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A profile of child care arrangements in the United States

Who Cares for the Children?

by Roger Neugebauer

Continuing a trend launched in the 1970s, care arrangements for US children continue to become more and more formalized. Gone are the Ozzie and Harriet days when most mothers stayed home to take care of their 2.5 children. In the 1950s and '60s, the vast majority of preschool children were cared for exclusively by parents and relatives. Today three out of four children are cared for by relatives or in centers for at least part of the day.

Care by Parents

Today less than one in four parents are the sole source of care for their preschool children (see Table A). In the 1980s this trend for more parents to reach out for help with childrearing responsibilities was driven primarily by the rise of women with young children in the workforce. In the 1990s, with the growing public awareness of the developmental importance of the early years, increasing numbers of parents also enrolled their children in care outside the home for educational reasons.

In our society, "care by parents," of course, typically means "care by mothers." At the outset of the 1990s there was some evidence that men were becoming more liberated and taking on more responsibility for child care. From 1988 to 1991, the percentage of fathers caring for their children while mothers worked increased by 33% (see Table B). However, two years later when the new statistics came out, father care had declined to nearly 1988 levels. In retrospect it was clear that the high unemployment rates in 1990 and 1991 had simply made more fathers available for this responsibility.

Care by Relatives

Relatives are becoming increasingly involved in the care of preschool children. The percentage of relatives caring for preschool children increased by over one third in the 1990s (see Table A). This is impressive in an age where families are far less likely than in the past to all live in the same community.

Two out of every three relatives caring for preschoolers are grandmothers. Not only are more grandparents caring for children for part of the day, more and more of them are involved in taking these children to and from other child care arrangements. Centers, for example, report that grandparents are increasingly replacing parents as the center's point of family contact.

White families are less likely to turn to grandparents for help than are Black and Hispanic families. Over 20% of Black and Hispanic parents rely on grandparents for some childrearing, whereas less than 15% of white parents do (US Census Bureau).

Care by Non-Relatives

Care by non-relatives (family child care providers, nannies, and babysitters) has been vacillating. It grew as a child care choice from 1991 to 1995, and then declined nearly back to the 1991 level by 1999 (see Table A).

Even within this category there have been changes. In 1999, four out of five children in non-relative care was in a family child care setting (Hofferth). However, family child care is currently declining as an option. From 1988 to 1993, the percentage of working mothers with preschool

children utilizing family child care declined by nearly 30% (see Table B).

Care in Centers

By the end of the 20th century, center care was clearly the care of choice for families in the United States. In 1999, three out of five three-, four-, and five-year old children were spending part of their day in early childhood centers — either in part day nursery schools, preschools, or Head Start programs, or in full day child care centers (Table A).

From 1975, when the child care boom started, until today, center care has moved from the least popular form of care to the most popular (*Inside Child Care*). Today, 5 million three-, four-, and five-year old children are enrolled in child care centers (US Department of Education).

Parents looking for center care are presented with a wide variety of choices — from a small community non profit to a larger center operated by a national chain; from a center housed in a church to one operated by one's employer; from a neighborhood *mom and pop* center to a preschool in the public schools; from a center operated by the local YMCA to a Head Start Center operated by the local CAP agency (see Table C).

The distribution of centers has remained diverse, without significant shifts for nearly 30 years (*Inside Child Care*). Today about 35% of all centers are operated on a for profit basis; in 1975 about 40% were. In 1955 about 54% of all centers were operated independently (either on a for profit or a non profit basis), and today well over 50% are still operated independently (Neugebauer).

While two out of three centers continue to be operated on a non profit basis, the mix of center-types within this sector has shifted a bit with the public schools playing a much bigger role year by year.

Looking Ahead

Viewing recent trends in the provision of child care services for US families, there is little reason to believe that the same trends will not continue to evolve. While a continuing recession may dampen the growth of care outside the home, as the economy recharges, it is likely that a increasing share of preschool children will be cared for outside the home, and that parents will continue to select more formal forms of care.

References

Hofferth, S., et al. (1995). "Characteristics of Children's Early Care and Education Programs: Data from the 1995 National

Table A

Child Care Arrangements of Preschool Children

	1991	1995	1999
Parents Only	31.0	25.9	23.3
Relatives	16.9	19.4	23.1
Non-Relatives	14.8	16.9	15.9
Centers	52.8	55.1	59.3

Percentage of all three, four, and five year-olds in various child care arrangements in USA. Note: Totals add up to more than 100% as some children participate in more than one form of care. *(Source: US Department of Education)*

The Economic Impact of Child Care

The National Child Care Association, an Exchange Strategic Partner, just released the results of its study, "The National Economic Impacts of the Child Care Sector." Interesting findings include . . .

- In 2001 Americans spent approximately $38 billion a year on licensed child care programs . . . . Expenditures on licensed care will be even higher in 2002 — likely exceeding $41 billion. As a result . . . the sector creates enough income to support approximately 2.8 million direct, indirect, and induced jobs, of which about one-third are in the child care industry itself. In addition, the sector generates almost $9 billion in tax revenues.
- The licensed child care industry directly employs more Americans than public secondary schools, and is directly responsible for twice as many jobs as the farming sector.
- Whether by choice or because of economic need, women play a crucial role in financially supporting their families. Approximately 55% of working women are responsible for half or more of their household's income, with almost 20% the sole family provider. Even among employed women in married couples, almost 50% contributed half or more of their family's earnings.
- Child care provides an essential infrastructure which enables mothers and fathers to be employed outside the home and earn necessary income. By making it possible for parents to work, the formal child care sector enables Americans to earn more than $100 billion annually.
- By the year 2010 the US is expected to add another 1.2 million children aged four and under, a 6% increase. Unless the formal child care sector likewise adds sufficient, affordable capacity, parents will not be able to fully participate in the US economy. As a result, growth will be slowed and family incomes will decline.

To view and print an executive summary of the NCCA study, go to www.NCCAnet.org.

Table B

Trends in Child Care Arrangements

	1991	1993	1995
Care by Fathers	15	20	16
Family Day Care	24	18	17
Centers	26	23	30

Percentage of children under the age of six with working mothers in selected child care arrangements. *(Source: US Census Bureau)*

Household Education Survey." US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Child Care Information Exchange. (2000). *Inside Child Care: Trend Report 2000*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press, Inc.

Neugebauer, R. (March, 2000). "Non Profit Child Care: A Powerful Worldwide Movement," *Child Care Information Exchange*.

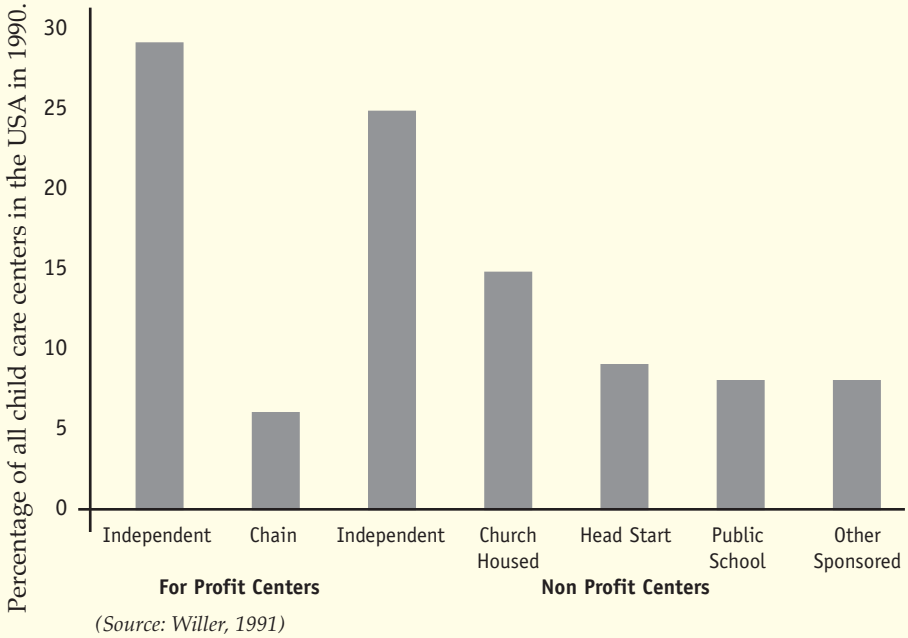
US Census Bureau, Current Population Report #P70-53, "Who's Minding the Children?"

US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *(Digest of Education Statistics 2000).*

For more articles on Trends in Child Care or to order *Inside Child Care: Trend Report 2000*, please visit our web site: www.ChildCareExchange.com.

Table C

Use of Child Care Centers by Legal Status



(Source: Willer, 1991)