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Insights from early years settings

What government can learn from effective frontline practice for boys from low-income families



Shaina Sangha | Sophie Metcalfe | Emma Conway | Nehal Davison

About this report

This report is one of five the Institute has published on how government can better meet the needs of groups that are often overlooked in early years policy, as part of our 'Policy making for left-behind groups' series. Its evidence base informs the recommendations for central government, local authorities and front-line services in our parallel paper: *Early years policy making: How can government ensure that boys from low-income families are not left behind during delivery?*

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Introduction

Policy making has repeatedly overlooked the specific needs of boys from low-income families.¹ In 2024–25, nearly three in five boys eligible for free school meals (FSM) were not reaching a 'good level of development' (GLD, the government's metric for school readiness) by the end of reception year. On top of this, the gender attainment gap for children eligible for FSM is wider than it is for their peers from higher income families.*

For governments seeking to improve children's early development, understanding and determining how best to support this large but poorly served group is critical. If the same proportion of FSM-eligible boys as non-FSM-eligible boys achieved a good level of development in 2024–25, an additional 11,487 children would have reached this developmental milestone. This would have raised the proportion of children who are school-ready nationally from 68.3% to 70.2%. The current Labour government's target is 75% of five-year-olds being school-ready by 2028.

The Institute for Government has previously set out the evidence on why boys from low-income families are among those least likely to be school-ready by age five.² The attainment gaps experienced by this group stem from a combination of biological differences in their development (primarily hormonal and neurological), gender-based differences in expectations and responses to their behaviour (at home, at school and in wider society), and the structural barriers associated with growing up in low-income households. These combine and compound to constrain the early development of boys from low-income families.³

In autumn 2025, we visited four early years settings with a strong focus on serving low-income communities. These promising models offer practical lessons for government on how to better serve boys from low-income families, both in policy making and delivery. This is particularly relevant to the government's school readiness target, but could be applied more widely too – helping to ensure that boys from low-income families are not 'left behind' in the implementation of government early years policy, now or in the future.

Our site visits

Between September and December 2025, we visited four early years settings: Meadows Nursery, Sheffield; Rosebuds Preschool, Brixton; St Edmund's Nursery School, Bradford; and Thomas Coram Nursery, King's Cross. Our aim was to understand the challenges and opportunities parents and early years practitioners face in supporting the early development of boys from low-income families.

* Throughout this report we use eligibility for free school meals (FSM), as collected by the Department for Education (DfE), as a proxy for low income. FSM status remains the primary – and most robust – measure of disadvantage in public data collected by DfE. Using FSM status enables us to explore intersectional disadvantages experienced by boys from low-income families – for example, by SEND status, ethnicity and geography. For further discussion on the use of FSM-eligibility as a proxy for low income, see Metcalfe S and Davison N, *Starting behind, staying behind*, Institute for Government, 20 November 2025, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/policy-making-left-behind-groups-boys-low-income-families

The settings varied in size, geographic location and demographics, and all were rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted.* Each has a strong reputation and serves communities with a high proportion of families on low incomes, including those not eligible for childcare entitlements linked to parental employment. The visits included:

- Eight interviews with head teachers, deputy teachers, directors and managers in early years settings.
- Seventeen interviews with early years practitioners and nursery teachers.
- Three focus groups, hearing the experiences of 25 parents.

These visits were supported by 10 interviews and/or sessions with combined authorities, local authorities, academics, experts and early years sector representatives.

Building on previous Institute analysis, our research set out to deepen our understanding of what holds boys from low-income families back in their early years, and how they can be better served by government. Although we set out to specifically understand what works for this group, we identified a set of principles that are likely to benefit a much wider group of children at risk of poor outcomes.

It is important to highlight however that these settings are exceptional in several respects. Their delivery models are grounded in relatively unique funding arrangements and deliberate choices to direct resources towards improving outcomes for children at risk of poor outcomes. Three of the four settings relied on a combination of government and third sector funding, with two also supplementing this with a private income stream (mainly from hosting other services on site).

More detail about their funding arrangements can be found in the Annex, at the end of this report.

* These settings all have a reputation for effectively supporting boys from low-income families, but we cannot evidence this with data showing the proportion of this group on track to reach a good level of development in these settings. This is for several reasons. Settings did collect attainment data but with their own methodologies so the results are not comparable. We also do not have the contextual data needed to interpret results – for instance, data showing outcomes for other two- to four-year-olds in the same neighbourhoods. Finally, as Sure Start evaluations have shown, the full benefits of support these nurseries provided may only materialise in the long term, and would not necessarily be visible in attainment data collected while children are attending nursery.

This report

This report is one of five the Institute has published on how government can better meet the needs of groups that are often overlooked in early years policy, as part of our series 'Policy making for left-behind groups'.^{*} Its evidence base informs the recommendations for central government, local authorities and front-line services in our parallel paper: *Early years policy making: How can government ensure that boys from low-income families are not left behind during delivery?* It is formed of three chapters:

- **Front-line perspectives on the barriers boys from low-income families face in their earliest years**, drawing on evidence from parents, practitioners and local authority leaders.
- **The role of gender-responsive approaches**. Views on the effectiveness of gender-informed approaches among the parents, practitioners and educational experts we spoke to.
- **Five principles for effective early years provision for boys from low-income families**. Elements of these practices could be adapted in other parts of the system to better serve this group.

^{*} For more detail on how and why boys from low-income families are left behind by policy making in their early years, see: 'The Labour government's "school readiness" target and opportunity mission', Institute for Government, 21 March 2025, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/topics/policy-making/series-policy-making-left-behind-groups/school-readiness

1. Front-line perspectives on the barriers boys from low-income families face in their earliest years

A fundamental of good policy making is understanding the needs and experiences of the groups policy is intended to serve, so that these are properly reflected in how policy is designed and implemented.¹

This chapter sets out the barriers* boys from low-income families face, as described by those who understand their day-to-day lives best: parents, practitioners and local leaders.** Although they described barriers known to affect all children from low-income backgrounds, they also highlighted those that might be experienced more acutely by boys. The key barriers are:

- **Financial pressures** – which affect families’ mental health and ability to meet basic needs
- **Time and resource constraints** – which reduce access to extra-curricular opportunities
- **Poor or insecure housing** – which holds back children’s health and learning
- **A lack of safe outdoor spaces** – which restricts children’s play
- **Poor-quality services** – leaving families’ critical needs poorly served or unmet
- **Standardised reception provision** – which leaves some children further behind

Barrier 1: Financial pressures

Over a quarter of families in England are living in absolute poverty – a figure that has remained largely stable since 2002/03.² In a 2024 survey of health visitors in England and Scotland, 86% identified poverty as one of the biggest issues facing families in need of support.^{3,4} Parents echoed this, describing the challenges of meeting their children’s basic needs – often choosing between food and heating, and relying on food banks and charitable support for daily essentials.

* We presented parents with 12 factors that might make it harder to support their children’s development. Many parents said they experienced more than half of these. This was inspired by the ‘Insecure lives and the policy disconnect’ UKRI-funded project: Tunstall R, Bucelli I, Grugulis I and others, *Insecure lives: The growth and impact of multiple insecurities*, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE), London School of Economics, 6 June 2025, https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/CASE/_NEW/PUBLICATIONS/abstract/?index=11618. The factors we presented families with were: Family relationships; Community; Local area; Money; Housing; Food; Mental health; Physical health; Childcare; Stigma and pressure; Stress; Other factors.

** This builds on previous Institute for Government research, which sets out the existing evidence base for what holds [boys from low-income families](#) back in their early development, and the [systemic policy making failures](#) behind why successive governments have left some children behind from the start.

Financial pressures can create and exacerbate other challenges – like poor housing or health – making it difficult for children in these circumstances to access the foundations for good development.

**“[I am] literally scraping it pay day to pay day, even though I work and get no benefits”
– Parent, Brixton**

Material hardship significantly increases families’ risk of poor mental health,⁵ with knock-on effects on children’s development. Parents described managing their own mental health struggles and feelings of guilt, while trying to do the best for their children. This included never being able to afford ‘nice’ things for their children, such as day trips or unplanned purchases like a magazine.^{6,7,8,9,10,11} Research by the children’s commissioner has highlighted how financial insecurity affects children’s self-perception and mental health, producing feelings of shame, embarrassment and constant anxiety about, for example, their housing circumstances and food security.¹²

Box 1 How does this barrier specifically affect boys from low-income families?

Academic research has suggested that boys and girls differ in their coping mechanisms to material hardship, with boys more likely to externalise their emotions. This behaviour can be perceived as ‘disruptive’ in the classroom, contributing to lower teacher expectations and more punitive action for this group, with detrimental impacts on their learning and development.^{13,14} Boys are twice as likely as girls, for instance, to be permanently excluded across all state-funded primary, secondary and special school settings, and the rate of exclusion among all children eligible for free school meals is five times higher than for their peers.¹⁵

Barrier 2: Time and resource constraints

It is well-evidenced that children from low-income backgrounds have limited access to extra-curricular and enrichment activities that support play, communication, exploration, and social and emotional development.¹⁶ In Sheffield, high transport costs and poor connectivity confined parents to limited options in their neighbourhood. In Brixton, although more extra-curricular support was available, parents said they were either unaffordable or poor quality. Irregular working patterns (including shift and night work) also limit the amount of time parents have to support children with activities that could help their development.

“Where are the free things that kids can do when their mum can’t afford to send them to swimming club, boxing club?” – Parent, Sheffield

Box 2 **How does this barrier specifically affect boys from low-income families?**

Boys from low-income families are likely to experience fewer opportunities for learning at home. BookTrust's 2022 Family Survey found that while girls, in general, access more language-based activities at home than boys, this gender gap is wider in lower income families. Boys from low-income families may therefore miss out on the benefits of language development and socio-emotional skills associated with shared reading.^{17,18}

The reasons for this are complex. One explanation is that care-givers are more likely to speak to infants who have already started speaking, "talking-to-talkers".¹⁹ As girls tend to develop language skills earlier, they are likely to benefit from more frequent and regular communication with adults at home, while boys tend to experience the reverse.²⁰ Families on low incomes face time and resource pressures, which leave less time for language-based activities, which may compound gender-based differences in treatment experienced by boys.^{21,22}

Barrier 3: Poor or insecure housing

"Housing is a disaster for many, many families and completely preoccupies them."
– *Early years leader, King's Cross*

Poor housing is a well-known barrier to children's development and presents significant physical and mental health risks to children and their families, increasing the risk of severe ill-health or disability by up to 25% in childhood and early adulthood.²³ Particular risks to children include respiratory problems²⁴ and lower weight gain in cold homes,²⁵ higher risks of contracting infectious diseases like tuberculosis²⁶ and meningitis²⁷ in overcrowded homes, and challenges to emotional self-regulation in poor quality environments.²⁸

Almost every family we spoke to had experiences of poor housing. Some were on long waiting lists for social housing and, in the meantime, living in overcrowded homes or frequently moving between temporary accommodation with limited space for children to play. Examples included:

- Having to turn down a long-awaited council house because it was unsafe, with extensive water damage and mould.
- A child developing asthma while living in a mouldy flat.
- Living in housing that was unsuitable for a child with physical disabilities, with steep stairs separating the child's bedroom and other living quarters.
- Parents sharing beds with their children or sleeping on an inflatable mattress in their kitchen.

This has consequences for children’s learning. We heard that the children in the settings we visited were often tired or ill at nursery: sleeping through sessions, feeling irritated and distressed or, conversely, difficult to settle with lots of unspent energy due to the lack of space to play at home.

“I’ve actually had people come and say I was going to come to a meeting about my kids this afternoon, but look at this and they showed me a picture of how their radiator’s leaked all over the floor or they can’t move into their new house from the refuge because it’s full of mice or the windows don’t close or, you know, quality of housing. And I think that has got worse.” – *Early years leader, King’s Cross*

Box 3 **How does this barrier specifically affect boys from low-income families?**

Poor-quality housing has a detrimental impact on all children, but may be more acutely felt by boys. As above (Box 1), there is some evidence that young boys may externalise frustration with their circumstances more.²⁹ Behavioural challenges can result in different expectations and treatment in the classroom, disrupting learning and leaving this group further behind.

Barrier 4: A lack of safe outdoor spaces

Academic research is clear that playing outside supports physical development, including immune and bone health, as well as cognitive development, relating to learning, social connectedness, confidence building and resilience.^{30,31,32} However, as is common in deprived areas,^{33,34} parents told us they could not access safe outdoor play and green spaces,* with no private or shared garden, and local spaces often being littered, poorly maintained and unsafe (sometimes even strewn with needles, or hotspots for local crime).

“A lot of these families, the only time their children get to go outside is when they come to nursery and play in the garden.” – *Early years practitioner, King’s Cross*

* The government has provided investment to local authorities for children’s play areas, including through the Youth Matters national strategy. It has also stated that £400 million will be spent on sports facilities across the UK, with a focus on providing access for under-represented groups. www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version

Box 4 **How does this barrier specifically affect boys from low-income families?**

While every child needs access to safe outdoor play, its absence is acutely felt by children who depend on movement to regulate and engage. Parents we spoke to told us that this was particularly true for their sons, who needed more space to move and 'let off steam'. There is evidence that the need for more physical activity is a 'boy-leaning' characteristic (that is, all children can have this characteristic, but it is more common in boys).^{35,36}

Barrier 5: Poor-quality services

Stretched public services – still, despite recent funding uplifts, negotiating a combination of real-terms funding cuts and rising demand since 2010 – emerged as a major barrier to boys from low-income families' early development. Parents described the effect: services that were provided too late; inconsistent; not joined up; poorly designed; providing the 'bare minimum'; and sometimes failing on the fundamentals.

Table 1 **Public service shortcomings, as experienced by low-income families**

Issue	Example
Provided too late	A Bradford early years leader told us that the thresholds for triggering 'early help support' [*] were far too high so support was "nowhere near early enough... There's so much paperwork in order to get early help support that we just don't bother... By the time they qualify for early help... things have got quite serious already".
	A practitioner told us: "We have children who probably require an EHCP [education, health and care plan], but don't have one yet because the system hasn't picked them up... They have not been seen or flagged by health care professionals."
Inconsistent	One parent told us: "Everyone you see is different... There are some you see weekly. There are some that disappear."
	A parent whose son is visually impaired explained that they used to see his previous physiotherapist weekly, but had not seen his new physiotherapist for almost a year.
Not joined up	Another parent who interacts with different local services (such as the sleep clinic and Right to Choose services ^{**}) noted that different parts of the system were not "speaking to each other", with slow referrals and crucial details missed during handovers or transitions.

* A preventative service designed to avoid the need for later social care involvement.

** Parents can choose the health care provider that provides additional support to their children.

Poorly designed	Some services were not designed with the needs of families living on low incomes in mind. For instance, some wraparound care providers require parents to pay for childcare in blocks, but many are living from one Universal Credit payment to the next and unable to save a lump sum.
Delivering the 'bare minimum'	We heard how opportunities for children to learn and socialise (like local play and learn groups, parental support networks and baby massage) had been scaled back. Practitioners now describe "seeing children that have probably never been outside of their house, except to go to the shops", impacting their communication and social development.
	Practitioners and families described health visitors providing a 'tick box' service. They report parents simply being handed leaflets with no follow-up after a visit, beyond a routine six-month phone call check-in (which parents reported happening with variable consistency).
	Parents felt after-school clubs, often run by external agencies, focused on minimising costs and making a profit, rather than providing a good service with engaging activities and quality meals and snacks.
Failing on the fundamentals	In some cases, families report fundamental failures in services. A mother in Sheffield disclosed to a health visitor that she feared she was at risk of harming her child, due to the chronic stress and lack of support she was experiencing. She told us that she never received any follow-up support from the health visitor or another service following that disclosure.

Box 5 How does this barrier specifically affect boys from low-income families?

Previous Institute for Government analysis shows that boys from low-income families are least likely to reach expected levels of development in literacy and numeracy skills – both key building blocks for later attainment. This group is also more likely to have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and if so is less likely to meet early learning goals than other children also with SEND. The failure of services to detect issues early and provide appropriate support can hinder this group's development during their formative early years, with long-term effects.^{37,38} For example, one study of boys aged eight to 16 years old who were excluded from school found that many had unidentified language and expression problems, emphasising the importance of early identification of need.³⁹

* This may partially reflect higher barriers to accessing support after needs have been identified. The Sutton Trust has found that children from more affluent homes are more likely to receive an EHCP, secure special school places, and successfully use the tribunal system to secure greater support for their children. Indeed, nine of the 10 councils that saw the highest number of EHCP applications were in the 50% most affluent council areas.

Barrier 6: Standardised reception provision

Those working in early years settings and schools describe the curriculum moving forward relentlessly – “like a juggernaut”. Fatigue across the system has reportedly fostered a tick-box mentality and a ‘one size fits all’ approach, which can obscure differences between children and the specific challenges some families face.*

This can undermine the quality of children’s educational experiences, and may disproportionately affect children from low-income households, and particularly boys,⁴⁰ who are already subject to lower teacher expectations and more punitive responses to their behaviour.**,^{41,42} This group would potentially stand to benefit most from teachers having the time and resources to support them individually. Parents told us that:

- **The expectations placed on parents and children were too high:** Parents felt that schools had unrealistic expectations of the time and expertise they had to support with homework, especially as their children were often too tired or overstimulated after a long school day to engage with learning well.
- **Schools did not invest in building relationships with families:** Parents felt that schools did not spend time connecting with parents and understanding what might be behind things like missed homework or behaviour issues. One parent spoke about how her child’s homework involved printing out worksheets, which was infeasible for her and for many families without a home printer: a reality that was clearly overlooked by the school.

The government and some parents can reasonably disagree about the various purposes of schooling and how spending should be allocated, including the extent to which provision should be standardised or tailored. However, families who felt that they had not been served effectively by other local services shared the view that a standardised approach felt particularly challenging for them.

Early years practitioners agreed and noted that parents often struggled with the transition to school, especially if they had received valuable and hands-on support from their previous nursery. After children have moved on to primary school, practitioners in Sheffield noted families stayed involved in the nursery community, while in Bradford parents came back for support with housing forms and translation from nursery staff.

* These impressions of teacher/school attitudes to low-income families manifest later in poorer quality relationships between schools and boys from low-income backgrounds. Boys aged 12–16 surveyed by Boys’ Impact describe respect from teachers as “inconsistent, compliance-driven and transactional”, and report that they do not always feel listened to with teacher describing interactions either as “tokenistic” or “focused narrowly on academic performance, rather than their broader lives, identities and pressures.” [<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/657178a3f8a237185d075437/t/6981ba0142cd5c0c77876448/1770109441897/Dignity+Respect+and+Meaningful+Engagement+in+the+Classroom.pdf>]

** Influenced by gender stereotypes, teachers are more likely to perceive boys as ‘unable to sit still’, ‘noisy and disruptive’, ‘lazy or apathetic’ and ‘less mature than girls’, shaping how they interpret and respond to their behaviour. A longitudinal study of children aged 6–9 found that teachers tend to label ‘playful’ boys as ‘class clowns’, seeing them as rebellious and intrusive, and communicating this in the classroom through verbal and non-verbal reprimands. The study linked this shift in teacher behaviour to lower attainment among playful boys (an impact not experienced by playful girls, who escaped the ‘class clown’ label).

Box 6 **How does this barrier specifically affect boys from low-income families?**

Those we spoke to had differing views on the extent to which boys require a tailored pedagogical approach, but many acknowledged that the current system implicitly and explicitly treats boys and girls differently, which can contribute to boys from low-income families disengaging from learning.* They noted that the school curriculum typically asks children to sit still, write, and not speak unless asked to. In this environment, children who are more active – which, as above, is a ‘boy-leaning’ characteristic – may disengage from school at an early age.^{43,44,45,46} Academic research also suggests that teachers – on average – have lower expectations of boys, especially those from low-income families.^{47,48,49,50}

The experiences described in this chapter exemplify the barriers families on low incomes face in supporting their children – and particularly sons – to reach a good level of development at age five. This presents a challenge to central government: how can policy making account for these barriers appropriately, to ensure boys from low-income families are not left behind in early years policy?

* For more detail on these differences, see Metcalfe S and Davison N, *Starting behind, staying behind*, Institute for Government, 20 November 2025, p. 20, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/policy-making-left-behind-groups-boys-low-income-families

2. The role of gender-responsive approaches

To ensure boys from low-income families do not get left behind in early years policy, government and front-line services need to understand whether – and to what extent – this group requires tailored approaches in service delivery that differ from the general population of children.

Through our research, three approaches emerged as potentially beneficial for boys' early development in early years settings, particularly for those from low-income families:

1. More opportunities for outdoor physical play and learning^{1,2}
2. Increasing the number of male early years practitioners^{3,4}
3. Applying gendered-informed approaches to learning.⁵

However, we found that the evidence for each of these is either contested or limited. Each may reap rewards in the right setting for the right child, but the parents, practitioners and experts we spoke to held a range of views on their importance for the group more generally. In other words, while all have potential value, none offers a silver bullet for better serving boys from low-income families.* Below, we provide a brief overview of these approaches:

1. More opportunities for physical play and learning

There is some evidence that boys in particular need opportunities to expend energy to improve concentration and self-regulation. Several practitioners and parents we spoke to observed this, and research by academics has found that physical play is especially important for children who show a strong 'physical activity drive', a trait that tends to be more common among boys than girls.^{6,7,8,9} At the same time, some practitioners and experts we spoke to noted that making assumptions about how children learn can be counterproductive (see Principle 3).¹⁰

While outdoor play can be useful for boys, it is likely to be beneficial for *all* children, and particularly those who do not have access to safe outdoor spaces at or near their home.^{11,12} The settings we visited provided activities and spaces for children to engage in physical play and learning, including 'free flow' spaces where all children could access an outdoor area at most times. This was in part because the nurseries recognised that many children from low-income families would return to "a box flat ... with nowhere to run around" at the end of their session.

* Chapter 3 sets out other factors that are arguably more critical, but not specific to this group and could support a wider group of children at risk of poor outcomes.

2. Increasing the number of male early years practitioners

Successive governments have developed strategies and campaigns to encourage more men into the early years workforce – though male practitioners still account for just 3% of the early years workforce nationally.^{13,14,15}

Early years leaders recognise the importance of having both men and women in nurturing, caring and educational roles.¹⁶ There are broad benefits to improving the gender diversity of early years settings, including reducing stereotypes and creating richer learning environments.¹⁷ Head teachers and nursery leaders want to recruit more men, recognising their importance in displaying ‘caring’ attitudes and shaping boys’ early attitudes to learning.^{18 19,20,21}

“We need to have a diverse workforce with a variety of interaction styles, interests and approaches to teaching, regardless of gender. It should be about who teaches the activity the best.” – CEO, London Early Years Foundation²²

In King’s Cross, practitioners told us that some children have witnessed domestic abuse perpetrated by men, increasing the importance of having “a positive male figure when [the children] have maybe only experienced really negative ones”. Not all male practitioners will fulfil this exact role but some we spoke to told us they felt this was something unique that they brought to their setting, and which could be especially beneficial for boys.

However, none of the parents we spoke to brought up the role of male practitioners in their sons’ early development. Where they did refer to individual practitioners, this tended to relate to the specific support they offered, regardless of gender. This chimes with research by the London Early Years Foundation and University of Wolverhampton, which found that children do not differentiate between male or female staff members when choosing activities, but gravitate to those who show expertise in activities they enjoy²³.

Therefore, while increasing the number of men working in the sector is likely to be beneficial for all children, including boys from low-income families, our research suggested that it is not the most important factor in better serving this group.

* Male practitioners are particularly under-represented in the early years workforce; 97% of staff at school-based providers and childminders are female, rising to 98% in group-based provision. A combination of factors has contributed to this disparity, including persistent perceptions of early years as ‘feminine’ and the expectation in some households that men should prioritise higher paid roles. Experts we spoke to also highlighted a lingering stigma around men working with young children, driven in part by fears of safeguarding accusations, which can make the profession feel less accessible and less appealing to potential male practitioners. Those already in the sector told us that there is very little national support or professional development, and that opportunities for sharing good practice (e.g. national conferences for male practitioners), have largely disappeared, making it harder to retain the small number of men in the sector.

** As the research authors put it: “What matters is the level of expertise, with children making comments like ‘he is really good at dinosaurs’, or ‘I like playing football with her because ‘she’s good at it.’” <https://oro.open.ac.uk/86321/1/86321.pdf>

3. Gender-informed approaches to learning

"I want children to have equal opportunity. But it's very difficult not to notice ... that many boys and many girls are a bit different. There are always exceptions. There are girls that fit into this pattern. There are boys that don't fit into this pattern. [But in general] They're less interested in things like mark making. They're just not. Three-year-old boys – it's not their thing, and this may well be a biological programme or it could be our expectations... we impose on them. I don't know." – *Early years leader, King's Cross*

Experts are divided on the extent to which boys require a tailored pedagogical approach that is responsive to differing interests from a young age. Some argue that boys do respond best to a specific approach – for instance, where educators clearly articulate the purpose of a task, or design tasks around boys' interests.^{24,25,26,27}

But this gendered approach to how boys learn is similarly contested.^{28,29,30} Several experts caution against 'lumping boys together', arguing that gendered approaches (such as focusing on stereotypical boy interests, or more learning outside) reinforce stereotypes and do not work.^{31,32,33,34,35} Some argue that a more intersectional approach sheds greater light on the needs of each child – observing social class, poverty, place, SEND status, race and ethnicity.³⁶

The settings we visited advocated **being responsive to, but not dogmatic about, gendered differences**. For instance, some early years settings found that designing activities around stereotypical boys' interests – like mark-making using superhero figurines or dinosaur tails – got boys more engaged with the early stages of writing. However, the Bradford setting found relying heavily on gendered expectations of behaviour or interests was unproductive, so staff developed a more individualised approach instead (see below).

"If you win it for the boys, you win it for all." – *Teacher, Boys' Impact Conference*

3. Five principles for effective early years provision for boys from low-income families

“If you put more into the child and their family early on, you reap the rewards later.”
– *Early years leader*

Our research set out to specifically understand how boys from low-income families can be better served by policy making and delivery. This chapter sets out five principles we identified as underpinning effective provision for this group.

These do not centre on gendered approaches, which our site visits showed are not necessarily the solution. They are instead more foundational, looking at how settings grounded interactions with families in care, respect and a shared commitment to improve children’s wellbeing and outcomes. Most of these are not unique to boys, but our research suggests that they are impactful for this group and likely to benefit a much wider group of children at risk of poor outcomes too.

These principles are consistent with wider evidence on the value of ‘relational’ public services.^{*1,2,3} The independent review into children’s social care in 2022 stated that services should support children to be “loved, excel in education, have a good home, have purposeful work and [be] healthy”. As such, the principles below may have relevance beyond the early years system to other public services that shape boys from low-income families’ early development outcomes – from Family Hubs to health visiting.

1. Build deep understanding of **local communities**
2. Centre families, not just children, to build **lasting trusted relationships**
3. Provide practical and meaningful support **for the whole family**
4. **Tailor learning appropriately**, without making assumptions about how different groups learn
5. Equip and empower staff to go ‘above and beyond’ for a **shared mission**.

* Relational public services are services whose effectiveness depends on the quality of the interaction between practitioners and the people they support. They rely on trust, consistency and understanding, rather than one-off transactions or standardised responses. Lowe T and Smith M, ‘Relational public service can tackle hardship in neighbourhoods’, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 19 April 2024, retrieved 2 June 2026, www.jrf.org.uk/neighbourhoods-and-communities/relational-public-service-can-tackle-hardship-in-neighbourhoods

In our parallel report – *Early years policy making: How can government ensure that boys from low-income families are not left behind during delivery?* – we focus on how government, local authorities and front-line services can learn from, and build on, this evidence base to ensure boys from low-income families do not get left behind in the implementation of early years policy.

The potential and limits of scaling these principles across the system

It is important to note again that the four settings we visited were able to serve boys from low-income families effectively in part because of their unique funding arrangements (see the Annex for details) and explicit social purpose. They had been established, with support by government or the third sector, with a clear mission to provide high-quality early education, including for children from families living on low incomes, such as those not eligible for government-subsidised childcare.

Their starting point differs from large commercial providers whose main organisational objective is to operate a service that meets demand for childcare – as a result, catering primarily to the private market and working parents eligible for the government’s childcare entitlements. Because of these unique features, it will not be possible to replicate these models in their entirety across the early years system.*

However, recent changes – including the uplift to the early years pupil premium,** additional inclusion funding*** and the expansion of the school-based nursery programme – create an opportunity for government and practitioners to adopt some of these practices (or elements of them) to better serve boys from low-income families.

The current government has also signalled that it will more actively shape the childcare market – for example, using regulation and incentives to support a wider range of providers into the market.⁴ This could help address the market failures that perpetuate worse outcomes for persistently under-served groups, including boys from low-income families (see our report *Policy making blind spots*⁵).

* Most settings will not have the resources or flexibility to adopt all the practices described in this chapter; more detail on the financial arrangements of each of the settings we visited is found in the Annex of this paper.

** Early years providers can claim early years pupil premium (EYPP) funding to support disadvantaged children taking up early education entitlements. Following the government’s £2 billion extra investment in early years in 2024, the EYPP funding rate is £570 per child per year as of 1 April 2025 – an increase of more than 45% on the previous year. The majority of early years providers use the additional funding for learning materials and other resources for use in the setting. In 2025, 117,160 children received EYPP funding. More than a quarter of group-based and school-based early years settings reported that uncertainty about parents’ eligibility, and difficulties getting parents to apply, were barriers to accessing the additional funding.

*** The government’s schools white paper – published in March 2026 – committed to providing £1.6 billion funding to schools and other educational settings over the next three years through the new Inclusive Mainstream Fund. Settings will be held accountable for how they use this funding to improve their inclusion offer and support children and young people with SEND, albeit potentially before government has itself defined what support settings should provide through National Inclusion Standards (which may not be published until 2028).

Principle 1: Build a deep understanding of local communities

Building a deep understanding of local communities was key for creating trust with families and underpinned the success of each of the settings we visited.

Settings took care to understand the values and experiences of their local communities, using culturally inclusive practices to deepen their relationships with parents. Practitioners who modelled humility, respect, empathy and attentiveness fostered strong and trusting relationships with families from a wide range of cultural backgrounds.^{6,7} For instance, in Bradford, a family support officer (FSO) with a shared heritage and cultural connection with Roma parents could speak to these families in their native Romani, helping them navigate housing issues, apply for SEND support and access financial help.* This same FSO had built trusted relationships with families from South Asian communities too, which he attributed to the care he took to understand and respect cultural differences with Muslim Pakistani families during home visits.

Likewise, several settings we visited employed staff members whose children had previously attended the setting, or had relatives and friends with children enrolled there. This fostered an environment in which parents felt that they 'belonged', as staff both represented and understood them.

Principle 2: Centre families, not just children, to build lasting trusted relationships

"If you want GLD for more children, then you need to support the families as well as the children." – *Early years leader*

"Parents should be at the forefront of what you do." – *Early years practitioner, Bradford*

All professionals who work closely with children seek to model care and respect in their day-to-day interactions with them. However, in the settings we visited, this went further – reflecting their social purpose. Staff were proactive and deliberate in demonstrating care not only for the child, but for the whole family – from how staff communicated with families to the systems of support that they built around them.

In practice, this involved:

Creating a non-judgmental safe space

"Our ethos is that all parents want the best for their children." – *Family support officer, early years setting*

Parents told us that nursery staff made the effort to understand their challenges. They trusted that they would be met with care and empathy, not judgment.^{8,9,10,11} As one parent in Brixton put it: "There's no judgment here. You could come in here crying

* Indeed, the family hub model could take lessons from what makes these EY centres successful; the Bradford setting employs practitioners who speak the languages (Roma and Urdu) most commonly used after English by parents in the community. In comparison, the local council employs expensive translators ad hoc to cover their needs.

your eyes out ... you can come in and bare your soul in front of nursery staff.” Settings created a ‘safe space’ where parents felt supported in part through gestures like providing dedicated rooms for parents to sit, chat or access support in the setting, or organising special events on Mother’s Day.

Starting to build relationships early

Settings built relationships with parents before their child officially started nursery – for instance, through ‘stay and play’ sessions. After building trust in the community, two of the four settings now conduct home visits, which helped them get to know families and their circumstances and support transitions to nursery.*

Getting to know families

“I feel like she knows them, she loves them, she’s doing it from the heart to help them.” – Parent, Sheffield, speaking about a nursery manager’s relationship with parents

Settings went to great efforts to understand the unique profiles of the families they supported, including their personalities, daily challenges and wider support network. For instance, in Bradford, a family support worker connected a younger sibling’s challenges to the wider family situation, where an older sibling required significant support from their parents. Understanding this helped the nursery support the whole family unit better, which parents said they really valued.

Sometimes this support came from key figures with family relationship roles, like the family support officers we met in Bradford. In all the settings, though, this was cultivated through a culture of kindness and respect; in Sheffield, for example, practitioners spoke with pride about their close relationships and shared local roots with families.

Prioritising regular, frequent and high-quality interactions with parents

All the settings placed great emphasis on high-quality, frequent and meaningful interactions with parents. Staff had daily conversations with families at drop-off and pick-up – treating them as ‘partners’ in their child’s development – and would use phone calls to update and check in with families during the day when needed. Alongside offering events to bring families into the setting (like monthly family fun days), one setting fostered family engagement through an ‘open-door’ policy, creating a culture where parents and their extended families were welcome at any time.

Families emphasised how much they appreciated this direct communication. It also empowered practitioners to have difficult conversations with parents (for instance, about safeguarding or developmental concerns), as rapport had already been established.

* This approach requires two members of staff to be offsite for each visit, which may not be feasible for settings with greater resource pressures.

Principle 3: Provide practical and meaningful support for the whole family

While co-production is frequently invoked in discussions about policy and public services, it is often hard to embed meaningfully.^{12,13} In every setting we visited, services were designed and refined in dialogue with families so that they felt a sense of ownership and investment in them. These settings exemplified the principle of working 'with' rather than 'for' communities.¹⁴ This brought huge benefits, both for children's development and families' wellbeing more broadly, and was possible because these settings had embedded Principles 1 and 2.

The table below sets out examples of practical and meaningful support for families that was beneficial for child development.

Table 2 **Examples of practical support that nurseries offered families**

Type of support	Examples
<p>Providing direct material support</p>	<p>Supporting with the basics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arranging access to food parcels and for excess food from local businesses to be dropped off and distributed to parents at the nursery site. • Accompanying a mother with learning difficulties to stay-and-play sessions until she was able to make the journey independently. • Linking a child's absence to not having any clean clothes and the family not being able to afford laundry detergent, which the family support officer provided.
<p>Facilitating access to local services</p>	<p>Using the nursery space as a 'hub' for family services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Settings brought other critical services – like health visitors, midwifery services and housing services – on to their site, either as a permanent base (as in Bradford) or on one-off occasions. • In Sheffield, the nursery manager arranged for a local authority housing manager to speak to parents on specific issues, breaking down (in the words of one parent) "that wall between us and the local authority so we can communicate together".

<p>Supporting parents to develop critical knowledge and skills that can support their child’s development</p>	<p>Parenting courses</p> <p>Poorly designed parenting programmes – especially mandatory ones – can make parents feel stigmatised, judged and patronised.¹⁵ In contrast, the Bradford setting ran popular, highly valued parenting programmes – including on difficult topics like hygiene and neglect – by co-producing them with parents. Trusted practitioners with good existing relationships with parents worked alongside them to design a service that was tailored and free of judgment.</p>
	<p>Training and information sessions</p> <p>Some settings arranged sessions that met parents’ requests and needs, and timed them to coincide with drop-off and pick-up. For example, the Sheffield setting provides courses on parenting children with autism; families told us that this was the first and only practical support they had been offered on this.</p>
	<p>Dedicated activities for dads</p> <p>Activities include Papa’s Pizza Parlour at weekends as well as the FRED (Fathers Reading Every Day) programme. One practitioner told us: “It was great to see the dads reading with [the children] in the corner. We saw the kids getting something different out of it, as well as seeing the dads become more confident.”</p>

	<p>Peer support systems</p> <p>Parents told us that co-produced networks and support groups had been highly beneficial for their emotional wellbeing. In Sheffield, following requests by parents for more peer support, the setting provided space and funding for parents to set up a weekly parents' breakfast club. Many parents cited the impact it has had by reducing isolation, and providing opportunities for parents to meet, share concerns and advice, and look after each other. One mother told us candidly about the effect the nursery's breakfast club community has had on her mental wellbeing, living as a single mum whose child has a disability, with no family in the UK:</p> <p>"I talk to the other mums – each one has a problem and we share it together, we make each other calm... The breakfast club community treated the damage I have inside me and my confidence. We become one family."</p>
<p>Experiences that support child development and would not otherwise be accessible</p>	<p>Day trips</p> <p>Settings offered trips to the seaside and camping weekends for children and families once a year, which would otherwise not be affordable.</p>
	<p>Community days</p> <p>Parents brought in cultural dishes to share and there was face painting or other activities for children to enjoy at no extra cost.</p>
	<p>Themed days</p> <p>Around special holidays, the nursery would put on activities that parents might not otherwise be able to afford, such as pumpkin picking at Halloween, and other activities at Christmas or Diwali.</p>

Principle 4: Tailor learning appropriately, without making assumptions about how different groups learn

“If you support the boys in the right way, they will thrive just as well as the girls.”

– *Early years leader*

As set out in Chapter 2 there are differing views – from the experts we spoke to and in the literature – on the extent to which boys respond best to specific, gender-informed approaches to learning. But the settings we visited told us that **all children can thrive when the approach to their development is individualised**, with some examples of good practice including:

- **Personalised development plans setting out the skills practitioners would work with each child on over the course of a term.** These goals were often mapped against progress measures linked to the early years foundation stage profile (EYFP) and tailored to the history and learning style of each child. In Bradford, practitioners recorded observations weekly and supplemented this with regular data gathering across a range of development indicators eight times a year.
- **Creating dedicated spaces for children with SEND** like sensory rooms, which may be particularly beneficial for boys from low-income families, as they are more likely to have any identified SEND than their peers at age five. Over a quarter of this group had any identified SEND by reception year in 2023–24.
- **Targeted interventions.** In one local authority, speech and language champions in each nursery undertook targeted communication interventions with children who needed additional support.

These approaches may – given the system pressures described in our parallel report – be challenging for many settings to implement. They rely on staff having the capacity and expertise to design and deliver tailored plans and activities. But the rewards can be significant.

As one parent put it: “They have a lot of kids to help, but they make sure that my child gets what they need.” Another parent in Brixton noted that, with support from the nursery, her son – who has additional communication needs – had grown in confidence and was trying to talk more. She told us: “He said good morning to his teacher today – I’ve never heard him say good morning before.”

Principle 5: Equip and empower staff to go 'above and beyond' for a shared mission

"If you're not going to pay people very much, then you need to train them very well, and celebrate the work they do ... to make the industry seem more attractive."
– *Early years leader, Bradford*

The settings we visited had passionate, committed teams, at all levels, from apprentices through to managers. Some told us that they had been working in the same setting for several years because of the fulfilment and respect they received in their work.

It is not feasible for settings to quickly, or without significant public or private investment, make any major changes to wages or workload in the early years profession.¹⁶ However, the settings we visited motivated and empowered their staff to go 'above and beyond' to deliver the best possible provision for families, despite not being able to pay them more. There were four factors that appeared to underpin this:

- **Fulfilment from working closely with families and seeing the daily difference they were making.**
- **Training and progression opportunities** that can change working in the early years from 'a job' to 'a career'. The Sheffield and Bradford nurseries offered on-site training and development opportunities – delivered by academics from a local university – in areas like child neurological development and autism, through apprenticeship training or a compressed learning offer during working hours.
- **Raising practitioners' status** by emphasising the unique and foundational role they play in a child's formative years. The London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) calls all staff 'teachers' to signal respect and reinforce expectations of high-quality provision. In Sheffield, senior management work in the setting alongside practitioners, rather than in separate offices, which staff noted created loyalty and camaraderie.
- **Protecting staff wellbeing.** The Bradford setting has mental health first aiders, wellbeing groups, a wellbeing survey, and two hours of paid 'wellbeing time' per term for each staff member. The nursery also runs 'Pause and Reflect' group sessions to support and discuss staff wellbeing. The Sheffield nursery offers fully paid sick pay, which is considered a departure from the norm in the sector.

These principles underpin exceptional practice and show how boys from low-income families can be better served in their early years. They are also likely to benefit a much wider group of children at risk of poor outcomes too.

It will not be possible for all early years settings to adopt these principles, but government, local authorities and front-line services can learn from them and adapt them where feasible to ensure boys from low-income families do not get left behind in the implementation of early years policy.

Conclusion

Successive governments have persistently overlooked the needs of boys from low-income families, with nearly three in five not school-ready at age five. This report has set out – in the words of parents, practitioners and early years experts – the barriers this group faces and five principles that underpin early years provision that serves them well.

As the current government moves forward with implementing its Best Start in Life agenda, it can learn from the promising models and practices set out in this report. These are a starting point for better policy making and delivery that do not leave boys from low-income families behind, and we encourage policy makers and front-line services to build and adapt them as more is learned about what works for this group, and other children at risk of poor outcomes.

For our recommendations on what government can do over the next 12 months to ensure it does not leave boys from low-income families behind in the implementation of its early years policy, see:

Early years policy making: How can government ensure that boys from low-income families are not left behind during delivery?

Annex: methodology

Between September and December 2025, we visited four early years settings: Meadows Nursery, Sheffield; Rosebuds Preschool, Brixton; St Edmund’s Nursery School, Bradford; and Thomas Coram Nursery, King’s Cross, operational and funding details for which are found below.

Table 3 **Nursery setting case studies, May 2026**

	Meadows Nursery, Sheffield	Rosebuds Preschool, Brixton	St Edmunds Nursery, Bradford	Thomas Coram Nursery, Kings Cross
Children enrolled at setting	50	18	239	105
Age range of children	2-4 years old	2-4 years old	9 months – 4 years old	2-5 years old
No. of children with identified SEND	10	3	20	48
No. of children in receipt of 2-year-old disadvantage offer	18	3	31	65
No. of children eligible for early years pupil premium	32	6	86	34
No. of staff	12	4	106	46
Ofsted rating	Good	Good	Outstanding	Outstanding

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Ofsted reports and data shared directly by early years settings in correspondence with the Institute. The two-year-old disadvantage offer (now generally referred to as 'early learning for two-year-olds' or the offer for families receiving additional support) is a funded early education entitlement in England that gives eligible disadvantaged two-year-olds 15 hours a week of childcare or early education for 38 weeks a year – totalling 570 hours a year. The early years pupil premium (EYPP) is extra government funding for early years settings to help improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children. Paid to local authorities through the dedicated schools grant, and then to eligible early years providers, it is most commonly used to cover the cost of learning materials and resources, as well as staffing costs.

Meadows Nursery, Sheffield: Meadows Nursery was founded through a partnership between Sheffield Hallam University, Watercliffe Meadow Primary School, Sheffield City Council and Save the Children UK. As part of the funding arrangement, representatives from both the charity and university are based in the setting, undertaking research with the community and sharing best practice. Local parents set up their own community interest company and now run a community pantry feeding 50 families per week. The setting has also secured external funding to run health-related services.

Rosebuds Preschool, Brixton: Rosebuds was established by local parents as part of Loughborough Community Centre (a registered charity) in 1981, following the Brixton riots. The setting receives some support from Lambeth Council and has secured funding from other sources, including Impact on Urban Health, the Childhood Trust, and National Lottery Community Fund.

St Edmund's Nursery School, Bradford: As a state-maintained setting, St Edmund's receives core government funding. Beyond this, their Birth-19 partnership secures additional grants and income for key initiatives, including the SCITT (School Centred Initial Teacher Training), the Apprenticeship Academy, the Early Years Stronger Practice Hub and 50 Things to Do Before You're Five. The nursery also receives some dedicated funding to provide "Children's Centre" services, including: Play and Learn sessions (twice weekly), Barnardo's and Portage services, midwifery and breastfeeding support.

Thomas Coram Nursery, King's Cross: Thomas Coram receives support through the Early Years Single Funding Formula, maintained nursery school supplementary grant, and additional funds from Camden Council. The setting also generates a small amount of private income through co-located services like after-school clubs, breakfast clubs and holiday clubs.

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About the authors

Shaina Sangha

Shaina is a researcher in the Institute's policy making team. Her research specialises in policy making for groups historically under-served by the state, with interests in early years and immigration/asylum policy. Before joining the Institute, Shaina worked as research and communications officer for a shadow minister, having graduated with a BA in history in 2023.

Sophie Metcalfe

Sophie is a senior researcher working in the policy making team. Her research specialises in why chronic policy problems persist, and lessons from past UK governments' major policy making success stories. She previously worked as an executive assistant at Resolution Foundation.

Emma Conway

Emma is a research assistant in the policy making team. She graduated with a BSc in international relations in 2025, and has previously worked as a policy intern in the civil service.

Nehal Davison

Nehal is the programme director leading the Institute's work on policy making. Before joining the Institute, she spent seven years working in New Zealand's civil service. Prior to that, she worked at the Institute for Government, where she led work on public services, civil service reform and ministerial development. She has also worked in PwC's Advisory Practice, the think tank Demos and the British Council.

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