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# Quality Child Care From A Parental Perspective

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**Quality Child Care From A Parental Perspective**

**A Thesis**

**Presented to the Department of Sociology**

**and the**

**Faculty of the Graduate College**

**University of Nebraska**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirement for the Degree**

**Master of Arts**

**University of Nebraska at Omaha**

**by**

**Ann Greathouse**

**July 30, 1996**

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# THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

## Committee

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**Department/School**

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*Mary Ann Raven*

**Date**

*7/30/96*

## **Abstract**

This thesis addresses the issue of quality care from a parental perspective. It is based on interviews with thirty parents in a Midwestern city who have children in different forms of child care: 10 with children in agency child care; 10 with children in registered child care homes; and 10 with children in unregistered child care homes.

Lengthy semi-structured interviews were conducted with the thirty parents. Questions explored the criteria parents used in deciding who was the right child care provider for them. Included in the interview were four hypothetical situations in which the interviewee was asked to advise other parents about choosing child care. The hypothetical situations were used to probe further into what a parent considers important in determining quality child care.

Parents view quality child care differently than child care professionals and early childhood educators. The factors which professionals include in quality care are: group size; staff ratios; physical space; care-giver training; and curriculum. These factors are not the main indicators of quality care for the parents in this study.

From this study it was determined that quality care for children is defined by parents according to their own values and perceptions about what is good for children. Parents who place children in agency day care want their child to be socially adjusted. It is important to them that their children learn to succeed in a group environment. They want their child to be given the best training for social adaptation. Parents who place children in unregistered child care want a home environment for their child. They are seeking a loving, caring environment. These parents want specific traits in a provider. The traits they sought were

nurturing traits such as being loving, caring, understanding and compassionate. Parents who place children in registered child care also want a home environment with qualities similar to child's home. They want to know that their child is being cared for by someone who loves and cares for the child. However, they also want certain health and cleanliness standards to be upheld. By seeking a registered home for their child's care, they know the state will guarantee that this home meets certain stipulations.

Convenience and access were considerations, especially for single parents, but subsidiary to basic values about the appropriate environment for a child. Cost was not an important consideration, perhaps because the sample was above the U.S. median in income or because in this particular locale parents were able to find child care that was affordable for them.

The study had certain limitations: only mothers participated; the sample was small and non-random; participants were almost entirely those who were favorable to their current child care provider; and the interviewing and interpretation of the data were the work of only one person. Nevertheless, the conclusion that parents' definitions of child care quality vary so dramatically from those of child care experts suggests the importance of further research, as well as a rethinking of child care policy.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

Child care in America has become a topic of great debate in the 1990s. We don't have to look far, in the newspapers or magazines we read, to find something written about child care. Even special television programs have devoted time to the issues of child care. Most media agree, however, on one point: child care has become a social problem in America. Child care has become a social problem because of the immense increase in the number of children in child care each day and the growing sense that it is society's responsibility to ensure that there is an adequate supply of quality child care. Parents are concerned about their children's welfare and the quality of care their children receive. Many laws have been enacted to control the quality of day-care that is offered.

This study investigates parents who have children in different forms of child care arrangements. The sample is of thirty parents from a Midwest city. The focus of the study is quality child care from a parental perspective.

#### **Child Care: Contemporary Patterns of Child Care**

The American family has gone through significant changes since the 1970's. One of the changes is the increase in the number of families where both mother and father are employed outside the home. Because of this, many of the children of these families are being cared for by someone other than their parents. Day-care is becoming a way of life for many small children.

Three main influences have caused the change in the traditional family roles:

(1) economic conditions have made it necessary in many cases for the mother to work to maintain the family's standard of living; (2) the divorce rate has increased, thus, there are more single parents who have to be provider and primary care-giver; and (3) the women's movement has had an influence, as women strive to achieve equality with men in the work place (Hayes et. al., 1990). For whatever reason, many children are in the care of adults other than their parents, and the parents of these children must arrange for the care of their children.

Presser (1988) found in dual-earner American couples that while fathers and relatives provide a large proportion of care, almost half of the children under age five were cared for by non-relatives. More and more of America's children are being cared for in some form of day-care setting. The most recent statistics (1988) show that approximately 13.3 million children under school age in the United States need someone else to care for them (Ahlburg and DeVita, 1992). It is obvious that child care has become a necessary part of the American family's way of life.

Although parents may have concerns about the quality of care for their children, they have few alternatives other than to rely on child care. Issues concerning child care tend to center round the quality of care given.

In my research I would like to determine how parents ascertain the type of day-care they want for their children. Why do they choose the type of day-care that they do? What do parents evaluate as being quality care for their children?

## **Child Care in America: A Review of Literature**

### History of Child Care in America

Child care is not new in this country; it dates back well over a century. The following is a brief history of child care given by Valerie Suransky in her book The Erosion of Childhood (1982).

The growth of the day nursery in the latter part of the nineteenth century came from the child care needs of mothers who, out of economic necessity, were forced to work. They were usually single or deserted mothers. Wealthy upper-class women became interested in the plight of the young children of these single women, and also wanted to help the working mother. Day nurseries flourished during this period. The day nursery was also used for immigrants' children, who were left alone because their mothers and fathers were forced to take what work was available. The day nursery helped to socialize the poor, including the immigrants. "The day nursery was a social welfare philanthropic institution and an attempt to 'school' the poor in the moral training grounds of the center" (p. 43).

There was a shift in attitudes about day nurseries in the 1920s, when professionals such as preschool teachers and professional social workers, entered the field. "The result was that the day nursery came under close scrutiny by a group whose philosophy and predispositions were unsympathetic to the notion that a mother should work and that a child should be cared for outside his home in a group setting" (p. 45). There was a loss of

interest in the plight of the poor and a growing belief that a mother's place was in the home.

During World War II, women were needed in the factories to replace the men who were at war. Child care centers reemerged and the prejudice toward working mothers diminished. However, after the war, thousands of child care centers were shut down, as mothers returned home to care for their children. Again, the prevailing attitude was that child care was for the poor. This attitude existed well into the 1960s. In the last two decades the women's movement has had a strong influence on society's current ideas about child care. Child care is not only for the poor, but has become a necessary way of life for women who have to work and a welcome service for women who choose to work (Suransky, 1982 pp. 42-46).

#### Current Utilization of Child Care

To meet the need for child care there are various arrangements from which parents can choose: (1) child care centers, which are establishments set up to take large numbers of children and care for them during the day (they may be for profit or non-profit); (2) family day-care homes, where the woman of the home takes a few children into her home to care and nurture (these homes may be regulated or unregulated); (3) preschools, where children receive some education as well as care, (4) before-school and after-school programs, where children are cared for at the school; (5) care for children in their home by a nanny or baby-sitting service; (6) care by relatives, such as grandmother and grandfather

or an aunt ; and (7) Head Start programs, federally funded programs that provide care for children whose families qualify financially for assistance from the government.

There is much diversity among the types of child care described above; there is even greater diversity within each group of child care alternatives. An example of this diversity is the child care center. Child care centers can be very different in their philosophy, practice, physical facilities and so on. The quality of child care arrangements can vary, ranging from very poor to very good depending on whether the child's developmental needs are being met.

Most American children in day-care are being cared for in centers where there are large numbers of children, or they are cared for in someone's home in small groups (Booth, 1992). In centers, children are most often grouped by age, whereas in family child care, they are all grouped together, more like a family setting. The number of child care centers in the nation has increased tremendously since 1970. A recent survey indicates that there are approximately 64,078 licensed centers (Booth, 1992).

Research on the national level shows there is a shortage of child care settings (Hayes et al., 1990). However, Sandra Hofferth (1992) believes the supply and demand for child care are equal. She draws this conclusion because of two reasons: (1) one does not find preschool-age children taking care of themselves and (2) the price of child care is not increasing. She states, "there is always one more person out there who is willing to care for another child" (p. 5).

Flanery (1992) explored the shortage of family child care for children in the Omaha metropolitan area. He suggested that there is a waiting list of parents who want home-based child care providers. Flanery's findings would indicate that locating the desired day-care that a parent wants for their child may not be easy even if supply and demand are in overall balance. It may be that the particular type of care parents are seeking is what is hard to find.

### Child Care in Nebraska

While one can learn a great deal about trends in child care by reviewing national statistics, one needs to look at specific region and state information to understand child care trends in these areas.

To date, Nebraska has had a few studies on child care. Nebraska's child care studies helped to decide policy and regulation of child care services in the state. These studies were sponsored by the Center of Public Affairs at the University of Nebraska and conducted by Drs. Patricia Funk (1988, 1990) and Christine Reed (1988). "In 1987 there were an estimated 72,500 preschool-age children (five years and under) whose mothers were in the Nebraska labor force, and who therefore needed some kind of day-care arrangement" (Reed, 1988, p. 37).

In a later survey, it was found that an estimated seventy-two percent of Nebraska's preschool children were in a regular child care arrangement (Funk, 1990). The national estimate for child care in 1988 was sixty-two percent. In the survey conducted in Nebraska, it was found that fifty-seven percent of the children under age one were in child



care compared to fifty percent for the United States as a whole (Hayes et al., 1990). Thus, not only did Nebraska have a higher rate of children in day-care as compared to the national average, but the children were entering child care at an earlier age than occurs nationwide (Funk, 1990).

In Nebraska there are basically five types of child care other than traditional parental care: (1) care by the extended family; (2) unlicensed day-care in the home; (3) licensed day-care in the home; (4) formally organized day-care centers; and (5) institutionally-based day-care provided by schools and employers (Funk, 1990).

Both national surveys and those conducted in Nebraska show that most preschool children were in home-based rather than center-based care arrangements. In Nebraska, home-based care for children represented seventy-nine percent of child care arrangements, while for the nation it was sixty-six percent. However, as one can see from the percentages presented, both the Nebraska and the United States percentages are high for home-based care compared to center-based care (Funk, 1990).

It seems that parents are "making a statement" by their choice of day-care. By choosing informal, home-based care for their children, they appear to be saying that they want their children in a family setting as opposed to an institutional setting. Does their choice reflect what they value as quality?

In Funk's (1990) survey parents were asked: "why they chose their current child care arrangement" (p. 18). She found that with the different types of day-care available to

the parents, sixty-one percent made their choice based on quality of care, while thirty-nine percent made their choice for logistical reasons.

Findings from Nebraska's surveys are consistent with information from the 1990 National Child Care Survey. This survey showed that sixty percent of parents believed that quality of care was the most important factor in their choice of a day-care provider. Of those who indicated that quality of care was important, the most significant factor in the choice was a provider characteristic. The most valued characteristic of the provider was that of being warm and loving (Hofferth, 1992).

### Effects of Child Care

At this time in America's history, non-parental child care is a thriving business. However, one can only wonder what effect it will have on children who are brought up in child care centers away from the nurturing of their mother or family at home.

There has been a great deal of research on the effects of child care on children. Much of this research was done during the 1970s and early 1980s. The research falls into three broad areas: (1) cognitive development, (2) attachment of mother and child, and (3) social development.

### **Cognitive Development**

Most researchers in this area agree that preschool-age children who attend child care are not hindered intellectually. Most studies show that children in child care programs do as well on intellectual testing as those who have not been in child care. They do as well on IQ tests, eye-hand coordination, counting, and reciting information, such as their name

and address. The research suggests, however, that these children do not have a permanent head start intellectually over those who did not attend child care or preschool. By the time they have completed first grade, children who did not attend a preschool program have caught up (Clarke-Stewart, 1992).

Researchers also found that social class is an important factor in understanding cognitive development. This research indicates that if children were from economically advantaged homes, child care made little difference in their cognitive development. But, if they were from economically disadvantaged homes and were placed in a high-quality child care program, they were consistently more advanced in cognitive development than their counterparts being cared for in their homes (Hayes *et. al.*, 1990). Belsky (1981) found, concerning cognitive development of middle class children, that home-reared children did not differ from children in care on indices of intellectual development.

### **Attachment**

There have been many studies regarding attachment security of children who are placed in child care. One needs an understanding of what attachment is to understand the importance of it in an infant's life. Attachment is defined as "an affectionate bond between two individuals that endures through space and time and serves to join them emotionally" (Falberg, 1979). Falberg expands on this definition by explaining that attachment is "the bond that a child develops to the person who cares for him in his early years and is the foundation for his future relationships with others" (p. 5). Falberg explains that parent/child interactions have an influence on the child's developing nervous system during

that first year. If a child is not well attached during this time, he often has poor cognitive development.

The findings regarding security attachment of children in child care are best related to children who enter child care during the first year of their life. For older children starting child care, the child care experience does not seem to alter their attachment to their mothers. Older children may experience some distress at first, but it is temporary; and beyond a period of adaptation, they do not show any difference in the quality of their attachment (Belsky, 1984).

Belsky (1991) reports "... children whose mothers were employed full-time beginning in their first or second year of life scored more poorly on a composite measure of adjustment than did children whose mothers were not employed during their first three years" (p. 1095). Many researchers agree with Belsky that many infants who start child care full-time during their first year of life show more anxious-avoidant attachment to their mothers than do those who are at home full time with their mothers. What researchers do not agree on is why this pattern of attachment exists. Belsky would suggest that it reflects an undesirable pattern in the mother/child relationship that will have negative effects for later development. Clark-Stewart (1989) suggests a possibility of self-selection factors: the differences between families who choose or do not choose child care in the first year of life.

## **Social Development**

Research on the social relations of children who have been in child care falls into two areas: (1) relations with peers and (2) relations with adults.

Clarke Stewart (1992) suggests that "preschool children who attend child care are likely to be more self-confident, outgoing, assertive and self-sufficient, more comfortable in new situations, less timid and fearful, more helpful and cooperative and more verbally expressive" (p. 65).

Children who have been in child care showed a shift in their social orientation; they prefer their peers to adults. Children who have been in child care show more peer interaction, but also show more conflict in the peer interaction (Hayes *et. al.*, 1990). Research has found a link between the child care experience and heightened aggression and noncompliance. These studies were of children whose child care began in their first year and who were being cared for full time or very close to full time (Belsky, 1992).

## **Quality of Child Care**

Research indicates that the effects of child care are very closely related to the quality of care that the child receives. Quality of care affects both the social and cognitive adjustments of children (Hayes *et. al.*, 1990). However quality of care is a problematic concept because quality is viewed differently by different groups.

A number of researchers look at certain indicators to determine quality. Professionals and early childhood educators define factors that enhance the child care

setting. These include group size, adult/child ratio, physical space and curriculum

(Bianchi, 1990). The particular specifications are as follows:

Group size: Infant to 1 year of age, 6 to 8 per group; 1 year of age to 2 years old, 6 to 12 per group, 3 years of age, 14 to 20 per group; 4 and 5 years old, 16 to 20 per group. These are maximum sizes.

Staff/Child Ratios: For the first 2 years 1:4; 2 years old, 1:6; 3 years old 1:10; 4 and 5 years old 1:10. These are maximum ratios.

Physical Space: Research indicates that the experiences for children are more positive when space is designed for children, orderly and differentiated.

Care-giver Training: Care-giver training, which is specific to child development, is important to a child's experience in child care.

Curriculum Research suggests that daily learning activities are important in the child care settings. Learning activities can be used to compliment unstructured time (Hayes et. al., 1990).

Quality of care is related to both psychological and socioeconomic factors.

According to research, families who are experiencing psychological and/or economical stress usually employ lower quality care for their children. This creates a cyclical effect, because children who receive lower quality care will bring more problems back to an already stressed home (Hayes et al., 1990).

Belsky (1991) cites recent research on child care staffing, done by Whitebrook, Phillips & Howes, 1989, which illustrates that the quality of care, as measured in these terms, is barely adequate as provided by most child care centers in America . In this study, researchers assessed 227 centers in five major metropolitan cities and found that the quality of care given to infants and preschoolers is quite limited.

However, Haskins (1992) reports that there is no scientific knowledge on the frequency of low-quality child care in the United States. He also indicates that there is limited evidence that government regulations would increase the quality of care.

Some of the studies done with regard to quality of care indicate that some parents are not well informed as to what child development experts classify as high quality care. Often parent's decisions about child care are affected by convenience and cost (Maynard and McGinnis, 1992). In a study of parents using proprietary centers, nine percent of the parents did not even visit the center in which they ultimately enrolled their children (Hayes *et. al.*, 1990).

But researchers may be overlooking factors that from the parents' point of view would constitute quality. For example, training of the care-giver may not be an issue of quality to the parents. Instead, parents might include such qualities as the care-giver's warmth toward the child, along with the environment in which the care is given. They might also consider location, and the hours available.

Presser (1992) expresses a concern over how quality is defined. She suggests that it is necessary to expand our idea of quality beyond structural dimensions such as staff/child ratios, education of providers, facility dimensions, etc. Presser reports that researchers know very little about the relationship between quality and price with regard to child care. Presser hypothesizes that the lack of relationship between price and quality might be because researchers measure quality of care in terms of structural terms and parents measure child care quality in terms of a process or outcome. The process for

parents involves a loving environment which creates emotional and intellectual growth for their child. She also indicates that paying more for day-care does not always lead to a higher quality of care however defined.

Suransky's research (1982) illustrates how quality measured within the guidelines of staff/child ratio, education of the provider, and the dimensions of the facility, can be very misleading. She describes visits she made to five different care centers in the Midwest over a two-year period. She spent time at each care center, observing and being involved in the daily activities. She interviewed the staff and the directors. What she found is that Americans are introducing infants and toddlers to institutionalization at early ages. She believes we are taking away a phase of their life which is the childhood stage, by grouping them at an extremely early age into institutions and socializing them as to the expectations of group conformity. In her view, the care center which provided the most rewarding experience for children was the one which was lacking in all the areas specified by the structural guidelines for quality listed above. What was so outstanding in this care center was the way the child could interact in the environment. The relationship between the staff and the children was the one factor that was most important for the children's self esteem, emotional growth and development at this care center.

Eckholm (1992) reports that a new Federal study of child care is being sponsored by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. This study is large in size and broad in its coverage and should provide some further answers to the unanswered



questions concerning the effects of day-care and the quality of day-care. This study began in 1991 and it will take five years to complete.

### **Parents' Decisions about Child Care: A Research Problem**

Quality of child care is very complex and is difficult to measure. The definition of quality child care is problematic because it is viewed differently by those who are concerned with child care. Even though child care experts agree on what factors determine quality child care, parents may include other factors when they determine quality of child care. It is important that research on quality of care consider the factors that a parent feels are important to quality care.

The quality of care a child receives is important to parents. They make the choice of who will provide care for their children. This choice is determined by many factors. Often these factors are determined by family characteristics.

The reasons that one parent chooses a particular child care arrangement may be different from why another parent chooses a different arrangement. Structure and control might be important to one parent, while flexibility is important to another. One parent may want their child to have learning activities, while another parent may feel that they are not necessary. Parents may want a particular type of discipline which they would indicate as a part of quality care. Whatever the reasons may be for choosing a particular type of child care it is the parent who decides the quality of care their child will receive. It is important to learn more about what constitutes quality of care from a parents' perspective. Presser

(1992) indicated that parents measure quality care by a process or out come whereas researchers measure quality care in terms of structural terms.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study explores quality child care from a parental perspective. It investigates those features and characteristics that shape which type of child care parents will seek for their children.

#### **Research Setting**

The research on which this study is based was carried out exclusively in Omaha, Nebraska. Nebraska's child care patterns are different from national trends in child care. Recent research in Nebraska indicates that parents tend to use more home-based day-care than the national average. This is not only true of the rural areas, but also of the metropolitan areas of Nebraska (Funk, 1990).

#### **Qualitative Method**

Parents select their child care provider based on their conceptualization of quality child care and perhaps other considerations such as cost. The goal of my research was to explore how parents conceptualized quality day-care and what features were important to them in choosing a child care setting. Qualitative research was suited to the purpose of my study because the emphasis was on understanding the parents perspective on quality day-care and on eliciting from parents the considerations they believe should determine child care choices.

The qualitative research was done through interviews with working parents with children. Because I was particularly interested in allowing the description of quality care of children to emerge from the point of view of the parents themselves, the questions in the interview were open-ended. For example, one of the questions I asked each parent was: "How would you define quality child care?"

I conducted lengthy semi-structured interviews with thirty parents. Questions dealt with their child care provider and how they determined who was the right child care provider for them. Using a semi-structured interview format allowed a free flowing response from the interviewee. The interviewee was not constricted to a "yes" or "no" answer or a specific answer. Interviewees were allowed to respond and explain their answers. By using this method, I felt confident that I was appraising what each parent believed to be quality care for children in a manner that reflected their experienced reality of quality day-care. I was not imposing my perception of quality child care on them. All the names have been changed (as well as occasional details that might identify a parent).

### **Sample Selection**

It was necessary to interview parents from each type of day-care arrangement in order to ascertain why they picked the type of day-care that they did. It was important to find out if the choice of day-care reflects what a parent perceives as quality care for their children. The four major types of day-care arrangements in the Omaha metropolitan area are: (1) registered homes; (2) registered agencies; (3) unregistered homes; and

(4) federally-funded programs. The federally-funded programs were eliminated as possible participants because the parents who used these programs are more restricted in their choice of day-care providers.

In order to interview parents, it was necessary to obtain a list of names of child care providers within the Omaha area. The State Social Services Office in Lincoln, Nebraska provided me with a computer printout of the licensed in-home day-care providers, as well as all the agencies within the Omaha area that provide day-care for children. I used this list to obtain my sample.

I determined that a sample size of thirty was a practical goal for this thesis research. Though limited, this sample would give some indication of how parents determine what type of day-care is best for their children and what they consider quality care for their children. Ten parents were to be interviewed from each type of day-care: registered homes, registered agencies and unregistered homes.

#### Registered Providers

From the list of registered homes and agencies, I used a systematic approach. There were a total of one thousand two hundred ninety names of registered home-based day-care providers. From this list, I sent every thirty-second provider a letter on university letterhead explaining the research. A total of forty letters were sent out to this group. The letter asked for the care-giver's cooperation in informing parents who used their service about the research I was doing. After the letters had been sent out to the providers, I made a follow-up telephone call to each to determine if they would be willing to help with the

research. Those who felt that they could be of assistance were then sent a letter to give to parents who used their facility. I also asked the care-giver to provide the parents with a letter from me. If the parents were interested in assisting with the research they were given a postcard which was pre-stamped and addressed to me. The postcard requested their name, address and phone number so that they could be contacted for a interview.

### Agencies

I used the same procedure to obtain names of parents who use agencies for their children's care. The social status of parents with children in day-care varies dramatically. Some nursery schools and day-care centers serve a predominantly white, middle-class clientele, while others cater overwhelmingly to working-class and minority children. On the list of names of agencies who provide care for children there were two hundred and sixty two centers. Some of these agencies were federally-funded for low-income clients. I eliminated these agencies from the list as their clientele do not have as much freedom in their choice of day-care providers as do those clientele of private agencies.

I then sent a letter to every seventh agency on the list. This required that forty letters be sent to obtain this portion of the sample. Again, I made a follow-up telephone call to each agency that received a letter. If the agency was willing to assist with the research, they were sent letters to give to parents interested in assisting with the research. If a parent was willing to assist with the research, they then returned pre-stamped postcards addressed to me. The postcard asked for their name, address and phone number.

### Unregistered Providers

I used a different approach with the unregistered providers because there was not a list available. For the unregistered day-care providers I used a snowball sampling technique. I knew the names of a few unregistered providers. I contacted them and asked if they would be willing to assist with the research. One unregistered provider's name led to other providers who were unregistered. I was also able to obtain the names of parents of children in unregistered day-care homes by talking to parents of children who had day-care age children. I continued to pursue these contacts until I had obtained ten parent interviewees with children in unregistered day-care homes.

The sample of thirty was dispersed throughout the Omaha metropolitan area. There were not as many from north Omaha as from the central, south, and west. The sample included both married and single mothers and included a wide diversity of incomes. My sample was intended to be of parents (of either/both sexes). But early in my study it became evident that it was the mothers who were primarily responsible for child care, and so they were the respondents to my request for participation in this study.

### Interview Design

I designed an outline for an interview which asked for demographic background data as well as how the parents determined what was quality care for their children (Appendix A). Included in the interview design were four hypothetical situations in which the interviewee was asked to advise other parents which type of day-care would be best for them (Appendix A). The hypothetical situations would determine if what a parent actually

said was quality care for a child coincided with how he or she would advise parents in selecting a child care provider. The hypothetical situations were used to probe further into what a parent considers in determining quality child care. The hypothetical questions were given to the parent during the interview and the parent was asked to read each hypothetical situation and respond to it.

As already indicated, the interviews were conversational interviews. I took notes and also did tape recordings so the interview could flow smoothly without interruption. The time of the interview was shortened by using the tape recorder. Each respondent was assigned a number on the tape and also on the transcribed copy so that the identity of the individual interviewees was disguised.

### **Interview Pretest**

Four pretest interviews were conducted before the actual interviewing of the selected sample was begun. This was done to determine the length of the interview and also how the flow of the interview went. Two interviews were done with two fellow graduate students who had children in child care and two interviews were done with other people I knew who had children in child care. I asked for feedback to find out how the interviewee felt during the interview and if they felt the interview time was about right. They were also asked if any further information should be obtained from the interviews. All four said they were comfortable during the interview and felt good about being able to share their experiences in seeking a child care provider. Only one of the four made a



suggestion: that additional information could be obtained by talking to the child care provider to ascertain if the provider and parent perceived quality care similarly.

### **Scheduling of Interviews**

When the postcards from prospective interviewees were returned, I contacted the parents to set up an interview time. The majority of the interviews were conducted in the evening when most of the mothers were home. A few of the interviews occurred during the day when the mothers had a day off or if the mother worked part time and was at home on a particular day. Each interview was conducted in the parent's home except for three in which the interviewee requested, for their convenience, that the interview be conducted at her place of work. All of the interviewees seemed very willing to share their knowledge about child care and child care providers.

All of the interviews were conducted with mothers. I did not have any fathers respond to my research. I interviewed two women where the father was within hearing range of the questions, but was a passive participant. One father participated in the interview somewhat, but did not respond to many of the questions unless the wife asked him what he thought. Each time he answered a question he checked with his wife to see if she agreed. I did some interviews where the father was present, but was responsible for the children while the mother spent time with me. I did one interview where the father was present, but the mother was still responsible for the child during that time. From my sample of parents it was clear that the responsibility of finding a child care provider was the woman's job and the man was only involved to a point. After the women narrowed down

the possible care providers, the husband generally went with his wife to visit the possible care providers. The men were involved in the final decision in some cases, but they did not do the initial leg work of finding a child care provider.

Interviewing of the sample of thirty took approximately two months. I began interviewing the third week of June 1993 and finished my interviews the last week of August 1993. After each interview the tape recording was transcribed using the Ethnograph program format. Ethnograph is a program for the computer-assisted analysis of text based data. Ethnograph was used to organize the text rather than to search and code words or word strings. Lotus was used as a database to tabulate and list objective characteristics. Lotus was also used to develop tables and figures.

In conducting sample interviews, I found it was important to guide the conversation so that the questions I had on my schedule could be answered briefly rather than allowing the conversation to drift into areas which were really not pertinent to my research. Also, through the pretest interviews it became very clear that the child's developmental stage was an important factor in the type of care that the respondents chose. This was also true of the sample interviews that were conducted. It also became very clear through the interviews that people do have very definite attitudes about different types of child care and they have strong feelings about what is right for their children.

Most respondents were more than happy to share their knowledge, feelings and attitudes about child care and enjoyed talking about why they made the decisions they had in choosing their child's day-care provider. A number of them indicated they were willing

to spend the time for the interview because they hoped the research would be of some benefit to children.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

This study is a small-scale, descriptive one. It has the modest goal of exploring the topic of parents' views about quality in child care. The primary strength of this research derives from the in-depth interviews, which provided fascinating insights into how a parent determines what is quality child care for his or her child. A few weakness that I might note in the methodology are with regard to sample size, sample selection, coding and interviewing:

1. Sample Size. The sample size would be considered more representative if it were larger, but due to time and resources the sample size was limited.

2. Sample Selection: I found in conducting my interviews that all but one of the interviewees were very happy with their providers. The ratio of parents who liked their providers compared to parents who disliked their providers was high: 29:1. It would appear that the sample selection process I used eliminated those parents who were not happy with their day-care providers. It may have been that the providers contacted only those parents who were happy with the child care service they were providing. I had only one interviewee who felt her day-care provider was rated average; and I felt the method of sample selection I had used did not allow me to draw into my sample those people who were not happy with their provider.

Also, my sample selection should have included perspectives from both parents, but I was only able to have one father participate in the interviews. Many of the mothers asked if it was necessary for their husbands to be present during the interview. I told them that it was their decision. From my sample it would appear that most mothers feel that child care is their responsibility and that the arrangements for child care are made by women. Therefore, when I refer to parents in my analysis, I am referring to the responses made by mothers.

Another outcome that I found interesting in my sample selection was that the average income of my sample was higher than the national median family income. My sample of parents included a relatively more affluent group.

3. Coding: This research was more qualitative in nature and the categories for coding reflected this. Ideally there should have been further review by additional coders.

4. Interviewing: Again, this was an area that a more objective view may have been obtained if the interviewing had been conducted by someone besides myself. Due to the limitation of resources, the coding and interviewing were done by myself.

### **Presentation of Data**

In Chapter 3, I report descriptive data about the sample interview group and its subdivisions. I describe service features of the various types of child care. In Chapter 4, I discuss factors in the child care choice. Family circumstances, as reflected in demographic data, affect the choice of providers. Data from the parents' responses to hypothetical cases elaborate on the parents' considerations in their choice. Parents may seek specific qualities

in a provider. Parents' ideas about quality care and their attitudes toward preschool education shape child care preferences. In Chapter 5, I discuss my research findings, summarize them and offer practical applications.

## CHAPTER 3

### CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTS AND PROVIDERS

In interviewing parents, I found there are many factors which influence a parent's choice of child care provider. Characteristics of the family affect parents' child care needs and their resources for obtaining child care. The various types of child care settings-- agencies, registered homes, and non-registered homes--have distinctive service features that appeal to different parents depending on their circumstances and their values.

Table I presents background data and some data on child care for each of the families in the study (see Table I). When I refer to a quote given by a parent, I will use the appropriate number from Table I to identify the parent.

#### **Sample Characteristics: Total Sample**

The sample consists of ten parents (mothers) from each type of day care: registered homes, registered agencies and unregistered homes.

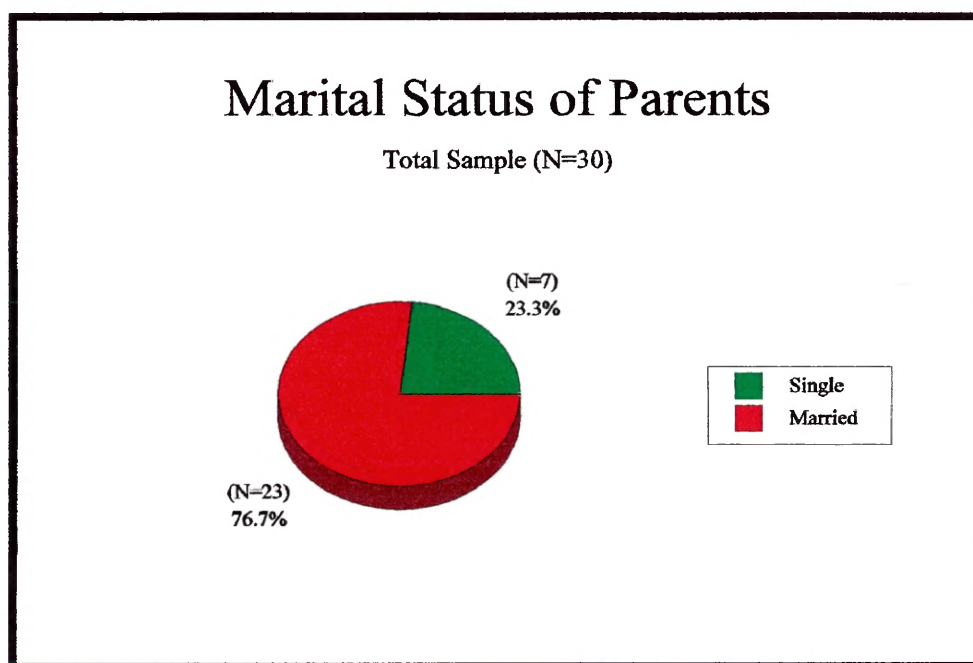
#### **Marital Status**

Out of the thirty parents interviewed, there were seven or twenty-three percent of the total who were single parents (see Figure 1). In comparison, the census data of 1990 showed that fifteen percent of the total national population were single parents (Ahlburg & DeVita, 1992).

TABLE I

## CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES AND THEIR CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENT

Int. No.	Type of Care	Family Income	Marr. Stat.	Hns. Emp. PT/FT	Wife Emp. PT/FT	No. of Children in Child Care	Weekly Child Care Cost Per Child	Weekly Child Care Cost Family	Hns. Ed.	Wife Ed.	Husband Profession	Wife Profession
1	NR	\$40,000	M	FT	FT	2	\$25	\$50	HS	HS	MECHANIC	CLERK
2	NR	\$60,000	M	FT	FT	1	\$70	\$70	HS+	BS	SALESMAN	SECRETARY
3	NR	\$28,000	S	N/A	FT	1	\$65	\$65	HS+	N/A	N/A	CLERK
4	NR	\$80,000	M	FT	FT	3	\$75	\$225	JD	MS	LAWYER	TEACHER
5	NR	\$12,000	S	N/A	FT	1	\$50	\$50	N/A	HS	N/A	CLERK
6	NR	\$75,000	M	FT	FT	3	\$80	\$240	HS	BS	CARPENTER	ACCOUNTANT
7	NR	\$70,000	M	FT	PT	3	\$47	\$140	BS	BS	MANAGER	ACCOUNTANT
8	NR	\$50,000	M	FT	FT	2	\$75	\$150	MS	BS	TEACHER	TEACHER
9	NR	\$100,000	M	FT	PT	1	\$75	\$75	BS	MS	SALESMAN	PHYCHOLOGIST
10	NR	\$60,000	M	FT	FT	2	\$75	\$150	HS	HS	MANAGER	SECRETARY
11	RH	\$47,000	M	FT	FT	2	\$65	\$130	HS+	HS	TECHNICIAN	CLERK
12	RH	\$60,000	M	FT	FT	1	\$85	\$85	DD	MS	DENTIST	MANAGER
13	RH	\$30,000	S	N/A	FT	1	\$65	\$65	N/A	MS	N/A	TEACHER
14	RH	\$45,000	M	FT	FT	1	\$70	\$70	HS+	BS	TECHNICIAN	MANAGER
15	RH	\$40,000	M	FT	FT	2	\$35	\$70	HS	HS	MANAGER	CLERK
16	RH	\$45,000	M	FT	FT	1	\$55	\$55	HS	HS+	LOCKSMITH	CLERK
17	RH	\$50,000	M	FT	FT	1	\$72	\$72	MS	MS	SPCH. PATH.	SPCH. PATH.
18	RH	\$52,000	M	FT	FT	1	\$70	\$70	HS	HS	CARPENTER	CLERK
19	RH	\$87,000	M	FT	FT	1	\$85	\$85	DD	MS	DENTIST	MANAGER
20	RH	\$45,000	M	FT	FT	3	\$55	\$165	HS	HS	TRUCK DRIVER	CLERK
21	AG	\$25,000	S	N/A	FT	1	\$55	\$55	N/A	BS	N/A	MANAGER
22	AG	\$150,000	S	N/A	FT	1	\$95	\$95	N/A	MD	N/A	MED. DOCTOR
23	AG	\$45,000	M	FT	FT	2	\$85	\$170	HS+	HS+	TECHNICIAN	CLERK
24	AG	\$25,000	S	N/A	FT	1	\$79	\$79	N/A	BS	N/A	MANAGER
25	AG	\$60,000	M	FT	FT	2	\$65	\$130	BS	BS	SALESMAN	MANAGER
26	AG	\$70,000	M	FT	FT	1	\$89	\$89	MS	MS	LIBRARIAN	LIBRARIAN
27	AG	\$45,000	M	FT	FT	1	\$77	\$77	HS+	HS+	SALESMAN	SECRETARY
28	AG	\$20,000	S	N/A	FT	2	\$75	\$150	N/A	HS+	N/A	CLERK
29	AG	\$61,000	M	FT	FT	2	\$100	\$200	BS	BS	TECHNICIAN	MANAGER
30	AG	\$45,000	M	FT	FT	2	\$50	\$100	HS+	HS+	SALESMAN	CLERK



**Figure 1 - Marital Status of Parents**

#### Employment Status of Parents

Out of the thirty parents interviewed, sixty-six percent (20) were in marriages in which both the husband and wife worked full-time; ten percent (3) were in marriages where the wife worked part-time; twenty-four percent (7) were single or divorced and worked full-time (see Table I).

#### Average Income

Each of the three child care groups within the sample included professional and non-professional parents. Each group had a diversity of income. The family income for the parents in the sample ranged from \$12,000 to \$150,000 plus, with an average of



\$54,000 (see Table I). The median family income for the nation was \$35,400 in 1990 (Alburg & DeVita, 1992), my sample median income is \$48,500. My sample has a higher median income than the median for the nation. The higher income of this sample was probably because federally funded agencies were eliminated from the sample.

The cost of child care to some of the parents in this sample was a much bigger portion of their income than it was for others. The two factors which influence this proportion were their annual salary and the number of children they had in child care. Those parents whose income was lower paid a significantly higher proportion of their household income for child care (see Table II). The income of the parents who were single was less, in most cases, than the family income where both husband and wife were working.

**TABLE II**  
**Proportion of Income Paid for Child Care**

No. in Each Income Range	Income Range		Avg. Annual Family Income	Avg. Annual Child Care Cost Per Child	% of Income Paid to Child Care
	From	To			
N = 9	\$12,000	\$40,001	\$27,500	\$2,919	10.61%
N = 12	\$40,001	\$60,001	\$50,643	\$3,599	7.11%
N = 9	\$60,001	\$150,000	\$86,625	\$4,197	4.84%

### Average Number of Children per Couple

In my study there were fifty-eight children in child care. Of the fifty-eight children's parents, there were four parents who had three children, twenty parents who had two children and six parents who had one child.

The average number of children for all the surveyed parents was 1.9. The average for the nation in the 1990 census data was just a little less than 2 children per family with children (based on U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994, T. 94, p. 63).

### Number of Years with Current Provider

The average number of years with current provider for the whole sample was 2.8 years. It appears that on the average the children were not left with any one care provider very long. My interpretation is that this occurs not because of dissatisfaction with the provider but to meet the child's developmental needs. Parents like to have their infants in child care where there is more "one-on-one care." As the child becomes older the parents prefer to have the child in a more social setting, such as a care center. A child may have different care providers because the parents feel the necessity for different developmental opportunities for their child.

### Average Cost of Care per Child

The average cost per child in child care for the total sample was \$70.00 a week. The average fee for child care for Nebraska was \$45.00 a week (Funk, 1990). Kisker and colleagues (1989) reported the national average cost per child in child care was \$50.00 a week (Hayes *et. al.*, 1990). My sample of parents appears to have a higher than average

investment in child care compared to other Nebraska parents. On the other hand, the cost of child care for this group might be higher because my sample was taken a few years later and included only urban parents whereas the Nebraska study and National study included both rural and urban samples.

### **Sample Characteristics by Child Care Choice**

#### **Marital Status**

I found that single (never married or divorced) parents used the agency form of child care more than the other forms of child care. Four of the ten interviewees had children in agency care. Out of the ten parents interviewed who have children in non-registered home care, two were single. Of those interviewed with children in registered care, one was single.

#### **Employment Status**

The parents who used non-registered homes included three mothers who worked part time, or thirty percent of the non-registered sample. All of the parents who used registered homes were employed full time, and all of the parents who used child care agencies also worked full time.

#### **Average Income**

The average income for parents of children in non-registered homes was \$57,000; for parents of children in registered homes, it was \$50,000; and for parents with children in agencies it was \$55,000.

### Average Number of Children per Couple

The average number of children for parents who used non-registered homes for day-care was 1.9, for registered homes it was 1.4 and for those who chose agencies it was 1.6.

### Number of Years with Current Provider

The average number of years with current provider for each group of parents was: (1) non-registered homes, 3 years; (2) registered homes, 2 years; and (3) agency, 3.5 years (see Table III).

<b>TABLE III</b>		
<b>Average No. of Years With Current Provider</b>		
<b>No. in Each Group</b>	<b>Type of Care</b>	<b>Average No. of Years With Current Provider</b>
N = 10	Agency	3.5
N = 10	Registered Home	2.0
N = 10	Non-Registered Home	3.0

### Average Cost of Care per Child

The average cost of care per child for children in non-registered homes was \$68.00 a week. The average cost per child in registered homes was \$66.00, and for those children in agencies it was \$77.00.

### **Service Features of Child Care Types**

Each type of child care offered specific services to parents as they selected a child care provider. Agencies provided the availability of more child care hours than the other forms of child care. Agencies provided more stability and adaptability for the parents. To the parents the word "stability" meant they could depend on the child care provider to care for a child when needed. The word "adaptability" meant that the care provider was able to adapt to the working parents' needs. Parents who used agencies did not have to worry about the child care provider taking vacation or being sick and unable to care for their child. Because child care through the agency was available more hours, it was more often selected by those who were single or divorced. Fifty-seven percent of the single parents chose agency care for their children.

A child care agency also offered other services to parents such as being able to visit and have lunch with the child, being able to leave clothes to be picked up by a professional dry cleaner, and being able to have fast food orders which were ready to be picked up at the agency when they picked up their child.

The most important feature of the non-registered and registered day-care providers was that they provided more individualized attention to the child than could agencies. Another feature of this type of child care was that the child was in a home environment. The parent of the child always knew who was providing care for their child each day.

The feature which differentiated the registered from the non-registered day-care was the issue of a regulated safe and healthy environment. It was very important to some

parents that there be some policing by the state of the safety and health conditions of the environment their child was in. The registered day-care must meet state regulations and was perceived as being a safer and healthier environment than the non-registered day-care.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FACTORS INFLUENCING A PARENT'S CHOICE OF CHILD CARE PROVIDER**

In this chapter I will review the factors which influence a parent's choice of child care provider. In my research the factors which were most important to the parent were: cost; convenience of child care setting; marital status of parent; and stability of the provider. This chapter also includes what parents perceive to be quality child care. Quality child care will be discussed in these sections: response to hypothetical situations; desired traits of a provider; parents' conception of quality care; and parents' attitudes about preschool.

#### **Factors Influencing Parents' Choice**

##### **Cost of Child Care**

Cost was a factor considered by parents in arranging child care, but not the sole determinant in their choice. As I talked with each of these parents, I asked them what their child care cost was and if they could afford more for their child's care. Ninety percent indicated that they could pay more and would pay more for the right child care provider. However, most of them felt they were paying the amount that was right for the community setting they were in. The parents were very much aware of the average charges child care providers charged for their area.

A couple of the parents indicated that the companies that they worked for offered assistance in paying for child care. The companies contributed matching employee funds for child care cost (#19) and (#20).

#### Convenience of Child Care Setting

There were a few parents who indicated that convenience was an important factor to them. Convenience to most parents meant proximity - meaning about five minutes travel time, reliability, - meaning dependability, not having to worry about the care provider being on vacation or sick - meaning that they would always be there for their child, and accessibility, - meaning that they were available more hours if needed. Convenience in terms of proximity was a factor in determining the child care provider. Parents wanted their children in close proximity to their work. Out of the thirty parents interviewed ten wanted their children close to their work. They felt the closer the child was to them in physical proximity, the more time they could spend with their child. They expressed a desire to know that their child was close and that they could visit them during the day if they wanted to. It was also a comfort to them to know that they could get to their child in a matter of minutes if they needed to.

Convenience in terms of accessibility was an important consideration when the mother might have to work longer hours than usual. Thirteen out of the thirty parents interviewed wanted accessibility. It was comforting for the mother to know that the child care provider could keep the children for longer hours if needed. These mothers most often



selected child care agencies so that they could have more child care time accessible to them.

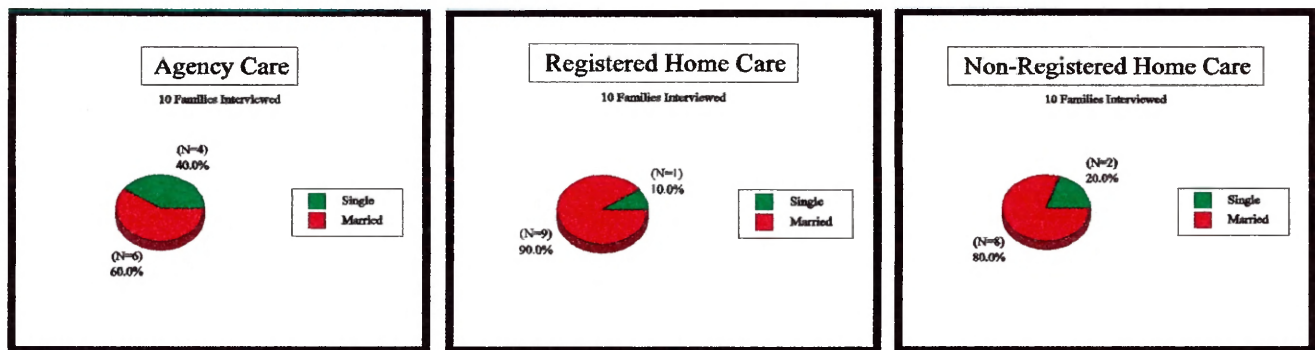
Reliability of the child care provider became the factor which was of most importance to the parents. Reliability was more important than proximity or accessibility to those parents who worked full time. One parent who worked full time and used an agency for child care commented: "We don't have family in town so reliability is important to me" (#25). Parents wanted to know that they could depend on their child care provider to be there to take care of their child when needed. Eight out of ten mothers with children in agency care indicated that reliability was very important to them.

#### Marital Status of Parent

A factor which influenced the choice of child care provider was the marital status of the parents. Because a single parent does not have any one to share the responsibility of the children, single parents often need a more flexible time arrangement for their children. The child care agency provides this for them because they are open longer hours.

Of those parents with children who were being cared for in agencies, forty percent were single. Only one of the ten parents with children in registered homes was single; and only two of those parents with children cared for in non-registered homes. One of the single mothers was having her mother care for her child (in an unregistered home). This gave her the flexibility she needed from the child care provider (Figure 2).

**Figure 2 - Marital Status by Child Care Type**



### Stability of Provider

Stability, meaning that the child will be able to have a bonding relationship with a care provider, was also important to parents. Seven out of thirty or twenty-three percent of the parents indicated that it was important to them to keep the same care provider for their child. If they had to travel further to keep this care provider, they would. Also, if they had to pay more to keep the same provider they would.

Convenience was important to these parents. Parents expressed that stability for their child was more important than convenience. If both the child and parent were happy with a child care provider, and some outside factor affected the convenience, a parent was willing to relinquish the convenience in order to have the right provider for their child. For example one mother said they were now traveling an additional fifteen minutes to get

Parents in this sample verbalized the importance of keeping their child with the same provider for stability in the child's life. However, the average time a child had been with the current provider was 2.8 years. These parents were also very concerned with the developmental needs of the child and would change the day care provider in order to meet the developmental needs of the child.

### **Quality of Child Care**

#### **Quality of Child Care: Responses to Hypothetical Situations**

In the interviews I conducted I used hypothetical situations (see interview schedule, Appendix A). The hypothetical situations were used to better ascertain the factors which parents consider to be quality child care by providing variation in circumstances. This mode of inquiry might also separate consideration of values in child care from identification with parents own choice. The interviewee was given a situation in which a parent was looking for a child care provider and had three or four options to choose from. The interviewee was asked which option she would choose and why. She was asked to advise the parent in the hypothetical situation as to which option she felt was best for the child so that the parent could make a informed, good decision. The interviewee was asked to make a recommendation to the parent based on what she perceived to be quality care for the child.

#### **Developmental Stages**

Twenty four out of thirty, or eighty percent of the parents I interviewed, used child developmental stages to determine which type of facility was right for the child in the hypothetical situation. There were some interesting comments about the developmental

stages of children. Some of the comments were: "because of the child's age I would advise the mother to put the child in a day-care center" (#10); "it is important to remember that the age of the child is an important factor in the type of care you want" (#22); "because the child is a baby, it is important to ask for and receive more individual care" (#24); and "because of the age of the child, it is important that he/she start interacting socially" (#17). One mother made the comment with regard to the hypothetical situation number one: "Cost and convenience are not the factors to consider, but the age of the child and type of care they are given ..... the developmental stage of the child is important as to the type of care you select" (#22).

### **Choices Similar to Own Choice**

In most cases the type of day-care arrangement the parents recommended for the child in the hypothetical situation was similar to the day-care they had chosen for their own child. Twenty-eight out of thirty mothers, or ninety-three percent, chose the type of day-care they had for their own child. By making this choice they validated their choice of child care provider. They acknowledged that they had learned from the experiences they had with their child being in child care. There were a few instances however, where the mothers would say that what they were recommending for the child in the hypothetical situation was not what they had done for their own child, but that they had learned from their experience with child care. One mother said "I wasn't able to use my family for child care and I think it is important to do so." (#25)

**Attention**

Most of the mothers in the sample expressed the need for an infant to be with a provider who could give attention to them. Twenty three of the thirty parents interviewed would select a home situation, as opposed to an agency, for an infant. The concern of parents over the infant being placed in a home rather than an agency or institutional setting indicated that most of the parents in this sample have an understanding of the necessity of an infant developing a bonding attachment with a care provider.

In hypothetical situation number one where the child was an infant, a couple of the comments were: "I would choose a home for this child because the child is a baby and would get more individual attention which they need when they are babies" (#10) and "the home environment would be better for this child because he still is an infant" (#13).

**Social Interaction**

Once the child is older, the parents expressed the need for social interaction for the child, and thus the parent would be more likely to select a agency that would provide preschool training and socialization for the child. When they responded to hypothetical cases, parents made comments about the child being old enough to be in a setting where he becomes socialized.

Some of the comments of the parents were: "I would choose the day-care center because of the age of the child" (#7); "the child is ready for social experiences" (#13); "I would go with the day-care center because of the age of the child; it is important for the development of their social skills" (#12).

Seventeen of the parents in this sample indicated that children are ready for socialization at 2 1/2 to 3 years of age and should only be with a home care provider until that age. At 2 1/2 or 3 years of age these parents felt that it was important that the child be in a group setting.

#### Quality of Child Care: Desired Traits of a Provider

Parents in this sample reviewed the traits which they were looking for when selecting a provider. The three groups of parents: those with children in registered homes, those parents with children in non-registered homes and those parents with children in agencies, selected different traits which they felt were important for their provider to have.

#### Agency Care

Parents with children in a child care agency were looking for features of the center in terms of services that were being offered for them and activities for their children, more than at specific personal traits of the provider. Parents who had children in an agency made such comments as: "they have a variety of activities" (#30); "they have those activities I do not have time for with my child" (#21); "they teach my child those things which I do not have time for" (#9); "I can depend on them, stability is important" (#26); more businesslike relationship" (#29); "I can drop in for lunch any time I want to be with my child for lunch" (#24); and last but not least; "the agency can provide extra services such as having my clothes picked up and delivered there by a professional cleaner and fast food orders can be picked up at the child care agency so that I only have to make one stop on the way home" (#27).

### **Registered Care**

Those parents who used registered homes for their child's care were looking for specific traits in a provider. Some of them made the following comments: "her values are the same as mine" (#11); "it is important how the provider treats my child" (#13); "it is important that the provider spends time with my child" (#18); "it is important that the provider understands children and the development stages and uses behavior modification techniques" (#17).

### **Non-registered Care**

Those parents who chose non-registered homes for their child's care were also looking for specific traits. Some of them made the following comments: "a caring loving person like a mother" (#2); "she likes children and does things with the children" (7); "gives my child attention" (#3); "a careful and cautious person" (#6); and "she is very much like myself" (#10).

I could see similarities and differences among the traits listed for the registered and non-registered care providers. They were similar in that they were looking for a provider who would give their child attention, love and time. They were different because the parent of the child who attended day-care in a registered home was consciously seeking a person who had further knowledge regarding child development, while this was not so important to the parent with a child in a non-registered home.

### Quality Child Care: Parents' Conceptions of Quality Care

During interviews with parents, I asked them in a direct question for a description of quality care for children. The parent, in determining quality of care, draws upon knowledge gained from friends, relatives, textbooks, the media, and professionals such as their family doctor. Also, a part of the perception of quality care for their child are the experiences the parent had while growing up and what they and their family valued. For example, some may have been from families where being together in the home as a family was important. These parents want a home setting for their child to be in when they cannot be at home. Other parents felt it is more important to be more individualistic and competitive. These parents want their child in a setting where they are learning socialization skills. There was a distinct difference between groups in how the mothers defined quality of care. Those mothers with children in non-registered homes sought a specific trait in the provider to define quality. They used words such as "loving", "caring", "attentive" and "kind" to describe quality care. Ninety percent of the mothers in this group listed a trait to describe quality of care.

Mothers of children in registered homes were also looking for specific traits in a provider to define quality. They were not using the same words to describe quality as those in non-registered homes. These mothers described quality as time spent with children and cleanliness of the environment. Fifty percent used words such as "caring" and "nurturing" to describe quality of care.



The mothers who had children in agencies used different words to describe quality of care. They used words such as "dependability", "stability", "structure", and "developmental needs". Only twenty percent of the mothers used words such as "loving atmosphere" and "loving and kind" to describe quality of care.

#### Quality of Child Care: Parents' Attitudes About Preschool

Those mothers who had children in agencies indicated that their children received preschool training at the agency. It was very important to those mothers that their children receive this training. One hundred percent of these parents wanted preschool training for their children. One mother expressed how important it was to her that her child receive preschool training in the following words: "Preschool training is very important to me. By the time my child was 2 1/2 she knew her ABC's and was potty-trained. This was done by the care provider. We (the parents) do not have time to do this"(29). Another parent responded, "Preschool is very important to me because so many children are receiving it. I feel it is important for the child's self esteem" (27).

Those with children in registered homes also indicated that preschool training was important to them. One hundred percent of these parents indicated that preschool training for their children was important to them.

Seventy percent of the mothers whose children were in non-registered homes indicated that their children were not receiving preschool training at the provider's. If they wanted preschool training for their child, they had to make arrangements for their child to get to preschool and back to the provider's. Twenty percent indicated that they did not feel

that preschool training was important for their children. These two mothers had college degrees and one of them was an elementary education teacher.

The mother who was an elementary teacher made the comment: "a child is going to go to school the rest of their life once they start kindergarten. I do not feel that it is necessary for them to go earlier" (#8). Both these mothers felt that the benefits of preschool are not long lasting; that through maturation the child who has not been to preschool soon reaches the scholastic level of those who have been in preschool

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed the factors which influence a parent's choice of child care provider. Cost of child care: ninety percent of the parents indicated that they could pay more and would pay more for the right child care provider thus cost was not a concern to the parents in this sample. Convenience of child care setting: reliability was part of the convenience factor which parents considered important when making a choice of child care provider. Marital status of the parent was a factor which influenced the choice of a child care. Single parents need more flexible time arrangements for their children and will choose the child care arrangement which will provide flexible time arrangements. Stability of the provider: parents do want to keep their child with the same provider so that the child could build a bonding relationship with the provider.

All of the preceding factors were subsidiary to quality of care. Quality of care was the most important factor which parents considered when choosing a child care provider.

Parents have their own concept of quality child care and will make a choice of a child care provider based on their conception of quality care.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Discussion**

The parents I interviewed were very happy with their day-care providers. Each parent had made a decision on a day-care provider based on well-considered reasons. Their particular reasons were a part of how they interpreted what quality child care was. Many of them had knowledge of child development from reading literature or from information that had been given to them by someone they trusted. This someone was a good friend who had children, or a mother or aunt, or a teacher at school. Some of the parents I interviewed relied on printed material about child development given at a doctor's office or on information through the media.

Because the parents' responses were positive about their choice of child care provider, it became evident that their preferences as to quality child care were expressed in what they were doing with their child's child care arrangements, and they wanted to share it with others. They felt very good about their choice of provider.

Only one of the mothers was not happy with the child care provider she had. She indicated she was forced to accept the assistance of her sister as a child care provider because of financial constraints. She stated that her sister did not do activities with the children and did not have a schedule for them. Because her sister did not organize the day

for the children, the children did not know what to expect from one day to the next. This mother said she would prefer to have her child in a child care agency.

Child care is well established in American society, and unless some unknown factor would cause Americans families to make a great change, arranged child care will continue to be an important aspect of the American family.

It appears that parents do not use the same indicators to determine quality of care as do the researchers and professionals who study child care. The factors which professionals include in quality care, such as group size, staff/child ratios, physical space, care-giver training, and curriculum, are not the main indicators of quality care for the parents I studied.

From my research I can conclude that the biggest indicator for a parent in determining the quality of care for their child are parents' values in raising their children, their views on how children should be cared for. The decision depends on what the parent wants for the child. Those who want their children to be socially adjusted seek care where they feel their children will be given the best training for social adaptation. It is important to them that their children learn to succeed in a group environment. Those mothers who felt that a nurturing loving environment was the most essential ingredient for the development of the child sought the home environment. These mothers were more concerned with a specific trait of the provider. The traits they sought after and admired were nurturing traits such as being loving, caring, understanding and compassionate. These parents associated the home environment with a family environment. One mother made the comment that her child care provider taught her children those things she would teach them if she were home

with them. She said, "This woman," referring to her child care provider, "believes and teaches many of the things I believe are important" (#11).

All of the parents in the sample agreed that an infant needs a great deal of attention and they would want their infant in a home environment rather than an institutional environment. Some of the parents told me that they stayed home with their child for as long as they could because they knew how important it was for the infant to have a bonding relationship. Others asserted the importance of having a child care provider who would have a one-on-one relationship with their infant. This provider, in effect, would have to take the mother's place, so needed to reaffirm the same ideology as the mother. The parents sought out a person who could provide their infant with a great deal of love and attention.

Research in the state of Nebraska (Funk, 1990) shows us that more parents are electing to have their children taken care of in a family child care setting. By selecting the family care setting they are making a decision about who cares for their child and what type of care their child will receive. The parents in my research had many reasons for why they chose one type of child care as opposed to another. Those who chose family care were doing so because of what they had learned from their families and associates about child care and they wanted the type of care for their child which they felt was important.

There is a definite difference in ideas about what is important in child care between those parents who have their children in homes and those who have their children in agencies. The parents who choose homes for their child care are choosing a more personal approach for their young children rather than an institutional one. They are seeking a

"loving, caring environment. In other words they are seeking a replacement of the child's home.

However, when comparing why a parent chooses a registered home as opposed to a non-registered home, the emphasis differs somewhat even though the children in both situations are in a home and the parents in both situations want an environment which has the qualities of the child's home. Those parents seeking the registered home also want certain health and cleanliness standards to be upheld. By seeking the registered home, they know the state will guarantee that this home meets certain stipulations. This is not important to those parents who are with non-registered homes. They want to know that their child is being cared for by someone who loves and cares for the child; this is of utmost importance to these parents.

Along with the parent's conception of quality of child care are other factors which have a role in the final determination of where a child is placed for child care. Cost is a factor, but not the main determinant of where a child is placed when money is not the issue, as it was not for these parents. All the parents surveyed indicated that they could afford what they were paying and were willing to pay more to keep the right child care provider. My research showed that those parents with lower income paid a significantly higher percentage of their income to child care (see Table III). The parent's income varied within each group: registered care, non-registered care and agency care. Within this sample of parents there was not a relationship of income to the type of care that parents were choosing (see Table I). Convenience is a determinant, but again, it is secondary to the basic values of

the parents. Convenience was interpreted two different ways by the parents in this sample. Some of them believed convenience to be reliability. Some believed it to be the distance that the child care provider was from work or home. Convenience in terms of hours of operation becomes more of an issue in quality of care when a parent must rely heavily upon the care provider and has no other resources for child care. An example would be the single mother who has to work late or is on call with her job. Convenience becomes a large determinant of quality of care for the parent when it is conceived of as reliability of the care-giver or dependability of the service.

In summary, my research with parents suggests that parents do not use the same method of measuring quality of care for their children as do the professionals in the field of child care. Professionals measure quality by structural features such as staff/child ratios, education of providers and facility dimensions. Quality of care for children is defined by parents according to their own perceptions of what is good for their children.

#### **Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research**

My research was limited because of the size of the sample and also because the sample included only those who were satisfied with their child care provider. Further research should include a larger sample from different areas of the state or on a larger scale within the country. It should also seek to include the voices of those parents who have been disappointed with their child care provider and give these parents the opportunity to express what they are seeking in a child care provider and what they perceive as quality child care.



Further research along the lines of the parental conception of child care would be beneficial to policy makers and those who administer child care, as well as for parents, and last but not least for those children in child care.

### **Conclusion**

The research reported here has several implications. It goes without saying that when a parent makes a decision to place a child in child care, they should keep in mind those things which they feel are of utmost importance to them and seek for the care-giver who will give to their child "quality" care as they themselves define and conceptualize quality care. Those who actually provide child care should endeavor to discover what are the perceptions of quality care by parents in the area and plan their service accordingly to meet the needs of these parents. Researchers, policy makers and administrators who set the direction for child care should listen to and take into account what parents are seeking for when they search for a care provider. The single most important conclusion from this study is that parents' voices are quite different from those of child care experts and we would do well to listen to them.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **CHILD CARE FROM A PARENTAL PERSPECTIVE**

#### **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE:**

I will be doing a conversational interview so the questions listed will not necessarily be asked in the order they appear. Subjects will also be presented with hypothetical situations concerning choices of child care.

- (1) How did you first locate this child care provider?  
Did you get a reference either directly or indirectly from a parent who had used this child care provider?
- (2) Did you know the person caring for your child before you first used him/her for child care? How did you know he/she and what were the circumstances?
- (3) Before choosing this child care arrangement did you check out or consider any other specific arrangements?
- (4) Why did you choose your child's current arrangement instead?
- (5) Would you prefer a different arrangement than you currently have.
- (6) Ideally, what type of child care arrangement or combination of arrangements would you like to have for your child during your working hours?
- (7) How long has your child been cared for in this particular arrangement?
- (8) Overall, how would you rate the quality of care of your child in the arrangement he/she is in? What is important to you as an indicator of quality?
- (9) Overall, how would you rate the convenience of your child care arrangement?
- (10) How many of your children are currently being cared for in this arrangement?
- (11) Are there any children other than your own in this care arrangement? How do you feel about having other children taken care of by your provider?
- (12) How many persons are caring for the group of children?

- (13) Besides you as parents how many regular care providers has your child had since he/she was born?
- (14) Does your child receive any preschool training or activities in his current arrangement?
- (15) How much do you usually spend per week on child care expenses?
- (16) How much do you spend per week on child care expenses for your school age children?
- (17) In general, how easy is it for you to afford the cost of your child care arrangement?
- (18) What is your occupation and what is your spouse's occupation?
- (19) How many children do you have?
- (20) How many years of school did you and your spouse have?
- (21) Are you and your spouse employed full time or part time?
- (22) What was the general level of your family's annual income before taxes?

## Hypothetical Child Care Situations:

How would you advise the parents in each case?

### Situation #1:

Bob and Sue Jones just moved into your neighborhood. Bob was transferred by his company. They do not have any relatives in the city. They have a 3 month old child, Todd.

Bob's job entails long hours and some travel. Sue had done fashion merchandising work before she had Todd. She plans to secure employment as soon as possible, but she is concerned about child care for Todd.

She has found through talking with the neighbors that there are a few possibilities and they are all within a few miles of their home. The following are the 3 possibilities she has to choose from.

(1) A day-care center which, she has been told, has a staff which is very good with children. They have a good ratio of adults to children; and the facility is designed for children.

(2) A woman who provides day-care in her home who has 2 other children along with 2 of her own. The children range in age from one to five. She is registered with the State. Those parents who have their children at her home say, "she isn't the best housekeeper but my children enjoy being with her."

(3) A woman Sue met at her doctor's office who has two children of her own. Sue and this woman have become friends. Sue enjoys this woman a lot and they have done some things together. They seem to have some things in common. This woman is not registered with the State, but has offered to provide child care for Todd when Sue is ready to go back to work.

Situation #2:

Tom and Jan Thompson are neighbors of yours. They have a two year old daughter. Tom is involved in construction work and Jan is a secretary. Jan's mother has taken care of their daughter up until now, however she had surgery and has gone to live with Jan's sister in another state to recuperate.

These are the possibilities that the Thompson's have come up with for child care. How would you advise them?

(1) Jan's mother has a friend who takes care of children and has done so for the last four years. She has a waiting list of parents who want her to take their child when she has a opening. She would provide care for Tom and Jan's daughter. The only problem is that this woman does not live close to the Thompson's. It would mean that one of them would have to plan a trip across town which would take an extra twenty minutes each way.

(2) A woman in the neighborhood provides day-care for children. She has two children of her own and provides care for three others. She is registered with the state and is highly recommend by those who use her. That is probably the reason she charges \$20.00 a week more than the day-care center that is in the area.

(3) A day-care center which is on the way out of the Thompson's housing area has also been recommended. It is a fairly new facility with a personable director who seems to enjoy children. The number of staff to children is good. Children do not seem to be neglected and there are plenty of activities for children to be involved in. The day-care center runs a very structured program so parents know what their children are doing at just about any hour of the day.

**Situation #3:**

John and June Anderson have lived in the neighborhood for a few years. They have a three year old son. June has been at home with him since he was born. However, like many other couples they are feeling the economic crunch. June has renewed her teaching certificate and plans to take a teaching job next fall at a school very close to their home. They have some possibilities for child care. How would you advise them?

(1) John's mother will take their son for a small fee. She hates to charge at all but could use a little extra spending money. The problem is she lives on the family's farm which is a 20 minute drive from the Anderson's home. June and her mother-in-law agree on most of the issues involved in raising a child and June likes the way her husband turned out and thinks his mother must have been a big influence in his life.

(2) There is a day-care center in the area which is very appealing to the Anderson's. It has a staff who seem to work well together. The children know what they are expected to do and there is a routine that is followed each day unless there is a special activity. The children are taken on field trips and have many learning experiences. They have the latest in toys and the children are even allowed to spend some time with the computers if they have some free time during the day.

(3) A woman in the neighborhood provides care for children. She has two children of her own and takes in two other children to care for. She is not registered with the state nor does she plan to register. She lives close to the school where June will be teaching. She has done a good job with the children she has cared for. Her fees are lower than the care center in the area.



**Situation #4:**

Cindy Howard has lived in your area for the last four years. Her and her husband have recently divorced. Cindy will be going back to work. They have a three year old son John. Cindy has been home with him since he was born. Now she must find a day-care provider. She has some alternatives for child care. How would you advise her.

(1) The day-care center close to her housing area which has a preschool incorporated in it. She has talked with the director and has toured the preschool. There were a number of kids there and there were adults supervising their activities at the time of Cindy's visit. The day-care center was well designed for younger children and had a lot of good play equipment.

(2) A neighbor who has a son John's age. She is not registered with the state but would be willing to care for John. She would charge as much as the day-care center.

(3) Another woman in the neighborhood has a registered day-care home. She cares for three children besides her own three children. Cindy has met her and has been in her home. Cindy was not too impressed with how this woman interacted with the children but the home was clean and the children seem to enjoy being together. The fees were less than the day-care center in the area.

(4) Cindy has a good friend who lives in another part of town whom she has known for a number of years. This woman has two children and would be willing to take care of John for a small fee. Because of their friendship she is willing to help Cindy by taking care of John.



University of  
Nebraska  
at Omaha

## APPENDIX B

College of Arts and Sciences  
Department of Sociology  
and Anthropology  
Omaha, Nebraska 68182-0291  
(402) 554-2626

June 14, 1993

name  
address  
city, state, zip

Dear Director (or name of the day care provider),

Your day care center provides a service to parents who have children at your center. Because you are providing such a service, I am writing to ask for your help.

I am a graduate student at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. I am working under the direction of Dr. M.A. Lamanna, Professor of sociology. I am doing a study of "why parents choose a particular day care provider."

I plan to conduct interviews with parents of children who are in day care in the Omaha metropolitan area. I would like your assistance in contacting some parents whose children are in your care.

I am enclosing a sample letter for your review which would be given to parents who use your services if you choose to help in this study. If you are willing to help, I will provide you with additional letters as you require. Each letter will have a postcard attached which parents will use to communicate with me.

I will be calling you in the next few days. If you have questions, I will be happy to answer them at that time. If you desire to meet with me, I would be willing to arrange a time at your convenience.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Ann Greathouse



65  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Department of Sociology  
and Anthropology  
Omaha, Nebraska 68182-0291  
(402) 554-2626

June 14, 1993

Dear Parent,

I am a graduate student at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. I am working under the direction of Dr. M.A. Lamanna, Professor of sociology. I am doing a study to determine "why parents choose a particular day care provider."

My research will involve interviews with parents who have their children in day care in the Omaha metropolitan area. It is important to know what parents want for their children when they choose a day care provider. If you are willing to help me with my study, please write your name, address and phone number where indicated on the attached post card and return it to me.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ann Greathouse

**ADULT INFORMED CONSENT FORM  
IRB #090-92 EX**

**CHILD CARE FROM A PARENTAL PERSPECTIVE**

**A research study about why parents chose the type of day-care they do for their children.**

You are invited to participate in this research study. The purpose of this study is to determine why parents chose a particular child care provider.

You are eligible to participate because you are a parent of a child who is receiving child care.

The following information is provided in order to help you to make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. You may telephone me at 330-3549.

Participation in this study will require approximately 60 minutes of your time. It will involve an informal interview with you which will revolve around how you made your choice of a child care provider.

There should be no risks or discomforts associated with this research.

You may find this interview enjoyable. The information gained from this study may help us to better understand what factors parents feel are important in making a choice of child care provider.

I would like to tape record this interview so I can pay close attention to the conversation. The tapes will be labeled with a number, not a name and will be stored in a locked cabinet.

Any information obtained during this interview with you will be kept confidential. Data on the selection process and factors involved in a parent's day-care choice may be published in academic form, but individuals will not be identified.

You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or the University of Nebraska.

**IRB #90-92 EX**

**DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT**

**YOU ARE VOLUNTARILY MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE CERTIFIES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE HAVING READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE INFORMATION PRESENTED. YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM TO KEEP.**

-----  
**SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT**

-----  
**DATE**

**IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**

Ann Greathouse, B.A.

Off: 554-3356

Home: 330-3649

**SECONDARY INVESTIGATOR**

Mary Ann Lamanna, Ph.D

Off: 554-3374