

“When Child Care Fails: Young Mothers’ Experiences With Missed Work
and Child Care Problems”

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Since 1970, sharp increases in single parenthood and rapid growth in mothers’ labor force participation have reshaped the boundaries between work and family life. Today, six in 10 families with children are headed by dual-career couples or single, working parents (Bianchi and Raley 2005:25-26), who juggle paid employment and unpaid family responsibilities rather than pursuing one activity or the other.

Despite profound changes in the work-family landscape, responsibility for childrearing continues to fall disproportionately on mothers, with implications for their success in the workforce. Mothers perform more at-home child care than fathers (Sayer, Bianchi and Robinson 2004:17-24) and typically act as at-home managers of household schedules and activities (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:91-92), including making special arrangements when regular ones break down. One common such breakdown occurs when child care arrangements fail.

Since the 1970s, scholars have explored several aspects of child care and work among mothers of young children, particularly the relationship between child care costs and employment (Presser and Baldwin 1980; Han and Waldfogel 2001; Myers, Heintze and Wolf 2002). Less is known, however, about mothers’ daily experiences managing child care and work. While a growing ethnographic literature examines welfare recipients’ experiences with child care (London et al. 2004; Clampet-Lundquist et al. 2004), no nationally representative, multivariate study of which we are aware has explored mothers’ experiences with the failure of regular child care arrangements or missed work that may occur when child care arrangements fall through, for example because a provider falls ill, takes vacation or is otherwise unavailable.¹

In previous research using the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a national sample of mostly unmarried mothers, we found that fully one fourth of working mothers with children near age one had to make special arrangements at least once in the previous month because their regular child care fell through (Usdansky and Wolf 2005). Thirteen percent of these mothers missed work in the past month as a result of this child care failure (Usdansky and Wolf 2005).

We found that neither socio-economic status nor marital status predicted missed work due to child care failure. Rather, missing work when regular child care arrangements failed appeared to be a widespread and relatively random event in the lives of the mothers in our sample. However, we found that mothers most at risk for missing work due to child care failure were those who depended on child care most. These mothers either worked multiple jobs or required child care for more hours than they worked, a fairly common occurrence given commuting time. Their circumstances, however, were quite distinct from those of substantial number of mothers in the sample whose work hours equaled or exceeded their child care hours, suggesting they were less dependent on child care as a means to work.

¹ The National Child Care Survey (Hofferth et al. 1991) provided bivariate statistics regarding the frequency of missed work due to child care failure among different groups of mothers but did not explore missed work in a multivariate context or in conjunction with the broader theme of child care failure.

In this paper, we extend our earlier analysis in two respects. First, we examine the experiences of this cohort of mothers at two points in time: when their children were approximately one and three years old. This enables us to consider the relationship between child age and child care failure and to better assess whether certain mothers face an unusually high risk of missing work due to child care failure over time. Because employed mothers of one-year-olds are a more selective group than employed mothers of three-year-olds, we are more likely to find significant factors associated with the occurrence of child care failure at the later time.² Also, we can see if the experience of child care failure when the child is one is associated with employment status or type of child care arrangement when the child is three.

Second, we examine several additional outcomes likely to be related to missed work due to child care failure. These include: missing work when a child falls ill; quitting a job due to child care problems; experiencing stress due to work schedule or shift; difficulty dealing with child care problems during work hours; and work schedules that are not flexible enough to allow mothers to handle family needs.

We utilize the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which follows a cohort of 3,712 children born to unmarried mothers in 20 U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000 and includes a comparison group of 1,188 children born to married mothers. The Fragile Families data are representative of all unmarried births in cities with populations greater than 200,000. We use data from the first three waves of the survey, including information collected when the children were approximately one and three years of age as well as baseline data, in order to track mothers' experiences with child care and employment over time. Response rates were generally high, including 87 percent of eligible unmarried mothers and 82 percent of eligible married mothers at baseline, 90 percent of unmarried mothers and 91 percent of married mothers eligible at 12-month follow-up and 87 percent of unmarried mothers and 89 percent of married mothers eligible at 30-month follow-up.

The Fragile Families data are particularly well suited for our purposes because they focus on unmarried mothers, who tend to be low income and who may face particularly acute child care dilemmas because of their low socio-economic status (London et al. 2004) and because they lack a spouse who might be able to help when child care arrangements fall through. (Given our previous findings, however, it is unclear how often spouses, partners or other adult family members are able or willing to provide help with child care on an emergency basis.) In addition, the longitudinal nature of the data allows us to examine whether problems related to employment and child care tend to improve, stay the same or worsen over time.³

Since little is known about mothers' daily experiences with child care and employment, we begin with descriptive statistics, focusing on our six related outcomes: child care failure; missed work due to child care failure; missed work due to child illness; quitting work due to child care problems; stress due to work schedule or shift; difficulty dealing with child care problems during work hours; and work schedules not sufficiently flexible to allow mothers to handle family needs.

We then examine how closely correlated these various measures of child care-employment problems are with one another. This allows us to evaluate whether different groups

² Preliminary analysis indicates that 55 percent of mothers worked at year three, compared with 45 percent at year one.

³ Fathers in the Fragile Families study were not asked questions about child care unless they had physical custody of the child, an uncommon arrangement.

of working mothers tend to experience different child care-employment problems or whether mothers who experience difficulties report multiple problems. We also examine the persistence of child care-employment problems over time, asking whether mothers who report a given problem when their child is approximately one-year old are likely to see the problem improve, worsen or stay the same over the subsequent two years.

We then use multivariate models to explore associations between child care problems and employment problems. Because questions about mothers' experiences with child care and employment are asked at only two discrete points in time, we inevitably miss turnover in child care and employment that occurs before the one-year follow-up survey and in between years one and three. The lack of continuous child care and employment histories for mothers prevents us from sorting out causal relationships between mothers' reports of child care problems and employment problems. We can, however, use multivariate models in a descriptive manner to explore associations between child care problems and employment problems while controlling for a variety of factors likely to affect these associations. These include: mothers' demographic characteristics (marital status, race-ethnicity, education, age and number of young children); mothers' labor force characteristics (hours worked, self-employment, working evening, weekend or night shifts, and working more than one regular job); child characteristics (age, sex, and mother's evaluation of health status); child care characteristics (child care type, hours in child care); and mothers' social network characteristics (number of employed male and female adults in household, number of unemployed male and female adults in household and relationship with the child's father).

All the outcome measures to be studied are binary, enabling us to use logistic regression throughout our analysis. Because we observe outcomes in several domains for each respondent and have repeated measures for these outcomes for most respondents, we will also explore correlated random-effect variants of the discrete-outcome models. This will enable us to detect the presence of unmeasured factors that influence two or more of the outcomes and therefore determine which outcomes tend to occur in combination. To ensure that our findings are representative of the experiences of working mothers in large U.S. cities, we weight the data.

Preliminary analysis suggests that a significant share of working mothers experience child care failure and missed work due to child care failure (Table 1). Despite some increase in the proportion of mothers who worked between years one and three, the risks of child care failure and missed work change little, with almost a third of mothers experiencing at least one failure in the past month and about 13 percent missing work due to a failure at both points in time. Similarly, about 13 percent of mothers reported having quit a job due to child care problems before year one and between years one and three.

The proportion of mothers who reported having to miss work when their child fell ill rose slightly, from 32 percent at year one to 36 percent at year three (Table 2). About one in 10 mothers reported that she or her child always or often experienced stress due to her work shift or schedule at both points in time. Six-to-seven percent reported always or often having difficulty dealing with child care problems at work at both points in time. The frequency with which mothers reported that they never or only sometimes had enough flexibility in their work schedule to handle family needs also remained stable over time at about 26 percent.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics for dependent variables regarding child care failure, work absences and quitting a job									
Frequency/occurrence of event in month before interview (proportions)	Regular childcare fell through		Missed work due to childcare problem		Quit work due to childcare problem ^a				
	1 year	3 years	1 year	3 years	1 year	3 years			
0 occurrences	0.72	0.70	0.87	0.88	0.86	0.87			
1+ occurrences	0.28	0.30	0.13	0.12	0.14	0.13			
N	1,026	1,275	1,026	1,225	1,247	1,648			
^a Since birth for mothers of one-year olds; Between years 1 and 3 for mothers of three-year olds.									

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for dependent variables regarding childcare- and work-related stress									
Frequency of event (proportions)	Always misses work if child ill		Shift/work schedule caused stress always/often		Always/often difficult to deal with childcare problems at work		Never/sometimes have enough flexibility in work schedule to handle family needs		
	1 year	3 years	1 year	3 years	1 year	3 years	1 year	3 years	
Yes	0.32	0.36	0.10	0.09	0.06	0.07	0.26	0.26	
No	0.68	0.64	0.90	0.91	0.94	0.93	0.74	0.74	
N	1,023	1,254	1,136	1,275	1,137	1,273	1,144	1,275	