

# The use of informal support by families with young children



## Introduction

Ensuring that parents are fully supported in bringing up their children is a key strand of the Government's Early Years Framework. Before we can understand the types of formal support services that parents of young children require, it is necessary to look at the sorts of informal support drawn on by parents. This briefing presents some key findings from the GUS study about how families with young children use informal support.

### What is informal support?

Informal support can be defined as advice, information and support that is sought from and provided by family members, including grandparents, friends and other parents. For example, new parents might seek advice about their child's health and development from family and friends. Formal support is provided by professionals, such as health visitors.

### Key findings

- Mothers with no qualifications and those from low-income households are more likely to have difficulties with seeking advice from professionals and to be wary of doing so than mothers with qualifications and those from high income households.
- Most parents draw on informal support from a wide range of sources, but parents living in disadvantaged circumstances reported more limited informal support networks than those in more advantaged circumstances.
- Almost all families in Scotland receive some form of support from the child's grandparents with many grandparents providing a full range of support, including regular childcare.



**Growing Up in Scotland (GUS)** is a major longitudinal research study following the lives of 8,000 children from infancy through to adolescence. Launched in 2005, the study provides a wealth of information to support policy making and planning of services

for young children and their families. Families taking part in the study are being interviewed annually until their child is 5 to capture crucial data about the early experiences and circumstances of children in Scotland today. For more information about GUS please visit the study website: [www.growingupinScotland.org.uk](http://www.growingupinScotland.org.uk)

The main findings from the first year of interviews (Sweep 1) were published in January 2007. Three further reports were produced to examine in detail

some areas of particular interest to policy makers, practitioners and others. This Briefing provides a summary of the Report 'The Use of Informal Support by Families with Young Children'.

GUS is being carried out by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen) in collaboration with the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) at the University of Edinburgh. The Study is funded by The Scottish Government.

### Attitudes towards seeking help or advice

Most parents do not find it difficult to ask for help when they feel they need it. Most do not have too much trouble finding out who to ask, and are not too concerned about the possibility of interference from the formal services providing support and advice. However, there are some small differences when it comes to attitudes towards seeking help from professionals. Mothers with no qualifications and those from low-income households were more likely to agree that seeking help from professionals would result in interference, and to express difficulty with seeking help or advice than mothers with qualifications and those from higher income households. Some mothers are less confident about seeking help and are more wary of formal intervention.

### Availability of sources of informal support

Virtually all parents have access to some sources of informal support and many have access to a wide range of sources. In general, parents in more socially disadvantaged circumstances reported more limited support networks than more advantaged parents. For younger mothers from low income

households, informal support is more likely to be provided only from their own parents.

### Using sources of informal support

Use of a wide range of types of informal support was reported by GUS families – including mother and toddler groups, advice on pregnancy or child health from friends and relatives and informal sources of childcare.

- 40% of mothers had attended a parent and toddler group in the last year, although attendance at such groups was higher among older mothers and couple families than for younger mothers and lone parents. The most common reason given for not attending groups was a lack of time.
- Younger mothers and lone parents were more likely to say that they felt awkward or shy about attending groups.
- Around 75% of mothers used at least one informal source of information or advice during their pregnancy, with most seeking advice from family or friends.
- Older mothers were more likely than younger mothers to have used formal sources of information and advice.

- Younger mothers and those living in low-income households were more likely than older mothers and those in higher-income households to be using informal childcare provided by the child's grandparents or other family members.
- Older mothers, particularly those aged over 40, were much more likely than younger mothers to have difficulties in arranging emergency childcare.

### Support from the child's grandparents

GUS finds that grandparents are a key source of support for parents in Scotland today. Almost all families (around 95%) were receiving some type of help or support from the child's grandparents. Many families were receiving a full range of support including regular childcare, babysitting, taking the child on outings and also providing financial or material support. Not surprisingly, grandparents provided most support when living close by or even within the household. The use of support from grandparents was highest amongst younger mothers and those on low incomes.

### Conclusion

Contrary to perceptions of the breakdown of support networks, the Growing Up in Scotland study finds that most parents have access to and make considerable use of informal support and only small differences exist across parents and families of varying characteristics.

### Policy implications

More research is needed to investigate the service and advice needs of younger mothers and those in disadvantaged circumstances.

Table 1 - Access of sources of informal support

	Level of access to informal support		
	Low	Medium	High
<b>Annual household income</b>			
Low (less than £8,410)	36%	47%	17%
High (more than £33,572)	10%	49%	41%
<b>Mother's education</b>			
No qualifications	36%	50%	14%
Higher grade or above	13%	50%	37%
<b>Age of mother at birth of child</b>			
Under 20	24%	53%	23%
20-29	18%	50%	32%
30-39	14%	50%	36%
40 or older	26%	43%	31%
<b>All participants</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>33%</b>

These findings are based on GUS Sweep 1, which involved interviews with the main carers of 5,217 children aged 10 months old and 2,859 children aged 34 months old, carried out between April 2005 and March 2006.

'The Use of Informal Support by Families with Young Children' was written by Paul Bradshaw, with Lynn Jamieson and Fran Wasoff. For a copy of the report please see: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/03/12110018/0>

Responsibility for the opinions expressed in this report, and for all interpretation of the data lies solely with the authors.

