

# Parents' Journeys through Flying Start in Cardiff



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## About this research

This research was developed in partnership between Nesta and Cardiff Flying Start (Cardiff County Council). It was designed and delivered by Rosa Robinson and Helen Wales between June and August 2023.

### **About Frame Collective CIC**

Rosa Robinson is a social researcher and evaluator specialising in creative, inclusive, participatory and people-centred approaches, often with 'less heard from' communities. Her work across the UK focuses on reducing health and social inequalities, improving outcomes and influencing policy and practice. Rosa is the founding director of Frame, an independent research organisation based in Wales: [www.framecollective.org.uk](http://www.framecollective.org.uk).

# Introduction

## Background

Flying Start is a Welsh Government initiative providing a comprehensive and targeted early intervention programme for families with babies and young children (0-4 years) living in economically disadvantaged communities needing support. Flying Start is delivered by local authorities, which receive a grant from the Welsh Government. Flying Start teams work closely with families in these areas to provide parenting support, high-quality childcare, and child health and development assistance. The programme focuses on improving health, education and overall wellbeing outcomes. It is free of charge for eligible families (determined by their postcode). Although the Flying Start programme is primarily targeted towards specific geographical areas, local authorities can also offer outreach to provide programme elements to a small number of vulnerable families with children under the age of four across the wider local authority, where a need is identified by the child's health visitor and referred through [the Family Gateway](#).

As part of its Fairer Start mission, Nesta collaborated with Cardiff Flying Start to explore families' journeys through early years services and identify opportunities for innovation. Qualitative research was conducted with parents at two Flying Start sites to understand the dynamics of parent engagement with the service. This report presents the findings from the research. It sheds light on how, why and when families engage with Flying Start services, what motivates, helps and hinders their journeys, and highlights the benefits experienced by children and parents.

## Context and timing of this research

It is important to note that some of the parents who participated in this research had babies during the Covid-19 pandemic, which may have affected their interactions with healthcare providers, community professionals and peers, impacting their overall experience of Flying Start.

## Aims and approach

The research focused on several key areas to understand the dynamics of family engagement with Flying Start:

- when, why and how parents engage with Flying Start
- factors that enable and hinder family engagement
- barriers faced by families in accessing the programme
- families' experiences of using Flying Start
- how families perceive and value Flying Start.

Staff from Flying Start local authority teams and contracted childcare settings helped recruit parents already using childcare at each location, providing information about the research and inviting them to participate. Between July and August 2023, we interviewed 13 parents (all mothers) from two Flying Start locations in Greenway and Adamsdown, Cardiff (Greenway n=7, Adamsdown n=6). These locations were selected because they facilitated connections with parents already engaging with health visiting teams and childcare services. Additionally, both locations also offered various programmes and group activities that parents could attend. As a result, the parents in our study were those who were engaging with the Flying Start programme at one of these locations when they participated in the research.

Interviews were scheduled according to the parents' availability and were conducted in private rooms at the respective Flying Start locations. In one instance, an interview was conducted over the phone due to the child being unwell. Each interview lasted between 35 and 50 minutes, and we used a semi-structured topic guide to ensure comprehensive yet focused conversations. Before each interview we provided the parents with an information sheet that explained the project's purpose and how their information would be protected, used and stored. We also reiterated this information verbally at the beginning of each interview and encouraged the parents to ask any questions they may have had. Each parent provided written consent to participate in the interviews, which were audio recorded with their permission and later transcribed. In appreciation of their time, we gave each interviewee a £30 high street voucher.

After completing the interviews, we analysed the data (interview audio and written notes) using Miro and Excel. We created a visual map of each parent's journey to identify and visually categorise the interview data into themes. We later used the transcripts to cross-check context and identify verbatim quotes and vignettes to illustrate themes. The outputs from our research are fully anonymous: people's names have been changed, and any personally identifiable information has been removed. Where we've used quotes, we've used fake names. We've summarised

key themes and used participant numbers (for example, P1 and P3) to let the reader see how many people the finding was relevant to. In Table 1 below, we've paired the participant identifiers and pseudonyms.

Table 1. Participant identifiers and pseudonyms

Identifier	Pseudonym	Identifier	Pseudonym
P1	Jo	P8	Megan
P2	Katie	P9	Aisha
P3	Yasmine	P10	Zoe
P4	Mariam	P11	Claire
P5	Yara	P12	Olivia
P6	N/A (did not participate in the research)	P13	Morgan
P7	Ceri	P14	Fatima

## Findings

### When and how do parents engage?

Our conversations with parents suggest that, while there is no singular 'typical' journey through the Flying Start (Cardiff) programme, there are common pathways and touchpoints across families' engagement. Parents engage with Flying Start services at different levels, depending on several factors: their awareness of the programme's offer, their specific family needs, the age of their children, their parenting skills and confidence and their existing support systems.

#### When parents engage

Each Flying Start journey is tailored to individual needs, and the level of engagement often evolves as their children grow or family circumstances change. A parent's first engagement with Flying Start was usually via a Flying Start health visitor, and their first interactions with the wider Flying Start programme were usually a childcare or parent-and-child activity (such as stay and play). Once in the system, some parents accessed all available support while others prioritised what they needed at particular times and didn't use services, programmes or activities that were irrelevant to their needs. For example, Yasmine, who was concerned about her child's development, has primarily pursued specialist support: *"When they were about a year old, I started noticing [they] weren't really meeting milestones...we're on the waiting list now for neurodevelopment, and we're under speech and language therapy."* Mariam, seeking social connections, was drawn to Stay and Play sessions and started attending them when her child was three months old: *"In the beginning, I didn't have many friends here [in Cardiff], so it helped me a lot to see mums...I now have some friends from here, from Flying Start."*

First-time parents and those with more experience with parenting usually require different levels of support and engage with different services, programmes and activities at different stages. Experienced parents who have previously used Flying Start, particularly those with access to local family support, usually require less guidance and support in accessing the programme (P1, P8). Jo explains: *"I think on the second time around, you're more aware, aren't you?... I'm well aware of what's available in my area."*



## How parents engage: key service touchpoints and enablers

Parents' engagement with Flying Start is facilitated through three main touchpoints: health visitors, childcare setting staff and peers. Health visitors introduce parents to the range of childcare services, parenting programmes, groups and 1:1 support, and more specialist support such as speech, language and communication services, assisting at critical stages of early parenting. Childcare staff play a vital role in establishing trust between parents and the programme, sharing information about services, parenting programmes and activities and making them feel like part of the Flying Start community. Parent peers also form a community that shares information and experiences, encouraging participation in various activities, parenting programmes and groups within the programme.

As the initial point of contact with the Flying Start programme, health visitors play a crucial role in making families aware of their eligibility and removing barriers to engagement. For example, Yara's health visitor arranged for an interpreter to enable them to communicate and for Yara to access other Flying Start services until her language skills improved. Yara said: *"When I had the birth of my first baby, the first [health] visitor...bring the Arabic translator with her...my English language became very good...I'm now independent to speak by myself."*

Parents' first interactions with the Flying Start programme usually involve attending group activities such as baby massage or stay and play. These interactions are often facilitated by an informal referral or recommendation by a health visitor. If the parent or health visitor had concerns about the child's development, a formal referral may have also been made to specialist services and parenting support programmes. For instance, Megan, a single parent and first-time mum, started her Flying Start journey by attending Stay and Play sessions with her newborn baby after her health visitor suggested it as a good way to meet new people. Similarly, Fatima, a mum of three, first connected with Flying Start when her health visitor recommended that accessing Flying Start childcare could benefit her two-year-old's speech and language development.

Flying Start childcare staff are crucial in enhancing parents' engagement with the programme. They are a vital touchpoint for providing information about available services, and parents highly value their recommendations and advice. During our research, many parents reported learning about the programmes they attended through childcare staff. They appreciated receiving personalised recommendations and being able to ask questions face to face with someone they knew and trusted.

Parent peers are also essential facilitators on the Flying Start journey. Once in the system, families often hear about what's available from parents they see at activities and childcare drop-offs. Parents value peers' feedback and recommendations. In some instances, peers are the first touchpoint for Flying Start. Several parents said they were made aware of Flying Start by family, friends and neighbours.

## Why do parents engage with Flying Start?

Parents engage with the Flying Start programme for a variety of reasons. They aim to improve their parenting skills, support their children's growth, connect with other parents and feel part of a community. Parents are motivated by the structure Flying Start brings to their daily lives, the quality of childcare and staff and the sense of community the programme offers. Opportunities for gaining qualifications and bilingual services are additional motivators.

**Doing their best as a parent:** parents often expressed a strong motivation to be the best parents they could be for their children and recognised the opportunities the programme offered to develop their skills and knowledge and acquire techniques to support their child's development (P4, P5, P14). As Yasmine explained: *"I just wanted to do everything that I possibly could to try my best for [my child], and one of those things was bringing [them] to this nursery because all it could do was benefit him..."* [Yasmine]

**Social connections and a sense of community:** parents saw Flying Start groups and programmes as good ways to combat loneliness and isolation by meeting other parents, making new friends and becoming part of a community. This was a significant driver of engagement for single parents and parents new to the country (P1, P2, P4, P5, P7, P9, P11).

**Improving child outcomes and school readiness:** improving their child's confidence, language skills, social skills and readiness for school were key motivators for parents. They said the opportunity to interact with other children (and adults) and make friends at nursery and Stay and Play sessions were critical drivers for engaging with childcare options and specialist support where needed (P2, P3, P7, P9, P13).

**Structure and routine:** parents were motivated to attend programmes, groups and play activities to provide structure and routine to their day, filling their time and giving them a reason to leave the house (P1, P4, P7, P9).

**Financial considerations:** some parents are motivated by the financial value offered by Flying Start. They recognise that many local activities are prohibitively expensive, appreciate that Flying Start is funded (free of charge to parents) and provides food for their children. They are motivated to maximise the benefit they can get from the offer (P9, P13).

**Safe setting and friendly staff:** clean, safe, secure and reputable childcare settings are key drivers of parental engagement with settings. Parents are also motivated to engage (and deepen their engagement) by the friendliness of the setting's staff. Some parents are also motivated by settings with staff experienced in addressing additional needs (P3, P8, P14).

**Gaining qualifications:** some parents are motivated to take part in programmes by the prospect of earning a qualification that they can use to help them develop their CVs and gain employment in the future (P12).

**Bilingual offer:** for one parent, the bilingual aspect of Flying Start childcare was a key driver for their engagement with the setting. They were bilingual and wanted their child to learn Welsh (P10).

## What influences how parents engage with Flying Start?

Engagement with Flying Start (Cardiff) is vital to supporting families and young children in their early years. To understand the factors that encourage parents to participate actively in the Flying Start programme, we have identified several key enablers and barriers that influence how parents engage with Flying Start.

**Supportive relationships and consistent support:** health visitors and childcare setting staff are pivotal in referring parents to Flying Start services and providing information at various stages, especially during the baby stage. When these key personnel get to know parents and build trust, parents say they are more likely to engage with the services, groups or programmes they suggest or tell them about.

**Convenience matters:** one of the standout factors is the convenience offered by the Flying Start programme. Families are eligible for Flying Start from birth and can access childcare from as early as two years old (until the child is three), which families value highly. Getting their babies weighed at drop-in sessions without the hassle of GP appointments is another significant convenience, and this flexibility aligns with the needs of many families. Self-referral for groups and programmes is

also highly regarded, especially for parents with multiple children. It works better for them, eliminating the need for formal referrals and allowing them to choose based on their preferences. Similarly, the flexibility of the programme and its staff in accommodating babies in the creche has been instrumental in enabling parents to attend parenting programmes, as they know their children are well cared for. Parents also highly value the choice and flexibility of groups and programmes offered by Flying Start (P1, P4, P5, P11).

**Quality and reputation:** the reputation of the Greenway and Adamsdown sites plays a crucial role in attracting parents to Flying Start childcare, groups and programmes (P8). Parents recognise the high quality of childcare – they find childcare staff friendly and knowledgeable and trust them – and it is a vital enabler for their engagement with other elements of the Flying Start offer, such as parenting programmes and groups. Parents' positive experiences with wider aspects of the programme sustain and deepen their engagement with Flying Start, encouraging them to find out what's available and leading them to recommend Flying Start activities and programmes to other parents. Some parents expressed a desire to repeat parenting programmes they had previously attended (P11) and noted the value of accredited programmes for career and personal development (P12), highlighting their perceived value to parents. According to parents' feedback, the high-quality reputation of the Greenway and Adamsdown sites, particularly in terms of childcare, positively impacts parents' engagement with the Flying Start programme.

**Familiarity and trust:** trusted relationships with staff fostered engagement for some parents. Once parents were involved in Flying Start, information flow often improved, although challenges remained in coordinating between different programmes. Familiarity and trust in the setting and its staff are also powerful enablers for engagement. Parents are comfortable leaving their children at childcare facilities within the Flying Start system because they are familiar with the setting and trust the staff (P12). This trust also extends to the staff's ability to provide high-quality care that is tailored to their child's needs, further promoting engagement. Some parents even choose to continue using a specific Flying Start childcare setting, even when a closer alternative is available, solely due to trust and familiarity with setting staff and the settings facilities (P7). *"I trust the women who work there, and I know [child] is going to be having a good time [and be] comfortable there. It means everything to me."*

**Social anxiety and feeling judged:** several parents said they had initial anxieties about going to parenting groups. They didn't have much information about the sessions, didn't know what to expect and felt nervous about going outside their comfort zone. These concerns were usually allayed once engaged in activities (P7, P9, P10, P11). Parents are also worried about being judged by staff or other parents. Aisha explained, *"I did have a fear of being judged...it was my first time going somewhere with other mums."* For Yasmine, the anxiety about attending sessions stemmed from a lack of information about the session and what to expect: *"I think it gets me a bit apprehensive thinking like how is he going to be, am I going to turn up then is it going to be like a circle of people all going around saying things, I don't know what to expect. I've just kind of been given a timesheet saying you can go to this hub on this day at this time, but that's the only information I've really got from it. Yeah, there's not much information online either that I've seen."* Olivia also felt anxious about how she'd manage with both of her children at play sessions but found the staff so supportive that it encouraged her to attend regularly. She said: *"They wouldn't look down at you if both your kids were crying or anything. They were just really supportive, just there to help."*

**Information and communication:** the accessibility of information online, in person, inside and outside Flying Start settings plays a crucial role in parental engagement. Parents often want face-to-face information from staff within the Flying Start system – particularly childcare staff and staff leading Stay and Play groups. They value their suggestions and feel 'seen' as parents. Others want to find their way around the system independently, engaging with information as and when they need it. The information packs, course details and activity schedules shared by health visitors significantly enhanced parents' awareness of Flying Start services, programmes and activities. However, parents had mixed feelings about the availability of information about Flying Start, including how and when it's shared with parents. Some parents said they'd received overwhelming amounts of information when their baby was born, but there was an information gap as their child got older (P1, P10, P11, P4). Several parents said that the information pack given to them by health visitors was comprehensive and useful. For example, Jo said: *"When the health visitor came out...she literally had a folder like this [gestures a big size] with lots and lots of leaflets. For me, that's good. Some people don't like that because they don't like everything, but for me, it was all in one place. There's no point in telling me, 'This is on next week on Tuesday'. That would go in and out."* Others, like Zoe, found the information given soon after birth useful but overwhelming: *"There are services trying to help you, but I think I just felt like it was a lot of information...I think...it's too much too soon."*

**Facebook, website and texts:** Facebook and text (or WhatsApp) emerged as a prominent channel for communication and information exchange regarding programmes and activities. Parents often talked about the convenience of texting their health visitors. Text invitations to attend activities were also important enablers for some parents. The Flying Start website is valued for its ease of use when seeking information about services, programmes and activities. Some parents prefer receiving information through Facebook, highlighting the significance of this platform (P12). However, several parents noticed that the Flying Start area (rather than the setting) Facebook pages were infrequently updated. Other parents were unaware that a Facebook group was one of the setting's primary forms of communication with parents, and they missed out on key information. Olivia said: *"They'll put [information] on their Facebook page, but I didn't even know they had a Facebook page until there was an inset day...I turned up, like, where the hell is everyone, and then the next day, they were like, 'Oh, you need to go on our Facebook page', but that was something that could have been communicated previously"* (P2, P8, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14).

**Peer touchpoints:** personal connections are strong enablers for engagement. Parents often learn about Flying Start groups, programmes and activities through their peers, such as family, neighbours and friends (P8, P12, P10). Recommendations from people they know and trust are significant in parents' decision-making process. Several parents, including Morgan and Olivia, faced difficulty accessing information. They said they only heard about groups, activities and programmes if they asked the setting staff. They also relied on neighbours and friends to help them navigate local support and activities. Olivia said: *"I was speaking to my neighbour over the wall and just saying I don't know where to take her. And then she was like, 'I'll text your details to the Flying Start East lady...and she'll message you about it.' So that's when we started the playgroups we're going to...I think the health visitors need to be more aware of what's going on and make you a little bit more aware."*

**Location and transport:** a few parents from Greenway drove and were willing to access Flying Start programmes and groups in different parts of Cardiff by car, contrasting with Adamsdown parents, with some finding even central Cardiff locations too far. Parents who don't drive strongly prefer staying in their local neighbourhood and sometimes feel they are missing out on activities available in other areas. Parents sometimes struggled to access activities and services outside their locale, including referrals to NHS appointments and found public transport unmanageable if they had more than one child (P2, P14). Katie explained that even

getting to the city centre was a problem: *“Transport is a bit of an issue for me...I do try to get places that I can get to. I walk to courses in the area, in Adamsdown or Splott...other areas are a bit far for me...It’s a bit difficult...on my own as well, and I can’t drive.”*

**Timings and flexibility:** the timing of some activities, groups and programmes clashed with some parents’ working patterns and with school pick-up times, which made attending them impossible (P3, P7, P10, P13). For example, Yasmine hoped to attend a Stay and Play session: *“My health visitor told me they do local playgroups in certain like hubs that we can go to...it was only on a Tuesday, so I’m at work a Monday and a Tuesday, so it was impossible for me to go to.”* Similarly, Zoe wanted to do a cooking class but couldn’t make it work with picking up her eldest child: *“I nearly did the cooking class, but I didn’t go; I think it crossed over with picking up [child] from school.”*

**Translation:** the translation services arranged by a health visitor were a significant enabler for one parent. They enabled her to understand what was available to her, build a relationship with her health visitor and gain the confidence to engage with the setting while she developed English language fluency.

**Creche facilities:** for parents with babies and infants, a creche facility enabled parents to participate in programmes and groups, but access to creche provision was mixed. This was particularly challenging for parents with two children under the age of two. In some cases, creche facilities were not available. Olivia explained: *“I did want to do the cooking course...they didn’t have a creche, so they asked that you find childcare, which I couldn’t really do.”* In other cases, parents were unaware they could access them or felt uncomfortable leaving their baby. Fatima said: *“Parents were talking about some [parent and child] cooking class...I have another baby now, so it’s difficult for me now to do something with [my other child] only, leaving the little one, because she is breastfed as well, so she needs me.”*

## How does Flying Start benefit families?

**Children feel happy, safe and enjoy themselves:** parents say that Flying Start childcare and activities benefit their children in numerous ways: they feel comfortable within the childcare setting, have opportunities to make friends with children in the community, enjoy quality time with other adults (childcare staff), and enjoy the activities in an environment where they feel happy and safe.

**Children's independence and confidence increase:** parents say that childcare offers children a break from their mothers, which parents feel is essential for their children's confidence and independence (P1, P2, P7, P10, P13). Parents also recognise that the Flying Start childcare team boosts their children's confidence to become independent and develop new skills. Morgan sees how childcare has benefited her daughter: *"[Flying Start childcare] gives her time to herself and to make friends...and that confidence because if she didn't have Flying Start, I dread thinking what she would've been like...I know how the separation anxiety was... she's a Covid baby; she was very nervous...A lot of people that know how [my daughter] was have said she's come on so much."* Ceri also feels that Flying Start childcare has made her child more confident, independent and determined: *"She's got a confidence boost, she's more independent...before, [my daughter] couldn't do her coat up...she started doing it herself after she started [at childcare]...She's determined to do something herself now, even puts her shoes on herself."*

**Children's speech, language and social skills improve:** parents also note significant improvements in their children's speech, language and social skills after attending Flying Start childcare. They also recognise how opportunities to make friends and play with other children at childcare improves their child's social skills and development (P1, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12). Jo said that it made a big difference to both her children who attended: *"When [my second daughter] went [to childcare], the confidence and the language, and everything else that came out of that just from being in nursery for two and a half hours a day was so beneficial...And then, with my third...she absolutely loves it, and she's come on leaps and bounds just from being in a setting with other children."* Aisha also thinks that Flying Start childcare has been beneficial to her child: *"[My daughter] is more willing to play on her own, to do things with other people. Her speech has come on amazingly, and they assisted with her toilet training."*

**Benefits to parents' mental health and wellbeing:** Flying Start offers various mental health and wellbeing benefits to parents through its childcare services, groups, activities and programmes. These options allow parents to take some time for themselves, establish structure and routine, get out of the house and interact with other adults. According to parents, these benefits contribute to their improved mental and emotional health. Additionally, parents find many of the activities enjoyable, especially cooking programmes, and they appreciate the care and support provided by childcare and programme staff, which adds to their overall wellbeing (P1, P2, P4, P7, P12).



**Time for themselves, time together:** parents feel that the Flying Start programme acknowledges the need for parents to have "me time" and "us time". Its varied and flexible offer, including childcare, stay and play, and parenting programmes with creche facilities, provides valuable opportunities for parents to spend quality time with their children, or take "a breather" from parenting without their children and a chance to do something for themselves. Parents appreciate this break, which can be crucial in maintaining a healthy balance (P1, P2, P4, P5, P10, P13).

**Benefits for home environment:** insights gained through parenting programmes and advice provided by childcare staff feedback contribute to healthier home environments. Parents say that the behaviour management strategies and nutrition information they've learned, alongside ideas to keep children stimulated from childcare, support them in creating a healthy home environment for their children. Katie said: *"Since I've cut all that [snacks and pop] back and I've started to be healthier, it has helped him with his behaviour; it's changed his behaviour"* (P2, P5, P8, P10, P14).

**Meeting other parents:** Flying Start plays a significant role in bringing parents together and mitigating the isolation experienced by single parents. Staff actively promote interactions among parents and offer support. This sense of community extends to building relationships, sharing experiences and fostering a feeling of being part of a supportive 'family'" (P1, P2, P5, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13).

**Feeling supported as a parent:** parents feel heard and supported through their engagement with Flying Start. The programme offers access to trusted professionals who parents find warm, supportive and nurturing. Tailored programmes that align with a child's age and stage, and assistance in articulating a child's needs, are invaluable. The service bolsters trust and helps parents understand their child's behaviour (P9, P11, P12, P13, P14).

**Material extras:** parents appreciate the additional offerings, such as breakfast and snacks for children provided by the creche and childcare offer. Flying Start organises trips for children and parents, which parents find enjoyable and are widely appreciated (P5, P12).

## What difference does Flying Start make to parents?

### Child outcomes

**Improved behaviour:** parents say that their children have shown marked improvements in their behaviour since engaging with Flying Start childcare. As Katie explained, *"I've seen a significant change in how my child behaves. They are much more well-behaved now, even though there are occasional challenges...He's playing more, he's sharing more, and they've seen a huge difference within him since he's come"* (P2, P8).

**Child happiness:** the positive impact on children's happiness has also been notable, as highlighted by parents. Megan told us, *"[My child is] really enjoying it....and all over the six weeks [summer holiday] now he'll be saying, "Are we going to school today?"* (P8, P12).

**Increased confidence and skills:** parents say their children have experienced a boost in their confidence, made other developmental progress and acquired valuable skills since attending Flying Start childcare. Parents told us that their children have become more self-assured and more independent. They are more willing to try new foods and eat a wider variety at home and in childcare (P1, P4, P5, P7, P13).

**General development and school readiness:** parents noted significant progress in their children's skills and development. They notice that their children are playing more and becoming more creative and skilled in their play (P8, P12, and P13). Their children have become more sociable and confident – they make friends easily and interact well with peers (P2, P4, P5, P10, P12). Parents also note that their children's speech, language and communication skills have improved significantly (P1, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12).

### Parent outcomes

**Enabling return to work:** the availability and flexibility of Flying Start childcare (and wraparound care) supports parents in meeting work commitments and enables them to return to work. Jo explains: *"My [child]...goes to Flying Start in the morning, and then stays for lunch club, so I actually pay extra every day for her to stay. Because I work from home and I'm working full time, that extra 45 minutes helps me"* (P1, P10).

**Improved parenting skills and wellbeing:** parents have experienced many improvements in their parenting skills and overall wellbeing. Flying Start parenting programmes and the support offered to parents have given them a better understanding of child development, nutrition and play techniques. Flying Start has increased parents' confidence to manage their children's behaviour at home and improved parent-child interactions, which have, in turn, improved parents' and children's wellbeing. Yara said of the Parent Nurturing course: *"It's very interesting. So, they show us.... how you can manage your kids...without saying no"* (P2, P5, P7, P9, P14).

**Stronger social networks:** Flying Start has enabled parents to expand their social circles, increasing their social confidence and helping them create a stronger support network (P12 and P9).

## Expectations and experiences

Parents' experiences with Flying Start encompass a range of positive aspects and challenges, reflecting the diverse needs and expectations of participating families. While some parents, like Jo and Ceri, had largely positive experiences, others, like Katie, Zoe and Yasmine, encountered challenges that meant some Flying Start services fell short of their expectations.

### Support expectations

Parents entering the Flying Start programme brought a wide range of expectations. Some found the available support incredible, praising the system's ease of navigation and effectiveness in meeting their family's needs. They felt fully supported at every stage of their journey and felt part of a community they valued highly. On the other hand, there were parents like Yasmine and Morgan who had higher expectations for support. They experienced disappointment when the responsiveness of health visitors did not meet their expectations. Parents with the highest expectations were often concerned about their child's development. Yasmine felt abandoned when her health visitor was not readily responsive to her questions about childcare provision, referrals and treatments for her child, highlighting a gap between her expectations and the support she received. Yasmine said, *"I didn't really know who else to turn to."* This sentiment was not unique to Yasmine; it encapsulates the feelings of several parents who anticipated a more hands-on and responsive approach from the Flying Start programme.

## Challenges in Flying Start experiences

**Accessing information:** contrasting with some parents' expectations of easily accessible information, several found obtaining online details about activities and programmes challenging. This gap between expectation and reality often led to missed opportunities and added frustration. For instance, Mariam mentioned, *"I didn't know about the breastfeeding support. If I had known, I would have definitely used it."*

**Feeling judged and brushed off:** Yasmine's journey with Flying Start reveals some of the programme's limitations in meeting the needs and expectations of parents concerned about their child's development. She felt that her worries about her child's development were "brushed off" because she was "a worrying new mum" and faced challenges in accessing consolidated information about the support available, which impacted her ability to use the programme fully for her child's developmental needs. Morgan had a positive experience with her first child but felt less supported by the health visitor allocated to her with her second child: *"I haven't had as much support as I probably would like. I feel like I was more judged when I had [second child] than I was with [my first child]."* Feeling unsupported affected parents' future engagements with the Flying Start programme. For example, Aisha explained how a lack of support during the pandemic put her off asking for support as her baby grew older: *"I had one nurse come in initially when [my child] was born in the first few days because I was struggling with breastfeeding. I didn't really get the help that I was expecting.... I didn't seek much help after that."*

**Change without communication is frustrating:** as expressed by parents like Zoe, the frustration over the lack of health visitor continuity further highlights a divergence from their expectations of stable and consistent support. Zoe's experience of having to adapt to different health visitors and the lack of communication about these changes exemplifies the challenge: *"It can be a little bit frustrating...I've had maybe three or four different health visitors since [my child was] a baby...No one let me know prior."*

## The perceived value of Flying Start

Parents show a profound appreciation for the Flying Start programme, particularly highlighting its role in enhancing their children's development, boosting their parenting skills, and improving their family's overall wellbeing. Parents are extremely satisfied and thankful for the programme despite some challenges. Gratitude for the

programme availability in their community is a common theme among parents who believe Flying Start is a “community asset”.

The developmental progress of children participating in Flying Start is especially notable, with parents observing significant advancements across a range of developmental milestones. The sense of community and belonging Flying Start fosters is another crucial aspect frequently mentioned by parents, like Aisha, who said: *“It’s like being a part of a community or a family... I’m already gonna miss it”*. This feeling of connectedness and support is an essential marker of the programme's success and its value to families.

Stay and play sessions, childcare and parenting programmes were particularly praised by parents for providing them with valuable insights into their children's behaviours outside of the family home and knowledge about developmental stages. In addition, the tailored assistance offered by Flying Start, which involves referring families to speech and language therapy and early years neurodevelopment support when needed, is valuable. Rapid referrals provide parents with reassurance or specialised care for their child when they are concerned about their child's development.

While many feel lucky to benefit from the programme, several parents highlighted what they felt was an arbitrary approach to eligibility. One parent living in council accommodation was recently moved and was worried she'd be allocated housing out of the Flying Start area. Another parent was not eligible but found that her ex-partner (her child's dad) was. Parents value the programme and recognise that the care and services they receive are of high quality. Two parents who had previously used private nurseries said that the care their children received through Flying Start was far superior. Parents also recognised the quality of the parenting programmes and groups and appreciated the community around Flying Start created by staff. These positive experiences underline the diverse advantages of the programme, which include direct assistance in child development, fostering community involvement, and enhancing parental satisfaction and confidence.

## Opportunities to enhance provision

**Improving communication:** improve the availability, accessibility and consistency of information about the programme. This could include more regular updates on social media, a more user-friendly website and clearer communication through health visitors and community networks.

**Enhancing support for diverse families:** engage more diverse caregivers in the programme, such as fathers and other family members. This can provide a more comprehensive understanding of family needs.

**Reducing barriers to engagement:** address social anxiety and judgement concerns that prevent parents from participating. This could involve offering clearer information about the format and what to expect.

**Enhancing flexibility and convenience:** adjust programme timings and offer more flexible options to accommodate parents' schedules, especially for working parents or those with multiple children.

**Addressing information gaps:** some parents felt overwhelmed by information initially but under informed later. A structured, phased approach to information dissemination may be more effective.

**Clarifying support expectations:** clear support parameters could manage parents' expectations and reduce dissatisfaction with services and communication.

**Enhancing (awareness of the) availability of creche facilities:** ensure adequate creche facilities are available and communicated to parents, particularly for those with very young or multiple children.

Addressing these areas could further increase Flying Start's effectiveness and enhance experiences and outcomes for families using the programme.

## Areas for further investigation

**Cross-site comparison:** this research focused on a small sample of parents using Flying Start in two areas of Cardiff and did not seek to understand differences in delivery. In the future, it will be useful to include other Flying Start sites to enable comparison across areas to understand differences and how these may impact parents' engagement and experiences.

**Non-engaged parents:** parents who participated in this research were established users of Flying Start, so their experiences only tell us limited detail about barriers to engagement. Future research should explore what prevents or deters families who are eligible to use Flying Start from doing so.

**Fathers and other caregivers:** all the parents who participated in this research were mums, and our findings suggest that it is predominantly mums who engage with Flying Start. It would be interesting to explore the dynamics of family engagement and understand the barriers and enablers of engagement from dads and other caregivers.

**Enablers of transitions to work:** our findings suggest that Flying Start has enabled and supported several parents to return to work. Exploring how Flying Start supports parents' transitions to work would be a valuable area of further investigation.

The word 'nesta' is written in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font in the top right corner of the page. The background is a solid blue color with large, abstract geometric shapes in white and orange that create a sense of depth and movement, resembling architectural elements or a stylized path.

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