








Childcare services at atypical times

With an increasingly service-based economy and 24-hour operation, more parents are working outside traditional 'nine-to-five' hours, Monday to Friday. At the same time, traditional childcare sources such as grandparents are predicted to become increasingly unavailable. This study by researchers at the Thomas Coram Research Unit looked at the barriers to developing childcare services to cover atypical working hours, and explored factors that may help to facilitate service development. From survey and case-study data, the study found that:

-  Although most Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships believed there is a need to develop childcare at atypical times, less than a third have tried to do so.
-  Around half of childminders provided care in the early morning, but few did so before 7am, and hardly any offered care after 7pm or at weekends. Other types of childcare service were even less likely to offer care at such times.
-  A few innovative services were starting to develop, such as community nanny schemes, childminding networks and centre-based weekend care. However, most parents working non-standard hours seemed to rely on partners, relatives or friends for childcare.
-  Demand appeared to be greatest for formal care services extending an hour or so either side of the standard working day, rather than late evening, overnight or weekend care. However, it is difficult to estimate demand accurately because parents' choices are affected by various factors such as cost, availability and childcare preferences.
-  The most common barrier to developing services at atypical times was the reluctance of many existing childcare workers to work these hours, primarily because of the impact on their own families. Other barriers included financial viability, registration requirements, unsuitable premises, and concerns about children being in formal childcare services at such times.
-  Childminders were generally seen as offering the most appropriate formal care for children at non-standard times, because of their home base. However, this could put their own work-family balance at risk since many have young children of their own.
-  The researchers conclude that it might be more appropriate to develop new types of service, or to target recruitment at people without childcare responsibilities, rather than expecting existing providers to extend their hours.

Background

Work at atypical times, defined in this study as hours outside 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday (taking account of travel time), is increasing. With the growth of a '24-hour society', many parents with young children are now working at atypical times, either by necessity or choice. Although the National Childcare Strategy has led to major expansion of childcare and early years services, little is known about how far formal childcare services are able to meet the needs of these parents. Nor is a great deal known about the particular issues from the providers' perspective in offering such provision.

This study used survey and interview data from childcare providers, national childcare organisations and Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) to consider what helps and what hinders the development of childcare services to cover atypical work times.

The demand for childcare at atypical times

The study found that there was some demand for childcare outside the hours of 8am to 6pm on weekdays, but it appeared to be limited, especially for overnight care. Demand appeared to be greatest for services extending an hour or so either side of the standard working day.

Most EYDCPs believed that existing demand was partly rather than fully met, mostly by informal care providers such as partners, relatives and friends. This study did not look at demand from parents' perspectives. However, other studies which have done so suggest that there is an unmet need for formal services generally, and that some parents working non-standard hours have particular problems in finding suitable childcare.

It is difficult to make an accurate, reliable assessment of demand for childcare services at atypical times, because demand depends on circumstances and is affected by a range of factors. These include the cost of care, parents' incomes and the quality of services on offer, as well as more intangible factors such as cultural attitudes and the acceptability of different forms of childcare at different times.

Willingness of providers to work atypical hours

Many childminders provided care in the early morning, but few did so before 7am. Hardly any kept children beyond 7pm or looked after them at weekends. Childcare outside standard working hours

was even less likely to be offered by day nurseries, playgroups or out-of-school services.

Over a third of providers were willing to consider working regularly outside their current working hours, but this rarely extended to late evenings, overnight or at weekends. In general, services were more willing to take children in the early morning and to provide care at times that varied from week to week.

Barriers to developing services

The study found that the main reason why such services have not become more widespread is the reluctance of childcare workers to work non-standard hours, primarily because of the impact on their own families. Almost three-quarters said that they did not want to work these hours themselves, and around a quarter said that they could not get staff to work at these times.

"I feel it encroaches on the privacy of my other family members. My husband needs to unwind after long shifts. I also feel family time together is important and try to safeguard weekends for quality time together." (Childminder)

"Finding quality staff is always difficult – to find staff who would be willing to work early or late would be even more so." (Day nursery)

Financial considerations such as sustainability and costs, especially when parental demand appeared to be low, were also significant barriers. Registration requirements for overnight care, unsuitable premises and not knowing when children would attend also created difficulties. Another concern was that it might not be in children's best interests to be cared for at such times by anyone other than a family member.

What would help?

Factors that would help in developing services were the converse of those identified as barriers. From the EYDCP perspective, having providers who wanted to offer such services and the ability to offer them financial support were most important. Other helpful factors identified were demand from parents, employer support and the availability of suitable premises. Around a quarter of EYDCPs thought that the Government's encouragement and guidance on this issue had helped them to develop childcare services covering atypical hours.

Around half of providers, especially childminders, said that nothing would encourage them to offer childcare outside standard working

hours – they just did not want to do it. However, a third of childminders would be encouraged to offer atypical hours care if they could charge higher fees. In addition, over a third of day nurseries and out-of-school services thought that a subsidy or financial incentive would help, as well as more parents asking for this service. Day nurseries saw the greatest needs as being able to offer better working conditions and recruit staff willing to work atypical hours.

Developing services

Services to meet the needs of parents working atypical hours are only just starting to develop, and there was little experience for the study to draw on. Some new initiatives were identified, such as a community nanny scheme, weekend care at a children's centre in hospital grounds, and a childminding network to meet the needs of police employees. Not all were fully operational at the time of the study, and a recurring theme was that developing such services cannot be done quickly. Respondents indicated that demand takes time to build, and it is very difficult for atypical hours services to be financially viable in the short term without some additional source of funding. Development of such services is more likely to take place with significant backing from employers, as has occurred with some NHS trusts.

Less than a third of EYDCPs in England reported actively trying to develop childcare at atypical times, although most thought that some parents needed such a service. Many EYDCP representatives and childcare providers believed that childminders were best placed to develop atypical hours care because of their home base. There was some concern, however, about over-reliance on childminders to fill this gap in services, and the possible effects on childminders, their own families and the children they care for.

The study showed that some childcare workers were willing or able to work at atypical times, and that developing new services in this area would be possible. However, a number of barriers or constraints would need to be overcome, including: creating sufficient demand; problems of funding and sustainability; combining non-standard and standard hours childcare; registration and inspection requirements; finding suitable premises; and ensuring support for providers.

Conclusion

Ideally, atypical hours care would form one part of a coherent range of services to address the varying needs of children and families. Such services would

cover not only childcare so that parents can work, but also education and stimulation for children, and advice and support for parents, and would assist in developing strong local communities. Current policy developments to integrate children's services, for example through the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative, Sure Start programme and proposed Children's Centres, show how this can be done.

Childcare at atypical times ought not to be seen as something to be bolted onto existing services, requiring providers to work even longer hours than many already do. This would be to miss the opportunity to consider how to bring services together to meet the needs of all those involved, not least the children.

Policy considerations

The workforce

A fundamental issue likely to affect the willingness of childcare providers to work at atypical times is the poor pay and low status attached to childcare work generally. To improve recruitment and retention, attention would need to be given to the working conditions and pay of this sector of the workforce.

Local factors are also likely to affect willingness to work atypical hours. Such factors might include a high number of unfilled places in childcare services, which may make providers more prepared to extend their hours in a bid to attract new customers. Or the local labour market might create a significant demand for atypical hours care again influencing providers' willingness to work these hours. Individual factors, such as childcare providers' own family circumstances, are also likely to have an impact. Many childcare workers have young children of their own. It would be ironic if by encouraging them to extend their work hours to provide childcare for parents working atypical hours, their own work-life balance were sacrificed.

Targeting people without childcare responsibilities of their own might be appropriate, as they may be more willing to work at atypical times. Alternatively, rather than expecting existing providers to extend their services, another approach would be to develop new forms of childcare to cover atypical hours.

Some provision covering non-standard hours has developed from existing services, but new types of services might be better suited to childcare at atypical times. The study found that childminding networks and sitter services offer a promising way forward. From April 2003, the Home Childcarers Scheme might help by making it possible for eligible parents

to claim childcare tax credit when using a registered childminder in their own home. However, this may not address childminders' general unwillingness to work non-standard hours.

Developing new services would also pose challenges to current registration and inspection procedures. A review of procedures for registering and inspecting services that deviate from traditional models may be necessary, along with consideration of extending eligibility for childcare tax credit to families who use a variety of different forms of childcare.

Funding and sustainability

A dilemma arising from improving childcare workers' pay would be that this would increase the cost of care to parents. Asking parents to pay more for atypical hours childcare is unlikely to be the answer to service development and financial viability, unless fees could be sufficiently subsidised (for example through tax credits or employer support).

Sustainability is a real issue for childcare services – the study found that many out-of-school clubs and newly developed services faced a real struggle to keep going. Short-term 'pump priming' funding gave them little time to establish and develop services. Services might also have to spend a high proportion of their time seeking further funding, and on monitoring and evaluating their work to satisfy funding requirements. Streamlining these procedures and the different funding streams that services can access would be a way to encourage and support service development.

Support from employers for atypical hours childcare could make such services more sustainable. However, few employers have introduced employment strategies recognising the specific needs of parents with young children, including those who have to work at non-standard times.

Children's needs

One factor influencing the use of childcare is parents' (and society's) beliefs about what is good for children. The common perception is that outside standard working hours, children are better off at home with a parent, or at least with family and friends. The study found that care outside the family at these times was still regarded with ambivalence and sometimes outright hostility by many childcare providers. However, there is little evidence to show whether or not children are adversely affected by

being in formal childcare services at atypical times. A broader debate is perhaps called for on children's place in society, and about ways of achieving a balance between children's and parents' needs and the requirements of paid work.

Family-friendly workplaces

Alongside developing atypical hours childcare services, it would be useful to consider how employment policies and working hours could be made more 'family friendly', so that parents have less need for care at such times.

About the project

Ann Mooney and June Statham at the Thomas Coram Research Unit undertook the research during 2002. A postal survey of the 150 EYDCPs in England was carried out, and received a response rate of 76 per cent. In addition, a random sample of 600 childcare providers in two local authorities were surveyed. These were predominantly childminders, but day nurseries, out-of-school provision and pre-school playgroups were also included. The response rate was 61 per cent. The views of six national childcare organisations were sought through telephone interviews, and six case studies were constructed of providers offering atypical hours childcare. These were also based on telephone interviews.

How to get further information

The full report, **Around the clock: Childcare services at atypical times** by June Statham and Ann Mooney, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Family and Work series (ISBN 1 86134 502 X, price £11.95).