

Parents' expectations, values and choice of child care

Connections to culture

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Previous research on parental decision-making concerning child care has attempted to define the factors that influence the forms of child care that parents select. Parents' decisions determine when a child starts using a child care service, for how many hours, the type of child care arrangement, and the quality of the child care. These then shape the nature and impact of the child's experience of child care.

Much of the research on parents' selection of care has focused on characteristics of the child care, such as location, aspects of the program curriculum, and cost. These have typically been organised into two domains, defined by Johansen et al. (1996) as intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors refer to characteristics of the child care that meet children's needs, or affect the child's experience in child care, such as carer-child ratio and curriculum. Extrinsic factors meet parents' needs, or affect the parents' experience, such as hours of operation, location, and cost.

Although the decision process is complex and many questions remain unanswered, research has produced some clear findings. For example, the importance of intrinsic factors, such as carer warmth and health and safety issues (Ispa et al. 1998), have been demonstrated in numerous studies to be the strongest predictors of child care selection, although parents choosing centre care appear to place higher value on educational components of the program than parents choosing a family care arrangement. Cost and convenience also rate very highly in importance to parents.

Other research has also looked at characteristics of the family such as income, maternal employment status, the levels of stress or support in the family, maternal psychological wellbeing, marital quality, ethnicity and the family's social structure (availability of a spouse, family size) as matters influencing the selection of child care. Numerous studies have linked demographic and family characteristics to both the type and quality of child care (see Lamb 1998 for review). For example, it has been demonstrated in overseas studies that children from families with higher incomes and more education tend to experience somewhat higher

quality child care than children with fewer advantages (Burchinal and Nelson 2000).

Yet other studies have examined the extent to which family process variables influence the selection process. Some parents may select child care that complements or compensates, rather than matches, the environment of the home (Rescorla et al. 1991). Cultural differences in child rearing beliefs and practices, including the importance various cultures place on educational activities, are argued to explain ethnic differences in the use of child care (Fuller et al. 1996). For example, parents from minority ethnic groups tend to choose child care arrangements that match their own culturally-based beliefs about early child-rearing (Wise and Sanson 2000). It is also thought that parents from different cultural backgrounds differ in their ideas about the role of child care in helping to achieve valued developmental outcomes (McGillicuddy-De Lisi and Subramanian 1994; Chen and Uttal 1988).

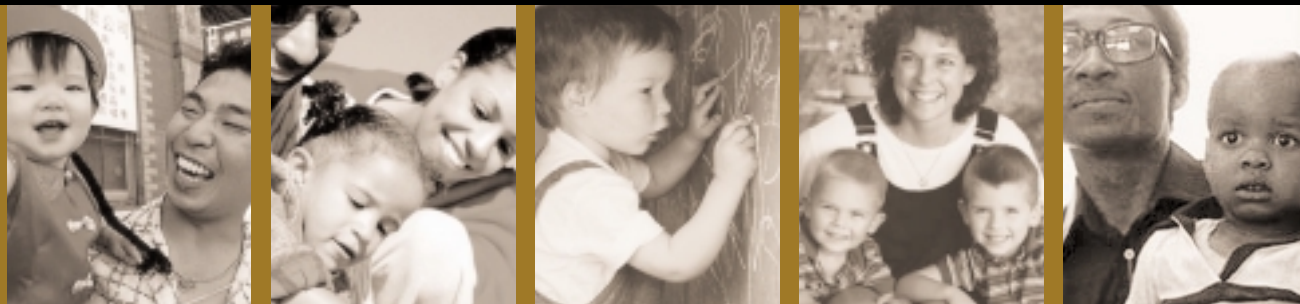
Developmental theory suggests that the greater the consistency and congruity across the environments in which children live and learn, the better the outcomes for the child. In situations where young children have to negotiate conflicting messages across multiple settings, studies have shown evidence of poor academic performance (Laosa 1982; Harkness and Super 1992), feelings of disorientation and insecurity (Howes 1991; Shimona and Ferguson 1992), and poor social skills (Harrison and Ungerer 1997).

Child care settings contain people, roles, rules and relations that a child must negotiate in addition to those in the family system. Thus, the extent to which parents choose child care that complements the environment of the home is likely to influence children's adjustment in child care.

Child Care in Cultural Context study

A new study conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, called *Child Care in Cultural Context*, is looking at the effects on children of differences between home and child care. Data are currently being collected from multiple sources on the development of children aged one to three years

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from Somali, Vietnamese and Anglo-Australian backgrounds attending either family care or centre care. Various characteristics of the home and child care settings are being assessed. Parents and children who meet the criteria for selection and their care providers are being recruited through child care centres and family care schemes in areas within Melbourne with high proportions of Vietnamese and Somali residents.

Data are currently being collected via parent and carer questionnaires and through direct observation of children and their child care environments. Parents are invited to complete questionnaires (translated into Somali or Vietnamese when appropriate) by themselves, or by interview (delivered in the appropriate language).

Some of the data collected for this study provide information on the value parents place on various care characteristics. In addition to intrinsic and extrinsic child care factors, the study is investigating the extent to which parents value a child care setting that matches the environment of the home. In line with other studies, it was expected that parents from minority ethnic groups would prefer child care that resembles, rather than conflicts with, the child-rearing beliefs and practices adopted at home, and that maintains the cultural values and practices of the child's ethnic group (see Uttal 1996, for example). It was also thought that parents who value child care that is like the family home would select family care rather than centre care, because family care is home-based and families can choose a particular care provider.

The study is also collecting information on parents' expected roles and functions of child care, such as whether child care should promote school-readi-

ness skills. Parental expectations for children's care and development are also likely to explain differences in child care selection, and the perceived role of child care may differ according to the type of care involved and/or the cultural background of the families concerned. Data on this issue may shed light on whether the functions of child care are expanding, or need to expand, to accommodate the needs of parents.

Research has suggested that the developmental potential of multiple settings depends on the level of communication and information exchange across settings (Feagans and Manlove 1994). The Institute study addresses whether care providers attempt to understand parents' expectations of child care, and children's experiences at home, and whether they share information about children's experiences in child care with parents to help smooth transitions from one setting to the other. Communication and negotiation about differences between the two settings are likely to lead to greater predicability and consistency for the child, which should contribute to a child's adjustment to a new setting and eventually to overall child competence.

Finally, information is being collected on care providers' attitudes and beliefs about the importance of matching the child care environment to the orientations of the home.

Preliminary findings on a sample of 113 parents (27 Vietnamese, 28 Somali, 47 Anglo-Australian, and 11 other) and 135 care providers (46 family care providers, 83 centre care providers, and six informal carers) are presented below. (For some analyses, data on children from non-specified cultures and children using informal care are excluded from the analysis.)

Of the 76 parent reports concerning children in centre care, 39 (51.3 per cent) were Anglo Australian,

16 (21.1 per cent) were Vietnamese, ten (13.2 per cent) were Somali, and 11 (14.4 per cent) were from an unspecified cultural background. Of the 34 parent reports involving children using family care, eight (23.5 per cent) were Anglo-Australian, 11 (32.4 per cent) were Vietnamese, and 15 (44.1 per cent) were Somali. Another three children in the parent sample were using informal care. Of the 129 formal carers, 53 (63.9 per cent) of Anglo-Australian carers, 16 (19.3 per cent) of Vietnamese carers, 13 (15.7 per cent) of Somali carers, and one worker from an unspecified cultural background worked in centre care. Of the family day carers, eight (17.4 per cent) looked after Anglo-Australian children, 12 (26.1 per cent) looked after Vietnamese children, and 26 (56.5 per cent) looked after Somali children.

These data concern parental values and expectations and care provider beliefs about promoting links between home and day care.

What parents value in a child care service

The parent questionnaire contains a series of items related to the importance of various characteristics of child care. Parents rate how important each char-

acteristic is to them on a scale between 1 and 3. A score of 1 indicates the characteristic is not very important to them, and a score of 3 indicates the characteristic is very important to them. These items are framed in terms of intrinsic (child), extrinsic (parent), and cultural factors.

Mean group scores are presented according to the type of child care used, and the child's cultural background in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Comparisons by care type used

Table 1 presents the group mean scores for parents with children in centre care and children in family care, whether the difference between the means is significant, and at what level. If the observed differences between the means are statistically significant, we should conclude that there is reason to suspect true differences between the groups rather than attributing the differences to chance.

These data clearly illustrate where the two groups of parents place their emphasis in their choice of child care. Parents with children in centre care and family care rated both intrinsic and

Table 1 Characteristics of child care valued by parents: mean group scores by type of care used

Item	Mean scores		Significant difference
	Long day care	Family day care	
Intrinsic factors			
There are a large number of carers for the number of children	2.79	2.74	
The carers are well trained and qualified	2.91	2.94	
The care is warm and sensitive	2.99	2.97	
The child is cared for by the same person each day	2.52	2.76	*
The program has activities to help the child learn new things	2.88	2.79	
The child care setting is a safe and healthy place for the child	2.96	3.00	
Children are provided with good quality food	2.92	2.91	
There are plenty of stimulating toys and materials for the child	2.78	2.94	*
Extrinsic factors			
Carers provide support and advice to parents to help them with child rearing	2.17	2.26	
The cost of care is affordable	2.74	2.97	**
The child care is conveniently located	2.78	2.85	*
Care is available during hours that it is needed	2.95	2.85	
Cultural factors			
The child is dressed appropriately and appears well looked after	2.72	2.91	*
Carers talk to the child in his/her own language	2.33	2.65	*
Carers are sensitive to differences between home and child care in ways of bringing up children	2.58	2.74	
Important festivals and holidays from the child's culture are celebrated	1.95	2.32	*
The child is given food s/he is used to at home	1.75	2.38	**
The child is treated in much the same way as at home	2.49	2.88	**
Carers take time to understand parents' ideas and practices about bringing up children	2.45	2.73	*
Carers will adapt the program to fit particular children's needs	2.69	2.73	
Carers know the child and his/her parents well	2.76	2.82	

* Significance level = .05. ** Significance level = .001.
Scale: 1=not very important; 3= very important.

extrinsic variables at the upper end of the scale, suggesting that there are no underlying differences in commitment to their children's development, or education orientation. However, parents using family care valued a child care setting where children are cared for by the same carer each day, and where there are plenty of stimulating toys and materials for the child significantly more so than parents using centre care. Although family income has not been considered in this analysis, parents using family care also valued a child care setting that was affordable significantly more than parents using centre care.

It is also interesting to note that parents using family care value a child care setting that reflects the values, orientations and practices of the child's

culture significantly more than parents using centre care. However, these findings may simply reflect ethnic differences because of the higher proportion of Somali and Vietnamese parents in the family care sample. It is also possible that parents may be using care that does not fit with their preferences, because of low availability, economic constraints or workplace constraints.

Comparisons by cultural background

When these same items are compared by children's cultural background, it becomes apparent that not all parents from minority ethnic groups attempt to match children's child care experiences to the home. Large and significant differences between mean scores were predominantly found on cultural

Table 2 Characteristics of child care valued by parents: mean group scores by child's cultural background

Item	Mean scores			Significant difference	
	Anglo	Vietnamese	Somali	Anglo/ Vietnamese	Anglo/ Somali
Intrinsic factors					
There are a large number of carers for the number of children	2.69	2.8	2.93		*
The carers are well trained and qualified	2.91	2.89	3.0		*
The care is warm and sensitive	3.00	3.00	2.96		
The child is cared for by the same person each day	2.62	2.37	2.82		
The program has activities to help the child learn new things	2.83	2.96	2.85	*	
The child care setting is a safe and healthy place for the child	3.00	2.96	3.00		
Children are provided with good quality food	2.91	2.93	2.96		
There are plenty of stimulating toys and materials for the child	2.79	2.89	2.89		
Extrinsic factors					
Carers provide support and advice to parents to help them with child rearing	2.17	2.70	1.71	**	*
The cost of care is affordable	2.77	2.89	2.86		
The child care is conveniently located	2.70	2.93	2.93	*	*
Care is available during hours that it is needed	2.88	2.93	3.00		*
Cultural factors					
The child is dressed appropriately and appears well looked after	2.72	2.81	2.93		*
Carers talk to the child in his/her own language	2.55	2.15	2.52	*	
Carers are sensitive to differences between home and child care in ways of bringing up children	2.63	2.56	2.75		
Important festivals and holidays from the child's culture are celebrated	1.91	1.59	2.93		**
The child is given food s/he is used to at home	1.84	1.48	2.71	*	**
The child is treated in much the same way as at home	2.55	2.59	2.82		*
Carers take time to understand parents' ideas and practices about bringing up children	2.52	2.56	2.63		
Carers will adapt the program to fit particular children's needs	2.72	2.48	2.93		*
Carers know the child and his/her parents well	2.81	2.63	2.92		

* Significance level = .05. ** Significance level = .001.
Scale: 1=not very important; 3= very important.
Source: Child Care in Cultural Context study, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2002.

items between the Somali and the Anglo-Australian groups (indicating Somali parents value a child care setting that maintains the cultural orientations of the home more so than Anglo-Australian parents).

However, a higher proportion of Somali parents were using family care compared with Anglo-Australian parents, which means these findings may underestimate the variance in attitudes among both cultural groups.

Significant differences were also found between Vietnamese and the Anglo-Australian group on some cultural items. Higher scores among the Anglo-Australian group indicate that Vietnamese parents do not value a child care setting that is “attuned” or complements the home as much as Anglo-Australian parents. While Anglo-Australian parents using family care are under-represented in this comparison, the data presented in Table 1 suggests parents with preferences for child care that is familiar to the home are more likely to use family care. Thus, differences between Anglo-Australian and Vietnamese parents are possibly even more marked than the current data suggest.

Anecdotal information collected during the course of the study can be used to interpret these findings. It has been suggested that Vietnamese parents sometimes use child care as an acculturation experience, to introduce children to Australian ways so they can compete with Australian children in academic pursuits, or simply because they wish to be seen to be fitting in with cultural mores. Thus, differences between Somalis and Vietnamese may reflect different attitudes toward acculturation. However, further analysis of the data is required before such statements can be made with confidence.

Table 2 presents the mean group scores for items where significant differences between cultural groups were found.

Parent expectations of child care

The parent questionnaire also asks parents to reflect on the degree to which they feel different domains of child development are the responsibility of the child care service, by rating a number of items on a 5-point scale. A score of 1 indicated that the domain was not a responsibility of child care and a score of 5 indicated that the domain definitely was a responsibility of child care. Responses to these items were interpreted as an indication of parents’ expectations of child care.

Comparisons by care type used

The mean group scores for parents using family care and parents using centre care across all items included in the questionnaire are presented in Table 3. By rating items in the upper end of the scale both groups of parents indicated that they felt child care had a definite responsibility for very many aspects of children’s development, including cognitive, social, emotional language and physical development. On the whole, parents expected child care to foster children’s social development the most.

However, parents using centre care and family care differed in their expectations of child care in several areas. Parents using centre care had significantly higher expectations of child care in promoting children’s thinking skills, ensuring the child is well prepared for school, and in teaching the child acceptable group behaviour.

Parents using centre care also expected child care to monitor children’s development more so than parents using family care. There are various possible interpretations of this finding; it may reflect an emphasis on child care that enhances children’s development among parents using centre care; or it may mean that parents believe centre

Table 3 Parental expectations of child care: mean group scores by care type

Item	Mean scores		Significant difference
	Long day care	Family day care	
To provide guidance and discipline	3.48	2.94	
To foster self-esteem and independence	3.96	3.52	
To ensure the child feels secure and loved	3.81	3.47	
To ensure the child develops a positive sense of him/her self	3.91	3.48	
To ensure the child is well prepared for school	3.94	3.56	*
To promote the child’s thinking skills	4.20	3.64	*
To promote the child’s physical coordination skills	4.08	3.81	
To foster language development	3.87	3.62	
To teach the child simple self care skills	3.88	3.62	
To teach the child about his/her culture	2.32	2.38	
To teach the child values (eg. honesty, caring for others, obedience, sharing)	3.83	3.71	
To teach the child acceptable group behaviour	4.34	3.85	*
To help the child to learn how to play with other children	4.55	4.09	*
To check on the child’s health	2.97	3.12	
To check on the child’s development	3.81	3.09	*

* Significance level = .05. ** Significance level = .001

Scale: 1=not a responsibility of child care; 5=definitely a responsibility of child care.

Source: Child Care in Cultural Context study, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2002.

care providers have a stronger capacity to assume this role than family carers.

It is also noteworthy that both groups of parents felt that child care did not have a definite role in promoting understanding of children's cultural background or in disciplining children. Therefore, it would appear that parents perceive the home to be the most appropriate setting for cultural exposure and for disciplinary behaviour.

Once again, however, the relatively high proportion of Somali parents in the family care sample, as well as the high proportion of Anglo-Australian parents in the centre care sample, confounds these findings. That is, the differences indicated between parents using centre care and family care may actually reflect underlying differences between Anglo-Australian and Somali parents.

Comparisons by cultural background

Robust differences were observed when scores on these items were compared according to cultural background. Anglo-Australian parents expected child care services to assume responsibilities across all developmental domains (indicated by mean scores in the upper end of the distribution), whereas Vietnamese and Somali parents had significantly more modest expectations in a number of areas.

As illustrated in Table 4, the highest expectation of child care among the Vietnamese group was to promote children's cognitive skills and to teach children about acceptable group behaviour. The Somali group expected child care to teach the child simple self-care skills, to ensure the child is well prepared for school, and to assist in children's language development most of all.

Links across child care settings

Preliminary findings that suggest parents using family care and parents from Somali backgrounds may prefer child care that is in tune with their own parenting values and practices raise a number of questions. These include the extent to which child care services are meeting this demand, as well as the extent to which this practice is in the child's best interests. As discussed in the introduction to this article, developmental theory suggests that children adapt better when there is consistency and continuity of experience across home and child care.

One aspect of continuity believed to influence the impact of differences between home and child care on children is the processes of the *relationship* between the child care service and the family (Powell 1989). Involvement and communication exchanges that attempt to increase knowledge and understanding of the child's experiences at home are thought to support child development in both settings (Feagans and Manlove 1994; van Ijzendoorn et al. 1998). As Feagans and Manlove (1994: 601) note: "Better communication between parents and care givers regarding their goals for children can pave the way toward providing continuity and important links between settings".

The summary of considerable research on this topic conducted in countries outside Australia has "painted a somewhat dismal picture of the relations between the adults in the settings, and especially the communication between parent and caregiver" (Feagans and Manlove 1994: 588).

The Institute's Child Care in Cultural Context study provides Australian data on the attitudes of care providers to accommodating the goals, values and practices of parents.

Table 4 Parental expectations of child care: Mean group scores by cultural background

Item	Mean scores			Significant difference	
	Anglo	Vietnamese	Somali	Anglo/ Vietnamese	Anglo/ Somali
To provide guidance and discipline	3.95	3.37	1.82	*	**
To foster self-esteem and independence	4.38	3.69	2.68	**	**
To ensure the child feels secure and loved	4.19	3.00	3.29		
To ensure the child develops a positive sense of him/her self	4.22	3.54	2.85	*	**
To ensure the child is well prepared for school	3.83	3.93	3.54		
To promote the child's thinking skills	4.40	4.04	3.11	*	**
To promote the child's physical coordination skills	4.34	3.77	3.52		*
To foster language development	4.14	3.33	3.54	**	*
To teach the child simple self care skills	4.16	3.26	3.61	**	
To teach the child about his/her culture	2.58	1.96	2.07	*	
To teach the child values (eg. honesty, caring for others, obedience, sharing)	4.28	3.33	3.29	**	**
To teach the child acceptable group behaviour	4.62	4.19	3.04	*	**
To help the child to learn how to play with other children	4.61	4.22		*	
To check on the child's health	3.24	3.04	2.32		*
To check on the child's development	4.03	3.30	2.71	**	**

* Significance level = .05 ** Significance level = .001.

Scale: 1=not a responsibility of child care; 5=definitely a responsibility of child care.

Source: Child Care in Cultural Context study, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2002.

Parent–carer communication and cooperation

Carers were presented with a series of statements and asked to give each statement a score between 1 and 5, where a score of 1 indicated that they strongly disagreed with the statement and a score of 5 indicated that they strongly agreed with the statement. Table 5 shows mean group differences between centre care providers and family care providers.

Both groups of carers strongly agreed with the principle of working in partnership with parents to help manage parent expectations and to identify parents' needs. Care providers also agreed with the practice of involving parents in the planning and management of child care programs.

However, family care providers were neutral about speaking to parents individually about their child rearing values and practices compared to centre care providers who tended to disagree that there was no need to speak to parents individually about these practices. Mean scores for the family care group were also significantly lower than the centre care group in their agreement that carers should create an ongoing information exchange with parents. On first impressions these findings appear inconsistent with earlier findings that suggest parents using family care prefer to match children's child care experience with the home.

Within the family care sample the majority of carers and parents were from the same cultural background. These findings could therefore mean that family care providers feel they are already in tune with parents' values, goals and practices, and do not perceive the need for ongoing dialogue to make "shared" knowledge about appropriate way of raising children explicit.

Furthermore, the data concerning care providers' beliefs and attitudes about matching certainly suggest a willingness to accommodate parents' routines

and customs. For example, mean scores for the family care group were larger (indicating more agreement) for statements suggesting carers should adopt parents' goals for the development of their children and child care should adopt the child rearing practices used at home.

Conclusions

The data presented here do not provide a complete picture about what parents from different cultural backgrounds expect of child care, what they value in a child care service, and how this may be influencing their child care decisions. As Early and Birchinal (2001: 494) note: "A complete model of child care selection would include not only demographic characteristics and preferred child care characteristics, but also information on availability (for example, options within the family's price range, options that meet the parents' scheduling needs) and data on parents' information (for example, information on the extent to which the care they select indeed has the characteristic they believe it has)".

However, the data partially support findings from previous studies that show parents from minority ethnic groups tend to select child care that parallels the child's experience in the home. In the Institute's study, this was true for Somali parents but not for Vietnamese parents, suggesting recency of arrival, or the extent to which parents want to assimilate with the dominant culture, may mediate between cultural background and child care selection.

The study also showed that parents using family care preferred child care that was consistent with their own beliefs and practices, and, congruently,

Table 5 Care provider attitudes toward communication exchange and matching: mean group differences by care type

Item	Mean scores		Significant difference
	Long day care	Family day care	
It is important to know what parents expect of the child care program	4.62	4.56	
Carers should work with parents to identify each child's individual needs	4.78	4.67	
Parents should be encouraged to be involved in the planning and management of child care programs	4.19	4.20	
Parents learn about child care more from observation rather than from detailed discussions with carers	2.89	3.20	
Carers should create an ongoing information exchange with parents	4.84	4.27	*
There is no need to speak to parents individually about their child rearing values and practices	1.93	2.59	*
Carers should adopt parents' goals for the development of their children	3.46	3.89	*
Carers should negotiate with parents the best way to educate and teach their children	3.69	4.00	
It is important to have non-Anglo Australian staff in centres	3.05	3.61	*
Child care should adopt the child rearing practices used at home	3.05	3.61	*

* Significance level = .05. ** Significance level = .001.

Scale: 1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree.

Source: Child Care in Cultural Context study, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2002.



Parents from ethnic minority groups select centre care as a deliberate acculturation experience, whereas parents who choose family care intend children to have a similar cultural experience to the home.

that family care providers agreed more strongly than centre care providers that they should adopt parental goals, practices and beliefs. It may be concluded, therefore, that parents from ethnic minority groups select centre care as a deliberate acculturation experience, whereas parents who choose family care intend children to have a similar cultural experience to the home.

It was also clear that expectations of child care differed according to parent cultural background and type of care selected. Vietnamese parents emphasised the development of cognitive and social skills; Somali parents emphasised social and emotional aspects of child care above all else; and Anglo-Australian parents had high expectations across all domains of child care and development. Parents using family care placed significantly less importance on cognitive development than parents using centre care.

Given these varied expectations, it was reassuring to note that care providers accepted the importance of creating an ongoing information exchange with parents to understand parental needs and requirements.

Work that attempts to unravel the interaction effects of home and child care on child outcomes is ongoing. Findings from this stage of the Institute's Child Care in Cultural Context study should indicate whether the current level of information exchange between parents and carers, and attitudes toward parents' child rearing beliefs and practices, need transformation through further education, training and support.

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