

PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD CARE:
ASSOCIATION AMONG CHILD CARE SELECTION, SATISFACTION, AND
QUALITY

by
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PREVIEW

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The primary objective of this study is to investigate the relationship among parental child care selection, overall parental satisfaction, aspects of parental satisfaction, and observed child care quality. The data were analyzed using bivariate (Pearson and Spearman) correlations, multiple regressions, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and one-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs).

Results indicated that parents with lower educational levels regard Similar Beliefs/Values, Caregiver Education/Training, Learning Activities, and Practical Concerns factors as more important than parents with higher educations. Parents with lower incomes are more likely to perceive Practical Concerns as an important factor for their child care choices. No significant difference on parental selection choice was found among parental employment statuses. Families with fewer people are more likely to identify Learning Activities and Practical Concerns as important factors, while families with more members are more likely to perceive Special Arrangement as an important factor.

The results also showed that both parental selection factors and aspects of satisfaction predicted child care quality as rated by trained outside observers, though parents' global ratings of satisfaction were much higher than the observers' ratings, as found in past studies. Interestingly, parental selection factors and aspects of satisfaction that focused on the child's learning environment were positively correlated to Observed Quality, while parental selection factors related to their practical concerns such as program location or needs for a special arrangement were negatively correlated. Thus, helping parents to focus on the aspects of child care quality related to their child's learning environment may influence their

choices and perceptions, leading them to place their children in the kinds of higher quality environments that have been found to lead to better outcomes for children.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Chapter 1

Introduction

As more and more mothers of young children are entering the workforce, the demand for non-parental child care has intensified. Currently, an estimated 62% of American women with children under age six are in the workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). This growing need means that parents must select appropriate child care for their children.

Child care is an important support for parental employment. Parents cannot focus on their work unless their children are safe and well cared for. Choosing appropriate, high-quality child care is beneficial for both parents and children. A high-quality program works to support parents' employment and decrease parents' stress. This support from high-quality programs might in turn enhance positive parent-child relationships and contribute to the child's well-being (Honig, 1995). Therefore, it is very important to study parents' child care selection processes.

Complicated Child Care Selection Process

Parents need to consider many factors when selecting child care, such as their budget, needs, location, provider characteristics, and program characteristics, in order to arrange the best care for their children (Kontos, 1992; Lerner, 1996). Child care programs also differ by type. Because different types of programs provide different services, parents also need to consider program types such as relative care, a family child care home, or a child care center. The search for child care requires time, knowledge, and energy; yet, many families often do not have enough time to collect thorough information (Honig, 1995). For example, Bogat &

Gensheimer (1986) found that parents generally do not spend time comparing different alternative child care arrangements. In Bogat & Gensheimer's sample, the majority of parents called only three providers to discuss child care placements while approximately one-fourth of parents made a decision without visiting any programs. Those who did visit visited only one program on average before they made their decision.

Many researchers have tried to understand which selection factors lead parents to make their final decision, but inconsistent results have been found. Some studies suggest provider characteristics such as warmth are most important (Ispa, Thornburg, & Venter-Barkley, 1998), while others suggest that practical concerns such as cost and operation hours are parents' first priority (Fuqua & Labensohn, 1986). Parental demographic backgrounds (income, education, employment status) may also influence parents' child care needs, budgets, and preferences. For example, child care expenses represent a large share of low-income families' budgets (Giannarelli & Barsimantov, 2000). Thus, lower-income families may be more likely to choose child care based on cost. In addition, parents who work irregular hours might need to consider providers who can take care of their children during the evenings or on the weekends.

There are many possible reasons why child care selection can be a complex process. Parents' decisions may be influenced by their needs, their values, their childrearing beliefs, their knowledge about child care quality, the information they gather, and the availability of programs (Bogat & Gensheimer, 1986; Kontos, 1992; Lerner, 1996).

Discrepancies in Perceptions of Child Care Quality

Parents' decisions to enroll their children in particular child care programs directly influence their children's learning experiences. These learning experiences, in turn, influence children's development. Much empirical evidence indicates that differences in the quality of child care programs may have significant impacts on children's developmental outcomes. For example, higher child care quality has been associated with better cognitive development, language skills, and school readiness skills (Burchinal, Roberts, Nabors & Bryant, 1996; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000). On the other hand, poor teacher-child relationships can predict children's poorer social competence with peers (Howes, 2000).

In the United States, there are no national standards for child care quality, and parents have the primary responsibility for their child care choices. Because parents visit their children's child care on a daily basis, they should know the program quality. If parents do not like the program, they can choose a better one. Thus, one would expect that the child care market would balance itself to improve overall quality. However, a great deal of research has found that many low quality programs exist, and a substantial proportion of programs provide mediocre quality of care and education. For example, the Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team (CQCO, 1995) found that 10% of preschool programs and 40% of infant/toddler programs were rated as poor quality as measured by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS; Harms & Clifford, 1998) and the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS; Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 1990). In addition, 64% of preschool programs and 52% of infant/toddler programs were rated as mediocre. Only 8% of infant/toddler rooms and 24% of preschool classrooms studied provided good to excellent quality. Using the same measures, the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium similarly

found that 18% of child care programs were rated as low to inadequate, 49% were mediocre, and only 33% provided good quality care (Raikes et al., 2003).

Parents act as primary advocates for their children; they love their children and try to take good care of them. Why then are there so many children enrolled in low quality programs? One possibility is that parents might overestimate quality. While actual program quality is mostly mediocre, research has repeatedly reported that most parents are highly satisfied with their children's care arrangement. Arkinson (1996) found that 70% of mothers rated their caregivers as excellent, and 27% of mothers rated them as good. Cryer & Burchinal (1997) reported that 90% of preschool parents and 91% of infant/toddler parents rated their children's programs as high quality. Moreover, the results from the Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study showed significant discrepancies between parents' and trained observers' quality ratings. Parents tended to give higher scores for all aspects of care, especially on interactions-, health-, and safety-related items. The discrepancies increased for those items difficult to observe (Cryer et al., 1997). Thus, researchers have speculated that either parents may not have enough information to be informed consumers (Cryer et al., 1997), or they do not know how to evaluate child care quality (Kisker & Maynard, 1991).

Ambiguous Meaning of Parents' High Satisfaction

In many studies, parent satisfaction is used to evaluate the effectiveness of a child care program in meeting parents' needs (e.g., Kisker, 1992; Lucas & Thomas, 1996) or as a measure of child care quality (e.g., Van Horn, Ramey, Mulvihill, & Newell, 2001). However, literature on parents' child care satisfaction demonstrates ambiguous findings. On the one hand, parents repeatedly reported high levels of global satisfaction. At the same time, studies

also suggest high percentages (e.g., 26% to 40%) of parents would change their child care arrangements if they could (Hofferth, Brayfield, Deich, & Holcomb, 1991; Wolfe & Scrivner, 2004). These contradictory findings make researchers suspect that parents are not knowledgeable enough to effectively evaluate their children's child care programs. Another reason for these contradictory findings may be that good quality programs are scarce. Parents may attempt to find better child care, but such programs may prove to be difficult or impossible to find.

Another possible reason for the ambiguity in findings regarding parent satisfaction and quality may be that parents value different aspects of programs than those considered important by researchers. For example, researchers found that parents tend to be highly satisfied with their providers when there is good parent-provider communication (Britner & Phillips, 1995; Fuqua & Labensohn, 1986). Little is known whether parents value other aspects of quality-related characteristics considered important by early childhood professionals. Hence, further investigation about other factors that predict parental satisfaction is needed.

Correlations among Parental Selection, Satisfaction, and Observed Quality

Investigating the correlation between parental reasons for choosing child care programs and their satisfaction with their chosen programs would greatly help us understand the effectiveness of parents' reasoning process during child care selection. Today, very few studies examine this issue; the only existing study suggested that there were non-significant correlations between mothers' perceptions of quality (satisfaction) and their child care selection reasons (Van Horn et al., 2001). The non-significant association between parents'

selection reasons and child care quality provides useful information about those parents who might be at risk of arranging their children in poor quality child care situations. Yet, existing research is still inconclusive. One study showed that parents who view daily programming (i.e., caregiver training, developmentally appropriate practices) as the most important factor are more likely to place their children in a higher quality program (Ispe et al., 1998).

For these reasons, more research is needed concerning the correlations among parents' child care selection, parental satisfaction (including global and specific aspects of satisfaction), and the actual quality children receive. The results will help parents be more effective in finding an appropriate child care program, inform parents about how to evaluate specific aspects of quality, and hopefully contribute to improving the quality of the child care market.

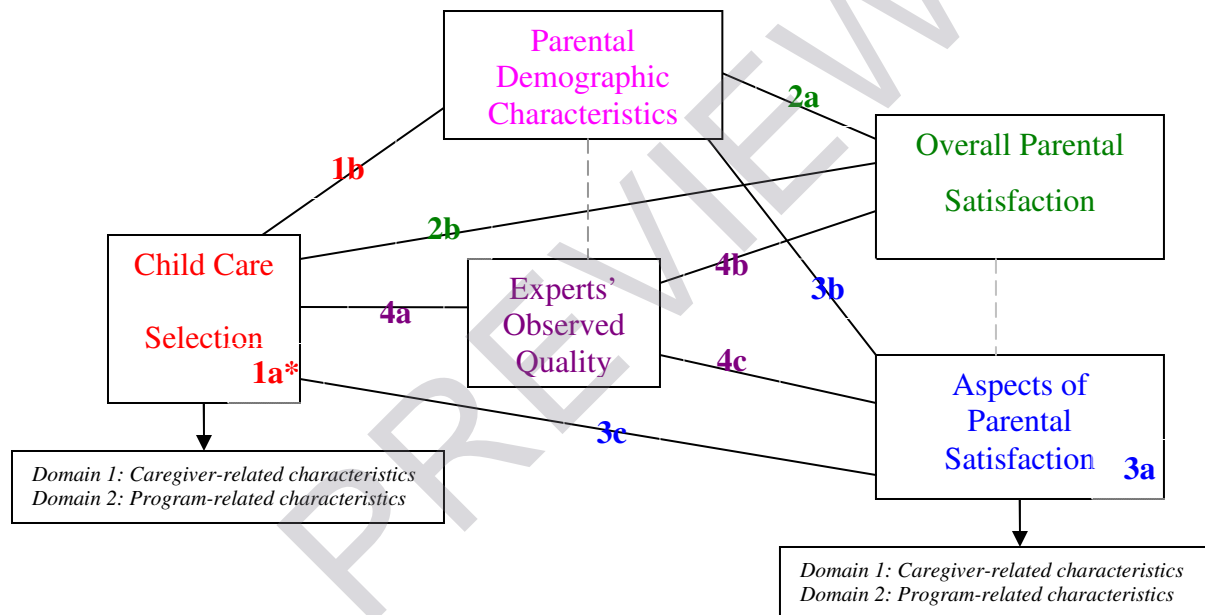
As discussed in the previous section, most child care programs provide mediocre quality of care. This might be because parents are not well-informed consumers and are unable to discriminate between high quality and low quality programs. It is also difficult for parents to assume the full responsibility of ensuring the quality of their children's child care arrangements. Therefore, parents alone cannot influence the child care market in order to improve its quality. Studying parents' child care selection has important policy implications. Thus, collaboration within local, state, and national agencies to improve child care quality is strongly needed.

Purpose of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are to examine (1) the dimensions underlying parents' child care selection and its association with demographic characteristics; (2) overall

parental satisfaction and its association with demographic characteristics and parental child care selection; (3) the dimensions underlying the aspects of parental satisfaction and its association with demographic characteristics and parental child care selection; and (4) the associations among experts' assessments of quality, parental child care selection, overall parental satisfaction, and aspects of parental satisfaction (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Overall Structure of the Study Model



* The bold alpha-numeric are the numbers of research questions

Main Research Questions

Datasets provided by the Midwest Child Care Consortium were used to examine parental perceptions of child care selection associated with parental satisfaction and program quality.

Four main research questions are explored in this section. Sub-research questions and hypotheses are detailed at the end of the literature review in Chapter 2.

Research Question #1: What are the dimensions underlying parental child care selection, and how do they relate to parental demographic characteristics?

Research Question #2: How do parental demographic characteristics and parental child care selection relate to overall parental satisfaction?

Research Question #3: What are the dimensions underlying the aspects of parental satisfaction, and how do they relate to parental demographic characteristics and parental child care selection?

Research Question #4: How do experts' assessments of child care quality relate to parental child care selection, overall satisfaction, and aspects of parental satisfaction?

Terminology

- Parental Demographic Characteristics are defined as participating parents' selected background characteristics including education years, annual income, employment status, and family sizes, which have potential impacts for child care selection, satisfaction, and quality, based on the previous literature.
- Child Care Selection (also referred to as *parental reasons for child care choices*) is defined as parental perceptions of which factors are taken into account to make decisions on child care choices.
- Overall Parental Satisfaction is defined as parental perception as a whole on child care satisfaction measured by quality rating (excellent to awful) by participating parents.
- Aspects of Parental Satisfaction (also referred to as *parental perception of child care quality*) is measured by ratings of specific characteristics of provider and program characteristics from participating parents.
- Experts' Observed Quality is defined as global child care quality observed by trained observers, using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), Infant and Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS), and Family Day Care Rating Scale (FDCRS). (These three scales will be detailed in Chapter 3.)

Significance of the Study

This study uses empirical data completed by parents, providers, and trained expert observers to investigate associations among child care selection, satisfaction, and quality.

The findings of this study are important for the following reasons: (a) a variety of data have been collected to represent different important populations including parents, providers, and observation experts; (b) the results can be used to further understand how and why parents make important decisions on child care selection; (c) the results may clarify how child care selection, satisfaction, and quality affect each other as functions of parental demographic characteristics; (d) the findings may inform early childhood professionals, child care administrators, and parents of important factors when considering child care programs; (e) the findings may encourage parents to have better judgment in discriminating between quality programs and poor ones within child care markets; and (f) the findings provide important policy recommendations for policy- and decision-makers to ensure the quality of child care programs.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Four main research areas are important to facilitate understanding of the current literature regarding parental perceptions of selection, satisfaction, and quality of the child care program: (a) theoretical perspectives on child care selection from ecological systems; (b) child care selection; (c) parental satisfaction (i.e., overall as well as specific aspects); and (d) child care quality.

Theoretical Perspectives: Ecological Systems

Parents' decisions on child care selection depend on a variety of factors such as parental beliefs/values, family economics, social resources, referral information, and availability of programs (Bogat & Gensheimer, 1986; Kontos, 1992; Lerner, 1996; Seo, 2003). In the current study, ecological systems theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 1989) was used as a study framework to examine which levels of environment might significantly affect parental decisions about child care selection, satisfaction, and quality (Figure 2). Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that the reciprocal interactions in many environmental contexts may all affect a developing person. In addition to parent's personal characteristics, a parent's decision is also influenced by many levels beyond him- or herself, including families, peers, neighbors, community, society, and culture. In this model, the parent's interactions with various contexts are as important as his or her own personal characteristics. For example, a parent's own beliefs may be influenced by relatives' and neighbors' child care beliefs. One mother might choose a family child care provider because

of her neighbors' recommendations, while another mother might choose another child care program that greatly emphasizes healthy food and a safe facility, according to such information from a referral/resource agency.

The ecological systems model explains well the relationships and interactions between individual and settings at five primary environmental structures. These five structures are micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems, in which each system is nested within the next in a concentric structure except for the chronosystem.

Microsystem (Innermost Level) refers to “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, pp.22). In the current study, elements are embedded within the microsystem. Settings that directly affect and are linked to a mother's child care selection include home (e.g., single mother families), employment (work places), day care (types of programs such as centers or family home), and health services (e.g., doctor's office). For example, if mothers need to work in evenings or weekends, they might consider flexible hours of child care programs as important selection indicators. The interactions within these settings influence mothers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions. More specifically, the ecological systems model at this structure includes ***parental beliefs*** about the important selection factors/reasons toward schooling (e.g., educational functions of child care), ***attitudes*** toward maternal employment and health services, and ***perceptions*** about program quality and satisfaction toward different types of child care programs (types of day care, e.g., centers, or family homes). Mothers' ***demographic characteristics*** include parental income, education, and employment, parental ages, locations of their houses (e.g., suburban, urban, city), number of family members, and