

Hidden Costs of Child Care?
The Relationship Between Child Care Problems and Mothers' Stress,
Labor Force Participation and Earnings

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High out-of-pocket child care costs and limited public financing of child care set the United States apart from many other developed countries whose governments provide more generous child care benefits to a larger share of parents than is the case in this country (Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Jacobs, Gerson, & Gornick, 2004). A large body of research documents that high child care costs deter mothers' employment (Connelly & Kimmel, 2003; Han & Waldfogel, 2001) and that child care subsidies increase mothers' employment (Danziger, Ananat, & Browning, 2004; Bainbridge, Meyers, & Waldfogel, 2003; Meyers, Heintze, & Wolf, 2002). But surprisingly little is known about the relationship between child care problems and working mothers' stress, labor force participation and earnings. Are mothers who experience child care problems more likely to experience stress, to drop out of the labor force, to reduce their work hours or to earn lower wages than mothers with more reliable care arrangements? It is particularly significant that so little research has been devoted to the potential negative consequences of child care problems given that they may contribute to the well-documented wage penalty faced by mothers (Anderson, Binder, & Krause, 2002; Budig & England, 2001; Waldfogel, 1997).

The dearth of information about the impact of child care problems reflects the more general scarcity of data about mothers' experiences with child care. Most national surveys of families do not collect information about parents' experiences with child care, and most surveys that do include child care information, such as the National Study of the Changing Workforce, are cross-sectional, hindering analyses of the impact of child care problems for mothers. In this paper, I use newly available data from the fourth wave of the Fragile Families Study of Child Well-Being, one of the few large panel data sets to include information about mothers' experiences of child care problems. The Fragile Families Study follows a cohort of 4,898 children born in large urban areas between 1998 and 2000. The study includes an over-sample of children born to unmarried parents with a comparison group of children born to married parents. Although low-income families account for the majority of children and parents sampled, the study includes families from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds.

By wave four, the children in the study were approximately five years old. Combining wave four with previous waves collected at birth and when the children were one and three years of age enables me to extend previous research showing that one third of urban mothers of pre-school children experienced at least one child care disruption per month because their regular child care provider was unavailable (Usdansky & Wolf, forthcoming). Half of those mothers missed work as a result, and half of all mothers reporting child care problems experienced multiple episodes of care disruption or missed work. Mothers with low incomes and low levels of social support were at greater risk of experiencing care disruptions, while only low social support predicted missing work given a care disruption (Usdansky et al., forthcoming).

This paper builds on those findings by exploring the impact of child care problems on working mothers. I ask whether child care disruptions and resulting missed work are associated

with any of the following potential negative consequences: heightened maternal stress; reduced satisfaction with parenting; increased job turnover; reductions in work hours; leaving the labor force; and earning lower wages. Because so little is known about patterns in mothers' experiences with child care and employment, I begin with a detailed descriptive analysis. I then use a variety of multivariate techniques discussed further below, including fixed effect and value added models, to ascertain whether bivariate relationships persist once controls for potential confounding factors are added.

Although the Fragile Families panel data are somewhat limited in terms of detail and frequency of collection of child care information, they are superior to most other potential national data sources and provide a solid basis for an exploratory analysis of the relationship between child care disruptions and child care-related stress on the one hand and mothers' labor force participation, work hours and earnings on the other hand.

There are a number of reasons to suspect that child care problems may create stress for mothers, hinder their labor force participation and decrease their earnings. At a minimum, disruption creates inconvenience, requiring a change of work schedule or the arrangement of backup care, which is not an easy task for many mothers (Henly & Lyons, 2000). For some mothers, disruptions lead to missed work, which could mean lost income. Other mothers, particularly those in the working class, face tremendous pressure to continue working despite care disruptions because their low-wage jobs do not provide benefits like paid sick days or personal days (Kaye & Nightingale, 2000; Perry-Jenkins, 2005), and frequent absences from work may lead to firing or assignment to undesirable shifts.

Mothers who experience frequent care disruptions may decide to reduce their work hours or leave the labor force entirely, joining the ranks of discouraged workers, particularly if their child care costs are high relative to their earnings (Scott, Edin, London, & Kissane, 2004). Child care disruptions and related stress may also reduce the wages of mothers who remain employed if child care problems affect their actual or perceived work performance.

On the other hand, it is possible that child care problems and related stress inconvenience working mothers but not to such an extent that these problems deter their labor force participation or affect their job performance. While not immune from child care problems, well-educated mothers can afford more reliable care and are likely to have high earnings relative to their child care expenses, factors which may incline these mothers to remain in the labor force. Working class and poor mothers may be more likely to encounter child care problems but may also be less likely to have the option of stopping work. Further, research on mothers' time use suggests that mothers go to great lengths to guard their time with children (Bianchi, 2000). Similarly, working mothers may adopt strategies to protect their work performance in the face of child care problems, for example, by building a network of backup care providers (Harknett, 2006; Henly, Danziger, & Offer, 2005). Thus it is possible that child care problems create stress, dissatisfaction or extra work for mothers but do not affect their labor force participation or earnings.

To explore the relationship between child care problems and maternal stress, labor force participation and earnings, I conduct a series of descriptive and multivariate analyses using the following dependent variables. The first dependent variable captures maternal stress related to work and family. It is a scale based on mothers' responses (never, sometimes, often, always) to the following three statements: "My shift and work schedule cause extra stress for me and my child;" "Where I work it is difficult to deal with child care problems during working hours;" "In my work schedule I have enough flexibility to handle family needs" (reverse coded). The second

dependent variable reflects dissatisfaction with parenting. It is a scale based on mothers' responses (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree) to the following four statements: "Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be;" "I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent;" "I find that taking care of my child(ren) is much more work than pleasure;" "I often feel tired, worn out, or exhausted from raising a family." The third dependent variable is a dichotomous measure coded one if the mother reported that she had ever quit a job due to child care problems. The fourth dependent variable is a dichotomous variable coded one if the mother remained in the labor force. The fifth dependent variable measures the number of hours the mother worked each week. It is censored at zero. The final dependent variable measures the mother's weekly earnings. It is also censored at zero.

The two key independent variables measure the number of times during the last month that the mother experienced a child care disruption and the number of times that the mother missed work due to a child care disruption. Both measures are continuous. The care disruption measure is based on a question that asked mothers, "Approximately how many times in the past month did you have to make special arrangements because your usual child care arrangement fell through?" Mothers were instructed to consider such child care disruptions to include both unscheduled events such as provider illness or closings due to inclement weather and scheduled events such as provider vacations. The missed work measure is based on a question that asked mothers how many times they missed work due to a care failure in the past month.

Control variables will vary from model to model, reflecting factors such as the nature of the dependent variable and the type of multivariate analysis employed. Control variables will measure factors such as mother and child demographic characteristics, household composition, social support, labor force characteristics, and child care characteristics.

Four waves of the Fragile Families Study are currently available. Data were collected at the time of the child's birth and when the child was approximately one, three and five years of age. I will employ a variety of approaches to the multivariate analyses. I will use fixed effect models to assess the relationships between care failure or missed work and maternal stress or dissatisfaction at years one and three. Fixed effect models will also be used to analyze the relationships between failure and missed work at year one or year three and reports of quitting jobs, leaving the labor force and work hours and earnings at years three and five. These models will be supplemented with a variety of other approaches. These will include value-added models, which regress the dependent variable on the independent variable measured in a previous wave while controlling the level of the dependent variable at the earlier wave. When appropriate, I will compare findings from fixed effect or value-added models with OLS, logistic regression or tobit models.

An illustration of the descriptive findings appears in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 shows maternal labor force status and median weekly work hours by number of care failures. Table 2 shows maternal labor force status and median weekly work hours by number of episodes of missed work due to care failure. The results do not show a consistent relationship between labor force status and hours and child care problems. Some relationships are negative, such as the number of child care failures at year one and participation in the labor force at year three. Other comparisons show no clear relationship. The multivariate analyses, especially those using fixed effects, will shed more light on the potential negative consequences of child care problems for mothers.

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Table 1. Maternal Labor Force Status by Number of Child Care Failures					
	In Labor Force		Median of Usual Hours per Week ^a		
Number of care failures ^b	Year 3	Year 5	Year 3	Year 5	
0	86.61	86.44	40	35	
1 or 2	91.98	86.97	40	40	
3, 4 or 5	87.93	85.12	35	40	
6 or more	76.47	93.33	35	40	
<i>N</i>	1,534	1,959	1,343	1,692	
^a Conditional on being in the labor force					
^b Calculated at year 1 for year 3 labor force status and hours and at year 3 for year 5 status and hours					

Table 2. Maternal Labor Force Status by Number of Episodes of Missed Work					
	In Labor Force		Median of Usual Hours per Week ^a		
Number of episodes of missed work ^b	Year 3	Year 5	Year 3	Year 5	
0	87.43	86.60	40	40	
1 or 2	88.80	85.15	40	40	
3, 4 or 5	90.57	87.34	36	40	
6 or more	91.67	92.31	40	25	
<i>N</i>	1,534	1,963	1,343	1,695	
^a Conditional on being in the labor force					
^b Calculated at year 1 for year 3 labor force status and hours and at year 3 for year 5 status and hours					