

# Minding the children during school holidays

The need for non-parental child care is an obvious and central outcome of the increased workforce participation of mothers. Given that school-age children generally have considerably longer holidays than their parents, many parents may confront difficulties in organising supervision for their children for large slices of time during the year. How do they handle this problem?

The rise in the participation of mothers in paid work over the last few decades represents one of the most significant social changes of modern times (for details see Gray, Qu, Renda and de Vaus 2003). For example, the proportion of couple mothers in paid work increased from 42 per cent in 1983 to 63 per cent in 2002, while the proportion of sole mothers in paid work increased from 32 per cent to 48 per cent during the same period. Although mothers are more likely to be in part-time than full-time employment, full-time employment rates for mothers (most particularly for mothers with partners) have increased (Gray et al. 2003). Mothers are particularly likely to return to paid work when their youngest child has reached primary school age.

Arrangements set in place for caring for children represent a central feature of family life that is particularly affected by mothers' employment. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the proportion of children under the age of five years who regularly spent some of their time in non-parental care (either work-related or otherwise) increased from 60 per cent in 1987 to 66 per cent in 2002 (ABS 1997 and 2002), with the increase in the use of formal types of care being particularly marked (from 29 per cent of all children under five in 1987 to 45 per cent in 2002).

In contrast, the use of regular non-parental care has remained fairly steady for children aged 5–11 years

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(applying to around 62 per cent of children in this age group), although the proportion using formal care increased from 6 per cent to 13 per cent between 1987 and 2002. Thus, in 2002, 62 per cent to 66 per cent of pre-school and primary school aged children regularly experienced some form of non-parental care.

A great deal of attention has focused on the use of non-parental care and its impact on pre-school age children (Boss, Edwards and Pitman 1995; Bowes et al. 2003; Ochiltree 1994). This is understandable, given children's strong dependency needs during their early years. However, children's need for some forms of care, including age-appropriate guidance and monitoring, continues as they move from dependency towards autonomy (Ambert 1997). While child care information is collected for school-aged children (aged 5–11) in the ABS child care surveys, information on child care arrangements for school holiday periods is typically not collected in these surveys.

Depending on their work schedules, parents with school-aged children may need to organise non-parental care during school term (before and/or after school hours) and during the school holidays. School holidays may be particularly problematic, given that they may represent a break from routine care arrangements and a time when, by definition, supervision arrangements for the entire day are left up to parents. In each state or territory in Australia, school

## ANALYTIC APPROACH

The question on work-related child care arrangements during school holidays was directed to a member of the household who had primary responsibility for child care arrangements. The HILDA dataset identifies the different forms of arrangements that families chose for *at least* one child (a "family-level" perspective).

In this article, if a family had two or more school-aged children under 15 years old, it was assumed that all such children in a family received the same arrangements. Thus, where there were two school-aged child under 15, each arrangement used was doubled – and so on in the case of more such children. In this way, the proportions of children receiving different forms of care were inferred (a "child-level" perspective). The overall pattern of results derived when this child-level perspective was adopted was similar to that derived from the original "family-level" perspective.



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holiday periods (that is, outside the school terms) amount to around 11–12 weeks per year, yet most workplaces provide four weeks of paid leave per year.

Couple parents who are dual earners may organise parental care for up to eight weeks if each parent takes annual leave during different school holiday periods, but unless parents take other forms of leave (including unpaid leave or sick leave), the family would never enjoy a holiday together and there would still be three to four weeks each year when neither parent would be on holiday with their children. Sole-parent families with little contact with the non-resident parent would be in an even more difficult position.

How then do parents manage school holiday periods when they are working? What arrangements do they make while they are working?

Data from the first wave (in 2001) of the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey* were used to examine these issues. (For a brief description of this survey, see de Vaus and Gray elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters*.)

#### **Non-parental child care arrangements**

This article focuses on the different *non-parental* care arrangements received by school-aged children under 15 years when their parents were working. (See accompanying boxed inset for the analytic approach.) Particular attention is paid to sole parents who were working full-time or part-time (44 per cent and 56 per cent respectively),

and to couple families in which both parents were working full-time or in which one or both parents were working part-time (35 per cent and 65 per cent respectively).

Only 3 per cent of children came to their parents' workplaces for some of the school holidays. More than half the children received non-parental care (53 per cent). Of these, 61 per cent had one care arrangement, 29 per cent had two arrangements, and 10 per cent had three or more arrangements. Table 1 shows that children from sole-parent families were more likely than those from couple families to experience non-parental care arrangements (73 per cent and 50 per cent

**Table 1** Types of non-parental care used by school-aged children when parents were working by family type \*

Type of care	Children in couple families (%)	Children in sole-parent families (%)	All children (%)
Relative	22.6	36.6	24.6
Child looks after self	16.8	15.2	16.6
Vacation care program	10.2	19.3	11.5
Brother or sister	10.7	8.6	10.4
Friend or neighbour	8.0	10.7	8.4
Family day care or sitter or nanny	3.3	7.9	4.0
Any non-parental care use	49.5	73.1	52.9
Number of children	1705	288	1993

\* The sum of percentages can be more than 100 per cent due to multiple uses.  
Source: HILDA survey 2001

respectively). However, multiple non-parental care arrangements did not appear to be associated with family type, or whether parents were working full-time or part-time.

The opportunity to work from home would typically enable parents to be available for their children during school holidays. This opportunity applied to a quarter of sole-parent families and to at least one parent in half the couple families. Thus, children whose parents could work from home were less likely to receive non-parental care than other children (43 per cent compared with 63 per cent). In addition, children with self-employed parents (80 per cent of whom could work from home) were less likely than those with parents who were employees to receive non-parental care (42 per cent compared with 58 per cent).

Care by relatives formed the most common non-parental care arrangement used when parents were working – a situation that was especially common for children in sole-parent families (37 per cent compared with 23 per cent of those in couple families). Although the relationship between the child and relative was not ascertained, it is likely that grandparents were a key source of relative care.

The next most common non-parental care arrangement was self-care. Around 17 per cent of children apparently looked after themselves at least some of the time. While 10 per cent were cared for by a brother or sister for at least some of the time, for 76 per cent of this group, the siblings were 15 years or older.

The distinction between self-care and care by siblings was not clear-cut, given that there may have been two or more children in the family seen by parents as “looking after themselves”. It appears that self-care applied to 17 per cent of children and 14 per cent of families. Of children who were apparently looking after themselves for at least some of the holidays, 95 per cent had one or more sibling who was at least ten years old. In other words, very few children appeared to spend some of their holidays “home alone”.

**Table 2** Types of non-parental care used by children during the school holiday periods by parents' work arrangement and family type\*

Type of care	Children in couple families		Children in sole-parent families	
	Both full-time (%)	One or both part-time (%)	Full-time (%)	Part-time (%)
Relative	23.1	22.4	43.4	31.1
Child looks after self	21.3	14.6	20.2	11.2
Vacation care program	15.0	7.3	18.6	19.9
Brother/sister	9.5	11.6	7.8	9.3
Friend or neighbour	6.6	8.9	8.5	12.4
Family care/sitter/nanny	2.7	3.7	9.3	6.8
Any non-parental care use	54.9	46.5	81.9	65.8
Number of children	588	1099	129	161

\* The sum of percentages can be more than 100 per cent due to multiple uses.  
Source: HILDA survey 2001

Formal vacation care, which is particularly designed for school-aged children during holiday periods, was used for 10 per cent of children. In most cases (64 per cent), vacation care was not school-based. Children in sole-parent families were more likely to use vacation care for some of the school holiday periods than children in couple families (19 per cent and 10 per cent respectively). Other forms of care (care by a friend or neighbour, use of family day care, or a sitter or nanny) were experienced by only 12 per cent of children.

### Care arrangement by family type and parents' work arrangements

Not surprisingly, children were more likely to receive non-parental care when each parent in couple families or the sole parent worked full-time (Table 2). However, non-parental care under these circumstances was more commonly experienced by children in sole-parent families than those in couple families (82 per cent compared with 55 per cent).

Children in sole-parent families were more likely than all other groups to be in the care of relatives during the school holidays (31–43 per cent compared with 22–23 per cent). This was particularly the case when the sole parent worked full-time (43 per cent).

Consistent with prior research by de Vaus and Millward (1997), children who looked after themselves were more likely to have both parents working full-time or a sole parent working full-time (20 to 21 per cent), than to have at least one parent in part-time work (15 per cent in couple families and only 11 per cent in sole-parent families).

As mentioned earlier, children in couple families were less likely to participate in organised vacation care programs than those in sole-parent families (7–15 per cent compared with 19–20 per cent). For the latter group, this experience did not vary according to whether the sole parent worked full-time or part-time. However, of children in couple families, the experience of vacation care was less common where one or both parents worked part-time than where both parents worked full-time.

In general, other forms of non-parental care were less commonly experienced regardless of whether the parents worked full or part-time.

### Summary

The move away from the male breadwinner and female home-maker model of family life, along with the increase in sole-parent families, has resulted in considerable change in the care arrangements experienced by pre-school and school-age children.

Mothers are particularly likely to return to work when their youngest child reaches school age, and some of the issues concerning care arrangements for school-age children differ from those for pre-school children. If sole parents or both parents in couple families are working full-time, then their

daily work hours will be longer than the school hours of their children, and some parents may also work on weekends. Furthermore, even for dual-earner couple families, the combined annual leave of each parent will fall short of the combined school holiday periods. However, information on child care arrangements of school-aged children for school holidays periods is not usually collected in ABS surveys.

This article examines worked-related non-parental care arrangements made for school-age children under 15 years old during school holidays. More than half of all children whose parents were in paid work received some form of non-parental care for at least some of this time.

Relatives represented an important source of care during school holidays, especially for children in sole parent-families (and most particularly when the resident parent was working full-time).

Not surprisingly, children were more likely to be seen as “looking after themselves” for some school holidays if their parents were working full-time rather than part-time, but this situation appeared often to involve the presence of siblings. That is, children who were deemed by parents to be “looking after themselves” mostly had a sibling to play with at home. They also tended to be at least ten years old.

Nevertheless, such arrangements highlight the mismatch between annual leave for parents and holidays for school children and in many cases may reflect inadequate access to suitable and affordable non-parental sources of care. Children’s experiences of considerable time in self-care may also be a source of justifiable worry for parents. Some of the children were described as being in the care of siblings rather than “looking after themselves”. Under these circumstances, the sibling was most commonly aged 15 years or older.

Children in sole-parent families were more likely than other children to use organised vacation care programs, and the use of such programs was relatively uncommon for children in couple families where one or both parents worked part-time. Other forms of care tended to be less common.

While this article provides a snapshot of children’s experiences of care during their school holidays, important questions remain unanswered: What do children do when they are in these different care arrangements? What impact do care arrangements have on children’s development and wellbeing, and on family relationships more broadly? The HILDA survey and another major Australian longitudinal study, *Growing Up in Australia*, will provide relevant data on these issues in the coming years.

While much attention has understandably been paid to the impact of the amount and quality of non-parental care for pre-school age children, far less attention has been given to appropriate forms of care for school children of different ages during

the school holidays. The level of guidance and supervision that best meets their needs will vary according to a complex of factors including their temperament and maturity – but the arrangements set in place may have less to do with these issues than with what is available.

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