

Mothers' views on using formal child care

Drawing on in-depth interview data from the Institute's Family and Work Decisions Study, this article explores mothers' reasons for using or not using child care, and their views on the child care available to them.

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Access to child care is seen as a key factor in encouraging women's return to the paid workforce after having children (Doiron and Kalb 2004), and Australian parents are increasingly using formal child care to meet their work and family needs (Baxter 2004; de Vaus 2004). Knowing "what women want" is an important question to be answered when planning child care provision and there has been much research about what drives child care selection and how parents view the child care available to them (Singer, Fuller, Keiley and Wolf 1998; Early and Burchinal 2001; Vincent and Ball 2001; Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds and Alldred 2004).

In the child care literature, considerable variation has been found between parents who use non-parental care in how they choose different care arrangements, the types of care selected and their reasons for use of non-parental care. This research usually focuses on the mother's perspective, assuming that mothers are usually responsible for choice of care. Research from Australia and the United Kingdom has found that parents see education and cognitive development as a key function of child care regardless of the setting (de Vaus 2004; Long, Wilson, Kutnick and Telford 1996).

However, parents' beliefs about what is best for children also seem to drive the type of care selected. For example, research has found that parents who emphasise the importance of children having close, warm relationships with adult carers choose family day care, whilst parents who emphasise education and a structured curriculum choose centre care (da Silva and Wise 2005; Seo 2003). Those parents who need to work but have a strong belief that children should be cared for in the home will tend to choose care from grandparents or other relatives (Whelock and Jones 2002). The age of children is also important when considering parents' child care use. Australian research, for example, has found that parents feel that it is important for children to attend some form of structured, non-parental care in the year before they start school in order to promote school readiness (Rodd and Millikan 1994).

Parent characteristics other than their attitudes and beliefs can also influence child care selection. In the United States, mothers with higher education levels and more positive attitudes to employment have been found to be more likely to select centre based care, and mothers on lower incomes and with lower levels of education tended to place greater emphasis on cost when selecting care (Huston, Chang and



Gennetian 2002). The types of communities parents live in also influence the ways in which they select care for their children, with parents in metropolitan areas of the United States placing greater emphasis on daily programming and less weight on friends' recommendations than parents in non-metropolitan areas (Ispa, Thornburg and Venter-Barley 1998).

The work and family literature has also explored how mothers' views about what constitutes "good" motherhood, influences their decisions about whether to use child care (Ford 1996; Himmelweit and Sigala 2004; Duncan and Irwin 2004; Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds and Alldred 2004; Probert 2002, Reid-Boyd 2000). This literature argues that mothers' beliefs about good mothering take precedence in decisions about choosing child care. Some researchers argue that these beliefs are influenced not only by mothers' own values, resources and experiences, but also the dominant values about mothering and caring for young children held within the communities in which they live (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Holloway 1998).

Commentators have argued that the cultural ideal of mothering in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States situates mothers as

primarily responsible for the wellbeing of children (Hays 1996; Vincent and Ball 2001; Probert 2002; Ribbens-McCarthy and Edwards 2002; Pocock 2003), and that being a good mother involves taking an "intensive" approach to childrearing that includes maintaining high levels of interaction with children and consulting with experts on the best ways to raise children (Hays 1996; Pocock 2003). In addition, despite continuing increases in the labour market participation of mothers, mothering research continues to find that mothers remain primarily responsible for the care of young children – whether by actually providing this care themselves or in finding adequate substitutes for their own care (Holloway 1998; Innes and Scott 2003).

Previous research has highlighted that mothers maintain a strong commitment to the idea of being a "good mother" and mothers consistently report "putting their children first" in their decisions about parenting, paid work and child care use (see, for example, Himmelweit and Sigala 2004). However, there is considerable variation amongst mothers about what this actually means. For example, in the context of child care, qualitative research in the United Kingdom has found that among some mothers, the use of child care is

viewed as potentially harmful to children and inferior to mothers' care, while for other mothers it is an important factor in children's social and cognitive development (Ford 1996; Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds and Alldred 2004; Himmelweit and Sigala 2004).

The type of child care preferred by mothers has been linked to mothers' childrearing beliefs and their own understandings of what being a good mother means: mothers who believe that children are best cared for by them tend to choose home based care such as family day care, selecting a carer

other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, children's participation rates in formal child care in Australia have increased over recent years. In 1993, for example, 34 per cent of children under the age of four used formal child care; by 2002, this figure had risen to 44 per cent (ABS 2003).

However, data about Australian parents' reasons for using child care suggests that this rise in participation is not related solely to mothers' labour force participation rates. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, for example, asked parents to indicate

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who can act as a "substitute for mother love" (Hertz 1997: 376).

Qualitative research has also revealed that trust is a key concern for mothers when making decisions about child care – but again this is variable. Himmelweit and Sigala found that some mothers would only trust relatives to provide care for their children, some would only trust home based child minders, and others would only trust "professional carers" found in centre care settings (Himmelweit and Sigala 2004).

In Australia, while there has been an increasing interest in understanding mothers' beliefs and decision making processes about parenting and paid work (Probert and Macdonald 1999; Reid-Boyd 2000; Probert 2002; Maher, Dever, Curtin and Singleton 2004; Morehead 2002 and 2003), qualitative research into mothers' beliefs about and use of child care is more limited. Reid-Boyd (2000) has examined mothers who choose to stay home with their children and found that these mothers chose to do so for a variety of reasons – for the pleasure of raising their children themselves, because they believe children are best cared for by their mothers or because of concerns about what may happen to their children in non-parental care settings. Probert's interviews with women who had been mothers in the 1950s and 1990s uncovered a strong suspicion about child care among some mothers. Probert concludes that only half the women interviewed thought that "child care centres are satisfactory, let alone good for kids; less than one-third would use child care centres and a tiny proportion would use them on a full-time basis" (Probert 2002:12).

However, despite consistent reports of widespread negative beliefs about child care, Australian mothers of preschool aged children continue to return to paid work at increasing rates and demand for formal child care places continues to be high (Campbell and Charlesworth 2004; Baxter 2004). Similar to

the main reason they used child care (ABS 2003). For children aged up to four years attending formal child care, 39 per cent of parents reported using child care for work-related reasons, 14 per cent for personal reasons (such as playing sport or doing the shopping), and 44 per cent because they felt that it was beneficial for the child. This suggests that parents use child care for multiple reasons that relate to both their own needs and that of their child.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies *Family and Work Decisions Study* was developed in part to examine what Australian mothers' beliefs about child care are, the reasons why they may choose to use child care, and how mothers make these decisions.

This paper describes the *Family and Work Decisions Study* from which the data presented were drawn. It then discusses mothers' patterns of child care use and their beliefs about child care, using in-depth interview data collected as part of the study.

Family and Work Decisions Study

The data presented here are drawn from the second stage of the *Family and Work Decisions Study*, conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. The first stage of the study involved a telephone survey of 2,405 mothers, half of whom were lone mothers and half of whom were partnered. All were in receipt of some type of government benefit at the time of selection into the sample. This meant that the sample members overall had lower incomes than a nationally representative sample.

The second stage of the study involved in-depth interviews with 29 of the lone mothers and 32 of the partnered mothers who participated in the first stage. These interviews were conducted approximately one year later, in late 2003 and early 2004. The mothers selected had children of different ages,

diverse work circumstances and diverse employment histories. The age of youngest child at the time of the qualitative interviews ranged from eight weeks to 16 years. Interviews were conducted in metropolitan, rural and remote areas of Victoria and South Australia. (For a more detailed description of the *Family and Work Decisions Study*, see Hand and Hughes 2004.)

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured in nature and took a life history approach, covering the different ways mothers and their partners (if applicable) had combined paid work with having and caring for children. While many sections of the interview are drawn on for this paper (for example, the cost of child care was often raised in the context of discussions about whether it was financially worth working), a number of questions were posed specifically about child care.

Issues tapped included: the nature of mothers' child care arrangements at different life stages and during periods of paid work; mothers' ability to access their preferred care arrangements; the advantages and disadvantages of child care; and whether mothers thought child care was developmentally advantageous for children. The responses to these questions are presented below.

Before considering this data, however, it should be remembered that some of the mothers in this study had teenaged children, and were relying on reflective recall. Therefore, the reflections of mothers of older children about the cost of, access to, and availability of child care may not accurately reflect the experiences of mothers seeking care in the current context. Similarly, these mothers' beliefs about the effects of child care may not reflect those of mothers who would be considering the use of any child care today. Nevertheless, the stories provided by mothers of older and younger children, particularly in regard to their beliefs about the appropriateness of using child care, were similar, and are considered together in this article.

Mothers' use of formal child care

Mothers who participated in qualitative interviews for the *Family and Work Decisions* study had a diverse range of child care arrangements. Their reports ranged from using no non-parental care at all (including no care from extended family members) to the use of full-time formal child care. However, most mothers reported having used combinations of different child care arrangements – informal arrangements (such as grandparent care or paid care arrangements with friends or neighbours), formal care options (such as centre care and family day care), or a mixture of the two.

Table 1 maps the child care use of different mothers participating in the qualitative component of the study. It shows that a substantial proportion (38 per cent) of mothers reported that they had never used formal child care. In some cases their children had attended kindergarten but this was not viewed by these mothers as child care. Mothers who had not used formal child care tended to be in couple

relationships (or had been when their children were small) and were not participating in paid work. Mothers in this group who did work used informal care, usually provided by a family member or friend.

While half of the couple mothers had reported never using formal child care, only 24 per cent of lone mothers reported having never used formal child care. Lone mothers who had never used formal care had typically (but not always) been in couple relationships when their children were preschool aged.

To help better understand these patterns of use, the remainder of the paper explores the reasons for using or not using formal child care and mothers' beliefs about the care that they have used.

Mothers' reasons for never using formal child care

Like other Australian research findings, the reasons some mothers gave for never having used formal care were about a preference to be at home and to not miss out on children's developmental milestones (Reid-Boyd 2000).

As one mother said:

"You miss out on a lot. I know a lot of young mothers who go straight to work after having kids. And they say, 'oh I missed out on his first smile', or 'he started walking today'. I don't know how they can do it myself." (Couple mother, one child aged 16, not in paid work.)

This preference to be at home by some mothers in the study is explored in greater detail in another Australian Institute of Family Studies paper describing mothers' attitudes about parenting and paid work (Hand and Hughes 2005).

For many mothers, like those in Reid-Boyd's (2000) research, the choice not to use formal child care was also based on a belief that children were best cared for at home by their mothers and that strangers such as child care workers could not be trusted to care for their children. They talked about the possibility of their child being harmed while attending care. Many of these mothers stated that children who attended formal child care learned bad habits and were exposed to values and beliefs that did not match those of their parents:

Table 1 Use of formal child care since birth of first child reported by mothers participating in the Family and Work Decisions Study (n=61)

	Couple mothers n = 32	Lone mothers n = 29	All mothers in the study n = 61
Never used formal care	16 (50%)	7 (24%)	23 (38%)
Used family day care	8 (25%)	7 (24%)	15 (25%)
Used centre care	10 (31%)	16 (55%)	26 (42%)
Used regular informal care	12 (38%)	10 (34%)	22 (36%)
Used kindergarten (not long day care)	8 (25%)	3 (10%)	11 (18%)
Used after school care	2 (6%)	5 (17%)	7 (11%)

Note: Mothers may have used more than one type of formal child care since the birth of their first child, so columns may tally higher than 100 per cent.

"It was just the fact that I didn't know these people – I don't know who they are, I don't know what their opinions are on how to raise a child." (Couple mother, one child aged 3.5 years, not in paid work.)

These mothers tended to have had no direct experience of formal child care themselves and had gained their knowledge of it through stories from other people:

"I don't like child care ... just the stories I hear, like when they come home with marks on them. They've probably just had a fall or something, but at least with him at home I know where he's fallen, I know what he's done. You've just got to look after them 100 per cent, so I just don't like ... like it's going to kill me even sending him to kinder because I can't be with him!" (Couple mother, one child aged 15 months, not in paid work.)

This lack of direct experience of child care by mothers who preferred not to use it was also noted in Probert's research. Probert (2002: 13) argues: "These evaluations are [rarely] based on sound knowledge of human development. They are, in fact, more likely to be ideological – that is, derived from the gender culture and its moral framework."

In contrast to child care, participation in early childhood education in the year or two preceding primary education (referred to as "kindergarten" or "preschool" depending on which Australian state a person lives in) was generally seen by mothers as a positive experience for children and was not seen as being the same as child care. Their children's attendance at kindergarten/preschool education, therefore, was framed entirely in the context of their educational needs:

"I've never used formal child care, ever, for any of my children. Besides kindergarten. They all went to kindergarten. But that was more educational than child care." (Couple mother, three children aged 6 to 30, not in paid work.)

Mothers who had a strong belief that mothers should care for their children all of the time were more likely to speak this way. Sometimes in interviews mothers would state that they had never used child care, but then it would emerge that they had used occasional care or a-day-a-week at a child care centre as a learning experience for their child. But this was framed entirely around the needs of the child and was therefore not perceived by these mothers as being child care.

The quality of available child care was also something that mothers who had never used formal care were concerned about, and a small number spoke about not being able to find care of adequate quality that they were willing to use. This was especially the case for mothers in regional areas who spoke about a lack of choice of services. Often there was only one centre or a handful of family day carers to choose from, and this led them to use no care at all if they were not happy with these options:

"I don't know if it was run by volunteers, or just the structure, but I didn't think it was very good. It was everybody clumped into this little hall and, no, I didn't think it was suitable." (Lone mother, one child aged 17, not in paid work.)

Some mothers were concerned about the cost of child care. Lone mothers and couple mothers on low incomes who were not working were also concerned about the effects of working on the cost of child care:

"When you're not working it's cheap as chips but when you're working it's really expensive. And it was like, well I'm going to pay half my wages to child care." (Couple mother, one child aged 3.5 years, not in paid work.)

Availability of hours was also discussed by some mothers not using formal care. This issue was of most concern for mothers who worked outside of normal business hours. Mothers were aware of the option of using family day care in the evenings but many were reticent about their children having to spend evenings away from their own homes. They stated a strong preference for support to have carers come to their homes instead:

"Say I wanted to work at night, and have family day care – but I'd have to take my children there. They'd be better off being at home, because you can put them to bed and have a normal set-up, but that option's not available." (Lone mother, two children aged 8 and 9, works part-time.)

"I'd have to drop my kids off so early in the morning so that I could start a 7 am shift somewhere, which is really tricky ... and it doesn't seem a fair thing to do for them ... The ideal thing would be to have a babysitter come in and look after them, but it's just totally out of my price range." (Lone mother, three children aged 6 to 11, not in paid work.)

Accessing child care in their local areas was also an issue. While waiting lists were a concern for some mothers in metropolitan areas, regional and rural mothers most often voiced concerns about being able to access any child care at all. They also voiced concerns about having limited choices in type of care and carer:

"There's very, very limited services available in this area." (Lone mother, one child aged 5, not in paid work.)

"And the availability, having to go on waiting lists ... " (Lone mother, three children aged 6 to 11, not in paid work.)

"That's the only place I could get into, all the rest of the places were booked. Couldn't get in, was on the waiting list." (Lone mother, three children aged 7 to 14, works part-time.)

Mothers in regional areas spoke about a lack of options to choose from, high demand for places, lack of stability of care, and the need to travel large distances to access care. Some mothers who had never used care said that there had never been care available. Others had started using care but the carer had become sick and they had lost access to care. Yet other mothers spoke about not being satisfied with the care offered and therefore feeling that they could not use it.

Reasons for using formal child care

Many mothers who had used formal child care – in fact, almost all of them – reported "child centered" reasons as part of the reasons for use. This reflects Australian Bureau of Statistics data, which also

found child-related reasons as prominent in parents' child care decisions (ABS 2003). Even if using child care also enabled them to work, for example, the fact that child care had benefits for children that could not be attained elsewhere was seen as an important part of why mothers said they used child care:

"I see a huge advantage in the way they learn. I mean, sure you can take them to a friend's house and they can play with her kids, but they're not going to learn. I mean, my son wouldn't have learnt anywhere near as much as he's learned in day care." (Couple mother, one child aged 2, not in paid work, uses regular centre care.)

"They've got little colleagues ... the hustle and bustle of having other children, learning to share..." (Couple mother, two children aged 3 and 20, works part-time, uses centre care two days per week.)

Reflecting Hay's (1996) discussion of intensive mothering, many mothers in the *Family and Work Decisions* study believed that exposing children to developmentally enhancing experiences provided by trained early childhood professionals (such as in formal child care settings) can be seen as an important part of their repertoire of "good mothering" and an experience that some mothers felt morally obliged to provide.

"When they were little, one day a week they used to go to day care and that was purely social, not because I had any jobs to go to or anything..." (Lone mother, works part-time, two children aged 6 and 9, used centre care and after school care.)

"Oh look, when I went back to work I realised I really needed to be at work and I was quite prepared to pay the extra and to have less money to have good child care, but have the work I wanted to do that I felt fulfilled in. And I really strongly feel that." (Couple mother, two children aged 16 and 17, works full-time, used centre care and nanny.)

The above quotes both share an underlying discourse that choices about using child care are based primarily on children's wellbeing. However, while the first mother argues that she chooses child care solely for the purpose of enhancing her children's development, the second considers her own needs as well. But implicit in this second quote is a defence of her own practice of motherhood – that is working is contingent on being able to provide good – albeit expensive – child care as a substitute for her own care. This seems to reflect the argument put forward by Hays (1996: 132) that: "If you are a good mother you must be an intensive one. The only 'choice' involved is whether you *add* the role of paid working woman."

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Mothers also saw child care as a way of gaining some respite from the demands of child rearing. This was especially important to lone mothers. The constant demands of being responsible for a small child were emphasised by many lone mothers of young children, who saw having time-out as enabling them to be a better parent overall, again emphasising that their choice to use care was as much about continuing to be a "good mother" as it was about meeting their own needs:

"Yeah [laughs]. Peace of mind, a sanity day. Just a bit of freedom to be able to do what I want. And it's very helpful now that I've started work, obviously. But before, the original reason wasn't to work but so I could have some time-out from her. Because when you're a sole parent and they're around 24/7, it gets very frustrating and they can be very whingey... You just need a break." (Lone mother, one child aged 2, works part-time, uses centre care.)

Explicitly stating that they used child care for work reasons was not popular with many mothers. This may be due to the mothers in the sample having relatively low levels of labour force participation, especially for couple mothers. The following are responses at two extremes, but is interesting to note that there was a "loud silence" on the issue of using child care to enable participation in paid work:

While few explicitly stated that that they used child care for work purposes, the stories of many lone mothers made it apparent that they did use formal care as a way of enabling them to return to paid work. Like the mothers in recent Australian studies by Probert and Macdonald (1999) and Morehead (2002), taking on the breadwinner role was an important aspect of good mothering for many lone mothers in the study (see Hughes and Hand 2005 for a more detailed analysis of this issue).

Mothers' beliefs about centre care versus family day care

Mothers had quite different views about their preferred type of care. Mothers who preferred centre care placed greater emphasis on structure and educational experiences and also on having a large group of children to play and interact with:

"I don't really like the idea of family day care... I know a few people who look after children and they don't have that experience – or not all of them, I shouldn't say all of them. But I know the ones I know don't have that child care experience... At child care they participate in a lot more activity, its more a structured kind of thing... they've got more kids to play with." (Couple mother, two children aged 2 and 4, not in paid work, uses two days centre care for older child.)

Other Australian Institute of Family Studies research found similar results. For example, the *Child Care in Cultural Context* study found that parents who used centre care most valued structural and educational activities such as learning activities, ratios between staff and children, and nutrition (da Silva and Wise 2005).

Mothers who preferred family day care, valued a home-like experience with less structure and close relationships between carers and children. Having a good relationship with caregivers was also an important measure of quality for these mothers. Some mothers spoke about experiencing difficulties in finding the right carer and had to change carers once or twice. These difficulties included a lack of stimulation (for example, the children watched television all day), or not using sunscreen and hats. But all reported being happy with their current arrangements:

"I prefer family day care. I like them to be in the same environment as what they'd be in at home ... his day care 'mum' is kind of like his second mum ..." (Couple mother, one child aged 2, uses family day care full time.)

"I didn't see centre care as a viable option because I think from my perspective that's too structured. I wanted the kids to have more of a family environment where they could see the role models of mum doing the dishes and the washing, and stuff they didn't necessarily see at home when I was working shift work." (Lone mother, five children aged 5 to 20, works evenings, uses family day care for younger children.)

Conclusion

Differences between mothers in their beliefs about using formal child care and their preferred child care arrangements seem to depend on their beliefs about motherhood. While these beliefs are a key factor in mothers' decision-making about many aspects of their lives, their ideas about how a "good mother" approaches child care varied considerably between mothers with different patterns of child care use. In part, these ideas may well be a product (rather than a driver) of their child care choices.

Mothers in the *Family and Work Decisions Study* talk about basing their decisions about whether or not to use formal child care mostly on their own child rearing ideologies rather than on particular characteristics of care (such as quality, cost and accessibility), and they explain their decisions about child care as being largely based on their own beliefs about what is good for their children.

This finding is not surprising – research overseas, and to a lesser extent in Australia, has yielded similar results (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds and Alldred 2004; Himmelweit and Sigala 2004; Reid-Boyd 2000; Probert 2002). Mothers in the Institute study, like those in previous research, are very well aware that they are expected to frame their child care decisions in the context of their children's wellbeing rather than their own needs (Hand and Hughes 2005; Probert 2002; Hays 1996).

Some mothers spoke about experiencing difficulties in finding the right carer, and had to change carers once or twice.



Like previous research (Hertz 1997), family day carers tend to be viewed as substitute mothers. It is also interesting that the second mother quoted above values "family environment" not because it mirrors what exists at home but that it provides the environment that she feels she would be providing if she was not working.

Some mothers mentioned they chose family day care because of cost:

"Well, basically I chose family day care through the council because it's cheaper." (Lone mother, four children aged 3 months to 16 years, works part-time, uses family day care.)

Like United States research findings (Huston, Chang and Genetian 2002), cost was a particularly important factor for mothers who were on the lowest incomes and influenced the type of care chosen as well as the number of hours used. In addition, others often weighed up the cost of child care when making decisions about paid work (see Hughes and Hand 2005 for a further discussion of this finding).

Mothers in the study did not tend to discuss issues of access to, availability of, and cost of, care in much detail. Instead, as noted above, they focused on the role of their broader belief systems about mothering and child care. This could be due to the retrospective nature of many mothers' accounts. However, access to child care in regional areas and the availability of care for shift workers was a concern for some mothers, and some mothers with young children spoke about cost being a barrier.

Other research (de Vaus 2004; Baxter 2005) confirms these findings about accessing care. The research also suggests that, consistent with the data presented here, less than 10 per cent of mothers who are not in the labour force give "lack of access to formal child care" as a reason for not working (Unpublished ABS data cited in Baxter 2005). In Baxter's research the majority of mothers not in the labour market stated that they were not working because they did not want to work and/or they wanted to care for their children themselves.

This seems to reflect the responses of many mothers in the *Family and Work Decisions Study* who stated that they chose not to use child care (and chose not to work) because they preferred to care for their children themselves.

In addition, some mothers who *had not* used formal child care spoke of barriers to accessing and affording such care. However, many of these mothers also had strong reservations about the effects of formal care on children, and it is not clear whether in fact they would have chosen to use formal care even had there been fewer perceived barriers.

On the other hand, some mothers who *had* used formal child care also noted barriers in accessing and affording such care – barriers that may have affected the availability of their preferred care type. Interestingly, mothers who could not access their preferred care type generally reported high levels of satisfaction with the care they had ultimately used.

Overall, findings from the Institute's *Family and Work Decisions Study* suggest that improvements in the provision of child care (in terms of availability, accessibility and cost) will not necessarily change the minds of mothers who believe that formal child care is not in the best interests of their children. However, such changes would most likely assist mothers who do choose to use child care to find care that best suits their needs and preferences.

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