

Is Targeting Formal Childcare the Best Way to Meet the Needs of Families in Britain?

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Abstract The overall aim of this paper is to examine the types and combinations of childcare being used by parents in Britain, and to compare how this childcare usage may vary between families, in order to critically examine parental childcare needs. The three specific research questions were: 1) ‘What types and combinations of childcare are being used by families?’, 2) ‘What are the socio-demographic comparisons between families using and not using childcare?’ And 3) ‘How do types of childcare vary between families?’. These questions were addressed by carrying out a secondary analysis of large-scale nationally representative datasets which provide information about patterns of childcare usage in the UK. Two main datasets were used: the Family Resources Survey and the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents, with analysis carried out for the years 2008 to 2013. The analysis carried out comes from a wider study seeking to examine the provision and use of preschool childcare in Britain. The findings show that despite policies to increase the use of formal childcare, parents continue to be reliant on informal care, especially grandparents, to supplement their childcare needs. Furthermore, childcare use is not equally distributed, but is related to family circumstances. For example formal care is used more by employed, higher income families, whilst informal care is used more by mothers who are not employed, less well educated and by younger mothers. The results overall suggest that formal and informal childcare in combination will better support maternal employment. Future government policy needs to address supporting this mixed provision. The data however says nothing about parental childcare preferences which are needed to unpack the observed patterns of childcare usage in the UK.

Keywords: *early childhood education, childcare, early childhood policy, secondary analysis*

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1. Introduction

From September 2017 the UK government will implement plans to provide 30 hours ‘free’ *formal* childcare to all families with three and four year olds, supported by research that good quality affordable childcare is key to encouraging women back into employment. These childcare policies are based on an assumption that formal (usually paid for) services are key to achieving the desired educational and development outcomes for young children. However, recent evidence suggests children in the UK do not have access to childcare of a sufficient standard to achieve desired developmental outcomes [1].

This paper contributes to these important debates through examining patterns of childcare use for different families in Britain. By carrying out this analysis we wanted to find out what childcare was being used in Britain in order to inform debates surrounding the impact of targeting government resources towards only formal childcare provision.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

In the UK, ‘childcare’ is a marketised system that embodies neoliberal rationality, making it the private responsibility of parent-consumers [2]. Uptake of formal childcare is reported to vary considerable according to income group across European countries, with the least use by families in the lowest income quintile (the poorest) - for the UK, 20% of children up to 3 years of age cared for in formal care come from the lowest quintile, which increases to 53% of children in the highest income quintile [3]: 38]. OECD data show that public expenditure on childcare in the UK was 0.5% of GDP on early childhood services compared to 0.7–1.1% in the Nordic countries with higher maternal employment levels and lower levels of child poverty [4].

Despite the different way in which childcare is provided in the UK (through market forces rather than a state service), the UK government remains committed to supporting ‘good quality, affordable childcare’, with the

emphasis on the value of formal preschool childcare, not least because children's access to good quality affordable childcare reduces their long-term risk of poverty [1]. For example, a report laying out plans for an expansion of childcare describes its benefits as follows: "More great childcare is vital to ensuring we can compete in the global race, by helping parents back to work and rearing children for school and, eventually, employment. And it can help build a stronger society, with more opportunities for women who want to work and raise children at the same time, and better life chances for children whatever their background". [[5]: 6].

To achieve the goals above, in June 2015, the UK government created the Childcare Implementation Taskforce December 2015 to increase provision of free childcare and in December 2015 the Childcare Bill set the government's election manifesto commitment to giving families where parents are working (at least 16 hours per week) an entitlement to 30 hours of free childcare for their three- and four-year olds [6]. This free childcare place entitlement will be fully implemented in September 2017. Additionally, in November 2015 the government announced it would invest an extra £1 billion per year by 2019-20 in the early education entitlements [6]. The impetus behind these childcare policies is an economic one: to increase maternal labour market participation and support parents to work more hours by improving the affordability of childcare, especially for those not currently using childcare because of a perceived cost barrier.

This ideology was set out in the government document 'Fixing the Foundations: Creating a more prosperous nation' in which it was stated that there are too many people for whom there are unfair or distorting barriers to work, including women whose high levels of skill are too often underused [7]. However, while use of childcare has risen over the past 30 years in line with increased female labour participation, the uptake has not just been of formal childcare. Moreover, recent evidence suggests much of the rise in the use of formal childcare since 1999 has been in part-time places and that consequently some of the rise in childcare reflects informal childcare being used in conjunction with formal childcare [8]. It was this combination in childcare use by parents and/or carers that we were interested in exploring further and on which we discuss the key findings for in this paper.

3. Materials and Methods

The overall aim of this paper is to examine the types and combinations of childcare being used by parents in Britain, and to compare how this childcare usage may vary between families, in order to critically examine parental childcare needs. The paper reports on part of a wider secondary analysis study 'The provision and use of childcare in Britain' examining national statistics between 2005 and 2014. This paper sets out to address three specific research questions: 1) 'What types and combinations of childcare are being used by families?', 2) 'What are the socio-demographic comparisons between families using and not using childcare?' And 3) 'How do types of childcare vary between families?'. We did this by

carrying out a secondary analysis of large-scale nationally representative datasets which provide information about patterns of childcare usage in the UK.

The datasets we used were the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents (CEYSP) and the Family Resources Survey (FRS) between 2006 and 2011 (the latest year available at the time of carrying out this analysis). While the FRS covers the whole of the UK, the CEYSP covers England only. This means geographical coverage between the two data sources is not consistent. However, both sources are useful (in different ways) for examining childcare usage (more discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of using these datasets is described elsewhere, [9]).

For the FRS, just under 4,000 cases of families with children aged 0-4 years were identified for each survey year from 2008 through to 2013. These were sufficient sample sizes for some year on year analysis without needing to combine survey years. Children could be using more than one type of care, so for the questions concerned with the types of childcare used, the analyses were conducted at the 'childcare level'. For example, the proportion of all childcare that is grandparent care - rather than the proportion of children being looked after by grandparents. For other questions concerned with comparing the demographic characteristics of mothers using and not using childcare, the analysis was conducted at the 'child level'. For example, the proportion of pre-school children with mothers qualified to degree level or above.

The CEYSP study aims to provide information to help monitor the progress of policies and public attitudes in the area of childcare and early years education in England. The data provide detailed information about what childcare is used by different types of families through two sets of data: family-level information about childcare used by all children in the sampled addresses and child-level information about a randomly selected child within that address.

This randomly selected child is selected at the sampling stage. The main difference between the two CEYSP samples is that the selected child is the focus of the detailed childcare section of the questionnaire. Our analysis used the data for the selected child rather than the 'all family' dataset because it provided more detailed information about childcare. Around 3,000 cases per survey year provided information about the randomly selected children aged 0-4 years between 2008 and 2013. The child weight variable from the dataset was used to gross the sample to represent the population.

We aimed to explore the types and combinations of childcare families use, to compare the socio-demographic characteristics of families using childcare with those that have preschool children, but who do not make use of childcare, and to examine variations in childcare types being used. These analysis themes are addressed in turn in this paper before discussing the implications of these findings for future childcare policy development. The interest in comparing families using and not using childcare is in order to inform understandings about what may encourage take-up of childcare in the future and where resources for childcare may be best placed.

4. Results

4.1. What Types and Combinations of Childcare are Being Used By Families?

The FRS showed in 2012-13 that 68% (2,462) of families with children aged 0-4 years were using some form of childcare (consistent proportion across the other survey years). For the same year, the CEYSP reports 89% (2,382) of children aged 0-4 years were in some form of childcare. Around half of families used more than one type of childcare (the FRS for 2012-13 showed 42% of families used more than one type of childcare, [Figure 1](#)). The single largest category of usage by families was care by grandparents (FRS 2012-13 showed 31% of all usage is by grandparents). Families combining different types of childcare typically used grandparents plus some formal provision. These findings support research by Bryson et al. [\[8\]](#) suggesting that formal childcare is not being used instead of informal care but rather that formal childcare is being used in combination with informal childcare.

After grandparents, ‘education or other formal childcare setting’ was the highest proportion reported being used by parents/carers in the FRS (22% in 2012-13). ‘Education or other formal childcare setting’ is a category we have created using the following given categories in the dataset: "Nursery school"; "Infant school (Reception)"; "Infant school (Nursery)"; "Primary school (Reception)"; "Primary school (Nursery)"; "Out of school club"; "Holiday scheme"; "Family/combined centre"; "Boarding school". A quarter of all childcare used was ‘Playgroup or pre-schools’ (14%) or ‘Day nursery or crèches’ (13%) and only six per cent of childcare was a ‘childminder & nanny/au pair’ ([Figure 2](#): the percentages add up to more than 100% because the childcare options are not mutually exclusive and respondents could select more than one option). These findings were consistent over time. A similar proportion of grandparents used for childcare (around a third) was also reported in the CEYP but unlike the FRS, the use of grandparents for childcare is second only to ‘education or other formal childcare setting’ in the percentage use.

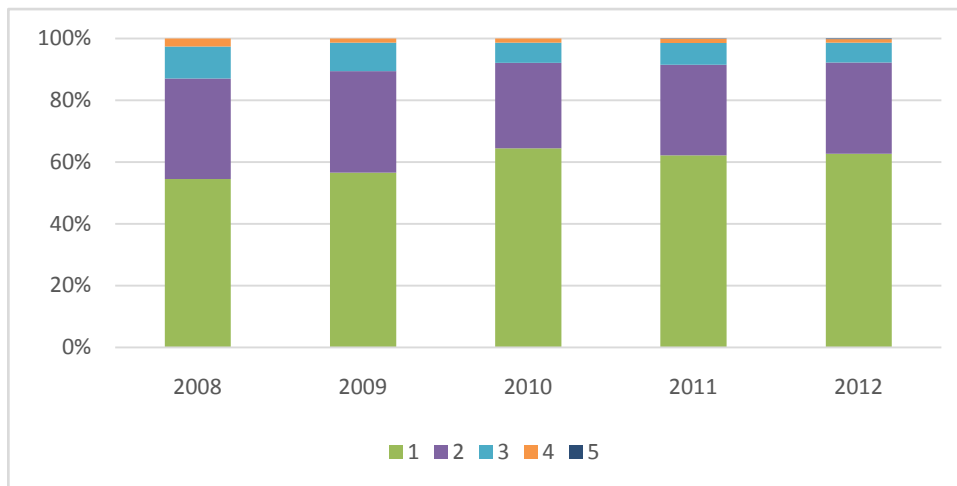


Figure 1. Comparing childcare that comprises one source or multiple sources (e.g. grandparents, with different types of formal provision), in percentages (CEYSP 2008-12 Department for Education 2014)

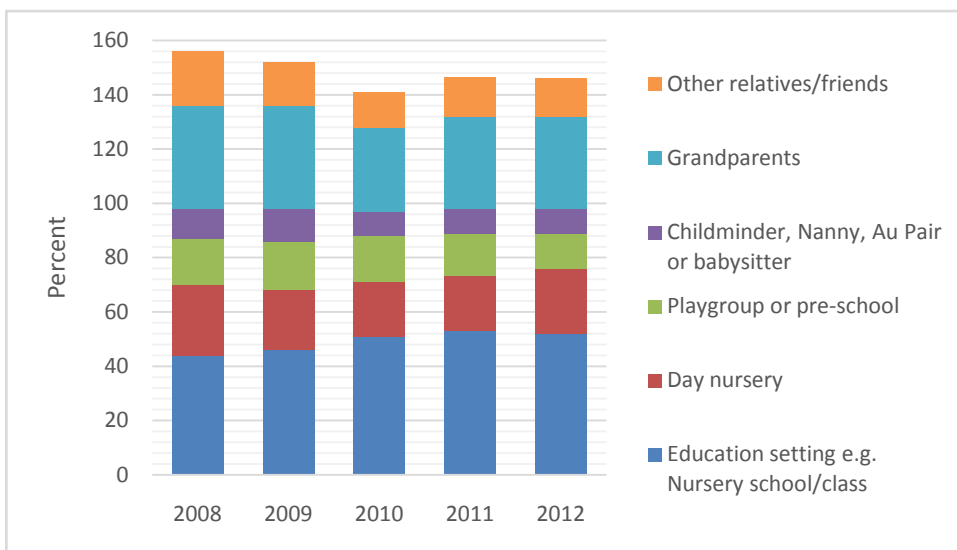


Figure 2. Types of childcare used by families with preschool children (FRS, 2008-12)¹

¹ Day nursery or crèche is a category given in the FRS and not our title.

4.2. What are the Socio-Demographic Comparisons between Families Using and Not Using Childcare?

Earlier research suggested that childcare use is associated with family work status [10,11], maternal age, maternal education and household income [8], so our analysis focused on these factors in relation to childcare usage. In line with Bryson et al. [8], we identified that childcare usage is not evenly distributed but is related to family circumstances. For example, from our analysis of the FRS 2010-11, we found that formal childcare is used more by employed, higher income families whereas informal care is used more by mothers who are not employed and by younger mothers. Couples where both partners were in employment were also most likely to use childcare (Figure 3).

4.3. How do Types of Childcare Vary Between Families?

Part-time childcare use – for 25 hours or less – varies according to hours worked by mothers, from 20% of

mothers working full-time (35 hours or more per week) using more than 40 hours of childcare to four per cent of mothers working part-time using more than 40 hours of childcare. Households where the child’s mother was working part-time have been found to be the most likely to be using some form of childcare [11]. Our analysis of the CEYP supports this, showing children’s length of time spent in childcare increases with hours of maternal employment and is greater in working couples (e.g. 19% usage where both are working) or for working lone families (25% usage) than for non-working families (13% usage for non-working couples and 14% for non-working lone parents). This pattern was consistent over time.

Analysis by Bryson et al. [8]: 75 found that “preschool children whose mothers have Higher Education qualifications are least likely to be looked after by their grandparents (either solely or in combination with other childcare) than other preschool children”. Our analysis of the CEYSP corresponded with that by Bryson et al [8], showing that the use of grandparents increased with higher levels of maternal education. Use of grandparents for childcare was greatest among mothers with less education.

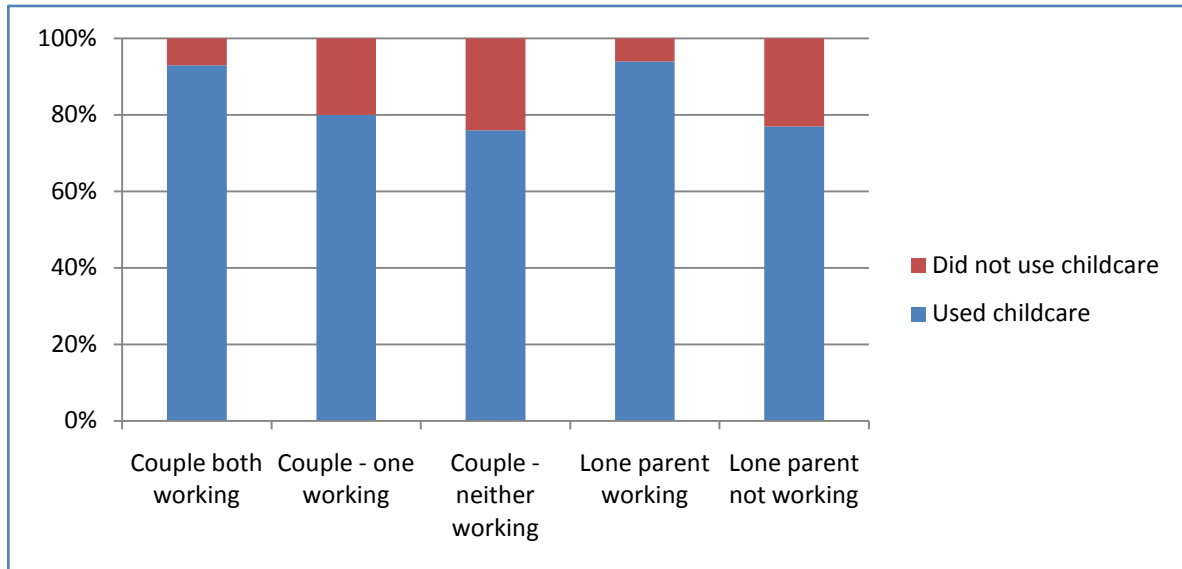


Figure 3. Childcare use by parental work status (CEYSP 2012 Department for Education 2014)

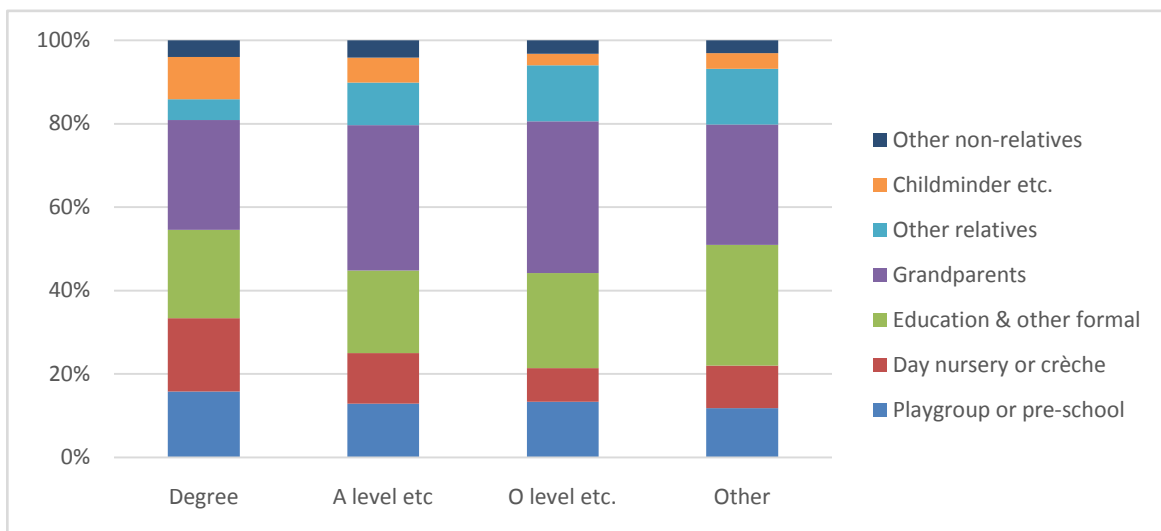


Figure 4. Types of childcare used by families with preschool children by highest level of maternal education (FRS 2012)

While the analysis by Bryson et al. [8] was confined to comparing 'centre based' childcare with care by grandparents, we analysed more childcare types in order to examine variations within formal and informal childcare types. Our analysis of the FRS for example identified variations of use by maternal education between formal childcare types (Figure 4): a higher proportion of childcare arrangements for mothers educated to 'Higher educational qualification below degree level/A levels/BTECS/ONC' and 'O/GCSE equiv. (A-C) or GCSE grade D-G' was 'Playgroup or pre-school' (16% compared to 14% of all childcare arrangements) or 'Day nursery or crèche' (18% compared to 13% of all childcare arrangements) or a 'childminder & nanny/au pair' (10% compared to 6% of all childcare arrangements).

Our analysis of the FRS also showed the type of childcare used also varies with the age of mothers so that a higher proportion of childcare arrangements for older mothers (aged 45 years or over) were 'education or other formal childcare services' (42% compared with 22% of all childcare arrangements) and a 'childminder/au pair' (11% compared to 6% of all childcare arrangements).

In contrast, a higher proportion of childcare arrangements for younger mothers (aged 16-24) involved 'Grandparents' (41% compared to 31% of all childcare arrangements) or 'Other relatives' (20% compared with 10% of all childcare arrangements). This pattern is also found by other research in Scotland which reported 'younger mothers were particularly likely to be using grandparents for childcare' [[11]: 162] and research by Bryson et al [[8]: 74] which also found that 'Children of younger mothers (under 30) were more likely to be looked after by their grandparents than children with older mothers'.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Our analysis has been valuable for highlighting variations within types of formal childcare provision by these factors which suggests it is too crude to compare 'centre based' childcare provision with informal care. This is especially important when relating this analysis, which comes from a 'demand side' perspective, with analysis about the childcare workforce (which is about provision) from sources such as the Labour Force Survey and The Childcare and Early Years Providers Survey which is not generally not grouped into centre-based or non-centred based childcare types.

The analysis carried out by us and earlier research demonstrates that patterns of childcare use are not uniform but vary by a range of socio-demographic factors between families, especially by income, maternal education, maternal age and work status. However, some of these associations are difficult to unpack because they are conflated with other factors. For example, differential type of childcare use by maternal education can partly be explained by the fact that older mothers are more likely to work full time and to be higher earners. Income and work status (including hours worked) have been found to be associated with greater use of formal childcare. It is possible also that the lower use of informal childcare by older mothers could be to do with children in such families having older mothers who may be less able or willing to take on a major childcare role. What would help with unpacking these findings would be information on

childcare preferences in order to understand what may be motivating the patterns of childcare usage we found and if parents prefer to use this combination or are forced into using this combination because current childcare provision is insufficient to meet their needs or preferences.

A possible attraction of using informal childcare in combination with formal provision is that it is often provided not for a fixed amount of time, and can therefore be used flexibly around formal childcare [12], which may be particularly needed for parents working atypical hours [13]. However, data on childcare preferences is currently not available and is an area for further research that is very much needed [8].

Despite policies to support the use of formal childcare, parents continue to use informal childcare, especially grandparents, to supplement their childcare needs. Although parents are not asked about reasons for their choice of care in the national data sources, it seems plausible that grandparents may be covering the gaps in formal childcare provision. Informal childcare might be a particularly attractive option for those parents struggling to afford the soaring costs of UK childcare [14], especially unemployed and younger mothers whom we found were most likely to use informal childcare.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to examine childcare usage patterns in Britain and to compare families using childcare with those not making use of childcare. This paper uniquely brings together analysis from several large-scale datasets to address three key questions: 1) 'What types and combinations of childcare are being used by families?', 2) 'What are the socio-demographic comparisons between families using and not using childcare?' and 3) 'How do types of childcare vary between families?'. These questions matter because they help inform understandings of the types of provision that are needed by families so that governments can target resources in an appropriate way.

Our finding of families using multiple sources of childcare has potential implications on the number of hours mothers can work because it necessitates more time for mothers to take their children to and from different childcare providers. A lack of access to flexible childcare may force parents to choose low-quality part-time jobs, trade down roles or leave work altogether, which would place more parents at risk of poverty [1]. The recent UK government policy of extending the free childcare provision to 30 hours for three and four year olds will not address these concerns around flexibility unless this provision can be used by families to provide wrap-around services for those working a variety of hours [15].

The childcare market makes preschool childcare the private responsibility of parent-consumers, and yet parents are limited by the availability of quality childcare at times which are suitable to them – a point that is especially important for parents working atypical hours. Furthermore, there are significant gaps in state supported benefits for those parents who are looking for work or skills building through education and training [1] which mean parents in these situations face greater potential risk of poverty.

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Statement of Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests.

List of Abbreviations

Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents (CEYSP)
 Family Resources Survey (FRS)
 Labour Force Survey (LFS)
 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

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