

Child care needs of parents in paid work

An interpretation of findings from *Australia's Welfare 1993: Services and Assistance*

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The extent to which the child care needs of parents in paid employment are adequately met is an important matter. This paper examines the issue using data published in the recent report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australia's Welfare 1993: Services and Assistance. Data from recent surveys by the Australian Bureau of Statistics are used to supplement the report's findings.

While families with both parents or the sole parent in paid employment are the major users of formal child care services many of them continue to experience difficulties in obtaining child care that meets their needs. Many of these families need to arrange their domestic and working lives to care for children within the family or rely on informal support by other family members, friends and neighbours. Many adopt a mix of strategies-formal services, informal support and flexible work arrangements-to meet their child care needs. These families show a high level of unmet demand for formal services; mothers in these families experience difficulties in balancing the competing demands of caring for children and paid employment.

Child care, which is defined here as non-compulsory care of a child aged 0-12 years by someone other than the child's parents or de facto partner of the child's parent, can take a variety of forms - long day care, family day care, outside school hours care, pre-school care, other formal services and informal arrangements such as care by family, friends and neighbours. Child care services and arrangements can thus serve a number of purposes. For children, they can provide opportunities for social interaction and learning, thereby fostering children's social, cognitive and psychological development.

For parents, they can provide an important supplement to parental care, enabling parents to work, participate in the community and take a break from the demands of parenting responsibilities. For

families, child care can assist in reducing the incidence of family dysfunction by providing parents and children with time away from the intensity of family interactions and the opportunity to mix with a range of other people.

Nevertheless, a major reason for the use of child care is to enable parents, particularly mothers, to participate in the workforce. Indeed, the increase in child care services over the last decade and, in particular, the expansion of the Commonwealth government's role, has been largely fuelled by the increased participation of women in the paid workforce and the growing numbers of one-parent families in which the sole parent is in paid employment. The number of children in child care increased from 1.1 million in 1984 to 1.5 million in 1990 (ABS 1986:35; ABS 1992:1). Over the same period, the number of families with children under the age of 12 with both parents or the sole parent in paid employment increased from 643,600 in 1984 to 928,200 in 1990 (ABS 1986:10; ABS 1992:38).

The potential need for work-related care is considerable. In June 1992, a total of 1.8 million children (48 per cent of all

children aged 0-14 years) belonged to either two-parent families in which both parents were in paid employment, or to one-parent families in which the sole parent was in paid employment. When one adds those families in which parents are studying or training to enter the workforce, the total number of children potentially requiring child care for work-related reasons rises to 2 million (or 54 per cent of all children aged 0-14) (AIHW 1993: 161).

Accompanying these social changes, the Commonwealth's Children's Services Program (CSP, variously named since its inception) with its objective of assisting families with dependent children to participate in the workforce, expanded rapidly, from 46,000 Commonwealth-funded child care places in 1983 to 190,000 in 1992. (AIHW 1993: 133). Moreover, the expansion in the numbers of children attending CSP-funded services has been particularly marked in three areas - the category of 'other formal care' (primarily special services such as Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services and occasional care), long day care and outside school hours care

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(AIHW 1993: 133). The latter two are used extensively by parents in paid work. The Commonwealth focus on the needs of parents in the workforce is reflected by the priority-of-access guidelines for long day care, family day care and outside school hours care, which give first priority to children whose parents are employed, looking for work, or training with a view to joining the workforce. The extent of work-related care indicated by these figures suggests that it is important to ask to what extent the child care needs of parents in paid work are being adequately met. A recent report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Australia's Welfare 1993: Services and Assistance*, provides a wealth of information on children's services and other matters. It is the purpose of this article to draw together a number of different strands in that report that shed light on this question, and to supplement the report with information excluded for reasons of space or unavailable at the time the report was compiled.

Service use: the providers' perspective

When the data on the use of child care is examined from the perspective of the provider, child care services would appear to be catering well for the needs of employed parents. A substantial majority of families using the CSP-funded services have both parents or the only parent employed. The ABS Child Care Survey 1990 found that 73 per cent of families using long day care services, 77 per cent of families using family day care services and 87 per cent of families using outside school hours care were those with both parents or the sole parent employed (AIHW 1993:163).

When the extended definition of work-related care, as defined by the CSP, is used and parents seeking work or

training for employment were also included, the proportions increased to exceed or approach the CSP benchmark of 85 per cent usage in terms of attendance hours-79 per cent for long day care, 93 per cent for family day care, and 93 per cent for outside school hours care. A similar picture is obtained if the numbers of children are used as the basis of calculation (AIHW 1993:163 & 359).

There are no set benchmarks for 'other formal services' occasional care, where child care is provided for short periods on an ad hoc basis, and adjunct care, where care is provided while the parents use the specific facility providing the care, and special services, such as multifunctional services for children in a remote areas and Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services. These services primarily provide for short term care on an occasional basis, and thus are more likely to be used for reasons other than the working requirements of the parents. The use of these services by families with both parents or the sole parent employed is quite large. For example, one-quarter of the children using occasional care are attending for work-related reasons and these children use 40 per cent of the total attendance hours provided by occasional care centres (AIHW 1993: 360). Given the occasional and short term nature of the care offered by these services, it is likely that they are being used to supplement other child care arrangements - formal or informal - to cater for the needs of parents working part-time, casual or shifts. While the CSP-funded services are used extensively by families with both parents employed or the sole parent employed, the same cannot be said of preschools. Of the children attending preschools, 45 per cent were from such families and 55 per cent from families where at least one of the parents was not in paid employment (AIHW 1993:163).

Service use: the clients' perspective

A somewhat different picture emerges when the data is examined from the perspective of the clients. While a much greater proportion of families with both parents or the sole parent employed used child care than did families where one or both of the parents were not employed (71 per cent compared to 49 per cent), what was surprising was that 29 per cent of the families with both parents or the sole parent employed use no child care at all (Table 1).

The ABS data on which these figures are based cannot be used to address the question of how such families manage the tasks of caring for children while both parents are, or the sole parent is, engaged in work, study or training, although it does contain some suggestive information. For example, in 65 per cent of these families the mother worked less than 30 hours per week (ABS 1992: 69), suggesting that for parents of school age children, limited working hours for one of the partners, usually the mother, provides one solution to managing the dual responsibilities of work and family. More recent data from the ABS 1992 Family Survey confirms that part-time work by the mother is indeed a major strategy for parents with children under the age of twelve. In that survey, 90 per cent of parents who worked part-time (less than 34 hours per week) were female. A much greater proportion of women with children under the age of twelve worked part-time (63 per cent) than did women without children in this age group. It is quite clear that working part-time is indeed much more likely to be done by the mother than the father. While men were less likely to be working part-time, working part-time was more likely to be undertaken by those men without children under the age of twelve

Table 1: Number of families, type of care by labour force status of parents, Australia, November 1990

Type of care	Both parents employed either full-time or part-time (Including sole parents)			One or both parents not employed (Including sole parents)		
	No. of families (000)	% of all families using care	% of all families	No. of families (000)	% of all families using care	% of all families
Formal care only	103.1	15.6	11.1	112.2	25.7	12.5
Informal care only	393.8	59.6	42.4	237.0	54.2	26.3
Both formal & informal care	163.4	24.7	17.6	88.2	20.2	9.8
Total families using care	660.3	100.0	71.1	437.4	100.0	48.5
Neither formal nor informal care	267.9		28.9	463.8		51.5
Total families	928.2		100.0	901.2		100.0

source: ABS 1992: Table 7.20; AIHW 1993: 162

Table 2: Employed persons with or without usual resident children under 12 years, hours worked by sex, Australia 1992

Hours worked per week	Without children under 12 years		With children under 12 years	
	Males %	Females %	Males %	Females %
0-34 (part-time)	13.7	38.1	4.2	63.3
35+ (full-time)	86.3	61.9	95.8	36.7
Totals (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Totals ('000)	3140.5	2389.1	1418.6	874.8

Source: ABS 1993: Tables 4.7 & 4.8

(14 per cent) than those with children in this age group (4 per cent) (see Table 2).

For those families in which the mother worked more than 35 hours per week and which did not use any form of child care (74,000 such families in the 1990 Child Care Survey, ABS 1992), other strategies need to be adopted. A study of employed mothers returning to work conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (Greenblat & Ochiltree 1993: 16) suggests two other possible patterns of caring for young children in these circumstances: either the children were looked after by the mother's partner while the mother attended work, or the mother cared for her child while she worked. The first solution is obviously not available to sole parents and only available to partnered parents if they do not share working hours. The second solution is only available to those parents whose working circumstances allow for the presence of young children at work, for example, family day care mothers, child care workers, and women who work at home.

Other options, particularly for older children, are for them to participate in supervised activities (for example, extra-curricular lessons or group activities) or to be left in their own care. Unfortunately, the data cannot provide an indication of the numbers of families or the numbers of children in these different circumstances.

Use of informal care

For the 71 per cent of employed families who used some form of child care in the 1990 Child Care Survey, formal child care services were not the primary source of child care: the 71 per cent comprised 42 per cent who relied on the informal networks of family, friends and neighbours, 18 per cent who used combinations of informal and formal care and only 11 per cent who used formal child care services only (see Table 1).

Of course, it is too simplistic to equate the high usage of informal arrangements with difficulties in accessing formal services that give priority of access to the

children of employed parents. Parents may prefer informal arrangements for a variety of reasons such as: convenience, cost, ease of access, trust in the carer, and assessed suitability of the care arrangements to the needs of the child (see, for example, Greenblat & Ochiltree 1993: 19-21).

However, if the pattern of usage for families with both parents or the sole parent employed is compared with that of families where one or both of the parents are not employed, the impression is strengthened that the families with both parents or the sole parent employed have difficulties in accessing formal child care services. Compared with families where one or both of the parents were not employed, a smaller proportion of families with both parents or the sole parent employed using child care used formal services only (16 to 26 per cent) and larger proportions used informal services only (60 to 54 percent) and the combination of both formal and informal services (25 to 20 per cent) (see Table 1) This difference was largely due to the comparative under utilisation of preschool services by fully employed families - 39 per cent of such families using formal care used preschool, compared with 65 per cent of families where one or both parents were not employed. In all other types of care, particularly in the CSP-funded services, a greater proportion of fully employed families used these services. Moreover, as the number of hours worked by the mother increased, preschool usage fell, while the reverse was the case for the CSP-funded services where usage actually increased with hours (ABS 1992: 39). Preschool services would appear to be perceived by the majority of fully employed families as not appropriate to their child care needs, perhaps because of the mismatch between the operating times of preschools and the working hours of the parents. The introduction of some after-preschool care services, predominantly in the independent preschool sector and the closer links between services offered by preschools and long day care centres, marks the recognition of this difficulty.

Client-identified need

The ABS measure of 'not met demand' provides a broad indication of dissatisfaction with existing child care arrangements. The 1990 Child Care Survey found that 19 per cent of families with both parents or the sole parent ill paid employment agreed that they needed child care in the last month, but did not receive it, or needed more than they used (ABS 1992: 41).

While, as discussed above, families with both parents in paid employment under utilised preschool services, the primary not-met demand for children of these families was for other services-outside school hours care (35 per cent), followed by other formal care (mostly occasional care) (27 per cent), long day care (17 per cent) and family day care (14 per cent), with preschools a mere 6 per cent. (ABS 1992: 59 Table 7.14; percentages need to be treated with caution because of standard errors in the cells). The low level of not-met demand for preschool services strengthens the impression gained from the usage data that fully employed families regard preschool services as not appropriate to their child care needs.

The 1992 Family Survey found that 29 per cent of employed parents reported difficulties in managing work and caring for their children, and the difficulty of balancing work and care was experienced by a greater proportion of mothers than fathers in each category of hours worked (ABS 1993:20-1). The fact that the proportion of mothers experiencing difficulties increased with hours worked, from 25 to 46 per cent, suggests that working part-time is, in some circumstances, an effective strategy. (see Table 3). However, the overall dimensions of the problem (326,700 women overall, 177,700 of whom are working less than 35 hours per week) indicate a considerable need for further support for employed women whether they are working full- or part-time (ABS 1993: Table 4.4).

Conclusions

While work-related care is the major component of formal child care usage, the experiences of the core groups of families - those with both parents or the sole parent in paid employment - suggest that formal child care services meet only a relatively small proportion of their need for child care. Such families also appear

to rely heavily on arranging their domestic and working lives to care for children within the existing family structure and on informal support by other family members, friends and neighbours. Many of these families also rely on multiple strategies (working hours and arrangements, informal care and mixes of formal services) to cater for their child care needs.

Further indications that the child care needs of parents in paid employment are not being fully met are that a substantial proportion of these families reported requiring more child care than they used, and that a substantial proportion of employed parents, particularly mothers working full-time, reported experiencing difficulties in balancing paid work and caring for their children. Further and more detailed analysis of the experiences of these families is needed to explore connections between paid work (particularly hours worked and the timing of work), existing child care arrangements and the extent of unmet child care needs for parents engaged in paid work. Recent data about to be released or just released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics from the Survey of Families in Australia, the Time Use Survey and the Child Care Survey will facilitate this analysis.

Table 3: Employed persons with children under 12 years: difficulty managing work and caring for children, by sex and hours worked, Australia 1992

Difficulty managing work and caring for children	Hours worked per week			
	0-15 (%)	16-25 (%)	26-34 (%)	35+ (%)
Females (%)				
Difficult	24.6	37.7	40.3	46.4
Not difficult	75.4	62.3	58.6	52.7
Totals (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Totals ('000)	254.9	202.1	96.8	321.1
Males (%)				
Difficult	14.3	23.5	22.0	23.9
Not difficult	85.7	75.2	76.5	74.9
Not stated		1.2	1.5	1.1
Totals (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total ('000)	14.7	22.5	22.3	1359.2

Source: ABS 1993: Table 4.4

REFERENCES

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 Greenblat E & Ochiltree G (1993) *Use and Choice of Child Care*, AIFS Early Childhood Study Paper No. 4, Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Joshua and Daniel Szwarc Memorial Trust

Expressions of interest sought

The Joshua and Daniel Szwarc Memorial Trust is administered by Oz Child: Children Australia. Its objectives are to support children with disabilities and their families. This is achieved by various means, including aiding people who work on innovative research projects in the field of children with disabilities, and by supporting eminent speakers who are considered innovators and ideas persons in that field.

The Trust is currently prepared to contribute towards the funding of a keynote speaker at a seminar or conference in Australia. The speaker must be prominent in the children's disability field and should have something of value to contribute to the building of knowledge and skills for work in the field. Organisations which are contemplating running, in the near future, a seminar or conference which will consist of or include a substantial segment on the topic of children with disabilities are invited to submit a proposal to the Trust. Details should include when and where the event will take place, details or outline of the program, the proposed keynote speaker, the amount of funding sought, and the purpose for which it is sought. Inclusion of information on the speaker's expertise would be helpful.

Applications should be submitted by 31 October 1995 and directed to:
 Secretary of the Joshua and Daniel Memorial Trust
 C/- Oz Child: Children Australia
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