

**Frontiers in Child Care Research**  
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**SESSION 12**

**Getting Stability: Understanding and Measuring the  
Dynamics of Child Care Arrangements**

*Stable arrangements are seen as a goal in child care—but what does stability mean, and how is it measured? This breakout session will focus on the various ways researchers have examined the stability of child care for low-income children and highlight findings from research. We will attempt to arrive at a better understanding of the measures and explore the possibility of using comparable measures on different data sets.*

Facilitator: No facilitator

Discussants: Ann Collins, Abt Associates

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**Roberta Weber**

**Getting Stability: Understanding and Measuring the Dynamics of Child Care Arrangements**

- What is stability? What should we call it? Are we using the right term? Is continuity a good term?
- There are many language and construct issues surrounding the stability terminology.
- It is inherently difficult to measure child care use over time.

**Language of Stability**

- There is no agreement in the literature on language (both stability and continuity are used)
- Stability versus continuity—are they the same thing?

**Terminology to facilitate discussion of child care stability**

- Caregiver is an individual
- Provider is a facility
- Arrangement is a unique combination of the provider and child
- Providers and children may be involved in multiple arrangements
  - Children may have multiple providers
  - Providers may care for multiple children
- Clarity is important with these terms In home-based care, the provider and caregiver are typically synonymous but not in center-based care.

**Two Major Types of Child Care Stability**

- Caregiver—micro-level within center-based care
  - Typically, multiple caregivers in the case of center-based care
  - Typically, caregiver and provider the same in home-based care
- Arrangement—macro-level
  - Unique combination of child and provider

**Reasons Researchers Have Studied Child Care Stability**

- Effects of stability on child outcomes (mixed with some micro-level and some macro-level studies). Measures of stability are gross and imprecise, but we have found effects of stability
- Association of stability and parental or family outcomes. Does child care stability lead to employment stability? What is the direction of the effect?
- Estimate of how stable child care arrangements are; that is, how long do arrangements last, and how frequent are the changes?
- Evidence: Relationships have been found between stability and attachment, social competence, and child and family outcomes

**Complexity within Stability Construct**

- Change does not always mean instability. It may be important to distinguish between predictable versus unpredictable change (work by Lowe and Weisner); for example, a move due to end of school year versus an end to the arrangement caused by loss of a provider.
- Age matters because the child's ability to develop and maintain relationships with multiple adults increases with age.
- There are challenges to multiple arrangements; however, the assumption that they are not good for children has not been demonstrated empirically, and parents commonly use multiple arrangements in order to provide the child with a group experience for part of the day. Multiple child care arrangements are associated with nontraditional shift work and are also related to parents attending school or training.

- Changes in parental and close relative providers are likely to have different effects on the child because the child has an ongoing relationship with parents and possibly grandparents. The father being counted as a “type of care” could change the prevalence of multiple arrangements.
- More careful discrimination in types of change is likely to enhance understanding of stability. Changing from care by the mother to non-parental care may have different results than changing from one type of non-parental care to another.

#### **Four Measures of Arrangement Stability**

- Number of providers
- Transitions between providers (no consistency in defining the type of care used in transition)
  - Percentage of children remaining with the same provider
  - Percentage of children who change providers at least once
- Primary provider ratio
  - Percentage of all observed months spent with the provider who provided the most months of care
- Duration of a child care arrangement (measured at the arrangement level)
- First three to be measured at the caregiver level

#### **Ann Collins**

#### **Family Child Care Sample from Study of Child Care for Low-Income Families**

##### *Study Sample*

- Total of 650 matched family child care providers and selected children and families from five counties (located in California, Massachusetts, Ohio, Texas and Washington) were sampled.
- Created calendars that tracked the following:
  - Child’s age
  - Months of the year
  - Employment status of the mother
  - Type and amount of all non-maternal care arrangements
- A “funny” aspect of the sample for this type of work is that family day care was always the starting point.
  - 12 months: 617 matched providers and family pairs
  - 18 months: 559 matched providers and family pairs
  - 24 months: 466 matched providers and family pairs
  - 30 months: 304 matched providers and family pairs
  - 36 months: 155 matched providers and family pairs

##### *Stability Issue*

- How does the concept of “stability” apply in different situations?
- Calendar examples were shown to illustrate the following concepts:

- When periods of maternal work status correspond with child care use
- When child care is “interrupted” by school time
- When a child has an ongoing child care arrangement and also an intermittent arrangement
- When some of the interrupted child care arrangements are with relatives, including non-custodial fathers

### **Stability Questions**

- How do we define stable child care?
- How do we define unstable child care?
- Should we have a threshold mark of defining unstable child care?
- Is the use of multiple caregivers (patchwork of caregivers) stable?
- How about the use of child care for a long duration?
- How about a combination of full-time and part-time child care?
- Do we need to see an individual history of child care experiences to tell the story?
- Are aggregate measures of stability capturing children’s experiences?
- What is most important for children?
- Is the use of unstable child care tempered by a child’s quality of attachment to the mother?

### **What we are currently doing?**

- Describe how we got the sample and how this may affect our findings on stability
- Separate non-relatives from relatives
- Show the findings within the context of the observation period (12–36 months)
- Do a separate analysis taking out unpredictable changes. (Separate predictable from unpredictable changes)

## **Helen H. Raikes**

### **Continuity of Caregiving**

#### Continuity

- Single caregiver continuing over a period of time with infants or toddlers

#### Studies

- Studies follow child care over time to determine the effects of keeping the same caregiver or teacher
- Raikes (1993): 90 percent of children who had the same high-quality caregiver for more than 1 year had secure teacher-child attachment relations versus 50 percent who had been with a teacher less than 6 months
- Attachment theory:
  - Infants benefit from secure relationships with parents
  - Those relationships are at the center of infant development theory
- Evidence suggests children benefit from secure relationships with secondary caregivers

- Some children benefit from continuous child care

#### Programs Recommend Relationship Continuity

- European-based programs (e.g., Italian programs)
- Early Head Start performance standards
- Many U.S. programs to implement a continuity model versus graduating children at age transitions
- Dimension of continuity as identified by programs:
  - Children's experiences of continuity (in child care and at home)
  - Parents' experiences (in comprehensive programs)
  - Program-level practices that lend themselves to continuity
- Measurement of continuity

#### Child

- Primary full-time caregiver
- Room transitions
- Secondary full-time caregivers
- Part-time staff members
- Family support workers (continuity from parents)
- Transition plan for the 0-3 year age period
- Transition practices

#### Parent

- Family support workers
- Cultural continuity (in terms of language)
- Primary full-time caregiver
- Room transitions
- Secondary full-time caregivers
- Part-time staff member
- Transition plan
- Transition practices

#### Program Practices

- Assigning of children to a primary caregiver
- Policy of consistent primary caregivers
- Children staying with primary caregivers
- Children staying together in peer groups
- Program preparing children for change
- Policy of supporting workers staying with the family
- Policy of part-time teachers staying with the children
- Policy of consistent substitutes
- Policy of undertaking cultural matches between teachers and support workers and parents and children

#### **Discussion (Comments and Questions)**

- Need to understand the context of child care experiences, including home life and the types of changes that children go through (i.e., good or bad changes, predictable versus unpredictable changes).
- Need to factor in individual differences (e.g., temperament). Some children may be better able to cope with changes in care than others; for example, easygoing children may be better able to adjust to new caregivers.
- Need a coalition of researchers to look at this construct:
  - Do we need to build a new data set that would be better able to answer more precise questions?
  - Can we use administrative data to tell the complete story of what children experience?
  - One strategy is to combine multiple administration data to piece together a story, for example, using Early Head Start data from *Research Connections*.
- Are certain data sets not generalizable to all families? Need data that are representative of all low-income people, not just families who use child care services (e.g., subsidy users).
- Are policies influencing the stability of child care for families?
- Are there relationships between the quality, type, and stability of care?
- Have cultural variations in expectations about the stability of child care arrangements been considered in the impact of children's outcomes?

### **Martha Zaslow**

#### **Are We Under-Assessing the Importance of Stability Because of Lack of Precision in How We Are Measuring?**

- From the discussion thus far, we are beginning to get a sense of what is good vs. bad instability. Bad instability is unpredictable in nature, such as unstable employment and/or child care, which may lead to other negative effects of unstable care
- Good instability occurs over a long duration, for example, changing from low- to high-quality child care
- Are we under- or overstating the strength of associations between stability and outcomes?
- Over-stating: the association really reflects characteristics of the families with the greatest instability. We do not know who the families are (selection effects), and we need to describe these families and their differences in education, SES, and levels of depression and anxiety (as well as underlying variables that may account for any differences).
- Under-stating: Our measures of stability are imprecise, and thus we end up understating the strength of the relationship with child outcomes.
- Use of dataset from "Five State Study:" The Project on State-Level Child Outcomes involves experimental evaluations in five states using welfare waivers.

The states are Iowa, Indiana, Florida, Connecticut and Minnesota. Each study looked at program impacts on economic variables like work and welfare receipt. But the studies were extended to include measures of program impacts on children. Measures included calendars of child care participation, maternal-report measures of child outcomes, and measures of change within the family, such as residential change, housing change, and change in partner relationships.

- What is different in the set of analyses now being carried out is the potential to look at changes in child care, taking into account changes in employment and changes in family circumstances. The study will control for background characteristics, but will simultaneously control for changes within family and in employment. And it will more fully isolate the role of child care changes.
- In conclusion, we need to take a careful look at both problems of under-assessing and over-assessing the role of stability in child outcomes. We need to both increase the precision of measures of stability and take into account more fully the characteristics of families and changes occurring within families.

### **Comments**

- The issue of stability needs to be assessed in a nationally representative, low-income sample; for example, those enrolled in welfare programs or those with incomes below a certain percent of poverty.
- Need to begin to more fully isolate the kinds of instability that are bad for children, and not assume that all change is bad.
- Need to take this perspective with respect to employment change as well as child care change. Is all change in employment necessarily bad for children?