Child Care Decision-Making: An Examination of the Processes Low-Income Parents Use in Selecting Child Care Arrangements for Young Children

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Introduction

Understanding child care decision-making processes is...

...important for:

- Assessing unmet needs
- Informing quality enhancement initiatives
- Targeting QRIS marketing to parents

...challenging because:

- The process is complex and influenced by many different factors
- Parents are uninformed consumers
- When ideal choices are not available, parents adjust their expectations
Purpose of this Study

Provide information on the child care decision making processes of low-income families in order to inform early childhood policies and programs:

- Identify patterns in child care decision-making processes
- Identify characteristics of families who use different patterns in making child care decisions
- Examine differences in the child care preferences, choices, and satisfaction with care arrangements among families with different child care decision-making patterns
Child Care Decision-Making Process

Priorities

- Three main priorities: cost, convenience, quality
  - Cost and convenience as constraints in child care decision-making
  - Parents’ definitions of “quality” vary:
    - Trust
    - Health and Safety
    - Provider-focused Indicators (e.g., experience, education, attitudes towards children, warmth)
    - Activities/Curricula
    - Characteristics of the Care Setting (e.g., institutional culture)

Process

- Less has been documented about families’ process when making child care decisions:
  - Low-income parents consider, on average, few child care options and child care searches tend to be short
  - Parents typically start exploring child care options through informal methods

References available upon request.
Child Care Choices and Perceived Satisfaction

Choices

• Child care choices vary by child, parent, and family characteristics (e.g., child age, parental employment status, family income, family structure, cultural acculturation)

• Child care choices are dynamic and complex
  – Informed by ...
    • parent’s perceptions and rational choices
    • social networks and other contexts
    • access to information

Satisfaction

• Parents tend to report being satisfied on research surveys
• Need for new ways to measure satisfaction

References available upon request.
Gaps in Knowledge/Methodological Issues in Existing Research

• Studies tend not to distinguish between child care priorities (what parents want) and choices (what parents end up choosing for their child).
• Parents’ priorities and satisfaction are difficult to measure reliably
• Studies of the child care decision-making process are scant
• As most analyses are based on average associations between variables, variation across diverse families is often lost
Data Source

• Wave 1 of the MN Child Care Choices study
  – Longitudinal study of low-income parents (N=323) involving biannual phone interviews
  – Parents were included in the study if they:
    • Had applied for public assistance
    • Lived in a QRIS pilot area or comparison area
    • Had at least one child age six or younger
• Parents from the MN Child Care Choices study were included in these analyses if they used some form of non-parental child care and the focal child was not in school (N=271)
Sample Characteristics

Survey Respondents:
• 92% were female
• Average age was 25 years (range 18-55)
• 39% were white (non-Hispanic), 7% were Hispanic, and 54% were non-white, non-Hispanic
• 75% of families were living below the federal poverty level
• 28% had less than a high school diploma, 36% held a high school diploma, and 36% attended some college or held an A.A.

Focal Children:
• 49% were female
• Average age:
  – 31% were infants
  – 30% were toddlers
  – 38% were preschool-age
• 62% were the first/only child in the family
• 13% had disabilities/health issues behavior problems
Analytic Strategy

• Person-centered statistical technique, used to
  – Identify patterns in child care decision-making processes
  – Identify characteristics of families with different child care decision-making patterns
  – Examine differences in the child care priorities, choices, and satisfaction with care arrangements among families with different child care decision-making patterns
Using a Person-Centered Approach to Identify Patterns in Child Care Decision-Making Processes

- Number of child care options considered
- Sources of child care information consulted
- Duration of child care decision-making process
Question # 1: Do distinct patterns exist in the child care decision-making processes of low-income parents?

For example...

**Pattern # 1**
- Few child care options considered
- Only one source of information consulted
- Quick decision

**Pattern # 2**
- Lots of child care options considered
- Multiple sources of child care information consulted
- Takes a long time to make a decision
Question # 2: Are there differences in the demographic characteristics of families with different child care decision-making patterns?

- **Characteristics of the Focal Child**
  - Focal child age, gender, health

- **Characteristics of the Parents**
  - Parent age, race, education, employment status, health/mental health

- **Characteristics of the Household**
  - Household income, family structure, immigration status, number of children in the household, welfare receipt

- **Characteristics of the Community**
  - Urban vs. rural, availability of QRIS, zip-code level economic indicators (median rent, median household income)
Question # 3: Are there differences in the child care priorities, choices, and satisfaction with care arrangements among families with different child care decision-making patterns?
Parents’ Child Care Decision-Making Processes, Priorities, Choices, and Satisfaction

Priorities:

• The majority of families cited quality (58%) as being most important in their choice among providers, about one-quarter cited convenience (26%) and 9% cited cost.

Choices:

• Care arrangements varied by age
  – The majority of infants (67%) and toddlers (60%) were in informal care.
  – Preschoolers tended to be in center-based care (58%)
  – Regardless of age, between 10-20% of children were in the care of a family child care provider

Satisfaction:

• Over half (66%) of parents stated that they would strongly recommend their provider
### Identified Patterns of Child Care Decision-Making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Quick Deciders 82% of sample</th>
<th>Time Takers 18% of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of options considered</strong></td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration of child care decision-making process</strong></td>
<td>1.7 weeks</td>
<td>10.7 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sources of information considered</strong></td>
<td>48%- child care experts/professionals 46%- child care list 42%- friends and family</td>
<td>67%- child care experts/professionals 45%- child care list 55%- friends and family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Differences in Select Demographic Characteristics by Child Care Decision-Making Process

• On average, *quick deciders* were less educated than *time takers*
  – 30% of *quick deciders* had less than a high school diploma (compared to 17% of *time takers*)
  – 53% of *time takers* had some college education (compared to 33% of *quick deciders*)

• Additionally, some age differences were found across the groups, with *quick deciders* being younger than *time takers*. 
Differences in the Priorities, Choices, and Satisfaction by Child Care Decision-Making Process

• *Quick deciders* were more likely than *time takers* to cite convenience as their primary concern in selecting a child care arrangement (29% vs. 13%).

• No statistically significant differences were found in the type of care chosen or satisfaction with child care arrangements among *quick deciders* and *time takers*. 
Conclusions

• The majority of low-income parents (82%) made a quick decision during their last search.
  
  – Decision was made in less than 2 weeks
  – An average of one other option was considered (M=1.3)

• A minority of families (12%) had a longer decision-making process
  
  – Decision took more than 2 months
  – An average of two other options were considered (M=1.8)

• Those who made quick decisions had less education and were younger than those who took longer to make decisions.

• Parents who made quick decisions placed a stronger emphasis on convenience as their primary priority for care than parents who took longer to make a decision.

• No differences in type of care selected or satisfaction with care were found between parents who made quick decisions and those who took longer to make a decision.
Questions for You

• Do the findings of this study mirror the experiences of resource and referral counselors in your state?
• What insights from your work could help shape future research on this topic?
• What innovative strategies is your state using to target information to parents who are *quick deciders*?
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Additional resources about child care decision-making are available on Research Connections:

http://www.childcareresearch.org/