

2010 CCPRC Annual Meeting  
Workshop Session C2  
October 22, 2010, 10:45 a.m.

## **Child Care Instability: Definitions, Context, and Policy Implications**

### **Description**

This breakout session provided an overview of research and policy issues around child care stability and continuity, as well as presentations on stability issues and their implications for child outcomes, parent and family outcomes, and child care subsidy patterns. It concluded with a discussion of the implications of these issues for CCDF policy and practice.

### **Moderator**

Gina Adams, Urban Institute

### **Panelists**

Taryn Morrissey, American University  
Ajay Chaudry, Urban Institute  
Julia Henly, University of Chicago  
Roberta Weber, Oregon State University

### **Discussant**

Rolf Grafwallner, Maryland State Department of Education

### **Scribe**

Shana Simkin, Child Trends

### **1. Documents in Session Folder**

- “Instability in Parental Employment: The relationship with child care instability,” Ajay Chaudry and Julia Henly
- “Child Care Instability: Definitions, Context and Policy Implications,” Gina Adams
- “Child Care Instability and Subsidies,” Roberta Weber
- “Child Care Stability and Child Development,” Taryn Morrissey

### **2. Summary of Presentations**

- **Summary of Presentation #1:** Gina Adams
  - Challenge 1: Lack of common definitions/measurement:
    - Changes in child care are common.
    - Rich research base, yet terminology, definitions, and approaches to measurement vary widely.
    - Important to recognize the fundamental differences between three different events: a) the ending of an arrangement; b) multiple arrangements; and c) ending of caregiver relationship within arrangements (turnover). All of these are sometimes labeled instability, yet may or may not represent instability, and can occur simultaneously.

- Challenge 2: Disentangling forms of change and likely impacts:
  - What are our logic models for the likely impacts of these different kinds of changes on children and families?
  - Different forms and combinations of change will likely have different implications for children and families, and operate through different pathways.
- Challenge 3: Determining causes of instability: there are a host of possible causes of instability.
  - Changes in parental employment situation or schedule.
  - Caregiver ends child care arrangement.
  - Parent is dissatisfied with the arrangement.
  - Child moves into next form of care due to age or time of year (such as going to school).
  - Changes in ability to pay for care (income and/or access to help paying for care).
  - Other changes, such as transportation, changes in residence/location, family composition, etc.
- Challenge 4: Exploring the importance of context:
  - Effects on child development, parental employment, and family stability likely depend on the specific type of change AND whether:
    - The change was predictable.
    - The change was intentional.
    - It involved moving to a higher quality care.
    - The child continued to have a relationship with the caregiver.
    - It was a one-time change, or part of a pattern of frequent changes.
    - It happened to a child with other risk factors or whose family was facing instability in other areas.
  - Yet these issues often are not measured/assessed, or examined in research—it is essential to start pulling apart these questions in future research on these issues.
- Challenge 5: Understanding interacting family domains. Child care instability can be linked to instability in a variety of other family domains including employment, income, and help paying for care and subsidies.
- Instability in multiple domains is common for low income families which compounds risk factors and creates challenge in identifying causes and disentangling effects.
- **Summary of Presentation #2: Taryn Morrissey**
  - Patchworks of care: A day in the life of a hypothetical 4 year old (see chart in PPT).
  - Patchworks of care: 7 months in the lives of three hypothetical 4 year olds (see PPT). And within a single arrangement, there may be turnover of teachers.
  - Study examined the number of non-parental child care arrangements among children in NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD).
    - Among children with employed mothers, one-fifth of children were in multiple arrangements.
    - Children with mothers employed during non-standard working hours were more likely to be in multiple arrangements.
  - Children experienced different combinations of care, and this changed with age.
  - Research and measurement issues:

- Datasets often confound two types of child care stability: multiple arrangements (concurrent) and long-term stability (over time).
    - Relatively little is known about: within arrangement stability and annual patterns of stability such as summer care.
  - Daily Instability: Unpredictable routines, structure, and frequent teacher turnover are linked with poorer child well-being and teacher-child interactions.
  - Multiple arrangements: greater number of concurrent arrangements is linked to a small increase in child behavioral problems.
  - Some evidence that exposure to diverse settings is beneficial for children:
    - Children whose mothers and child care providers used different control strategies exhibited fewer behavioral problems.
    - Children who experienced high levels of discontinuity in play objects at child care and at home displayed more cooperative social play and autonomy.
  - Future Research Questions:
    - How can we collect better data on child care stability?
    - How can we distinguish planned, developmentally appropriate child care changes/instability from unintentional or unpredictable changes?
    - Does the intentionality and predictability of child care changes moderate the effects of child care instability on child development?
    - What mechanisms underlie the links between child care instability and child development?
    - How do child and family characteristics moderate the impacts of child care stability?
    - How has the current economic downturn affected child care stability and child well-being?
    - What policy changes can better support stability from a child's perspective?
- **Summary of Presentation #3 Ajay Chaudry**
  - Examined forms of instability in employment: instability across jobs in terms of the movement in and out of jobs; instability within a job; and instability within a job related to job turnover.
  - Instability across jobs: lots of instability and movement in and out of jobs particularly for low wage workers:
    - Some evidence about employment dynamics/patterns.
    - High job turnover, movement across jobs.
    - Variations by worker/family characteristics; many low wage workers are young adults, young mothers.
    - Variation by occupation/industry.
    - Employment instability is likely worse in the course of a recession and slow labor market recovery; one-third of parents worked every month, which implies most mothers are working, but not working every month.
      - One-fourth of all single mothers were consistently working every month over a 4 year period.
      - Two-thirds of single mothers worked two or more jobs.
      - One-half of married mothers worked two or more jobs.
  - Instability within a job:

- There are several aspects of low wage jobs that create and contribute to instability.
      - Nonstandard work schedules timing (especially in industrial sectors where low-income working women are concentrated, such as health care, retail, and hospitality).
      - Fluctuated hours (no minimum-hour guarantees in most hourly jobs, and fluctuating hours translate into various earnings).
      - Unpredictable and variable schedules.
      - Limited job flexibility.
    - Paired decisions:
      - Child care and employment as simultaneous decisions.
      - Employment characteristics shape child care needs and are therefore an important factor influencing child care decision making.
      - Employment characteristics influence child care subsidies receipt.
    - Interacting instability: employment instability can cause child care instability and child care instability can cause employment instability
  - Flexibility: What is it? What kind is important for families?
    - Families need flexibility somewhere such as the home, child care, or work.
    - In terms of work, it is important to recognize the kind of flexibility that benefits child care.
      - Employee control (input) over when, where, and/or how much they work.
      - Common measures of flexibility do not properly distinguish employer vs. employee driven-flexibility.
- **Summary of Presentation #4: Roberta Weber**
  - Why does continuity matter and what is the status of subsidy continuity research?
    - Some level of continuity is needed to reach program goals for development and employment.
    - Subsidy use may destabilize child care.
    - Ten years of research on subsidy durations beginning with a five-State study of subsidy dynamics.
  - Major challenges in measuring continuity:
    - Capturing patterns of engagement (duration of subsidy spell, length of breaks, number of re-entries).
    - Measuring the duration of subsidy spells including:
      - Sample including censoring.
      - Unit of analysis.
      - Definition of a break in service.
    - Challenges related to data sources: linking administrative data with survey data
    - Bringing in the qualitative studies: How can we find out if we are missing major drivers of instability?
  - What is known about continuity in subsidy programs?
    - Family factors are associated with continuity in the subsidy program; parent and family characteristics associated with longer spells include:

- Higher earnings and more stable employment; may be due to other factors such as more human capital, higher management skills, or stronger social networks.
  - Younger children, more children, and higher subsidy values (all correlated so relationship is not clear).
  - Mixed findings on effect of age of the child; spells are longer for children not in school.
  - In three of five States in dynamics study: no pattern.
  - Provider characteristics may be associated with the continuity in subsidy program:
    - Meyers and colleagues, and Ha find no pattern by type of care.
  - Community characteristics associated with continuity in subsidy program:
    - Parents in rural communities have shorter spells.
    - Longer supply of child care predicts longer spells.
  - Policy characteristics associated with continuity in subsidy program:
    - Major subsidy policies: Eligibility level, eligibility period, copayment levels, maximum payment rates.
    - Parents experience combinations of policies working together. Higher co-pays and income eligibility are associated with longer spells. Higher maximum payment rates associated with no effect.
  - Reasons parents leave the subsidy program: job loss or low earnings account for most exits.
  - Questions for future research on continuity in the subsidy program: What child, family, and community characteristics are associated with stable and unstable subsidy programs?
- **Summary of Presentation #5: Rolf Grafwallner**
    - Maryland State Department of Education: there are many policymaking decisions they don't control; amount spent on child care subsidies is more than the state spends on pre-K or Head Start.
    - Policy and implementation is driven by the State; choice of care is driven by parents. 94% of those receiving subsidy vouchers are single parents.
    - The agency grapples with how they can get vulnerable children into high quality programs—we must influence parents' decisions so their choices provide greater benefits for their children.
    - There are mediating factors that they can set up to encourage better choices:
      - Are there specific incentives?
      - Is there a way to look at the other two subsidized programs (Head Start and preK) to coordinate some kind of choice?
        - Coordinate the enrollment for the children (with local school systems and state-funded resource and referral agencies) to come together.
        - Parents would get a spectrum of choices that get paid through the child care voucher (e.g., Head Start with child care wraparound).
    - Research is needed at the policy level, and more research to evaluate the impact of children's early learning opportunities in programs and their outcomes later on.
    - The “subsidy spell” issue: participation trends shot up so huge growth in subsidies was anticipated. However, the growth was less than expected; people lost their jobs

and were locked out of using their vouchers. This created an unstable situation for families in an economic downturn.

- We must look beyond the needs of child care and look at where children are in terms of high quality care.

### **3. Summary of Discussion with Presenters and Participants**

- Roberta Weber: The subsidy program in Oregon greatly increased during the recession, compared to Maryland's, which decreased.
- Policy implications of the instability: If we loosen up the type of eligibility?
- The subsidy system seems like a hassle for parents.
- We need to make the subsidy program empower parents to choose higher quality care.
  - Ajay Chaudry: Regarding the strictness of parental employment requirements, if there is a change in employment, child care continuity is important for those who are already in the system. However, we would have to figure out who would receive extended eligibility.
  - Gina Adams: What is the range of what the States are doing?
  - Reeva Murphy: We must look at the entire context of the family, so all of the factors are working together. CCDF is a block grant; it is flexible.
  - Gina Adams: Subsidies need to smooth out the bumps instead of creating problems.
  - Amber, OPRE Research Scholar: What defines high quality care? A child may experience little instability in child care, but what definition are we using for high quality care?
  - What will it cost us to keep children in the Head Start and pre-K programs? What are the costs to the providers, conversely?
    - Ajay Chaudry: Once a family is determined eligible, then States should provide flexibility. Chicago has done this for Head Start.
    - Roberta Weber: What have we learned from Head Start partnerships? What was the cost of the providers?
- Roberta Weber: Providers experience a high amount of fluctuation in what they get per month. The program must be built on what we know about their lives.
- Gina Adams: Many providers do not accept subsidies or do not continue to care for subsidized children. There is a connection between the money you get and the quality you provide.
- Reeva Murphy: Tightly calibrated policies (e.g., between employment and subsidies) hurt more than they help.
  - Rolf Grafwallner: There are families who go online to find child care for their children or to find subsidies. Parents are not informed about what subsidies are available and parents do not like the bureaucratic process of receiving a subsidy.
  - Gina Adams: Stable care requires stable supply and information.
  - Sherry Rackliff: They work to stabilize the child care subsidy situation, but instability in care changes the dynamics of the classroom, making it lower quality. We must give the children a sense of routine with stable teachers.