

Understanding and Strengthening Parent-Child Care Provider Partnerships
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Project Description.

This project is funded by a Child Care Research Scholars grant and consists of the first author's dissertation work.

Although research and theory suggest that strong parent-child care provider partnerships are important for their potential to promote successful child outcomes and aid parents in balancing work and family life, little is known about how parents and providers understand or create partnerships. This study used a qualitative approach to address this gap in the literature by examining the relationships that parents and center-based child care providers form and how these relationships can provide parents with support in their efforts to maintain stable employment and navigate the child care subsidy system. Participant observations and in-depth interviews were conducted during a year of field work at two privately owned child care centers. A strategically selected sample allowed for comparisons between the experiences of working-class/poor parents and middle-class parents.

Research questions.

- How do parents and center-based child care providers understand and create parent-provider partnerships? Specifically, what strategies do they employ to create partnerships and what barriers do they encounter?
- How do parent-provider partnerships help low-income parents maintain stable employment and navigate the subsidy system?

Sample. Data were collected from two privately owned child care centers. One center served primarily working-class/poor families and the other center served primarily middle-class families. In-depth semi-structured interviews were completed with 23 parents (19 mothers and 4 fathers) and 17 child care center staff members (2 center directors, 5 head teachers, and 10 assistant teachers) from the two centers. All parents had at least one child who was younger than three years old. Additionally, over 100 field notes were generated from qualitative observations in the centers. These observations took place primarily in the morning when parents were

dropping off their children and the afternoon when they were picking up their children.

Methods. During a year of field work at two privately owned child care centers, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and child-care center staff and field notes were generated from qualitative observations. Using both observations and interviews allowed me to witness parent-provider relationship formation firsthand and explore parents' and providers' perspectives. Additionally, generating several different types of data from multiple sources allowed for triangulation and a rigorous research design. The data were analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach in which I moved through three waves of coding: open, axial, and selective coding.

Progress Update.

My dissertation was successfully defended in June 2011. I am currently preparing manuscripts for publication and a research brief.

Key Findings.

- In addition to partnerships, I identified four other distinct parent-provider relationship types: basic familiarity, working relationships, independent relationships, and discordant relationships. I also developed a model that explains how these relationships are established and maintained.
- I found that establishing and maintaining partnerships requires time, effort, and a specific skill set from parents and providers as well as opportunities for regular communication. Class-based patterns emerged from my data which suggest that middle-class parents may be in a better position to form partnerships with their providers than working-class/poor parents. Therefore, it may be unrealistic to expect all parents and providers to form partnerships. Rather, the benefits of alternative relationship types should be considered.
- The providers in my study helped parents with all aspects of the child care subsidy system, from learning about child care subsidies to enrolling and maintaining eligibility. Providers and center directors offered this assistance because they

wanted to help parents and also because it was in their best interest; when parents were continually enrolled in the subsidy system the center received regular payments. This assistance was offered informally which meant not all parents received it and the parents who communicated with their providers more often seemed to be more likely to receive this kind of support.

- The providers in my sample offered parents logistical, financial, and emotional support which helped the parents maintain stable employment and balance the demands of work and family life.

Implications for policy/practice

The findings from this study suggest that child care providers help parents navigate the child care subsidy system. Providers should be supported in their efforts to assist parents; providers should have easy access to accurate and timely information about the subsidy system.

Implications for research

The findings from this study provide insights that should be taken into consideration when designing measures to assess the quality of parent-provider relationships. Ideally both parents’ and providers’ perspectives concerning the quality of their relationship should be taken into consideration. When assessing parent-provider communication, multiple forms of communication (e.g. email and telephone conversations) should be considered, not just in-person communication. Also, the amount, content and quality of parent-provider communication may change over time making it optimal to take multiple measurements at different time points.

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<p>Key Topics</p> <p>Please select all that apply and briefly describe/explain. This information will be used internally in planning the CCPRC Annual Meeting.</p>	
<p><i>Child Care Subsidy Policies & Practices</i> e.g., How do policies and practices influence parents’ child care decisions, parental and/or child outcomes, providers’ behavior, access to quality child care?</p>	<p>My findings concerning how the providers in my study helped parents navigate the subsidy system and the impact of the kind of relationship that the parents and providers formed on the kind and amount of assistance that was offered to parents may fit into this topic area.</p>
<p><i>Parents & Families</i> What do we know about parent decision-making and how it is influenced by issues such as culture, employment, subsidy policies? What other family-level constructs are relevant to child care policies/practices?</p>	<p>My findings concerning the five kinds of parent-provider relationships that the respondents in my sample formed and how they created these relationships may fit into this topic area.</p>
<p>Please note, this study is being included as part of a proposed workshop for the CCPRC research day (11/17) in the Parents and Families theme group.</p>	