



# Unstable and multiple child care arrangements and young children's behavior<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Growing evidence suggests that child care instability is associated with child behavior problems, but existing studies confound different types of instability; use small, convenience samples; and/or control insufficiently for selection into child care arrangements. This study uses survey and calendar data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study to estimate the associations between three different types of child care instability—long-term instability, multiplicity, and the use of back-up arrangements—and children's internalizing, externalizing, and prosocial behaviors at age 3, controlling for a large number of child and family background characteristics. Long-term instability between birth and age 3, as measured in both the survey and calendar data, is associated with higher levels of externalizing behavior problems. Current multiplicity at age 3 (as measured by survey data) is associated with higher levels of both externalizing and internalizing behavior problems, but stable multiplicity over time (as measured using calendar data) is not. Finally, the use of back-up arrangements at age 3 is associated with higher levels of internalizing behaviors. We find no consistent differences in these results by the timing of instability, child gender, family income, or type of care.

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## 1. Introduction

Emerging evidence indicates that instability in non-parental child care arrangements threatens child developmental processes. Experiencing a greater number of child care arrangements or multiple, concurrent arrangements is consistently associated with more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems and fewer prosocial behaviors in children younger than age 5 (Claessens & Chen, 2013; De Schipper, Van IJzendoorn, & Tavecchio, 2004; Morrissey, 2009; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network [NICHD ECCRN],

1998). Theoretical hypotheses suggest that experiencing multiple child care arrangements, either sequentially or concurrently, may make it difficult for young children to develop secure and sensitive relationships with non-parental caregivers and that negotiating new and multiple child care environments may be stressful for children (Ahnert, Pinquart, & Lamb, 2006; Gunnar, 2006; Lamb & Ahnert, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Many unanswered questions remain in this relatively new area of research. Most prior studies focus on one type of child care instability (e.g. experiencing multiple, concurrent arrangements) or confound different types of instability, making it difficult to know which types of instability may be driving the observed effects on children's development. Several existing studies use small, convenience samples, making it difficult to generalize their results (Cryer et al., 2005; Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Howes & Stewart, 1987). Others do not control sufficiently for child and family characteristics that are likely to confound estimates of the relationship between child care instability and child outcomes (Bacharach & Baumeister, 2003; De Schipper, Van IJzendoorn, et al., 2004).

In addition, in order for parents, child care providers, and policy advocates to prevent child care instability or buffer children against the effects of instability, we need to parse out the specific relationships between different types of child care instability and child behavior. For instance, if experiencing multiple changes in child care arrangements over time is more detrimental than having

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multiple, concurrent arrangements at any one time, this information would be useful to policy-makers designing child care regulations and child care subsidy and early education programs. As parents weigh a complex set of preferences and constraints when making child care decisions (Chaudry, Henly, & Meyers, 2010; Meyers & Jordan, 2006; Weber, 2011), to the extent that parents have choices, a better understanding of the effects of child care instability could also be informative for deciding whether or not to change arrangements or to use multiple arrangements.

This study uses longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (FFCWS), to examine the associations between three types of child care instability—long-term instability, multiplicity, and the use of back-up arrangements—and child behavior at 3 years of age. We address the shortcomings of the existing literature by using a large, national sample of low- to middle-income families and by constructing multiple measures of child care instability using both survey and child care calendar data. This approach allows us to estimate the effects of both concurrent and longitudinal instability, as well as whether those effects differ by the timing of instability in relation to child's age. In addition, we leverage the rich FFCWS data to control for a large set of child and family characteristics that may confound the relationships between child care instability and children's behavioral outcomes, including a measure of children's temperament at age 1.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

In early childhood, child care experiences constitute an important influence on child development and well-being. According to developmental theory, development occurs through regular and repeated, reciprocal interactions between children and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Sameroff, 2009). Stability and continuity in child care providers promotes positive interactions between children and caregivers and the development of secure attachment relationships (Ahnert et al., 2006; Barnas & Cummings, 1994; Howes & Hamilton, 1992; Raikes, 1993). To the extent that frequent changes in providers or multiple, concurrent providers prevent these secure relationships from forming, child care instability may result in adverse behavioral and socio-emotional outcomes in early and middle childhood (Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; Howes, Hamilton, & Philipsen, 1998; Howes, Rodning, Galluzzo, & Myers, 1988; Oppenheim, Sagi, & Lamb, 1988).

Additionally, child care instability may disrupt family routines and create stress for parents and children, which may in turn interfere with positive parenting and lead to child behavior problems (Conger et al., 1992; Fiese et al., 2002; McLoyd, 1998; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Research suggests that parents, particularly those with low income, often find it difficult and stressful to manage changing employment demands and child care arrangements (Chaudry, 2004; Henly & Lambert, 2005; Henly & Lyons, 2000; Lowe & Weisner, 2004; Scott, London, & Hurst, 2005). It may also be difficult and stressful for children to adapt to and navigate multiple social environments with different rules and expectations, teaching and discipline styles, and peer groups. This is evidenced by studies of children's transitions into new preschool or elementary school classrooms, which find that children's stress levels peak at the beginning of the school year and then drop-off over time (Bruce, Davis, & Gunnar, 2002; Gunnar, Tout, de Haan, Pierce, & Stanbury, 1997; Russ et al., 2012).

It is important to note that not all changes in child care providers or multiple, concurrent arrangements will be detrimental to children's development. Changes that are planned and purposeful and that lead to higher quality or more developmentally appropriate care, such as transitioning from in-home care to center-based care during the preschool years, may lead to more positive

outcomes (Ansari & Winsler, 2013; Morrissey, 2010). In these cases, any negative effects of changing to a new setting or new caregiver may be short-lived or outweighed by benefits. Moreover, the effects of long-term instability may be non-linear, such that any adverse effects occur only after children have experienced multiple provider changes.

### 1.2. Prior research

Prior studies identify two primary types of child care instability: *Long-term instability* refers to changes in non-parental caregivers over a period of time, such as between birth and kindergarten entry, that occur when a child leaves a child care arrangement (e.g. switches from one child care center to another) or when a child changes to a new caregiver within the same setting. *Multiplicity* refers to experiencing multiple, concurrent child care arrangements over the course of a single day or week on a regular basis (Adams & Rohacek, 2010; De Schipper, Tavecchio, Van IJzendoorn, & Linting, 2003; Morrissey, 2009; Tran & Weinraub, 2006). Both long-term instability and multiplicity have each been associated with adverse effects on a range of socio-emotional outcomes in early childhood, including internalizing and externalizing behavior problems and prosocial behaviors (Claessens & Chen, 2013; De Schipper et al., 2003; De Schipper, Tavecchio, Van IJzendoorn, & Van Zeijl, 2004; De Schipper, Van IJzendoorn, et al., 2004; Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Howes & Stewart, 1987; Morrissey, 2009; NICHD ECCRN, 1998; Tran & Winsler, 2011). Two of these studies also suggest that changes in arrangements are associated with a reduction in negative behaviors (e.g. noncompliance) in the child care setting (NICHD ECCRN, 1998; Tran & Winsler, 2011), perhaps suggesting that children who experience a greater number of arrangements become better able to adapt to the demands of new settings over time.

Children may also experience disruptions in their regular child care routines due to foreseen or unforeseen changes in the child care provider's schedule or availability, resulting in the use of temporary *back-up arrangements* (Gordon, Kaestner, & Korenman, 2008; Usdansky & Wolf, 2008), which we conceive of as a less-studied third type of child care instability. For example, parents may use back-up arrangements when their regular provider is temporarily unavailable due to a holiday, vacation, or illness. Children may experience back-up arrangements as stressful to the extent that they disrupt families' regular routines and/or result in the child being cared for by a less familiar caregiver. In general, we expect back-up arrangements to be less detrimental to children's behavior than either multiplicity or long-term instability because they represent short-term disruptions to children's regular care arrangements and daily routines, but not disruptions of their long-term relationships with their regular child care providers.

Importantly, prior studies tend to examine the effects of either long-term instability or multiplicity and may therefore confound the effects of these different constructs because children who have multiple, concurrent arrangements may also be more likely to experience more child care providers over the long-term (Claessens & Chen, 2013; Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Howes & Stewart, 1987; NICHD ECCRN, 1998; Tran & Winsler, 2011). The few studies that examine long-term instability and multiplicity together, but as separate variables, find inconclusive results (De Schipper et al., 2003; Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004). In addition, many studies of this topic rely on the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD) data (Morrissey, 2009; NICHD ECCRN, 1998; Tran & Weinraub, 2006), which underrepresents minority and socio-economically disadvantaged families. Other studies use small convenience samples (Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Howes & Stewart, 1987) or international samples (Claessens &

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