

Childminding Babies: A Review of the Global Evidence on Conceptualising, Measuring and Supporting Quality in Childminding Provision for 0-2 Year Olds

Dr Mona Sakr, Middlesex University

Dr Sara Bonetti, Independent Researcher

Kayla Halls, Middlesex University

How to cite this report:

Sakr, M., Bonetti, S. & Halls, K. (2026) Childminding Babies: A Review of the Global Evidence on Conceptualising, Measuring and Supporting Quality in Childminding Provision for 0-2 Year Olds. Available online: <https://childmindingbabies.blog/rapid-evidence-review/>

Other reports in the series:

Sakr, M., Bonetti, S. & Halls, K. (2025) Quality in the Baby Room: Actionable Findings from a Global Evidence Review. Available online: www.thebabyroom.blog/report-1

Sakr, M., Bonetti, S. & Halls, K. (2025) Opening the Door to the Baby Room: Learning from the Experiences and Perspectives of Baby Room Educators and Nursery Managers. Available online: www.thebabyroom.blog/report-2

Sakr, M., Bonetti, S. & Halls, K. (2026) The Ideal Baby Room: Vision-Building with Baby Room Educators and Nursery Managers. Available online: <https://thebabyroom.blog/baby-room-vision-building-online-workshop-briefing/>

Sakr, M., Bonetti, S. & Halls, K. (2026) Achieving high-quality provision in English baby rooms: Looking ahead to the future. Available online: <https://thebabyroom.blog/final-report/>



The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

Bluesky: @nuffieldfoundation.org

X: @NuffieldFound

LinkedIn: Nuffield Foundation

Website: www.nuffieldfoundation.org

Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	7
Methodology	8
Findings	10
The relative invisibility of babies in childminding research	11
Why do we need research focused specifically on babies in childminding provision? ..	14
Childminding is a distinct form of provision and some of its distinctive features may be particularly valuable for babies	18
Conceptualising quality for babies in childminding provision.....	23
How has quality been measured in childminding provision for babies?.....	28
How can quality be improved for babies in childminding provision?	32
Engaging with the challenges childminders face as a foundation for improving quality	37
Conclusion	41
Recommendations arising from the review	42
Recommendations for policy makers	42
Recommendations for training providers	43
Recommendations for the research community.....	44
Bibliography	45

Executive Summary

Why this review matters

This report presents findings from a global evidence review conducted as part of the extension to the Nuffield Foundation-funded project, *Achieving high-quality provision in the baby room of English nurseries*. The extension project responds to a clear message that emerged throughout the original study: conversations about high-quality provision for babies aged 0 to 2 years cannot focus solely on nursery baby rooms. Childminding is a significant and often overlooked part of the early years landscape, particularly as England continues to expand government funded provision for children under two.

The aim of this review was therefore to examine what existing international evidence can tell us about high-quality provision for babies aged 0 to 2 years in childminding settings. Specifically, we sought to understand how quality has been conceptualised, measured and supported within childminding contexts and what this evidence might tell us about future policy, practice and research priorities.

The review forms the first phase of a wider programme of work that will also include surveys and focus groups with childminders in England.

What we did

We conducted a rapid global evidence review, drawing together academic and grey literature published between 2010 and 2026. The search focused on literature relating to childminding provision (in other countries, often referred to as ‘family childcare’ or ‘home-based provision’) for babies and very young children aged 0 to 2 years old.

A total of 206 academic articles were initially identified through database and journal searches. Following duplicate removal and further screening, 29 academic articles were included in the review, alongside four items of grey literature. Given the anticipated scarcity of evidence, we also included studies that examined

broader age ranges and studies that compared childminding with other forms of early childhood provision.

Key findings

1. Babies in childminding are relatively invisible within research

Very little research focuses specifically and exclusively on babies aged 0 to 2 years within childminding contexts. Instead, babies are often subsumed within broader studies of childminding that span the entire early years age range, while childminding itself is frequently overshadowed by research focused on centre-based provision. This creates a significant blind spot at precisely the intersection that is becoming increasingly important within policy and practice.

2. Childminding is a distinct form of provision and some of its distinctive features may be particularly valuable for babies

The literature consistently suggests that childminding should not be understood simply as a smaller version of nursery provision. Rather, it is a distinct form of early childhood education and care characterised by continuity of care, emotionally responsive relationships, close partnerships with families, flexible routines and highly personalised experiences. These features may be particularly significant during the first two years of life.

3. Existing understandings of quality may not automatically transfer into childminding contexts

The review highlights growing recognition that quality may manifest differently across different provider types. While some studies continue to apply existing nursery-based frameworks to childminding settings, others argue that if childminding is distinctive, then quality itself may need to be conceptualised differently. This points towards the need for more relational, contextual and baby centred understandings of quality.

4. No single approach to measuring quality is sufficient

A wide range of quality measures have been used within the literature, including environmental rating scales, interaction measures, wellbeing scales and observational tools. However, no single measure emerged as capable of fully capturing babies' experiences within childminding contexts. The literature instead points towards the need for plural and contextually sensitive approaches to quality assessment.

5. Improving quality requires investment in professional infrastructures around childminders

The literature consistently identifies qualifications, ongoing professional learning, mentoring, coaching, reflective practice and communities of practice as important mechanisms for improving quality. However, support must be tailored to the realities of childminding rather than directly imported from centre-based provision. One of the clearest messages to emerge from the review is that if isolation is one of the defining features of childminding, then connection may be one of the most important mechanisms for improving quality.

6. The strengths and challenges of childminding are often inseparable

The same features that may make childminding particularly valuable for babies, namely close relationships, flexibility, continuity and personalised care, can also create vulnerabilities for childminders themselves. Lone working, emotional intensity, blurred boundaries between professional and domestic life and limited opportunities for reflection all shape the realities of childminding practice. Improving quality therefore requires these challenges to be acknowledged rather than overlooked.

Recommendations

The findings point towards several priorities for policy, practice and research.

Policy makers

- Explicitly recognise babies in childminding as a distinct policy priority.

- Avoid one size fits all approaches to quality assurance and quality improvement.
- Invest in growing childminders' professional networks.
- Recognise childminder wellbeing as a quality issue.
- Develop a clearer statement of purpose for childminding provision for babies.

Training providers

- Design professional learning specifically for childminders working with babies.
- Place relationships, attachment and co-regulation at the centre of training.
- Create opportunities for collaborative reflection and peer learning.
- Recognise everyday care routines as important pedagogical opportunities.
- Provide support for the emotionally intensive aspects of the role.

Research community

- Prioritise babies aged 0 to 2 years as a distinct population within childminding research.
- Move beyond comparisons between childminding and centre-based provision.
- Develop more baby-centred approaches to understanding quality.
- Investigate childminder wellbeing as a determinant of quality.
- Develop and test quality measures that are sensitive to childminding contexts.

Next steps

This evidence review represents the first stage of a wider programme of research. The next phase of the project will engage directly with childminders in England through surveys and focus groups to understand their experiences, priorities and perspectives on quality provision for babies.

Introduction

This report presents findings from a global evidence review conducted as part of the extension to the Nuffield Foundation funded project, *Achieving high-quality provision in the baby room of English nurseries*. The original project sought to understand what high-quality provision for children aged 0 to 2 years looks and feels like within the ‘baby room’ of English nurseries. However, throughout the project, a recurring question emerged from stakeholders, particularly local authorities, regarding the absence of childminders from these discussions.

These conversations highlighted an important reality: childminding is a fundamental part of the early years landscape in England and cannot be separated from wider conversations about babies, quality and the ongoing expansion of government funded provision for children under two. Childminders themselves also expressed a strong desire to be included in these discussions, with many approaching the project team through conferences, workshops and other professional learning activities. Collectively, these conversations pointed towards the need to broaden the scope of the project and to explicitly consider what high-quality provision means, looks and feels like for babies in childminding contexts.

The aim of the extension project is therefore to extend the conversation around quality for children aged 0 to 2 years to include practice in the context of childminding in England. Specifically, the extension has three objectives: (1) to review the international literature focused on babies in childminding provision, (2) to explore the perspectives and experiences of childminders in England, particularly in relation to quality, professionalism and professional learning, and (3) to collaborate with childminders to further develop a vision of what high-quality provision for babies looks like that is responsive to the distinctiveness of childminding contexts.

This report addresses the first of these objectives through a global evidence review focused on quality provision for babies aged 0 to 2 years in childminding

settings. The review forms the first strand of a wider programme of interconnected research. Its findings will inform the design of subsequent data collection efforts through a survey and focus groups with childminders, and will ultimately be brought together with these primary data strands in a final project report. Throughout the project, we adopt a pragmatist approach, working collaboratively with childminders, local authorities and sector bodies to ensure that our understanding of quality is grounded in the realities of practice.

Methodology

This report presents findings from a rapid global evidence review examining quality provision for babies aged 0 to 2 years in childminding settings. The review focused on literature published between 2010 and the present day and incorporated both academic and grey literature from international contexts. The intention was not to provide an exhaustive systematic review of all literature relating to childminding, but rather to develop an evidence informed understanding of how quality has been conceptualised, measured and supported within childminding contexts for the youngest children.

The academic literature search was conducted in multiple stages. First, searches were undertaken within two academic databases, Education Research Complete and Web of Science. Search terms combined a range of descriptors for childminding (e.g. childminder, home based childcare, family childcare, family daycare and home daycare) with terms relating to babies and very young children (e.g. baby, infant, toddler, birth to two and under two). Searches were restricted to English language publications published between 2010 and 2026. Results were initially screened according to title and then abstract, using broad inclusion criteria focused on home based early childhood education and care provision for children aged two and under.

To strengthen the comprehensiveness of the search process, database searches were supplemented by targeted searches of leading international journals in early

childhood education and care. Searches were conducted within high-ranking journals identified through the Scimago Journal and Country Rank system and included journals such as *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *Early Education and Development*, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *Early Child Development and Care* and *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*.

The search process was intentionally broad in order to address the anticipated scarcity of literature at the intersection of babies and childminding. Across the database and journal searches, 206 academic articles were initially identified. After removing duplicates and undertaking further screening at abstract and full text stages, a set of 24 academic articles was retained. We also included four advisory group recommendations and one peer reviewed academic article found in the grey literature search for a total of 29 academic articles for inclusion in the review. Articles were included where they had an explicit focus on childminders working with babies or where they offered meaningful insights into quality provision for babies within childminding contexts. We also remained open to studies that included babies within broader age ranges or considered childminding alongside other forms of provision, recognising that the evidence base focused exclusively on babies aged 0 to 2 years was likely to be limited.

Alongside the academic literature, we also included four items of grey literature. These were identified through relevant international organisations (OECD, National Children's Bureau, Early Childhood Ireland, and Coram PACEY) and recommendations from members of the project's advisory group. Grey literature was included to ensure that the review captured emerging policy discussions and sector perspectives that may not yet be represented within peer reviewed publications.

Throughout the review, articles and documents were examined according to three overarching questions: how quality is conceptualised in childminding contexts, how quality is measured, and how quality can be supported and improved. As

analysis progressed, additional themes emerged inductively from the literature, including the distinctiveness of childminding as a provider type and the challenges that childminders encounter in delivering high-quality provision for babies.

Across all stages of the review, we sought to be explicit and transparent about the methods used to identify the final body of literature included. The advisory group played an important role in supporting the rigour and usefulness of the review through recommendations for additional literature and refinement of search parameters. This collaborative approach reflects the wider ethos of the project, which seeks to combine academic evidence with sector expertise to develop a meaningful and actionable understanding of high-quality provision for babies in childminding contexts.

Findings

The findings are organised so that each section builds on the one before it, gradually developing a richer understanding of what we currently know, and do not know, about high-quality provision for babies aged 0 to 2 years in childminding settings. We begin by highlighting the relative invisibility of babies within childminding research and making the case for why this specific intersection of age group and provider type deserves dedicated attention. We then explore the evidence that positions childminding as a distinct form of early childhood education and care, particularly in relation to babies' experiences.

Building on this foundation, we consider the implications of this distinctiveness for how quality is understood, measured and improved within childminding contexts. Throughout these sections, we examine the extent to which existing approaches to quality, many of which have been developed in centre-based provision, can be meaningfully applied to childminding settings, and where more nuanced and contextually grounded approaches may be needed.

Finally, we engage directly with the challenges that childminders face, arguing that these challenges should not be overlooked or minimised in discussions about

quality. Across the findings, a consistent message emerges: if childminding offers a distinctive context for babies, then we need equally distinctive ways of researching, conceptualising, measuring and supporting high-quality provision within this unique form of care and education.

The relative invisibility of babies in childminding research

The first and perhaps most striking finding from this rapid evidence review is the limited body of research available on babies and very young children in childminding provision. Of the 33 articles we reviewed, we identified very few studies (three) that focused specifically and exclusively on childminders caring for children aged 0 to 2 years, or age ranges closely aligned with this period of development (i.e. 0 to 3). Instead, much of the available evidence sits within broader categories of research. Studies either examine childminding across a larger age range (e.g. 0 to 5 years), or they investigate the experiences of the youngest children across multiple provider types, bringing together childminding and centre-based provision rather than considering them separately. Indeed, many of the studies that became central to this review only included babies as one subgroup among much larger populations. Studies frequently examined all children across the early years age range in childminding settings (e.g. Ang and Tabu, 2018; Brooker, 2016), focused on multiple provider types simultaneously (e.g. Reid et al., 2021; Ang and Tabu, 2018; Susman-Stillman, Pleuss and Englund, 2013), or considered broad age ranges that included babies alongside older children (e.g. Garner, Parker and Prigmore, 2019; Groeneveld et al., 2012).

This means that babies in childminding settings are often only partially visible within the research literature. Their experiences tend to be subsumed within wider discussions about childminding as a whole or within broader analyses of early childhood education and care systems. This mirrors an important finding from our previous work on baby rooms in English nurseries, where we similarly found that babies themselves have often remained under considered as a distinct population within research, policy and professional discourse (Sakr, Bonetti, and Halls, 2026;

Sakr, Bonetti, and Halls, 2025a; Sakr, Bonetti, and Halls, 2025b). Rather than being recognised as a group with unique developmental needs and experiences, babies have historically occupied a relatively marginal position within wider conversations about early childhood provision.

There are likely to be several interconnected reasons for the lack of evidence we have encountered.

First, childminding typically represents a smaller segment of early childhood provision than centre-based care. In England, childminders offered 147,500 registered places in 2025, or approximately 9% of all registered childcare places¹. Similar patterns can be observed internationally, with centre-based provision accounting for the majority of childcare places in many countries. For example, although figures are not directly comparable, analyses of licensed childcare capacity in the United States suggest that family childcare homes account for approximately 8% of licensed childcare places². Smaller sectors often attract less research attention, particularly where research funding and policy interest tend to be directed towards forms of provision serving larger numbers of children.

On the other hand, in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, family-based childcare occupies a more prominent position within the early years system than it does in England³. Reflecting this greater prominence, a number of studies identified in this review originated from Flanders, where family-based provision forms a substantial component of services for young children. This suggests that the scale and visibility of childminding within a country's early childhood system may influence the extent to which it becomes an object of research and policy attention.

¹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2025#section-section-2-childcare-places>

² https://nara.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/ChildCareLicensingStudies/2017CCStudy/family_child_care_home_licensing_trends_brief_2017.pdf

³ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-01/EC0319375ENN.pdf>

Second, research activity is closely connected to policy priorities and public investment. In England, which forms the primary focus of this project, government funding for childcare places for younger children, including in childminding provision, is relatively recent. It was only following the expansion of childcare entitlements, completed in September 2025, that the care of children aged 9 months to 2 years – whether in nurseries or childminding provision - became more substantially integrated into publicly funded provision⁴. As public investment in a sector increases, so too does policy scrutiny and demand for evidence. It is therefore possible that the research literature is simply lagging behind developments on the ground, with scholarly attention yet to catch up with the changing realities of provision.

Third, the nature of childminding itself may make age specific research more challenging. Childminders typically work with mixed age groups; understandably then, researchers may be more inclined to study childminding as a holistic form of provision spanning the entire early years age range, rather than isolating the experiences of babies and toddlers. This pattern was evident throughout our review. Several studies explicitly focused on mixed age contexts (e.g. Ang and Tabu, 2018; Brooker, 2016), while others included babies within broad age ranges extending to four years and beyond (e.g. Garner, Parker and Prigmore, 2019; Groeneveld et al., 2012). This contrasts with centre-based provision, where organisational structures such as baby rooms naturally lend themselves to age specific investigation.

Finally, there may be practical challenges associated with conducting research in childminding settings. Unlike centre-based provision, childminding usually takes place within the childminder's own home, making it a particularly personal form of care. Researchers may therefore face additional barriers in accessing these environments and establishing trusting relationships with participants.

4

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683981d4c99c4f37ab4e86e3/September_2025_early_education_and_childcare_entitlements_expansion_-_local_authority_system_guidance_May_2025.pdf

Interestingly, some of the studies that moved closest to understanding childminders' lived experiences relied on relatively small-scale qualitative methodologies, such as focus groups (Brooker, 2016), interviews (Page, 2017) and in-depth case studies (Stratigos, 2016). Compared with larger nursery settings, where organisational structures and leadership teams can facilitate research participation, entering a childminding context often requires a greater degree of individual trust and negotiation. This may, in turn, contribute to the relative scarcity of research in this area.

Taken together, these factors suggest that the limited evidence base is not simply an accidental gap in the literature. Rather, it reflects the intersection of policy priorities, sector structures, methodological challenges and longstanding assumptions about both babies and childminding itself. Indeed, one of the clearest messages to emerge from this review is that babies have often been doubly obscured within research. First, they are subsumed within broader studies of childminding that encompass the entire early years age range. Second, childminding itself is often subsumed within wider discussions of early childhood education and care, where centre-based provision dominates. The result is a significant blind spot at precisely the intersection that this review seeks to illuminate: babies aged 0 to 2 years within childminding settings. Yet this blind spot is becoming increasingly difficult to justify given the growing policy significance of childminding for younger children and the evidence emerging elsewhere in this review that babies may experience childminding in distinctive ways that are not captured by existing assumptions about quality, provision and support.

Why do we need research focused specifically on babies in childminding provision?

As argued in the previous section, babies in childminding settings occupy a position of relative invisibility within the research literature. However, this absence is not simply an academic gap to be filled. Rather, it matters because emerging

evidence suggests that babies may experience childminding in distinctive ways that have important implications for how we conceptualise quality, measure quality, support quality improvement and understand the challenges associated with delivering high-quality provision.

The rationale for this work focused on childminding babies aligns with figures from Coram PACEY (2026) who found that the majority of childminders in England and Wales care for babies, with 81% of surveyed childminders reporting having cared for a child under 12 months old in the last year. Moreover, this work emerged directly from our previous project on achieving high-quality provision in the baby rooms of English nurseries. Throughout that project, local authority stakeholders repeatedly questioned why childminders had not been included within the scope of the research. These conversations highlighted an important reality: when discussing both the expansion of government funded provision in England for children under two and the future of provision for babies, childminding is an integral part of the conversation. Yet, stakeholders consistently described childminders as a cornerstone of the early years sector that can often be overlooked, particularly in relation to babies.

This point is especially important because childminding is frequently positioned as a distinctive form of provision. It is often described as a 'home away from home' and can be an attractive option for families who may be reluctant to place their child in larger and busier group-based environments. However, as later sections of this review demonstrate, these descriptions should not simply be accepted at face value. Rather, they require careful investigation if we are to understand both the opportunities and challenges that this form of provision presents for babies. If childminding constitutes a meaningful proportion of babies' early experiences, understanding what high-quality provision looks and feels like in these contexts becomes essential rather than optional.

Although our review identified relatively little literature specifically focused on babies and childminding, we did identify a small number of studies that make a

compelling case for why this area deserves dedicated attention. Collectively, these studies argue that understanding quality for babies requires attention to both children's age and the type of setting in which care is provided.

Perhaps the clearest example comes from Zheng and Yu's (2023) international systematic review of quality in family childcare, which synthesised findings from 68 studies published between 2002 and 2022, albeit with a strong dominance of research originating from the United States. The review argues that quality in home-based settings is multidimensional, extending beyond structural indicators and encompassing relationships, participation in everyday activities and children's lived experiences. Importantly, the authors caution against viewing family childcare simply as a smaller version of centre-based provision. Instead, they argue that it represents a distinct form of early childhood education and care with its own strengths, including continuity of care, family like environments, flexible routines and emotionally responsive caregiving.

While relatively few of the studies reviewed by Zheng and Yu focused exclusively on babies, the authors identify several characteristics that may be particularly significant for infants (0-to-1-year olds) and toddlers (1- to 3-year-olds). Smaller group sizes, close caregiver child relationships and continuity of care appear especially important during the earliest years of life. In this sense, family-based provision may offer developmental opportunities that are not merely different from centre-based provision, but uniquely suited to some aspects of babies' experiences and needs.

This argument is echoed in other studies that explicitly focus on the experiences of younger children. Susman-Stillman, Pleuss and Englund (2013), for example, examined quality across family childcare and centre-based settings serving infants and toddlers in the United States and place relationships at the centre of quality in provision for the youngest children. Although many correlates of quality have been well established in the wider literature, there remains uncertainty about whether these factors operate in the same way in centre-based and family-based

settings. Their work suggests that quality cannot simply be assumed to be transferable across contexts. Rather, different provider types may have distinct drivers of quality and therefore require different approaches to professional development, workforce support and quality improvement.

This emerging argument is developed further by Reid et al. (2021), whose mixed methods comparative study involving family childcare providers, centre-based teachers and centre directors working with infants and toddlers in New York City focused explicitly on differences between centre-based and family childcare provision. Drawing on a bio ecological and attachment-based perspective, the authors position positive educator child relationships as central to high-quality provision while also highlighting the importance of workforce wellbeing, professional preparation and supportive working conditions. Crucially, they argue that quality may manifest differently across settings and caution against the assumption that a single, universal definition of quality can adequately capture the strengths of different forms of provision. They explicitly critique the tendency to apply centre-based measures of quality to family childcare settings, suggesting that such frameworks may be poorly aligned with the realities and strengths of childminding environments.

Taken together, these studies point towards a significant gap in current understanding. Research has not yet sufficiently explored the intersection between a particular age group, children aged 0 to 2, and a particular provider type, childminding. Too often, one or both of these dimensions disappear from view. Either childminding is examined across the entire early years age range, or babies are considered across multiple forms of provision without attention to the distinctive characteristics of childminding itself.

This distinction matters because babies' experiences are fundamentally relational and deeply shaped by context. As the subsequent sections of this review demonstrate, childminding may require us to think differently not only about quality itself, but also about how quality is measured, how quality is improved and

how quality is sustained in the face of the unique challenges childminders encounter. If childminding offers different structures, rhythms, relationships and opportunities from centre-based provision, then we cannot assume that existing understandings automatically transfer across settings. Rather, we need a more nuanced understanding of what high-quality provision looks and feels like specifically for babies in childminding environments.

Ultimately, the argument is not simply that childminding should be included within existing debates about babies. Rather, it is that studying babies in childminding may challenge and expand those debates altogether. Developing this understanding is increasingly important in England as public investment in provision for children under two grows and the role of childminding within this expansion remains under defined.

Childminding is a distinct form of provision and some of its distinctive features may be particularly valuable for babies

One of the strongest messages to emerge from this review is that childminding should not be understood simply as a smaller version of centre-based provision. Rather, the literature consistently suggests that it is a distinct form of early childhood education and care, characterised by different structures, relationships, rhythms and ways of conceptualising quality. This distinction may be especially important when considering babies and children under the age of two.

Several authors explicitly argue that childminding possesses its own distinctive characteristics and should therefore be understood on its own terms.

Papatheodorou and Luff (2023), for example, distinguish between the defining characteristics of childminding and the qualities that support those characteristics. They identify structural features such as low child to adult ratios, stable environments and mixed age groups, alongside a distinctive pedagogy that is simultaneously discursive, enacted and grounded in everyday life. Their work highlights an important point for this review: the distinctive features of

childminding are not incidental but are central to understanding what quality might look and feel like in these settings.

This argument is reinforced throughout the wider literature, which repeatedly cautions against applying centre-based understandings of quality uncritically to childminding contexts. Rather than positioning childminding as an alternative that should aspire to become more nursery-like, several studies suggest that its value may lie precisely in the fact that it offers something different, with quality emerging through distinctive relational, contextual and pedagogical features (Papatheodorou and Luff, 2023; Aaronricks, 2023; Zheng and Yu, 2023; Reid et al., 2021; Tonyan, 2015; Susman-Stillman, Pleuss and Englund, 2013).

A particularly strong thread running through the literature is the fundamentally relational nature of childminding provision. Across multiple studies, high-quality childminding is associated with emotionally responsive relationships, continuity of care, close partnerships with families and flexible routines that are shaped around children's individual needs. Quality is therefore often conceptualised less through formal instructional approaches and more through the everyday interactions and relationships that children experience, with emotional attunement, continuity and personalised caregiving emerging as central features of high-quality provision (Reyes, Rumper and Khamis, 2025; Zheng and Yu, 2023; Reid et al., 2021; Ang and Tabu, 2018; Susman-Stillman, Pleuss and Englund, 2013).

Reid et al. (2021), drawing on a mixed methods comparative study of family childcare providers and centre-based teachers and directors in the US, identify several distinctive strengths of family childcare for babies and toddlers, including secure attachment relationships, continuity of care, culturally responsive practice, bilingual interactions and strong family partnerships. Importantly, the authors argue that quality may manifest differently across different provider types and caution against relying solely on formal instructional measures to understand what high-quality provision looks like for the youngest children.

Similarly, Reyes, Rumper and Khamis (2025) conceptualise quality through the idea of a positive 'mental health climate', placing adult attunement, contingent responsiveness, emotional safety and authentic interactions at the centre of children's experiences. Their work suggests that emotionally supportive environments do not simply accompany learning but actively create the conditions in which babies' language development, communication and wellbeing can flourish. Crucially, the authors position family child care providers not as deficient alternatives to centre-based settings but as important community-based professionals capable of delivering high-quality, relational care when appropriately supported.

The centrality of relationships is perhaps most clearly articulated by Susman-Stillman, Pleuss and Englund (2013), who examined quality across family child care and centre-based settings serving infants and toddlers in the United States. They place emotional availability at the heart of quality provision, defining it as caregiving that is sensitive, attuned, appropriately structured and emotionally responsive to children's needs. Given that the formation of secure attachments represents one of the central developmental tasks of infancy, they argue that the quality of caregiving relationships is particularly important during the first years of life. Their findings suggest that a childminding context may offer distinctive relational advantages for babies, with emotionally available relationships tending to remain relatively stable over time and less susceptible to fluctuations in provider satisfaction and motivation than those observed in centre-based settings. Continuity, intimacy and relational stability therefore emerge as potential strengths of childminding provision.

Other studies similarly emphasise the personalised nature of childminding. Ang and Tabu (2018), drawing on qualitative research across five home-based childcare settings in England and Japan that combined practitioner interviews, narrative observations and document analysis, found that educators described quality primarily in terms of personalised support for children and families, with activities and routines organised around children's interests and needs rather than

predetermined curricula or schedules. This suggests that childminding may create opportunities for highly individualised experiences that can be more difficult to achieve in larger group settings.

The relational qualities described across these studies are closely linked to another prominent discourse surrounding childminding: the notion of being a 'home away from home'. While this phrase can sometimes oversimplify the complexity of childminding, it does point towards an important distinction, namely that this form of care and education takes place within a home environment rather than an institutional one.

Tonyan (2015) offers a useful way of understanding this distinction by arguing that quality is culturally organised rather than universal. The author identifies three overlapping models through which providers organise their work: enrichment, school and home. Particularly relevant to babies is the home model, which prioritises intimacy, emotional security, flexibility and continuity of relationships. Providers working within this model often describe themselves as secondary parents and focus explicitly on helping children feel safe, loved and emotionally secure. Importantly, these models are not mutually exclusive, with many childminders combining relational approaches with developmental and school readiness goals. Nevertheless, the work highlights that the strengths of childminding may lie precisely in its capacity to foreground relationships and emotional security rather than replicate centre-based educational approaches.

This resonates with the work of Brooker (2016) who conducted 42 focus groups with childminders from across England who cared for children aged 1-4 years old. In discussions about the benefits of choosing childminding for parents and children, childminders conceptualised quality provision as consisting of homely environments and responsive caregiving, offering a distinct focus on care and relationships with the children and families over institutional demands. Similarly, Shannon et al. (2014) offered a report focused on childminding in Northern Ireland. Parents felt that the quality of childminding was higher than that of centre-

based provision due to the home-like environment, paired with flexible care and close relationships between childminders and children.

Several studies also raise the possibility that different forms of provision may be better suited to different stages of development. Marshall (2011), in a US literature review that brought together evidence from developmental neuroscience and childcare research, suggests that home-based environments may be particularly appropriate for the youngest babies because they can more readily provide calm environments, opportunities for high-quality sleep, strong attachment relationships and holistic support for families.

Similarly, Morrissey (2010), analysing longitudinal data from 1,349 children participating in the US NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, found that children who attended family childcare provision during infancy before transitioning to centre-based provision during the preschool years demonstrated strong cognitive outcomes without some of the behavioural difficulties associated with prolonged centre-based attendance. Together, these studies point towards the possibility that babies may need something different from older children and that childminding may be particularly well positioned to meet some of those needs.

However, the picture is far from straightforward. Comparative studies do not consistently demonstrate that one type of provision is inherently better than another. For example, a study of 37 home-based providers in Montreal found that infants experienced lower quality interactions than preschoolers in home-based provision as measured by the CLASS (Lemay et al., 2023). On the other hand, Eckhardt and Egert (2020), conducted a quantitative study in Germany comparing 138 family childcare homes with 218 centre-based classrooms serving children under three years old and found that process quality was generally moderate across all forms of provision, although average scores were somewhat higher in family childcare settings. They also identified educator sensitivity and educational beliefs as particularly important drivers of quality within family childcare

environments. Other studies present conflicting findings, with some reporting higher quality in centre-based settings, others identifying greater caregiver sensitivity and child wellbeing within home-based provision, and some finding them to be similar (OECD, 2026; Bleses et al., 2024; Groeneveld et al., 2012). This inconsistency is itself instructive. Rather than supporting simple hierarchies of quality, the evidence suggests that comparing provider types may be the wrong question altogether.

Taken together, the literature points towards a different conclusion. Childminding is neither a lesser version of nursery provision nor an automatically superior alternative. Instead, it is a distinct form of early childhood education and care with its own strengths, challenges and ways of supporting children's development. For babies in particular, its defining characteristics, namely continuity of relationships, emotional attunement, flexible routines, personalised experiences and close family partnerships, may be especially significant. Yet these possibilities remain under explored. This reinforces the need for research that does not simply ask whether childminding is better or worse than centre-based provision, but instead seeks to understand what high-quality provision looks and feels like for babies within this unique context.

Conceptualising quality for babies in childminding provision

The literature points towards an important fork in the road when considering how we conceptualise quality for babies in childminding settings. On one hand, there are studies that apply existing measures of quality, often developed for centre-based provision, to childminding contexts and work within these established frameworks to understand quality. On the other hand, there are studies that begin from the premise that if childminding itself is a distinct form of provision, then quality may also need to be conceptualised differently. Rather than seeing these as two opposing positions, they can be understood as two ends of a continuum, each offering important insights into what quality for babies might look and feel like in childminding contexts.

At one end of this continuum are studies that retain relatively fixed definitions of quality. These studies frequently rely on validated observational measures or established quality frameworks and then seek to understand how childminding performs according to these criteria.

Janssen, Spruyt and Vandenbroeck (2021), for example, analysed survey data from 2,650 parents of children aged 0 to 3 years in Belgium, where approximately half of the sample used family daycare providers and half used centre-based provision. Quality was operationalised through established observational measures often applied in nursery settings, including CLASS Infant/Toddler and the Leuven Scales for Wellbeing and Involvement. The researchers found that parents whose children attended family-based provision reported higher levels of satisfaction than those using centre-based settings, despite observational measures failing to identify higher levels of quality among childminders. The authors suggest several possible explanations for this discrepancy. They argue that parents may place a misplaced trust in family-based provision because it appears more familiar and home-like, leading them to apply lower educational expectations. However, they also acknowledge an alternative possibility: that small group sizes, close relationships and domestic environments may foster trust and satisfaction in ways that existing measures of quality struggle to capture. This study therefore exposes a tension that runs throughout the literature. Are parents misunderstanding quality, or are our existing definitions of quality too narrow?

A similar tension is evident in Linberg et al. (2019), who conducted a quantitative study in Germany involving 65 centre-based settings, 47 family-based settings and 414 two-year-olds drawn from the German National Educational Panel Study. Using observational measures including the ITERS and FCCERS alongside self-reported measures of quality, the researchers explored the relationship between perceived and observed quality. While self-assessments explained a considerable proportion of the variance in observed quality, the largest over and under estimations occurred among childminders. This may suggest that working in relative isolation provides fewer opportunities to calibrate perceptions of quality

against those of others. Importantly, however, the study also identified elements of quality that appear particularly salient within family-based provision, notably the quality of conversations between parents and childminders and the qualifications and experience of the childminder themselves. These findings suggest that conceptualisations of quality may already be shifting towards dimensions that are more specific to childminding contexts.

Some studies have also applied observational tools originally developed for centre-based settings in order to understand what high-quality interactions look like within childminding environments. Vandenbroeck, Slot and Hulpia (2021), for example, examined process quality in home-based childcare for babies and toddlers using CLASS-Infant and CLASS-Toddler observational tools. Their findings suggest that quality in the domain of emotional support was generally moderate to good, whereas quality in the domain of educational support was consistently lower. Childminders appeared particularly successful in creating emotionally warm and secure environments, but often missed opportunities to extend language, learning and exploration during everyday interactions. Importantly, the study also demonstrated that quality is not static. Interaction quality fluctuated according to the activity taking place, with guided activities showing higher levels of quality than mealtimes, care routines and free play. Given that routines such as feeding, nappy changing and free play constitute much of babies' everyday experience, these findings suggest that global measures of quality may obscure important variation across the day.

At the other end of the continuum are studies that attempt to move beyond existing measures altogether and ask whether quality itself needs to be reconceptualised.

Brooker (2016), for example, conducted 42 focus groups with childminders across England caring for children aged between one and four years old. Rather than beginning with predetermined measures of quality, Brooker conceptualised childminding through what she terms a 'triangle of care' connecting children,

families and policy. Quality was perceived to emerge through homely environments, responsive caregiving and close relationships with children and families, often in tension with institutional demands. Childminders described feeling pressure to demonstrate quality through paperwork and compliance with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Ofsted requirements, while simultaneously feeling that these requirements could detract from time spent with children and undermine the face-to-face relationships that families valued most. Several participants described how parents wanted their children simply to be happy, suggesting another possible dimension of quality that is often absent from formal measures.

At the same time, this work also reveals important tensions. Some childminders associated their expertise primarily with their experiences as mothers rather than professional qualifications or formal learning. While this reflects a desire to protect and value forms of relational and experiential knowledge that have historically characterised childminding, it also risks reproducing questionable narratives that position childminding as requiring less professional expertise than other forms of early childhood provision. Recognising the distinctive relational qualities of childminding should not become a rationale for resisting professionalisation or lowering expectations regarding qualifications, support and standards of care, particularly when working with babies whose developmental needs are so significant.

The qualitative studies that move closest to the day-to-day realities of childminding also begin to reveal dimensions of quality that are often difficult to capture through existing measures. Hillburn et al. (2025), for example, conducted virtual semi structured focus groups with 19 family childcare providers in rural areas of the United States to explore the challenges associated with responsive feeding. Although the study focused specifically on mealtimes, it highlights relationships and connection as fundamental components of quality even during routine caregiving activities. Providers described numerous tensions that made responsive feeding difficult, from worrying about babies spilling food onto carpets

to balancing the competing needs of infants and older children during hectic mealtimes. At the same time, participants described creative adaptations, such as placing babies next to themselves during meals, strategically positioning older and younger children together and dividing responsibilities between adults where possible. Such findings suggest that quality is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation that unfolds within the realities of everyday life.

One study stood out as a distinctive attempt to move far closer to the baby's own experience of being with a childminder. Stratigos (2016) explores quality from a baby's perspective, foregrounding dimensions such as feeding, closeness with the childminder, relationships with peers and babies' responses to new children entering the setting. Although based on just a single case study, the article poses an important challenge to the wider literature. Are we paying attention to the aspects of provision that matter most to babies themselves? While a focus on relationships and closeness with familiar adults recurs throughout the literature we have reviewed, these dimensions are often framed as mechanisms for producing other outcomes, such as language development or school readiness, rather than being valued through the eyes and experience of babies.

Taken together, the literature suggests that conceptualising quality for babies in childminding may require us to expand our thinking beyond existing frameworks and measures. Established frameworks remain useful and provide important opportunities for comparison across settings. However, if childminding is indeed a distinct form of provision, then quality may also need to be understood as something distinctive, relational and situated within everyday life. Rather than asking whether childminding meets standards originally developed elsewhere, future work may need to ask a different question altogether: what matters most to babies in childminding settings, and how can our conceptualisations of quality begin from that starting point?

How has quality been measured in childminding provision for babies?

Alongside debates about how quality should be conceptualised, the literature also raises important questions about how quality should be measured. Our review identified a wide range of approaches, drawing on established quality rating scales, observational tools, measures of child wellbeing and newer approaches that attempt to capture the relational and emotional experiences of babies more directly. However, no single measure emerged as sufficient in itself. Instead, the literature suggests that understanding quality in childminding provision for babies requires combining multiple approaches, each of which captures different aspects of children's experiences.

The most common approaches involved established observational measures that have either been developed for centre-based settings or adapted for use within childminding contexts. These included CLASS Infant and CLASS Toddler (Lemay et al., 2026; Bleses et al., 2024; Janssen, Spruyt and Vandenbroeck, 2021; Vandenbroeck, Slot and Hulpia, 2021), ITERS (Linberg et al., 2019), the Caregiver Interaction Scale (Eckhardt and Egert, 2020; Groeneveld et al., 2012) and the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS) (Eckhardt and Egert, 2020; Linberg et al., 2019). These tools generally assess either the quality of interactions between adults and children, the organisation of the environment or broader aspects of children's experiences.

Lemay et al. (2026) sought to understand the psychometric properties of the French version of the CLASS Toddler, identifying whether it was suitable for home-based provision in a study with 37 home-based childcare providers in Montreal. They found that home-based childcare offered particularly strong 'Emotional and Behavioural Support,' but tended to obtain more moderate scores for 'Engaged Support for Learning.' This could be attributed to the structural differences in home-based provision versus centre-based provision, with learning opportunities often being embedded in care routines or other demands. The

authors suggest that while the CLASS Toddler could be used in home-based provision, consideration must be given to the other factors that make it unique, such as mixed-age groups, lone working, and the use of domestic space.

FCCERS is particularly noteworthy because it was developed in recognition of the fact that childminding contexts differ from centre-based provision. As part of the ECERS family of measures, FCCERS was specifically designed to account for features that do not translate neatly from nursery contexts, including mixed age groups, continuity of care, smaller group sizes, closer relationships with families, domestic environments and the reality that childminders often work alone. Consequently, FCCERS places greater emphasis on balancing the needs of different ages simultaneously, integrating care into everyday routines, communication with parents and how home environments are organised to support children's learning and wellbeing.

The literature also points towards the emergence of newer tools designed specifically with babies and toddlers in mind. One example is the Quality of Care for Infants and Toddlers (QCIT), developed in the United States (Nguyen, 2023). Unlike broader environmental rating scales, QCIT focuses explicitly on the quality of interactions and examines four domains: support for social emotional development, support for language and literacy development, support for cognitive development and areas of concern. Importantly, many of these domains align closely with themes identified elsewhere in this review, including responsiveness to children's cues, predictable routines, relationship building, conversational interactions and opportunities for exploration and problem solving.

Other researchers have moved away from environmental measures altogether and focused more explicitly on relational processes. Emotional Availability scales (Susman-Stillman, Pleuss and Englund, 2013), for example, shift attention towards dimensions such as adult sensitivity, non-intrusiveness and children's involvement in interactions. Similarly, Reyes, Rumper and Khamis (2025) assessed what they term a positive 'mental health climate', combining

observational assessments of relational and emotional experiences with measures of babies' language environments using LENA technology. Varghese et al. (2023) also prioritised process quality through observational measures of provider child interactions, highlighting dimensions such as responsiveness, oral language use, book reading and instructional support.

Importantly, our review identified a distinction between measures of quality and measures that focus more directly on children's wellbeing. Several studies employed the Leuven Scale of Wellbeing (Janssen, Spruyt and Vandenbroeck, 2021), while others adopted more nuanced observational approaches. For example, Linting et al. (2013) examined the relationship between noise levels and child wellbeing in Dutch childminding settings through repeated video observations across a morning. Their approach was grounded in the assumption that children communicate their experiences through observable signs of wellbeing, such as openness, confidence, relaxation and pleasure, alongside signs of discomfort, such as crying, insecurity and tension. This illustrates a broader shift towards asking not simply whether a setting is high quality, but how children are experiencing that environment.

At the same time, several studies challenge the assumption that existing measures are sufficient. Papatheodorou and Luff (2023) argue that home-based childcare cannot be conceptualised and evaluated using developmental frameworks designed for centre-based provision. Instead, they suggest that quality must be understood through the distinctive ecology of childminding itself, foregrounding continuity, trust, communication, flexibility, family support and what they term a real-life pedagogy. Similarly, Zheng and Yu (2023), in their international review of family childcare quality, note that many commonly used measures focus primarily on environments or group level indicators and may fail to capture the experiences of individual children. They therefore advocate for more child-centred, dynamic and longitudinal approaches to assessment.

The literature also highlights wider challenges associated with quality measurement. Eckhardt and Egert (2020) describe debates in the field as becoming increasingly polarised between objective measures, often used for regulatory and accountability purposes, and more subjective understandings of quality. However, the evidence reviewed here suggests that both perspectives may be necessary if we are to build more holistic understandings of babies' experiences in childminding settings.

Several studies also reveal important mismatches between what different stakeholders value. Janssen, Spruyt and Vandenbroeck (2021), for example, identified a disconnect between parental satisfaction and observed quality scores, suggesting that parents may value dimensions of provision that are either overlooked or de-emphasised within validated tools, including close personal relationships and warm, home-like environments. Similarly, Ang and Tabu (2018) argue that quality remains difficult to measure consistently across home based settings, particularly when attempting to link provision to children's longer-term outcomes. Bleses et al. (2024) also found greater variability in quality scores between family-based providers than between centre-based settings, raising questions about the challenges and opportunities that accompany a less standardised form of provision.

Taken together, the literature suggests that measuring quality in childminding provision for babies is not simply a technical exercise of choosing the right tool. Rather, it requires careful consideration of what we value, whose perspectives we prioritise and whether existing measures are capable of capturing the distinctive relational, domestic and dynamic characteristics of childminding provision. No single measure currently appears capable of doing this alone, pointing instead towards the need for more plural, child-centred and contextually sensitive approaches to quality assessment. It also highlights the need for far more research to be done on what measures work well when it comes to investigating provision for 0–2-year-olds in the context of childminding.

How can quality be improved for babies in childminding provision?

The literature suggests that improving quality for babies in childminding provision requires a combination of approaches. Some of the levers that support quality appear to cut across provider types, particularly qualifications, professional learning and reflective practice. At the same time, there is growing recognition that childminding is a distinctive form of provision and therefore requires tailored approaches to quality improvement rather than simply being incorporated into initiatives designed for centre-based settings.

Several studies point towards qualifications and professional learning as foundational mechanisms for improving quality. Linberg et al. (2019), for example, found that qualifications and professional experience were important predictors of observed quality in family-based settings, mirroring findings that have emerged in nursery contexts. Similarly, Papatheodorou and Luff (2023) identify trained and educationally focused home-based educators, ongoing professional learning and reflective practice as important foundations for high-quality provision. They also emphasise the structural conditions that support quality, including low child to adult ratios, continuity of care, stable relationships and family centred working practices.

However, the literature also suggests that there may be particular reasons to focus on qualifications and professional development within the childminding workforce because its profile differs from that of the nursery workforce. Brooker's (2016) qualitative study involving 42 focus groups with childminders across England revealed a longstanding tension between professional qualifications and experiential forms of expertise. Many childminders described their knowledge as deriving primarily from their experiences as mothers and from 'common sense', while simultaneously valuing the public recognition associated with professional frameworks such as the EYFS. Some participants expressed frustration that increasing regulatory requirements appeared designed simply to prove they were

not 'stupid'. These findings point towards enduring discourses around the purpose of childminding, the nature of expertise within the sector, and the value given to the field of childminding. Given the removal of qualification requirements for childminders in England, these questions may be particularly pertinent in the current context. Indeed, Shannon et al. (2014), whose work is based in Northern Ireland, stated that the lack of mandatory qualifications for childminders was one of the biggest barriers to improving status and securing recognition of the quality of their work.

Evidence from Germany similarly points towards qualifications as an important lever for improving quality. Eckhardt and Egert (2020), who compared 138 family childcare homes with centre-based settings serving children under three years old, found that educational qualifications shape not only providers' practices but also their educational beliefs, which in turn influence process quality. Their findings suggest that qualifications may be especially important in family childcare because educational beliefs appear more strongly associated with quality in these contexts than in centre-based settings. The authors therefore identify professional learning as one potential mechanism for reducing variability in quality across providers.

Early Childhood Ireland (2024) points to the need for more formalised training and ring-fenced time for CPD among childminders in Ireland, drawing the conclusions that childminders are better able to offer quality provision when they are trained and receive up to date CPD. Importantly, the literature consistently suggests that quality improvement initiatives need to be tailored to childminding contexts rather than directly imported from nursery settings. Zheng and Yu's (2023) international review identifies several mechanisms for supporting quality improvement, including professional development, mentoring, coaching, practitioner networks, reflective practice and sustained professional support. However, the authors argue that these initiatives must recognise the distinctive ecology of family childcare rather than imposing models developed elsewhere.

Several studies reinforce this message. Susman-Stillman, Pleuss and Englund (2013) argue that professional development should extend beyond technical skills to include relational practice, reflective beliefs and the emotional dimensions of caregiving. They also suggest that home based and centre-based educators may require different support models because the factors influencing quality differ between settings.

Similarly, Tonyan (2015) argues that quality improvement should begin from providers' lived realities rather than universal assumptions about good practice. Professional learning should recognise the diversity of childminders' identities, goals and cultural models, while also acknowledging the practical constraints of working within domestic environments, including limitations of space, resources and material provision.

The literature also highlights childminders' relative isolation as an important barrier to quality improvement and points towards relationship-based approaches as particularly promising. OECD (2026) conducted an international survey of ECEC staff and leaders about their experiences across several categories including daily work practices, training, job satisfaction, and wellbeing. They found that home-based providers face particular challenges attributed to lone working, such as fewer opportunities for collaboration with colleagues and receiving less support with administrative tasks. As a result, they often reported spending less time documenting children's development and engaging with parents than staff in centre-based settings. Home-based providers also reported working longer hours (> 60) and having heavier workloads.

However, there are protective factors that can come into play to mitigate the effects of lone working. Interestingly, they found that home-based providers in the Flemish Community of Belgium, Israel and New Brunswick were often more likely to participate in professional networks than centre-based staff (OECD, 2026). Home-based providers in these countries also participated in coaching. These opportunities for connection are particularly important to combat isolation from

lone working. Ang and Tabu (2018), for example, identify communities of practice as valuable spaces that simultaneously support children's opportunities for socialisation and create professional networks for childminders who may otherwise work alone. In some contexts, these communities are facilitated through local municipalities, suggesting that local authority infrastructures may play an important role in supporting childminders' ongoing professional learning in England.

Bromer and Korfmacher (2017) similarly propose a comprehensive model of support for home-based childcare that combines individualised and group-based approaches. Their model incorporates support focused on caregiving practices, administrative and material resources, and relationship-based approaches to implementation. Importantly, the model also recognises provider wellbeing as an outcome in itself, highlighting reductions in isolation and increased professional confidence as important markers of success.

Indeed, one of the clearest findings across the literature is that combinations of support appear particularly effective. Bleses et al. (2024), for example, evaluated a large-scale infant toddler school readiness intervention involving both centre-based and family-based provision in Denmark. The intervention improved children's outcomes across both provider types, suggesting that childminders can and should be included more intentionally in wider ECEC professional learning initiatives. However, the study also highlights the importance of considering how programmes are implemented within different contexts.

Other studies suggest that interventions may need to be designed specifically for childminding environments. Vandebroek, Slot and Hulpia (2021), for example, found that pedagogical support and supervision were more important predictors of quality than years of experience alone. They argue that professional learning should help childminders recognise the educational opportunities embedded within everyday routines such as meals and free play rather than treating care and education as separate domains.

Similarly, Reyes, Rumper and Khamis (2025) demonstrate the potential of relationship based coaching and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation. Their intervention led to improvements in adult-child interactions, responsiveness, social and emotional learning practices and emotionally supportive behaviour management, while also increasing children's vocalisations and reducing exposure to electronic media sounds. The authors argue that quality improvement requires sustained reflective consultation, emotional support for adults and strengths based professional learning rather than compliance focused training.

Varghese et al. (2023) also provide evidence for flexible and accessible approaches to professional learning for childminders. Their randomised controlled trial evaluated the BEECH programme, which combined online learning, in person training, communities of practice and, in one model, additional coaching and video reflection. Improvements were particularly evident in educator sensitivity and oral language interactions. Importantly, the authors explicitly recognise the realities of childminders' working lives, including isolation, long working hours and limited access to professional development opportunities.

Finally, the literature points towards opportunities for highly specific interventions that respond to the realities of babies' everyday experiences. Linting et al. (2013), for example, found that higher noise levels in Dutch family childcare settings were associated with lower levels of babies' observed wellbeing, suggesting that childminders may benefit from support in creating calmer environments. Marshall (2011) similarly emphasises the importance of quiet, calm environments that support babies' need for high-quality sleep.

Taken together, the literature suggests that improving quality for babies in childminding is not simply a matter of increasing regulation or extending existing nursery initiatives to another provider type. Rather, it requires investment in a professional infrastructure around childminders, one that combines qualifications, reflective professional learning, mentoring, communities of practice, emotional support and opportunities for connection with peers. Underpinning all of these

approaches is a recognition that childminding is a distinctive form of provision and that supporting quality therefore requires solutions that are equally distinctive.

Engaging with the challenges childminders face as a foundation for improving quality

Throughout this review, we have highlighted the distinctive features of childminding and the ways in which these may be particularly valuable for babies. However, there is also a risk in presenting an overly positive account of childminding that romanticises these features without acknowledging the challenges they can create. Indeed, we argue that engaging directly with these challenges is a necessary foundation for improving quality. Support can only be effectively tailored to childminders if it is grounded in the realities of their work.

This is particularly important in an English context, where childminding currently occupies a precarious position. The number of registered childminders has declined substantially over recent years, creating understandable sensitivities around problematising the sector⁵. Researchers may therefore feel reluctant to highlight challenges for fear of contributing to negative narratives about childminding. However, avoiding these discussions altogether risks creating another problem: support systems that fail to recognise the realities childminders face and therefore fail to meet their needs.

One of the clearest challenges identified in the literature relates to isolation. Linberg et al. (2019), in their German study involving 65 centre-based settings, 47 family-based settings and 414 two-year-olds, found that childminders were more likely than educators in centre-based settings to overestimate or underestimate the quality of their own provision when compared against observational measures. Rather than framing this as an individual deficit, the findings point towards a structural challenge associated with lone working. Without regular opportunities to

⁵ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2025#section-section-2-childcare-places>

observe peers, discuss practice or engage in collaborative reflection, calibrating judgments about quality may become more difficult. These findings suggest that childminders need access to regular feedback and opportunities for collective reflection that extend beyond regulatory inspection.

The literature also points towards opportunities to address this challenge through tools specifically designed for individual providers. Nguyen (2023), for example, suggests that the Quality of Care for Infants and Toddlers (QCIT) tool can function simultaneously as an assessment framework and a professional development tool, allowing educators to identify strengths and establish tailored goals for improvement. Such approaches may be particularly valuable in childminding contexts where opportunities for informal peer learning are more limited.

A second theme concerns the emotional intensity of childminding work. Throughout this review, close relationships, emotional attunement and continuity of care have emerged as defining strengths of childminding for babies. Yet these same qualities also demand considerable emotional investment from childminders themselves.

Page (2017), drawing on in-depth interviews with eight educators in England, including one childminder, explores infant-toddler pedagogy through the concept of professional love. Grounded in attachment theory, the article argues that high-quality provision for babies depends on emotionally attuned, loving relationships that are enacted through everyday practices such as nappy changing, cuddling and settling babies to sleep. Although the study does not focus exclusively on childminding, it raises important questions about how professional love is experienced in contexts characterised by closer relationships with families, greater isolation and different safeguarding dynamics. The article also highlights educators' desire for opportunities to reflect on issues of love, touch and emotional care, suggesting that these topics should form a much more explicit part of professional support.

The emotional demands of childminding also emerge in research focused on provider wellbeing. Garner, Parker and Prigmore (2019), who observed 72 centre-based educators and 28 family childcare professionals in the United States and collected questionnaire data alongside these observations, found that family childcare providers were more likely to report higher levels of emotional conflict within their relationships with children. While the evidence base is limited, the findings raise an important question: if childminders experience higher levels of stress while simultaneously working in emotionally intensive contexts, how might this affect their capacity to provide emotionally responsive care for babies?

Several studies suggest that childminders' wellbeing should itself be understood as a quality issue. Groeneveld et al. (2012), for example, examined relationships between stress and caregiving behaviours among 55 home-based caregivers and 46 centre-based caregivers in the Netherlands working with children aged between two months and four years. While home based providers generally demonstrated higher quality caregiving, providers who reported greater levels of stress also demonstrated lower quality caregiving behaviours. These findings suggest that reducing stress should not be considered a separate workforce issue but rather a central component of quality improvement itself.

Luckey, Lang, and Jeon (2021) provide a particularly helpful framework for understanding these interconnections. Their model identifies three closely related factors: provider wellbeing, provider-family relationships and provider-child relationships. These elements can reinforce one another positively or negatively, creating either virtuous or vicious cycles. Childminding may offer opportunities for exceptionally close relationships with children and families, but these relationships may also become emotionally burdensome because they are so tightly interwoven. Childminders occupy multiple roles simultaneously, often acting as educator, business owner, administrator and host within their own homes. Consequently, stress within one domain can quickly spill over into others. Unlike larger nursery settings, where relationships and responsibilities may be distributed across a team, childminders often carry these responsibilities alone. The authors

also point towards practical implications for support, including helping childminders develop strategies for coping with stress, providing training around cultural diversity and offering support with financial planning, accessing subsidies and managing the economic realities of running a home-based business.

Finally, the literature cautions against idealising childminding itself.

Papatheodorou and Luff (2023), for example, offer a highly positive account of home-based provision, repeatedly emphasising its family like qualities, flexibility, accessibility, emotional attunement and continuity of care. They also foreground routines such as feeding, movement and self-care as rich pedagogical opportunities. While these insights are valuable, they also invite further questions. Childminders may be flexible, but at what cost to themselves as lone workers? Everyday routines may present pedagogical opportunities, but do childminders consistently have the time, resources and support to realise this potential while simultaneously managing multiple responsibilities?

A more balanced approach is therefore required. Varghese et al. (2023), for example, explicitly challenge assumptions that warm relationships alone are sufficient to guarantee quality. Instead, they argue for intentional, reflective and pedagogically informed responsiveness, while also recognising the structural realities of childminding work, including isolation, long working hours and limited access to professional development. Their work reinforces an important message that runs throughout this review: relationships matter enormously, but relationships alone are not enough.

Taken together, the literature suggests that the strengths and challenges of childminding are often inseparable. The same features that can make childminding particularly valuable for babies, namely close relationships, flexibility, continuity and personalised care, can also create vulnerabilities for childminders themselves. Rather than overlooking these tensions, quality improvement efforts should begin with them. Doing so allows support to be grounded in the complex

realities of delivering emotionally responsive care for babies within highly relational, home-based contexts.

Conclusion

This review began with a relatively simple question: what do we know about high-quality provision for babies aged 0 to 2 years in childminding settings? In answering this question, we encountered a striking absence in the evidence base. Babies in childminding occupy a position of double invisibility within research. On the one hand, babies are often subsumed within wider discussions about early childhood provision. On the other hand, childminding itself is frequently subsumed within broader conversations about early childhood education and care that are dominated by centre-based provision. As a result, very little research explicitly examines the intersection between this age group and this provider type. Yet this absence is becoming increasingly difficult to justify given the growing policy significance of childminding for younger children, both in England and internationally.

At the same time, the literature that does exist points towards an important and consistent message: childminding should not be understood simply as a smaller version of nursery provision. Rather, it is a distinct form of early childhood education and care with its own structures, rhythms, relationships and opportunities. Across the evidence base, continuity of care, emotionally responsive relationships, close partnerships with families, flexible routines and highly personalised experiences emerge as defining characteristics that may be particularly valuable for babies. This distinctiveness has significant implications for how we think about quality. The review suggests that we cannot simply assume that existing understandings, measures and approaches to quality developed in centre-based settings automatically transfer into childminding contexts. Instead, there is a need for more nuanced, relational and contextually grounded ways of conceptualising, measuring and improving quality that begin from babies'

experiences rather than from pre-existing assumptions about what quality should look like.

Finally, this review also cautions against romanticising childminding. The very features that may make childminding particularly valuable for babies can also create vulnerabilities for childminders themselves. Lone working, emotionally intensive relationships, blurred boundaries between professional and domestic life, and limited opportunities for collaboration, reflection and support all shape the realities of childminding practice. Improving quality for babies therefore cannot simply be a matter of increasing regulation or extending existing nursery initiatives to another provider type. Rather, it requires investment in a professional infrastructure around childminders that recognises the distinctive nature of their work and supports them accordingly. Ultimately, the findings of this review suggest that we need to move beyond asking whether childminding is better or worse than centre-based provision. Instead, the more important question is what high-quality provision looks and feels like for babies within this unique context, and how we can best support childminders to provide it.

Recommendations arising from the review

The recommendations below arise from the existing evidence base and should be viewed as preliminary recommendations that will be further refined through the subsequent research phases of the project.

Recommendations for policy makers

- Explicitly recognise babies in childminding as a distinct policy priority. Current policy discussions about children under two should not focus exclusively on centre-based provision. Childminding should be routinely included in discussions about babies' experiences, workforce development and quality improvement.

- Avoid adopting a one size fits all approach to quality. Policies relating to quality assurance, inspection and quality improvement should recognise childminding as a distinct form of provision rather than treating it as a smaller version of nursery care.
- Invest in growing childminders' professional networks. The literature consistently highlights the risks associated with isolation and points towards the value of networks, mentoring, supervision, communities of practice and peer support.
- Recognise childminder wellbeing as a quality issue. Policies designed to improve quality for babies should explicitly consider childminders' workload, stress and emotional wellbeing, particularly given the highly relational nature of their work.
- Develop a clearer statement of purpose for childminding provision for babies. As investment in provision for children under two grows, there is a need for central government to define with greater clarity what childminding uniquely contributes to babies' experiences and development, positioning them as integral to wider policy work with babies.

Recommendations for training providers

- Design professional learning specifically for childminders working with babies. Generic early years training may not adequately address the distinctive realities of home-based provision and mixed age environments.
- Place relationships at the centre of professional learning. Training should explicitly address attachment, emotional responsiveness, co-regulation, communication with families and the pedagogical opportunities embedded within everyday care routines.
- Create opportunities for collaborative reflection. Given the challenges associated with lone working, professional development should prioritise peer learning, communities of practice and facilitated opportunities for childminders to reflect together on quality.

- Support childminders to integrate care and education rather than treating them as separate domains. Everyday activities such as feeding, nappy changing, settling to sleep and free play should be recognised as important pedagogical moments, while also acknowledging and offering support around the logistical challenges in treating them as such.
- Develop professional learning around emotionally intensive aspects of the work. Topics such as professional love, touch, boundaries, safeguarding and emotional labour should become more explicit features of training opportunities.

Recommendations for the research community

- Prioritise babies aged 0 to 2 years as a distinct population within childminding research. There is a need to move beyond broad age categories and examine babies' experiences more explicitly.
- Move beyond comparisons between childminding and centre-based provision. Rather than asking whether one provider type is better than another, research should investigate what high-quality provision looks and feels like within childminding itself.
- Develop more baby-centred approaches to understanding quality. Existing research prioritises adult perspectives and global measures of quality. More work is needed that foregrounds babies' everyday experiences and perspectives.
- Develop and test quality measures that are sensitive to childminding contexts. There is a need for approaches that capture relational quality, continuity of care, family partnerships and the realities of mixed age home based environments.
- Investigate childminder wellbeing as a determinant of quality. Future research should explore the relationship between isolation, stress, emotional labour and babies' experiences.

- Invest in longitudinal research. There is a need to understand not only what quality looks like at a single point in time, but also how babies experience childminding over time as relationships develop.
- Examine quality improvement interventions designed specifically for childminders. The literature points towards the potential of mentoring, coaching and communities of practice, but the evidence base remains underdeveloped.

Bibliography

Aaronricks, K. (2023) "A childminder approach: recognising a distinctive home-based pedagogy", *Norland Educare Research Journal*, 1(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007>

Ang, L. and Tabu, M. (2018) "Conceptualising Home-Based Child Care: A Study of Home-Based Settings and Practices in Japan and England," *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 50, pp. 143–158. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-018-0218-8>.

Bleses, D. et al. (2024) "Examining the effects of an infant-toddler school readiness intervention in center- and family-based programs: Are results generalizable?," *Early childhood research quarterly*, 67, pp. 252–264. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2024.01.001>.

Bromer, J. and Korfmacher, J. (2017) "Providing High-Quality Support Services to Home-Based Child Care: A Conceptual Model and Literature Review," *Early education and development*, 28(6), pp. 745–772. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1256720>.

Brooker, L. (2016) "Childminders, parents and policy: Testing the triangle of care," *Journal of early childhood research : ECR*, 14(1), pp. 69–83. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X14548779>.

Cook, K. et al. (2013) "Discourses of professionalism in family day care," *Contemporary issues in early childhood*, 14(2), pp. 112–126. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2013.14.2.112>.

Coram PACEY (2026) *The magic of childminding*. London: Coram PACEY.
Available at: <https://www.corampacey.org.uk/get-involved/campaigns-media/magic-of-childminding-report/> (Accessed July 3, 2026)

Early Childhood Ireland (2024) *The determinants of experiences and outcomes for children and young people in Childminding: A Rapid Review of the Research Literature*. Available at: https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ChildmindingSystematicReviewReport_Full.pdf? (Accessed July 3, 2026)

Eckhardt, A.G. and Egert, F. (2020) "Process quality for children under three years in early child care and family child care in Germany," *Early years (London, England)*, 40(3), pp. 287–305. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2018.1438373>.

Garner, P.W., Parker, T.S. and Prigmore, S.B. (2019) "Caregivers' emotional competence and behavioral responsiveness as correlates of early childcare workers' relationships with children in their care," *Infant mental health journal*, 40(4), pp. 496–512. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21784>.

Groeneveld, M.G. et al. (2012) "Caregivers' cortisol levels and perceived stress in home-based and center-based childcare," *Early childhood research quarterly*, 27(1), pp. 166–175. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2011.05.003>.

Hillburn, C. et al. (2025) "Multiple Roles and Children With Mixed-Age Groups Are Primary Challenges for Adoption of Responsive Feeding for Rural Family Child Care Home Providers," *Journal of nutrition education and behavior*, 57(7), pp. 664–679. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2025.02.010>.

Janssen, J., Spruyt, B. and Vandenbroeck, M. (2021) "Is everybody happy? Exploring the predictability of parent satisfaction with childcare in Flanders," *Early childhood research quarterly*, 55, pp. 97–106. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2020.11.006>.

Lemay, L., Lemire, J., Bigras, N., Bouchard, C., Paquette, A., & Laverdière, K. (2023, August 30–September 2). Quality of interactions offered to infants, toddlers and preschoolers in home-based childcares: An exploratory study [Research poster]. 30th EECERA Annual Conference, Lisbon, Portugal.

Lemay, L., Lemire, J., Paquette, A., Paquette, N., Bouchard, C., and Bigras, N. (2026). How reliable and valid is measuring interaction quality in Quebec's home-based childcare with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System Toddler? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2026.2676850>

Linberg, A. et al. (2019) "Quality of toddler childcare. Can it be assessed with questionnaires?," *Early child development and care*, 189(8), pp. 1369–1383. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1380636>.

Linting, M. et al. (2013) "Threshold for noise in daycare: Noise level and noise variability are associated with child wellbeing in home-based childcare," *Early childhood research quarterly*, 28(4), pp. 960–971. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2013.03.005>.

Luckey, S.W., Lang, S.N. and Jeon, L. (2021) "Examining associations among provider-family relationships, provider coping strategies, and family child care providers' relationships with children," *European early childhood education research journal*, 29(6), pp. 877–894. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1985556>.

Marshall, J. (2011) "Infant Neurosensory Development: Considerations for Infant Child Care," *Early childhood education journal*, 39(3), pp. 175–181. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-011-0460-2>.

Morrissey, T.W. (2010) "Sequence of child care type and child development: What role does peer exposure play?," *Early childhood research quarterly*, 25(1), pp. 33–50. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2009.08.005>.

Nguyen, T. et al. (2023) "Supporting Responsive Caregiving for the Youngest Children: Psychometric Evidence of the Quality of Care for Infants and Toddlers (QCIT) Observational Measure," *Early education and development*, 34(7), pp. 1682–1703. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2022.2144685>.

OECD. (2026). *Building quality education and care for children under three: Further results from TALIS Starting Strong 2024*. OECD Publishing. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/5d960dfd-en> (Accessed July 3, 2026).

Page, J. (2017) "Reframing infant-toddler pedagogy through a lens of professional love: Exploring narratives of professional practice in early childhood settings in

England,” *Contemporary issues in early childhood*, 18(4), pp. 387–399. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949117742780>.

Papatheodorou, T. and Luff, P. (2023) “Characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare: exploring the views of trained childminders and nannies,” *Norland Educare Research Journal*, 1(1).
<https://doi.org/10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.000000008>.

Reid, J.L. et al. (2021) “Promoting quality in programs for infants and toddlers: Comparing the family child care and center-based teaching workforce,” *Children and youth services review*, 122. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105890>.

Reyes, C.R., Rumper, B. and Khamis, R. (2025) “Fostering Infant/Toddler Mental Health and Language in Underserved Family Child Care Settings,” *Children (Basel)*, 12(8). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/children12081044>.

Sakr, M., Bonetti, S. and Halls, K. (2025a) Quality in the Baby Room: Actionable Findings from a Global Evidence Review. Available at:
www.thebabyroom.blog/report-1 (Accessed July 3, 2026)

Sakr, M., Bonetti, S. and Halls, K. (2025b) Opening the Door to the Baby Room: Learning from the Experiences and Perspectives of Baby Room Educators and Nursery Managers. Available at: www.thebabyroom.blog/report-2 (Accessed July 3, 2026).

Sakr, M., Bonetti, S. and Halls, K. (2026) Achieving high-quality provision in English baby rooms: Looking ahead to the future. Available at:
[https://thebabyroom.blog/final-report/](http://thebabyroom.blog/final-report/) (Accessed July 3, 2026)

Shannon, R., Geraghty, T. and Molyneaux, F. (2014) *Childminding in Northern Ireland: An exploration of practice, quality and the impact of vertical placements on children*. London: National Children’s Bureau. Available at:
https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/09%2520childminding_final_report_26.06.14.pdf (Accessed July 3, 2026).

Stratigos, T. (2016) “Babies and big boys: Power, desire and the politics of belonging in early childhood education and care,” *Global studies of childhood*, 6(3), pp. 268–282. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610615597109>.

Susman-Stillman, A., Pleuss, J. and Englund, M.M. (2013) “Attitudes and beliefs of family- and center-based child care providers predict differences in caregiving

behavior over time,” *Early childhood research quarterly*, 28(4), pp. 905–917.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2013.04.003>.

Tonyan, H.A. (2015) “Everyday routines: A window into the cultural organization of family child care,” *Journal of early childhood research : ECR*, 13(3), pp. 311–327.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X14523748>.

Vandenbroeck, M., Slot, P. and Hulpia, H. (2021) “Quality in home-based childcare providers: variations in process quality,” *European early childhood education research journal*, 29(2), pp. 261–277. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1895272>.

Varghese, C.A. et al. (2023) “Impacts of the beginning education: early childcare at home (BEECH) program for family child care providers and young children,” *Early childhood research quarterly*, 62, pp. 287–303. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.08.006>.

Zheng, C. and Yu, D. (2023) “Features, measurement, and quality improvement in family childcare: a systematic literature review (SLR),” *Early child development and care*, 193(15–16), pp. 1667–1699. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2023.2273793>.