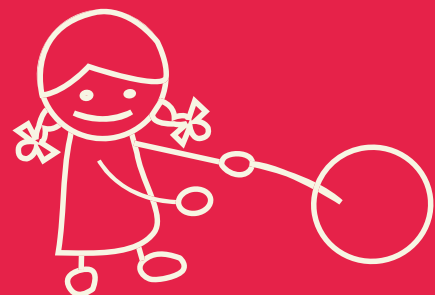


NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

Reforming school-age childcare in Ireland



A research report
by

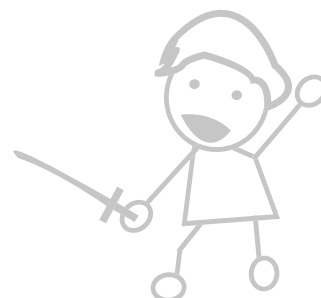
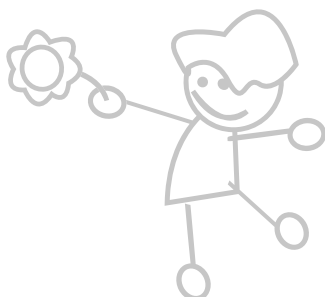


October 2020



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Foreword

Sherpa Kids' new report, *No child left behind: reforming school-age childcare in Ireland*, shows just how profound the impact of Covid-19 lockdown has been on parents and children. It also demonstrates how much every part of Irish society and the economy, including parents, children, and school communities, stand to benefit from increased government investment in school-age childcare.

More than 9 in 10 parents report that lockdown has had negative effects on their lives and the lives of their children, particularly in terms of mental health. As many as 80% believe that their child's routine has been negatively altered, while 67% believe that their education has been hindered.


Working parents have been asked to function as part-time teachers, and as individual schools and classes are closed to contain virus outbreaks, it is likely that this will continue. Intuitively, we know that parents cannot be fully professionally productive while also providing a quality education to their children. The data bears this out: **64%** said they have found it very or quite challenging to home-school, while **62%** have had difficulty even finding the time to do it.

This is not easy for children, either. Whatever their age, they need routine and a moderate amount of structure. They must be socialised with their peers and have clearly demarcated home and school lives. The erosion of that boundary was abundantly clear during lockdown, so much so that **60%** of parents believe that their children would have benefited from structured school-age childcare. International studies show that children who participate in supervised after-school activities enjoy improved academic and physical health outcomes and social and emotional competencies, as well as better promotion and education prospects.⁽¹⁾ This may be especially true for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.⁽²⁾

In September, in a move to bring Ireland's childcare in line with international best practice, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs announced that it would spend an additional €574 million on childcare by 2028. Sherpa Kids believes that this is not ambitious enough. UNICEF recommends an annual investment of **1% of GDP** in childcare, and we must commit to that for the benefit of children, parents, and wider Irish society. The government currently invests just **0.2% of GDP** in childcare and does not make the important distinction between early-years childcare (0-3), which focuses on developmental education, and school-age childcare (4-15), which focuses on holistic social and creative learning.

Parents, children, school communities, and the economy will all benefit from an increase in government investment. There will be reduced childcare costs for parents, better career and education prospects for Irish children, increased female participation in the workforce, and a faster economic recovery as parents are more productive in their professional roles, taking less time off for childcare.

Aside from funding, Ireland's school-age childcare services lag infrastructurally, despite there being no shortage of premises—we already have over 3,300 primary schools in Ireland, most of which have the requisite space and only need an investment in equipment to provide suitable home-from-home after-school care. However, we lack accessibility, and that requires cultural change. Many school boards of management and school communities are, for a number of reasons, reluctant to allow after-hours care providers to use their facilities.



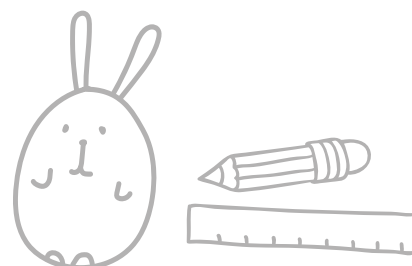
Providers like Sherpa Kids are working hard to change this mentality. We have established a presence in 50 schools in the last six years. However, the sector needs visible government endorsement of on-site school-age childcare solutions, as well as assistance educating school leaders on the benefits of after-hours care for children, parents, and the wider school community, particularly in a post-Covid, remote-working world where economic productivity depends on clear boundaries between parents' professional lives and their children's education and learning experiences.

Because Ireland's childcare system was for so long left to its own devices without a joined-up government vision, disparities have arisen. Some childcare providers are poorly qualified, which results in varying standards of service provision for Irish children and a widening of the gap between low- and high-income households, the latter which are able to invest in higher-skilled carers. If it is this government's goal to build a more equal Ireland, then we believe we must have universal standards by introducing a nationally accredited school-age childcare qualification.

Covid-19, while providing its own challenges, has served to highlight chronic issues in school-age childcare. Sherpa Kids believes that these issues are surmountable. We have outlined three key actions that we believe government can take, in collaboration with the industry, to ensure the building of a sustainable school-age childcare sector that leaves no child behind. These are a 1% GDP, or €3.2 billion, investment per year in childcare by 2025, with a €500 million annual "long-term investment fund" specifically for school-age childcare; full utilisation of primary school infrastructure for school-age childcare provision; and the introduction of an accredited school-age childcare qualification.

Working together with these three actions in mind, the Irish government and Ireland's childcare providers can build a positive, productive school-age childcare sector that benefits the children it strives to teach and nurture, their parents, and our wider societal and economic structures in a new Covid world.

John Miles,
Managing Director of Sherpa Kids Ireland



1. "Afterschool Programmes: A Review of Evidence Under the Every Student Succeeds Act", The Wallace Foundation, 2019.
2. "Swedish young people's after-school extra-curricular activities: attendance, opportunities and consequences", British Journal of Sociology and Education, Vol 40, 2019.



Key Findings and insights

91% of parents feel that their home lives have been negatively impacted by Covid-19.

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80% say their child's routine has been affected, **67%** their child's education, and **59%** their own mental health.



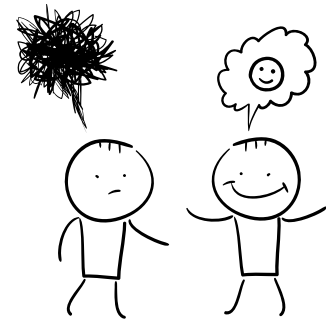
Though lockdown has lifted, parents and children still need all the support they can get.

School-age childcare providers must play a more active role in providing these supports, in collaboration with the government.

Almost half of all parents would avail of mental health support services for their child as they return to school.

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82% of parents who are already concerned for their child's mental health would avail of these supports.



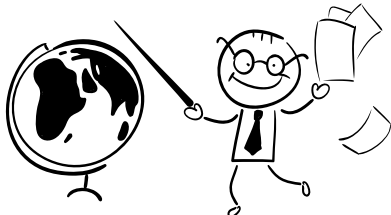
Childcare providers need to embrace this new awareness early.

Mental health issues frequently worsen the longer they go unrecognised, which creates long-term problems for children, parents, and service providers. Sherpa Kids' Buddy Bench mental health partnership, for example, helps children communicate their issues and build resilience and coping skills.

60% of parents believe structured school-age childcare would have improved their child's behaviour during lockdown.

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This figure reaches **65%** among parents aged 18-34 and for parents of young children aged 0-4 years.



Children need structure and routine to preserve their physical and mental health, and to maintain domestic harmony.

Sherpa Kids has found that children are thriving now that they are back to school with their friends and peers. Creative and free play programmes encourage socialisation and improve social development.

More than two-thirds (69%) of parents feel that the government should be providing more mental health and wellbeing supports to children.

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42% believe these supports should come from local authorities, while **31%** believe they should come from childcare providers.



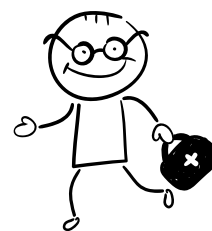
Parents recognise government as the most effective provider of child mental health supports. This must be reflected in policy.

School-age childcare providers must work together to ensure that the government develops a long-term mental health support programme for children, especially post-lockdown.

63% of parents say that adherence to Covid-19 health and safety measures by school-age childcare providers is key to determining service use.

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Cost was a key factor for **58%** of parents in March 2020, dropping to **36%** in August.



The school-age childcare sector is strictly adhering to the government's Covid-19 guidelines.

However, these new requirements have brought increased costs that will take time to offset, especially with reduced capacity.

While financial supports for the sector have been invaluable in the short term, long-term relief measures must be assessed.



Action points

The Covid-19 crisis has made clear the need for a well-structured, well-resourced school-age childcare system. The once clear lines separating the home, the office, and the school have been blurred.

This lack of structure is not conducive to the long-term prospects of a remote-working economy, to children's education and development, or to the population's mental and physical health.

There is much that individual childcare providers can do to help remedy this. For example, this year Sherpa Kids partnered with Buddy Bench, an award-winning mental health initiative, to provide young children with coping and interpersonal skills. By December 2020, Buddy Bench will be an integral part of our programme and available in 50 primary schools in Ireland

However, the pandemic has merely underscored Ireland's longstanding need for large-scale, government-led action in school-age childcare, which until only recently has remained the remit of parents, grandparents, and informal childminders. In the long-term, this lack of structured after-school childcare will disadvantage parents and children; in the short-term, with Covid-19 restrictions, uncontrolled, unregulated childcare environments are simply not practical.

Real change starts with funding. Greater allocation of state funding to childcare, including a "long term investment fund" specifically for school-age childcare, can lead to improved educational and professional outcomes and better physical and mental health for children.⁽³⁾ Ireland invests, at best, less than half of what UNICEF recommends.

Furthermore, Ireland's primary school infrastructure remains under-utilised. This is primarily a cultural issue. School boards of management and school communities must be convinced of the benefits of sharing their facilities with after-hours school-age childcare providers. Many Scandinavian countries have had success in this regard.

There is also no clear framework for the provision of quality school-age childcare. As a result, quality of service varies, and many parents are spending money on subpar care that is of little benefit and perhaps detrimental to their children.

Sherpa Kids believes that addressing these three key areas will make a meaningful difference to the lives of children, parents, and school communities, and create short and long-term benefits for Ireland's rapidly changing economy and society.

1. Increase childcare investment to €3.2 billion per year by 2025, with €500 million for school-age childcare

Study after study has shown that public investment in high-quality early and school-age childcare has long-term benefits for children, parents, school communities, and society at large, including lower costs for households, improved educational opportunities for children, and higher female participation in the workforce. According to a 2020 UNICEF report, supportive social networks, free play, and mental health coping skills are major predictors of childhood happiness, all of which can be provided in a school-age childcare environment.⁽⁴⁾

Presently, however, the Irish government invests just 0.2% of GDP in childcare per year versus the OECD average of 0.8% and the UNICEF recommended investment of 1%. In Iceland, investment is as high as 1.9%.⁽⁵⁾ The Irish government also makes little distinction between early-years childcare (0-3) and school-age childcare (4-15), which leads to missed opportunities for older children. Indeed, a European Commission report noted Ireland as a country with a "high unmet need for out-of-school services".⁽⁶⁾

Sherpa Kids calls on Irish policymakers to bring investment in childcare to 1% of GDP, approximately €3.2 billion, per year by the end of 2025. Sherpa Kids also calls on policymakers to recognise the crucial distinctions between early-years and school-age childcare, and to recognise specifically the nascent state of the school-age childcare sector in Ireland. To that end, Sherpa Kids calls on the government to ringfence €500 million of the €3.2 billion annual investment as a "long-term investment fund" specifically for the school-age childcare sector. This fund would be invested in facilities and care improvements, staff training, including an accredited qualification (see Point 3) in the line with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs' Workforce Development Plan, and special programmes for older children, including mental health education.



2. Accelerate consultation process on use of primary school infrastructure for school-age childcare.

The pandemic has accelerated remote working trends. Parents of young children are now increasingly working from home, which has disrupted the typical school day and routine. For parents who are still working at home when the school day finishes, it can be difficult to remain productive. This has the potential to slow Ireland's economic recovery and long-term prospects.

The provision of after-hours school-age childcare depends on access to primary school facilities. In Sweden and Denmark, on-site school-age childcare services are directly coordinated with schools so that all-day care can be provided.⁽⁷⁾ In Ireland, however, many school communities and boards of management are reluctant to share their facilities, even after the school day has finished. While Sherpa Kids has had some local successes changing this mentality, the sector needs visible government endorsement to harmonise relations between school stakeholders and school-age childcare providers.

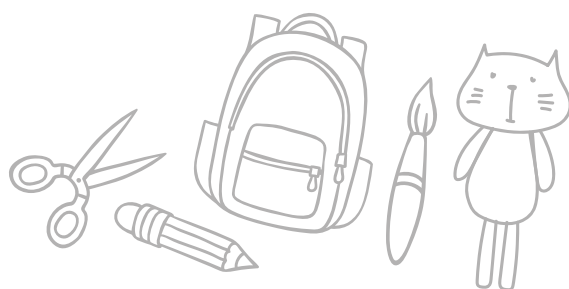
In August, Minister for Children Roderic O'Gorman announced a new consultation process on the school-age childcare sector. While Covid-19 has delayed this process, and made physical consultations impractical, Sherpa Kids urges Minister O'Gorman to re-prioritise the consultation and use digital tools wherever possible to bring stakeholders in school-age childcare together for constructive and progressive dialogue.

3. Introduce an accredited qualification for school-age childcare.

Despite the clear social and economic benefits of quality school-age childcare, Ireland lacks a universal, integrated system for its delivery. Because the system is so disparate, among school-age childcare providers there are wildly variant standards in training, health and safety, and child behaviour and developmental care. This has repercussions for children, working parents, employers, and many other stakeholders.

Some school-age childcare providers have developed their own certifications for carers. Sherpa Kids, for example, requires all new carers to undertake in-house training so that parents and children can be guaranteed a quality service. However, a nationally recognised qualification would play a major role in reassuring all parents and school communities of the long-term value of school-age childcare.

Sherpa Kids calls on Irish policymakers to begin a consultation process on introducing a standardised, accredited qualification for school-age childcare, in conjunction with childcare providers and academics and in line with international best practice, to ensure greater consistency in service quality. This accredited qualification should form a central part of the Workforce Development Plan.



3. Wallace Foundation, 2019.

4. "Worlds of Influence: Understanding What Shapes Child Well-being in Rich Countries", Innocenti Report Card 16, UNICEF, 2020.

5. "Public spending on childcare and early education", OECD Family Database, 2019.

6. "Childcare services for school-age children", European Commission, 2013.

7. Ibid.





Research Findings

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN ON PARENTS AND CHILDREN

The majority of parents, some part of the school community themselves, have found it difficult to manage their professional duties and their role as home-school teacher. This struggle was particularly apparent in the earlier months of the lockdown, particularly March to June.

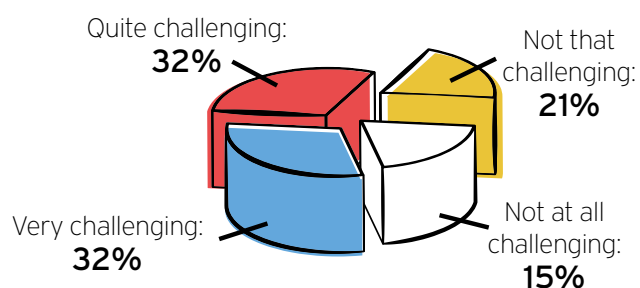
- Older parents (45+) and fathers generally reported being more challenged by home-school lessons and finding the time to dedicate to home-schooling.
- Among all parent age groups, those under 34 found it the most challenging to secure childcare to undertake out-of-home tasks.
- More than **9 in 10** parents have been negatively impacted by Covid-19 restrictions.
- Mothers were most likely to report an impact on their personal mental health (**68%**), while fathers were slightly more likely to report a negative impact on their child's education (**70%**).
- Parents aged 35-55 and 45+ were more likely to report a negative impact on their child's routine (**86%** and **83%** respectively), perhaps because older children have a more established daily schedule.



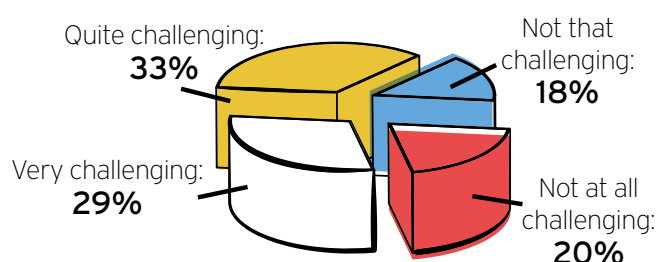


How challenging have you found the following?

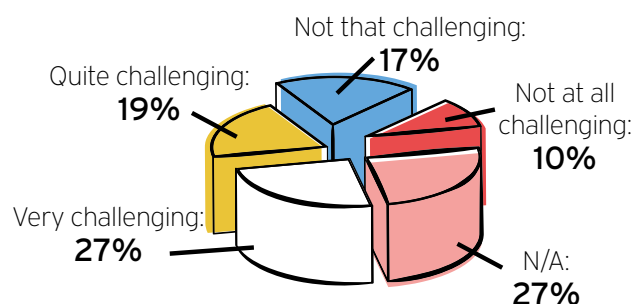
Going through lessons and home-schooling:



Finding the time to home-school:



Securing childcare for necessary out-of-home activities:



In what ways has balancing your working life and home-schooling your child affected you and your family?

My child's routine

80%

My child's education

67%

My own mental health

59%

My child's development

59%

Greater tension at home

58%

My child's mental health

54%

My child's confidence

53%

My own confidence

45%

My relationship with my spouse/partner

44%



Research Findings

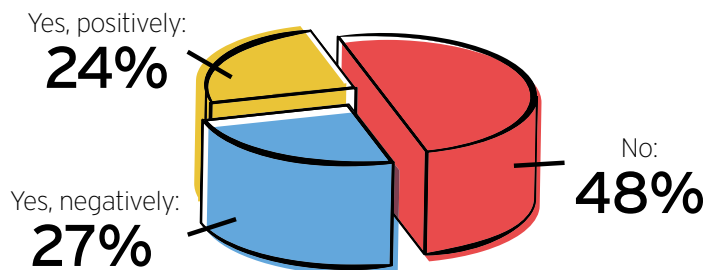
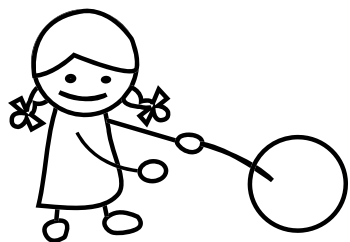
ROUTINE AND STRUCTURE

Almost 3 in 10 parents reported a negative change to their child's behaviour as a result of Covid-19 restrictions, a figure that increases with the age of the child.

- The majority of parents agree that school-age childcare would have improved their child's behaviour during lockdown.
- School-age childcare provides structure and routine, such as creative learning, supervised study sessions, skills training, and physical exercise.
- After the disruption of lockdown and faced with an uncertain and potentially disjointed school year, more than half of parents are concerned about their child's mental health as they return to the classroom.
- By providing a structure to traditional after-school hours, school-age childcare can help ease children and parents back into the typical "school day" and preserve the home as a place for positive social interactions with family, recreation, and rest.



Do you think that your child's behaviour has changed as a result of Covid-19 restrictions?



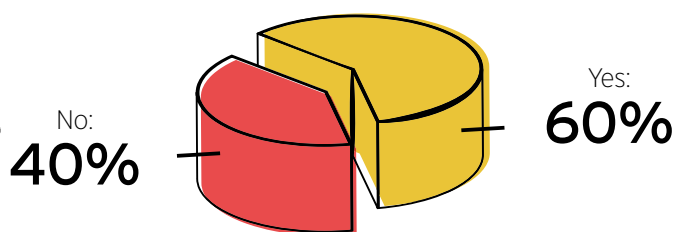
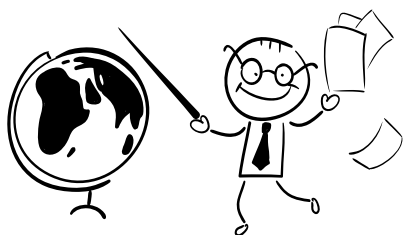
"Yes, negatively" breakdown

34% among mothers

29% among parents located outside of Dublin

37% among parents of children aged 13-17

Do you believe that structured school-age childcare would have improved your child's behaviour during lockdown?



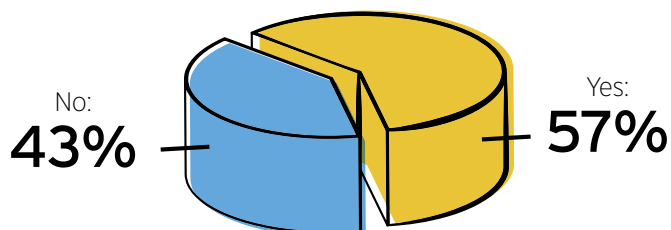
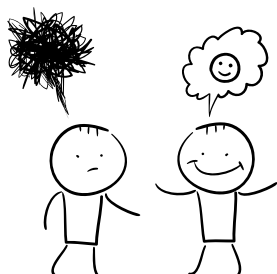
"Yes" breakdown

65% among parents aged 18-34

65% among parents of children aged 0-4

63% among fathers.

Are you concerned about your child's mental health as they return to school after lockdown?



"Yes" breakdown

60% among mothers

60% among parents over 45

59% among parents located outside of Dublin



Research Findings

FACTORS DETERMINING USE OF SCHOOL-AGE CHILDCARE

Covid-19 has altered the priorities of parents choosing to avail of school-age childcare.

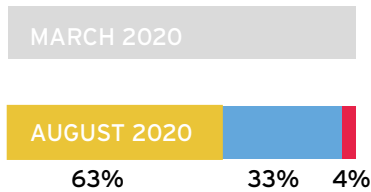
- For 63% of parents, a provider that fully complies with the government's Covid-19 health and safety guidelines is the most important factor determining their decision.
- Since March, every other factor has dropped in significance, most slightly, others significantly.
- Cost, a key factor for parents in March, has dropped from 58% to 36%. Despite this, its importance remains high; only 12% say that it is not important in their decision to use school-age childcare.
- For decision-makers in the school-age childcare industry and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, it is important not to lose sight of parents' long-term priorities or put off addressing chronic, systemic issues.
- While Covid-19 measures are crucial now, once the virus is controlled, other issues that were important to parents in March, such as cost, qualified and experienced staff, and safety and security, will once again drive demand.



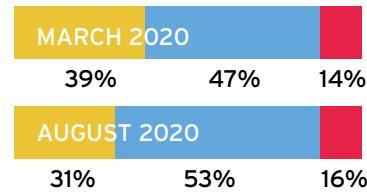
Which of the following are key factors and which are less important or not important in your decision to use school-age childcare?

KEY FACTOR IMPORTANT NOT IMPORTANT

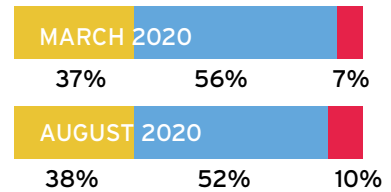
COVID-19 HEALTH AND SAFETY MEASURES IN LINE WITH GOVERNMENT GUIDANCE:



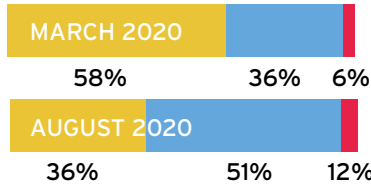
AVAILABILITY OF FINANCIAL SUPPORTS:



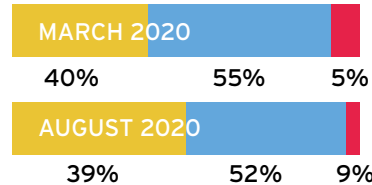
PROVISION OF STRUCTURED ACTIVITIES:



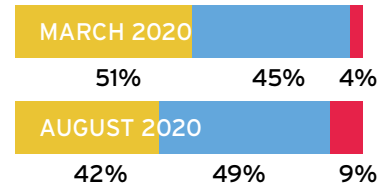
COST:



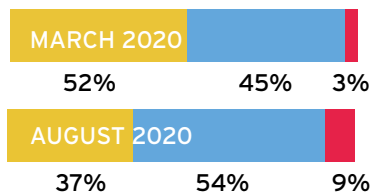
PROVISION OF EDUCATIONAL PLAYTIME:



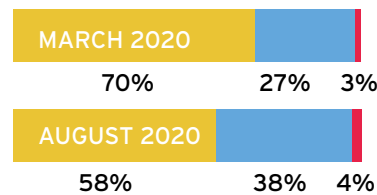
PROVISION OF HEALTHY, NUTRITIONAL FOOD:



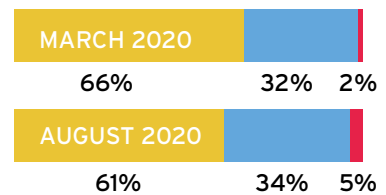
POSITIVE WORD OF MOUTH:



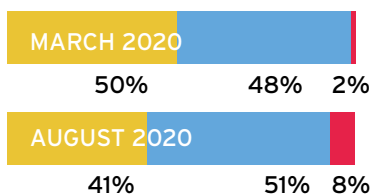
KNOWLEDGE AND TRUST IN THE QUALITY OF THE SERVICES:



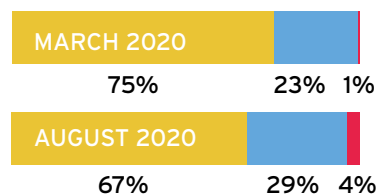
QUALIFIED, EXPERIENCED STAFF:



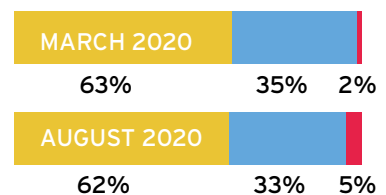
LOCATION:



SAFE AND SECURE ENVIRONMENT:



CLEANLINESS OF THE FACILITY:





Research Findings

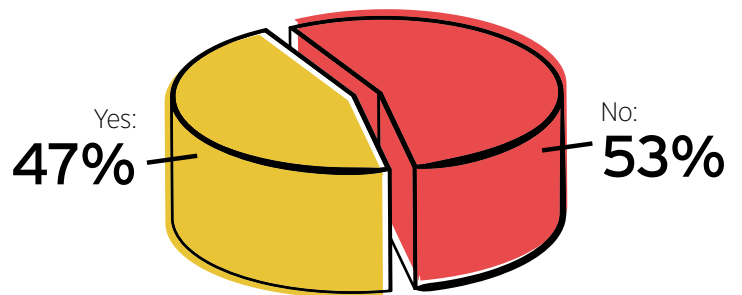
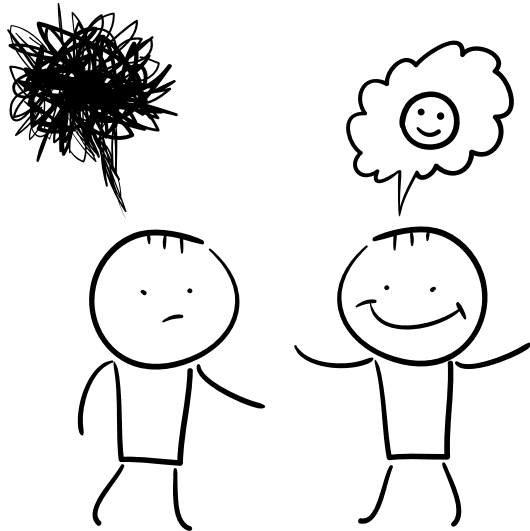
MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

More than half of parents believe that Covid-19 restrictions have affected their child's mental health, while nearly 6 in 10 parents are concerned about their child's mental health as they return to school.

- The lockdown has completely altered children's routines, and with clearly negative effects. They have been unable to socialise with their peers, unable to enjoy a full-time, physical education, and have been confined mostly to their homes with parents who are under pressure to function as both full-time teachers and full-time employees.
- That 69% of parents believe that the government should do more to provide mental health supports to school-age children underscores the need for the government to allocate 1% of GDP to childcare by 2025.
- Greater funding will result in higher-quality health and welfare supports. Likewise, a standardised operations model for the school-age childcare industry will ensure all children, not just those from wealthy backgrounds, receive quality services.



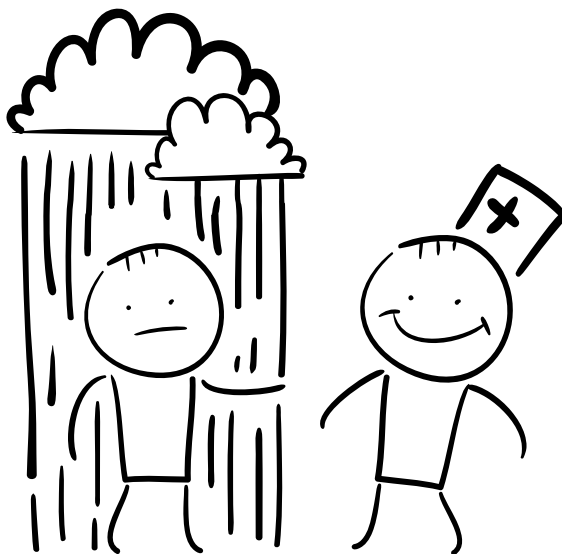
Would you avail of mental health supports for your child?



82%

of parents who are worried about their child's mental health returning to school would avail of these supports

Who should provide mental health supports and assistance to school-age children?



The government: **69%**

Local authorities: **42%**

Childcare providers: **31%**

Other: **3%**

None: **9%**



Research methodology

- Research for this report was commissioned by Sherpa Kids Ireland and carried out by Behaviour and Attitudes.
- The survey sample comprised a total of 1,276 adults in line with CSO census data and AIMRO guidelines.
- Corrective weighting was applied to ensure a nationally representative sample.
- The research occurred in two waves: 1,000 adults were surveyed between 11-19 March and 276 between 31 July-17 August 2020.



About Sherpa Kids

Sherpa Kids is the leading school-age childcare provider in Ireland, with 50 services operating in primary schools around the country. Sherpa Kids is regulated by Tusla.

Our ethos is to be a childcare provider that honestly strives to build social value into everything that we do. At our heart is our purpose: to support Ireland's families and make a difference. We provide affordable school-age childcare with flexible access built around parent's needs.

Since starting Sherpa Kids Ireland in 2014, we have always believed that we are involved in a sector that is about more than just childcare. Our purpose is to support families in their lives every day, through the care we provide, in a time and a place that suits their needs. We have very much made Sherpa Kids about being a business with a purpose. Our teams comprise childcare professionals who operate under the core values we have created for our company, which support our purpose.

We know that childcare is now more valued post-Covid 19. Parents appreciate the benefits of a stimulating environment and social interaction for their children. For us, we think that as we all shift to live within new parameters, caring for children in the community close to their home will be more valued. That is why we believe our ethos of rooting our school services in the community is so important to all our stakeholders, be they parents, kids, principals, and boards of management.

Sherpa Kids International is a childcare company operating in six countries. The company was established 22 years ago in New Zealand by Dawn Engelbrecht, a working mum with childcare requirements. She recognised a demand, based on her needs and what she felt were the needs of others, to establish a childcare service in the community, with on-demand access for parents. Sherpa Kids now operate over 200 services in New Zealand and over 100 in the UK, Ireland, and South Africa.





CONTACT

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