

## ‘Grandparents Are the Next Best Thing’: Informal Childcare for Working Parents in Urban Britain

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### ABSTRACT

This article is based on a unique empirical investigation of the contribution that informal childcare – relatives, friends or neighbours looking after children, usually on an unpaid basis – makes in allowing parents to go out to work. There has been little research on either the use of such complementary childcare by parents, or of the carers who undertake it, and this is a review of a two-stage investigation of both. One of the earliest initiatives of the Labour government elected in 1997 was to put a National Childcare Strategy in place. The strategy recognised the importance of childcare both for the development of children and in enabling parents – particularly mothers – to go out to work. To date, however, childcare needs and provision have been assessed almost entirely in terms of *formal* childcare. A clear understanding of why working parents use complementary childcare (particularly from grandparents) is essential for any childcare policy that hopes to be attuned to what families actually want. The article argues that policy makers, lured by a simplistic vision of economic vitality into adopting a behavioural paradigm from economics – in which parents are assumed to respond to purely financial incentives – are likely to find themselves distracted from important issues of the social well-being of working families with children. Childcare needs are related to dramatic changes in women’s labour market participation over recent years, where the largest increase in female employment has been among mothers of children under the age of five. Neither mothers nor fathers may be in a position to provide the desired amount of childcare

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inside the nuclear household. This situation gives rise to the possibility of a 'childcare deficit'. In failing to acknowledge and underpin the value which parents place upon complementary forms of childcare, policy makers are in danger of committing themselves to institutional arrangements which may make that deficit worse in the longer term.

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'IF SHE CAN'T HAVE HER PARENTS LOOKING AFTER HER ...'

It is very timely to review a study of informal childcare – relatives, friends or neighbours looking after children, usually on an unpaid basis – at this moment. One of the earliest initiatives of the Labour government elected in 1997 was to put a five-year National Childcare Strategy in place. Indeed, this strategy is at the heart of New Labour's policy. Childcare is deemed important for its own sake in terms of the benefits it gives to children, as a means of counteracting social exclusion, and to support women (*sic*) in going out to work. Policy makers now see childcare as a macro-level issue, of concern to the economy as a whole, rather than a micro-level matter to be dealt with by the individual family (Himmelweit, 2000). The strategy recognises the importance of childcare both for the development of children and in enabling parents – particularly mothers – to work. It is based on three principles: that parents should have choice; that childcare must be high quality; and that it should be affordable.

To date, however, childcare needs and provision have been assessed almost entirely in terms of *formal* childcare delivered through state, market or voluntary institutions such as nurseries, childminders or out-of-school clubs. Yet a recent survey conducted by Mori for the Daycare Trust found that 40 per cent of respondents saw support from family and friends as an essential precondition for mothers to return to work (Daycare Trust, 2000). When the independent Childcare Commission chaired by former social security secretary Harriet Harman reported in January 2001, it too recognised the role of relatives for childcare. Informal, complementary childcare clearly has the potential to affect parental choice very profoundly. It is likely to have an impact on what is perceived as affordable too. Parental perceptions of the quality of childcare may also be informed by the value they put on informal care.

The approach of the National Childcare Strategy is essentially that of a tax credit-primed, regulated market-based provision. To underpin quality standards, the regulation of pre-school childcare is being rationalised and integrated into the educational regulatory mechanisms under the joint umbrella of the schools inspectorate, Ofsted. At the same time,

formal childcare is being subsidised by government. Local Childcare Partnerships can apply for annual central government funds to subvent childcare schemes (such as out-of-school provisions), until they become self-financing. As from April 2000, a means tested Childcare Tax Credit has been available for working parents, supplementing the Working Families Tax Credit in aiming to 'make work pay' for families with children. Underlying this regulated market approach to childcare is an implicit assumption of a universal behavioural model: that people – including parents – take individualist, cost-benefit type decisions about how to maximise personal gain. They will, in other words, respond to purely financial incentives.

In adopting such models, policy makers have borrowed the models that economists posit for how people behave. There is now a substantial literature on the problems that arise for economic prediction when such simplistic models are applied to the real world (e.g., Hollis and Nell, 1975; Loasby, 1996; Hirschman, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1993). Yet the individualist model is routinely applied to economic and labour market policy (as, for example, under the New Deal scheme), and indeed to family policy (Barlow and Duncan, 2000). The National Childcare Strategy, of course, combines elements of labour market and family policy. There is growing evidence that there can be clashes between policy makers' (borrowed) models of how people behave and how they actually make choices (Quilgars and Abbott, 1999; Nelson and Smith, 1999), and much of the research under the ESRC's *Economic Beliefs and Behaviour Programme* confirmed this picture in a variety of policy fields (Taylor-Gooby, 1998). Such disjunctures may give rise to problems with policy implementation in the form of unforeseen responses from those at whom policy is directed. For in the real world choices are constrained by personal principles, family 'ways of doing things' and social values. As Julian Le Grand (2000) has argued, policy may even impact upon motivations, undermining 'knightly', altruistic behaviour, and Folbre and Weisskopf (1998) put similar arguments with specific reference to caring labour.

The argument that underlies this article is that policy makers, lured by a simplistic vision of economic vitality into adopting a paradigm from economics, are likely to find themselves distracted from important issues of the social well-being of working families with children. Will childcare that is being conceived of as a final (albeit regulated and subsidised) market frontier actually work? What choices do people in families in fact make about their childcare? Our study shows often complex 'jigsaws' of childcare with high levels of reliance on informal childcare to complement formal care. Grandparents and other informal carers are undertaking

very large volumes of childcare. What will the medium and long-term effects of encouraging parents to use formal childcare have on the provision of complementary informal childcare? It is only by paying attention to the interrelations between formal economic activity (which may indeed be driven by choices based on individualist motivation) and complementary economic activity (which is more likely to be based on social and non-monetary values) that answers to these important questions can be found (Wheelock, 1992).

The study reported on here is unique in its focus on the informal childcare used by parents who are in employment, in combination with a survey of carers. In Britain to date there has been very little research on either the use of informal care by parents or of the carers who undertake it (Moss *et al.*, 1998; Grundy *et al.*, 1999). There is not even a standard definition in the social science literature of what 'informal care' consists of. Because of the problems of defining informal childcare, we prefer to use the term 'complementary childcare'. The research team adopted a working definition of such childcare as being when relatives, friends or neighbours look after children while their parents are working, studying or training. (In contrast to some studies, we excluded the contribution to childcare made by resident partners/fathers from our definition, e.g. Meltzer). We made no presumptions about whether complementary childcare was paid or not, but we were aware that informal care was unlikely to be paid (Meltzer, 1994; La Vallee *et al.*, 1999). Here we report on a two-stage investigation of complementary childcare, consisting of surveys of parents and carers, followed by telephone interviews with parents and focus groups with carers.

It is the combined impact of increased working hours of mothers (particularly mothers of young children), continuing high hours of employment for fathers, and the importance for family income of having two earners that makes the study of complementary childcare so important. Neither mothers nor fathers may be in a position to provide the desired amount of childcare inside the nuclear household. This situation gives rise to the possibility of a 'childcare deficit' (Purdy, 1998). Childcare needs are related to dramatic changes in women's labour market participation over recent years. In 1979 women's labour market participation rates already stood at 63 per cent, but they have risen steadily since then and now stand at 73 per cent, only twelve percentage points below that of men. Even for women with dependent children (children aged 18 or under) activity rates are higher than they were for *all* women 20 years ago, at 69 per cent (Office of National Statistics, 2000). The largest increase in female employment has been among mothers of children

under the age of five. Almost half of all married women with children younger than statutory school age are currently employed, compared with around 25 per cent twenty years ago. Between 1984 and 1994, the average hours that mothers worked rose 2.3 hours a week; for mothers of children under 5 there was an even heftier rise of 4 hours a week! (Wheelock and McCarthy, 1997)

This article then aims to place a novel set of empirical findings within the context of the relationship between the formal and the complementary economy (Wheelock, 1992). A case study of complementary childcare is used to show that it does not follow from the individualisation of economic responsibility and the weakening of some forms of collective interests that people become abstract, asocial beings. Indeed the term individual is misleading because it conjures up the idea of isolation and does not distinguish between men and women. When we look at economic choices the crucial unit is not the individual, but individuals in their household context (Wheelock and Oughton, 1996).<sup>2</sup> Instead, the widespread use of complementary childcare provided by grandparents indicates that the boundaries of the household are porous and permeable, and should not be defined simply in terms of co-residence (Oughton, Wheelock and Wiborg, 1997; Wheelock, Baines and Oughton, 2000). Rather, the household is constructed by the social relations of domestic labour in a particular context (Mackintosh, 2000). As the empirical work reported on here demonstrates, these include the caring work performed by non-resident grandparents.

The gendered characteristics of complementary childcare, and the difficulties that this throws up for ensuring equal opportunities are a further important theme within this article. Duncan and Edwards (1999) have contended that labour market decisions are made according to 'gendered moral rationalities', and we think that this is a useful framework for childcare choices too. Our study also provides strong evidence that economic decisions about childcare are almost invariably determined at least in part by non-economic motives, but this does not mean that decisions are irrational or random. Some institutional economic theoreticians offer valuable tools for understanding how women and men develop and sustain their livelihoods. For example Nancy Folbre argues for the use of 'choice action' instead of the 'rational choice' concept so beloved of economics (Folbre, 1994: 25). Purposive choice 'encourages us to ask how people define and pursue their desires while avoiding any implicit dichotomy between rationality and irrationality' (ibid. 29). In their study of caring for older family members, Finch and Mason (1990) point out that the idea of making 'choices' between employment and family

responsibility implies autonomy and that in real world situations, people try to avoid stark choice situations. As we shall demonstrate, parents hold very strong views of who should look after their children if they themselves are unavailable.

#### HOW THE RESEARCH WAS DONE

The study was undertaken in the major conurbation of the north east of England. Tyneside was seen as 'post-industrial' even in the 1980s (Robinson, 1988). Economic and social change over the last quarter century has transformed the regional labour market: the stereotype that old heavy industry employing male manual labour has been replaced by call centres employing part time female labour sums this up. There have been some changes in the divisions of labour in households as a result (Wheelock, 1990). Some Tynesiders have indeed 'got on their bikes' thanks to rates of unemployment that have been consistently above the national average, so that population structure has been affected by out-migration (Byrne, 2000). Otherwise, apart from its large student population, the north east is not characterised by population mobility, so that for working age families that do not leave the region, grandparents will often live nearby.

Almost 3,000 survey packs to working parents were distributed via employers across a wide range of sectors, public and private in each of the four Tyneside boroughs, garnering 425 postal returns. Parents receiving the pack were asked to pass on a questionnaire aimed at informal child carers, of which 224 were returned by carers. The follow up qualitative study consisted of 30 semi-structured telephone interviews with parents and five focus groups with carers. Telephone interviews were based on a purposive sample of working parent respondents to the survey who made use of complementary care on a regular basis (identified as at least once a week).

What were the characteristics of the sample? The 425 parent respondents were overwhelmingly female and 14 per cent were lone parents. Just over half the families had one child and most of the rest had two, with 648 children aged 14 or under in the sample overall. There was a strong preponderance of young children, with over a third of children aged under four, while 45 per cent of parents had pre-school children. Nearly a quarter of families had a child of one year or less. Over half of respondents were working full time, but taking mothers alone, there was a 50/50 split between part time (30 hours a week and under) and full time. Respondents held overwhelmingly non-manual jobs, with two thirds in administrative and professional employment and the rest in



white collar work.<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of two-parent families resided in dual-earner households. Forty two per cent of households received incomes of £400 a week or over, with just over a fifth who received incomes of £200–300 per week. Lone parent families were far more likely to fall into the lower income brackets.

Thirty telephone interviews were held with parents. Due to difficulties in contacting men, only one was with a father. The interviewees included eight lone parents and three students. Ten of the parents worked full time, while four worked shifts. The remaining parents worked part time hours. The number of children amounted to forty eight in total in this sample. Ten families had pre-school children only, eleven had school age children only, and nine families had children in both age groups (proportions which were consistent with those in the survey).

And who were the carers? The 224 respondents to the carer survey were overwhelmingly female (94 per cent), and grandparents predominated (79 per cent). Carers were looking after 391 children. As with respondents to the employed parents survey, there was a strong preponderance of pre-school children. Over a third of carers looked after two children, while 13 per cent looked after three. (It was not possible to ascertain from the survey whether these children were being looked after at the same time.)

It was initially planned that the survey in stage one of the research would also form the basis of the sampling for the focus groups with carers. However, relatively few questionnaire respondents indicated willingness to participate in a focus group. Groups were therefore recruited mainly through advertising with the assistance of local childcare development workers, but still included a small number of survey respondents. In total thirty-nine carers participated. Despite extensive efforts to recruit male carers, all group members were female, 90 per cent of whom were grandmothers. The non-grandparent participants looked after a friend, neighbour's, or other relative's child(ren).

#### PATTERNS OF COMPLEMENTARY CHILDCARE

Our empirical findings provide striking evidence of the high levels of dependence of working parents on complementary childcare, and strong indications of a substantial volume of complementary childcare undertaken by carers on Tyneside. The immense importance of *any* childcare for working parents is clearly indicated in that a mere 6 per cent of respondents to the employed parents' questionnaire stage did not access any form of childcare outside the nuclear household. (See Table 1) Heavy reliance upon informal childcare is demonstrated by the fact that well

TABLE 1. Comparison of use of formal and complementary childcare (% of respondents)

Use of complementary childcare	Use of formal childcare			Totals
	Regular <sup>a</sup>	Occasional <sup>b</sup>	No use	
Regular <sup>a</sup>	22	2	32	56
Occasional <sup>b</sup>	18	4	8	30
No Use	7	1	6	14
Totals	47	7	46	100

Notes:

<sup>a</sup> at least once a week

<sup>b</sup> few times a month

over half of employed parents used complementary childcare at least once a week (defined in Table 1 as 'regular use') when they were at work. Almost a further third of the working parents sample relied on this source of childcare less often, but still did so a few times a month (defined in Table 1 as 'occasional use'). Strikingly the *overall* volume of usage of complementary childcare was significantly higher than the overall use of market-based childcare.

There are indications from Table 1 that many parents piece together a 'jigsaw' of childcare, using a mix of formal and complementary childcare. Over a fifth of employed parents accessed both formal and informal childcare on a weekly basis. However, although different types of childcare were frequently used in combination with each other, there was a far heavier reliance on non-market-based care than market-based care. Hence, a third of the employed parents' sample were able to rely on family and friends to look after their children without buying in additional care from the market. This compares to a mere 7 per cent of the parental sample who relied solely on the formal sector. In other words, access to and use of formal childcare (childminders, out-of-school clubs, nurseries and so on) was supplemented more often by the use of care from family and friends than the other way around.

Since over half the surveyed parents worked full time (i.e. over 30 hours) they had requirements for correspondingly high levels of support from relatives, friends and/or neighbours. This, however, was not all the work that carers who responded to the survey undertook. Although almost half were retired, nearly a third were in employment themselves, or were studying (see Figure 1). Grandparents participating in the focus groups highlighted the long hours and many described the childcaring they were undertaking in terms of having a job.



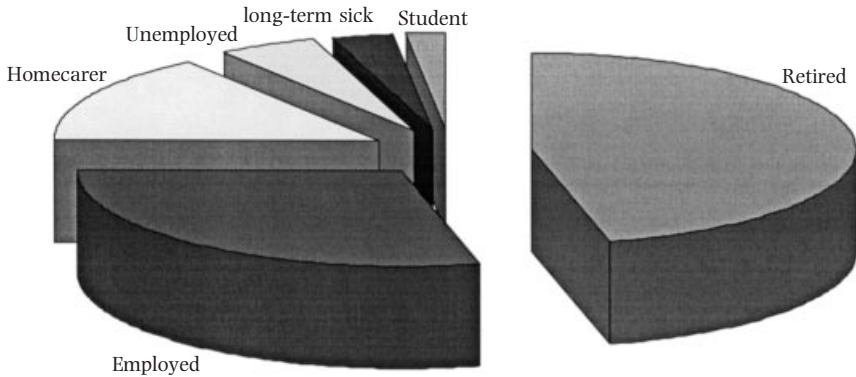


Figure 1. Employment status of carers

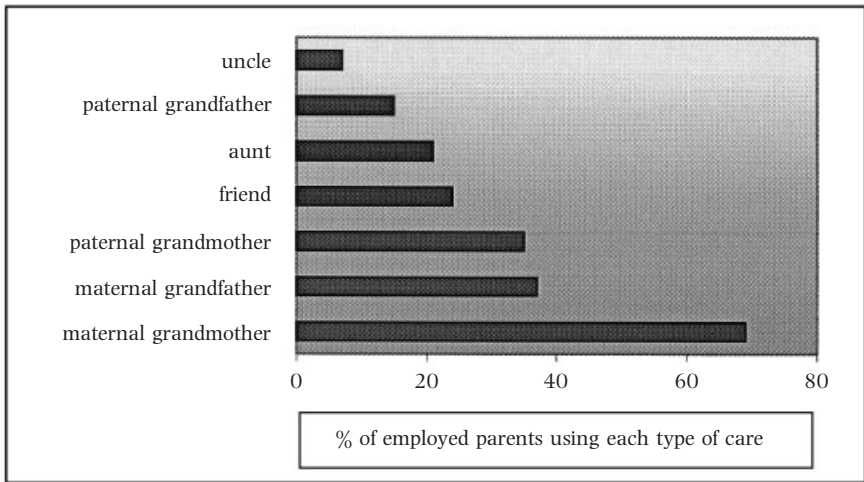


Figure 2. Employed parents' use of any complementary childcare<sup>4</sup>

So, who are these complementary childcarers? The working parents' survey showed that what professionals and academics usually call 'informal care' was overwhelmingly 'grandparent care'. Figure 2 indicates the patterns of overall support by friends and relatives: taken together, grandmothers and grandfathers were providing childcare for 52 per cent of the parental sample on a regular basis (i.e. once a week or more). Other relatives were also providing childcare. For instance, a quarter of the working parents reported using their children's aunts, and 10 per cent, their children's uncles when they were at work. However, patterns of reported usage indicate that aunts and uncles were more frequently used to

provide childcare *in conjunction with* grandparents, rather than being the sole means of care. Friends and neighbours were relied on overall far less than family members. They instead tended to be accessed in school holidays, and when emergencies or unforeseen circumstances arose.

As might be anticipated, carers in the complementary childcare sector were predominantly female. This may be a reflection of availability of female support in terms of their lower labour market activity, but, as we discuss below, it may also be an active choice based on gendered moral rationalities. The vast majority of the small numbers of male carers mentioned were grandfathers. Interestingly, by far the most popular choice by all employed parents was grandmothers on the mothers' side (70 per cent of parents), who were twice as likely to be called upon as grandmothers on the paternal side of the family (34 per cent of parents).

#### REPRODUCING GENDER: THE FLEXIBILITY OF COMPLEMENTARY CHILDCARE

We have suggested that the patterns of childcare found in this study can be likened to piecing together formal and complementary childcare into a 'caring jigsaw'. For instance, as a nurse working shifts, Judy (a lone parent with an 11-year-old daughter) had one of the most complex childcare jigsaws found at the interview stage of the research. As Judy had no regular weekly shifts, she and the primary carer of her daughter – her retired mother – had four different care permutations that they worked between them. This was rearranged on a week-by-week basis depending on Judy's shifts. The jigsaw also varied spatially, and Judy's daughter needed to stay overnight with her grandmother depending on the structure of her mother's shifts. During school holidays, if Judy was unable to take a holiday herself, and her mother was unavailable, she also accessed her daughter's former childminder.

This section uses the findings of the telephone interviews to show the manner in which the flexibility of complementary childcare illustrated so graphically in Judy's case is delivered via a gendered intergenerational childcare strategy which goes beyond the nuclear family. There are spatial elements to this strategy, in that grandparental and parental homes are located separately. The nature of the flexibility required is above all dependent upon the hours and times that parents work, with particular difficulties arising during school holidays and during family emergencies, including sickness. Flexibility is heavily reliant upon the capacity of complementary carers, and this section ends by highlighting the role that family friendly employers could play in underpinning such capacity.

It was evident that managing the childcare jigsaw was primarily the responsibility of mothers, with only a few exceptions (see also Cohen,

1988; Brannen and Moss, 1987). Of the 22 families with husbands or partners present, in only four cases did respondents say that there was joint responsibility. 'It's always up to me to make sure the kids are picked up, dropped off, whatever, it's my responsibility', Rachel typically reported (two children, 8 and 5, both parents work full time). True, over three-quarters of fathers played a role in taking their children to, or collecting them from childcare (leaving nearly a quarter who played no role at all), but this did not include *organising* childcare. In general, despite being pressed in the interviews, mothers perceived paternal involvement in childcare as limited, confirming a highly gendered management of the childcare jigsaw.

The gendered management of childcare was also evident on an inter-generational level. We have already pointed out that the survey revealed that support was substantially delivered through the distaff side of working families: mothers predominated over mothers-in law. There was evidence that the shared values and 'ways of doing things' between mothers and daughters is one of the social reproduction mechanisms through which the gendered provision, organisation and management of childcare are reinforced. As we have seen, childcare was most frequently organised and managed by mothers, and it is therefore unsurprising that it should be more frequently delivered through maternal relatives. There are many factors which can militate against paternal involvement then. Hence, perhaps one of the most unexpected findings from the interviews and the focus groups was the extent to which grandfathers and paternal grandparents did nevertheless participate in the intergenerational childcare jigsaw (see Figure 2).

Given the importance of the support of relatives for working parents, their capacity to perform this function is paramount. Three of those who looked after the children of the parents we interviewed were classified as long-term sick, and tiredness was an issue, which arose from both the interviews and the focus groups. As one grandmother put it, 'I can do nothing else while they are there', adding that she is probably overprotective because it is someone else's child. Parents too, mentioned their concerns. 'It's all right for us, but for me mam and me husband's mam, you now, it's a lot harder for them. I think when they're a bit older you sort of feel as if you're putting on them a bit' (Kate: working full time with self-employed partner and two children aged 5 and 2).

Indeed, parents had a strong concept of what was fair in terms of hours of support, aware that grandparents have their own lives to lead. A former nurse who had relied on both sets of grandparents had given up work in the intervening period between responding to the survey, and the interview

stage of the research. 'I was also aware that they had retired to enjoy their life and I didn't want to put any full-time care, you know, where they were restricted. I used to use them all on a now and again basis with nothing as a set pattern' (Sheila: full time shift worker, with partner also working full time and two children aged 5 and 2).

Clearly, complementary childcare can only support parents if the times that relatives (or friends) are available meshes with the times when parents require childcare. Many carers hinted at the flexibility required in indicating that they adapted themselves to when parents were doing shift work, or working late. Others revealed that they made themselves available whenever they were needed. The most common time that childcare was required reflected parents' working hours, and school hours. This was predominantly during the daytime, in particular before 9 a.m. and after 3 p.m. The research suggests that grandparents are a common sight outside the school gates. Many are involved in taking children to school and collecting them. Grandparents were also said to 'keep' the children after school until one or other parent arrived home from work. From the telephone interviews we analysed in whose home complementary childcare took place. This revealed a fairly even divide between children remaining in their own homes and children going to what was overwhelmingly their grandparents' home. The latter group of children had a second part-time home with their grandparents.

Flexibility in organising and finding childcare is a particularly vexed issue when school holidays and emergencies or other unforeseen circumstances arise, and may be a particular benefit of support for childcare outside the market sector. A very high proportion of carers (84 per cent) who responded to the survey reported that they were looking after children in the school holidays. Indeed, grandparents were even more heavily used during this time than at other times. Parents with school age children who were interviewed reported the stresses of organising and managing the childcare jigsaw during the holidays. One full-time employed mother related that: 'it's a juggling act week by week', and when her sister took her holidays from work during the school holidays 'it's OK', but otherwise 'every aunt, uncle, niece and nephew comes into it' (Linda: partner also working full time; two children aged 8 and 13 months). For other working parents, taking their own holidays from work could provide at least a partial solution. Where there was a husband or partner co-resident, this often meant that each parent took holidays at different times, so that a family holiday might have to go by the board. Some mothers saved up flexi-time from work for use during the school holidays. In other families, additional informal childcare is complemented by formal childcare pro-

visions – play-schemes, holiday clubs or football courses for example. To sum up, it was in school holidays that childcare arrangements were most likely to be not 'good enough'. As Linda continued: 'it's not ideal, but it's the best I can do'.

Respondents were also specifically asked about what arrangements they made when emergencies arose. To most parents, it was children becoming ill or having an accident that constituted an emergency, though carers being poorly was also occasionally mentioned. Essentially three different types of modification to the childcare jigsaw could provide solutions. The most common was to deal with it inside the nuclear household by one or other parent taking time off work when children were ill. Generally, this was the mother, and she would frequently use up leave or flexi-time to cover her time off. A second modification was to call on the wider family, sometimes family members who were already involved in complementary childcare, but also other family members, such as a case of the involvement of a great-grandmother living close by. The third additional source mentioned was neighbours. It is to be noted that it is only in emergencies that neighbours appeared to constitute any significant part of the childcare jigsaw, and that a number of respondents were emphatic that they would never call on neighbours even then.

Our research indicates that employers could play a considerable part in easing the burden of organising childcare jigsaws,<sup>5</sup> or in helping to put the informal pieces of that jigsaw in place. Yet, the interviews provided almost no evidence of such family-friendliness when travel, school holidays or sickness posed problems for employees. Instead, we found a substantial proportion of respondents saying they were using flexi-time and leave entitlements as cover for school holidays and children's sickness. Many commented that they had no entitlements left to take family holidays where the whole family could be off together. 'It's very hard because all my holidays and spare time is solely to fit in with carers' remarked one full-time employed mother (Julie: with a partner on night shifts and a 14-month-old child). Such practices are likely to have a serious impact on the availability of quality family time, and run completely counter to policy aspirations for balance between work and family commitments.

#### CHOICE, AFFORDABILITY AND QUALITY: WHAT PARENTS WANT

You know, me mam looking after him is as close as you can get to me actually looking after him. He's kept in a home environment and he's got all the attention he needs, which I prefer rather than having to go to a day-care nursery or something. (Pat: working part time, partner full time with a 3-year-old)

The National Childcare Strategy is based on choice, affordability and quality for childcare. The telephone interviews uncovered the sorts of positive gains that parents received from using relatives, specifically grandparents, as carers for their children and showed the factors underpinning parental childcare choices. The trust and love involved in using complementary childcare leads to high levels of parental well-being thanks to perceptions that grandparents provide childcare of a type that they consider important, often essential, to a child whose mother is out at work. A further positive gain is perceived to be the well-being of grandparents themselves. This is not to deny that employed parents are also making decisions based on economic factors (the price of formal childcare), as is discussed further below. Our study shows that this is not the primary factor. Many parents, as we have seen, do indeed access market-based childcare, but they may still wish to draw on family support too.

The type of care that grandparents are seen to provide is often critical to what families perceived as high quality; it is the 'best' childcare: best for children, best for parents, and from the grandparents' point of view, best for them too. Repeatedly, in the focus groups and in the interviews, carers and parents expressed the view that if mothers are going out to work, then relatives and in particular grandparents are the best alternative. Grandparents are indeed 'the next best thing', as we indicate in the title to this article. Moreover, this was not just a view held by employed mothers, but grandmothers too: complementary childcare is based on values about childrearing that are shared between the generations. Perhaps the most important dimension of what is valued by parents when it comes to grandparenting is that it comes from love (see Folbre and Weisskopf, 1998). This was in contrast to the way that 'outsiders' or 'strangers' who work in the formal childcare sector were sometimes seen. 'When you go to work, you don't know what's going on, whether your daughter is getting special attention, whereas I know with family she is getting that attention' (Julie again). There was then, a clear perception that grandparental care is linked to the well-being of children. This in turn is inextricably linked to the well-being of parents who feel they can therefore go to work and not worry.

By far the most frequently mentioned benefit to parents of using family to care for their children was that of being able to trust, and therefore rely on, family. As Rachel put it: 'The main advantage to me of having me mam look after me kids is that there's nobody I trust more with me kids than me mam and dad.' Trusting family to undertake childcare also meant that they could trust them to be reliable.



For me, it's the fact that they know them, they know who they are, and I trust them which is important because they have known them all their lives, and so they trust them and I can rely on them. I know they'll always be there. If they say they'll be there to pick them up, they will be there. (Anne: part time with partner on full time shifts and two children aged 9 and 7)

Other studies (Meltzer 1994) have drawn attention to the importance of trust in relation to the childcare provided by family, and it can safely be argued that this provides a major dimension to the quality of family care in the eyes of the parents who were interviewed for this study. It should be added that some parents referred to family tensions that arose from childcare, but these were always presented as either manageable, or differences that can be negotiated over.

There is every indication from our study that parents were in fact overwhelmingly using their preferred choice of childcare. As with other studies (Thomson, 1995) levels of satisfaction with current arrangements were high, with a mere 4 per cent of respondents to the survey expressing themselves as dissatisfied. Significantly, over three quarters of the parents who indicated that their first choice of care was a member of the family (grandparents are the most frequently mentioned) were actually using grandparental care for their children when they were working. Only 6 per cent of the respondents to the survey nominated a preferred choice of childcare that they were *never* using. Further evidence as to parents' personal choice is provided in that nearly 80 per cent of employed parents who felt the strongest about having a family member look after their children, were in fact relying on family already. This was without any additional recourse to the market. Those who rated this less highly in their decision-making were more likely to be using a combination of family and formal childcare, or even having a sole reliance on the market.

One of the advantages of this study was being able to explore complementary childcare from the carers' perspective as well as the parents. In the focus groups looking after grandchildren was seen as a reward in itself, something that arises from love. 'I can't think of anybody else I'd rather be with than my grandchild', remarks one, or most graphic at all: 'It's quite like being in love – I can't sleep before they come and when they go, I think about what they've done.' Grandparenting, such quotes imply, also contributed to the well-being of grandparents. A number of aspects to this were apparent. Grandparents saw looking after grandchildren as a 'second chance' at parenting. An advantage of second time around parenting was that 'you don't have the discipline thing, only at second hand'. Interestingly, discussion at a number of the focus groups emphasised that looking after their grandchildren was providing *grandfathers*

with their first experience of being really involved in bringing up children. This provides a glimpse of one route through which the intergenerational reproduction of gendered childcaring might be loosened.

Second time around parenting could help to keep grandparents young at heart and fit in mind and body. 'I love having the children about. They keep you occupied, young and happy' was a typical remark from the focus groups. So although (as discussed above) there are limits to the capacity of grandparents, depending on their age, health or other commitments, it was nevertheless clear that grandparenting could make a major contribution to the well-being of the oldest generation. For at least some this takes the form of a 'social career' (Humphrey, 1993). Adopting a social career as a commitment to an unpaid role in the wider family is perhaps particularly apparent amongst grandparents who pre-plan their childcare role. For example, in some cases the contribution that grandparents made to childcare arrangements had been agreed in advance; in one case, even before the mother became pregnant.

What about the economic base for choosing support from wider family? As we pointed out in the introduction, the National Childcare Strategy, in taking a regulated market approach to childcare is essentially ignoring the possible role of complementary childcare. This involves an implicit assumption that individuals respond to purely financial incentives. It was clear from the research that an economic rationale was not absent, either from parental decision-making, or even from grandparental offers of help. Indeed, although the telephone interview schedule specifically asked about the cost of childcare in terms of affordability, this was a theme that many brought up before being prompted. At first glance, a clear case of rational economic decision-making? Perhaps yes. From the first stage survey, parents who rated the statement 'I feel I cannot afford to use a registered childminder' were four times more likely to be using complementary care; and at the second stage, the inhibiting costs of formal childcare was referred to by over half the interviewees.

However, it is also clear from the interviews that the benefits to parents of using family-based childcare (discussed above) went far beyond the negative, push factors of the perceived high costs of formal childcare. The well-being of the family as a whole came across as being at least as important, if not more so, than the fact that they did not have to pay for childcare. Some mothers spoke of shared family values being beneficial in terms of having the same ideas about rearing children. Others mentioned the value of the closeness of family, and one mother indicated that the grandparent's caring responsibilities had in fact made them closer as a family. 'I think it's nice. When I was young, I saw my grandmother every

other day. If she did not go to my mam's then we would only see her once or twice a month' (Rose: works part time with partner working full time and with two children aged 5 and 18 months).

So is there a space for 'formalising' complementary care? The research provided substantial evidence that it was precisely the informal features of complementary childcare that were most appreciated by parents and carers alike. For example, only a small proportion (under a fifth) of either parents or carers wanted informal carers to receive any form of childcare training. This is unsurprising because for parents and carers alike, it was the personal experience of parenting that was seen as the crucial qualification for undertaking complementary caring. Above all it was the fact that parents knew and (generally) approved of the way in which they themselves had been brought up: they appeared to wish to see the same standards applied to their own children.

Payment for complementary childcare was also very much the exception rather than the rule. Nearly three quarters of carers said that they did not want any reward *from parents* for the caring they undertook, and this was even more marked for grandparents. Parents generally did not see formal payment from themselves as appropriate either. At the telephone interview stage, nearly a quarter made no kind of payment or gift in kind at all. A number gave money towards the costs of childcare, whether for meals, transport costs or days out. Over a third did give some sort of in-kind thanks: flowers, chocolates or gifts. This included special treats, like shopping or the rather wonderfully named 'pamper days' that one grandmother was taken on. Our research, then, found childcaring arrangements characterised by being non-monetised, based on personal family relations and privately organised. The majority of respondents in this study wanted a substantial volume of caring to coincide with a family relationship (Himmelweit, 1995). They did not generally want it to be a market one. It is possible that if they were not in a position to get informal support to a desired minimum, childcare would be perceived as 'not good enough', as being 'in deficit' (Purdy, 1998).

#### CONCLUSIONS: VALUING COMPLEMENTARY CHILDCARE

The empirical evidence reported on here provides considerable evidence that complementary childcare involves a redistribution between parental and grandparental generations. This is predominantly a redistribution in terms of an in-kind gift or reciprocal relationship, although money may sometimes change hands. Complementary childcare work is undertaken for a whole range of reasons, but one element is often based on a wish to help parents in a variety of different ways. While the Beveridge Report

provided a foundation for the welfare state to provide insurance against life-cycle poverty or privation (Baldwin and Falkingham, 1994) more than half a century later, we are still seeing this supplemented to a very considerable extent by caring from the complementary, unpaid, sector of the economy.

Effectively complementary childcare is (in part) a gift of caring time given by grandparents to parents providing family based life-cycle insurance. This is of course not all that it is. We have seen that complementary childcare is also a source of well-being to all three generations. However, it is important to be aware that this redistribution can involve what economists would call 'opportunity costs' for grandparents. For example, we found grandparents giving up their own paid work to allow them to look after grandchildren (without pay), which in turn allows their daughters (or sometimes daughters-in-law) to earn in the labour market. There can, then be very complex patterns of cross-cutting shifts between paid and unpaid work between the generations. When grandparents take on caring, they may also take on additional costs (travel, outings, food etc.) which parents may or may not reimburse them for.

For *grandparents*, the gift of time to their daughters – less frequently, their daughters-in-law – to allow them to work appears generally to be freely given. There is little evidence of complementary carers making their decisions on the basis of hard-nosed economic criteria. The reverse appeared to apply to *mothers* who go out to work. It was frequently the case that mothers commented on the careful calculations they made about whether it was worth their while entering or staying in the labour market. This sort of economic rationality that mothers use in relation to working is commented upon in the literature on women and employment (e.g., Yeandle, 1984). It is not difficult to guess at the reason why this should be the case. When mothers go out to work, as we have shown, they retain the time-consuming (and stressful) responsibility for arranging childcare. It is this double burden (alongside the continuing small part that husbands in two earner households play in other domestic work, Anderson *et al.*, 1990) that pushes women to calculate the financial gains and losses of paid work so carefully. There is clearly an additional burden on mothers – and fathers – if they are not fully satisfied with the childcare arrangements that they have for going out to work.

This study of complementary childcare provides a sobering health warning for any policy makers who want to apply a simplistic model based on narrow economic motivations hoping to achieve a straightforward response from households in the real world. It suggests a number of features at variance with policy assumptions. Since the supply of family

carers is inevitably limited, childcare subsidies may not encourage labour market participation. Families seem to insist on 'good enough' childcare and this may include a non-negotiable element of support from near relatives. Perhaps families will only contemplate mothers working if they have childcare in place that they are happy with. There is also an implication that the traditional economic analysis in terms of marginal costs and benefits does not apply to childcare. Indeed, most family carers did not seem to want to be formally rewarded by parents at all. Sue Himmelweit's (1995) article in *Feminist Economics* suggests (controversially) that caring should perhaps not be viewed as work because the work performed is inseparable from the individual person who does the caring (e.g., mother/father); caring as a product cannot be depersonalised as usually happens in a market. Certainly, Himmelweit appears to be correct as far as family choice about childcare is concerned. People do indeed want a considerable proportion of caring to coincide with a family relationship; they do not generally want it to be a fully market one. Folbre and Weisskopf (1998) provide a theorisation of why such non-self-interested caring is likely to be profoundly gendered.

Our research strongly confirms the indications from other studies that a substantial proportion of parents see grandparents as the next best source of childcare if mothers cannot look after their children themselves due to their work commitments. Formal childcare is not often a substitute for this family based childcare (see Brandon, 2000 for an empirical study of the US situation). Such families will inevitably think that it is very unfair that they cannot claim for Childcare Tax Credit as the legislation currently stands – unless, that is, grandparents register as childminders just for their own grandchildren. Unsurprisingly, this is a bureaucratic and time-consuming solution that both parents and grandparents were decidedly unenthusiastic about. CCTC is therefore likely to penalise this relatively high proportion of childcare users whose choice of complementary childcare is based precisely on its 'informal' characteristics. The significant role that grandparents play in keeping families with children in the labour market deserves public recognition in its own right. A small 'grandparenting allowance', say of £3 or £4 per week could provide just such recognition, and would counteract the tendency of CCTC to downgrade, de-motivate and discourage complementary childcarers, at the same time underpinning parental choice and intergenerational welfare (see Frey, 1998).<sup>6</sup> A clear understanding of why working parents use complementary childcare is essential for any childcare policy that hopes to be attuned to what families actually want.

Policies which encourage the maximisation of individual financial

benefits and individualism, are likely to push families more towards individualisation of their behaviour. Individual agency operates within an institutional framework, and in an extended family context, this institutional framework is profoundly gendered. Policies need rather to be based on an awareness of the processes in intergenerational complementary childcare which reproduce traditional gendered patterns of childcare. They need to identify measures, which could facilitate fathers and grandfathers taking a greater part. Family-friendly employment policies are all too often equated with *mother*-friendly policies (Burgess and Ruxton, 1998). For example, a real lead would be provided by *paid* parental leave, where a proportion has to be taken by *fathers* and cannot be transferred to mothers, as happens in Scandinavia. Folbre and Weisskopf advocate a new social contract that generates a sense of responsibility for caring labour in all members of society – men and women.

Finally, it is important to look to the forces determining the supply of complementary childcare for the future. It is likely that the supply of active grandparents is currently particularly high, due to a combination of historical circumstances. Many contemporary grandmothers are from a generation of mothers whose labour market activity levels were relatively restricted. The current cohort of mothers has much higher employment rates. Although the average age at which women have their first child has risen to an historical high, grandmothering is something that is generally required at the age of fifty plus, rather than after retirement. There may therefore be a sharp fall in the future availability of grandmothers for the childcare economy. Thanks to sickness and early retirement amongst men (only around half of men over fifty are active in the labour market in the north east) there is a stock of grandfathers currently available to supplement, and even substitute for, grandmothers. However, contemporary changes in the labour market make it unlikely that as many men will be able to afford to take early retirement in the future. The availability of grandparents is also likely to be exacerbated by the geographical mobility requirement of labour markets increasingly subject to global forces.

Helen Wilkinson of Demos remarked recently that ‘the government has to invest in building a care economy because unpaid work is no longer feasible for most people’ (quoted in *The Independent*, 7/2/2000) Can anything be done to retain the early twenty-first-century army of grandparent carers? Changes to pension arrangements could be helpful here. Older workers, who wish to reduce their paid work to a part-time basis, in order to combine it with grandparenting or other voluntary activities, incur major penalties in terms of their pension entitlements. It is possible



that today's generation of working parents may be even keener to take on a grandparenting role as second time around parents, given that many have adopted a 'next best' strategy of childcare for their own children. Pension arrangements should allow this, and be based on best pay over a number of years, rather than the final two or three years before complete retirement (Reday-Mulvey, 1998).

#### NOTES

- 1 The article title is part of a quote from one of the telephone interviewees, who had a two year old and worked part time: 'If he can't have his parents looking after him, then I think grandparents are the next best thing.' For full details of the empirical work see Wheelock *et al.*, 2000.
- 2 The argument about household boundaries is pursued more fully in 'Getting by with a little help from your family: towards a policy-relevant model of the working household' (Jane Wheelock, Elizabeth Oughton and Susan Baines) which is forthcoming in *Feminist Economics*. That article draws heavily on the empirical work presented here, but uses an additional case study of rural small business households to develop understanding of the policy significance of porous household boundaries.
- 3 This was partly as a result of the distribution of questionnaires.
- 4 As parents often employed multiple use of informal carers, the percentages do not total 100. There was no significant difference between partnered parents and lone parents use of different types of complementary care.
- 5 Only two respondents received help from their employers with childcare costs in the form of childcare vouchers. Only one used a workplace nursery, where she herself worked.
- 6 Pre-retirement age grandparents who have withdrawn from the labour market to look after their grandchildren should also be entitled to have national insurance contributions paid (Home Responsibility Payments) in the same way that those claiming Child Benefit can.

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