

# Multiple child care arrangements in Australia

The majority of Australian children will use some form of non-parental child care before entering school, yet very little attention has focused on the combinations of care types that children use across early childhood, and the reasons why parents make these child care decisions.

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Over recent decades, the workforce participation of mothers with young children has been steadily increasing. The employment rate of mothers with a child aged four years or younger, for example, rose from 29 per cent in 1984 to 45 per cent in 2004 (ABS 1984, 2004), although the majority of mothers in both those years worked part-time.

Not surprisingly, the use of non-parental child care, in particular formal child care, has also increased. For example, the use of non-parental child care among children aged under five years increased slightly from 60 per cent in 1987 to 64 per cent in 2002 (ABS 1988, 2003). During the same period, the use of formal child care for children of the same ages jumped from 29 per cent to 48 per cent.

In addition to the rate of maternal employment, healthy government subsidies for child care (Popple and Martin 2003), better access to government-funded child care places (Baxter 2004; ABS 2003), and quality assurance and accreditation systems for long day care and family day care may have also contributed to the increased use of formal child care services over the years.

Given the large uptake of child care in Australia, the consequences of its use, for both children and their families, are far-reaching. For this reason, and because the early years of a child's life are critical to their later development (see Prior, Sanson, Smart and Oberklaid 2000), there has been much research and debate about whether non-parental child care can fulfil a child's developmental needs. Researchers have focused on the developmental pathways of children to see how child care might influence them.

## Formal and informal child care

Types of formal care include long day care centre, family day care, occasional care centre, preschool, other formal care. Types of informal care includes grandparent, brother/sister, other relative, people who are not related to the child such as family friends, babysitters, nannies or neighbours.

Child care research has tended to focus on child care

as a "risk" for the development of problems in children. The very early child care research, for example, focused on child care use *per se* as a risk for the development of problems such as insecure mother-child attachment relationships.

In contrast, contemporary child care research concentrates on particular aspects of a child's child care experience, such as long hours of child care in infancy, or structural and/or process features of the child care environment (like the adult-to-child ratio or carer-child interactions) that are thought to affect the course of development. Current research considers these aspects alongside other important child, family and community influences. In this way, research is helping to construct a picture of the child care circumstances in which children from particular familial circumstances, with certain individual characteristics, do more or less well.

The significant (albeit small) influence that various child care variables have on child development has warranted ongoing research, particularly in the Australian context where this country's unique legislative, funding, quality assurances, accreditation and service delivery arrangements can result in substantial differences between children's child care experiences in Australia and those of overseas.

This article focuses on one aspect of children's child care experience that has only recently received attention in empirical research in Australia – namely, the phenomenon of multiple child care, or "multicare". Multiple child care arrangements or multicare refers to the situation where children are using two or more different child care arrangements in a given week, perhaps a long day care centre and care by a grandparent, for example.

Multicare might pose a challenge to child development, as contact with a number of caregivers may undermine the establishment of warm trusting relationships between children and their carers, and constitute unpredictability and inconsistency for children. Multicare may also contribute to the levels of stress that parents and child care providers experience.



**Multiple child care arrangements are strongly linked to parental employment. Children are more likely to be in multiple care arrangements if their resident parents are in paid work than if a parent in the household is not employed.**

Although Goodfellow (1999) and Bowes, Harrison, Ungerer, Simpson, Wise, Sanson and Watson (in press) report that approximately one-third of children in their samples of children using child care in New South Wales are using multiple child care arrangements, it is not clear whether this picture is representative of Australian children as a whole.

Using unpublished tables from the *Child Care Survey* (2002), a national representative survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistic (see ABS 2003 for details of the survey), this article presents the prevalence of multicare arrangements among children under five years of age, and compares families who are using multicare with families who are using a single child care arrangement on selected family-related characteristics. It is intended that such a comparison will help illuminate *why* families choose multiple child care arrangements and, in particular, the extent to which accessibility and affordability issues are implicated in such child care decisions.

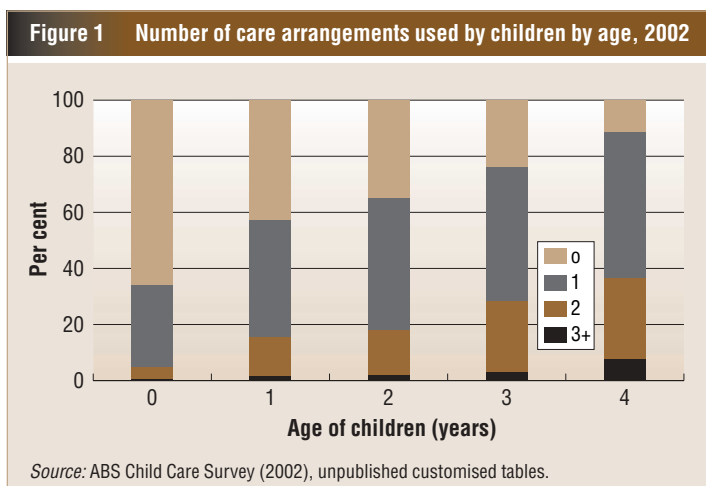
The Child Care Survey collected information on both formal and informal (for example, grandparent, aunt, nanny) non-parental child care arrangements (see accompanying box for the list of types of care). Thus for the purposes of this article multicare refers to use of two or more non-parental child care arrangements per week.

### Prevalence of multiple care arrangements

According to the Child Care Survey, 65 per cent of children aged under five years used child care in the week that the survey data were collected (the reference week). Child care involving only one form of arrangement represented the most common experience for these children (44 per cent of all children

involved in the Child Care Survey), while multicare arrangements applied to 21 per cent of children (or 32 per cent of children actually using some form of non-parental child care). Approximately 18 per cent of the entire survey sample were using two weekly child care arrangements, and only 3 per cent were using three or more child care arrangements. It should be noted, however, that these figures may actually slightly underestimate the prevalence of multicare in Australia, as the survey only recorded which “types” of child care children attended, and did not record whether a child was attending two different long day care centres, for example.

Consistent with prior research (Bowes et al. (in press); Capizzano and Adams 2000), the prevalence of multicare in Australia increases with age, although it should be noted that the use of child care *per se* also increases as children approach





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school age. Only 5 per cent of infants involved in the survey used multicare in the reference week compared with 37 per cent of four-year-olds. With increasing age, children were also more likely to use three or more child care arrangements. These findings are illustrated in Figure 1.

Notwithstanding the limitations imposed by the way child care data were collected in the Child Care Survey discussed earlier, it was clear that the majority of multicare users were using a combination of formal care and informal care (82 per cent). In comparison, 10 per cent used a mixture of formal care (for example, a long day care centre and a family day care arrangement) and 8 per cent experienced a mixture of informal care only (for example, a paid nanny and a grandparent).

The combination of care types varied according to children's age, with those aged two and three years being the most likely to experience a mixture of formal and informal care. A larger proportion of

four-year olds used two or more formal child care arrangements compared with all other children (21 per cent of the four-year-olds compared with 4–6 per cent of children aged one to three years old, and barely any of those under 12 months old), which is most likely a reflection of the use of pre-school/kindergarten among this age group. In contrast, younger children were more likely than older children to have a mixture of two or more informal child care arrangements (40 per cent of infants under 12 months compared with less than 1 per cent of the four-year-olds). These findings are presented in Figure 2.

### **Who experienced multiple child care arrangements?**

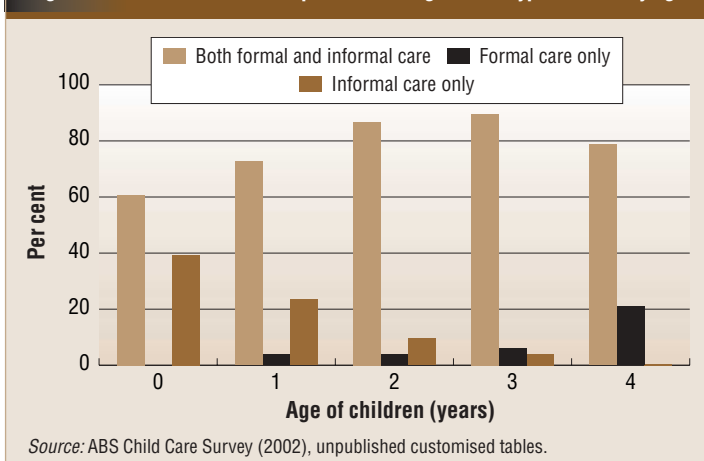
Table 1 presents the proportion of children involved in the Child Care Survey who were not using non-parental child care, those using a single child care arrangements, and those using multiple child care arrangements by selected family characteristics.

To simplify the analysis, children are presented in two age groups – those who were aged under one year, and one year and two years of age (referred to as the “younger” children), and those children who were three or four years of age (the “older” children). These two age ranges were chosen because children often commence preschool sessions at the age three years.

#### **Family type**

Children from one-parent families (mostly lone mothers) were more likely than children in couple families to experience multiple child care arrangements, and this was more pronounced for the older children (42 per cent of older children from one-parent families used multicare compared to 30 per cent of older children from couple families).

**Figure 2 Children with multiple care arrangements: types of care by age**



It should be noted however that children in one-parent families across all age ranges used some form of non-parental child care in greater numbers than children in couple families (62 per cent compared with 51 per cent).

### Employment status

Not surprisingly, use of multiple child care arrangements was linked to parental work arrangements. Children in both age groups were more likely to be in multiple care arrangements than in single care if their resident parent(s) (both parents in couple families or a sole parent) were in paid work. Full-time or part-time work did not appear to affect the use of multiple child care arrangements.

Of the younger age group in couple families, multiple child care arrangements were experienced by 29 per cent of children who had both parents in paid work full-time and 22 per cent of children who had at least one parent in paid work part-time. This compared to less than 5 per cent who had one or both parents not employed. It is also noteworthy that 20 to 24 per cent of younger children with both parents in paid work (full-time or part-time) did not experience any form of non-parental care (that is, the parents themselves were providing work-related child care). Of the older age group in couple families, around 45 per cent with both parents in paid

work were in multiple care arrangements, compared with 15 to 17 per cent of those with one or both parents not employed.

### Parental income

Parental income (which refers to the combined income of both parents for couple families) was linked to multiple child care arrangements. For ease of interpretation, families were divided into four income groups according to their weekly household income: less than \$600; \$600-\$1,000; \$1,000-\$1,400; and \$1,400 and above.

For both age groups, children with parents in the two highest income groups were more likely to experience multiple care arrangements than children with parents in the two lower income groups. There was very little difference in use of multicare within the two high- and two low-income groups. These patterns are generally consistent with research conducted in the United States by Capizzano and Adams (2000). As parental income and parental employment both relate to increased use of multicare, it is likely that these two issues overlap somewhat.

### Regional location and language spoken at home

Use of multiple child care arrangements among children living in state capital cities was similar to that among children living in the rest of Australia.

**Table 1** Number of child care arrangements by selected family characteristics and age of children

	Younger children (children aged 0-2 years)				Older children (children aged 3-4 years)			
	No child care	Single care	Multicare (2+ care arrangements)	Total	No child care	Single care	Multicare (2+ care arrangements)	Total
<b>Family type</b>	<b>Per cent</b>							
Couple family	49.4	38.4	12.1	100.0	18.6	51.3	30.1	100.0
One-parent family	38.5	44.9	16.6	100.0	14.2	43.4	42.4	99.9
<b>Labour force status</b>								
Couple - both employed full-time	20.4	50.7	29.1	100.2	6.3	48.4	45.3	100.0
Couple - one or both part-time	24.0	53.9	22.1	99.9	10.2	45.7	44.1	99.9
Couple - one employed and one not employed	66.4	29.2	4.4	100.0	25.7	56.9	17.4	100.0
Couple - none employed	74.6	22.9	2.5	100.0	33.3	52.0	14.6	100.0
One parent - employed full-time	4.0	62.7	33.3	100.0	4.9	41.5	53.7	100.0
One parent - employed part-time	0.6	53.1	46.3	100.0	1.9	25.0	73.1	100.0
One parent - not employed	48.9	41.7	9.4	100.0	21.1	51.1	28.0	100.2
<b>Income (weekly)</b>								
Less than \$600	51.4	38.8	9.7	99.9	19.3	50.7	29.9	100.0
\$600 to less than \$1,000	53.3	36.9	9.8	100.0	18.9	54.5	26.6	100.0
\$1,000 to less than \$1,400	38.1	47.9	14.0	100.1	15.1	45.3	39.7	100.1
\$1,400 or more	46.8	36.7	16.5	100.0	17.7	49.2	33.1	100.0
<b>Regional location</b>								
State capital cities	48.5	38.8	12.7	100.0	17.4	50.8	31.7	100.0
Balance of Australia	46.8	40.2	13.0	100.0	18.4	48.5	33.1	100.0
<b>Language spoken at home</b>								
English	46.1	40.4	13.5	100.0	16.9	49.4	33.8	100.0
Other	66.9	28.3	4.8	100.0	33.1	58.9	8.0	100.0
<b>Number of children</b>								
('000)	353.7	290.8	94.5	739.0	89.5	251.2	162.6	503.3

Source: ABS Child Care Survey (2002), unpublished customised tables.



*Despite parents' reasons for choosing multicare, the direct and/or indirect impacts of such arrangements on children's development are currently unknown.*

This observation is consistent with the findings by Bowes, et al. (in press). However, children whose parents spoke a language other than English were less likely to experience multiple child care arrangements compared with children whose parents spoke English only at home (14 per cent of children in a non-English-speaking home environment using non-parental child care compared to 25 per cent of children in an English-speaking home environment using non-parental child care).

In summary, children from one-parent families were more likely than those from couple families to experience multiple care arrangements. Children with both parents in paid work or with a sole parent in paid work were also more likely to use multicare. Multiple child care arrangements were not related to regional location, but children whose parents spoke English at home were more likely than other children to experience multicare. Multiple child care arrangements might be linked with amount of time that children spent in care. The issue will be investigated in the future.

### **Multiple child care arrangements and unmet needs for formal care**

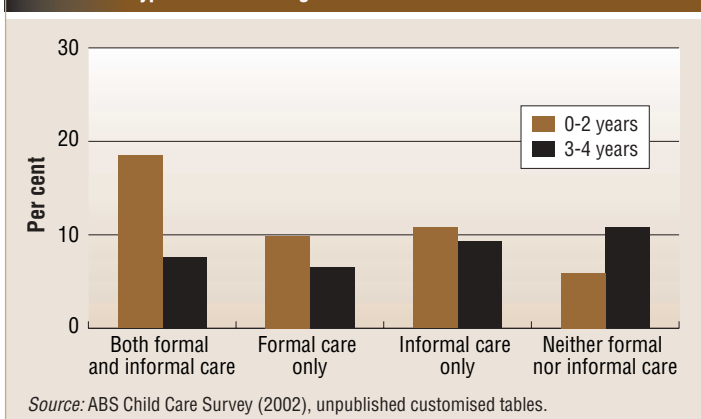
The ABS Child Care Survey collected information on needs for any formal care (among non-users of such care) and for additional hours of formal care (among users). If any formal care or additional hours of such care were required, the survey asked for the main reason behind such unmet needs.

The vast majority of children using a mixture of formal and informal care did not report needing additional hours of formal care (89 per cent and 92 per cent of younger and older children respectively). Figure 3 presents information about the remaining small proportion of children who had unmet needs for formal care by the types of care experienced by children in the two age groups. It shows that the younger children using a mixture of formal and informal child care were more likely to have unmet needs for formal care than those with either formal care only, informal care only, or no non-parental care. However, older children with combined formal and informal care did not report substantial unmet needs for formal care.

Table 2 refers to children who use a mixture of formal and informal care. It shows the main reasons parents gave for not accessing the formal care they needed for their children. The primary reason given for having such unmet needs was "booked out or no places" (applying to 60 per cent of the younger children and 52 per cent of the older children). Costs were mentioned as the main reason for only 13 to 19 per cent of the two age groups of children.

Seen in combination, these findings suggest that multicare (or to be more specific, use of an informal arrangement in addition to formal child care) is not being driven by accessibility issues (although access may apply somewhat more to multicare children in the youngest age group), nor is it being driven by parents' attempts to ease the costs of child care.

**Figure 3** Proportion of children who had unmet needs for formal care by types of care and age



These findings generally concur with those reported in the study by Bowes et al. (in press).

## Summary and conclusion

Child care is fast becoming a conventional part of early childhood in Australia, and this article suggests that multiple child care arrangements form an important dimension of the child care landscape in this country.

According to the ABS Child Care Survey (2002), approximately one in five children aged under five years of age use multiple child care arrangements. Multicare is more common among older children, with more than one-third of four-year-olds experiencing multiple child care arrangements. The majority of children using multicare are using two types of child care, with a combination of formal care and informal care being the most common care “mix”.

Multiple child care arrangements are strongly linked to parental employment. Children are more likely to be in multiple care arrangements if their resident parents (both parents in couple families or sole parent) are in paid work than if a parent in the household is not employed. Higher parental income also increases the chance that children will be experiencing multicare (although parental employment and parental income may be confounded). Furthermore, children from one-parent families and those from an English-speaking home environment, are more likely to use multiple child care arrangements than children in couple families or children from a non-English-speaking home environment.

Although it is difficult to interpret these findings with any real certainty, it is unlikely that parents typically choose multicare as a way of reducing child care costs and increasing their take-home income. The lack of an apparent link between the cost of child care and multiple child care arrangements in Australia is likely to be attributed to the means-tested child care subsidies which makes cost of child care generally equitable across low-income families and high income families.

Furthermore, the vast majority of children in a combination of formal care and informal care do not require additional formal care, suggesting that multiple child care arrangements are not primarily driven by unmet needs for formal care, although access issues may apply somewhat more for younger children using multicare than older children in similar circumstances.

The proposition that parents are choosing multicare as a preferred child care arrangement, either because it is more convenient for them, or because they believe it confers advantages for their children, thus deserves further study.

However, despite parents’ reasons for choosing multicare, the direct and/or indirect impacts of such arrangements on children’s development are currently unknown.

Such concerns have provided the impetus for the conduct of a longitudinal study – the “*Child Care Choices Study*”. With financial assistance from the Australian

**Table 2** Children who used formal and informal care: main reasons for additional formal care not used

	Children 0-2 years	Children 3-4 years
None exist/don't know of any in area	2.2%	6.8%
Cost or too expensive	18.4%	12.6%
Booked out or no places	60.3%	51.5%
Other service related	8.1%	6.8%
Child related	0.0%	2.9%
Other	11.0%	17.5%
Number of children ('000)	13.6	10.3

Source: ABS Child Care Survey (2002), unpublished customised tables.

Research Council and the New South Wales Department of Community Services, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Macquarie University and Charles Sturt University have enrolled 689 families with children under three years of age using formal child care in the Sydney metropolitan area and Bathurst/Orange. Designed in 2000 and piloted in 2001, the *Child Care Choices* study will continue to follow children and their families until 2007. This landmark Australian longitudinal study will cast light on the role of multicare in children’s development.

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Further details about the Australian Institute of Family Studies Child Care Choices study can be found at: [www.aifs.gov.au/institute/research/progA.html#childdcare](http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/research/progA.html#childdcare).