

# UNDERSTANDING PARENTS' CHILD CARE DECISION-MAKING: A FOUNDATION FOR CHILD CARE POLICY MAKING



Research-to-Policy, Research-to-Practice Brief OPRE 2011-12  
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## Understanding Parents' Child Care Decision-Making: A Foundation for Child Care Policy Making

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Policies such as those related to child care subsidies and quality rating and improvement systems are designed to increase the likelihood that child care and education arrangements meet developmental needs of children and employment needs of parents. Ultimately, parents select child care arrangements, and the quality and stability of these arrangements are affected by parents' decisions. The decisions parents make regarding child care affect the ability of child care policies to achieve desired outcomes. How well policies "fit" into and support the complex parental child care decision-making process affects achievement of policy goals.

Child care is one component of a complex set of family management decisions that are often made simultaneously. For example, parents commonly make child care, employment, and transportation decisions at the same time. Parents attempt to find a child care solution that meets both child development and employment goals. Parents work to find the solution which best fits their situation, but the resulting child care arrangement(s) may or may not meet all their goals.

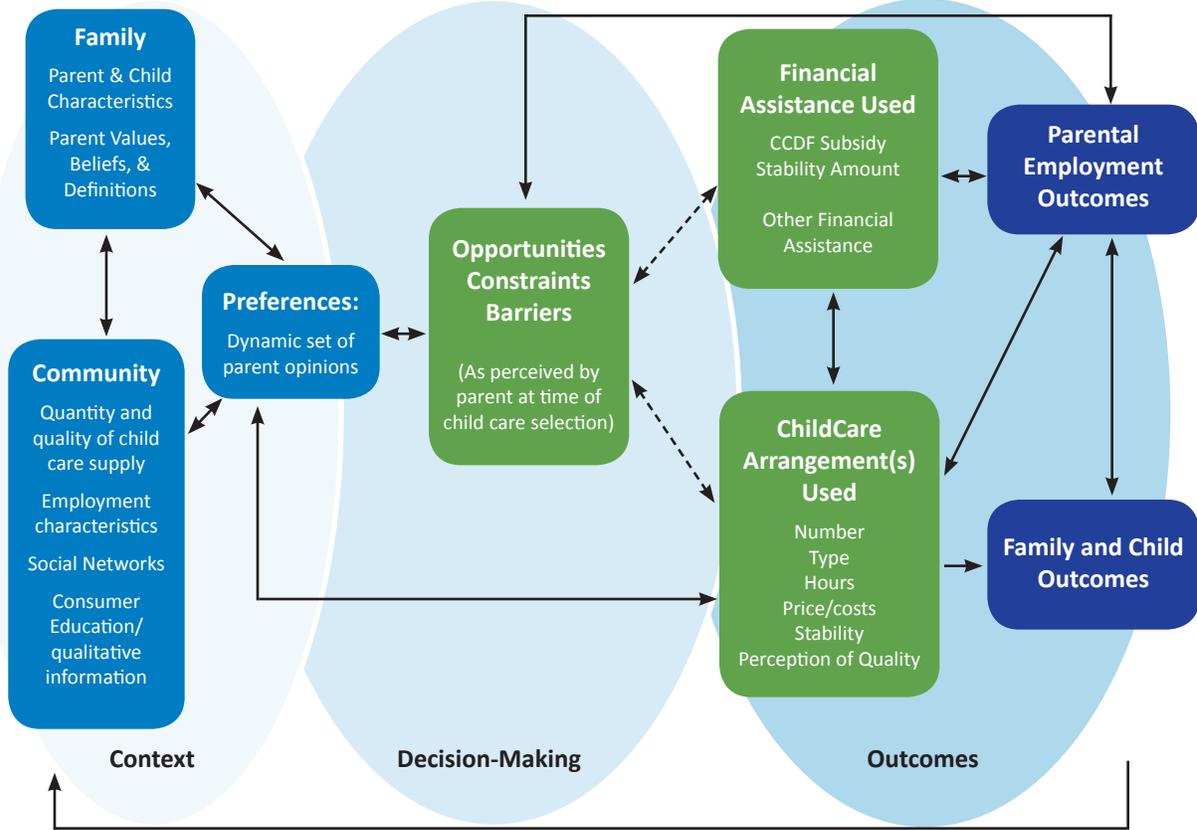
Child care and early education decision-making cannot be understood outside of the world in which a family lives and works, and understanding this context is key to creating child care and early education policies that support parental decision-making. Using a graphic representation of the decision-making process, this paper provides insights into the forces that shape parents' child care and early education decisions. The goal of this brief is to help policy makers by graphically depicting the complexity of child care decision-making revealed through research.

## **Graphic Description of Parental Child Care Decision-Making**

Parental decisions about child care arrangements flow from a number of factors. The following graphic illustrates the complex relationships among families and communities within which child care decisions are made. Although decision-making is commonly thought of as a linear process involving information gathering followed by ranking and selection of the best option, researchers have found it to be multi-faceted and complex.<sup>5,21,38,42</sup> In a companion publication, Chaudry, Henly, and Myers provide a discussion of several conceptual frameworks with which to study parental decision-making.<sup>6</sup> Using the graphic, this paper focuses on the factors that affect the decisions parents make. This information can be used to inform the development of policies that fit the lives of parents and thus have a greater likelihood of achieving desired outcomes. A third in this series of papers on child care decision-making is planned that will present a more complete discussion of the research on which the graphic is built.

The graphic of parental child care decision-making depicts family and community characteristics as context for the decision-making process. Given these contextual factors, parents generate a number of preferences that the model creators conceptualize as a dynamic set of priorities about child care characteristics, including type of care. How strongly a parent holds these preferences varies both across parents and within the same parent over time. Preferences meet with a set of perceived opportunities, constraints, and barriers. Through the interaction of all these factors comes the selection of one or more arrangements. Child care decisions affect parent and child outcomes and also become part of the context that will shape future decisions.

## Parental Child Care Decision-Making: Graphic Description



**Outcomes become part of context for next child care decision**

### Context

The challenge of selecting a child care arrangement varies with the characteristics of the family and community.

#### Family

Some of the *parent and child characteristics* which researchers have found associated with the type of child care and early education used include:

- Education of parents,<sup>17,19,22,46,49,51</sup>
- Family income,<sup>8,9</sup>
- Age of child(ren),<sup>9,17,22,25,26,36</sup>
- Special needs of parent or child,<sup>10,37</sup>
- Number of children and adults in the household,<sup>3,4,17,22,25,49,50</sup> and
- Race, ethnicity, culture, and whether or not the family speaks English.<sup>12,19,28,31</sup>

*Values and beliefs* also affect what arrangements parents seek.<sup>13,45</sup> Cultural values factor into parents' notions of appropriate caregiving.<sup>31</sup> Values may be so embedded in a parent's understanding of the world that they do not consider some child care options. For some low-income parents, trust (usually requiring knowing the caregiver prior to making the arrangement) has to exist in order to even consider a caregiver.<sup>29</sup> Beliefs about motherhood and maternal employment may influence the type of child care, if any, a parent perceives to be appropriate for their child.<sup>34,44</sup>

Some values seem to be widely shared by parents even though the parents may differ in education, income or other characteristics. In numerous studies, parents rank safety, caregiver warmth, and support of learning in child care arrangements as most important.<sup>1,2,7,13,16,20,22,23,29,36,40,41,46</sup> Parents also take into account practical considerations such as cost and convenience.<sup>1,16,22,27,29,41</sup> It appears that parents differentiate between characteristics they believe are needed for the child and those needed to manage daily life, sometimes giving one a high ranking at the same time that they give the other a low ranking.<sup>11</sup>

## Community

Families live in communities and their options are affected by what is and is not available within a manageable distance from home or work. The number of child care options is linked to population size; families in rural and other sparsely populated communities typically have fewer options.<sup>47</sup> The *quantity and quality of child care supply* varies by region of the country and between communities within a state.<sup>15,32,48</sup> Prices range widely across states.<sup>30</sup>

The type of industries, jobs available, and *employment characteristics*, such as work schedules and wage levels, vary across cities and towns, and these characteristics are associated with the types of child care available in a given community. Communities also vary in the number and strength of *social networks*, which studies have found to be the major source of child care information.<sup>18,34</sup> The amount of *consumer information* available, the accessibility of that information, and how meaningful parents find it also varies by community. Child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies provide access to information via the Internet as well as through phone, and in-person consultations. Accessing *qualitative information* about child care facilities is far more challenging than finding basic descriptive data. Many states have Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) in place, but it is common to have information on only a limited portion of child care and early education facilities. Additionally, little is known about how parents are using the information they do receive.<sup>43</sup>

## Preferences: Dynamic Set of Parent Opinions

Preferences emerge out of values, beliefs, and the other family and community factors that shape a parent's child care decision. In the case of child care and early education, they refer to those characteristics of an arrangement to which a parent assigns a high priority. Parent preferences are likely to change over time.<sup>14</sup> Values and beliefs mix with what a parent knows about child care options. Preferences are dynamic and may be based, at least in part, on the options that are available. Parents may learn that there are few options available to them, and this knowledge may shape their priorities. Similarly, the experience of having a child in an arrangement may influence parents' priorities.<sup>35</sup> Most importantly, before a preference is translated into a decision that can be observed, parents' perceptions of opportunities, constraints, and barriers will shape that decision.

## Opportunities, Constraints, and Barriers

As the family approaches the selection of an arrangement, they are faced with a set of opportunities, constraints, and actual barriers associated with characteristics of the family and the community.

Employment demands including nonstandard hour schedules,<sup>33</sup> unpredictable schedules, and fluctuating hours<sup>24</sup> are likely to constrain options. Parents need flexibility to manage daily life and may or may not find flexibility from three primary sources: home, work, and child care.<sup>11</sup> Parents are responsible for managing competing demands on their finances, time, and other resources; some arrangements can place stress on these resources. Lack of a car or access to stable mass transit also constrains child care options because only those arrangements that a parent can reach and still get to their place of employment will be manageable. The price of child care constrains child care options for many families. Access to financial assistance, whether it comes through families, employers, tax credits, federal/state child care subsidies, or child care providers with grants or contracts, reduces the price barrier for some families.

Parents have to accommodate employment demands, and arrangements must be manageable in terms of schedules and transportation. Some options will not meet the needs of all children in the family, and managing multiple arrangements may be burdensome. Moreover, the decisions must work for the whole family, not one member in isolation.

## Observable Behavior: Financial Assistance and Child Care Arrangement(s) Used

Results flowing from the child care decision-making process have high policy relevance and include type and number of arrangements, hours of care used, cost or amount spent, and use of financial assistance including the state's child care subsidy program, Head Start/Early Head Start, a public prekindergarten, or tax credits.

Policy makers and researchers commonly focus on what parents do rather than the decision-making process that leads to what they do. It is common to see reported the type of care selected or whether or not financial assistance was used. But policy effects flow through parents' decision-making, as is exemplified in the link between financial assistance policy and child care decisions. Financial assistance increases parent options by providing access to all types of care, especially more expensive types of care. The underlying logic is that with the increased options parents' child care decisions will produce better child care outcomes. Since policy effects flow through the child care decisions parents make, understanding decision-making is key to making policy decisions that will achieve desired outcomes.

Policy makers and researchers are also interested in the extent to which any of the observed behaviors vary by race, citizenship status, language spoken, or ethnicity. Caution is needed when attributing the cause of the observed differences to these family characteristics. Observed differences in child care usage across racial and ethnic groups may be causally linked to other factors such as household income, lack of information, or other barriers to the use of child care and early education rather than to race, ethnicity, language usage, or citizenship status *per se*.<sup>12,19,40</sup>

Observed child care usage reflects the family, the community, and the competing demands on family resources. The selected arrangement(s) may not be optimal for the child, the parent, or the family as a whole, but at that point in time the parent found it to be the best of perceived available options.

## Outcomes: Parental Employment and Family and Child Well-Being

Parental employment and family and child well-being outcomes flow from the decision-making process, but child care decisions are seldom one-time occurrences. For example, parents change jobs, or employers change work schedules. Children outgrow arrangements, or parents decide that arrangements are not good for children. Changes in child care subsidy policies or relatively small changes in earnings can make a family ineligible or reduce the benefit amount. At that point the hassle of participating in the subsidy program may make it seem not worth the effort. Any change can result in parents rethinking their child care decisions, thereby re-entering the decision-making process. It is also important to note that the outcomes of the earlier decision-making process themselves can change family characteristics (for example, the parent may have gained more work experience or increased education while the children were in arrangements that resulted from an earlier decision-making process). Earlier decisions can also influence parental child care preferences (for example, experience in a child care center may increase the desirability of that type of care). As shown in the model, the outcomes of the first decision-making process become part of the context that shapes the next one.

## Implications for Policy Making

Research documents a complex decision-making process shaped by characteristics of the family and the community in which they reside. A major implication of research findings on child care decision-making is that no single program or set of policies can reduce the barriers and constraints low-income parents face as they make child care decisions. The impacts of a range of public and workplace policies are inextricably linked, as is captured in Angela's story of child care decision-making, a story drawn from parent interviews completed in Oregon in 2010.<sup>39</sup> Her work schedule limits her options but investments in provider training, receipt of subsidies, and access to information expand her options.

Child care subsidies cannot provide access if options do not exist in the parent's community, nor will increased information help if the available options do not provide high-quality education and care. Child care options are likely to be reduced by workplace practices such as evening, weekend, and rotating shifts, or fluctuations in hours worked,<sup>24,33</sup> whereas a parent's ability to make and sustain high-quality arrangements is strengthened by flexible workplace policies and practices.<sup>11</sup> Workplace and child care policies create both opportunities and constraints for parents as they make child care decisions. One promising strategy would involve both public and private child care as well as workforce policymakers working in consort to support parental child care decision-making by increasing opportunities and reducing barriers.

Another major policy implication is that timing of the support provided to parents as they make child care decisions matters. Timing is critical for delivery of information on child care options (including the quality of child care facilities) and on how to access financial assistance. Child care searches are typically short<sup>14</sup> and parents may not know that information is available or where to find it. More support for child care searches may improve both stability and quality of child care arrangements. Of special concern are policies which inadvertently put parents in the position of making a child care selection rapidly, as is often the case for a TANF parent who must meet job readiness or employment demands in a matter of days, or a parent who risks losing a job or a child care subsidy if a replacement arrangement is not found quickly. Even if strategies to get information to parents are in place, a parent needing to make a decision rapidly may not be able to access it.

Angela, a 24-year-old mom of two children, is recently divorced and has a GED. Her oldest child, James, is four and she also has an infant, Molly. In order to find a job she has moved to a larger city in her state. She receives no child support, but recently found a position as a caregiver in a nursing home. She was offered a 6:00 am to 1:00 pm shift and will have to work some weekends. She would prefer that a relative care for Molly and that James go to a center, but she also would like the children to be together. Her position at the nursing home began one week after it was offered to her which gave Angela less than seven days to make arrangements for the children. A woman she talked with at the laundromat told her that the state could help her pay for child care. Based on a conversation with a person at the state office, Angela thinks she will get help. Since she has no relatives who can care for Molly, she is hoping to find a center that can care for both children. She called a number she had been given when she went to the state office to apply for financial assistance. She was excited that these people would be able to give her information including the quality of providers, but learned that most centers do not have spots for infants, and none of them are open on weekends or at 5:30 am when she would need to bring the children in order to get to work on time. Few facilities opened early enough or provided care on weekends. She began calling and visiting child care homes and was excited to learn that Sue could care for both of her children at the times she needed, and that Sue was receiving training on how best to meet the developmental needs of children in her care. Although she received no information on the quality of Sue's home care, Sue was willing to receive part of her payment from the state. Angela considers herself lucky to have found care she believes will make her life work for her family.

Additionally, the ability to get information to parents depends on understanding their preferred ways of gathering information and how critical trust is to many parents as they make a decision of high importance and little certainty. Strategies that build upon social networks and trusted information sources, such as pediatricians, are likely to strengthen information sharing strategies. The impact of a range of public and private programs and policies to improve child and family outcomes depends on parents' child care decisions. Understanding parental child care decision-making increases the likelihood that policies and program will be designed to effectively support parents' decision-making and improve child and family outcomes.

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