

Day Care Hopping: Stabilizing Day Care Options for Low-income Mothers through Subsidies

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We examined how to allocate a subsidy to low-income women that would stabilize children in day care at a Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The subsidy is to alleviate day care hopping (i.e. when parents move from day care to day care) leaving unpaid tuitions at each place. Day care hopping is really a survival strategy for the working poor, but is detrimental to children, parents, and the day care facilities. Using a focus group method, we identify the best way to allocate the subsidy to benefit both the parents, children and the YWCA.

Introduction

“Day care hopping” is when families (primarily single mothers) lack the resources to pay for their child's tuition at the day care, and leave without paying a final balance. The mothers get into another day care where they repeat the pattern. Thus, these families enroll in day care to day care, leaving unpaid bills at different places. Day care hopping is an economic survival strategy among the working poor. While cost has been found as a major predictor for mothers *choosing* a day care (Fuller, Holloway, Rambaud, & Eggers-Pierola, 1996), it is also a primary reason for *leaving* a day care. When there is not enough weekly income to cover all the bills, mothers typically shuffle bills, prioritizing what will be paid that month, and what will not be paid. Day care bills are subsequently left unpaid.

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Day care hopping affects mothers, children, and the child care facility. Low-income mothers are very resourceful in patchwork quilting together day care options for their children (Edin & Lein, 1997). However, it is difficult to find new day care arrangements on a continuous basis. Thus, women start piecing together help from friends and family, and then enrolling in different day cares from time to time.

Relying on family and friends for child care can be stressful. Children under the age of five years of a single parent holding a job are assumed to require full-time care, while those between ages five and 12 need about one-third of full-time care to cover periods after school and during summer vacations (Renwick & Bergmann, 1993; Uttal, 2002; Presser, 2003). In poor communities, social networks are at times a hindrance, in which obligations to others mount, ultimately causing distress (Usher Mitchell & LaGory, 2002) and negative parenting behaviors (Ortega, 2002). As a result of the patching together of child care, mothers may miss work; and after too many absences, lose their job—thus creating even more financial distress. Mothers who move from day care to day care also cannot provide for their children some of the factors most important to them in selecting child care facilities such as school activities, optimal location and hours of operation, good games and equipment, hot meals, and so on (Lee Van Hornn Ramey, Mulvihill, & Newell, 2001). Finding affordable day care for single mothers is a problem documented both in the United States (Edin & Lein, 1997) and in Britain (Roberts & Pless, 1995).

This practice hurts children who lose any semblance of continuity of care. Children's friendships, surroundings, and caregivers constantly change. Young children thrive on routine, and having such an unstable environment can leave children confused. Children need to form secure attachments to those who care for them. Having a different set of caregivers, in an ever-changing environment, could lead to insecure attachment, behavioral problems, depression, and so on (King & MacKinnon, 1988). Additionally, young children get used to certain foods. When young children are routinely presented different foods, prepared different ways, it may lead them to reject the meal, thus leading to nutritional problems.

Finally, the child care center suffers because they lose tuition, which is never repaid. They also have times when it is unclear whether the mother has left the day care, thus leaving potentially open spaces unfilled (and thus unbilled). The morale of the workers and children is tried, due to the unstable environment of the transient population. Because of this unfortunate trend, there is a growing support for programs that subsidize childcare expenditures, in order to permit families, especially low-income ones, greater economic opportunity to increase quality of childcare for their children (Berger & Black, 1992). Childcare subsidies are efficacious in stabilizing children in childcare (Kimmel, 1995).

The Young Women's Christian Association and Child Care

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) helps women and girls in 122 countries in the world. It is dedicated to promoting women's full participation in their societies through leadership opportunities and training. Additionally, the YWCA

seeks social and economic justice for women (World YWCA, 2004). The YWCA of Central Alabama's programs and services focus on three major areas: child care, domestic violence services, and affordable housing.

Non-profit organizations and churches provide the majority of affordable childcare in the United States. YWCAs in the USA are the second largest provider of childcare (YMCA is the largest), with a great majority of these being for the working poor. YWCAs generally receive United Way funding and charge reasonable fees for services. This still leaves a gap in funding and YWCAs are always having to organize fundraisers, write grants and solicit donors/organizations to provide revenue for quality care.

Our Task

The YWCA of Central Alabama secured a grant to stabilize children in day care—the mission, to end the practice of “day care hopping”. The YWCA received \$100,000 to be spent over a three-year period from the Junior League of Birmingham to bolster families' resources to end day care hopping. The Junior League is an international organization of women who provide funds and volunteers to worthy non-profits in their local communities. Junior Leagues exist in the United States, Canada, Mexico and Great Britain.

The principal investigator of this project was Patricia Drentea, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Alabama—Birmingham (UAB). Her research on work, family and economic hardship is internationally known. She was called upon to assist the day care center in establishing a system of identifying parents in need of supplemental scholarship in order to stabilize their day care choices. The center had noticed the disturbing trend of what they named “day care hopping”. Drentea gathered three research assistants, all seeking doctoral degrees, in the Department of Sociology to help her with the project. The research assistants brought different strengths to the research project. Mercie Mwarua received her Bachelor's Degree from Kenyatta University in Sociology and English. More recently she worked at the Population Council and also Family Health International in Nairobi, and has conducted qualitative interviews and focus groups in a rural Kenyan town (Nakuru) and the coastal city Mombasa. Emily Norman received her Masters of Library and Information Science at University of California, Los Angeles, and an MA in Sociology from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas while she headed a survey project for the Nevada Department of Education that evaluated programs. Juan Xi received her MA in sociology from the Huazhong University of Science and Technology. In China, she conducted interviews with children for a study that compared the development of only-children to the development of children with siblings. Her current research is on migration. Throughout the summer of 2003, Drentea and her research assistants met weekly to establish how to conduct the research, collect the data, and then write up the results.

The YWCA asked the researchers to come up with a screening device that would identify certain telling characteristics of mothers who would typically “day care hop”

and yet remain as objective as it possibly could. This device would help flag certain individuals who may be in need of financial assistance and provide this necessary help *before* these parents withdrew their children from the day care center. Through information acquired from the day care staff who interact with the parents (and can easily provide useful information concerning the behavior of "day care hoppers"), the research team would create a screening tool. This would be an objective tool that would provide every needy parent with an equal chance of being funded, based on responses to standard questions in the screening device.

To come up with the screening device the research team relied heavily on information provided by the center's staff because they are in constant contact with the families. Their opinion on what kinds of families they thought they should assist, versus those they thought would not benefit from the funding, would be drawn from their years of experience in dealing with these families. The device would help the center invest in families that would be identified as being in desperate need of funding and who may otherwise not afford any other form of day care for their children.

In addition to the screening device, the research team was also expected to assist the center in designing an evaluation tool that would be used to report the success of the funding program to the donors, in the hope of securing further funding. The funds at the disposal of the staff are fairly limited and families would have to be carefully screened so that the funds could be stretched as far as they could go and help as many families as is logically possible. With a solid documentation of success stories from families that benefited from the funding, the center's staff hoped to secure continued support and funding so that the practice of day care hopping would be eliminated. Children would stabilize in their educational experience and progress to public school or kindergarten. In addition, mothers would be less stressed and would benefit from the assurance that their children are receiving quality care and building relationships. In turn, they could set their minds on other financial matters.

Method

This study uses the focus group method with YWCA staff at the day care center to explore the reasons for day care hopping. The interview was tape-recorded and the tapes transcribed. Interview notes were also taken during the session.

Participants

A focus group is a research method in which a group of individuals with something in common is assembled to understand how people feel or think about an issue, product, service or idea (Krueger & Casey, 2000). A comfortable and permissive environment is created that allows individuals to brainstorm together about an issue (Krueger & Casey, 2000). A focus group requires a skilled moderator (in our case, the principal investigator) whose job was to draw out information from the participants regarding the topic of interest (Berg, 2001). Because in this research we needed to cover a lot of material and allow for more in-depth probing, we used a triad focus group (i.e. three

participants) (Edmunds, 1999; Krueger & Casey, 2000). In our case, the participants were the only ones who knew about the women who day care hop, and would be the ones to decide which women would receive the stipend. Thus, it was imperative to have only them in the focus group, so that they could brainstorm together to come up with the best instrument to use as a screening device.

The participants of the group were staff of YWCA Birmingham day care program. They all had more than 10 years of working experience in YWCA, and had rich experience in the YWCA day care program. There was an easy camaraderie among them and discussion was in no way inhibited.

Procedure

The focus group session was held at the YWCA building. The moderator, an experienced researcher, guided the focus group session following a procedural guide, which was prepared in advance of the focus group session (Berg, 2001).

First, the moderator let everyone involved introduce themselves. Rapport between moderator and participants was created through this process. Then confidentiality was explained, as well as the Internal Review Board (IRB) requirements of informed consent required by The University of Alabama—Birmingham. The IRB ensures that participants in research are voluntary, and not coerced into giving information. Additionally, the IRB ensures that researchers follow stringent guidelines for maintaining an ethical relationship with their research participants.

During the discussion, two main open-ended questions were asked: the first addressed the circumstances in which families day care hop, while the other asked the participants to describe characteristics of a family they can help versus one that they cannot. Follow-up probes were asked to solicit detailed information on the main questions posed by the moderator. The atmosphere in the whole session was relaxed and comfortable. Because there were only three of them, the participants had constant interaction with each other and provoked one another's thoughts.

The focus group session was tape-recorded, with consent from the participants and during the discussion, three research assistants were taking field notes and putting up posters on the wall to update the participants on the information that they came up with in the course of discussion.

Results and Discussion

The findings from the YWCA focus group meeting uncovered salient issues within families that might determine their eligibility status for the childcare stipend to prevent "day care hopping". According to the focus group respondents, approximately 10–20% of their families end up "day care hopping". As previously discussed, a screening tool is necessary to differentiate those who can truly be helped with the stipend versus those who are having too many difficulties to be worth the financial risk. Realizing that such a decision-making process can potentially be laden with difficulties for the YWCA workers, certain questions were asked in the focus group to

illuminate common types of problems in potential families to clarify the process of selection. In the following we list the six main themes that emerged from our data. We list the theme, explain it, and provide quotations from the focus group. In order to maintain anonymity, we use a first letter of a name, rather than a full name, to offset a quote. This ensures no one would know the person or position of the person who stated the quote.

The initial most central theme addressed circumstances in which families “day care hop”. The following themes emerged from our findings: economic problems, transportation problems, psychosocial problems, bad attitudes, family structure, and identifying ideal candidates for the stipend.

Economic problems

The respondents stated that generally economic problems led to “day care hopping”. More specifically, a family may juggle bills from month to month to keep up with day care expenses at first, but then eventually fall behind when the other bills accumulate. The families find it easier to opt not to pay their childcare bills than other bills at times because the YWCA is unlikely to stop caring for a child the day a bill is missed:

D: [There is] an increase in utility bills [which causes the family to fall behind in their day care payments].

DT: Right, like higher gas bills. It's always worse in winter.

D: We're much easier to deal with than the utility companies.

Living beyond their means is another economic concern of families that does not always come to light until there are serious problems. Lack of knowledge about money management skills seems to be one suggested explanation and is not readily volunteered by the families or asked about by the YWCA workers. On these issues, the participants had the following to say:

C: People are making poor choices. There's no way to afford stuff. There's just not enough money to go around.

D: They buy what they want but beg for what they need. And the children end up paying for it.

The living arrangements of the family may become problematic, such as a change of residence or higher utility bills (as previously noted). Shifts in employment status are also central to economic problems in the families. Finally, payment history should be analyzed, as well as any known balances at other day cares.

Transportation

Transportation was an issue on many levels. If the family vehicle breaks down, they then deal with the financial expense of repair, alternate means of transport, and how to get to work until repairs are complete. Dropping off and picking up the child from day

care becomes an added stressor, but often the parents cannot work if day care is not available.

Psychosocial problems

Other relevant factors included emotional/mental problems, patterns of incarceration, substance abuse, and physical abuse in the home. The YWCA of Central Alabama also helps those who are victims of physical abuse. The YWCA staff said they are aware of instances of physical abuse among the families using day care, and said that this supplied another layer of difficulty with which to deal. Substance abuse is another concern but does not immediately lead to the curtailment of YWCA childcare. The families are never put out just because a parent is using (drugs), but because they cannot pay the childcare expenses. Parents dealing with mental conditions are highly contextual situations; much depends on what other resources they have in their life. Very young mothers were also considered, in that frequently they lacked work skills and emotional maturity. Finally, low-income, single-parent households are unlikely to be helped due to possible lack of financial and social resources to begin with. Thus, they may be screened out from getting initial YWCA childcare because they cannot afford it from the beginning.

Bad attitudes

The focus group participants said families that seem unlikely to be helped out of difficulties are those who have "bad attitudes" (their own words) in general. These are situations in which the parent regularly does not make the attempt to pick their child up on time, exhibiting seemingly little commitment or respect to the day care process. They perhaps have difficulty holding down a job and tend to be threatening or unpleasant to deal with altogether. Indeed, they also spoke of being physically threatened by these mothers.

Some in the focus group discussed a clear example of this phenomenon:

D: A good example we have is a 19-year-old mother. She has a bad attitude. She lost her third job in a month. She runs twenty minutes late picking up her child because of getting her hair done. But at what point do you cut your losses?

C: People like that we can't help. We usually get about two to three similar cases per year, and they tend to show themselves quickly. The indicators are there early. We let it go longer because of the children, but we knew it the first week.

For these low-income mothers, the stressors of having a child (or children) in a social environment of great inequality takes its toll, and anger is a common reaction to socioeconomic stress. Indeed, two of the main predictors of anger in women are economic inequality and an unequal distribution of parental responsibilities (Ross & Van Willigen, 1996).

INTERNAL DOCUMENT

FAMILY SCREENING FORM

FAMILY NAME BELOW _____

DATE OF INITIATION _____

Please fill this out when a problem is suspected. This form is to remain **confidential**, only to be filled out by (name erased for anonymity (nefa)), and seen by (nefa). It is informal, and is based on impressions, rather than solid evidence. As information collecting is ongoing, put dates by observances.

Below is a checklist of possible problems. Please circle the number of all which may apply, where 1 means the circumstance is known, up to 7 which means it's mildly suspected. Also fill in date of entry.

Circumstances	Known			Suspected				Date
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Falling behind in tuition	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Balance at other day care	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Cut-back hours/Lost Job	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Single mom with little work experience/training	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Housing issues	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Incarceration	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Sick kids	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Drug and Substance Abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Car problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Living beyond means	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Young mother	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Winter Months and/or utilities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Other _____	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Other _____	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Other _____	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	_____
Total number of checked items _____								

Additional Comments here (this is an ongoing log, put dates when making an entry):

Please record the names and ages of all children here (and pregnancies):

Figure 1. Family Screening Form.

Family structure

The participants also discussed family structure as both a pro and con to supplying funding to a mother. On the negative side, a mother with one or more children under three years old is not as desirable to fund, due to the obvious reason that they would require more years of funding. More ideally, the stipends would go to those who have

Now we'll try a point system to score eligibility, an objective means of quantifying eligibility. Only score what you know. This system was devised using your criteria for the types of families you would like to support and those you prefer not to support.

To identify ideal candidates, add a point for any of the following:

Negative aspects	Yes
Score a negative one (-1) for each yes in the blank.	
Single-parent family where mother has no training and can't get/keep job	_____
Balance at other day care	_____
Drug and Substance Abuse	_____
Living beyond means	_____
Bad attitude (threatening, abusive, violent, habitually-late child pick-up)	_____
Emotional stability too problematic	_____
Child is under 3-years old	_____
Family has other pre-school children to support	_____
Lying (explain here)	_____
Payment History	_____
Other _____	_____
Other _____	_____
Other _____	_____
1. Total	_____
Positive aspects	Yes
Score a positive one (1) in each blank.	
Family just hitting a bump in the road. We know them, they're on their way.	_____
Child is 3-years-old and over	_____
Family has good support system in city	_____
Mother has no access to other subsidy	_____
Family is bridging, needs help before another subsidy kicks in.	_____
Payment History	_____
Other _____	_____
Other _____	_____
Other _____	_____
2. Total	_____
3. Grand Total (add line 2 to line 1)	_____

*this should serve as a rough guide—a negative number means don't fund. The higher the number, the more likely it will be a good candidate. However, realize that the more that is known about a family, the more likely the number will be higher. Thus use this score as just one of the possible tools for screening.

Figure 1. Continued.

a child three years and older. That way, there would be fewer years to cover, and a more "measurable" outcome that could be reported back to the funding agency. That is, the YWCA could report that a stipend was given and now the child has graduated into kindergarten, which is federally funded—thereby creating a success story.

Identifying ideal candidates for the stipend

Another prominent theme reflects what types of families in trouble can be helped by the stipend versus those who are also having problems but would probably day care hop regardless of receiving the stipend or not. An ideal family to help would first

<p>Form for Client</p> <p>Some funds have been made available for temporary assistance to help keep your child in this day care.</p> <p>Please tell us what would happen if you received the scholarship? What problems would be prevented? For instance, would it help with a change in your work, housing issues, falling behind on other bills and so on... Please be specific.</p> <p>This information will be used to examine if you qualify for funds.</p>
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Figure 2. Excerpt from the Form for Client.

include those that, up to the point of having difficulties, have been steadfast and reliable with their day care payments and have hit a supposed temporary rough spot in their life. Additionally, if the day care workers are well acquainted with a family, knowing them personally, they probably would be able to ascertain whether that family is a worthy risk venture. One such example is documented in the focus group:

C: We have a family here where the husband lost his job. It put the family into a tailspin. We had confidence he'd get another job, and he did, and they would catch up. They had a huge balance. It's hard for us to demand full payment. They came to us and told us their problems. We can help them get through the hard time.

Based on these trends discussed in the focus group we created a series of forms to be implemented by YWCA childcare workers once a problem with a family paying became apparent. The first "Family Screening Form" is fully confidential and will only be filled out by the person in charge of day care activities. This individual, however, will not be the one to make the final decision about a family's eligibility for the childcare stipend. This protects the worker from having to make a difficult emotional decision as well as buffering the potential for the family to act differently around this individual. Once the childcare worker fills out this initial form, it goes to the head of the YWCA childcare program for assessment of eligibility (see Figure 1).

When a family is chosen for the day care stipend, a second "Form for Client" will then be addressed. It is to be filled out only by the client, and will serve to explicate, in their own words, how this financial award will help them maintain stability and quality of life for them and their families. Thus it acts as a qualitative study measure to indicate the extent of need on behalf of the family (see Figure 2)

Finally, after the clients no longer need the scholarship aid, a third "Exit Form" is to be completed. The first page, to be filled out by a YWCA childcare director, pertains to quantitative measures about the stipend received along with close-ended questions on its efficacy. Space is allowed for further comments by the YWCA employee. The second page is completed by the client only and qualitatively reinforces how the day care stipend helped them and their family. This final first-person account will also be

EXIT FORM
(YWCA fill out first page, client fills out second page).

Family Name _____

*the main purpose of this form is to report any successes, so that it can be used for Junior League.

When did family start and stop the stipend? _____

Total amount given to family \$ _____

Did the child move on to kindergarten? _____

Did stipend bridge time before child care resources stipend began? _____

Did stipend allow mother to stay in job? _____

Did any additional children in family get added during this time? _____

Did child move on to other day care? _____

Other _____

Please have client fill out the next page on their own.

Please tell us in your own words how this stipend helped you. This information will be used (without your name) to show our funding agency that the money is helpful to families. Anything you tell us could help us receive more money to help other families.

Figure 3 Exit Form.

utilized in order to illustrate the efficacy of the day care stipend to the outside funding agency (see Figure 3).

Perhaps an evaluation tool of this nature can aid other social service organizations striving to make efficient use of funds while at the same time preventing unnecessary attrition of those critically in need. One childcare worker in the focus group succinctly stated such a purpose:

D: We need to be stewards of the YWCA. We need to put the money towards those we can really help.

In this article, we introduced the term “day care hopping”. Day care hopping is a problem that affects the child, parent, and the day care system. The child lacks stability, the parent experiences stress, and the day care lacks payment. One way of solving this problem is to give scholarships or stipends to parents who qualify. In this research, we were charged to help the YWCA allocate their financial subsidy to those who were most likely to be able to use the money and succeed. The further the money could go, the more people who could be helped. Also, the more the YWCA could help families to stop “day-care hopping”, the more likely they can go back to the Junior League in the future and ask for additional grant money to help more women.

In this research, we conducted a triad focus group in order to help YWCA create a screening device to identify needy families. The main themes that emerged from our discussion were economic problems, transportation problems, psychosocial problems, bad attitudes, family structure, and identifying ideal candidates for the stipend. There were some limitations to this study. Primarily, while we created a screening form to help identify the most deserving families, we do not know if our system worked. It will take a few years of using the system to learn whether this system worked. Another limitation is that much of the information gained regarding families that may receive the stipend is subjective. Indeed, our form even ranked the extent to which something is known versus suspected. Finally, while we used the triad focus group approach (because our participants had highly specific knowledge to share), a typical focus group is usually between six and 10 people (Edmunds, 1999). The only way to expand to that many participants, who would have been knowledgeable, would have possibly been to invite the mothers who would potentially receive the stipend. However, that would have been problematic because the YWCA staff, and the mothers, would not have been able to speak freely about problems they encounter. Also, the IRB would have been very concerned about the researchers speaking directly to disadvantaged potential recipients of the subsidy.

It is our hope that both researchers and practitioners who seek to understand the lives and universal problems of low-income women will use this research. Additionally, this research provides evidence of how organizations attempt to aid low-income families and unstable family situations. We also expect that organizations may examine our screening device in order to identify a potential best practice of the most efficient way to invest their limited funding.

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