









How parents co-ordinate childcare, education and work

This research explores how co-ordinating childcare and education services for *all* the children in a family is central to reconciling work and family life. Christine Skinner, of the University of York, interviewed 40 mothers living within two separate areas in a middle-sized English city. She examined how parents co-ordinated getting one or more children between home, school, pre-school education, and childcare in a way that fitted with work commitments and she shows how co-ordination affected mothers' ability and willingness to work. The study found that:

-  Children had to be picked up and dropped off safely and efficiently from home, childcare or education at fixed times of the day in order for parents to ensure a seamless package of care that dovetailed with their working hours.
-  The number and timing of these fixed times varied depending upon the parents' (mainly mothers') working hours and the number and types of educational/childcare services used.
-  Parents' own preferences for particular childcare services could make co-ordinating arrangements more complex. But complexity also increased where there was more than one child in the family and particularly children of different ages, as they used different services, often with different opening times.
-  Working mothers relied on a mixture of formal, informal and back-up support to manage these arrangements. Non-working mothers managed picking up and dropping off themselves.
-  Contrary to expectations, full-time working mothers had the least complex arrangements and part-time working mothers the most complex.
-  Many non-working mothers believed co-ordination was too difficult to manage with work commitments and this deterred them from taking paid work. However, some mothers did prefer to 'be there' to pick up children from school themselves.
-  One of the most difficult times to manage was moving between statutory part-time pre-school education and formal childcare in private nurseries. These services were institutionally separate, operated different opening times, were some distance apart and offered no support in transporting children between the two services.
-  Fathers played an important role in transporting children, particularly where mothers worked full-time. This support was additional to, or separate from the care provided by fathers at atypical times (early morning/evenings/weekends).

Background

We know a great deal about the use of formal and informal childcare and the shortfalls in provision facing mothers who want to return to paid work. But much less is known about how childcare and educational services for *all* the children in the family need to be co-ordinated to enable parents, and especially mothers, to do paid work, or how these arrangements may deter mothers from working. This tends to be a hidden activity, wrapped up in the daily routine of family life. This research interviewed 40 mothers - seven working full-time, 21 working part-time and 12 not working - about how they managed these arrangements during term-time.

Co-ordinating arrangements

The study identified critical times in the day when parents had to get themselves to and from work and their children to and from childcare and education. These affected not just the daily journeys made by individual family members, but also how these journeys had to be synchronised effectively to ensure there were no delays. For example, any delay in the journey from home to school would create a delay in the subsequent journey from school to work. Synchronising such journeys was crucial, both for the parents to maintain a good work record and to ensure the continuity of children's care.

Figure 1 illustrates the journeys made by one family with two children (aged six years and 13 months) with both parents working full-time. The mother took the major responsibility. In the mornings and evenings she travelled with the children to and from the home, school, nursery, the childminder's house and her workplace. The childminder also picked up the older child from school in the afternoon and then looked after him until the evening. Thus, this family had three 'co-ordination points' to manage: morning, post-school and evening. The parents could not manage all three by themselves and had to rely on the childminder to pick their older child up from school, but still had to plan and organise this.

How did parents manage?

The working mothers in the study relied on a network of individuals offering informal, formal and back-up support with transporting children that was often *additional* to formal childcare. For example, six of the seven full-time working mothers used full-time formal childcare, yet they also had to rely on informal or formal support in transporting children at least once a day. All 21 of the part-time working mothers used either formal or informal childcare, but 13 also relied on support from others with transporting children. Informal and back-up support was provided by family (including fathers), friends and neighbours. Nannies, childminders,

Figure 1: The daily journeys made by a family to and from home, school, private nursery and workplace

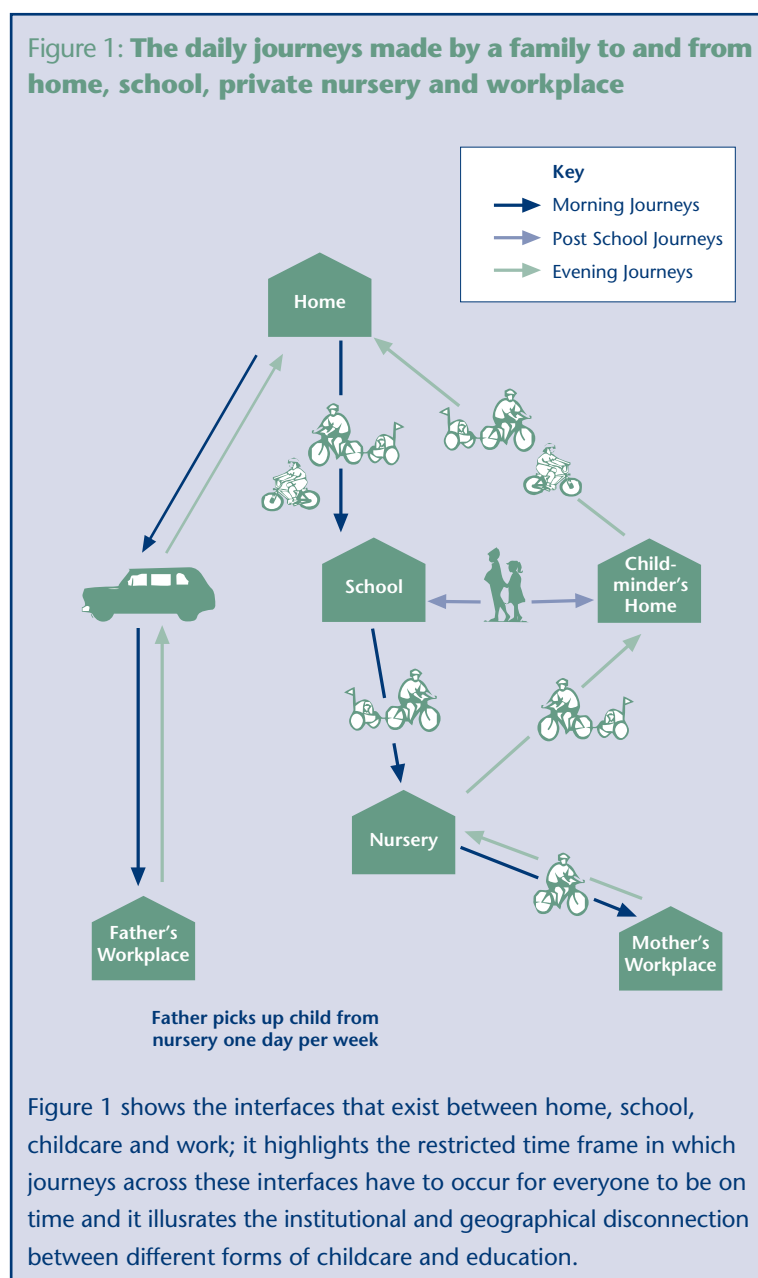


Figure 1 shows the interfaces that exist between home, school, childcare and work; it highlights the restricted time frame in which journeys across these interfaces have to occur for everyone to be on time and it illustrates the institutional and geographical disconnection between different forms of childcare and education.

childminders' husbands and out-of-school-clubs provided formal support with transporting children whereas no support was given by private nurseries or school nurseries. Back-up support was arranged to cover exceptional events and to 'step in' when other regular support with transporting children failed. Non-working mothers managed without other support.

At its simplest, support involved fathers or others taking children to and from care/education, but within this, more elaborate co-ordination strategies could be involved, including:

- Parents working different hours to one another so one was always available.
- Fathers adjusting working hours to help with transporting children (leaving work early or taking shorter lunch breaks).
- Mothers restricting their hours of work to atypical evening/weekend hours.
- Parents relying on flexi-time or flexible work arrangements.
- Parents relying on the goodwill of employers and work colleagues to release them from work so they could take children to and from care.
- Booking and paying for additional formal childcare as a back-up that may never be used.
- Splitting the weekly childcare for a single child across similar providers (using two instead of one private nursery for example) because one offered more extended opening hours.

Many of these strategies were used in combination and altered over time in response to children's changing educational and childcare needs. The families living in the more affluent Area A used more support than those living in the less affluent Area B. But this was closely related to more mothers in Area A working daytime hours (between 8am-6pm) and thus being less available to pick up children. Mothers in Area B were more likely to work atypical hours.

The impact on mothers' working

Twelve mothers in the study were not working. Five specifically identified the following as deterring them from working:

- the inflexible nature of pre-school education;
- the inflexibility of employment to fit around pre-school and primary school education; and
- transportation problems: either a lack of access to efficient public or private transport when mothers needed it, or lack of support from others to take

children to and from education or childcare. Some mothers, however, also stated a preference to 'be there' to pick up children from school themselves.

It is hard to be sure which of these factors, if any, carried the most weight as a barrier to employment. Children's ages (rather than simply the numbers of children in the family) were important as different forms of education and childcare were needed, often in combination. This made arrangements both more complex and time-consuming as children needed to be taken to and from different care settings. Lack of support from others or lack of access to efficient transport also increased the 'time costs'.

Mothers also identified childcare costs as a barrier to employment; these increased in direct relationship to the numbers *and* ages of children in the family. Even so, it seemed that time costs were equally if not more important than childcare costs. For example, as one mother who was actively seeking a job explained:

"Cost definitely, but also as I say, it has been up to the dropping off factor because I don't drive, I'm being practical, I probably won't be able to run around all over the place, take one child to nursery and then the other to school, and get on to work."

Six mothers said they were postponing returning to work until all their children were in school full-time. When all the children were old enough to go to the same school co-ordinating arrangements would be simpler and the journey times would reduce, potentially making it easier to return to work. However, these non-working mothers appeared to have limited choices for working in the future; first, because they wanted to dovetail their working hours around the school day so they could still 'be there' to pick up children from school themselves and, second, because they could not rely on fathers to provide support with transport or care in the evenings/weekends. Four of these non-working mothers were lone parents; in the other eight cases the fathers worked long hours into the evenings/weekends or away from home.

Conclusion

This small-scale study found that parents, particularly mothers, were 'running around in circles'; not only were they doing the 'school run', but the 'pre-school nursery run', the 'childcare run' and the 'work run'. The main points that emerge from these interviews were:

- **Co-ordinating arrangements is a skilled activity.** It involves synchronising childcare, pre-school and primary school education with both parents' work commitments, their conditions of employment and the availability of formal and informal support with transporting children at critical times.
- **Co-ordinating arrangements is as important as service provision.** The experiences of these 40 mothers with access to the same formal childcare services shows that it was not necessarily lack of childcare that deterred mothers from working, but the complexity of the arrangements needed in families with at least one child under five years of age.
- **Co-ordinating arrangements is about reducing time costs.** Parents, particularly mothers, were always trying to reduce the time costs associated with co-ordinating paid work, childcare and education.
- **Fathers played an important role in enabling mothers to work,** either by looking after children themselves to help reduce childcare costs or by providing informal support with transporting children to help reduce time costs.

The researcher suggests that thinking about childcare, work and education has become compartmentalised and split. More radical ways of thinking about parents' and children's needs could include:

- Tackling the lack of co-ordination between pre-school education and childcare, perhaps by providing integrated childcare provision within locally based schools.
- Dealing with the culture of working long hours, particularly for men.
- Recognising the needs of children and parents for efficient transport services.

About the project

The study was carried out in 1999 by Christine Skinner from the University of York. It formed the English part of a European project, which explored how parents reconciled work and family life. The qualitative data generated in England was never analysed in full and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded the secondary analysis of that data, which is reported here. A single semi-structured interview was carried out with 40 mothers living within a medium-sized city in England. The 40 mothers were selected from two distinct areas, 20 from a predominately

private housing area and 20 from a predominately social housing area. This provided a sample of respondents with varied socio-economic circumstances, whilst simultaneously controlling for access to local formal childcare services. Two selection criteria were used; respondents had to live in one of the two areas and have at least one child under five years of age. The study examined co-ordination on a term-time basis only and cannot therefore deduce what co-ordination might have been like in school holidays or during other atypical times.

How to get further information

Further information can be obtained from Dr Christine Skinner, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York, Heslington, York YO10 5DD, Tel: 01904 321251, email: cbes100@york.ac.uk.

The full report, **Running around in circles: Coordinating childcare, education and work** by Christine Skinner, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Family and Work series (ISBN 1 86134 466 X, price £13.95).