
MINDS STILL MATTER

An updated analysis of the impact
of working in the early years sector
on the mental health and wellbeing
of the workforce

Please note that this report explores issues relating to mental health and wellbeing, and includes brief references to self-harm and suicide.

If you require support on any of the issues raised in this report, it is important to remember that there is support available.

The helplines below may be of help:

Samaritans: 116 123

Mind: 0300 123 3393

Papyrus (for people under 35): 0800 068 4141

The Silver Line (for older people): 0800 4 70 80 90

Anxiety UK: 08444 775 774

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KEY FINDINGS

- Nearly eight in ten (**79%**) respondents are stressed about Ofsted inspections 'fairly' or 'very' often.
- More than six in 10 (**62%**) have had a negative Ofsted experience and around a fifth (**21%**) have filed a formal complaint.
- More than half (**52%**) have previously received what they feel was an unfair inspection judgement.
- Only **14%** believe that the current Ofsted inspection regime has a positive impact on the provision of quality care and education, while **37%** 'strongly disagree' and **26%** 'somewhat disagree' with the statement.
- Over three-quarters (**77%**) support the removal of the single-word Ofsted grading, with almost three in five (**58%**) 'strongly' supporting this.
- More than eight in ten (**81%**) were regularly stressed about a work-related issue during the month prior to the survey, with Ofsted inspections, sector-specific government policy and pay listed as the most common causes.
- In the past year, around two-thirds (**67%**) suffered with anxiety, fatigue (**65%**) and loss of motivation (**64%**). **14%** had experienced panic attacks, while **3%** said they had had thoughts of taking their own life.
- Nearly six in ten (**59%**) educators feel negatively about working in the sector (**40%** said they feel 'somewhat negative' and **19%** 'very negative').
- A third (**35%**) are considering leaving the sector due to stress and mental health difficulties.

BACKGROUND

In June 2018, the Early Years Alliance published its landmark *Minds Matter* report, which explored the impact of working in the early years sector on the mental health of early educators.

Many of the challenges highlighted in that report are still prevalent today – particularly concerns over staffing, high workloads and low pay. However, in the time since, the sector has also faced a multitude of new challenges, many of them unexpected, which have had a lasting effect on the morale and mental health of the workforce.

A clear example of this is the pandemic. During this period, nurseries, pre-schools, childminding professionals and baby and toddler groups were required to implement a number of substantial changes to the way they operated – often at short notice – in line with fast-changing health and safety guidance. Crucially, registered early years settings were instructed to remain open at a time when death rates due to Covid were at their highest, while the remainder of education settings closed in line with government guidance. As outlined in our 2021 report [*Breaking Point*](#), this policy had a significant impact on mental health and morale in the sector.

Even now that Covid restrictions have been removed, it's clear that the pandemic has had a lasting impact on the sector and that settings are still feeling the effects of that period, not only on their finances and staff levels, but also the learning and development of the children they care for and educate.

More recently, intense inflationary pressure and the impact of cost-of-living crisis have tightened setting budgets – which, due to years of severe sector underfunding, were already limited – even further. While the national living wage increased to £10.42 an hour in April 2023 (with plans for this to rise even further to at least £11 next year), these changes have once again failed to be matched by increases in early years funding, placing even greater strain on the financial health of settings.

And of course, all of these challenges come when the sector is on the brink of the biggest expansion of the 30-hour offer since its introduction in 2017.

In the March 2023 Budget, the Chancellor announced plans to extend the current 30-hour early entitlement offer to include children aged nine months onwards from eligible working families by September 2025. However, serious questions remain about whether early years funding rates will

be high enough to sustain these offers and crucially, whether the sector will have the capacity to deliver any increases in demand as a result of this policy. [Alliance research](#) published in July 2023 showed that while the majority of eligible families expecting to use the expanded offer are optimistic that they will be able to access all the hours and sessions they want, many providers warn that they will not have the capacity available to meet families' expectations.

Alongside this, Ofsted inspections continue to be a significant source of stress for the sector. Following the death of headteacher Ruth Perry in January 2023, important questions have been – and continue to be – raised about the impact of Ofsted inspections on educators' mental health. However, to date, many of these discussions have centred on the primary and secondary sectors, with little focus on the early years.

It is within the context of these multitude of pressures that this report aims to once again shine a light on those facing the early years workforce, and to explore the impact these are having on educators' mental health and wellbeing, both in the short and long term.

METHODOLOGY

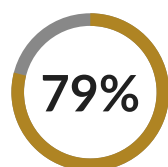
This survey was conducted online between 29 March and 27 April 2023, and received 1,910 responses. Respondents comprised of pre-schools (**47%**), nurseries (**31%**), childminding professionals (**16%**), primary school nursery classes (**1%**), out-of-hours clubs (**1%**), and other settings (**3%**), which included baby and toddler groups and creches.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey results reveal a sector of education professionals who are severely struggling with their mental health and wellbeing. Overall, eight in ten (**81%**) respondents said they felt stressed about a work-related issue 'fairly' or 'very' often within the past month.

Ofsted

Ofsted was cited as the biggest cause of stress among respondents, with nearly eight in ten (**79%**) stating they were stressed about Ofsted inspections 'fairly' or 'very' often.



of respondents said they were stressed about Ofsted 'fairly' or 'very' often

A number of providers commented that the pressure of Ofsted inspections has tainted how they view the early years profession. One said: "I feel the fun is being completely drained out of the life of each of us because of the pressures of Ofsted and the fear of doing something wrong. I feel very on edge."

Many also noted that in the days, weeks and even months leading up to an Ofsted inspection, the stress associated with the visit can become unbearable. One respondent described being "terrified" in the lead-up to their inspection while another said that the stress surrounding her

setting's inspection had prompted her to go into early labour.



"The stress of waiting ... with each day waking up and thinking: 'Is it today?', or not being able to sleep thinking: 'Are they coming tomorrow?' The mental stress during this time for my staff and myself was unbelievable."

For some respondents, the stress associated with Ofsted inspections has been so severe that it has prompted them to consider leaving the sector entirely. One provider explained: "Our setting is due to have an Ofsted inspection and it really changes how I feel about my job and the workload. It's a reason why I feel this role is not sustainable for me, which is really sad as I love working with the early years – but there is too much pressure on the setting from Ofsted."

It should be noted that even providers who have received positive Ofsted judgements highlighted how stressful the lead-up to inspections can be. One said: "The actual Ofsted inspection was actually ok; the inspector was lovely and very knowledgeable about the early years, which was such a blessing. However, the three years leading up to it were the worst of my life. I didn't sleep [or] eat properly

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[and] my staff were scared daily; they had so much to remember and felt under pressure to not let anyone down. We were constantly practising the correct terms to say.”

Alongside the worry caused by the anticipation of Ofsted inspections, many respondents highlighted that the actual experience of undergoing an inspection is often incredibly stressful.

Nearly two-thirds (**62%**) of respondents said they have had at least one negative Ofsted experience, with several respondents describing their most recent inspection as an “absolute nightmare”.



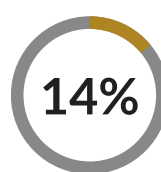
“After Ofsted in February 2023, I did consider leaving my job role due to the stress and the pressure, This is the only time that this has really been an issue in my career in early years, which has been for over 30 years.”

One said: “Ofsted visited us recently and rated us as inadequate, which has severely affected the mental health of all of the staff, caused most of us to question our careers and has left us shattered due to sleepless nights.”

Another commented: “There’s so much pressure to be perfect. It used to be about the children [and] playing with them, but now it’s

more about Ofsted and paperwork. We had Ofsted and they made us feel worthless.”

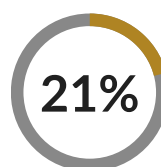
In total, only **14%** of respondents said that they felt the current Ofsted inspection regime has a positive impact on the provision of quality care and education in the sector. Over a third (**37%**) ‘strongly disagreed with this statement, while a quarter (**26%**) ‘somewhat disagreed’.



of respondents felt the current Ofsted inspection regime has a positive impact on the quality of early years provision

Respondents also raised concerns over the fairness and accuracy of Ofsted judgements, with over half (**52%**) saying that they had previously received inspection judgements they felt were unfair.

However, while over a fifth (**21%**) of respondents stated that they have previously filed a formal complaint about an Ofsted inspection, many respondents highlighted concerns with the efficacy of the complaints process.



of respondents have previously filed a formal complaint about an Ofsted inspection

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One provider said: “We were subjected to a very unprofessional inspection which I tried unsuccessfully to raise as a complaint to Ofsted. Unfortunately, Ofsted has an ineffective complaints process which supports and facilitates a poor inspection.” Another described Ofsted’s complaint process as a “complete waste of time”.

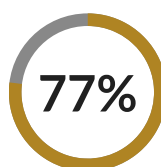
A common sentiment expressed by respondents was that the outcome of inspections is often based on luck. One provider, who received a positive result, said: “We were lucky with the Ofsted inspector we had; however, it shouldn’t come down to who you receive on that day.”



“Ofsted come in and see you on one day. They have no knowledge about who you are, what you achieve and then they have the ability to ruin lives.”

Others pointed out that that inspections can only ever provide a snapshot of how a setting operates. “To make a judgement on one short visit without any context can be damaging,” one provider said. Another commented: “You have to get all the grade descriptors ticked in a window of three to six hours. It does not matter what you did in the past three to four years – just that day counts.”

Given the significant impact that a negative Ofsted judgement can have on a setting – not least the potential loss of early entitlement funding – it is perhaps unsurprising that the vast majority of respondents (**77%**) said they support the removal of the single-word Ofsted grading, with almost three in five (**58%**) ‘strongly’ in support of this.



of respondents support the removal of the single-word Ofsted grading system

Many argued that the existing single-word judgement fails to paint a complete picture of the quality of provision at a setting. “A single-word grading such as ‘requires improvement’ overshadows any good things the setting is doing. It can be one thing that they need improving on but many things they are doing right,” commented one respondent. Another argued that “removing this would make parents read the full report rather than just seeing the one-word decision”.



“A single word grading does not give the full story of the setting.”

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However, there was less certainty about what should replace the current single-word judgement approach, though there was a broad consensus that a longer narrative would give parents and carers a more holistic picture of a setting.

For example, one respondent suggested “a written report unique to the [setting] based on several different areas including: education of the children according to the EYFS, care and emotional support of the children, parent satisfaction [and] safeguarding.” Another proposed “a report which highlights strengths and areas for improvement, summed up in a paragraph” arguing that “that way, parents will get a fair view and can decide for themselves”.

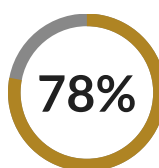


“[We need] a report highlighting areas of outstanding and good practice and areas that require improvement. The ‘inadequate’ wording should be totally erased. Would we tell children they are ‘inadequate’?”

Government policy

Another common theme throughout the survey was the disconnect between the early years policy developed by government officials and the early years practice delivered by educators on the ground. As a

result, government policy was cited as the second most common cause of stress behind Ofsted inspections, with **78%** of educators stating that this was a cause of stress ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ often.



of respondents said that government policy is a cause of stress ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ often

“We are trying to demonstrate the value of early years provision, but it does not feel that this is reflected in government policy,” one provider said. Another commented: “I have worked in various early years settings in my career to management level. Never have I felt policy to be so out of touch with reality.”

Similarly, another said: “The government policy on early education doesn’t seem to take into account the actual workings of a setting; the responsibilities we have to the children and families we have contact with.”



“As far as government policy is concerned, I don’t feel they share our values and belief in the importance of early years education, and just want to acquire childcare at cut price.”

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Respondents also pointed out that understanding and adhering to complex and ever-changing guidance and requirements adds to their already-high workloads and can often take them away from the aspects of their role they enjoy the most, leading many to feel dissatisfied, unfulfilled and overwhelmed.

One said: “So much pressure is now put on early years settings to be outstanding, it’s unreal. I used to enjoy going to work and spending my day playing with the children and helping them learn and grow. Nowadays it’s not as much fun; it’s mostly stressful. I feel like I’m constantly chasing my tail because legislation is constantly changing and we have to make sure we are up to date with everything.”

Respondents also pointed to specific policies as a source of potential stress and concern, with ratios and the so-called ‘free entitlement’ schemes among the most commonly cited. “Regarding government policy, and especially changes to ratios, I’m very, very concerned about how providers are going to offer the education required with even less resources, staff and time,” said one provider. “As someone studying for an early years degree, I am very aware of the needs of the children and how challenging meeting these can be especially in the shadow of Covid. [Instead,] the answer is free places and reduced ratios.”

“The issues around ratios, staffing challenges

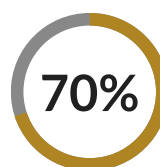
and funding have negative implications on an otherwise dream job,” commented another.



“The sector is in crisis and someone needs to step up to remedy this. Current government have no comprehension of the reality of their insane decisions [such as] so-called ‘free’ hours [and changes to] staff ratios.”

Pay

Given that the early years sector has been repeatedly singled out by the Low Pay Commission as one of the lowest paying of all employment sectors, it comes as no surprise that the majority of survey respondents (**70%**) cited pay concerns as a common cause of stress.



of respondents said that pay is a cause of stress ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ often

Many highlighted the sizeable discrepancy between the pay they receive and the demands and responsibilities of their job, especially when comparing salaries in the early years to that of other sectors. Recent strike action in other industries and the subsequent attention – and in some cases,

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pay offers – that this has resulted in has brought these concerns into sharp focus, as one respondent explained:

“It is disheartening to hear and see various industries having strike action to demand more pay and yet the early years sector remains working and struggling on. I am paid less than the Living Wage, which is a joke. Our pay isn’t in line with other sectors and with the cost-of-living crisis, it is no wonder that so many settings are having to close their doors. We deserve equal pay for the demanding job that we do, but a lot of people believe that we ‘just play’.”



“Pay for staff is terrible and we have lost 11 staff in the last three years – two to become teachers, two still in nurseries. The rest have left the industry.”

Respondents also spoke about the long-term financial impact that low pay has had on their personal finances and the negative impact this has had on their mental health.

One said: “I love my job and feel I make a huge difference to the families I work with. But I worry about how low my earnings are and paying my bills each month, [especially given] that I am 51 and I don’t have a pension.”

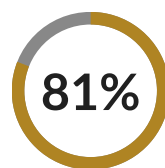
Others highlighted that consistently low levels of pay have prompted highly-skilled educators to leave for less stressful, more flexible sectors, many noting that they can be paid more for the same or less hours in the retail or hospitality sectors. One respondent said all the educators in their setting also have second jobs to supplement their income. Another commented: “I could get more money with less responsibilities working in retail or as a cleaner.”



“I feel sometimes it would be a lot less pressure and stress to go and work in a shop!”

Work-life balance

Despite the widespread low rates of pay in the sector, the majority of those surveyed (**62%**) said they do not have a good work-life balance, with around more than eight in ten (**81%**) saying they regularly work outside of work hours.



of respondents said that they regularly work outside of normal working hours

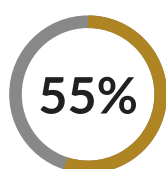
Many providers said they often cancel non-work plans to ensure that their work is

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completed, which can often mean they struggle to switch off, as one respondent explained:

“I prioritise work over my family. If my children are not feeling great, I tell them I can’t be off work as there’s no one else that will cover. My evenings are spent doing paperwork that I didn’t get finished, rather than spending time with my family. I never dare to book holidays or days out as I feel I’m always on call.”

In addition, more than half (**55%**) said their personal relationships have been impacted by stress or mental health difficulties caused by or related to work.



of respondents said their personal relationships have been impacted by work-related stress or mental health difficulties

Even those who are able to work more realistic hours often find it challenging to switch off when they leave the setting. “Although the hours I work are not unmanageable, I often leave work feeling extremely stressed and overwhelmed,” said one provider. “It’s not uncommon for me to cancel events that I planned in my non-work life because I don’t feel able to do much more after work than head home and hide out.”

The survey also highlighted the increasing pressures that managers and those in

leadership positions are under. As put by one respondent: “There is always a lot of paperwork to complete in order to keep on top of things e.g. records, ensuring policies are up to date, progress checks to oversee/complete, salaries every month, ensuring HMRC details/payments are up to date, attending online conferences /meetings – I can’t always fit them in due to timings – enrol new children, prepare and print invoices, answer enquiries from customers, prepare planning – the list goes on. When do I ever get an evening or weekend to myself?”

Many manager respondents noted that ongoing staff shortages has meant they have to be counted in ratio during the day, and that as a result, evenings and weekends are often the only time when they are able to get work done.

“Recruitment problems affecting the sector have led to me being permanently in ratios so I struggle to find the time to complete paperwork, ensure legislation is kept on top of, manage children’s learning journeys [and] attend training,” said one manager. Another commented: “I love my work with the children which I truly believe makes a difference to them, but the pressures of being manager, trustee, DSL [dedicated safeguarding lead] and Senco are huge. Recruitment is constantly difficult so I’m often in ratio, leaving much of the admin and Senco role to be done outside my working hours.”

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"I feel tired and worried a lot – so when I'm not in work, I find myself still thinking about work. I also spend a lot of time planning and providing team building activities to try to cheer the staff up and keep them going."

A number of respondents in leadership positions also said that while they place a lot of value on the wellbeing of their team or teams, they rarely have the time or resources to be able to actively support this.

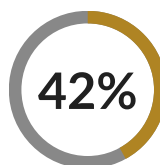
"There is no time, money or staff resources to focus on staff wellbeing," said one manager. "We are unable to find qualified staff who are prepared to work for minimum wage, which means we have no staff cover to give people time off or release staff to go on courses. Anything extra-curricular must be done in their own time on evenings or weekends, which further impacts on their work-life balance."

Impact on overall health

Unsurprisingly, work-related stresses have had a lasting impact on many educators' wider wellbeing, with the vast majority of respondents identifying at least one long-term health condition prompted by on-the-job stresses.

Anxiety was the most commonly-cited

consequence of work-related stress (**67%**), followed by fatigue (**65%**) and loss of motivation (**64%**). In total, **15%** of respondents said they have taken time off work due to work-related stress or mental health difficulties, while **6%** have resigned from their role. In addition, more than four in ten (**42%**) said their work performance has been negatively affected due to stress.



of respondents said their work performance has been negatively affected due to stress

As one respondent explained: "I have no energy or enthusiasm to fulfil my role, I feel stressed and not able to function on the tasks I need to. This causes anxiety."



"I love working with the children and seeing them progress. What I don't like is the ridiculous amount of paperwork. At the moment, I'm off work with depression."

Others detailed serious and long-term physical health conditions prompted by job-related stresses, including ulcers, heart conditions and high blood pressure. One respondent said they are currently in speech and language therapy after work-related

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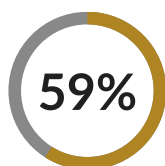
stress prompted them to lose their voice.

The most serious and concerning finding of the survey is that several respondents have or are experiencing suicidal thoughts, which have either been prompted by or worsened due to job stresses. In total, **3%** stated that they had thoughts of ending their own life as a result of the overwhelming responsibility placed on them in their early years role.

In the UK, Samaritans can be contacted on freephone on 116 123, or by emailing jo@samaritans.org

Negative perception of working in the sector

Overall, nearly three in five (**59%**) said they felt negatively about working in the early years sector. It should be noted that many respondents said that they love aspects of their role where they work with children; however, for a significant proportion, the enjoyment they take from this is all too often dwarfed by work-related stresses.



of respondents said that they felt negatively about working in the early years sector

One respondent said: "I love the setting I work in, the ethos and care for the staff and children. However, the early years sector as

a whole makes me feel sad, underappreciated and something I feel very negative about it."



"I love my job and the little people I educate and care for, but I have never been so disheartened as I am now. Although I know what I do and the effort and commitment I put into my role is worthwhile, I can't help but feel worthless."

Notably, respondents who have been early educators for many years have said that the challenges facing the sector, combined with a lack of external support and respect, have led to an increasingly negative view of their role and the sector as a whole. One respondent said: "[The] early years has changed. Employment crises affect the overall feel of working in the sector. Expectations are so high and the fact that there is a shortage of quality staff does not allow [settings] to reach these expectations, no matter how much we want to... Passion is on its death bed."

Indeed, waning passion due to work-related pressures was a running thread throughout the survey responses. One said: "There are so many contributory factors that cause me to feel pretty numb about working in the early years if I'm honest. Despite my passion and dedication, a lot of hours, blood, sweat, tears and 24/7 working during the first five

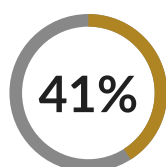
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years, so many factors have let us down and caused me to feel complacent. I have considered selling my business recently to at least come away with something, which is absolutely not the reason I set up my business in the first place [and] is devastating in itself.”

Another commented: “We are passionate about inspiring young minds but at times Tesco seems very appealing: better pay, better hours and less responsibility.”

Meeting the needs of children

Respondents also highlighted that a rise in the number of young children with additional needs – which many attributed at least in part to the pandemic – and the subsequent impact this has had on children’s behaviour and development has been a driver of stress. Overall, two in five (**41%**) respondents said they find it stressful to meet the needs of children at their setting ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ often.



of respondents said they find it stressful to meet the needs of children at their setting ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ often

One respondent commented that children in their setting have struggled with behaviour more than previous years, and that this, coupled with a lack of funding, has made it difficult for them to manage: “I enjoy working with the children, but in recent

years, it has become more challenging,” they said. “We seem to be getting more children with additional needs, including some very challenging behaviour including hitting, kicking and biting staff or other children. Funding is never enough [to appoint] extra staff to shadow these children to give them the support they really need. We do our best with the resources we have.”

Another said: “The impact Covid has had on interactions with some children has been hard. We have got lots of children with additional needs ... there is so much paperwork for EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan) assessment applications. There is very little support [from] outside agencies due to massive waiting lists, so all in all, [it is] quite negative.”



“The job has changed. We experience more children who are challenging and expected to be experts in various fields in dealing with them. The pay is low. Practitioners are giving the best of care as it is a job involving emotional attachments, and this can affect staff mental health.”

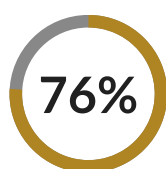
One provider said they were concerned about the impact this has on educators’ individual wellbeing: “I am concerned about the mental health of our staff. They are

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under so much pressure for every child to achieve, which I agree with, but how do you support children with additional needs, children with EAL [English as an additional language], those without support and those who need challenging activities all at once, while giving equal care to each child to enable them to achieve their full potential? It is impossible.”

Internal support

Overall, only half of respondents (**53%**) said they have reached out to someone in their workplace about their work stress or mental health issues. However, of those that did, more than three quarters (**76%**) felt they were given adequate support.



of respondents who had reached out to someone in their workplace felt they were given adequate support

For example, respondents spoke of being directed to counselling services, working with colleagues to brainstorm strategies to lighten their workload, and temporarily working reduced hours.

One respondent explained that their manager has played a key role in helping to ease on-the-job stresses: “My manager is amazing and allows all staff to take time off or adjust anything if needed because she understands that her staff’s mental health is the most important [aspect] of being able to

provide the best care for children,” they said.

Others also highlighted that although their role has an impact on their mental health, working in a supportive environment has helped them feel less isolated and they have been able to take comfort in the fact that they are dealing with the same worries. As one respondent explained: “We are very much a team and talk to each other regularly about the challenges we face.”

However, others commented that while they appreciate the support of colleagues, given that many of their stresses and worries stem from long-term industry-wide issues such as funding or staffing, there is rarely action they can take to ease the pressures:

“When we shared our issues with our manager, he listened and empathised and reminded us that it was a sector-wide issue,” said one provider. “Although it was good to share our experiences, it did not leave me feeling more supported or better able to cope with my work life and the impact it is having on my mental health and wider life.”



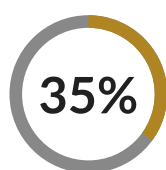
“Apart from sympathy, there is nothing anyone can do to help. The problems that cause stress and ill health [will not be solved] unless things change, and we are funded properly.”

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Those in senior positions also said they often struggled to find an appropriate person to open up to as they didn't want to burden more junior colleagues with their worries. As put by one respondent: "As the manager, it's my job to relieve the burden on my team – not add to it."

Long-term impact

It's clear from the results of this survey that if the causes of work-related mental health issues are left unaddressed, it is likely to worsen an already acute sector-wide recruitment and retention crisis. More than a third of respondents (**35%**) said they were actively considering leaving the sector due to stress and mental health difficulties, a ten-percentage point increase compared with the Alliance's 2018 *Minds Matter* survey.



of respondents said they were actively considering leaving the sector due to stress and mental health difficulties

Meanwhile, a further **6%** have either confirmed that they are leaving (**4%**) or have already left the early years (**2%**). Only a fifth (**20%**) said they had not considered leaving the sector's workforce.

Even providers who have spent decades in the early years said they are questioning whether remaining in the sector is worth the impact it is having on their mental health, as

one respondent explained:

"I have worked in the early years, and in this particular job, for over 25 years. Each year the pressure gets greater and the funding gets less in real terms. I am seriously thinking of giving up, but I worry I don't have enough money to pay the redundancy payments for staff."



"I am currently looking to sell or close the nursery. [It's] heartbreaking but I can't take much more pressure, motivating a workforce that is underpaid and undervalued."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this survey paint an incredibly concerning picture of the wellbeing of the early years workforce.

Although providers – rightly – take great joy, pleasure and professional pride from the child-focused aspects of their role, for many, this is not enough to mitigate the myriad of day-to-day pressures they are required to cope with.

With Ofsted listed as the most significant driver of stress, it's clear that this must be a key area of focus in any efforts to address the concerns highlighted in this report. However, while Ofsted announced several changes to its inspection process this year, almost all – with the exception of changes to the complaints process – failed to include the early years.

That said, although Ofsted is the most common driver of stress among early educators, as this report highlights, it is far from the only one. Respondents voiced a clear frustration with the disconnect between government policy and the reality of working in the early years sector, something that has only been compounded by the upcoming expansion of the 30-hour offer. In addition, sector pay remains a notable cause for concern, with wages in the early years not only failing to match the responsibilities of the educator role but, in an increasing number of instances, failing to cover basic living costs.

The fact that over a third of respondents are actively considering leaving the sector because of the impact that working in the early years is having on their mental health should be cause for serious alarm among policymakers, especially in light of the upcoming early entitlement expansion. While we of course recognise that mental health challenges are complicated and nuanced, and there are no quick-fixes or overnight solutions, we believe that there are a number of steps that could be taken to address worsening mental health across the sector and go at least some way to ensuring that educators feel supported.

These include:

- A holistic and comprehensive review of Ofsted's inspection process, including the early years, with a view to replacing the single-word judgement with a narrative summary, and an emphasis on ensuring that inspections are a collaborative and positive process focused on supporting high-quality provision.
- An updated joint review of administrative requirements in the early years sector by the Department for Education and Ofsted in partnership with the Early Years Alliance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The consistent provision of clear, plain-English sector guidance on all new and upcoming policy and legislation changes.
- The development of guidance and resources to help improve discussions around stress and mental health in early years settings, as well as a review of the support mechanisms available for childminding professionals and other non-group-based early years providers.

Of course, these recommendations can only ever effect positive change in the sector if they are underpinned by policy changes that tackle the fundamental challenges facing the sector – namely:

- An increase in early years funding levels to ensure that rates cover the cost of delivering high-quality early years places, and the establishment of a mechanism through which to ensure that rates increase on an annual basis going forward to reflect rising business costs, such as statutory wage requirements, business rates, and mortgages and rents.
- A clear and comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy for the early years sector to support settings to be able to recruit and retain educators, and support to enable settings to dedicate time to training and other professional development opportunities.

Despite the clear feelings of frustration, concern and anger expressed throughout the survey, what also shone through the responses was the incredible dedication and commitment of educators to the children and families they care for, educate and support. Those working in the early years love what they do at its core – it is all the additional layers of pressure, alongside a sustained lack of support, that has brought the sector to the precarious position it is in today.

We firmly believe that it is possible to turn the current situation around, and with so much political focus currently on the early years, there has never been a better opportunity to do so. We therefore urge policymakers to take urgent and decisive action on this critical issue.

The early years workforce is the very heart of our vital sector – it's time they were treated with the appreciation, recognition and professional respect they deserve.



“I hope the government will start reflecting on what the early years staff do, see them for their worth and keep as many as [possible] in the profession [to ensure] better outcomes for children.”

“I don't want to give in; I want to have hope that it will improve.”

“I am passionate about what I do. I truly believe that I make a difference to the children that come through our doors, and for that reason I would not leave.”

FULL SURVEY FINDINGS

How would you best describe where you work in the early years?

Nursery: **31%**

Pre-school: **47%**

Childminding professional: **16%**

Maintained nursery school: **0%**

Primary school nursery class: **1%**

Out of hours club: **1%**

Children's centre: **0%**

Specialist provision: **0%**

Other: **3%**

How would you best describe your role within your setting?

Owner only: **5%**

Both owner and manager: **20%**

Manager only: **38%**

Deputy manager: **8%**

Early years teacher/professional/Level 6 educator: **6%**

Room leader: **2%**

Level 4 or 5 educator: **1%**

Level 3 educator: **8%**

Level 2 educator: **1%**

Level 2 assistant: **0%**

Unqualified educator: **1%**

Apprentice: **0%**

Other: **9%**

[Excluding those who answered 'Owners only'] **How regularly do you work outside of normal paid working hours?**

Very often: **63%**

Quite often: **19%**

Sometimes: **11%**

Rarely: **5%**

Never: **2%**

FULL SURVEY FINDINGS

[Excluding those who answered 'Owners only'] **How many additional hours do you think this adds up to on average each week?**

Less than 5 hours: **35%**

6 – 10 hours: **39%**

11 – 15 hours: **12%**

16 – 20 hours: **7%**

More than 20 hours: **7%**

[Only those who answered 'Owners only'] **How regularly do you work outside of what you would consider to be reasonable working hours?**

Very often: **53%**

Quite often: **21%**

Sometimes: **15%**

Rarely: **8%**

Never: **3%**

How many additional hours do you think this adds up to on average each week?

Less than 5 hours: **33%**

6 – 10 hours: **39%**

11 – 15 hours: **12%**

16 – 20 hours: **6%**

More than 20 hours: **9%**

How long have you worked in the early years sector?

Less than a year: **1%**

1 – 5 years: **5%**

6 – 10 years: **11%**

11 – 15 years: **17%**

16 – 20 years: **19%**

More than 20 years: **48%**

How would you describe how you feel about working in the early years sector at the moment?

Very positive: **5%**

Somewhat positive: **20%**

Neither positive nor negative: **16%**

Somewhat negative: **40%**

Very negative: **19%**

FULL SURVEY FINDINGS

Thinking of your current early years role, how often over the past month have you felt stressed about work or an issue relating to work?

Very often: **54%**

Fairly often: **27%**

Sometimes: **15%**

Rarely: **3%**

Never: **0%**

How often do you feel the following are a source of stress? Please select the response that most applies to your current situation.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often
Administration and paperwork	2%	7%	28%	33%	31%
Workload (other than administration and paperwork)	1%	9%	30%	33%	28%
Working hours	5%	17%	32%	24%	22%
Pay	3%	7%	21%	24%	46%
Morale within your team or setting	8%	14%	32%	27%	20%
Relationships with colleagues	23%	35%	25%	11%	6%
Relationships with parents	11%	37%	36%	11%	5%

FULL SURVEY FINDINGS

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often
Financial resources of the setting /provision	2%	7%	20%	26%	44%
Meeting the needs of children	9%	21%	30%	23%	18%
Ofsted inspections	2%	5%	13%	18%	61%
Government policy on early education and childcare	1%	4%	18%	26%	52%

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “I believe that my work and non-work life are balanced.”

Strongly agree: **3%**

Agree: **14%**

Neither agree nor disagree: **21%**

Disagree: **36%**

Strongly disagree: **26%**

Have you experienced any of the following symptoms / health impacts due to work, or where work was a contributing factor, over the past year? Please select all that apply.

Anxiety: **67%**

Fatigue: **65%**

Loss of motivation **64%**

Insomnia: **58%**

Irritability: **52%**

Tearfulness: **52%**

Mood swings: **30%**

Depression: **27%**

FULL SURVEY FINDINGS

Withdrawal: **18%**

Panic attacks: **14%**

Thoughts of ending your own life: **3%**

Self-harm: **1%**

None of the above: **4%**

Prefer not to say: **3%**

Other: **7%**

Has stress or mental health difficulties caused by or related to work caused any of the following over the past year? Please select all that apply.

I have taken time off work: **15%**

I have resigned from my job: **6%**

I have been fired from my job: **0%**

My work performance has been negatively affected: **42%**

My personal relationships have been negatively affected: **55%**

Have you spoken to anybody at your workplace about your work stress or mental health issues?

Yes: **53%**

No: **47%**

[If 'Yes'] **Who did you speak to?**

My manager: **32%**

A senior staff member that wasn't my line manager: **11%**

A colleague: **35%**

Other: **22%**

[If 'Yes'] **Did you feel you were given adequate support?**

Yes: **76%**

No: **24%**

Have you ever considered leaving the early years sector due to stress or mental health difficulties?

Yes, I have already left: **2%**

Yes, I have already confirmed that I will be leaving: **4%**

Yes, I am considering leaving: **35%**

Yes, I have considered it but I don't think I will leave: **38%**

No: **20%**

FULL SURVEY FINDINGS

Have you ever experienced an Ofsted inspection in an early years setting?

Yes: **96%**

No: **4%**

The following questions were asked to respondents who have experienced an Ofsted inspection in an early years setting only.

Thinking of your most recent inspection, how would you describe the experience?

Very positive: **12%**

Positive: **28%**

Neither positive nor negative: **28%**

Negative: **16%**

Very negative: **15%**

Unsure / Can't remember: **1%**

[Those whose most recent inspection was not 'negative' or 'very negative' only] **Have you ever had a negative Ofsted inspection experience?**

Yes: **45%**

No: **47%**

Not sure / Can't remember: **7%**

Have you (or any settings you have worked in) ever filed a formal complaint about an Ofsted inspection?

Yes: **21%**

No: **72%**

Not sure: **7%**

[If 'Yes'] **What was the outcome?**

The complaint was fully upheld: **10%**

The complaint was partially upheld: **17%**

The complaint was not upheld: **53%**

Not sure: **21%**

FULL SURVEY FINDINGS

Have you / any settings you have worked in ever received an Ofsted inspection judgement that you felt was unfair?

No: **48%**

Yes, once: **41%**

Yes, more than once: **11%**

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The current Ofsted inspection regime has a positive impact on the provision of quality care and education in early years settings"?

Strongly agree: **2%**

Somewhat agree: **12%**

Neither agree nor disagree: **23%**

Somewhat disagree: **26%**

Strongly disagree: **37%**

There have been recent calls to overhaul the inspection system, and in particular, to remove the 'single-word grading' judgement approach currently taken, which sees education and care settings receive an overall judgement of 'outstanding', 'good', 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate'. Which of the below best describes your view on proposals to remove single-word Ofsted gradings?

Strongly support the removal of single-word Ofsted gradings: **58%**

Somewhat support the removal of single-word Ofsted gradings: **19%**

Neither support nor oppose the removal of single-word Ofsted gradings: **18%**

Somewhat oppose the removal of single-word Ofsted gradings: **4%**

Strongly oppose the removal of single-word Ofsted gradings: **2%**