



HOME IS WHERE WE START FROM



Map of local Home-Starts across the UK



While the dots are where Home-Starts are located, many of them will offer support to parents over a wider area.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to everyone who contributed to the making of this report.

The report contains findings from a survey undertaken by Critical Research of 1,238 parents supported by local Home-Starts across the UK in the last year. It also includes information gathered from local Home-Starts and insights gained from discussions with local Home-Start coordinators and managers. Home-Start practitioners and volunteers. We are grateful too for the contributions from referrers to local Home-Starts and from other partner organisations at a local and national level who champion the work we do and value the role of Home-Starts in supporting families.

We are especially grateful to the families who have spoken with us and allowed us to share their stories, which so powerfully bring to life the need and the opportunities we have to make a difference.

Thank you to all of the staff and volunteers across the Home-Start network who took the time to give us a more detailed picture of their work and its impact. It is their experience, commitment and passion that shines through in this report and that has touched so many families' lives in positive ways.

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Foreword



Peter Grigg CEO Home-Start UK

It has been a year like no other for families. Wave after wave of lockdowns have pushed all families to the limit. If parenting and nurturing children was not hard enough, the global pandemic, social isolation and economic turbulence have magnified the pressure and anxiety of every possible challenge a family might face.

Yet, it is in times of crisis that fundamental human values are revealed. In our communities, so many have risen to the collective challenge – in hospitals, supermarkets, food banks. The pandemic has demonstrated that we are capable of co-operating at scale with social purpose and a selflessness that many previously may not have thought possible.

It is this spirit of kindness that we celebrate in this report. As Home-Start charities working with volunteers, staff and families in communities across the UK, this report highlights the humanity, humility and care that we have witnessed over the past 15 months. We surveyed families from across our network of local Home-Starts across four UK nations to explore what has made the biggest difference. Crucially, we consider how we might build on this extraordinary effort in order for society to "build back" – not just better, but fairer and kinder too.

In a year when so many have yearned to get outside, it may seem odd to provide this reminder of the importance of the home environment for children. But home truly is where it starts from. Supporting parents to not just cope, but feel confident to thrive, in their role as caregivers on a day-to-day basis is what Home-Start has been doing for fifty years.

We know first-hand the value of compassionate, non-judgemental, volunteer and expert support for parents and carers. In this report we shout this loudly and proudly because – after this strange period of extended isolation – childhood can't wait. We look forward to working with families, communities, funders and decision makers in the months and years ahead to make a fairer, kinder future for families a reality. Home-Start is here to play our part.

Executive summary

Over a year on from *Babies in Lockdown*, the report informed by UK parents with babies and young children, we have once again listened to parents' voices. It has been an extraordinary year of disruption and challenges for individuals, for families, and for organisations. Navigating the changing landscape continues to be a priority for Home-Start – building the resilience of our network so we can support the resilience of families.

The landscape has shifted from one of emergency response to tentative horizon-scanning for a 'new normal'. In the year that has passed, more than 600,000 babies will have been born in the UK. Countless numbers of parents, extended families and friends will have missed out on the informal and essential fabric of connections that are normally a part of family life before school. Toddlers have missed out on opportunities for socialisation or new experiences, and their mums and dads have missed out on opportunities to share the triumphs and tribulations of being a parent, or to find a listening ear for their concerns.

There are other concerns, too, about what has not happened over the course of the last year. Services such as health visiting, already overstretched, have been disrupted by redeployment and burgeoning caseloads. This risks missing opportunities for picking up on developmental delays, addressing loneliness in the absence of mother and baby groups, and responding to domestic abuse kindled by confinement to the home in a time of heightened pressure.



This report combines the findings from our latest survey of more than 1,200 parents with the learning from our network of local Home-Starts, shining a light on their challenges and on the sustenance and hope that can arise from ordinary human connections. This is combined with what we know from research about the impacts of adversity on a) the youngest in society, and; b) on the parents who, despite a desire to give their children the best start for life, find themselves needing and benefiting from the kind of parent-powered support which Home-Start provides.

We highlight the assets that exist within parent communities, and how bringing people together can lighten the load for parents and, in so doing, empower them. We paint a picture of the breadth and depth of our work with families across the UK, working within and alongside public services, and the difference it can make.

We make the case for doing things differently: for recognising the place for our kind of parent-powered responses to the needs of families experiencing challenges and to the existing inequalities exposed in the past year. We set out what is needed to build on this vital work, and to secure the very important place of volunteer home-visiting within the range of support that is available to families.



i. Best Beginnings, Home-Start UK, & the Parent-Infant Foundation (2020) Babies in lockdown: listening to parents to build back better.

We suggest that our approach is all the more necessary now, as we turn to face the future. There is much to be learned from understanding the impact of trauma on individuals and on communities, and much to be gained from relationship-based compassion, kindness and connectivity. Our view is that we must champion the unique, often understated connections between parents and home-visiting volunteers, and the value of relationship-based support, rooted in communities, within and alongside public services, as a doorway to recovery and resilience.

The huge strength in being a federated network is that we have the potential to harness local context, needs, knowledge, passion and experience while drawing on the scale and capacity available across the federation. Local impact coupled with national reach is a potent combination.

As we move into the second year of unprecedented change resulting from COVID-19, there is an urgent need for decision makers, funders, commissioners, and politicians to address the needs of families with the youngest children. Together, public services and civil society must be empowered to build upon the understanding and support of families that has been galvanised across communities. The network of more than 180 local Home-Starts across all four nations of the UK, has enormous experience of what makes a difference for families, built on the human qualities of giving, learning, sharing and receiving that were first highlighted by our founder in 1973. The creativity, energy and care that has been demonstrated across the network over the past year has been extraordinary, and has benefited very many families.

We know first-hand of the value of this for individuals. We hope that in this report we can share this, or shout it from the roof-tops even, because now it matters more than ever, and home is where we start from. The years ahead will be challenging, but we have opportunities to make a difference, and Home-Starts are committed to building back better, fairer and kinder.



BUILDING BACK BETTER MUST START WITH FAMILIES

Our kind of parent-powered support – which builds upon parents' strengths, strengthens core skills, celebrates relationships, fosters connections, and reduces sources of stress – can play a crucial role in moving towards recovery and resilience.



BUILDING BACK FAIRER MUST STARTWITH FAMILIES

The findings from our survey and insights from local Home-Starts tell us that what is shown in the data it is not simply about the 'poorest' but reflects the inequality of security – that fundamental safe base for families that comes from access to affordable and stable housing, not being hungry, being able to meet basic needs, access to quality facilities and services, and not experiencing additional adversities arising from trauma and discrimination.



BUILDING BACK KINDER MUST START WITH FAMILIES

The principles of supporting responsive relationships, strengthening core life skills and reducing sources of stress in families' lives are the golden threads running through the work of local Home-Starts. They are founded on the humility, humanity and humour first highlighted by our founder in 1973, and woven through the ordinary day-to-day interactions between our families, our volunteers, and our staff across the Home-Start network. This is our contribution to building back kinder.



1. Home is where we start from

WHY IT MATTERS

The first 1,001 days of life from pregnancy lay the foundations for physical and mental health. Babies' brains are developing rapidly, and are at their most adaptable in the womb and in the earliest years of life. These years can be turbulent; full of challenge and opportunity, vulnerability and growth.

To give children the best start for life during the vital first five years takes nurturing relationships, an enriching home environment, and parents who are well supported and enabled to undertake this essential role. In particular, socio-economic factors have a stronger influence on younger children's health outcomes than those of older children, suggesting that families' circumstances are crucial in the years before school.

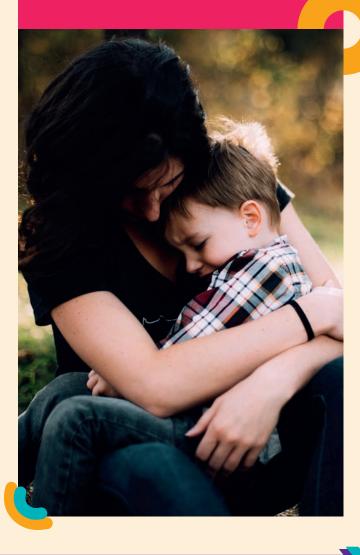
The Home-Start approach and our roots in communities mean that we are well placed to reach and support families facing challenges and experiencing distress, be that disability, poverty, poor physical or mental health, isolation or a relationship breakdown. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns have acted as magnifiers, exacerbating existing issues, presenting new challenges, and creating additional pressure within homes. We are already witnessing the impact of this in rising levels of domestic abuse, mental illness and child poverty.

THE POWER OF PARENTS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF HOME

Home-Start is built upon a model of parent-powered support, which addresses directly some of the stressors that are impacting families. We seek to build upon parents' strengths, to empower and enable them so that they can move forwards in their lives with renewed and restored capacities.

Our families told us that a trusted relationship between parent and volunteer that starts in the home is one of the key drivers of impact. It has enabled many to feel more comfortable about asking for help and more confident. Importantly, Home-Start support also meant parents have felt less judged by others. The parents of young children who we surveyed told us about the challenges they have faced in the past year. The key findings include:

- Most parents of children aged 0-5 have found parenting more challenging during the pandemic.
- Prior to contact with Home-Start, just1 in 5 usually found it easy to ask for help.
- > Home-Start has been a lifeline for parents during the pandemic.
- Almost all parents experienced challenges across multiple domains relating to themselves and their children.



2. The challenges of parenting: from conception to reception

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Young children develop within the context of relationships, where strong attachments with loving caregivers underpin their early development and act as a buffer against adversity.

The context within which parents undertake their parenting journey makes a difference. Some parents, no matter how resilient they are, will face the challenges of adverse events. For others, the more chronic impacts of environment or unresolved trauma will mean that the ordinary demands of parenting are more challenging.

The gap between disadvantaged children and their peers has widened, and existing inequalities have been magnified by the pandemic. At the same time, access to support has been more difficult, with services already overstretched and hollowed out following a decade of austerity.

Home-Starts look to support home environments where children can thrive, through relationship-based interventions to address the stressors parents are experiencing. Our workforce of volunteers and staff are effectively trained, supported and equipped to tailor their support to the individual needs of each family.

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Feeling isolated was the most common challenge faced by parents, with three-quarters (75%) of our survey respondents saying that they felt cut off from family and friends.

HOW ARE FAMILIES COPING?

Over half of parents with young children we surveyed do not believe that they have coped well over the last year.

- **Half (52%)** of all parents told us that they have not coped well.
- Over a third (36%) of parents told us that they feel their children have not coped well.
- Parents' perceptions are that their children aged four or five have fared significantly worse than their younger children.
- **Over three-quarters (79%)** of parents told us that their children aged between three and five needed their attention more during the last year.
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents reported that their baby had become more clingy.
- ➤ Almost half (47%) said that their baby was crying more or having more tantrums.

However, our survey also found that parents were not feeling the effects of the pandemic equally. Consistent with other emerging research on the disproportionate impact of the pandemic across different groups, our survey revealed the depth of impacts for individuals experiencing poor mental health, isolation, financial insecurity or disability – in particular, how differences in experience and expectation were shaped by income.





STRESS AND ITS IMPACT ON CAREGIVING

Whatever the reason a parent comes to Home-Start, some circumstances make the job of being a parent a much greater challenge. Local Home-Starts support families through their challenging times.

A pile-up of stressors on families has a wear-andtear effect on parents. Adversity, whether acute or chronic, impacts on parents' wellbeing, their social networks and resources and their ability to provide nurturing care.

Our approach supports parents, supporting children. Local Home-Starts have worked in creative and agile ways to address the range of challenges experienced by families. In the main report we give examples of the work of local Home-Starts supporting families across a range of issues.

POVERTY

Despite parents' desires to do their very best in giving their children a good start, in the UK today there is no guarantee that parents will be able to provide the basic needs for their families.

Of the 4.2 million children in poverty before the pandemic, 1.3 million were babies or children aged under five, with households with a child under three facing the highest risks of poverty.

Rising unemployment, falling income, and juggling work and caring responsibilities have placed financial pressure on families across the board. As many as 1.1 million additional people – including 200,000 children – were estimated to have fallen below the poverty line by the end of 2020. This brings the total number of children living in poverty to 4.5 million – an overall increase of 5% since before the pandemic."



Little Village (2021) It Takes a Village: how to make all childhoods matter.
 www.wp.littlevillagehq.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Anniversary_1080px_V8.pdf

Local Home-Starts are seeing first-hand the impact of poverty on families as a result of rising bills, falling income and barriers to accessing the technology that we have all relied upon over the past year. Food insecurity, fuel bills and digital poverty have all increased in households with children, particularly those headed by lone parents.

Home-Start has been a lifeline for families by helping them in essential ways to access food, as and other things that they need for their babies and young children.

Home-Starts have supported families in the following ways:

- Helping with increased fuel costs
- Support to access technology or data
- Providing social support for those who are isolated and cannot access online services
- Providing vital emotional support for those experiencing financial shocks arising from the pandemic.

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

Through the pandemic, parents have been deprived of opportunities for sharing experiences, enjoying adult company and getting out of the house. Additionally, we have heard that difficulties accessing vital services, such as health visiting, have left many parents feeling abandoned, alone and angry about the loss of support.

- Being cut off from family and friends was cited as the main challenge by three-quarters (75%) of the parents we surveyed.
- Nearly three-quarters (74%) of parents we surveyed said that support from Home-Start helped them to feel less alone.

Home-Starts have brought families together through online groups and shared digital activities, such as storytelling, crafts or cooking, to address isolation, strengthen parent-child relationships and build social and community networks.



PARENTAL MENTAL HEALTH ACROSS THE FIRST 1,001 DAYS

Perinatal mental health problems affect many women and often go unidentified, undiagnosed, or untreated.

Local Home-Starts, alongside universal and specialist public services, help address perinatal mental illness in a preventative way with expectant or new mums and, increasingly, with dads. They do this through peer support, raising awareness, supporting early identification of difficulties, and assisting women to access one-to-one or group support or more specialist interventions where appropriate.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

Women who have experienced domestic violence and abuse can be left struggling with the legacy of that trauma, alone and without support. They may go on to face other forms of disadvantage, such as poor mental health, isolation and poverty, with enduring consequences for themselves and their children.

The effects of exposure to domestic abuse on children are far reaching and can include mental health difficulties, behavioural challenges, and neurological impacts.

We are committed to working to support the families we serve who have been affected by domestic abuse. Local Home-Starts have built up expertise, share learning across the network, and work with specialist domestic abuse partners to develop services and deliver training for volunteers.

3. The Home-Start approach

OUR PLACE IN THE WIDER SYSTEMS OF FAMILY SUPPORT

Home-Starts come alongside families in their challenging times with humility, humanity and humour, led by volunteers who have time to care, have experience and understanding of family life, and can be flexible in their approach.

MEETING PARENTS ON THEIR OWN TERMS

It is the ordinary interactions outside more formal approaches, and the value of connection, that stand out to parents as being of benefit. The little things that make a difference in an ordinary way, without stigma, thresholds or diagnosis, and before situations deteriorate, and add up to bigger impacts.

Support from Home-Start helps parents to make connections with peers, build their social networks, normalise the challenges of parenting and receive practical help. This support is provided in a holistic way, tailored to the particular needs of the family.

Home-Starts across the UK are alongside parents in relation to a wide range of issues – from healthy eating and managing routines to financial budgeting and employability, and from difficulties in relationships to poor mental health. We support parents in practical and emotional ways.

Parents we surveyed told us that support from Home-Start has lessened feelings of loneliness and helped them to cope. The support has also provided hope for the future, helped people feel more confident in their parenting and helped parents have fun with their children.

HOW HOME-START'S MODEL MAKES A DIFFERENCE

When families find themselves vulnerable, they might need to realise and build on their strengths. Our core model of volunteer-led home-visiting support, provided alongside a wide range of projects, activities, group support and targeted interventions in response to local need, allows us to work responsively with parents to meet their unique needs.

The science of child development and resilience suggests a set of 'design principles' that those in decision-making positions or providing a service for families can use to guide them in finding ways to improve outcomes for children and families.

The strength in the Home-Start model is that we can hold in mind these essential principles and use them not only to inform our approach but also to tailor the support offered to a family.

These three principles are:

- Support responsive relationships for children and adults.
- 2 Strengthen core life skills.
- Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families.

iii. Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families. 2021 update. Harvard Center on the Developing Child. Available at: www.developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principlesimprove-child-family-outcomes.

THE POWER OF VOLUNTEERS

Home-Start staff and volunteers offer continuity and consistency of contact with families, often visiting homes once or twice a week over many months, enabling relationships of trust to form with parents and children. There is something unique and valuable in informed, responsive support that is freely given.

Home-Start harnesses the experience, knowledge and skills rooted in communities, in other parents and caregivers. In so doing, we enable volunteers to quietly work their ordinary magic in strengthening families.

The elements of a personalised offer of support negotiated between volunteer, family and Home-Start practitioner serve to tip the balance in favour of improving the resilience of parents and children.

'Being there' was selected by more parents than any other aspect of Home-Start support, with almost two-thirds (63%) of parents choosing this. This highlights the importance for parents of knowing that there is someone to whom they can turn if they need to.

TIPPING THE BALANCE IN FAVOUR OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN

It is not just parental knowledge of early development that is important; crucially, it is parents' capacity to put this knowledge into action.

Parents who are experiencing high ongoing levels of stress and trauma are less likely to have the emotional resources to do what they may know is best for their child. Parents who themselves have experienced early adversity are likely less able to deploy all of the skills they have to cope with challenging circumstances.

Working alongside other universal, specialist, statutory and voluntary sector services in communities, Home-Start's relationships with parents – and with their children – can scaffold a parent's influence over their child's early development in the following ways:

- > Supporting parental wellbeing.
- Supporting the home learning environment.
- > Supporting parent-child interactions.



THE POWER OF CONNECTION

Local Home-Starts have been agile in their responses to the pandemic, many moving swiftly to find new ways of providing support. These included:

- Providing one-to-one and group support online, by text or telephone, or face-to-face.
- Offering doorstep visits.
- > Setting up walking or outdoor groups.
- Working with food banks and baby banks to help deliver essentials.
- Distributing Government funds to those experiencing poverty.
- Supporting families to quickly access what they needed to adjust to new circumstances.

Across our UK-wide federated network we have distributed emergency relief and COVID-19 pandemic response funds amounting to more than £700,000 to increase our support for families and provide vital goods, food, access to technology, warm clothes and activities for children.

THE DIGITAL PIVOT

Technology has been valuable for maintaining relationships and connections during the pandemic. It has enabled our services to adapt in order to continue to offer Home-Start support to families. However, certain groups have been, and still are, at risk of being excluded. Lack of access to technology, data or suitable environments in which to use technology is preventing people from connecting with friends and family or from accessing education, information, advice and support.

Supporting families remotely has also raised concerns about what is lost in the relationship when working online, and the difficulties in keeping children and families safe.

We have worked hard to address issues of digital exclusion and build confidence in using digital communication channels among our volunteers, our practitioners and the families we work with. Local Home-Starts have offered many services online, including groups for babies, toddlers, twins and multiple siblings, along with digital one-to-one support and online sessions for expectant parents.

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened up other ways of working with our families, and we are exploring actively how digital technology offers another option for engagement alongside our traditional face-to-face contact.

PLAY AND PLAYFULNESS

The pathway to secure attachment in children is sometimes framed through the lens of parents being "bigger, stronger, wiser and kind", iv recognising the important role that parents have in supporting their child's developmental progress, alongside the things that can get in the way of this.

This lens also recognises the fundamental place of play and playfulness along this pathway, whether that is the patience, curiosity and kindness a relaxed parent is able to bring to the interactions with their child; the rough and tumble of 'horse-play' that arises more safely and more easily within secure relationships; the imagination and creativity that are fostered by attuned relationships; the good-humoured responses that a parent whose own resources are topped up can offer to a child who has overstepped the mark; or the much-needed understanding they can bring to a child who has experienced a small but nonetheless crushing defeat. All of this is more difficult in circumstances of adversity and stress.

At Home-Start, we know the importance of play for families, and we know this can be more difficult for parents when they are overstretched and their own resilience is low. We work in ways that value fun, humour and joy, and we celebrate positive connections in the relationships between parents and their children – even just for moments, and no matter what challenges a family is facing.

iv. www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/circle-of-security-model/what-is-the-circle-of-security



4 Where now for families?

In so much of the pandemic response across the UK, there has been a disappointing lack of strategic focus on the family and family relationships, on childcare, and on the early years. Because of this, we see an urgent need for greater ambition and clarity on families, babies and children as we begin to consider recovery. So much has been placed on hold, and child development is not something that can wait.

We have observed parental burnout and isolation, pressure on parental and child mental health and the very real effects of poverty on families. Parents are worried about lost opportunities for play and socialisation, and they are anxious because their children have missed out on so much.



At the same time, the insight gained during this remarkable period offers us hope for the future. The humanity, humility and care we have witnessed in communities gives us a clear steer for strengthening the resilience of families moving forwards. Based on this, we conclude with three calls to action that we believe should inform our societal response for families and children:

1. WE NEED TO BUILD BACK BETTER

This is a moment to fundamentally consider redesigning family support systems in a coordinated way that places families and children at the heart, responds to the trauma of the pandemic, and makes up for lost time in terms of child development.

2. WE NEED TO BUILD BACK FAIRER

The pandemic has harshly exposed inequality that was there before but has now been magnified. Our response to this must address these structural inequalities that contribute to poorer outcomes for ethnic minority groups, younger parents, lone parents and those on low incomes, and help to rebalance the unequitable nature of caregiving.

3. WE NEED TO BUILD BACK KINDER

Our children truly are our future. Strong healthy relationships, nurturing and safe home environments, and kind, compassionate communities must be at the heart of our approach as we move forwards.

v. Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families. 2021 update. Harvard Center on the Developing Child.

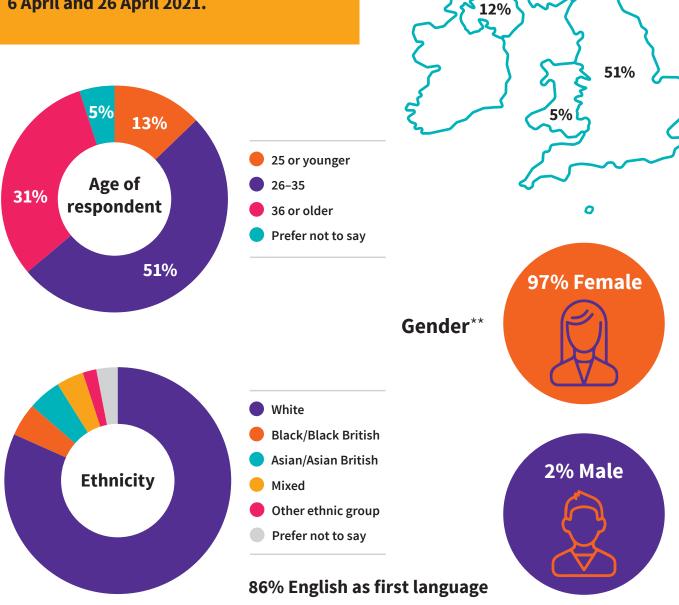
Available at: www.developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes



Our survey of families

Home-Start UK commissioned Critical Research to work with us to gain insights into the impacts that COVID-19 is continuing to have on families of all backgrounds from across the UK.

The online survey was live between 6 April and 26 April 2021.

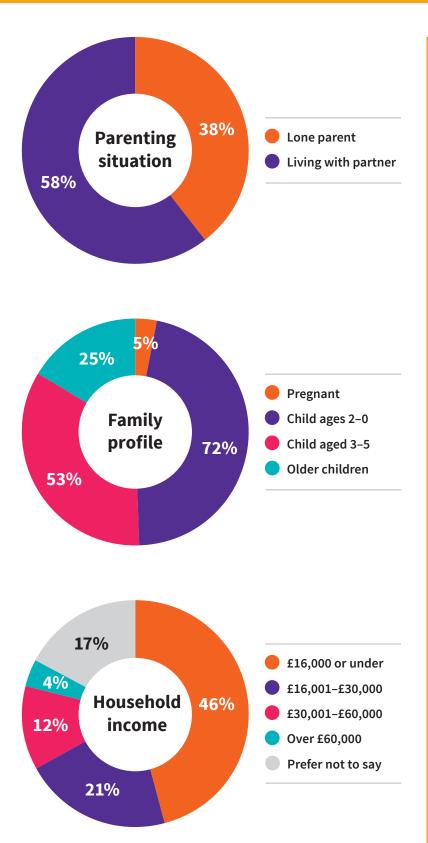


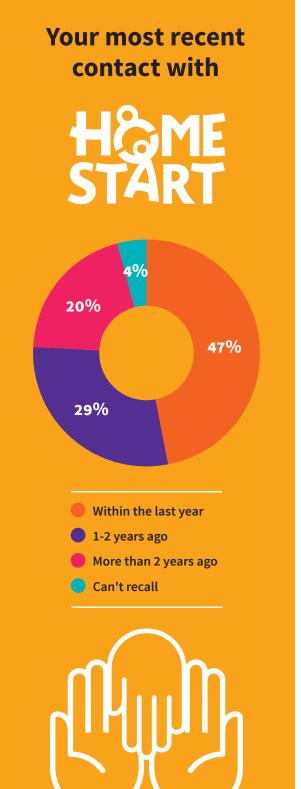
Nation*

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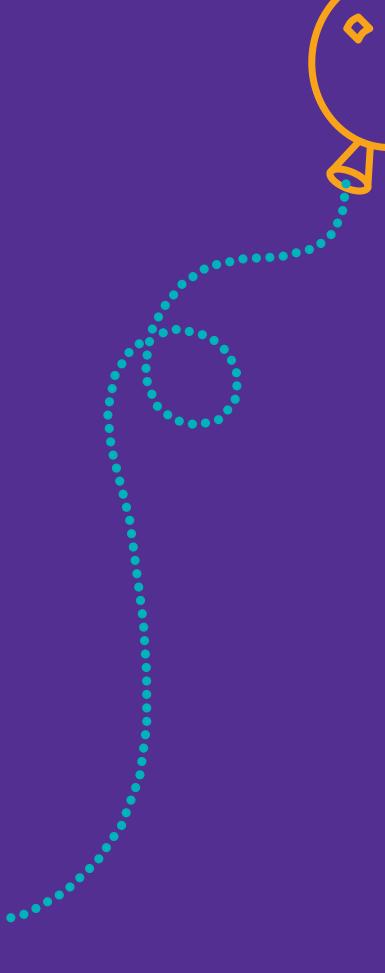
^{* 8%} of responses (93 in total) could not be attributed to a local Home-Start and therefore 'nation' was not recorded. Base: All respondents (1,238).

 $^{^{**}}$ 1% of respondents chose not to answer the question.





Base: All respondents (1,238).



GET IN TOUCH

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