

Family and child factors related to the use of non-maternal infant care: An English study

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Abstract

This paper explores factors related to the use, amount and type of non-maternal child care infants experience in their first year, reporting on a prospective longitudinal study of 1201 families recruited from two different regions in England. The selection and timing of non-maternal child care was investigated within a socio-ecological model that took account of child and family characteristics as well as maternal psychological factors. Family socio-demographic background (education, occupation and income level) was the most consistent predictor of the amount and nature of non-maternal care infants received. Infants who started in non-maternal child care before the age of 3 months were more likely to come from relatively disadvantaged families; in contrast the mothers of infants starting in child care between 4 and 10 months were more advantaged. Disadvantaged families were more likely to use familial care, while more advantaged families were likely to use purchased child care. Children who began non-maternal care later (3–10 months) and spent more hours in care were more likely to be from ethnic minorities (Asian) and have mothers who believed that maternal employment had more benefits and fewer risks for their child. First born children were also more likely to experience non-maternal care after the age of 3 months. Infants rated by their mothers at 3 months as less ‘adaptable’ in temperament and at 10 months as more ‘fussy’ spent more hours in child care. Finally, the type of child care selected was related to the families’ socio-economic background, maternal beliefs and attitudes, and birth order. Findings are compared with the US large scale National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) study and considered in the light of national policies.

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There has been a dramatic increase in English mothers returning to work and their children starting non-maternal child care in their first year of life (Inter-Departmental Childcare Review, 2002; National Audit Office, 2004). Because of this, research on the effects of non-maternal child care on children’s development is important; its findings are heavily disputed (Belsky, 2001; Belsky & Rovine, 1988; Burchinal & Cryer, 2001; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), 1997a, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d; Vandell, 2004). Fewer studies have investigated which kinds of children experience early child care and which kinds of parents select it (Early & Burchinal, 2001; Huston,

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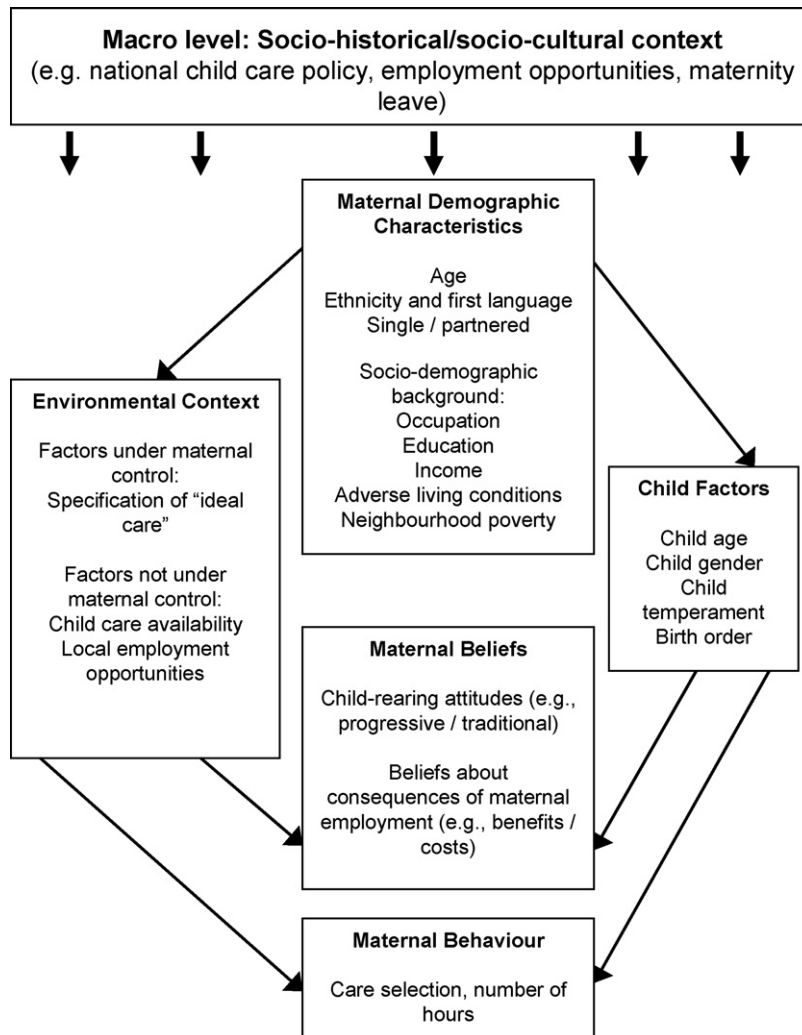


Fig. 1. Contextual model of child care use (adapted from 'Influences on child care selection' in Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999).

Chang, & Gennetian, 2002; NICHD, 1997a, 1997b; Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien, & Roy, 2001; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999; Singer, Fuller, Keiley, & Wolf, 1998). This paper explores factors associated with use, amount and the type of non-maternal child care that English children² experience in their first year of life.

The theoretical model of Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999) (see Fig. 1) underpins this study. This model rests on an eco-behavioural model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) that places the selection and timing of child care in a series of nested contexts with the child at the centre and the parents, family and community all contributing to (and being affected by) the choice of child care. We have adapted Fig. 1 to include a 'macro' context, such as governmental policy, in which the 'micro' and 'exo' levels are embedded.

1. Factors associated with timing, amount and type of non-maternal child care use

Starting at the child level, children's age has been shown to be one of the most predictive factors in child care use. In general, child care increases steadily through infancy until school age, a trend that reverses only in later childhood.

² The UK includes England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The study was carried out in two regions in England and the participating children were born between 1998 and 2001.

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