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# **Families struggle to access special needs daycare - report**

***Research reveals inadequacy of daycare services for families with disabled children***

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**The childminding organisation, NICMA, is to set up a multi-agency taskforce to improve daycare services for children with special needs, in the light of a highly critical research report on the issue which is being launched in Belfast today, Monday 10<sup>th</sup> December at the offices of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.**

The report, which was commissioned by NICMA, says parents of children with both physical and learning disabilities in Northern Ireland are struggling to access appropriate daycare services which could provide them with badly-needed respite care and enable them to go out to work.

The report's co-author, Teresa Geraghty of the National Children's Bureau Northern Ireland, who will be speaking at today's launch, says there is a pressing need for more resources, together with a more flexible and co-ordinated approach on the part of the various agencies responsible for daycare.

***“There is a real mismatch between the needs of disabled children and their parents, and the services which are currently available to them,”*** she says.

***“Childminding, in particular, has enormous potential as a flexible and individually tailored daycare service which can provide much-needed respite care for parents, and also, in many instances, enable parents to enter employment.***

***“Those childminders who already offer special needs childminding services are performing an invaluable role – but there are not nearly enough of them.”***

Although 20% of NICMA's members state that, in principle, they are prepared to care for children with special needs, the evidence suggests that far fewer are actually willing to take on this responsibility in practice.

NICMA's Director, Bridget Nodder, readily acknowledges that childminding services for children with special needs must be expanded and improved.

***"We know that many parents are unable to find a childminder who is prepared to take on a child with special needs," she admits.***

***"This is partly due to a lack of confidence on the part of many childminders in their ability to care adequately for children with special needs, and partly due to a lack of resources to enable us to offer training on a sufficiently wide basis.***

***"That's why we will be establishing a taskforce, with representatives from all the relevant government and non-governmental agencies, which will seek to address effectively the important issues raised in this report."***

One childminder who does care for a child with special needs is Karen Black who is based in Portadown.

She looks after seven year old Lucie-Jo Outhwaite who has Down's Syndrome and is also partially sighted.

***"I was nervous when Lucie-Jo's mum asked if I would take her on, but I have to say that looking after Lucie-Jo has been so rewarding," says Karen.***

***"I would really encourage any other childminders who are thinking about taking on children with special needs to go for it.***

***"It is hard work but the satisfaction you get makes it all worthwhile."***

The care provided by Karen enables Lucie-Jo's mother, Trudie Outhwaite, to get regular breaks from the stress of caring for her daughter, and to spend some one-to-one time with her nine-year old son, Mathieu.

***"The respite care which Karen provides has been my lifeline," says Trudie.***

***"As a single parent without a partner to share the burden of caring for Lucie-Jo, I can honestly say I don't know where I'd be without Karen."***

Another lone parent who has benefited from special needs daycare services provided by a childminder is Sinead Byrne from south Belfast, who will also be speaking at today's launch.

Sinead's six-year old son, Conor Byrne, has cerebral palsy and, when younger, he needed intensive care and attention.

***"When Conor was a baby, the strain of looking after him on my own and my anxiety about his condition were really tough – I was barely able to cope," says Sinead.***

***"But I was fortunate enough to find a brilliant childminder who initially took Conor on to give me a few hours' respite a week.***

***"Now, she provides after-school care for Conor while I study for a degree which will enable me to fulfil my dream of becoming a social worker.***

***“Conor’s childminder has truly enabled me to turn my life around – but I know there are many other parents out there who haven’t been as lucky as I have.”***

The research report has been warmly welcomed by the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Patricia Lewsley, who will also be speaking at the launch.

***“It is clear from this report that far too many parents cannot find appropriate child-minding services for their special needs children,”*** she says.

***“I hope that the actions of NICMA – and the voices of families struggling in difficult circumstances – are a spur to urgent action.”***

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**Editor’s notes:**

1. NICMA – the Childminding Association is a charity, and is the sole organisation representing childminders in Northern Ireland. 74% of registered childminders here are members. For more details about NICMA, please go to: [www.nicma.org](http://www.nicma.org)
2. **The report**, *The Daycare Needs of Disabled Young Children in Northern Ireland*, is co-authored by Teresa Geraghty and Ruth Sinclair of the National Children’s Bureau Northern Ireland (NCB NI), and is published by NICMA and the NCB NI.