



# The work–family support roles of child care providers across settings

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 16 April 2008

Received in revised form 17 April 2009

Accepted 22 April 2009

### Keywords:

Child care

Child care providers

Family support

Work and family

Child care providers

Low-income working families

Provider–parent relationships

## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a qualitative investigation of the work–family support roles of a sample of 29 child care providers serving low-income families in the Chicago area (16 family, friend, and neighbor providers (FFN), 7 licensed family child care providers (FCC), and 6 center-based teachers). Providers report offering low-income parents substantial logistical (flexible hours, help with routines) and economic help (flexible fees, help with subsidies) managing work and family, in addition to their care of children. For FFN providers, support was often provided in the context of significant stress and burden. FCC providers and center-based teachers were often constrained in their help-giving by ambivalence regarding professional guidelines and institutional constraints. Findings from this study may inform future research on the effects of child care on children and parents, and models of child care quality.

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The early care and education field has long-recognized the dual role of child care in serving the work needs of parents and the developmental needs of children (Adams & Rohacek, 2002; Lombardi, 2003). Much of the child development research on child care has focused on the potential of child care programs to support children's development and contribute to positive child outcomes. However, less research considers how child care programs and providers support parents—especially low-income working parents. Work–family support is one form of provider support to parents. In this paper, we define work–family support as the informal and formal services offered by child care providers and programs to help parents manage the daily logistics and economics of work and family life. Work–family supports offered by providers and programs may include extended day and overnight hours, flexible financial payments, and other work-related resources for employed parents. Improving knowledge about the work–family support roles of child care providers and programs – both what kinds of supports are offered by different types of providers as well as the personal, relational, and institutional factors that may facilitate or constrain their actions – may help the field better understand the effects of child care on children and families and may also improve our models of child care quality. For example child care that meets the work–family needs of parents in addition to the developmental needs of children in care may be more amenable to parents' work lives and may have beneficial effects on children as well as parents. Indeed, even the highest quality child care programs may ultimately not serve the needs of families if parents are not able to use them due to high costs, inflexible hours and fee structures, or other factors that limit their usefulness to working parents (Bromer et al., *forthcoming*).

Attention to the work–family support roles of child care providers may be especially important for addressing the needs of parents employed in the low-wage labor market, many of whom face difficult challenges managing work and family with few resources and limited control over their work schedules. Jobs available to lower-skilled workers disproportionately

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require weekend and evening hours and often involve irregular, fluctuating, and unpredictable hours (Henly, Shaefer, & Waxman, 2006; Lambert & Henly, 2007; Presser, 2003). Nonstandard schedules such as these are especially prevalent in the service sector, where low-income mothers are disproportionately employed (Presser, 2003; Presser & Cox, 1997). These jobs pose particular challenges to parents of young children, who must find child care arrangements that can accommodate the financial and time constraints such jobs present.

The work–family support roles of child care providers have been relatively unexplored in the child care and family support literatures. The term family support implies that families need external supports to thrive and encompasses a broad range of services to parents from employment and housing to emotional and personal assistance (Cahan & Bromer, 2003; Kagan, Powell, Weissbourd, & Zigler, 1987). The family support literature, however, has paid limited attention to the specific work–family issues facing low-income working parents or the potential of family support services to address these concerns. Few research studies to date have investigated the extent to which providers – whether in home-based or center settings – understand and respond to the job demands, scheduling issues, and financial needs of low-income working parents. Thus, it remains unknown whether and how providers work with parents around employment-related conflicts such as fluctuating hours, last-minute schedule changes, and variable earnings, all of which arise to a greater extent with low-income families.

It is the contention of this paper that in addition to their primary focus on children, child care providers across settings may offer parents a range of types of assistance with managing the demands of work and family. Some studies find that parents report receiving more work-related supports from informal, home-based caregivers than from center-based providers (Li-Grining & Coley, 2006). Yet this research is limited, and we know little about how providers – home-based or center-based – view their work–family support roles, the burdens or limits of such responsibilities, or the expectations providers have about the kinds of activities that fall within the purview of their responsibilities. We also have limited information about the individual, relational, and institutional factors that encourage or constrain the provision of work–family supports. To begin to fill this void, in this paper we examine the work–family support roles discussed by 29 providers across a range of home and center-based child care settings in the Chicago area. The results of this qualitative interview study suggest that providers across settings consider their child care work in the context of parents' work lives, but that providers vary considerably in whether and how they include parents as targets of their caregiving work. In our description of differences in provider work–family support roles, we also examine providers' motivations and obligations, provider–parent relationships as well as professional and institutional constraints that can restrict support activities especially in licensed family child care homes and child care centers. As discussed further in the paper's discussion, the descriptive data presented here is a first step toward understanding the relevance of provider-based work–family supports across a “continuum” of settings, from informal care to center-based programs (Porter, 1998).

## 1. Background literature

The idea of child care as a family support is embedded in the philosophy of Head Start and other family-focused comprehensive interventions from the 1960s (Cahan & Bromer, 2003; Gomby, Larner, Stevenson, Lewit, & Behrman, 1995; Rusher & Ware, 1998). Many early childhood education programs with a family support component have been piloted and evaluated in the years since Head Start's inception including both center and home-based programs (Layzer, Goodson, Bernstein, & Price, 2001; National Research Council [NRC] and Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2003). Researchers and advocates argue that two-generation programs may be more able to produce positive results for family and child well-being than more narrowly focused child-development programs (Ramey, Ramey, Gaines, & Blair, 1995). Yet evidence for the success of family support programs is currently mixed (Seitz, 1990; Yoshikawa, 1995), and longitudinal research examining long-term benefits has only been undertaken in studies of a few well-known programs (e.g. the Perry Preschool Project, Chicago Child–Parent Centers, Carolina Abecedarian Project) (Karoly, 2001).

Most evaluations of early childhood and family support programs focus on formal support services for parents rather than the informal ways programs and providers across settings help parents manage work and family. The effects on child and family well-being of informal family support delivered directly by child care providers and teachers themselves, for example, have not been examined. Child care providers may be well-positioned to provide other work–family supports (e.g. logistical help with managing the daily demands of work and family management) because of their daily contact with parents and the close relationships with families that some providers develop. Indeed, families may feel comfortable going to providers for help around a range of issues (Bromer, 2006) even when formal family support services are available through other service providers. Seitz (1990) suggests that the close interactions between teachers and parents may make this a more effective approach to family support than the more common models in which child care and family support services are performed by separate people and often separate agencies. Yet the burdens of providing support to parents in addition to caring for children may make it difficult for providers to deliver effective support to families. Moreover, there may be institutional barriers to offering work–family supports or professional norms that discourage the provision of support beyond the individual children in care.

Family, friend, and neighbor providers, family child care providers, and center teachers may extend support differently. Although the research is limited in this area, some research suggests that informal family support may be a particular strength of home-based providers such as relatives and family child care providers who have more flexibility around scheduling and fees and who may have greater intrinsic motivation to serve the family as a unit due to long-term relationships and kinship ties. Existing research on the work–family supports offered by providers across a continuum of settings are reviewed below.

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