

Perceptions of Childcare and Parenting Support among Working Parents

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study was to explore the perceptions of childcare and parenting support among working parents.

Method: This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with 20 working parents from diverse professional backgrounds. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a balanced representation of genders and a variety of family structures. The interviews were conducted either in person or via video conferencing, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software, following a systematic coding process to identify key themes and patterns. The final sample size was determined by theoretical saturation.

Results: Three main themes emerged from the analysis: experiences with current childcare arrangements, challenges in balancing work and parenting responsibilities, and access to and satisfaction with parenting support resources. Parents reported limited availability and high costs of childcare, concerns about quality, and a need for flexible services. Challenges included time management, employer support, stress, and the impact on career advancement. Informal support networks, such as family and friends, played a crucial role, while formal support services were beneficial but often underutilized due to lack of awareness.

Conclusion: The study highlights the complex challenges faced by working parents in managing childcare and parenting responsibilities. Findings underscore the need for more flexible, affordable, and high-quality childcare services, along with stronger support systems within the workplace and community. By addressing these needs, policymakers, employers, and childcare providers can improve work-family balance and overall well-being for working parents. The insights gained can inform the development of more effective policies and practices, ultimately benefiting parents, children, and society.

Keywords: *Childcare, Parenting Support, Working Parents, Work-Family Balance*

1 Introduction

The importance of childcare for working parents cannot be overstated. It is a critical factor that influences parents' ability to maintain employment and balance their work and family responsibilities (Feierabend & Staffebach, 2015). High-quality childcare not only supports parents in their professional lives but also plays a crucial role in the early development and well-being of children (Fenech, 2012). However, access to quality childcare is not always guaranteed, and many parents face significant barriers in finding and affording suitable childcare services (Feierabend & Staffebach, 2015).

The study is grounded in the theory of work-family conflict, which posits that the demands of work and family roles are often incompatible, leading to stress and reduced well-being (Craig & Mullan, 2011). This conflict is particularly pronounced for parents who must navigate the logistical and emotional challenges of childcare while fulfilling their professional obligations. The theoretical framework also incorporates insights from the literature on social support, highlighting the role of both formal and informal support networks in mitigating work-family conflict (Brady, 2016; Wheelock & Jones, 2002).

Research has shown that the availability and quality of childcare services are critical determinants of parents' satisfaction and well-being. In Chile, for example, the right to childcare is recognized as essential for working parents, yet the actual availability and accessibility of these services remain limited (Armijo & Ananias, 2022). Similarly, studies in other contexts have highlighted the challenges parents face in accessing affordable and high-quality childcare, with significant implications for their work-family balance and overall well-being (Feierabend & Staffebach, 2015).

The division of childcare responsibilities between mothers and fathers is another important factor influencing parents' experiences and perceptions of childcare (Craig & Mullan, 2011). Traditional gender roles often result in mothers bearing a disproportionate share of childcare duties, which can exacerbate stress and limit their professional opportunities (Liu & Suh, 2022). However, emerging trends suggest a shift towards more equitable sharing of childcare responsibilities, particularly among younger generations and in dual-income households (Gao & Ruan, 2022).

Informal childcare arrangements, such as relying on grandparents or other family members, are a common strategy for many working parents (Peng, 2023; Wheelock & Jones, 2002). These arrangements can provide flexibility

and emotional support, but they also come with their own set of challenges and limitations (Brady, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated childcare dynamics, as many families have had to adapt to changing circumstances and rely more heavily on extended family support (Peng, 2023).

In addition to informal support, formal childcare services and workplace policies play a crucial role in supporting working parents. Studies have highlighted the importance of employer-provided childcare services, flexible work hours, and parental leave policies in reducing work-family conflict and supporting parents' professional and personal well-being (Connolly & Devaney, 2017; Moon & Hasan, 2022). However, the availability and quality of these supports can vary widely across different contexts and organizations (Feierabend & Staffebach, 2015).

Despite the extensive research on childcare and work-family balance, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of how parents perceive and navigate these challenges. Many studies have focused on specific contexts or demographic groups, leaving a need for more comprehensive and inclusive research that captures the diverse experiences of working parents (Silva & Wise, 2006; Weaven & Grace, 2010). Additionally, the rapid changes in the labor market and family dynamics necessitate ongoing research to keep pace with evolving needs and preferences (Spinelli et al., 2020).

This study aims to address these gaps by exploring the perceptions of childcare and parenting support among a diverse sample of working parents. Specifically, it seeks to:

- Understand the factors that influence parents' satisfaction with their current childcare arrangements.
- Identify the challenges parents face in balancing work and parenting responsibilities.
- Examine the role of informal and formal support networks in mitigating work-family conflict.
- Provide insights into potential improvements in childcare services and support systems to better meet the needs of working parents.

2 Methods and Materials

2.1 Study Design and Participants

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of childcare and parenting support among working parents. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for understanding complex social phenomena, as it

allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives.

The participants in this study were working parents from various professional backgrounds and industries. Inclusion criteria required that participants be currently employed and have at least one child under the age of 12. A purposive sampling method was used to ensure a diverse representation of participants in terms of gender, age, and job type. The final sample size was determined by theoretical saturation, the point at which no new themes or insights are observed in the data.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method that provides a balance between the flexibility of open-ended questions and the focus of structured interviews. This approach allows participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences while ensuring that key topics related to childcare and parenting support are covered.

Each interview was conducted either in person or via video conferencing, depending on the participants' preferences and availability. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. An interview guide was developed to steer the conversations, covering topics such as:

- Experiences with current childcare arrangements
- Perceived challenges in balancing work and parenting responsibilities
- Access to and satisfaction with parenting support resources
- Suggestions for improving childcare and parenting support systems

Table 1

The Results of Thematic Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Experiences with Current Childcare Arrangements	Availability of Childcare Services	- Limited options- Waiting lists- Location constraints
	Quality of Childcare Services	- Safety standards- Staff qualifications- Child engagement
	Cost of Childcare	- Affordability- Financial strain- Subsidies available
	Flexibility of Childcare	- Hours of operation- Emergency care- Part-time options
	Trust in Childcare Providers	- Personal recommendations- Reputation- Communication with providers
2. Challenges in Balancing Work and Parenting Responsibilities	Impact on Child Development	- Social skills- Learning opportunities- Emotional well-being
	Accessibility for Special Needs	- Specialized services- Inclusion practices- Staff training
	Time Management	- Scheduling conflicts- Overtime work- Commute time

2.3 Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis tool that facilitates the coding and categorization of data. The analysis followed a thematic approach, involving several stages:

Familiarization: Researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading the transcripts multiple times.

Initial Coding: The transcripts were coded line-by-line to identify significant phrases and concepts.

Development of Themes: Codes were grouped into broader themes based on their similarities and relationships.

Reviewing and Refining Themes: Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and addressed the research questions.

Finalizing Themes: The final themes were defined and named, providing a coherent framework for presenting the findings.

3 Findings and Results

The study included a diverse group of 20 working parents, with a balanced representation of genders (10 males and 10 females). The participants ranged in age from 25 to 45 years, with the majority (15 participants) falling between 30 and 40 years old. In terms of marital status, 16 were married or in a domestic partnership, while 4 were single parents. The participants had between one and three children, with 12 parents having one child, 6 having two children, and 2 having three children. Regarding employment, the sample included parents from various professional backgrounds, including education (5 participants), healthcare (4 participants), information technology (4 participants), retail (3 participants), finance (2 participants), and other sectors (2 participants).

3. Access to and Satisfaction with Parenting Support Resources	Employer Support	- Flexible work hours- Remote work options- Parental leave policies
	Stress and Mental Health	- Work-life balance- Burnout- Coping strategies
	Division of Parenting Roles	- Shared responsibilities- Gender roles- Single parenting
	Impact on Career Advancement	- Promotion opportunities- Job performance- Professional development
	Informal Support Networks	- Family help- Friends' support- Community groups
	Formal Support Services	- Parenting classes- Counseling services- Support groups
	Workplace Policies	- On-site childcare- Parental leave- Employee assistance programs
Government Programs and Policies	- Childcare subsidies- Maternity/paternity leave- Early childhood education	
Awareness and Utilization of Resources	- Information availability- Usage rates- Perceived effectiveness	

3.1 Experiences with Current Childcare Arrangements

Availability of Childcare Services: Participants frequently discussed the limited options available for childcare. Many expressed frustration with long waiting lists and the constraints of location. As one parent noted, "Finding a good daycare nearby is almost impossible. We're on several waiting lists, but nothing has opened up yet."

Quality of Childcare Services: The quality of childcare services was a significant concern. Parents emphasized the importance of safety standards, staff qualifications, and child engagement in their choice of childcare. One participant shared, "I need to know that my child is safe and well taken care of. The staff's qualifications and how they engage with the children are crucial."

Cost of Childcare: The affordability of childcare emerged as a major theme, with many parents citing financial strain. Some mentioned the availability of subsidies, but these were not always sufficient. "Even with the subsidies, the cost is still a huge part of our budget," one parent explained.

Flexibility of Childcare: Flexibility in childcare services was highly valued, particularly concerning hours of operation, emergency care, and part-time options. A parent mentioned, "Our daycare's flexible hours are a lifesaver, especially when I have to work late or on weekends."

Trust in Childcare Providers: Building trust with childcare providers was essential for parents. Personal recommendations, the provider's reputation, and effective communication were key factors. "I chose our daycare because several friends recommended it, and the staff communicates well with us," said one parent.

Impact on Child Development: Parents were keenly aware of the impact of childcare on their child's development, highlighting the importance of social skills, learning opportunities, and emotional well-being. "I see a

big difference in my child's social skills and learning since starting daycare," one participant observed.

Accessibility for Special Needs: Accessibility for children with special needs was another important consideration. Parents looked for specialized services, inclusion practices, and staff training. "My child has special needs, and finding a place that can cater to them has been challenging, but essential," a parent shared.

3.2 Challenges in Balancing Work and Parenting Responsibilities

Time Management: Scheduling conflicts, overtime work, and commute times were common challenges. Parents often felt pressed for time, juggling work and family responsibilities. "It's a constant balancing act trying to fit everything into the day," one parent remarked.

Employer Support: The level of support from employers varied, with flexible work hours, remote work options, and parental leave policies being crucial. "My employer offers flexible hours, which helps a lot. I can start early and leave early to pick up my kids," said one participant.

Stress and Mental Health: The stress of balancing work and parenting responsibilities was evident, with many parents reporting burnout and the need for effective coping strategies. "Sometimes it's overwhelming, and I feel burned out. It's hard to find time for myself," a parent admitted.

Division of Parenting Roles: The division of parenting roles within families varied, with shared responsibilities, traditional gender roles, and single parenting all impacting the balance. One parent explained, "We try to share responsibilities, but it's tough, especially with both of us working full-time."

Impact on Career Advancement: Concerns about career advancement were prevalent, with some parents feeling that their parenting responsibilities affected promotion opportunities and job performance. "I feel like my career has

stalled because I can't commit to extra hours or travel," a parent noted.

3.3 Access to and Satisfaction with Parenting Support Resources

Informal Support Networks: Family help, friends' support, and community groups played a significant role in providing informal support. "We rely heavily on our family and friends. Without them, it would be much harder," one participant shared.

Formal Support Services: Parenting classes, counseling services, and support groups were mentioned as beneficial resources. However, access and awareness varied. "The parenting classes we attended were really helpful, but they're not well advertised," a parent stated.

Workplace Policies: On-site childcare, parental leave, and employee assistance programs were critical workplace policies that supported parents. "Having on-site childcare at work has been a game-changer for me," said one participant.

Government Programs and Policies: Government initiatives, such as childcare subsidies, maternity/paternity leave, and early childhood education programs, were discussed. Some parents appreciated these resources, while others felt more could be done. "The government subsidies help, but they're not enough to cover all the costs," one parent explained.

Awareness and Utilization of Resources: The awareness and utilization of available resources varied among parents. Information availability, usage rates, and perceived effectiveness influenced their satisfaction. "I only found out about certain support programs by chance. More awareness is needed," a parent commented.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of childcare and parenting support among working parents. The three main themes identified were: experiences with current childcare arrangements, challenges in balancing work and parenting responsibilities, and access to and satisfaction with parenting support resources.

Participants highlighted the limited availability of childcare services, the high costs associated with these services, and concerns about quality. Many parents faced long waiting lists and geographical constraints that made it difficult to find suitable childcare options. This aligns with the findings of Armijo and Ananias (2022), who reported

similar challenges in Chile, where the right to childcare is recognized but access remains limited (Armijo & Ananias, 2022).

Quality of care was another significant concern, with parents emphasizing the importance of safety, staff qualifications, and child engagement. Fenech (2012) also noted that parents can be crucial informants of childcare quality, often prioritizing safety and developmental outcomes for their children (Fenech, 2012). The financial strain associated with childcare costs was a common theme, as parents struggled to balance affordability with quality. Feierabend and Staffebach (2015) discussed the economic pressures on working parents, highlighting how corporate childcare can sometimes mitigate, but not fully eliminate, these stresses (Feierabend & Staffebach, 2015).

Flexibility in childcare services was highly valued, especially in terms of operational hours and emergency care. The need for flexibility is underscored by Craig and Mullan (2011), who found that both mothers and fathers need adaptable childcare arrangements to better manage their work and family responsibilities. Trust in childcare providers emerged as a critical factor, with parents relying heavily on personal recommendations and effective communication to feel secure about their choices (Craig & Mullan, 2011).

Time management, employer support, stress, and mental health were recurring themes when discussing the challenges parents faced. Many parents experienced significant scheduling conflicts and felt overwhelmed by the dual demands of work and family. This finding is consistent with Liu and Suh (2022), who reported high levels of parenting stress among working mothers in China, exacerbated by inflexible work schedules and insufficient support (Liu & Suh, 2022).

Employer support varied widely among participants, with flexible work hours, remote work options, and parental leave policies being crucial for managing work-family balance. Moon and Hasan (2022) emphasized that employer-provided childcare and supportive workplace policies can significantly enhance work efficiency and reduce stress for employed parents. However, the availability of such support is not consistent across all workplaces, highlighting a critical area for improvement (Moon & Hasan, 2022).

The impact of parenting responsibilities on career advancement was another significant issue, with many parents feeling that their professional growth was hindered by their need to balance work and childcare. This finding aligns with the work of Gao and Ruan (2022), who noted that

gender inequalities in childcare time can affect career trajectories, particularly for women (Gao & Ruan, 2022).

Informal support networks, such as family and friends, played a vital role in helping parents manage childcare responsibilities. This informal support is essential, especially in contexts where formal childcare services are lacking or unaffordable. Wheelock and Jones (2002) highlighted the importance of grandparents and extended family in providing reliable and flexible childcare support (Wheelock & Jones, 2002).

Formal support services, including parenting classes and counseling, were also beneficial but often underutilized due to a lack of awareness. Connolly and Devaney (2017) emphasized the need for better dissemination of information regarding available support services to ensure parents can fully benefit from them (Connolly & Devaney, 2017). Government programs and workplace policies that provide financial and practical support were appreciated but deemed insufficient by many parents. This aligns with the findings of Hamari et al. (2021), who noted that immigrant families, in particular, face barriers in accessing these resources (Hamari et al., 2021).

Parents' satisfaction with available resources was closely linked to their awareness and utilization of these services. Many parents reported discovering crucial support programs by chance, indicating a need for more proactive communication and outreach from service providers and policymakers.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 20 participants, while providing valuable insights, is relatively small and may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among working parents. Future studies should aim to include a larger and more representative sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews, which may be subject to recall bias and social desirability bias. Participants might have over- or under-reported certain experiences based on what they perceived to be socially acceptable responses. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study, while providing in-depth insights, limits the ability to make broad generalizations. Finally, the study focused on a specific geographic area and may not reflect the experiences of working parents in different cultural or socioeconomic contexts.

Future research should consider expanding the scope of the study to include a larger and more diverse sample of working parents. This would help to capture a wider range

of experiences and provide more robust data on the challenges and supports needed by working parents. Longitudinal studies could also be valuable in understanding how parents' perceptions and experiences with childcare evolve over time, particularly as their children grow older and their work situations change. Additionally, comparative studies that examine childcare and parenting support across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts would provide valuable insights into how these factors influence parents' experiences and needs. Research could also explore the impact of specific policy interventions on parents' work-family balance and well-being, providing evidence to support the development of more effective childcare policies and programs.

To better support working parents, several practical recommendations emerge from this study. Employers should consider implementing more flexible work arrangements, such as remote work options and flexible hours, to help parents manage their dual responsibilities. Providing on-site childcare services or partnering with local childcare providers could also significantly reduce the logistical challenges faced by working parents. Policymakers should work towards increasing the availability and affordability of high-quality childcare services, including subsidies and financial support for families in need. Effective communication and outreach are crucial to ensure that parents are aware of and can access the support services available to them. Creating comprehensive information resources and using various channels to disseminate this information can help bridge the awareness gap. Additionally, developing and promoting parenting support programs, such as classes and counseling services, can provide parents with the tools and support they need to navigate the challenges of work and childcare. Collaboration between employers, policymakers, and community organizations is essential to create a supportive environment that meets the diverse needs of working parents.

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by working parents in managing childcare and parenting responsibilities. The findings underscore the need for more flexible, affordable, and high-quality childcare services, as well as stronger support systems both within the workplace and in the broader community. By addressing these needs and enhancing the support available to working parents, we can help to improve their work-family balance and overall well-being. The insights gained from this study can inform the development of more effective policies and practices,

ultimately benefiting parents, children, and society as a whole.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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