., 2017
7 Carrillo et al., 2017
8 Chaudry et al., 2011
9 Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012
10 Hipp, Morrissey, & Warner, 2017
11 The students interviewed employers and managers from various sectors: retail, industry, hospitality and catering, care, education and government. The size of their organisations ranged from small to large. Ten of the 18 employers required flexible working hours during the day, eight required weekend work, seven evening work and three night work. One business operated an on-call service.
12 Bowlby, 2012
13 McKie, Gregory, & Bowlby, 2004
14 Sinek, 2009
15 These interviews were conducted by students in the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education programme at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences (Ghent). A total of five in-depth interviews were conducted with coordinators from 'Prototype 2' childcare in West and East Flanders. These settings in urban and rural areas all receive level 2 or 3 subsidies and all offer more than 19 places.
16 Peltoperä et al., 2018
17 Salonen, Sevón, & Laakso, 2016
18 Statham & Mooney, 2003
19 De Weyer, 2008
20 Goossens, 2017
21 Flemish government, 2007
22 Laevers et al., 2013
23 Cooke et al., 2019
24 Estola, Farquhar, & Puroila, 2014
25 Sevón et al., 2017
26 Declercq et al., 2016
27 SICS : Well-being and Involvement in Care A process-oriented Self-evaluation Instrument for Care Settings, an instrument for Early Childhood settings developed by prof. dr. Ferre Laevers, retrieved from https://www.kindengezin.be/img/sics-ziko-manual.pdf

Chapter 3

1 Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010
2 Urban et al., 2011
3 Urban et al., 2011, pp. 35-38
4 Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014
5 Flanders uses a system of subsidy application rounds. Settings must wait for an application round before they can receive subsidies.
6 Les auxiliaires de puériculture and les titulaires du CAP petite enfance.
7 It poses the biggest challenge in the Netherlands. The role of local government in organising and managing facilities there is limited: childcare is a private market.
8 https://www.kindengezin.be/kinderopvang/sector-babys-en-peuters/transitie-decreet/opvang-aan-huis/
9 CNAF, 2018
10 For more detailed information, see https://www.generali.fr/dossier/garde-enfant-assistante-maternelle/
11 For 2019, the minimum wage was £8.25 (for an at-home carer aged 25 and over): see https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates
12 The educational requirement is level 2; a bachelor's degree is level 6.
13 Details obtained at https://www.belastingdienst.nl/wps/wcm/connect/bldcontentnl/belastingdienst/prive/werk_en_inkomen/werken/niet_in_loondienst_werken/huishoudelijke_werkzaamheden_voor_anderen/u_huurt_iemand_in_voor_huishoudelijk_werk/u_huurt_iemand_in_voor_huishoudelijk_werk
14 This system also exists in Flanders: a family can employ an at-home carer as a 'white-collar worker'. If the carer works at least 24 hours a week, with working days of at least 4 hours, the family can treat part of the costs as tax-deductible, recovering 30% of the cost actually paid in this way. However, this system is little known in Flanders, and the early years sector does not promote it.
15 Ang, Brooker & Stephen, 2017
16 European Commission, 2019 – Eurydice Report
17 https://www.gov.uk/early-years-foundation-stage
18 These basic pedagogical goals were introduced as a regulatory requirement in 2005. The Municipal Health Service (GGD) checks that childminders are actually working to implement this plan.
19 MBO2 instead of MBO3 (MBO = 'secondary vocational education').
20 In 2013, parents in the highest income category used a childminder 9.2 times more often than parents in the lowest income category. For group settings this factor was 2.4.
21 Assistantes maternelles agréées dans les services d'accueil familial: See https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichCodeArticle.do?idArticle=LEGIARTI000006907527&cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006074069&dateTexte=20070101; In Flanders, the training requirements are being expanded and from 2024 they will be at the same level as for other childcarers: see https://www.kindengezin.be/img/kwalificaties-attesten.pdf
22 https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F798
23 European Commission, 2019
24 https://www.kindengezin.be/kinderopvang/lokaal/lokaal-loket-kinderopvang/
25 From the bill published at http://www.senat.fr/leg/ppl18-139.html
26 The decree of 20 April 2012 on childcare for babies and toddlers states this in Chapter 4, Article 13.
27 VVSG, 2019
28 http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/5/pdfs/ukpga_20160005_en.pdf
29 Rutter & Stocker, 2014
30 https://www.landelijkregisterkinderopvang.nl/pp/StartPagina.jsf
31 https://kinderopvangkaart.nl/
32 For the Hague, for instance, see: https://www.denhaag.nl/nl/in-de-stad/opgroeien-en-opvoeden/kinderopvang.htm
33 15 hours of free funded sessions for 2-year-olds and 30 hours for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Chapter 4

1 Deci & Ryan, 2012
2 de Schipper et al., 2003b
3 Emlen, 2010
4 Kind en Gezin (Child and Family) is the Flemish agency responsible for the quality of childcare; see https://www.kindengezin.be/algemeen/english-pages.jsp
5 Chaudry et al., 2011
6 Questioned during an international partner meeting in Antwerp (BE) in February 2020.
7 It poses the biggest challenge in the Netherlands. The role of local government in organising and managing facilities there is limited, as childcare is privatised.

NOTES PART III.

Chapter 1

1 Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013
2 Hart, 2012
3 Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978
4 Lombardi, 2018
5 The Aspen Institute, & Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2016
6 Vandooren, 2018

Chapter 2

1 Accessed at https://burobeeldkracht.nl/business-model-you/
2 Osterwalder & Peigner, 2010
3 These coordinators were interviewed by students on the early years pedagogy programme at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences Ghent in 2019. The facilities where they work were not part of the PACE project.
4 In England, the staff/child ratio differs according to the age group. This is also the case in the Netherlands and France.

Chapter 3

1 Declercq et al., 2016
2 De Weyer, 2008
3 Vandenbroeck, 1999
4 Flemish Government, 22 November 2013
5 Goossens, 2017
6 Dom, Vorsselmans, & Willockx, 2019
7 Stevens, 2019
8 De Weyer, 2008, p. 32
9 Geens, 2015
10 de Schipper et al., 2003b3
11 Kagan, 1998
12 Ramaekers & Suissa, 2013
13 Reidt-Parker & Chainski, 2015
14 Rinaldi, 2006
15 Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007
16 Van Liempd, 2018
17 Vorsselmans, Willockx, & Dom, 2019
18 Peleman et al., 2018b
19 Urban et al., 2011
20 Raes, 2019
21 Easen et al., 1992
22 Ramaekers & Suissa, 2013

23 Kernan, 2012
24 Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Snoeck, 2009
25 The Aspen Institute & Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2016

Chapter 4

1 European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019
2 European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, p. 68. In Europe, children under the age of three spend an average of 27.4 hours a week in childcare. In Belgium and France, the average is just over 30 hours per week, and in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands 15 to 16 hours per week. This gives an indication of the predictability of childcare demand.
3 Moss, 2016
4 Peleman et al., 2018b
5 Urban et al., 2011
6 Rutgeerts, 2018
7 Jensen & Iannone, 2018
8 Sinek, 2009
9 This online survey was a variant of the previously developed questionnaire on 'attitudes to occasional and flexible childcare', and was sent to the PACE project partners. The questionnaire was completed by 23 childcare workers in France and 12 in Flanders. There was a pre- and post-test in England. We received 42 responses at pre-test and 31 at post-test.
10 De Weyer, 2008
11 Goossens, 2017
12 Reidt-Parker & Chainski, 2015
13 Geens, 2015
14 Vandenbroeck, 2011
15 Vandenbroeck et al., 2019
16 Vandenbroeck et al., 2009
17 Ramaekers & Suissa, 2013
18 Hauari et al., 2014; in Peleman et al., 2018b: 4
19 Peleman et al., 2018a
20 Moss, 2018
21 Stevens, 2019
22 In baby and toddler care, the idea still often plays a role of caring for a child in the way that a mother would do so, cf. Moss, 2016
23 Geens, 2015, p. 192 ff.
24 van Laere, Cauwels, & Boudry, 2013

Chapter 5

1 The basic links method focuses on connection; Baert & Droogmans, 2010
2 Brants, n.d.
3 Taylor, 1997
4 See https://www.kindengezin.be/cijfers-en-rapporten/jaarverslag-2018/koala/ for more information.
5 Hart, 2012
6 Vandooren, 2018
7 Naert, 2019
8 From Brants, n.d., p. 6
9 De Corte, Verschuere, & De Bie, 2017

Chapter 6

1 PACE worker during focus group in Brighton & Hove, England, 2018
2 Recommendation of managers from Flanders, 2019 and of the PACE manager from Ghent, 2020.
3 Kind en Gezin, 2014

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In this book we regularly refer to services and forms of welfare provision in the different PACE countries. An overview is given below of the most common terms and the names used in each country.
The table at the end shows the specific services in each country.

EMPLOYMENT SERVICES
Public employment services connect job-seekers with employers. They are structured differently in each country, but their essential function is to match supply and demand on the employment market through information, activation and training.

SERVICES RESPONSIBLE FOR UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS AND LIVING WAGE
In most countries, employment services are responsible for unemployment benefits. The type of benefits provided differs from country to country. In France and Flanders, benefits and premiums for young families are sometimes overseen by services other than those that regulate unemployment. In England, all of these functions are the responsibility of Jobcentre Plus.

SERVICES FOR THE ACCREDITATION AND INSPECTION OF QUALITY CHILDCARE
Childcare settings are supervised by an inspectorate, which checks whether they are complying with the rules on the use of space and on hygiene. The inspectorate also checks the pedagogical quality of childcare. Again, the way these services operate varies from country to country. In England, Ofsted inspects the quality of childcare and schools. In the other countries, quality inspections are conducted within the education system for children over the age of three (Flanders, France) or four (the Netherlands) by services other than those in charge of checking the quality of childcare.

SERVICES IN CHARGE OF CHILDCARE BENEFITS
Flanders and France subsidise childcare. In the book, we describe this as supply-side funding. In addition, parents themselves also receive a childcare allowance, which is paid by services with broader competence for childcare and young families. In England, France, Flanders and the Netherlands, parents can reclaim childcare costs through the tax system. Free funded sessions are also offered in England.

SERVICE	FLANDERS	FRANCE	ENGLAND	THE NETHERLANDS
EMPLOYMENT SERVICE	Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeids-bemiddeling (VDAB)	Pôle Emploi	Jobcentre Plus	Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemers-verzekeringen (UWV WERKbedrijf)
SERVICE RESPONSIBLE FOR UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS	Rijksdienst voor Arbeidsvoor-ziening (RVA)	Pôle Emploi	Jobcentre Plus	UWV
SERVICE RESPONSIBLE FOR LIVING WAGE	Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappe-lijk Welzijn (OCMW)	Caisse d'Allocations Familiales (CAF)	Jobcentre Plus	Local authority
SERVICE FOR THE ACCREDITATION AND INSPECTION OF QUALITY CHILDCARE	Kind en Gezin	Service dépar-temental de la Protection Maternelle et Infantile (PMI)	Ofsted	Gemeentelijke Gezondheids-diensten (GGD)
SERVICE THAT PAYS CHILDCARE ALLOWANCES TO PARENTS	Agentschap Uitbe-taling Groeipakket in conjunction with five payment bodies. Payment of the 'Growth Package' to which this agency's name refers takes place automatically. Con-trol of the package lies with Kind en Gezin and the tax service	Caisse d'Allocations Familiales (CAF)	Parents must apply directly to the government for their 15 or 30 free hours of childcare, or for tax-free childcare. A local authority can help them with this	The tax service pays a childcare allowance to families who apply for it and meet the conditions

Flexibility has become an integral part of our lives and especially of the organisation of the labour market. This has consequences for families: it presents new possibilities, but often also makes life and caring for children more complex. This book shows how occasional and flexible childcare can support families. Childcare organisations and policymakers will find various approaches to the organisation of good, flexible childcare described in it. In addition, the book shows how childcare can adapt existing practices to a flexible way of working: interacting with children and their families, supporting staff and working with partners. It becomes clear that generous policies are a prerequisite for good, flexible childcare.

The book was written as part of the Interreg 2Seas project PACE (Providing Access to Childcare and Employment). In this social innovation project, project partners in four European countries explored how both work and childcare can be made more accessible for families living in vulnerable circumstances.

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