2009 CCPRC Annual Meeting
Pre-Meeting Session
Wednesday, October 28, 2009, 1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Challenges and Lessons Learned in Research
With Parents about Child Care

Description and Purpose

The purpose of this session was to engage in a participant-directed discussion of the challenges researchers experience in communicating with parents about child care. There is a growing interest in understanding how parents facing diverse circumstances make child care decisions. Numerous researchers have explored this question and have experiences and wisdom to share. In response to interest in the field, quantitative and qualitative researchers who have studied, or are currently studying, parental perceptions, processes, choices, and constraints as they apply to child care and early education were gathered in a half-day pre-session of the *Annual Meeting of the Child Care Policy Research Consortium*. The intention of this meeting was to share lessons learned and to identify next steps for improving research with parents around child care. Particular emphasis was given to:

- Terminology and Language—language that researchers use when talking to parents about their child care.
- Study Design and Methods.
- Practical Considerations and Implementation Issues.

This meeting used large and small group brainstorming sessions to identify key issues, challenges, strategies, and lessons learned in research with parents about child care.

Session Leader

Susan Jekielek, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE)

Presenters/Facilitators

Bobbie Weber, Oregon State University
Julia Henly, University of Chicago
Rupa Datta, NORC
Gina Adams, Urban Institute
Ajay Chaudry, Urban Institute
Helen Ward, University of Southern Maine
Ann Collins, Abt Associates
Kathryn Tout, Child Trends
Nikki Forry, Child Trends

Scribe

Tabitha Isner, Child Trends

Brainstorming Key Issues, Strategies, and Lessons Learned in Research with Parents

The meeting began with a whole group brainstorming exercise using the following guiding questions:
1. What issue related to collecting accurate and reliable data from parents would you like to explore in this working meeting?
2. What strategies have you implemented successfully to address challenges in measuring [insert topic]?
3. What is one lesson you have learned from collecting information from parents?

Eight topical content areas were identified as being of greatest interest to meeting participants:
1. Basic terminology: What do words like "child care" and "school readiness" mean to parents and how can we talk about these critical concepts in a way that parents will understand?
2. Parental perceptions of the role of child care: Is child care an employment support or a child-enrichment activity? Does the role of care differ depending on the type of care used? Are choices made differently depending on the purpose the parent has for the care?
3. Defining and measuring child care quality: Abstractly, what do parents value in child care? Specifically, what do parents value about their current arrangement(s)? How do parents understand or interpret quality improvement initiatives? How should researchers define quality? Can we and should we create a measure of quality that suits all types of child care and allows for every provider to have at least one strength?
4. Situating the focal child in the wider context of the family: How are employment and child care decisions interdependent? How should researchers conceptualize the impact of employment on child care and vice versa? Do the two change simultaneously or sequentially? Which drives the other? Do patterns emerge? What is the importance of the number and ages of children in the household, the location of the household, the relation of the family to the wider community? How do parents make decisions together?
5. Factors affecting parents' perceptions of available child care choices: Where do parents get information about child care? Can we describe both the actual supply of care available in a market and the parent's perception of what is available?
6. Parental Involvement and Engagement: How do parents want to interact with their child care provider(s)? Do they want to be involved? Engaged? How can we speak more clearly about parental involvement and parental engagement?
7. Child Care Decision-Making Among Special Populations: How do parents of children with special needs conceive of their child care decision making? Is it different than parents without special needs? How do parents from cultural communities and ELL parents conceive of their child care decision making? Is it different than other parents?
8. Cost of Care: What are parents actually paying for child care and what would that care cost without any supports?

Across these content areas, several key themes emerged:
1. How can researchers obtain the most *complete* responses?
   - Confusing terminology is often a barrier as parents answer the question as they understood it, rather than as the researchers intended it.

- Perhaps if researchers do a better job of explaining the purpose and importance of the research, parents will have a better context for understanding what is being asked of them.

2. Recall: What can researchers reasonably expect parents to remember? How much time can elapse?
   - Can parents report on ideal preferences before the constrained choice was made?
   - Can parents report on other options that were available/considered and reasons for making a particular choice?
   - Can parents report on their use of subsidies and other financial supports?
   - Can parents report on the price of care if no assistance were available?
3. Social Desirability Bias: When are parental responses biased by what they think we want to hear?
   - Do parents primarily view child care as a necessity so they can work or as something good for the child? Will they respond honestly?
4. Measuring change over time in longitudinal studies:
   - Repeated measures both reveal and complicate the above issues. Researchers sometimes discover in follow-up interviews that data was incomplete in the baseline assessment or that parents don't recall their original answers.
   - Repeated measures may be helpful in that terminology may be learned over time.
5. Cultural and linguistic barriers:
   - Cultural and linguistic barriers exacerbate problems of terminology. Can results across cultural groups be compared when interview questions are inevitably different?

Further Exploration of Topical Content Areas through Small Group Discussion

Two breakout groups were used to further explore the topics identified as being of greatest interest during the brainstorming activity. Group 1 was tasked with focusing on exploring challenges and best practices for **collecting accurate information** from parents about their child care decisions. Group 2 was tasked with focusing on the challenges of **contextualizing the child care decision making process** and identifying, measuring, and relating key contextual features to the decision making process.

Participants in each group were asked to clarify, and share their experiences dealing with problems related to terminology and language, about the following:
- Primary challenges for researchers when communicating with parents about child care;
- Successful strategies for addressing these challenges; and
- Lessons learned regarding data collection from parents.

Group 1: Capturing Accurate Information

Challenges to Collecting Accurate Data
- Inconsistent findings across research projects and inconsistent data across multiple sources—Data doesn't match for so many reasons: Different wording of questions, different populations, and different method of choosing respondents. Some sources will be more reliable than others, so asking multiple sources may create unnecessary confusion.

- Terminology—Researchers often use jargon. We want to use consistent language to describe child care and categories of child care arrangements, but our vocabulary is not shared by our respondents. In fact, vocabulary may vary widely by type of respondent, geography, and other factors. How can we be both consistent and flexible?
- Survey Design—Often we don't spend as much time as we should on designing surveys. This is partly due to a lack of funding for survey design and cognitive interviews/pre-testing. What can we learn from other fields about good design for surveys/interviews? How can we share our wisdom with one another?
- Maximizing Time with Parents—Parents aren't perfect sources of data, yet they are the only people who can answer certain questions. How do we make the most of our time with them, not waste their time, and have realistic expectations of their recall abilities?

Key Questions for Designing Surveys & Interviews:
- **Who** should we be asking?
  - Should mothers automatically be our respondents?
  - Should we ask who is most knowledgeable about the child?
  - If parents share responsibility, neither parent may have all the needed information.
  - Should we talk to the parent who speaks English? In bilingual samples, parents may be looking for an opportunity to practice their English and therefore prefer English even though they are more fluent in another language.
  - Who does the family prefer we talk to? Sometimes gender dynamics, language, and/or social desirability bias determines who a family chooses to be the respondent and how the decision-making process is presented/framed.
- **What** should we be asking?
  - What information do parents have that we cannot obtain elsewhere?
  - We need to be clear about whether we want facts or perceptions.
  - What can we reasonably expect parents to *know*? to *remember*?
- **Who** should we be asking **about**?
  - Selection of focal child depends on the research questions.
  - We won't have sufficient data to report on the subpopulation of children with special needs unless we always choose the child with special needs to be the focal child.
  - We also must be cautious not to overburden minority populations by conducting too many studies in their community. Collaboration among researchers can reduce the burden by reducing duplication of questions.
- **How** should we be asking?
  - Cognitive interviews and pretesting of survey designs is crucial to making surveys high quality. Group participants report that doing so has been worthwhile.
  - Consider when additional probes or follow-up questions are truly necessary. Sometimes, particularly for non-central research questions, gaining clarity through probes is not cost-effective.
  - Focus groups create additional group dynamics that may change how questions are answered. Social desirability bias may be more pronounced. On the other hand, someone else's answer may help others in the group to understand the question and how to answer clearly.
  - Don't expect parents to be able to differentiate between types/kinds of care. For example, asking a parent to describe where her child spends her time--some

4

responses, like "gymnastics practice" will not be relevant, but it will be easier for the researcher to determine relevancy than the parent.
  - Get rid of jargon whenever possible. Examples include:
    - Instead of asking about "child care," ask "Who looks after your child?"
    - Instead of asking about family child care and center-based child care, ask "Is it in someone's home? Did you know the person who looks after your child before they started caring for him/her?"
    - Instead of "Are you receiving a subsidy?" ask "Do you receive any help paying for this?"
    - Some caregivers don't consider themselves child care providers and will resist being put in that category. Avoid labeling.
- **Who** should **do** the asking?
  - An outsider may be more objective but may not be able to establish trust as quickly.
  - Interpreters/translators need to understand child care and the research questions in order to appropriately interpret/translate.
    - Example: Translating "care" into Spanish is complicated by the fact that there are different words for "provide basic needs," and "provide education." Moreover, as in English, words have multiple possible meanings. "To care for" may also be interpreted as "have custody of."
  - Interpreters need to have legitimacy in the community.
  - Interpreters should not have a conflict of interest or a product/service they are selling. They should be well trained to remain objective.
  - Gender issues and other power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee may harm the interview or focus group.

Group 2: Contextualizing Child Care Decision Making

Challenges of Contextualizing the Child Care Decision Making Process
- We have learned that families' lives are chaotic and full of lots of moving parts. There are so many possible influences on child care decisions. How do we choose where to focus our energy?
- Public policies, particularly subsidy policies, often assume stasis in families. Eligibility and benefits change as the family's situation changes. This makes subsidies too much work for many families.
- The desire for high quality care supportive of child outcomes is often in tension or direct conflict with the desire for child care arrangements supportive of the parents' or family's needs (e.g., flexible hours, convenient location, affordable rates).
- Should quality be defined entirely in terms of the child's outcomes or should family outcomes be considered too? Can these two really be separated?
- Non-English speaking families and providers face unique challenges, both internally and in terms of access to public programs.
- Large cultural, natural, or economic events or shifts can drastically impact research. How do such events expand or alter our research questions? Do some research questions need to be abandoned in light of such events?
- Terminology can complicate already confusing issues. For example, what does it mean to ask, "Does your job have flexible hours?" This could mean that the employee is required

to be flexible (and show up whenever asked to) or that the employer is required to be flexible (and allow an employee to leave early to pick a child up from child care).

<u>Key Contextual Features to Consider</u>
- Household Features
  - Marital status (marriage, divorce, health of marriage, presence and stability of significant others in home).
  - Number, ages, and special needs of all children in the home.
  - Additional members of household (extended family, friends, roommates).
  - Custody – Is custody shared, contested, or unclear for any of the children?
- Income
  - What are all the sources of income? (Wages, public assistance, child support, etc)
  - Which income sources are linked to one another? (Wages and child care subsidy)
  - Who provides this income? What are the power/relationship dynamics that result?
- Employment
  - Full time/part time, during regular business hours?
  - Does the employer ask for consistent hours from week to week?
  - Does the employer give the employee sufficient notice about changes in the schedule?
  - Can the employee adjust her/his own hours to meet her/his needs?
  - Does the employee make a consistent wage and work a consistent number of hours?
- Location
  - How mobile is the household as a whole? Does seasonal employment require mobility?
  - How mobile is the child? Does the child get shuffled between multiple homes depending on time of year or other circumstances?
  - Is the family located near child care options? Near employment options? Near grandma or other extended family?
  - What forms of transportation are available and affordable?
  - What events are currently shaping the community? Has a factory closed? Has there been a natural disaster? Health epidemic? Recession?
- Language
  - Do parents speak English? Do children speak English?
  - Is the family's primary language one that is well-supported in the community?
  - Does the family prefer early education in the home language or in English?
- Culture
  - What do parents value? What do they consider quality? What does the wider cultural community value?
  - Does the family's culture require that a child care program provide special accommodations in accordance with cultural norms? For example, does the child have dietary requirements based on culture or religion? Does the culture require that adults be addressed in a particular way or that particular punishments are or are not used?
- Public Policies
  - Does state or local policy favor English over other languages?
  - How much flexibility does subsidy policy allow in a family's financial situation?
  - Do families have to reapply for subsidies after a relocation, short-term windfall, or temporary loss of employment?

o   If a child stays home with grandma while she visits for two weeks, will the child no longer qualify for the subsidy?

Next Steps for Improving Research with Parents about Child Care

To close the meeting, participants were asked what types of guidance documents or research products would be helpful for moving the field forward in research on this topic. Below is a list of suggested products:

- General purpose brief on research with parents on child care: Lessons learned.
- A brief on research with non-English speaking communities: Tips for using interpreters; Key considerations for translating surveys; Cultural considerations; and Other lessons learned.
- Short technical briefs on already completed or in-process research with parents, describing methods used and lessons learned.
- A series of briefs on terminological issues and possible solutions. Possible topics include: Describing child care arrangements; Capturing employment stability and volatility; and Differentiating ideal preferences from constrained choices.
- A brief on what parents do and don't know and how to use administrative data to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.
- A brief on what has changed in the field in the last ten years.
- A brief on how to design better surveys and interviews through feasibility tests and cognitive testing.
- A brief on possible methods for collecting information from dual parent households.