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## Flexibility

**Changes in work patterns (eg shift work, longer commutes, short-term contracts) mean that families require access to more flexible provision, in order to meet their changing childcare needs.**

**Childcare providers have to find a balance between making their service flexible for parents, while also ensuring that they have enough space, food, staff etc in the short term, and a minimum guaranteed income to sustain their business over the longer term.**

**This section looks at how a wide range of different school-based childcare providers in England are rising to the challenge of offering more flexibility for parents.**



### **Offer flexible booking and payment methods**

Parents need to be able to make bookings and payments when and how it suits them. Those travelling long distances to and from work aren't going to be able to pop into the school office during normal working hours to book and pay for their child's childcare place, for instance.

Consider whether your school-based provision can offer flexible booking and payment methods (eg phone or online using a credit/debit card, face-to-face using cash/cheque).

People on short-term, variable or zero contracts may struggle to pay the same amount each month by direct debit.

Can you offer a more flexible system, which allows parents to top up their childcare payments when they get paid?

### **Use different formats**

Different parents need to be able to access information in different ways, so ensure you provide up-to-date information about your service (eg forms, policies, special offers) in a range of formats.

Rye Oak Primary School's school admin team take bookings at the main office, for instance. There are also specially arranged events, where parents can sign their child up for the childcare provision.

### **Offer 'pay as you go' sessions**

Parents working term-time only may not require holiday childcare at all. Some parents may just require childcare for the first half of an after-school club, and those working shifts may also not require the same childcare week in week out.

Are you able to offer parents the opportunity to 'pay as you go' (ie parents just pay for the sessions they need, rather than paying for childcare they don't require simply to retain their child's place)?

- Each of the Gipsy Hill Federation schools using Fit For School as its childcare provider offers emergency childcare. For example, if a parent requires childcare unexpectedly, they can simply phone the customer support phone line up to two hours beforehand to arrange a place for their child.
- Parents at Parkee Primary School in Atherton can ring up the childcare provision and book for the same day. The childcare setting does not charge families if a child is off school ill.
- Unique Kidz and Co in Lancashire offers flexible holiday provision, which starts at 8am and finishes at 6pm. However, the majority of the children come for the 10am to 4pm time slot. Prices vary according to the sessions chosen.

## Provide emergency childcare

There will be occasions where parents are unavoidably detained and fail to pick up their children on time (eg train breaks down).

While it's important to encourage parents to keep to their regular pick-up and drop-off times (eg introduce fines for picking up their child late), unavoidable delays can be incredibly stressful for parents, as they fear losing their child's place in the provision.

Parents at Castle Hill St Philip's C of E Primary School in Wigan are able to approach their childcare provision up to half an hour before a session for emergency childcare.

This service is aimed at foster families who are facing a crisis or have to suddenly take in new children, and at parents working late or experiencing unavoidable transport delays.

## Vary session times and costs

Depending on their finances, their childcare needs and the age of their children, parents may need half-day, full-day or extended day sessions, or a combination of these options, during a school holiday programme.

For example, parents may require extended provision for their 8 year old, but 10am to 4pm for their 14 year old. Parents may also need flexibility around when they pay.

Consider whether your school-based provision can offer parents this flexibility, and at what cost. Parents are often happy to pay a bit more for added flexibility.



*Castle Hill St Philip's C of E Primary School*

Many school-based providers already offer a range of different drop-off and pick-up times to meet the needs of families.

A Devon setting aims to cover its costs and offer an affordable and flexible service for parents. Half days are always catered for in the Holiday Club, and there is a charging system in place for parents who wish to drop children off early or pick them up late.

The setting aims to be as flexible as possible (eg late bookings, different payment plans – weekly, monthly etc). Where parents have more than one child at club, the manager is always happy to discuss discounts.

At another setting in Devon families can book childcare for a whole day in the holidays (8am to 6pm) for £17 or they can book provision for any five hours during the day for £10.

This flexibility is offered to help meet the needs of working parents, some of whom work in a local supermarket on four-hour shifts. These parents only need childcare for five hours.

Breakfast club costs a standard £3 per child. After-school club rates are 75p per quarter of an hour. This arrangement was introduced to meet the needs of working parents, not all of whom need childcare for the full 3.15–6pm period. Parents appreciate this flexibility.

The manager keeps detailed financial records to show the periods of time that families book. The setting also offers discounts for siblings, and currently has a number of families sending more than one child to the childcare provision.

## Further information

- Family Action was funded 2013-15 by the Department for Education (DfE) to support schools to develop wraparound and childcare provision. Find out more about the project, and download a wide range of free resources from: [www.learning-exchange.org.uk](http://www.learning-exchange.org.uk)
- Our Learning Exchange Facebook page gives links to events, suppliers, equipment, training and venues that might be of interest to school-based childcare providers: [www.facebook.com/pages/Learning-Exchange/904749822892733?sk=timeline](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Learning-Exchange/904749822892733?sk=timeline)

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Registered charity in England and Wales no: 264713

Registered company limited by guarantee in England and Wales no: 01068186

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*Last updated:*  
5.3.16

