



Rural families' use of multiple child care arrangements from 6 to 58 months and children's kindergarten behavioral and academic outcomes



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ABSTRACT

Non-parental child care prior to kindergarten is a normative experience for the majority of children in the United States, with children commonly experiencing multiple arrangements, or more than one concurrent child care arrangement. The experience of multiple arrangements has predominantly been shown to be negatively related to young children's health and behavioral outcomes. The present study examined the use of multiple concurrent arrangements for children in the Family Life Project, a representative sample of families living in six high-poverty rural counties. Using the full sample of 1292 children who were followed from six months to kindergarten, this study examined the associations between the number of child care arrangements averaged across six time points and children's behavioral and academic outcomes in kindergarten. After including a number of control variables, regression results suggested that a greater number of arrangements prior to kindergarten were related to higher levels of teacher-reported negative behaviors, but not positive behaviors, and letter-word decoding skills, but not mathematics skills, though effect sizes were small. Moderation analyses by child care type and quality were conducted, with no evidence emerging that findings varied by type or quality of care.

1. Introduction

Non-parental child care for young children has expanded dramatically over the last forty years, becoming an increasingly normative experience for children in the United States. Children's experiences with child care have been shown to be related to their long-term social and academic trajectories (Curenton, Dong, & Shen, 2015; Pungello et al., 2010; Vandell et al., 2010). Important characteristics of child care, such as quantity, type, and quality, have been explored by child care researchers to understand how children in child care learn, grow, and prepare for school entry in their first five years. Recently, work has focused on the understudied relationship between participation in more than one child care arrangement and children's development. Children commonly experience sequential transitions among child care arrangements (termed child care instability or child care changes) or participate in two or more concurrent child care arrangements (termed multiplicity or multiple arrangements). In this study, we focused on the associations between multiple arrangements – defined as the average

number of non-parental child care arrangements experienced over the period from 6–58 months – and school readiness in a sample of children living in the rural US.

Existing research suggests that approximately 20% of families both in the US and internationally use multiple concurrent arrangements prior to age five (Claessens & Chen, 2013; Morrissey, 2013). Piecing together multiple child care arrangements is related to a number of factors, including parental nonstandard work hours, fluctuating incomes, and limited access to child care subsidies (Chaudry, 2004; Danziger, Ananat, & Browning, 2004; Enchautegui, Johnson, & Gelatt, 2015; Folk & Yi, 1994; Han, 2004; Scott, London, & Hurst, 2005). For families living in rural areas marked by high poverty, these challenges may be especially prevalent (Forry & Walker, 2011; Grace et al., 2006). Rural poverty has been fueled by the disappearance of family farms (Dimitri, Effland, & Conklin, 2005) and railroad, steel, textile, and furniture manufacturing jobs (Smith & Tickamyer, 2011; Vernon-Feagans, Burchinal, & Mokrova, 2015). Rural adults are more likely to work in service-industry jobs (e.g., retail, fast food, and home health), which are

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characterized by lower wages, poorer benefits, and nonstandard work hours (including evening, overnight, rotating, and weekend shifts; Smith & Tickamyer, 2011). Thus, rural families' ability to access child care arrangements that best meet their needs is limited, potentially leading to a stronger need for using concurrent multiple arrangements (Grace, Zaslow, Brown, Aufseeser, & Bell, 2011).

Above and beyond demographic risks, the use of multiple arrangements has generally been associated with poorer outcomes for children, including negative health outcomes (Chen, 2012; Morrissey, 2013) and behavioral problems (Bacharach & Baumeister, 2003; Claessens & Chen, 2013; Morrissey, 2009), with only a handful of studies predicting to academic outcomes (Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Koury, & Miller, 2013). Although some of these studies used nationally-representative samples that included rural and low-income families in the US (i.e., Early Childhood Longitudinal Study [ECLS] samples; Bacharach & Baumeister, 2003; Chen, 2012; Votruba-Drzal et al., 2013), other studies have used more middle-income samples (i.e., NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development [SECCYD]; Morrissey, 2009; Tran & Weinraub, 2006), and still others have used international samples (i.e., from Australia; Claessens & Chen, 2013). Because work on multiple arrangements has generally failed to disaggregate data by rurality, we focused on a rural sample.

Thus, this study contributes to the growing literature on multiple arrangements in a number of ways, including the use of data from the Family Life Project (FLP), a representative sample of families living in the rural US and, in particular, piedmont areas in the Southeast and Appalachian areas in the Northeast (Vernon-Feagans, Cox, & Family Life Project Key Investigators, 2013). Longitudinal FLP data included parental reports of concurrent arrangements across six distinct time points (6, 15, 24, 36, 48, and 58 months). Unique to this study, child care quantity and type (although not quality) were available for all arrangements and were included in analyses. Recent studies have explored how multiple arrangement usage at age four was linked to kindergarten outcomes (Forry, Davis, & Welti, 2013; Gordon, Colaneri, Usdansky, & Melgar, 2013). In this study, we sought to broaden the literature by examining the links between children's average number of non-parental child care arrangements between 6 and 58 months (termed throughout the paper as *multiple arrangements*) and children's behavioral and academic skills at kindergarten. We also examined two important follow-up questions. First, we examined whether the relations between multiple arrangements and children's behavioral and academic skills at kindergarten varied as a function of child care type and quality. Second, we examined whether the average number of multiple arrangements experienced during infancy/toddlerhood (6–24 months) was differentially associated with kindergarten outcomes as compared to multiple arrangements experienced during preschool years (36–58 months).

1.1. Multiple child care arrangements

1.1.1. Construct and prevalence rates

The use of multiple arrangements is defined as children attending two or more concurrent non-parental child care arrangements on a regular basis (Adams & Rohacek, 2010). Multiple child care arrangements may include an array of settings regularly experienced by children, such as child care centers, family child care settings, and home settings with relative or babysitter care. Current research indicates that the prevalence rate of multiple child care arrangements in the US during early childhood is estimated to be around 20–30% (Morrissey, 2013), which translates to roughly 5–7 million children who experience more than one concurrent non-parental child care arrangement. Specifically, researchers reported that 14% of the full sample of NICHD SECCYD participants were in multiple arrangements at 15 months (Tran & Weinraub, 2006), 18% across 24 and 36 months (Morrissey, 2009), and 29% at 54 months (Morrissey, 2013). Specific to low-income families, U.S. census data revealed that nearly 26% of children of

working mothers living below the federal poverty threshold used multiple child care arrangements for their children ages birth through five (Laughlin, 2013).

1.1.2. Rural poverty and multiple arrangements

The prevalence of rural families' use of multiple arrangements, however, is largely unknown. In one known example, baseline data from ECLS-K and ECLS-B revealed that 56% of African American children living in the rural US were in multiple arrangements the year prior to kindergarten (Grace et al., 2011). On the one hand and as discussed above, families may have a strong need to use multiple arrangements due in part to economic restructuring and high poverty rates in the rural United States, with rural families facing challenges such as irregular and shift employment and the need to work multiple jobs (O'Hare, 2009). Rural locations also have fewer center-based care options, longer driving distances to child care (Walker & Reschke, 2004), and higher child care costs (Smith & Gozjolko, 2010), which present challenges for families in poverty who also frequently have limited access to reliable transportation (Bratsch, 2011). Consequently, families often create patchworks of child care, including the use of multiple concurrent arrangements, in order to meet structural constraints such as employment insecurity, transportation demands, and limited child care options (Usdansky & Wolf, 2008; Vernon-Feagans, Garrett-Peters, De Marco, & Bratsch-Hines, 2012).

On the other hand, one frequently-cited benefit of living in rural areas is the availability of a wider social support system and increased access to extended family (Bauer, Dyk, Son, & Dolan, 2011; Simmons, Braun, Wright, & Miller, 2007), which may provide rural families with friends and family members who can provide regular concurrent child care for their children. Ultimately, however, families living in low-income areas, as represented in the current study, tend to find it more difficult than middle-income families to maintain consistent child care arrangements (Chaudry, 2004; London, Scott, Edin, & Hunter, 2004). In this study, we used the full FLP sample to provide a detailed description of child care use among families living in areas of rural poverty.

1.1.3. Theoretical framework

To frame our study, we relied on bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which posits that *proximal processes* – sustained, reciprocal interactions that occur between the developing child and adults, other children, and objects in his or her immediate environments and that last long enough for optimal development to occur – are the process mechanisms through which development occurs and by which the child's potential is realized. In the original framework posited by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the child is placed at the center of a network of environmental systems. Applicable to the current study, the child directly participates in *microsystems* (e.g., the child's home, each child care setting), with the *mesosystem* linking microsystems together (e.g., child care to home, child care to child care). The child is the stable core element of the mesosystem, which thereby represents the multiple contexts providing the child with opportunities to learn, refine, and adapt his or her behavioral and academic skills. Further, if skills are nascent or insufficiently developed in one context, other contexts may benefit the child. Below we review empirical evidence that supports potential advantages and disadvantages of multiple arrangements, a complex mesosystem of child care settings.

1.1.4. Potential advantages of multiple arrangements

Potential benefits of multiple arrangements include increased exposure to a variety of peers and adults, linguistic and social interactions, objects for manipulation, and general academic opportunities (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Howes, 2010; Johnson et al., 2003). Because children actively participate within each child care environment, they have the potential to learn from and respond to the strengths of each setting, thereby enhancing their development. However, these proposed developmental benefits are potentially more prevalent for

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