

# Summary

## A look at childcare

How parents think about the affordability, accessibility and quality of childcare

Anne Roeters  
Freek Bucx

Original title:  
Kijk op kinderopvang  
978 90 377 0876 9

# Summary and conclusions

## S.1 Background

### New developments, new questions

More than 700,000 children in the Netherlands go to formal childcare (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, hereinafter 'szw', its initials in Dutch, 2018). This means that children up to 4 years of age go to a crèche or a childminder. Children of primary-school age are cared for at childcare facilities outside school (before, between and after school hours, and during holidays) and by childminders. The government wants to encourage the use of formal childcare so that parents can work, or work more hours than they do now. It does this among other things by means of childcare allowance: parents who work, or are following a training course or degree programme, or are looking for work, get a subsidy from the government that covers part of their childcare costs.

Childcare has been through a turbulent period. After a period of growth in the first decade of this century, there was a period of contraction. Starting in 2012, there was a decline in the use of childcare: fewer children attended at a childcare facility, and the number of children who were taken out of care also went up (Portegijs et al. 2014). This was partly because of the economic crisis: unemployment rose, and as a result the number of parents who were entitled to childcare allowance fell. In addition, the government cut back on the childcare allowance, which made childcare more expensive for parents who did have a job. During this period, the affordability of childcare became a major problem for parents (Portegijs et al. 2014). Childcare costs were thus often cited by parents as one reason they were making use of formal childcare either less than they previously had or not at all. Now, in 2018, the economic crisis is behind us. There has been a sharp rise in employment and thus possibly in the need for childcare, too. In recent years, the government has also invested in childcare again. The childcare allowance has been increased, the entitlement to the allowance has been broadened, and ways to make the funding system simpler and more accessible to parents are currently under consideration (Rijksoverheid 2017; TK 2015/2016a, 2015/2016b, 2017/2018a).

In recent years, there has also been a shift in the emphasis in childcare policy. For a long time, the emphasis of legislation was on the affordability and accessibility of childcare facilities. The idea was that women would work more if it was financially advantageous and if they could find a spot for their child. Recently, more and more attention has also been paid to the quality of care and the potential benefits to the children themselves. Scientific research shows that children who go to high-quality childcare facilities are challenged in a playful way, so that they learn and develop (Heckman 2016; Melhuish et al. 2015). This could facilitate the transition to primary school that very young children have to make, and could compensate early on for any disadvantages they have experienced (Bes-

ten en Gesthuizen 2018; SER 2016). This shift in emphasis in the scientific and social debate has resulted in the Innovation and Quality in Childcare Act (hereinafter 'IKK', its initials in Dutch), which is intended to improve the quality of childcare and, specifically, to promote child development (TK 2015/2016a, 2015/2016b).

In the light of the recent developments in the area of childcare, it is important to get a good sense of how things currently stand with childcare in the Netherlands, and especially to find out what parents today think of it. Have the new tone of the debate and of policy, and their new focus, led parents to take a positive view of childcare? How affordable and accessible do they think it is? What do they think of its quality: do they feel that children are getting enough attention and that they benefit from the care they are getting? There is a second reason why it is interesting to check in with parents. The fact is, they play a key role in ensuring the success of policies. The government assumes that both parents and children can benefit from affordable, accessible, high-quality childcare. We also know, however, that reality has a way of being stubborn. Thus, despite the availability of the income-dependent allowance, rates of use of childcare by low-income groups have hit a plateau (CBS 2015; Melhuish et al. 2015; Roeters en Bucx 2016). This means that take-up rates are lowest among families with children who could benefit the most from the allowance. In addition, years of research both in the Netherlands and abroad have shown that the effects on the labour market of reducing childcare costs are quite limited (Akgündüz en Plantenga 2015; CPB 2015). To get a better understanding of why parents make the choices they make, and so that future policy can be aligned more effectively with this stubborn reality, it is crucial that we learn about parents' perceptions and experiences, and about how they go about making the choices they make.

### Aims and approach

The aim of this report is twofold. First, we will outline the policy-related and social background to recent developments in the area of childcare. Second, we will examine parents' perceptions of and experiences with childcare, and look at whether these perceptions are related to their participation in the labour market and to their quality of life. Throughout the report, we distinguish among three 'core dimensions' of childcare: affordability, accessibility and quality.

'Affordability' refers to actual or perceived costs for parents. Do they see childcare as expensive or inexpensive? It therefore does not concern the affordability or otherwise of the system. 'Accessibility' refers to the practical possibilities that parents have to make use of childcare. Care is accessible if parents can find a place for their child during working hours, if the distance to the facility is not too great, and if there are few or no administrative barriers to signing up. The definition of 'quality' is based on the principles of Riksen-Walraven (2004). In keeping with this, we assume that the care provided is of a high quality if it offers emotional safety, stimulates cognitive and non-cognitive skills, and contributes to the child's social development.

In this study, three steps can be distinguished. First of all, we have looked at how childcare has been written about in policy documents and how policy theory (the assumptions underlying policies) has developed in recent years. In the second step, we have charted trends in the characteristics and use of childcare based on national registry data. In the third step, we have analysed the data from a survey of parents.

In the summer of 2017, almost 2,000 parents completed a questionnaire (24% of those invited to take part). The answers were used to determine what parents think about childcare and what their experiences have been with it. We also looked at what forms of childcare these parents make use of, how much work they do, and what their quality of life is. It is important to bear in mind that, on the basis of the data available, it is not possible to investigate how parents go about making the choices they make, or to come to any definitive conclusions about cause-and-effect relationships. For example, we can investigate whether parents who have a more positive view of childcare also use it more often, but we cannot say with any certainty that this means that parents use childcare *because* they have a positive view of it. For this reason, we are cautious in our conclusions, and base ourselves on the scientific literature as much as possible in addition to our own data.

This report focuses on two groups of parents: those with babies ranging in age from 6 to 18 months, and those who have pre-schoolers 4.5 to 5.5 years of age. These parents have recently had to choose what childcare their child will have (either because the period of parental leave has ended, or because the child has started going to school) and will thus still have a clear recollection of the factors they took into consideration. This focus of this research also means, however, that for the most part we have not included parents of toddlers, playgroups, and childcare for older children. It is entirely possible, then, that parents who did not use formal childcare during the period covered by the research will do so at a later stage, or that they will eventually take their child to a playgroup.

## S.2 Answers to the research questions

### S.2.1 To what extent and why does recent government policy focus on the affordability, accessibility and quality of childcare?

#### From austerity measures to investments

In 2014, the cutbacks in childcare were the main reason motivation for the scp report *Childcare: Cutbacks and Decline* (hereinafter 'KiK', its Dutch initials) (Portegijs et al. 2014). At that time, childcare had become too expensive for many parents, and many of them started using it less. Instead, they used more informal care (such as by grandparents) or arranged care themselves, for example by working flexible hours.

Five years later, the picture is very different. In recent years, the government has invested a great deal in childcare and is more active in encouraging greater use of it. This is also reflected in the way in which the costs of childcare are shared among the government, employers and parents. Until recently, the contribution that parents and employers made

was relatively small, but since 2017 the basic premise of the Childcare Act has been followed once again, and each party bears one-third of the costs.

### Greater attention to accessibility and quality

Until a few years ago the primary focus of childcare policy was to make childcare affordable, but in recent years that focus seems to have shifted to increasing the quality of care. For example, the Act on Innovation and Quality in Childcare (hereinafter 'IKK', its initials in Dutch) has laid down new and far-reaching quality requirements. Although policy debates seem to be paying less attention to accessibility, new developments are also taking place in this area. Consideration is being given, for example, to lowering administrative barriers for parents.

### Greater emphasis on childcare as a tool for child development

Although promoting participation in the workforce has never been the sole objective of childcare policy, it has always been the one that has received the most attention in the policy debate. However, with the development of knowledge about the potential benefits to children, and amidst increasing concerns about social inequality, it seems that childcare is being seen more and more as a policy instrument that can also serve social purposes, such as stimulating the broad development of children and combatting inequalities. This is, for example, reflected in the new focus on the quality of care. The current and previous cabinets have also allocated funds to municipalities in order to enable them to provide childcare for toddlers who are not currently entitled to benefits and who do not yet go to preschool. The scholarly literature has shown that the effects of reducing or increasing the childcare benefits on labour participation are relatively limited and that it is precisely in the realm of social objectives that significant gains can be made.

### Scant attention to work-life balance

In the Dutch debate on childcare, scant attention has been paid to the potential benefits for parents' work-life balance. The subject is often touched on briefly, but in the end the emphasis is on parents' participation in the labour market and not so much on their broader wellbeing. This is surprising, since a great deal of attention is paid to these effects in international policy discussions and research (Adema en Whiteford 2007; Notten et al. 2017; SER 2016; Stier et al. 2012; Unicef 2008).

## S.2.2 How have the affordability, accessibility and quality of childcare developed in recent years? How did parents arrange for the care of their children, and how are they doing so now?

### An end to the downward trend

Many parents make use of formal child care. In 2015, for example, no fewer than 422,000 households received childcare benefits. About half of children 3 years of age or younger, and a quarter of those aged between 4 and 12, go to childcare. A few years ago, parents

were still scaling down in their use of childcare (Portegijs et al. 2014), but this no longer seems to be the case. In recent years, the proportion of children going to care has even increased slightly. This trend may be linked to the new investment in childcare, but can also be associated to the economic upturn, which has led to an increase in the number of parents who are working.

### The cost of childcare is dropping for low- and middle-income parents

For the lower- and middle-income groups childcare has become less expensive in recent years. For example, the amount per hour that parents in the lowest income group contribute themselves (i.e., after deduction of the childcare benefits) fell from an average of 80 cents per hour in 2012 to 65 cents per hour in 2016. The costs for higher-income groups fluctuated more over the years. On average, parents in the highest income group paid € 4.41 per hour in 2012. This amount went up to € 6.08 in 2013, and between then and 2016 gradually dropped to € 5.46.

### The quality of childcare is improving slightly, but there is still room for improvement

In the most recent report which monitors the quality of Dutch childcare, the researchers have concluded that the picture is positive overall. On average, the so-called emotional quality (the degree to which children are well cared for and, for instance, are comforted and cuddled) ranges from sufficient to good. The educational quality (the extent to which the development of children is stimulated) is at a lower level, and at the limit of what is internationally considered sufficient. This means that the quality of childcare seems to be good, but that, if the intention is for childcare to be an effective tool for development, it seems there is still room for improvement. There is more variation in the quality of care provided by childminders. For this form of childcare, there are other requirements, too. Over time, there seems to have been a slight increase in the quality of childcare (Fukkink et al. 2013; Slot et al. 2017). Childcare offered to school-age children outside school seems to be an exception to this, but the researchers emphasise that the findings from the most recent reports cannot be compared one-to-one to those from previous reports.

### Little knowledge about accessibility

It is more difficult to say anything about the progress when it comes to accessibility, because it has been looked into in less detail. For example, we do not know about developments when it comes to the number of waiting lists. However, between 2012 and 2016, the average number of childcare centres within a one-kilometre radius remained about the same. The number of childcare facilities for school-age children fell between 2012 and 2014, but remained stable after that.

### Formal childcare is often combined with informal childcare

A few years ago, the downward trend in the use of childcare was accompanied by an increase in the use of informal care (Portegijs et al. 2014). Informal childcare refers to care provided by family members such as grandparents, or by friends or acquaintances. These

days, many parents still use informal care, usually in combination with formal care. Almost half of parents with babies and one in three parents with toddlers have arranged for care in this way. In most two-parent families it is also common for one parent to be at home at some point in the week, while the other is working. Approximately two out of three fathers are at home half a day a week or more. However, this is much more common among mothers: more than nine out of ten mothers are at home at some point while their partner is working.

Parents have also been asked whether their children's childcare centres offer any additional services. And it turned out that many did. For example, most parents could use an app or a website to keep better track of their child, and most centres and childminders provided care before 08:00 and after 18:00. Warm meals for the child are less common. Among parents with babies, 30% indicated that this was an option, while among those with four-year-olds the figure was 15%.

### Most parents are satisfied with the way in which the care of their child or children has been arranged.

Of the parents who do not use formal childcare, three-quarters are satisfied with this situation, while 15% would prefer to use childcare. The remaining 10% are dissatisfied for another reason. Parents who do use childcare are also largely satisfied. However, a quarter of them would prefer their child to spend fewer hours in childcare or not to have to go to care at all. At the time of the KiK study that was done a few years ago, parents were less satisfied with their childcare situation. Among the parents who were using care, for example, there were fewer who said that their child was going to the care for the preferred number of hours. There were also more parents who said they wanted their child to be able to go to childcare (for more hours).

### 5.2.3 What do parents think about the affordability, accessibility and quality of childcare, and what are their experiences with it?

With regard to the question of what parents think about childcare and the childcare system in general, we pay attention to the perceptions of both parents who make use of childcare and those who do not. For experiences with one's own childcare, only those parents whose children are going to childcare were questioned.

#### Four out of ten parents feel that childcare is not affordable

Parents today seem to think less negatively about affordability than they did a few years ago, but a substantial part still feels like care is expensive or too expensive. For example, more than four out of ten agree with the statement that 'nowadays it is almost impossible to pay for childcare'.

Parents who do not make use of childcare are more negative about affordability than parents who do. This may have to do with the fact that many non-users are not entitled to childcare benefits, for example because they or their partners do not have a job. As a result, childcare would be very expensive for them.

But users of childcare facilities are also often critical when it comes to affordability: four out of ten of them regard it as unsatisfactory. It should be noted, however, that opinions on affordability vary with income: parents with a low income are less negative than those with a high income. This is probably because the childcare benefits are income-dependent.

#### Parents also see barriers with regard to accessibility

By no means all parents regard the childcare system as accessible. For example, only one-third of parents think there are enough places available. The rest think there are not enough, or do not have an opinion on this. Approximately one in seven parents also feels that applying for childcare benefits is complicated.

Furthermore, more than one in ten parents with babies, and two in ten with four-year-olds, say that drop-off and pick-up during opening hours are stressful. Parents who bring their babies to a childminder are less likely to see this as a problem. This may be because there are more opportunities to coordinate drop-off and pick-up times with the minder (Boogaard en Bollen 2014).

#### Parents have a positive opinion of quality; non-users have their doubts about safety

Parents are generally positive about the quality of childcare, and this is not that different from a few years ago. They believe, for example, that children are well cared for. Of particular concern is that parents who do not use childcare have doubts about the safety and attention they receive: only one in three is convinced that childcare is a safe environment for their child. Perhaps this is partly because, when the survey was carried out, a lot of attention was being paid in the media to a child-abuse case in childcare centre for school-age children.

Most parents believe that childcare can be beneficial to the development of children. The main advantage parents see from it is that children learn to play with other children. When it comes to child development, the main advantages they see are for toddlers. That childcare can also be good for babies and older children is less obvious to parents.

Parents who do use childcare are significantly more positive about its quality in general than parents who do not. They also usually have good experiences with their own childcare facilities. This is true above all for parents with babies. For example, they appreciate the regularity of the daily schedules and the fact that the facilities communicate clearly with them. Rooms and toys are clean. Parents of children at facilities for school-age children also appreciate the regularity and cleanliness, but are a little less satisfied with possibilities for quiet time. Almost four out of ten parents report that their child sometimes experiences the childcare centre as too busy. In addition, two out of ten parents believe that staff turnover is high.

#### S.2.4 Do parents' perceptions of, and experiences with, childcare depend on their use of childcare and their participation in the labour market?

##### Parents adapt their choice of childcare facility to their personal situation and their ideas about childcare

The government sees childcare as a service that helps parents enter or stay in the workforce – while also furthering the development of children. In keeping with this, parents mention benefits for both their work and their children when asked why they are taking their little one to childcare. For example, one in three parents with babies states that their wish to work more was the most important reason for using formal care. And an equal proportion of parents say that they like the fact that their child can play with other children.

Parents who do not use formal childcare were asked why. They give reasons primarily having to do with the private sphere, such as a preference to take care of their child themselves. Some of them also have no paid work. Parents also mention reasons related to the affordability, accessibility and quality of childcare. For example, more than one-third cited the costs of childcare as a reason not to use it. If the cost of care were reduced, half of these parents would consider formal care. And if more attention were paid to the development of children, one in four would do so.

##### Parents who think more positively about childcare are more likely to make use of it

Parents who see childcare as less expensive, better and more accessible are more likely to use it. For example, whereas there is a likelihood of 40% that parents who take the most critical view when it comes to costs will use formal care (taking into account their background characteristics such as education and income), the likelihood is twice as high – 85% – that parents who think most positively about costs will do so. However, there is no correlation between the perceptions parents have of childcare and the number of hours their children spend in childcare. This suggests that parents who have decided to use childcare will, from that point on, give little or no consideration to cost, accessibility or quality when deciding on how many hours their child will be in childcare for.

##### Mothers work more hours when they use formal care and think more positively about care

Mothers in families that use formal care work more hours than those in families that do not. There is no such correlation when it comes to the father's working hours. We also examined whether families that have a positive opinion on childcare more often opt for a combination of formal childcare with a job for the mother that requires more hours. The results suggest that this is indeed the case for parents who believe that care is affordable and of high quality. As far as accessibility is concerned, particularly those families where parents do not know how accessible childcare is, use formal childcare less often, and the mother works fewer hours.

### S.2.5 Do parents who make greater use of childcare have a better work-life balance and a higher level of emotional wellbeing?

#### Many parents regularly experience a conflict between work and private life

Reconciling work and family life can be difficult for parents. For example, a teacher training day at school may coincide with an important meeting at work. Six out of ten parents regularly, often or always feel that they have little time for themselves and their partners. In addition, four out of ten parents experience the combination of work and childcare as hard, and almost half feel rushed regularly or even more often. This does not seem to detract from their emotional wellbeing, though: nine out of ten parents indicate, for instance, that they feel happy regularly, often or always.

#### Parents who think positively about childcare experience a better quality of life

Parents who see childcare as more affordable, and who experience less stress when dropping off and picking up their child, report a better work-life balance and a higher level of emotional wellbeing. Parents also experience a higher sense of well-being when they feel that their own childcare is of a high quality.

#### Parents who see childcare as more affordable and of a higher quality are more likely to be satisfied.

In order to better understand how parents experience the combination of work and care, we also looked at which parents are satisfied with the number of hours their child is in childcare for, and which parents prefer their child to spend more or fewer hours there. A significant majority of parents are satisfied, but 6% of the parents who use childcare would rather make use of more hours, while 15% of those who do not would rather do so. Those parents who are satisfied generally think positively about the costs and quality of childcare. They also report a better work-life balance and a higher level of emotional well-being.

#### No differences between parents with lower and higher work and family demands

Because it is conceivable that some parents could benefit more than others from childcare for their children, in the last stage we looked at differences among parents. We expected that parents whose work and family demands were higher (for instance, because they had informal caring responsibilities) would be able to benefit more from childcare. Coordinating work and care is more complicated for this group than for other families, and formal support might therefore be more relevant. We did not find empirical support for this idea. Similarly, our expectation that parents with fewer resources, such as flexible work, benefit more from childcare was not borne out.

## S.2.6 Is there any evidence that parents in a disadvantaged position are less likely to use childcare because they think more negatively about childcare and experience more barriers?

### Lower use in disadvantaged families

In single-parent, low-income, and/or less-well-educated families, children are at high risk of falling behind at an early age. For this reason, these families are often referred to as ‘disadvantaged’. In view of the risks associated with being disadvantaged, children in these families could benefit a good deal from high-quality childcare (Leseman 2002; SER 2016). However, these families do not use childcare as often as other families (CBS 2015; Roeters en Bucx 2016; SER 2016; TK 2015/2016c). In this study we looked at what might be behind this.

Despite efforts to reach this group, the rate of their responses to the questionnaire was low and seemed selective. Families who had lower levels of education, who had lower levels of income, and/or who had immigrated from a non-Western country were underrepresented. This is a pity, because it does not allow us to draw general conclusions from the findings. Nevertheless, we think that the information on those parents who did participate is valuable. Based on the literature, we have outlined expectations about the differences between parents who are in a disadvantaged position and those who are not. The findings seemed to be largely in line with the literature. Furthermore, we see these analyses as a first step, and we hope that future research will take a close look at them.

For this reason, we make statements only about those parents who participated in our research, and we do not generalise from the findings to all disadvantaged families in the Netherlands. We have also relied on other scientific studies wherever possible. Parents are identified as disadvantaged if one or more of the following risk factors are present in the household: low income, a low level of education, no job and/or a single parent.

### Differences in perceptions, experiences and restrictions seem to be related to differences in use (and participation in the workforce)

The literature suggests that the low use of childcare by disadvantaged families is caused in part by these parents’ having different perceptions of affordability, accessibility and quality of care, as well as by their experiencing other restrictions. Our research provided some empirical support for this idea.

For example, the more positive parents’ perceptions and experiences of affordability, quality and accessibility are, the more likely it is that the mother of a disadvantaged family will work and that formal care is used. However, differences in perceptions and experience are only part of the explanation; other factors and explanations also play a role. Low use of childcare among disadvantaged groups is inextricably linked to low income, which is often the result of a low number of hours’ being worked. If there is little money, the threshold of what is considered affordable childcare may be low. And if at least one of the parents is not in paid employment, the family is not entitled to benefits, and childcare is thus expensive; moreover, childcare may also be less of a necessity in this situation. Therefore, if we are to

understand the low take-up of childcare by disadvantaged groups, their low rate of participation in the workforce must also be taken into account.

### 5.3 Reflections on the role of the affordability, accessibility and quality of childcare

This study has looked at three dimensions of childcare: affordability, accessibility and quality. All three dimensions seem to matter when it comes to combining paid work and care. Parents who use childcare indicate that they have taken these factors into account when choosing a childcare facility. Those who do not use it cite various barriers in each of these areas. In addition, for each dimension of childcare, parents who have more positive views on this subject are more likely to combine formal childcare with a job where the mother works more hours, and to report a better quality of life. Below we will examine, for each dimension, how the ideas of parents can be interpreted and explained.

#### Affordability

Although the results suggest that parents of babies and pre-schoolers have developed more-positive opinions about affordability between 2013 and 2017, a significant proportion of these parents still hold negative views on that score. This is somewhat surprising. In recent years, the budget for childcare has been increased, and a significant part of it has been used to make childcare more affordable. To better understand why such a large proportion of parents still find childcare expensive, it is helpful to distinguish two groups of parents: those who do not get a childcare allowance, and those who do.

Parents who are not entitled to a childcare allowance because they are not working must shoulder all costs for any formal childcare. For this group, childcare therefore actually is quite expensive. For those parents who are entitled to a childcare allowance and who may even be already getting it, there are other reasons why they may consider the care expensive. First of all, it is mainly the parents with higher incomes who find care expensive. This makes sense: because the amount of the allowance is tied to their income, they pay more for childcare than parents with lower and middle incomes. Moreover, the costs for the latter two groups have fallen in recent years, whereas this is not the case for those with higher incomes. A second explanation is that parents may not have a clear picture of the net costs (the costs they ultimately pay after the benefits had been deducted). After all, systems for allocating allowances are complicated and not always transparent to citizens (WRR 2017). Thirdly, the costs of childcare got negative news coverage for quite some time. This negative picture may be difficult to correct, especially for the group of parents who do not use childcare.

In addition, parents may compare formal with informal care (such as by grandparents), or make a comparison with the costs for primary school. In both cases, formal childcare does indeed often cost more. Finally, it is useful to bear in mind that whether people find something expensive also depends on their spending capacity. In general, families with young children have less to spend than those with older children (Van den Brakel en Moonen 2013).

## Accessibility

In an accessible childcare system, parents can find good care, regardless of their background or personal characteristics. ‘Accessibility’ is an abstract concept – more abstract than the affordability of childcare (which is about money) or quality (for which pedagogues have developed a clear framework). Accessibility covers a wide range of aspects. Traditionally, the main focus has been on the length of waiting lists, but we now know that parents can also face other barriers, from the administrative burden of applying for a childcare allowance, to cultural barriers and a mismatch between the opening hours and parents’ work schedules. Because this is such an abstract and broad concept, it is difficult for researchers and policymakers to gain insights into the accessibility of childcare. Something similar seems to apply to parents. Compared to the statements they made about affordability and quality, a relatively large number of parents indicated that they did not know how accessible childcare is. This was particularly true of parents who did not use childcare. This report provides greater insights into the accessibility of childcare, and the bottlenecks involved, in at least two respects. First of all, accessibility seems to be a particular problem for parents who work evenings, nights, and/or weekends. Although more than half of childcare providers allow children to be dropped off early and picked up late, there are few or no options for the evenings, nights or weekends (Verhoef et al. 2016). It is also not economically viable for most childcare centres and childminders to offer care during these off-peak hours. This means that these parents must depend on their partner or their informal network.

Second, the report suggests, with regard to the accessibility of childcare, that there is a certain tension among the policy objectives of the childcare policy. On the one hand, there is the policy goal of increasing labour-force participation. On the other, the policy strives to promote the development of all children, and particularly those who are disadvantaged. In order to achieve the first goal, only parents with a job are entitled to childcare benefits. This means, however, that access to care for the children of parents who are not working is either limited or non-existent. However, in order to achieve the second objective, all children should be able to go to care. It is disadvantaged families in particular who, because they are not working, are not eligible for childcare benefits. Assuming that children do indeed benefit from high-quality care, this may even increase their disadvantage compared to the children of working parents.

## Quality

The third and final dimension of childcare is its quality. Parents think more positively about the quality of childcare than about its affordability and accessibility. This is certainly the case when it comes to their own childcare centre and the care that babies get. There are also a number of concerns, including the high turnover rates among staff and four-year-olds who do not like the childcare or find it too busy.

The quality of childcare depends on many factors. It is important to ensure that children are well cared for (and receive adequate attention, for example), but high-quality care also ensures that children can learn by playing (Riksen-Walraven 2004; Slot et al.

2017). The government is trying, with the IKK, to focus on all these quality aspects. Our research shows that parents generally think positively about childcare. They do not make a clear distinction among the various aspects of quality.

It is also striking that the parents of babies in particular report really positive experiences with the quality of care at their own facilities, perhaps even more positively than expected on the basis of the most recent measure of quality (Slot et al. 2017). We cannot rule out the possibility that some of the parents have given an answer that is socially acceptable. Cognitive-resonance reduction may also be a factor: for parents who take their baby to care, it is not a pleasant idea that the care and guidance they receive there may not be up to par. They may therefore close their eyes – consciously or unconsciously – to this possibility. Another, more positive possibility is that parents are simply very satisfied with the attention and guidance their children receive in childcare.

#### S.4 From knowledge to policy implications

Knowing parents' ideas and experiences allows us to better understand how they act and how they respond to policy. The findings in this report therefore offer various points of departure for policy.

##### Comprehensive policy

For the parents in our study, the affordability, the accessibility and the quality of care appear to be important. Childcare policy should therefore consider all three dimensions of childcare. And if investments are made, they should be made in a balanced way.

In the past, policy changes often focused on one of the aspects of childcare. For a long time, most attention and money went to the affordability of childcare. Recently, the focus has shifted to its quality. But if investments are made in one dimension without taking the other dimensions into account, the policy may have a limited impact or even lead to unintended effects. For example, some parties are concerned that the increase in quality requirements will translate into an increase in the costs of child care (ABN AMRO 2018) and a shortage of staff in the sector (Kok et al. 2018). In this situation, any positive impact that an increase in quality will have may be offset by the negative impact of the increase in costs. Another possible unintended consequence is that the increase in the employee-child ratio in the daycare centre will lead to a shortage of personnel, and that this will come at the expense of accessibility. It is therefore necessary to consider carefully the consequences – intended or unintended – that policy measures in one area can have on the other areas. A comprehensive policy aimed at striking the right balance among the three dimensions of childcare can prevent such unintended consequences from arising.

##### Different groups of parents, different approaches

This report shows that a large proportion of parents with babies and four-year-olds – both those who use formal care and those who do not – are satisfied with the way they have now arranged for childcare. At the same time, however, some parents seem to be open to

increasing their use of child care, whether in the future or over the longer term. This is true both of the parents who already make use of childcare facilities and of those who do not. Of the parents who do not currently use childcare, about one in seven would like their child to go to childcare. And about 5% of parents who use childcare would like to use it more. This report has shown that there are major variations in the ideas parents have and in the circumstances they are in. If the government wants to make investments to encourage greater use of childcare, different parents should be approached differently. Below we distinguish four groups of parents and discuss for each group which specific points of attention are important.

## 1 Parents who use childcare

Parents who use childcare generally have a favourable view of it. They are quite satisfied, for instance, with the care and attention their child receives. They also see care as something that benefits their child and that enables them to combine work and care. However, there is also room for improvement. As far as the affordability of childcare is concerned, the middle- and higher-income groups in particular often believe childcare is expensive. That being said, parents already think more positively about the affordability of childcare in 2017 than they did in 2013. There is also room for improvement in terms of accessibility and quality. For example, only half of the parents who use childcare believe that there are enough places, and one in five find applying for a childcare allowance complicated. When it comes to quality, it appears that the parents of babies have very positive experiences, but there are more concerns among the parents of four-year-olds.

Based on the answers of the parents, it would therefore be a good idea to continue investing in the affordability, accessibility and quality of childcare. The middle- and higher-income groups and childcare facilities outside primary school require extra attention in this respect. Such investments – if they are also clearly visible to parents – could increase the level of satisfaction with care and perhaps encourage parents to use more hours of care.

## 2 Parents who do not use childcare

Although it may be possible to persuade those who use childcare to make greater use of it, it is more likely that future policies will mainly focus on parents who do not use childcare. What is their background, what are their perceptions and experiences, what constraints, if any, are they facing, and are there any other reasons why they do not use them? This report highlighted three groups of non-users:

- a parents who appear to be less or not at all open to formal childcare;
- b parents who are open to care but who are not entitled to a childcare allowance;
- c parents who both appear to be open to care and who are entitled to an allowance, but who do not make use of the former.

If the government wants to encourage these non-users to use childcare, it would do well to take into account the differences in the underlying situations and in the motives of these groups, and to adapt its approach accordingly.

## 2a Parents who are not open to formal childcare

The first group is less or not at all open to formal childcare. In our study, we saw that some of the non-users belong to this group: they say they do not use childcare because they have a strong preference for informal care or would like to take care of their own child. Since this group of parents has more-personal preferences, ideas or beliefs about the care and upbringing of children, it can be expected that they will be less receptive to improvements in the childcare system. However inexpensive, accessible or good the childcare may be, these parents will, based on their personal convictions, be less inclined to use it. Even though it is possible that these parents – if circumstances change – can still be persuaded to use formal reception facilities, for the time being the options for influencing this group's choices seem limited.

## 2b Parents who are not entitled to a childcare allowance

The second group is made up of those who are not entitled to a childcare allowance because they or their partners do not work. In principle, they would like to make use of childcare, but for many of them it is not affordable without a childcare allowance. It is estimated that this is true of about 15% of the parents (this is the proportion of parents who do not use childcare and who are not satisfied with this situation).

Under Minister Asscher, municipalities were asked to offer affordable childcare to all toddlers. This measure – which is being pursued by the current government cabinet – is aimed at children whose parents are not entitled to a childcare allowance and who do not yet go to a pre-school or kindergarten. For the parents of younger children and children of primary-school age, such an offer has yet to be made. The decision to also reimburse these parents for the childcare costs they incur is a political one, but viewed from the perspective of the policy objectives of childcare, there are a number of considerations that can be taken into account.

From the point of view of promoting children's development, such a measure could help combat any developmental problems that have arisen or that threaten to do so at an early age. Many of the families in this group are in a disadvantaged situation and if these children in particular are deprived of the experiences that children of working parents are (or can be) offered, that would be a missed opportunity.

From the point of view of the objective of participation in the workforce, such a provision can have a positive effect for this group of parents. It is conceivable that these parents might become motivated to seek work if their child goes to affordable childcare for part of the week and they have more time to look for work. On the other hand – in keeping with the assumptions in childcare policy thus far – such a provision may actually reduce the financial incentive for some parents to start working, as they receive an allowance for the cost of childcare even without work. Based on experience with Asscher's policy on toddlers, consideration could be given to extend the age limits associated with this offering in the future.

## 2c Parents who experience other barriers

The third and final group are the parents who, in principle, are entitled to benefits and are also open to using formal childcare, but who, for other reasons, do not use it. For these parents, perceptions of, and barriers related to, affordability, accessibility and quality can play a role. These parents may, for example, feel (rightly or wrongly) that costs are high, they may be wary of the administrative burden or have concerns about their children's safety. In our research, we saw that this holds true for some parents. However, barriers that parents perceive can be removed by investing in childcare in a way that is visible to parents.

Traditionally, a great deal of attention has been paid to the affordability of childcare, and in recent years a great deal of attention has been paid to its quality. On the basis of this report, the researchers recommend that more thought be given to barriers to accessibility in the coming years. That being said, a number of steps are already being taken in this area. The importance of administrative barriers is being recognised, and the government is trying to reduce them (TK 2017/2018a, 2017/2018b). It is proposing, for instance, that the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration checks parents' data for accuracy more often, and that the provision of digital services be expanded. Parents who have experienced problems in the past will also get assistance from a case manager. With these measures, parents will 'get some measure of relief, but will still be responsible for requesting, discontinuing and modifying all relevant information' (TK 2017/2018b: 3).

An issue for debate is whether these proposals go far enough. It is conceivable, for example, that not all parents have the skills, digital or otherwise, that they need in order to find their way around in digital systems. Neither are case managers a solution for parents who are applying for a childcare allowance for the first time. This group in particular will probably find it difficult to know what to do. In addition, the findings in this report suggest that it may be difficult for parents to estimate how much they are paying, or should pay net (that is, after the allowance has been factored in) for childcare. It is not evident that, once the proposals for improvement have been implemented, this will become more transparent for parents.

The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (hereinafter the 'WRR', its Dutch initials) advises policymakers to assess how 'practicable' the policy is before introducing it. This can be done by checking whether the policy is based on realistic assumptions about the capacity to get things done and the mental burden on citizens ([www.wrr.nl](http://www.wrr.nl)). Such a test could provide realistic insights into any bottlenecks that could arise. But it is also worth monitoring, in the next few years, how accessible childcare is for parents.

In this report we also found that some of the non-users knew little about childcare. It could be that these parents will develop positive ideas about childcare when they are given the opportunity to learn about it. From this perspective, it could be useful to provide more opportunities for these parents to come into contact with childcare. Existing initiatives in

which childcare services more actively seek contact with parents could help to change parents' perceptions. It also seems a useful step to make the inspection reports by the Dutch Municipal Health Service (hereinafter the 'GGD', its Dutch initials) more accessible to parents. This information will enable them to gain a better understanding of the quality of childcare (TK 2017/2018).

## 5.5 Follow-up questions

### Future developments

Because the IKK entered into force only in 2018 and parents had already completed the questionnaire in the summer of 2017, our measurement of parents' perceptions can be seen as a kind of baseline measurement. In line with recent publications from other sources (such as the National Quality Monitor on Childcare; Slot et al. 2017) and the quarterly reports of the Ministry), this study suggests that parents consider the quality of childcare to be high. Nevertheless, some parents think that children are not safe there. It will therefore be interesting to investigate in the coming years whether parents develop more positive perceptions of the quality of childcare. Parents can also be asked directly what they consider to be 'high-quality childcare'.

With regard to the affordability and accessibility of childcare facilities, it is also important to keep an eye on how these aspects develop. As described in section 5.4, it is conceivable that investments in quality could be made at the expense of the affordability and accessibility of childcare. If this is the case, it will be useful to flag such a development at an early stage.

In addition to the traditional measure of the affordability of childcare (the parental contribution), it is interesting to monitor what parents would be willing to pay. (In the economics literature, this is referred to as 'willingness to pay'.) What are the various social groups willing to pay for childcare, and does a possible increase in the quality of the care mean that they would be willing to pay more? It is also interesting to investigate, through qualitative research, what parents use as a frame of reference when evaluating the costs of childcare. Do they compare it with their income? With informal childcare that is free of charge? Or do they think about it in a different way? Finally, we recommend that the accessibility of childcare become a point of attention in both future research and policy. In both areas, the different aspects of accessibility need to be considered and there will need to be more clarity around which barriers are experienced by which parents.

### Cause-effect relations

In line with theory on policy (the assumptions behind the policy), we expected that perceptions would precede the choices of parents and that parents would start working because they could make use of care. Although many of the associations that were found in this study are in line with these assumptions, we cannot be certain about causality. In the literature, but also in our own results, there are various indications that the cause-effect relationships can also go in the opposite direction. For example, there is a group of parents

who indicate that they do not use childcare because they are not working. It is also possible that parents who do not use childcare may have no impression, or a negative one, of childcare because they themselves have had no experience with it. Where there is a link between using childcare and labour force participation, it may therefore be a) that parents who do not work or who work a limited number of hours do not use childcare because they do not need it, or b) that the decision to use childcare and the choice of how many hours to work are made at the same time. And the finding that there is a link between perceptions of childcare and how much it is used its actual use may indicate that parents include their perceptions of childcare in their considerations. But it is also possible that parents who use childcare take a more positive view of childcare because they have positive experiences of it.

It is not easy to get a better grasp of the cause-effect relations involved, but future research could make an attempt at this in at least two ways. First of all, it is possible to collect longitudinal data and follow how parents use childcare over time. For example, prospective parents could be asked how they feel about childcare. Within this group, there are no differences between parents who do have experience with childcare and those who do not. Subsequently, researchers can track the choices they make and the development of their ideas on childcare. Secondly, experiments and quasi-experiments can be used to investigate whether parents who receive specific information about childcare will make different choices. For example, a consulting doctor could discuss childcare with a randomly selected group of parents. It can then be ascertained whether the targeted information changes the ideas of parents and whether, as a result, they are more inclined to use childcare, or use it for more hours.

### Parents' decision-making processes

Future research that aims to gain further insights into the complexity of parents' decision-making processes could take a qualitative approach and ask them, in interviews or focus groups, at what moment they decided whether to use childcare and what factors were involved in the decision at the time. An additional advantage is that parents can be asked directly what they themselves consider affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare. More questions could also be asked about the role of social norms and the social context. Another way of gaining insights into the role of social norms is to compare the Netherlands with other countries. How, for example, do the ideas that Belgian, German or Scandinavian parents have, and the parental decision-making processes, differ from what we see in the Netherlands? What is the role of the Dutch culture of working part-time? And how do parents in different countries take policies on childcare and leave into account as they make their choices?

A vignette study is an alternative method for gaining more insights into the parents' decision-making processes. In such a study, respondents are presented with hypothetical situations and asked what they would do in various situations. By varying the characteristics of a given situation and analysing how these variations are related to the choices made by respondents, more insights can be gained into their decision-making. In the case of

research into childcare, parents could be presented with hypothetical situations in which, for instance, the characteristics of the available childcare are specified. Parents could then be asked how many hours of childcare they would like to use and how many hours they would like to work. By varying the hypothetical costs and quality levels, such a study offers insights into the (relative) value that parents attach to these aspects of child care. The research institute SEO Economic Research is currently working on a study into the use of childcare, and vignettes are part of it.

Knowledge about young parents can be further expanded by considering the role of the employer and the social network. What forms of support do parents receive, and what restrictions do they experience? Is it possible, for example, to work flexible hours, or do parents feel they will be blamed if they leave a meeting early in order to pick up a child? It is also interesting to hear from parents what social pressures they are feeling from their immediate environment.

### Parents of toddlers

This research has focused on the parents of babies and pre-schoolers. That is why we have only shown part of the overall picture and cannot make any statements about the parents of toddlers or of older children. For example, we cannot rule out the possibility that the parents of babies who do not use childcare will do so when their children are older. It would be interesting if future research were to shed light on this. Both people who have children and those who do not expect childcare to be more beneficial for toddlers than for babies and school-age children (Portegijs en Van den Brakel 2016; Vermeer en Groeneveld 2016). Does this also affect parents' decision-making? With the introduction of the harmonisation law, as from 2018 the same quality requirements apply to 'peuterspeelzalen' (facilities specifically aimed at toddlers that have a strong focus on the development of children) as to childcare, and funding will also be harmonised (TK 2016/2017a). What does this mean for parents? Will this help broaden accessibility, as the government expects, or will traditional users of 'peuterspeelzalen' see this development as a step backwards?

### Disadvantaged families

Unfortunately, despite targeted efforts to reach disadvantaged parents, the response from this group was low. For this reason, we have been unable to draw general conclusions on these types of families in the Netherlands. We recommend that future research into disadvantaged families should approach this group in a different way than by means of a letter and telephone reminders. For example, visiting potential respondents has proved to be effective. However, such an intensive strategy is costly.

An alternative way to get a better view of disadvantaged families is to use registration data. Statistics Netherlands (known by its Dutch initials, 'CBS') has a wealth of information, which so far has been only partially analysed. Registration data, for example, make it possible to identify which characteristics distinguish parents who have not applied for childcare benefits from those who have. By looking at risk factors such as income, family situation, education and language deficits, we can better understand why disadvantaged

parents make little use of childcare. Each risk factor has a different background to it and may be related in a different way to the use of childcare. For example, a low level of education can go hand in hand with limited ambitions on the labour market, while a low income discourages the use of childcare by putting up financial barriers.

### Leave and childcare

It would also be a good idea if policy and research could look at the overall picture of leave arrangements and childcare. Both are tools that can help parents to combine work and care, and for that reason alone they are closely linked. In Scandinavia, for example, not only do parents have access to more and less-expensive childcare, but it is also common practice in that part of Europe for one or both parents to have a long period of leave, as a result of which children often do not go to childcare until after they have turned one. It would therefore be a good idea if an overarching view of the child's first years of life could also be developed in the Netherlands. At present, partner leave is being extended and the European Union has proposed paid parental leave. But how would parents like to organise their child's first year? What would an extension of leave arrangements mean for the demand for childcare? And how does this affect the division of paid and unpaid work between men and women?

## 5.6 Conclusion

After a turbulent period, childcare seems to have finally reached calmer waters in 2018. Many parents use daycare centres, facilities outside schools, or childminders to combine care for their children with paid employment, often in combination with care that is given by grandparents. And their experiences with childcare are mostly positive. The proportion of children in childcare is also rising again, albeit slightly.

At the same time, by no means all parents make use of existing childcare facilities, even if they would like to do so in principle. For example, the affordability of care remains a problem for many parents, and there are several barriers in the care system that reduce accessibility for some parents. Some parents also have their doubts about whether a childcare centre is a good place for their child. In each of these areas, there still seem to be many opportunities to make childcare both more attractive and more accessible in the near future.

## References

- ABN AMRO (2018). *'War for talent' ontspruit op de kinderopvang*. Amsterdam: ABN AMRO.
- Adema, W. en P. Whiteford (2007). *Babies and bosses: reconciling work and family life. A synthesis of findings for OECD countries*: Parijs: Publications de l'OECD.
- Akgündüz, Y.E. en J. Plantenga (2015). *Childcare prices and maternal employment: a meta-analysis*. Utrecht: Utrecht School of Economics (Discussion paper series 15-14).
- Besten, R. den en S. Gesthuizen (2018). Laat de kansen van peuters niet afhangen van hun achtergrond. In: *Trouw*, 28 maart.

- Boogaard, M. en I. Bollen (2014). *Gastouders in beeld. Een inventarisatiestudie onder gastouders in Nederland*. Amsterdam: Kohnstamm Instituut.
- Brakel, M. van den en L. Moonen (2013). Welvaart van paren met en zonder kinderen. In: *Sociaaleconomische trends*, september 2013, 01.
- CBS (2015). Peuters lage-inkomensgroepen blijven vaker thuis. Geraadpleegd 11 augustus 2017, via <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2015/39/peuters-lage-inkomensgroepen-blijven-vaker-thuis>
- CPB (2015). *Kansrijk arbeidsmarktbeleid*. Den Haag: Centraal Planbureau.
- Fukkink, R.G., M.J.J.M. Gevers Deynoot-Schaub, K.O.W. Helmerhorst, I. Bollen en J.M.A. Riksen-Walraven (2013). *Pedagogische kwaliteit van de kinderopvang voor 0-tot 4-jarigen in Nederlandse kinderdagverblijven in 2012*. Amsterdam: NCKO.
- Heckman, J.J. (2016). *Early childhood education: quality and access pay off. The Heckman equation*. Geraadpleegd via [https://heckmanequation.org/assets/2017/01/F\\_Heckman\\_Moffitt\\_093016.pdf](https://heckmanequation.org/assets/2017/01/F_Heckman_Moffitt_093016.pdf)
- Kok, L., T. Smits en R. Scholte (2018). *Verwachte kosten verandering baby-norm kinderopvang*. Amsterdam: SEO Economisch Onderzoek.
- Leseman, P. (2002). *Early childhood education and care for children from low-income or minority backgrounds* (paper gepresenteerd tijdens de OECD Oslo Workshop op 6-7 juni). Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam.
- Melhuish, E., K. Ereky-Stevens, K. Petrogiannis, A. Ariescu, E. Penderi, K. Rentzou, A. Tawell, P. Leseman en P. Broekhuizen (2015). *A review of research on the effects of early childhood education and care (ECEC) on child development: Report submitted to Brussels as part of the WP4*. Brussel: Europese Commissie.
- Notten, N., D. Grunow en E. Verbakel (2017). Social policies and families in stress: gender and educational differences in work-family conflict from a European perspective. In: *Social Indicators Research*, jg. 132, nr. 3, p. 1281-1305.
- Portegijs, W. en M. van den Brakel (red.) (2016). *Emancipatiemonitor 2016*. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.
- Portegijs, W., M. Cloin en A. Merens (2014). *Krimp in de kinderopvang. Ouders over kinderopvang en werk*. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.
- Rijksoverheid (2017). *Rijksbegroting 2018*. Geraadpleegd op 18 januari 2018 via <http://www.rijksbegroting.nl>.
- Riksen-Walraven, M. (2004). Pedagogische kwaliteit in de kinderopvang: doelstellingen en kwaliteitscriteria. In: R. van IJendoorn, L. Tavecchio en M. Riksen-Walraven (red.), *De kwaliteit van de Nederlandse kinderopvang*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Boom.
- Roeters, A. en F. Bucx (2016). *Beleidssignalement over het gebruik van kinderopvang door ouders met lagere inkomens*. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.
- SER (2016). *Gelijk goed van start. Visie op het toekomstige stelsel van voorzieningen voor jonge kinderen*. Den Haag: Sociaal-Economische Raad.
- Slot, P., IJ. Jepma, P. Muller, B. Romijn en P. Leseman (2017). *Landelijke kwaliteitsmonitor kinderopvang. Kwaliteit van de Nederlandse kinderdagopvang, peuteropvang, buitenschoolse opvang en gastouderopvang*. Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht / Sardes.
- Stier, H., N. Lewin-Epstein en M. Braun (2012). Work-family conflict in comparative perspective. The role of social policies. In: *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, jg. 30, nr. 3, p. 265-279.
- szw (2018). *Rijksjaarsverslag 2017*. Den Haag: ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid.
- TK (2015/2016a). *Betere kwaliteit, betere toegankelijkheid in de kinderopvang*. Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2015/2016, 31322, nr. 303.
- TK (2015/2016b). *Kamerbrief kinderopvang*. Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2015/2016, 31322, nr. 305.
- TK (2015/2016c). *Verzamelbrief onderzoeken kinderopvang. Brief van de minister van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid*. Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2015/2016, 2016-0000152615.
- TK (2016/2017). *Kamerbrief Harmonisatie, Innovatie en Kwaliteit Kinderopvang (IKK)*. Brief van de minister van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid. Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2016/2017, 2017-0000101490.

- TK (2017/2018a). *Brief van de staatssecretaris van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid*. Vergaderjaar 2017/2018, 31322, nr. 361.
- TK (2017/2018b). *Kamerbrief Aanpassing financieringssysteem kinderopvang*. Tweede kamer, vergaderjaar 2017/2018, 31322, nr. 346.
- Unicef (2008). The child care transition. A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries. In: *Innocenti Report Card*, jg. 8,
- Verhoef, M., A. Roeters and T. van der Lippe (2016). Couples' work schedules and child-care use in the Netherlands. In: *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, jg. 25, nr. 4, p. 1119-1130.
- Vermeer, H. J. and M. G. Groeneveld (2016). *Kwaliteit van babyopvang. Een literatuurstudie*. Leiden: Centrum voor Gezinspedagogiek, Universiteit Leiden.
- WRR (2017). *Weten is nog geen doen. Een realistisch perspectief op redzaamheid*. Den Haag: Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid.