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Australian parents' needs and expectations regarding out of school hours care: A pilot study

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Abstract

An increasing number of working parents are making use of out of school hours care (OSHC) for their young primary-school aged children, but in Australia very little is known about how effectively these services meet parent needs. The present pilot study aimed to gather information non-directively from employed parents, first, about how OSHC use affects their workforce participation and ability to resolve the competing demands of work and family responsibilities. The second goal was to gain some idea of what parents look for in OSHC and how satisfied they feel with the service they use. Thirteen mothers answered open-ended but structured questions in a telephone interview. They expressed how vital OSHC services are in enabling them to work, but usually did not spontaneously evaluate the quality of the service. Results suggest a need for more systematic research on OSHC quality, and how it does or might contribute to parent and child well-being.

Keywords

early childhood education, family well-being, formal child care, out of school hours care, working parents

Workforce participation has economic and potential psychosocial benefits to adults and their dependent children but its risks include occupational stress and work–home conflict. Quality child care helps parents – especially mothers – to join the workforce, provides social, physical and educational stimulation for children which reduces future risks of unemployment and reduced well-being, and fulfils statutory needs for child protection and care in out-of-home settings for children with special needs (see Cass, 2007; Cassells et al., 2005; Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2008). In European and many other countries, but not the UK, US or Australia, early childhood education and care programs are expected by parents, regarded as good for children, and heavily subsidized by governments (Kamerman, 2000; OECD, 2007). Internationally, Australia lags behind other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in provision of accessible education and care for young children: Kamerman (2000) notes that in Europe, programs begun with the goal of allowing mothers to work have been so well accepted on the grounds of benefits for children that maternal employment status has become of secondary importance.

Most Australian parents face the challenge of balancing work and family life, because 92 percent of fathers with dependent children in the home are employed, and so are two-thirds of coupled mothers and 30 percent of lone mothers (de Vaus, 2004). Baxter et al. (2007) report that in the 2004 cohort of four to five-year-old children ($N = 4973$) in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), 6 percent lived with an employed single parent and 48 percent with two employed parents, showing the extent of the need for out of home care for young children. Since 1984 the percentage of children under 12 years of age using any formal childcare has doubled from 12 percent to 25 percent. There were three times as many children aged 5–11 in before and after school care in 2002 as in 1984 (de Vaus, 2004). Employment rates of coupled and lone mothers increase substantially when the youngest child starts school (de Vaus, 2004). However, junior primary school-aged children (i.e. aged 5–8 years) need adult supervision and care as much as preschoolers do, and previously effective child care arrangements may no longer be accessible or appropriate once they start school.

The high rate of employment amongst parents of young children, combined with lack of universal accessible child care, means that many parents, especially mothers, experience conflicts between the time and energy demands of employment and of family responsibilities, and strains in sustaining several roles and also maintaining their own well-being. These conflicts have been studied extensively by psychologists and others, using terms such as work–home conflict, and found to be associated with increased risks of psychological distress and illness (de Cieri et al., 2005; Frone,

2000). If parents, particularly mothers, are kept out of the workforce due to inadequate child care availability, society loses the potential contribution of workers who are often highly educated and technologically sophisticated (ABS, 2006).

Finding childcare is often the mother's responsibility. Mothers make decisions about the type of childcare and then pay for it with their salary (Vincent et al., 2004). In two-parent working households, it is the woman who is often obliged to work part-time work or 'limited' hours. Recent research has begun to focus on how women manage work and family demands. Burchielli et al. (2008), for example, report that flexible working hours do not necessarily alleviate conflict between work and family: women may strive to meet work demands by working late and working excessive hours, and suffer exhaustion and guilt as a consequence. Women describe needing multiple types of support from partners and other relatives, hence physical and emotional strain when having to negotiate childcare while they work. For women, overload and a poor fit between work hours and demands outside of work have major influences on their work–life conflict (Skinner and Pocock, 2008).

Little research has focused on the factors that influence the type of child care parents choose for school-aged children. In the US, influencing factors include whether the program fits in with the parent's work demands, whether the parents have to arrange multiple child arrangements for older and younger children and the transport costs involved (Chang et al., 2007). A recent US study has highlighted that when working mothers of young children make decisions as to the choice of childcare for their children, factors such as location, cost and times the care are available are most important whereas learning and quality related factors may not be as important in decision-making (Kim and Fram, 2009). In the UK, child care strategy is based on parental choice of child care being dependent upon costs of different childcare, flexibility of childcare provision, reliability and quality (Lewis, 2003). In general the international scientific literature is sparse concerning the provision and evaluation of care for children of school age, instead focusing on preschoolers.

The Australian Census and some large-scale surveys conducted by LSAC and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) have established some facts about the growing usage of out of school hours care (OSHC) by Australian working parents of young school-aged children. The 2006 Australian Government Census of Child Care Services Summary Booklet (DEEWR, 2008) reported that in May 2006 the estimated number of Australian children attending OSHC was 173,770, an increase of 8 percent over two years. Each service provided care to an average of 64.7 children, 47 percent of whom were aged 5–7 years; 9 percent of the children had a non-English speaking background and 3 percent had a disability. The average attendance at OSHC per child was 7.4 hours per week. Almost all (93%) of OSHC was work-related, meaning that parents were employed, looking for work, or engaged in education/training. The proportion of staff with a formal qualification in a children's services related field was 48 percent. Virtually nothing is known about how well OSHC satisfies parent or child needs or expectations, or how families might wish it to do so better.

There is little research in Australia, as elsewhere, about school-age child care. In August 2008 a telephone survey on the topic of OSHC was commissioned by the National Foundation for Australian Women. In a nationally representative sample of 464 parents of children aged 5–15 years, 10 percent had used OSHC run by a school in the last week, 27 percent used relatives, 9 percent non-relatives, and 56 percent used none. Howie (1996) studied third- and fourth-grade children in Sydney and found no differences in self-esteem, anxiety, life skills or academic achievement in children in parental care or attending OSHC for at least four hours per week. Rosenthal and Vandell (1996) found that third- to fifth-grade children preferred school-aged child care programs with smaller enrolments, fewer negative staff–child interactions, and a greater variety of activities.

Interestingly, they found convergence between the children and their parents about the factors enhancing program quality.

Although most OSHC directors welcome constructive comments and feedback, and although the national accreditation process for OSHC requires services to seek feedback from user families, in practice obtaining that from representative samples of parents has proven very difficult. The present lack of information about how working parents view their children's OSHC services reflects that gap and limits the capacity of OSHC directors to assess parental satisfaction and engage parents in decision-making about services. The relative lack of regulation of this sector of early childhood care and education may reflect its ambiguous position between education and care. Nevertheless, the amount of time that children at crucial developmental stages spend in OSHC warrants attention to the quality of the OSHC experience for children and families. Between the ages of five and eight years, children's social, cognitive and emotional development is extremely rapid (Bornstein and Lamb, 2005), and can be enhanced by education and care policies that promote quality cognitive stimulation, social interactions between carers and children in care, and facilitate safe unstructured play (Lamb and Anhert, 2006). It is particularly important to learn more about the care being provided or not provided for junior primary schoolchildren, who cannot and should not be left without adult care and supervision after school. This goal is congruent with the call by Press (2007: 192) of early childhood education and care in Australia, which is currently 'uneasily positioned between the conceptual and jurisdictional frameworks of education, health and social welfare'.

The primary goal of this study was to collect first-hand accounts from OSHC-using parents of young school-aged children about how OSHC affects parents' workforce participation and their resolution of the competing demands of employment and family responsibilities. A second goal was to gain some idea of what parents look for in OSHC and whether they are finding it. Given that nothing is known about either of these questions a preliminary study using interviews of OSHC-using parents was conceived as an appropriate starting point. The advantage of the interview data collection method is that it can allow participants to give their opinions with fewer restraints due to how the researcher frames the issues or by his or her choice of standardized measures. Open-ended questions give respondents latitude to express their own experiences and views, and qualitative thematic analysis allows researchers to analyse and discern common themes (response patterns) across respondents, reporting the data in rich detail (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Such research lays the foundations for subsequent enquiries which may utilise representative samples, standardized measuring instruments, and control groups.

Our study sought to establish the role of OSHC for working parents of junior-primary-school-aged children, and also parents' assessments of its quality. The existence of internationally accepted quality benchmarks (Kamerman, 2000) allowed researchers to begin the task of interpreting parent feedback by framing the data analysis question: to what extent do Australian parents who use OSHC services feel satisfied with the quality of these services? The study described here sought to elicit parent needs and expectations of the OSHC service attended by their children, using a non-directive methodology which gave parents discretion to express their spontaneous experiences.

Method

Participants

Employed parents of young school-aged children who were using OSHC services at metropolitan primary schools in South Australia, and who had adequate English language fluency, were invited to be interviewed by telephone at times convenient for them. All participants ($N = 13$)

were volunteers; they received no incentives or rewards for their assistance, and were assured of confidentiality.

All interviewees were female and their ages were estimated as in the 30s or 40s. All but one of the mothers had partners. All 12 fathers and nine of the mothers were working full-time, and four mothers worked part-time. Interviewees' children were aged 5–12 years and spent from four to 20 hours in OSHC per week (mean = 9.2), at a mixture of public and private, inner and outer metropolitan schools.

Measures

Questions were developed after extensive discussions amongst the multi-disciplinary group of investigators, and a trial version of the interview conducted with a suitable volunteer. The final structured interview format included these questions:

1) How old is [child using OSHC] and how old are your other children, if any?
2) About how much time does [child] spend in OSHC each week?
3) How many hours per week are you employed on average? Your partner? (Note: record hours also if parents are studying, looking for work, etc.)
4) How is having [child's name] in OSHC working out for you?

Probes:

How does it affect your working life?
How closely does your OSHC program match what you'd regard as ideal to meet your child's needs?

Some people have said they find it expensive – what do you think about that?

5) How do you think your child(ren) enjoy(s) OSHC?
6) Is there anything that would make OSHC work better for you and your family?
7) Could you briefly tell me about other child care that you also use when you're at work, for example with relatives or friends?
8) Do you have any other comments about how working parents cope with care of their young children, or what else might be useful to them?

The interviewer also recorded the location of the OSHC service attended, the approximate duration of the interview, and the sex and estimated age-group of the parent.

Procedures

Approval for the project was gained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Adelaide and also the Community and Tertiary Liaison Section of the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS). The project then approached OSHC service directors at both inner and outer metropolitan locations and in both the private and public sectors, seeking their permission to try recruiting parents who used those services, as participants. Information letters were delivered to six OSHC sites, in some cases to be picked up if parents wished and in others, to be distributed with other parent notices. The letters explained the study, sought parent participation, and invited them to inform the research team of their mobile telephone number and a suitable time of day for a brief telephone interview.

After giving informed verbal consent volunteer parents from five of the sites were asked a series of questions (none volunteered from the sixth site). All interviews were conducted by the same postgraduate psychology student who had received training from other investigators including registered psychologists and early childhood specialists. Responses were recorded verbatim in writing without auditory records, and later coded for emergent themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Pope and Mays, 2006) and for any spontaneous references to the Quality Indicators used in the Kamerman (2000) review of child care in the OECD. These are group size, staff–child ratios, caregiver qualifications, salaries and stability, men on the staff, physical space, and active involvement or links with the parents. Interviews continued until no new themes emerged, indicating that saturation had been achieved.

Standard qualitative analysis procedures were applied (Pope and Mays, 2006) to the data: a spreadsheet to tabulate responses was developed by one investigator then applied independently by another, to enable a check of their agreement on response frequencies of emergent themes. Three minor discrepancies in coding were identified and resolved by discussion.

This article focuses on responses to Q4 above: how does it (OSHC) affect your working life? How closely does your OSHC program match what you would regard as ideal to meet your child's needs? Participants' answers to Q5–8 above were included when relevant to these issues.

Results

Thirteen interviews were conducted; the sample is described above.

Influence of OSHC on parents' working life

Nine of the parents reported that OSHC was vital to their ability to work, using direct statements such as 'without OSHC I would be ''stuffed''"; 'it means I can work', 'I couldn't work otherwise'. Many parents ($n = 6$) also commented on their need for OSHC to have more flexible, longer hours and to provide vacation care. Some parents indicated how they had had to change their work hours to fit around their children, as they did not have suitable alternative child care available (see Text 1).

> Text 1: I was in a senior management position. I have had to drop salary and level to accommodate children and this is what we think is the right balance . . . It is difficult to get care for children when they are young, even child care it is difficult to find places and times available. So having to look for care for your children is an additional burden to family life, I continually have to think 'Who will look after my children?' It has taken me years to get over it (having to come down in salary and leave a management position). Even though it was my decision I made, it has still taken me a long time to come to terms with my 'demotion', my lack of professional standing. This is what I had worked my whole life for . . .

Parents also mentioned how employers were often not flexible and were insensitive to employees with children (see Texts 2 and 3 below). In particular parents stressed that even with OSHC services available there is still a conflict between working and childcare. The problem is with the employers who are 'inflexible' not with the OSHC services.

> Text 2: . . . I think businesses need to be more family-friendly and this would help a lot. It also depends on the position of the woman holds . . . I have been a full-time worker since A. was 9–10 months old, and it is hard to juggle it all . . . The work place though needs to be more flexible, when parents are trying to get to places to pick up a child . . .

> Text 3: . . . Jobs are fairly inflexible, you know you work from 9–5, with possibility of overtime. And you only get 4 weeks of annual leave a year. So we try to cover the rest when school's not there, this can be really hard though . . .

The emotional demands of achieving balance between work and family priorities is captured in the following response by a mother to Q8. In particular, the mother highlights the emotional costs of being both a parent and an employee. The demands of having a family and requiring to work are emphasized with the use of 'guilt-ridden'.

> Text 4: As a parent it is really difficult, because you feel guilt-ridden all the time. It is important to find someone trustworthy, responsible and nice to look after your child. It is difficult because you need to work; but also you want children. But because of the costs of everything you have to work and can't afford to just look after them without working. It is important to weigh up cost vs. working factor. It is also important to be appreciative of the time that you do have with them. My employer is fantastic; but there are a lot of employers that I am aware of who are not as understanding or flexible. This may be partly because often they don't have children themselves and they then have no idea of how difficult it is when you have a child. Before you have a child; work is most important – it comes first. After you have the child, the child is most important, you will do anything for that child and so work comes second to the child.

Parent evaluations of their OSHC service

Most parents ($n = 10$; 77%) described their OSHC service as 'good', providing a 'holistic' program with a broad range of activities. Program aspects that were sometimes highlighted included a wide range of activities, healthy after-school snacks, and help with homework. Additionally, a number of parents considered OSHC to be a good place for their child to mix and socialize with other children of different ages (see text 5 below).

> Text 5: . . . The variety of age groups is really good – my child is a buddy to a younger child like a reception child and this gives him responsibility and leadership. It also means he can mix socially across a wider age group and this is a real plus. Otherwise he would only probably be mixing with children his own age . . .

Spontaneous references by parents to the Kamerman quality indicators were as follows: five parents mentioned Physical Space and Activities, all favourably. Staff–Child Ratio and Caregiver Qualifications were each briefly mentioned by one participant in mildly dissatisfied terms. In relation to Staff Stability, one parent mentioned appreciating that the staff 'do not change too much so the girls get to know them and get used to them'. No participants mentioned any of the following quality criteria: Group Size, Staff Salaries, Men on Staff, or Involvement of Parents.

Discussion

A lack of information in the research literature about how Australian working parents view out of school hours care (OSHC) prompted this pilot study. The parents who volunteered to be interviewed, all employed mothers of young school-aged children, were very clear about the crucial role in their lives of this form of child care. They indicated that OSHC was essential to allow them to work, often expressing the wish for greater availability of OSHC in the form of longer hours per day and more days per year specifically to cover school holidays. This is consistent with the United Kingdom childcare strategy that highlights that with the increase of mothers' working hours goes

the need for increased and more flexible child care hour arrangements (Lewis, 2003). These results are also consistent with those from other Australian sources (Baxter et al., 2007; Cassells et al., 2005) but begin the much needed process of investigating how OSHC fits into family and work life from a psychological rather than epidemiological perspective. The research team comprising as it did, clinical, health and organizational psychologists, an epidemiologist, and early childhood education and Out of School Hours Care representatives, provides a model of the multidisciplinary perspectives needed to further understanding in this field.

With several generations of women in the same family now likely to be working, there is a reduction in the family options available for child care. Thus, parents have become more reliant on other services. The cultural context remains one where the woman is seen as providing emotional wellbeing and care for others (McKie et al., 2001; Vincent et al., 2004) and her male partner is dominantly the income earner.

The work–family juggling act being experienced by employed parents of young school-aged children is a demanding one as their comments demonstrated, and as reported by Skinner and Pocock (2008). There was much support expressed for employers who are prepared to allow flexible and family-friendly work practices, in order to retain and motivate the loyalty of staff. How Australian employers put their 'work–life balance' policies into practice is a separate issue but in one sense, a very relevant question for the future of OSHC services. Because effective work–life policies are associated with improved organizational performance and advantages in recruitment (Beauregard and Henry, 2009), this is also an imperative issue for employers to consider.

An interesting point is that all of the parents who chose to be interviewed were mothers, reinforcing how finding child care remains predominantly a woman's responsibility (Vincent et al., 2004). Recent research highlights how women need many forms of support from partners and other relatives hence their physical and emotional strain when needing to negotiate child care while they work (Burchielli et al., 2008, Skinner and Pocock, 2008). It has also been suggested that single mothers may differ from their married counterparts in terms of their purchased services. For example, single mothers spend less time on traditional housework compared with partnered mothers (Zick et al., 1996).

Relatively few parents commented on the quality of care or education received at their OSHC site, rather emphasizing OSHC as a credible child care service while they worked. It was the fact that OSHC was essential to work that primarily governed its use, rather than OSHC being an important part of child development. Perhaps because of the limited number of places available at the various OSHC sites, parent attention seemed to be focused on availability rather than the quality of care or education received by children, notwithstanding their expressed appreciation for its social and physical activities. There are strong arguments for expanding how OSHC is perceived, to incorporate educational as well as custodial aspects (Cass, 2007; Kamerman, 2000; OECD, 2007; Press, 2007). The contribution that OSHC could potentially make to child development integrated across health and fitness, socio-emotional growth, cognition and even life skills, seems unlikely to be realised without considerably greater financial support for the sector. In Australia unlike other European countries, there is at present relatively little government investment in formal care (DPM&C, 2008).

Limitations of the pilot study

This pilot study highlighted the needs and expectations of employed parents of children using OSHC, but it had several limitations. The sample was small and urban and not representative: individuals who were passionate about OSHC may be over-represented. Telephone interviews were unrecorded, but this is less problematic because interviews were structured.

Future research directions

This study has been useful in helping researchers understand practical issues such as how a more representative sample of parents can be recruited in future. The relatively low consent rate using paper-based methods showed that it is necessary to take account of the time pressures on these parents, and possibly offer response incentives and online versions of any formal questionnaire measures: many of the parents in this age group (generations X and Y) are likely to be technologically sophisticated (ABS, 2009). It also seems important to have a research assistant on site promoting the project to parents and other stakeholders, rather than hoping that paper methods of communication for recruitment will suffice.

Daily time records from some families would provide rich and intensive understanding of the work–life balance of all members. The substantial amounts of child care provided by grandparents, some of working age themselves and some older, also needs to be better explored from the perspectives of the working parents, their school-aged children, and the older generation (Goodfellow, 2006). Future more comprehensive studies could collect data directly from not only parents who use OSHC but the children concerned, the OSHC coordinators, and the parents' employers. Future studies are also needed to investigate employer attitudes to child care needs of workers and management decision-making in relation to provision, modelling and uptake of 'family-friendly' policies such as flexible work hours, family leave, and working from home. In addition, it would be valuable to undertake structured interviews of OSHC staff and program directors and school principals, to learn more about the perceived staff selection and training needs for those delivering the care-giving and educational components of OSHC programs. Also desirable in future research would be standardized measures of parent or child wellbeing, health behaviours and time usage, and investigation of possible moderators such as parent income or job control.

In conclusion, this pilot project has been important in initially exploring the expectations and needs of parents who use OSHC. Subsequent studies are needed to describe the relationships between use and quality of out of school hours care (OSHC), the well-being of parents and children, and parents' workforce participation and productivity. The out of school care and education of school-aged children has been seriously neglected as a topic of study, and will require interdisciplinary collaboration drawing on theoretical perspectives from developmental, occupational and health psychology, education, sociology and industrial relations. Findings will benefit not only the children but their parents as employees, consumers of child care services, guardians of their children's psychosocial and cognitive development, and as individuals struggling to optimize their own health and well-being.

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