



Selection into early education and care settings: Differences by developmental period[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 May 2013

Received in revised form 17 March 2014

Accepted 31 March 2014

Available online 14 April 2014

Keywords:

Childcare

Early education and care

Selection into childcare

Accommodations model

ECLS-B

ABSTRACT

Early education and care programs (EEC) serve important functions in promoting children's school readiness skills and supporting parental employment. Yet knowledge remains limited concerning factors inhibiting or increasing families' use of EEC programs for their young children and whether such factors function differently as children age. This study employed nationally representative data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) following 10,700 children from infancy through early childhood to assess predictors of home and center-based EEC and to delineate whether predictors differed by developmental period. Drawing on Meyers and Jordan's (2006) rich accommodations model of EEC selection, analyses found that factors associated with family needs and resources (parental employment, income, education, and family structure), cultural norms and preferences (race, ethnicity, and immigration status; geographic location; child characteristics; and parental priorities regarding EEC characteristics) and contextual opportunities and constraints (availability of care in the community) were all associated with selection into EEC settings. Many patterns were similar for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, although race/ethnicity, employment, and availability were most strongly linked to EEC type during infancy, whereas parental priorities for features associated with higher-quality care programs predicted EEC most strongly for preschoolers. Results are discussed in terms of efforts to increase family choice and access to EEC programs.

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Participation in early education and care (EEC) programs in the U.S. has grown steadily in recent decades in response to several forces, including rising maternal employment rates, increasing provision of publicly funded prekindergarten (pre-k) programs, and mounting awareness of the potential for EEC to enhance children's readiness for formal schooling (Mulligan, Brimhall, & West, 2005). Parents face challenging decisions regarding when to enroll their children in EEC programs and what type of EEC to use. One pattern in EEC use is very clear: the proportion of children experiencing regular nonparental EEC increases from infancy through the year prior to kindergarten entry, with home-based care more common for the

youngest children and center-based programs the most popular option for preschool-age children (Coley, Votruba-Drzal, Miller, & Koury, 2013; Mulligan et al., 2005). Yet there are notable individual differences in the type of EEC families choose.

Many factors influence EEC selection, ranging from family needs and resources, cultural norms, and parental preferences, to the availability, affordability, and accessibility of EEC options. Understanding these forces is important. Extant research indicates that center-based EEC programs, particularly for older toddler and preschool-age children (i.e., ages 2 through 5), promote the early literacy, numeracy, and language skills that undergird success in kindergarten and beyond (Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005; Loeb, Bridges, Bassok, Fuller, & Rumberger, 2007; Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004; NICHD ECCRN & Duncan, 2003; Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Koury, & Miller, 2013). Home-based nonparental EEC, including relative and non-relative in-home care as well as group daycare homes, may support maternal employment but does not appear to promote children's cognitive skills in the same manner as center EEC programs (Magnuson et al., 2004; Votruba-Drzal et al., 2013). On the other hand, there is some evidence that center EEC, particularly when experienced over longer

[☆] We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Spencer Foundation (#201300115) and the Foundation for Child Development (UPIT-1-10) Young Scholars Program. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the grantors. A special thank you is also extended to the children and families that participated in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort.

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time periods, is associated with heightened externalizing problems and lower attention skills in early elementary school (Coley et al., 2013; Loeb et al., 2007; NICHD ECCRN & Duncan, 2003). Elucidating factors supporting or inhibiting families' use of EEC programs for children in different developmental periods will help to inform practices and policies seeking to increase EEC access and support children's development. The goal of the current study is to assess a multidisciplinary accommodations model of EEC selection (Meyers & Jordan, 2006) with a nationally representative sample of American children, paying particular attention to variability in selection of children's primary EEC settings as children age from infancy to preschool age.

1. Theoretical frameworks in EEC selection

In this analysis, we draw from Meyers and Jordan's (2006) accommodations framework of childcare selection. Meyers and Jordan (2006) argue that EEC decisions are *accommodations* rather than choices – part of a socially – and culturally-determined process in which families accommodate to opportunities and constraints determined by an extensive range of individual, family, and community factors (Chaudry, Henly, & Meyers, 2010; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999; Weber, 2011). Incorporating individual consumption choice and socially constructed models, this perspective argues for the centrality of four key sets of factors influencing selection of EEC settings: family needs, family resources, cultural norms and preferences, and contextual opportunities and constraints.

The accommodations model argues that family needs, driven by factors such as maternal employment and family structure, as well as family resources, affected by income and education, are likely to affect both the need for nonparental EEC and families' information about and access to care options. A variety of contextual and cultural factors, including families' racial and ethnic backgrounds, child characteristics, geographic location, and parental preferences about particular characteristics of care, may also influence the availability and accessibility of EEC options. Finally, families are embedded within communities that differ notably in the supply of nonparental care options for children, and differences in supply and access are likely to affect parents' selection of EEC settings. In short, this model argues that numerous constraints and opportunities affect the type of EEC settings that families select for their children. Since many of these factors are correlated, sophisticated, multivariate models are necessary to tease apart the unique roles of elements shaping EEC decisions (Chaudry et al., 2010; Meyers & Jordan, 2006; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999; Weber, 2011).

2. Developmental differences

The accommodations framework argues that factors affecting EEC selection may shift over time. Family needs and resources change, for example, with gains or losses in household members or income sources. Parental preferences vary as parents are exposed to different experiences, and community resources and childcare supply may be modified with new economic conditions or policy levers (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). In this paper, we extend this perspective by arguing that EEC selection may shift *systematically* over time as children age. As postulated by lifespan theories, the point where children and parents are in their life course may alter the role of personal and contextual forces in family behaviors (Moen & Wethington, 1992; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999).

Enrollment in nonparental EEC changes drastically from infancy to preschool, yet very little research has investigated how factors related to selection into EEC change as children age, a major omission in extant literature. EEC selection research has often assessed only one age group (Grogan, 2012; Sylva, Stein, Leach, Barnes, &

Malmberg, 2007) or has combined age groups and included child age as a covariate (Ertas & Shields, 2012; Hirshberg, Huang, & Fuller, 2005). Neither of these approaches allows for an investigation of how the broad array of factors affecting selection of EEC differs for infants, toddlers, or preschoolers. The few studies that have looked across development (NICHD ECCRN, 2004) have considered only a small number of key family needs (e.g., marital status, number of children), family resources (e.g., income, maternal education, maternal depression), and norm and preference variables (e.g., child age and gender, race/ethnicity, maternal beliefs), omitting attention to other aspects of family structure, child characteristics, more diverse immigrant and racial/ethnic groups, geographic locale, and child care supply.

There are numerous conceptual reasons to expect selection into EEC to change systematically with child age. In particular, since preschool is more normative than infant or toddler EEC, many factors that relate to EEC selection in infancy and toddlerhood are likely less predictive of preschool EEC. For instance, maternal employment and single parenthood, which both increase the need for nonparental care, may be less predictive of EEC the year prior to kindergarten when most parents enroll their children in preschool as a means for supporting school readiness regardless of their employment or marital status (Davis & Connelly, 2005; Jaffee, Van Hulle, & Rodgers, 2011). Similarly, differences in social norms regarding parental care between cultural groups or geographic locales may diminish as children age (Singer, Fuller, Keiley, & Wolf, 1998). Because preschool care is more readily available and affordable than infant or toddler care (Davis & Connelly, 2005), availability constraints also may become less important in the year or two before kindergarten. For low-income parents, in particular, options for center programs through Head Start or public pre-K may greatly expand opportunities for EEC (Schmit, Matthews, Smith, & Robbins, 2013), decreasing the association between family economic resources and EEC for preschool-age children. It is also possible that parental priorities regarding specific characteristics of EEC shift from infancy to preschool, with preferences for convenience or accessibility becoming less influential as EEC grows more readily accessible and preferences for care that focuses on learning and prepares children for kindergarten becoming more important.

3. Empirical evidence regarding selection into EEC

In this section, we briefly review the empirical evidence considering factors associated with selection into EEC. To fit with the accommodations framework, we have categorized variables as delineating family needs and resources, norms and preferences, or contextual constraints, but we acknowledge that many factors could be construed as fitting within more than one of these categories (for example, single parenthood is likely to increase the need for nonparental care, but is also likely to be a marker of more limited economic and social resources to access EEC, and could also reflect parental preferences regarding parenting and economic resources; similarly, geographic region and urbanicity may be associated with cultural norms regarding EEC, but may also be related to EEC availability and cost).

3.1. Family needs and resources

Meyers and Jordan (2006) argue that families differ in their need for nonparental care based on a number of family characteristics, most notably employment and family structure. Maternal employment has obvious implications for EEC needs. As would be expected, children of mothers who work are more likely to be in nonparental care (Kuhlthau & Mason, 1996), especially center care (Connelly & Kimmel, 2003), than peers with nonemployed

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