



Family, child and location factors and parents' reasons for multiple concurrent childcare arrangements in the years before school in Australia



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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that multiple non-parental care arrangements may have adverse effects on young children, yet little is known about their prevalence, factors associated with their use, or parents' reasons for making these care arrangements. This longitudinal study reports on 677 children and their families recruited from government-regulated child care centers and family child care services in urban and rural New South Wales, Australia. Multiple concurrent care arrangements were relatively common, with one third of children attending at least two child care arrangements per week. Multiple child care was found to be more likely for children who were older, with better health, or with employed mothers, and who were living in rural rather than urban areas. Results suggest that parents' reasons for using multiple care arrangements were based largely based on preferences that were made in the best interests of the child and on convenience. The deliberate choice by parents to use multiple child care arrangements to benefit their child challenges the assumption in previous literature that mixed care is not the parents' first choice.

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Introduction

Research on the effects of child care has recently begun to focus on the significance of stability in child care arrangements for children's wellbeing and development (Morrissey, 2009). Stability has been defined in a number of ways: (1) changes in child care setting or in caregiver (i.e., changes in and out of child care placements and within-arrangement changes; de Schipper, Tavecchio, van Ijzendoorn, & van Zeijl, 2004; Wolf & Sonenstein, 1991); (2) daily instability (i.e., availability of caregivers throughout the day; de Schipper, Tavecchio, et al., 2004; de Schipper, van Ijzendoorn, & Tavecchio, 2004); (3) duration of time spent with a caregiver or attending a child care arrangement (Blau & Robins, 1998); and (4) the use of multiple (concurrent) arrangements within a single week (Bacharach & Baumeister, 2003; Chen, 2013; Claessens & Chen, 2013; Morrissey, 2009; NICHD ECCRN, 1998; Tran & Weinraub, 2006). The issue of instability of care in the early years is significant in that research to date has suggested that concurrent

changeable arrangements may pose risks for children's development, when assessed concurrently (Harrison et al., 2009) and over time (Claessens & Chen, 2013; Love et al., 2003; Morrissey, 2009).

The current study extends the research on stability of child care by examining, in a large sample of families from middle- to upper-socioeconomic status using government regulated child care centers and/or family care services in Australia, the prevalence of multiple child care arrangements in the years prior to entering school, factors associated with the use of multiple concurrent care arrangements, and the reasons parents have for their decisions leading to use of this form of care. By examining multiple care in the Australian context, where government regulations ensure good-quality care (higher than is typically reported in USA studies) (Fenech, Sweller, & Harrison, 2010) and government subsidies for the cost of care are available for most families, the study is able to provide a broader picture of parents' reasons for using multiple child care arrangements. Another feature of the Australian system is the high availability of preschools for children aged between 3 and 5 years. These have a shorter day, similar to school hours (i.e., 6 h day), and can be attended from one to five days a week.

The first task was to establish the prevalence of multiple care arrangements across the years from birth to school-age (typically at age 5 in Australia). The second task was to determine the

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factors associated with multiple child care arrangements. Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999) argued that research into the different factors implicated in the use of multiple concurrent child care has tended to examine these in isolation rather than acknowledging the potential for interconnectedness of variables. From a socio-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), children's experiences are best understood when consideration is given to the multiple contexts in which they operate, including both the family and non-parental care environments as well as the personal characteristics of parents and the child. The current study draws on Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model to understand better the interconnections among child and parental characteristics and key contextual variables (i.e., family income, parental employment constraints, child care availability, and residential location) associated with parents' making multiple child care arrangements in the years before school. The study also examined reasons parents have for making such arrangements with a focus on whether parents felt they had control over their decisions.

Age-related differences in the use of concurrent multiple child care

Reports about the prevalence of multiple concurrent child care arrangements are mixed and depend on the definition used. While definitions all refer to more than one child care arrangement in a week, they differ in whether or not they include regular care by the child's father as one of the additional child care arrangements i.e., whether they refer to non-parental or to non-maternal child care arrangements (Folk & Yi, 1994; Morrissey, 2008; Qu & Wise, 2004). This study refers to non-parental child care (father care is not considered an additional child care arrangement).

The extent of multiple concurrent child care arrangements (more than one child care arrangement a week) for children under 5 years in the USA has been reported to range from 15% (Morrissey, 2009) for non-parental child care to 46% (Tran & Weinraub, 2006) for non-maternal child care. Early findings reported from the NICHD ECCRN (1995) study showed about one third of all infants experienced at least three different non-maternal concurrent child care arrangements in their first year (including care provided by the father). Child care attendance patterns in the USA have shown that 3- and 4-year-olds are more likely to experience multiple child care arrangements than infants or toddlers (Chen, 2013; Morrissey, 2008). Similarly, figures reported for the nationally representative Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) show an age-related increase in multiple care. The proportion of children receiving regular non-parental child care who used multiple care was 23.2% for infants under 1 year and 25.5% for 2–3-year-olds (Harrison, 2010), but 40% for 4–5-year-olds (Harrison et al., 2009). The current study will examine age differences in the prevalence of multiple child care arrangements over the five years prior to the commencement of school.

Child, family, and location factors associated with multiple child care arrangements

A socio-ecological perspective suggests the choices parents make with respect to child care are dependent upon and shaped by a number of key interconnected factors, including characteristics of the child, the family, and where the family lives. Parental selection of child care is likely to be influenced by the child's personal characteristics and these characteristics may also be related to making multiple arrangements (Tran & Weinraub, 2006). Child care arrangements have also been found to be sensitive to diversity in family income, employment status, maternal education and psychological wellbeing, the level of support families receive and

whether families live in an urban vs. a rural location (Claessens & Chen, 2013; Harrison, 2010; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999).

Child factors

Individual child characteristics that may be predictive of the use of multiple child care include child temperament, gender, and health. Whilst a U.K. study of child care usage in the first year of life has shown that infants with difficult temperaments experienced more hours of non-maternal child care than those with easy temperaments (Sylva et al., 2007), other research has failed to find any link between parents' child care choices and infant (Melhuish, Moss, Mooney, & Martin, 1991; Volling & Belsky, 1993) or child temperament (Claessens & Chen, 2013; de Schipper, Tavecchio, et al., 2004). Findings with respect to child gender are equally mixed, with some studies noting a greater use of child care for girls (Hiedemann, Joesch, & Rose, 2004), for boys (Fuller, Holloway, & Liang, 1996), or no differences by child gender (Chen, 2013; Claessens & Chen, 2013; NICHD ECCRN, 2001). Children's health status is another factor that may influence child care decisions (Leibowitz, Klerman, & Waite, 1992; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999). Morrissey (2008) found that children's health was one significant factor in a model predicting use of multiple child care arrangements among low-income families. If children have health problems, particularly if children have other additional needs, families are more likely to use a single form of child care (Folk & Yi, 1994). On the other hand, Chen's (2013) examination of a large U.S. sample, and Claessens and Chen's (2013) study of the LSAC sample, noted no differences for infants with low birth weight in the attendance at multiple vs. single childcare arrangements.

Family factors

Studies that have examined links between family demographics and non-parental child care choices have produced conflicting results. While some studies have shown variations in child care arrangements with respect to family structure and socioeconomic status, the number of hours mothers and fathers work outside the home, and maternal wellbeing, others have found no associations. Research from Australia and the USA suggests that multiple child care tends to be more prevalent among children from one-parent families (Morrissey, 2008; Qu & Wise, 2004). Differential patterns of child care attendance have also been linked with parental income. Children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to experience multiple concurrent child care arrangements than children from lower-socioeconomic groups in both Australia (Claessens & Chen, 2013; Harrison, 2010; Qu & Wise, 2004) and in the U.S. (Chen, 2013), although Morrissey (2008) found no association between family income and multiple child care in her USA study.

Differences in child care arrangements have been noted for parental employment status, with children more likely to experience multiple concurrent child care arrangements if their parent(s) were engaged in paid employment (Chen, 2013; Folk & Yi, 1994; Qu & Wise, 2004), and employed continuously (Claessens & Chen, 2013) or full-time rather than part-time (Harrison, 2010). Similarly, higher levels of maternal education have been associated with greater use of child care in general (Blau & Robins, 1998; Folk & Yi, 1994; Johansen, Leibowitz, & Waite, 1996), and multiple care specifically (Chen, 2013; Claessens & Chen, 2013). Multiple concurrent child care has also been associated with larger family sizes (Wolf & Sonenstein, 1991); specifically, the use of multiple child care reduces as the number of siblings increases (Chen, 2013; Claessens & Chen, 2013).

Location factors

The use of multiple concurrent child care is also influenced by external constraints, many of which tend to be outside the parent's

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