

Child Care Policy and the Experiences of Employed Albertan Families with Pre-school Children
Final Report

Seed Grant, File 11SG_Breitkreuz

Submitted to
The Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research

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February 11, 2013

Child Care Policy and the Experiences of Employed Alberta Families with Pre-school Children: A Pilot Study

KEY MESSAGES

1. More quality child care spaces are needed for parents to integrate employment and family care.

Our study indicates that the government's recent investment in the creation of new child care spaces and in an accreditation program for child care facilities is a valuable step in the right direction. Parents in urban sites in our study struggled to find high-quality child care spaces and often had to settle for available spaces that were of lower quality than they desired.

2. The cost, quality, and availability of child care influence the employment decision-making of mothers.

Many parents in our pilot study were willing to pay high fees and/or travel long distances to place their children in quality child care. However, despite this willingness, parents often could not secure the care option that they desired and had to settle for another, less desirable option. Some mothers would change their employment or drop out of the workforce rather than have their children in child care that did not meet their quality standards.

3. The quality and flexibility of child care influences mothers' level of stress in work-family integration.

Our pilot study found that for many parents in urban centres in Alberta, child care experiences were a considerable source of stress and a barrier to work-family integration. However, when parents were confident about the quality of their child care and felt that child care was a positive experience for their children, their well-being and work-family integration was enhanced. This finding indicates that the province should continue to expand its important policies targeting child care space creation and quality enhancement.

Our study findings also show that parents need more flexible child care hours to successfully integrate work and family. Parents stated that their paid work day often ended around the same time as their child care centre closed, causing them to race against the clock. Incentives for child care facilities to offer extended hours therefore need consideration. In addition, drop-in spaces for occasional child care needs could benefit parents. Particularly in urban areas, some parents in our study, employed or not, needed quality drop-in child care in order to attend appointments and do other occasional tasks that require child care.

4. Communication and relationships between parents and child care providers enhances parental trust and confidence in their child care situation.

Training to enhance child care workers' knowledge about and ability to communicate with parents is a simple strategy to enhance parental knowledge about their child's day in child care. This could be one step in reducing parents' stress and anxiety about child care.

5. There may be rural and urban differences in child care experiences.

The one pilot site that we visited in rural Alberta showed a difference in child care needs in comparison to our urban sites. This indicates that child care experiences should be documented in a greater number of rural and urban centres throughout the province to capture the unique aspects of various parts of the province: rural, remote, agricultural, boom town, etc. Further investigation is required before we can make any definitive conclusions about rural and urban child care experiences and needs. This documentation is integral to informing child care policy that meets the needs of parents in rural and urban areas of Alberta.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. CONTEXT

There is a significant disconnect between the number of preschool children in Alberta requiring non-parental childcare, and the number of regulated child care spaces available. The high labour force participation among Albertan mothers with young children is not matched by a corresponding rate of regulated child care spaces. In 2008, there was a regulated child care space for fewer than one in five children aged 0-5 in Alberta, yet across the country, 54% of children are in some form of non-parental child care. The gap between the number of children requiring non-parental child care and the number of regulated child care spaces available suggests that the majority of employed parents with young children are dependent upon non-regulated child care. This raises an important question: Who is caring for these children? The purpose of this study was to answer this question through conducting research that asked parents in Alberta what kinds of care arrangements they were using for their pre-school children.

Significance: This is an issue of concern to family policy makers for two important and closely related reasons. First, access to quality child care is a factor that is particularly important to employed parents' successful work-family integration. Lack of child care options are a source of considerable family stress and may have a significant negative impact on healthy family and child functioning. Yet, there is much that we still do not understand about the experiences and challenges families face finding quality care environments for their young children. Second, little is known about the short and long-term impact of non-regulated child care on the wellbeing of children. Given the recognition of the vital importance of the first five years on children's health and development as well as their future life successes, it is of great interest to policy makers to ensure that optimal care and learning environments are provided to young children. Yet the kind of care being received by the majority of young Alberta children who require non-parental care but do not have access to regulated child care spaces, and its impact on families, remains unknown.

2. IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this pilot study are as follows:

2.1 More quality child care spaces are needed for parents to integrate employment and family care.

Our study indicates that the government's recent investment in the creation of new child care spaces and in an accreditation program for child care facilities is a valuable step in the right direction. Parents in urban sites in our study struggled to find high-quality child care spaces and often had to settle for available spaces that were of lower quality than they desired.

2.2 The cost, quality, and availability of child care influence the employment decision-making of mothers.

Many parents in our pilot study were willing to pay high fees and/or travel long distances to place their children in quality child care. However, despite this willingness, parents often could not secure the care option that they desired and had to settle for another, less desirable option. Some mothers would change their employment or drop out of the workforce rather than have their children in child care that did not meet their quality standards.

2.3 The quality and flexibility of child care influences mothers' level of stress in work-family integration.

Our pilot study found that for many parents in urban centres in Alberta, child care experiences were a considerable source of stress and a barrier to work-family integration. However, when parents were confident about the quality of their child care and felt that child care was a positive experience for their children, their well-being and work-family integration was enhanced. This finding indicates that the province should continue to expand its important policies targeting child care space creation and quality enhancement. Our study findings also show that parents need more flexible child care hours to successfully integrate work and family.

2.4 Communication and relationships between parents and child care providers enhances parental trust and confidence in their child care situation.

Training to enhance child care workers' knowledge about and ability to communicate with parents is a simple strategy to enhance parental knowledge about their child's day in child care. This could be one step in reducing parents' stress and anxiety about child care.

2.5 There may be rural and urban differences in child care experiences.

The one pilot site that we visited in rural Alberta showed a difference in child care needs in comparison to our urban sites. This indicates that child care experiences should be documented in a greater number of rural and urban centres throughout the province to capture the unique aspects of various parts of the province: rural, remote, agricultural, boom town, etc. Further investigation is required before we can make any definitive conclusions about rural and urban child care experiences and needs and this documentation is integral to informing child care policy that meets the needs of parents in rural and urban areas of Alberta.

3. APPROACH

For this pilot study, we conducted focus groups in two urban and one rural location in the province. In total, seven focus groups were conducted and 42 research participants in total participated in the focus groups. Focus groups ranged in size from five to eight participants. Each focus group was conducted in a 90 minute time slot. The purpose and aim of the focus groups were clearly explained to all participants, and written consent was obtained. Examples of questions asked included:

- *What is your current child care situation? How did you choose this? What were the steps that you took to find this child care? What influenced the choice?*
- *What is the best feature of your current child care situation? What is the worst?*
- *Is there anything you would do differently when choosing your child care?*

4. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

4.1 Child Care Challenges Impacted Mothers' Labour Force Attachment and Well-being

Mothers' work-family integration and associated well-being was significantly impacted by child care experiences. Numerous mothers in our study decreased their labour force attachment or made other changes to their paid employment because of child care challenges and questions of child care quality. Furthermore, they experienced considerable stress and ambivalence when they were unsure of the quality of their child care.

4.2 Having to Settle for Available Care

Many mothers were willing to pay high fees and/or travel long distances to place their children in quality child care. However, despite this willingness, mothers often could not secure the care option that they desired and had to settle for another, less desirable option.

4.3 Trust in Child Care Choices Made a Difference

The quality of child care was associated with the experience of using child care. Lack of confidence in the quality of their child care option was a main factor associated with the experience of parental stress and anxiety about having children in child care.

4.4 Communication between Child Care Provider and Mothers Facilitates Parental Well-being

Mothers felt more secure and satisfied with their child care arrangements when child care providers prioritized communication with mothers and built a relationship with them.

4.5 What type of Child Care? Day Homes vs. Day Care Centres

Mothers made their decisions about child care type based on many factors. One of the decisions that mothers faced is whether to choose a day home or a day care centre. Mothers who chose day homes often felt that a home-like atmosphere was ideal relative to an institutional-like setting. Mothers who chose day care centres often did so because of a perceived consistency in quality, programming, and service and because of the accountability that child care workers had to other child care professionals in day care centres.

4.6 Need for Respite or Drop-In Care

Most mothers, whether from urban or rural regions or using stay-at-home or non-mother care, described a need for trustworthy, quality drop-in, child care that could be utilized in the event of unexpected or irregular events. These events could include, for example, the temporary illness of a mother or child. Not having care in place for such unexpected events was a source of considerable strain in mothers' lives.

4.7 Different Urban and Rural Child Care Experiences

Our one pilot site in a rural farming area of Alberta showed evidence of strong friend and family networks, providing child care for mothers, many of which were stay-at-home mothers with different child care needs. Mothers in these groups indicated that they had trust in friend and family care providers and did not indicate stress related to their child care arrangements.

5. FURTHER RESEARCH

This pilot study points to a number of important areas that merit further investigation. In particular, it shows the need to learn more about possible regional differences in child care experiences and differing needs of families in Alberta. In addition, more research is needed to examine the range of care types that families use and their reasons for using them. These choices, and the constraints that shape them, have implications for child and family wellbeing. Finally, understanding the diversity of child care experiences and needs of parents based on socio-economic status and employment type would assist policy makers to address the diverse child care needs of parents in Alberta.

FINAL REPORT

1. CONTEXT

1.1. Relevance

In Alberta, the labour force participation rate among mothers with young children is significant: 61 percent of those with a child aged 0-2 and 73 percent of those with a child aged 3-5 are employed (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu & Forer, 2009). This represents an estimated 113,000 mothers with children aged 0-5 in the paid labour force (Beach et al., 2009) and implies a significant need for child care in the province. The high labour force participation among Albertan mothers with young children, however, is not matched by a corresponding rate of regulated child care spaces. In 2008, there was a regulated child care space for fewer than one in five children aged 0-5 in Alberta, the third lowest rate among provinces and territories (Beach, et. al., 2009).

To address the shortage of regulated child care spaces in Alberta, Alberta Child and Youth Services (ACYS) introduced two key initiatives. First, ACYS proposed the creation of 14,000 new regulated child care spaces (ACYS,2008) and in February 2011, ACYS Minister Fritz announced that the government had exceeded this target by 4,000 spaces and was concluding this initiative (Calgary Herald, 2011). Second, the province developed a voluntary accreditation program for child care centres and contracted family day homes to enhance child care quality, and aims to have 95% of all centres accredited by 2013-14 (ACYS, 2011a). To date, ACYS has accredited over 81% of child care facilities in the province (ACYS, 2011b). Currently, Human Services is in the process of creating an Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for child care educators in child care and day home settings (Human Services, 2013). All of these initiatives have increased the number and quality of child care spaces in Alberta. However, a significant gap remains between the needs of families and current service capacity (Sakaluk & Breitkreuz, 2011).

In Alberta, there were an estimated 281,061 children aged five years and younger in 2010 (Muttart Foundation, 2010), and Canadian data shows that over half of children in this age group require some type of non-parental child care (Bushnik, 2006). In 2009, the most recent year for which statistics have been released, the Alberta government indicated that there were 26, 322 regulated day care spaces in the province and 10, 757 approved family day home spaces (Government of Alberta, 2009). Even with the additional spaces created in the past two years, these numbers show that there is a significant shortage of regulated child care in the province. The significant disconnect between the number of regulated child care spaces available and the number of children requiring non-parental child care suggests that the majority of employed parents with young children are dependent upon non-regulated child care. This begs the question: who is caring for these young children?

To date, little is known about the range of child care options that Albertan (or Canadian) parents are utilizing to meet their child care needs. However, we propose that this is an issue of concern to family policy makers for two important and closely related reasons. First, media reports suggest that a lack of child care options are a source of considerable strain on Alberta families (Brunschof, 2011; Hewes, 2008; Mahaffey, 2006; Sadava, 2008; Smith, 2008), yet little has been researched in this regard. However, a large body of evidence shows considerable challenges to

health and well-being that dual earner families, and particularly women, face when balancing paid work and unpaid family work (Barrette, 2009; Hochschild, 1989; Marshall, 2009). Stress associated with the maintenance of work-family balance negatively affects parents' personal sense of well-being (Nomaguchi, Milkie, & Bianchi, 2005) and increases the risk of adult psychiatric conditions such as substance dependence and anxiety disorders (Frone, 2000). Children's healthy functioning is also negatively affected by family strain. For example, Hart and Kelley (2006) found that mothers' work-family conflict predicted children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Research suggests that access to child care is a factor that is particularly critical to low-income employed families' successful work-family integration (Breitkreuz, Williamson, & Raine, 2010; Henly & Lyons, 2000) and healthy functioning (Press, Fagan, & Bernd, 2006). Thus, it could be hypothesized that the utilization of unregulated care may be a source of considerable family stress and may have a significant negative impact on healthy family and child functioning. Yet, there is much that we still do not understand about the experiences and challenges families face finding quality care environments for their young children.

Second, little is known about the short and long-term impact of non-regulated child care on the wellbeing of children. Given the recognition of the vital importance of the first five years on children's health and development as well as their future life successes (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008; UNICEF, 2008), it is of great interest to policy makers to ensure that optimal care and learning environments are provided to young children. Yet the nature and family impacts of the care being received by the majority of young Alberta children who require non-parental care, but do not have access to regulated child care spaces, remains unknown.

1.2 Research Questions

With the support of this ACCFCR Seed Grant, we began to address these gaps in knowledge. To this end, the following research questions were asked:

- a. What kinds of care arrangements are employed parents making for their pre-school children?
- b. What are the facilitators and barriers to accessing and maintaining child care?
- c. What are some of the key strategies parents utilize to integrate employment and care of young children?
- d. How do parents perceive the impact of these child care arrangements on the wellbeing of their children and families?
- e. How do these child care arrangements compare to what is known about optimal care environments for children?

1.3 Significance

In UNICEF's (2008) international review of early childhood education and care, the actuality that the majority of young children in the West are now in some form of non-parental care is presented as not only a significant change for the experiences of young children, but an urgent policy issue. The report states: "Whether the child care transition will represent an advance or a setback – both for today's children and tomorrow's world – will depend on the wisdom of the response" (UNICEF, 2008, p.7). We agree with this statement, and posit that the extent to which child care policies and programs have the potential to positively impact the wellbeing of families

with preschool children is contingent upon policy makers' ability to: 1) understand the impact of current child care policies on the day-to-day child care experiences of families with preschool children; and 2) recognize the implications of current child care service gaps on child and family wellbeing. This comprehensive examination into the linkages between child care policy and the experiences of families with young children will: 1) enhance knowledge about the day-to-day lives of families through giving voice to their experiences and perspectives; 2) make explicit the effects of current child care policies on families with young children attempting to integrate work and family; and 3) contribute to the development of child and family-centered child care policy.

2. IMPLICATIONS

2.1 More quality child care spaces are needed for parents to integrate employment and family care.

In recent years, the Alberta government has invested in the creation of new child care spaces in the province and in an accreditation program designed to standardize the quality of current child care options. Our study indicates that this investment is a valuable step in the right direction. Parents in urban centres in Alberta struggle to find high-quality child care spaces and often have to settle for available spaces that are of lower quality than they desire. Further investments in space creation and in measures that improve the quality of existing spaces will continue to improve parents' access to the good quality child care spaces that are clearly needed.

2.2 The costs, quality, and availability of child care influence the employment decision-making of mothers.

Many parents in our pilot study were willing to pay high fees and/or travel long distances to place their children in quality child care. However, despite this willingness, parents often could not secure the care option that they desired and had to settle for another, less desirable option. Some mothers would change their employment or drop out of the workforce rather than have their children in child care that did not meet their quality standards.

2.3 The quality and flexibility of child care influences mothers' level of stress in work family integration.

Our pilot study found that for many parents in urban centres in Alberta, child care experiences were a considerable source of stress and a barrier to work-family integration. However, when parents were confident about the quality of their child care and felt that child care was a positive experience for their children, their well-being and work-family integration was enhanced. This finding indicates that the province should continue to expand its important policies targeting child care space creation and quality enhancement.

Our study findings also show that parents need more flexible child care hours to successfully integrate work and family. Parents stated that their paid work day often ended around the same time as their child care centre closed, causing them to race against the clock. Incentives for child care facilities to offer extended hours therefore need consideration. In addition, drop-in spaces for occasional child care needs could benefit parents. Particularly in urban areas, some parents in our study, employed or not, needed quality drop-in child care in order to attend appointments and do other occasional tasks that require child care.

2.4 Communication and relationships between parents and child care providers enhances parental trust and confidence in their child care situation.

Because communication from child care providers to parents made such a difference to the extent to which parents felt better about their child's care situation, this should be a key aspect of training for child care providers. Enhancing communication between child care providers and parents is a simple strategy to enhance parental knowledge about their child's day in child care, thereby reducing parents' stress and anxiety about child care.

2.5 There may be difference between rural and urban child care experiences.

The one pilot site that we visited in rural Alberta had a greater concentration of stay-at-home parents and more extended family support than our urban sites overall. Overall, parents in this site did not indicate the same stress about child care described by many of our urban parents. Our pilot study suggests that there may be differences in rural vs. urban areas of the province. However, our pilot study visited only one rural community in Alberta, and this particular community may have a unique demographic because it is a well-established farming area with families that have lived in the area for multiple generations. Before we can make any definitive conclusions about rural and urban differences, child care experiences should be documented in a greater number of rural and urban centres throughout the province to capture the unique aspects of various parts of the province: rural, remote, agricultural, boom town, etc. This documentation is integral to informing child care policy that meets the needs of different experiences in rural and urban areas of Alberta.

3. APPROACH

The seed funding from ACCFCR was used to conduct pilot work that will be used as a foundation upon which to develop a larger proposal to conduct comprehensive research on child care in Alberta. In this pilot study, we developed a research process to conduct focus groups exploring parents' child care experiences in two urban and one rural location in the province: Edmonton, Calgary, and Lacombe. Ethics approval was attained from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board.

3.1 Data Collection

In total, seven focus groups were conducted and 42 research participants participated in the focus groups. Four focus groups were conducted in Edmonton, one was conducted in Calgary, and two were conducted in Lacombe.

3.1.1 Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a variety of methods. In addition to putting up posters in public libraries, preschools, and other public locations where families with young children were likely to congregate, we also developed a recruitment email that was distributed throughout the province on the Parent Link Centre (PLC) Network. In this email, we explained the contours of our study, and included a recruitment poster, information letter, and consent form that could be posted in PLCs (see Appendix B for these documents). From this network email, we received calls from both PLC personnel and parents in a range of locations including Calgary, Airdrie, Edson, Lacombe, Edmonton, Ft. Saskatchewan, and beyond. Because this was a pilot study with a limited budget, we could not go to all the areas with interested participants to conduct focus groups, so we went to places where we had enough participants recruited to conduct focus groups. We recorded names and contact information for all the other interested participants, and explained that we had a much higher response to the study than anticipated. We informed them that if we were able to solicit additional resources, we would contact them to conduct a focus group in their area. To date, we have approximately 30 additional participants waiting on our list from Lethbridge, Airdrie, Grande Prairie, Drumheller, Calgary, and Edmonton. We also have agency contacts in Edson and Drayton Valley waiting to help us organize focus groups in their regions.

3.2 Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted between July 2012 and November 2012. They were facilitated by one PhD student in Human Ecology, Laurel Sakaluk, a skilled graduate student with considerable previous experience in conducting qualitative interviews with participants on topics related to parenting and work-family integration. Laurel was assisted primarily by one Master's student in Human Ecology, Iryna Hurava. Laurel and Iryna were prepared to conduct focus groups by the Principal Investigator (PI), Rhonda Breitkreuz. The PI also came to the first focus group, in order to observe the process and debrief the effectiveness of our planned process and interview guide. Focus groups ranged in size from five to eight participants. Questions covered the following domains of knowledge: child care experiences, work-family integration, and child care ideals.

Each focus group was conducted in a 90 minute time slot. The purpose and aim of the focus groups were clearly explained to all participants, and written consent was attained. Examples of questions asked included:

- *What is your current child care situation? How did you choose this? What were the steps that you took to find this child care? What influenced the choice?*
- *What is the best feature of your current child care situation? What is the worst?*
- *Is there anything you would do differently when choosing your child care?*

In addition to conducting focus groups in a variety of locations, we also attempted to recruit parents with a range of experiences including diversity in family structure, socio-economic status,

numbers of children, and a range of employment experiences (i.e. shift work, low-income work, self-employed, etc.). We were also able to conduct two focus groups with teen parents. Table 1 aggregates the demographic profile of our participants, and Table 2 documents the child care arrangements.

3.3 Data Analysis

Each focus group was transcribed verbatim by a qualified transcriber. Preliminary data analysis happened in several phases. Detailed field notes were recorded after the focus group by both the facilitator and the assistant facilitator. After each focus group, a debriefing meeting was organized with the facilitators and the principal investigator to discuss key impressions of the focus groups recorded in the field notes. An iterative process, known as the constant-comparison method was employed (Strauss & Corbin 1998), to make sense of the rich and complex descriptions of participants. Similarities and differences between the content in the different focus groups was identified, and recurring themes were noted, serving the basis of the descriptive findings in this report. In addition, the assistant facilitator is currently conducting a rigorous and detailed process of coding for each focus group. Upon completion of this process, each Co-Investigator will also conduct a thematic analysis of one or two of the transcripts, which will then be discussed by the whole research team. These further data analysis efforts will be utilized in subsequent publications.

Table 1. Demographic profile		
		Number of participants (n=42)
Age of participants	16-20	7
	20-29	14
	30-39	12
	40-49	9
Number of children	Expecting	1
	One	19
	Two	14
	Three	7
Family income	Under \$20,000	5
	\$30,000-49,999	9
	\$50,000-69,999	4
	\$70,000-89,999	3
	\$90,000-109,999	8
	\$110,000 and above	11
	Not reported	2
Personal income	Under \$20,000	14
	\$20,000-39,999	7
	\$40,000-59,999	4
	\$60,000-79,999	8
	\$80,000 and above	2
	No personal income	7
Working hours per day	10 and less	2
	20-29	4
	30-39	8
	40 and more	10
	Not reported	1
Occupation	Professional	15
	Quasi-professional	5
	Blue collar	5
	Not employed	7
	Maternity leave	10
Co-parent situation	Single parent	6
	Husband	29
	Common-law spouse	1
	Ex-spouse	1
	Fiancé	1
	Not reported	4
		Number of children
Age of children	0-1	19
	1-3	27
	3-5	16

Table 2. Child Care Arrangements		
		Number of participants
Type of child care arrangements	Day care	13
	Day home	11
	Pre-school	1
	Parents take turns	10
	Grandparents	15
	Other relatives	6
	Babysitter	3
	Friends	7
		Hours
Hours per week in child care arrangements	Day care	15-55
	Day home	8-60
	Pre-school	15
	Parents take turns	8-32
	Grandparents	4-30
	Other relatives	6-10
	Babysitter	2-16
	Friends	8-16

4. KEY FINDINGS

In our study, we were able to document rich stories of a diversity of experiences in families with young children. These are detailed below.

4.1 Child Care Challenges Impacted Mothers' Labour Force Attachment and Well-being

The most prevalent finding in our study was that mothers' work-family integration and associated well-being was significantly impacted by child care experiences. Numerous mothers in our study decreased their labour force attachment or made other changes to their paid employment because of child care challenges and questions of child care quality. Furthermore, they experienced considerable stress and ambivalence when they were unsure of the quality of their child care.

The cost of high quality care was sometimes prohibitive. Some mothers described their child care payments as a second mortgage. Because the cost of high quality care was simply not affordable for some mothers they utilized other child care arrangements. Some mothers left paid employment because they would be paid little more at their paid job than the cost of high quality child care. For them, it didn't seem worthwhile to engage in paid work for such little net financial gain. In illustration, one mother commented on her child care decision-making, following the birth of her third child:

And after we had our third we couldn't afford daycare anymore. It was just too expensive. We were bringing home about \$75-\$100 a month extra so it just wasn't worth eating more prepared meals and you know, everything that comes along to working and so I asked for a leave. (mother from urban centre)

Mothers' work hours often did not coordinate with the hours of operation of child care centres and this was a source of considerable strain in mothers' lives. Some mothers engaged in a race against the clock to pick up their child at the end of each work day and some were fined for being late to pick up their child from child care. Other mothers made special child care arrangements for the period of time in which their child care centre was closed at the end of the day, but the mothers were still at paid work. In the following quote, a participant commented on the challenge of coordinating her and her husband's paid work with the hours of operation observed by her day home provider. She describes the challenge of picking up her son 'on time':

It's not really ideal because...I work out of town a lot and I'm done at...or my husband works 'til six thirty and she closes at five, so I have to have my brothers or my sister in law or my friend come and pick him up for an hour and a half and come to our house and stay there and it's just... Well, yeah. It's my biggest challenge. Endlessly frustrating and on the phone, calling people and, "Can you pick him up? Can you pick him up?" (mother from urban centre)

Some mothers considered quitting or changing paid employment because of the challenges of coordinating paid work and child care. These challenges motivated some mothers to engage in paid work at home and simultaneously provide child care. Sometimes mothers started family day homes so that they could provide care for their own children while earning money. The following quote describes the experience coordinating childcare and paid work of one mother who decided to change her paid employment and operate a dayhome:

And so, so I thought I could juggle it. Like I thought, you know, my job has quite a lot of flexibility and so I thought I could, you know, go in early and you know, that sort of thing, but it's been a train wreck, like just crazy [laughingly]. So, you know, my husband, I mean, he's available when he is, but then, you know, like I have to be back at a certain time so he can leave and so, my work is the one that gets sacrificed. Like I have to leave, or else, you know. And so I'm just [sigh] it's silly, it gets really silly and so I'm actually, I'm changing. I'm leaving my job and I'm going to start a dayhome, which I never thought I'd do but I got to the point where I was paying for... and I thought, this is like exactly half of what I take home each month, pretty much. And so maybe I'll just like figure something out [laughingly]. (mother from urban centre)

For many employed women, their ideal child care situation was described as a child care centre at their work site: having their child at their work site would enable work/family integration and alleviate time pressures associated with having to travel to separate work place and child care sites at the beginning and end of the work day. As an example, this mother articulated the strain and time pressure associated with travelling between paid work and child care centre. She describes a situation in which she chose to take a day off of paid work because she anticipated

weather-related challenges travelling to her child care centre at the end of the work day. She would be fined if she was late to pick up her child from child care:

So everyday, yeah, I have to come to the clock and to watch the traffic [laughingly] and to fly.... Yeah, every single day. If it's really snowy day it's like, last week I just take off day because I think I for sure was stuck in the traffic. (mother from urban centre)

4.2 Having to Settle for Available Care

Many mothers in our pilot study were willing to pay high fees and/or travel long distances to place their children in quality child care. However, despite this willingness, mothers often could not secure the care option that they desired and had to settle for another, less desirable option. This is illustrated in the following comment about child care choices from a mother who struggled to find child care due to a lack of available spaces:

And for this choice, I don't think I really choose anything...it's what is available so you just get it [laughingly]. And you have to run for it otherwise maybe it's not available. (mother from urban centre)

In urban centres, mothers described long waiting lists for child care spaces and some mothers stated that to secure a spot, they must place a child on a waiting list even before the child was born. In the following statement, one mother described her assessment of the challenges of finding child care in a context where availability is low and long waiting lists are common:

... that's what blows me away, is just that people have to be on waiting lists for years for childcare? Seems really quite ludicrous, that there isn't enough available. So it sort of discourages, I think, mothers from going to work because it's such a hassle, because it's...and I mean, and besides the whole emotional part of actually going back to work and leaving your children in the care of someone else, the fact that, not only that, but that you might not even have anything. So sometimes you're just scrambling and taking whatever you can get rather than actually wanting to, you know, talk and meet with the daycare providers or the caregivers to make sure that they're adequate for what you want for your children. So I found that very frustrating. (mother from urban centre)

Good quality part-time care was particularly difficult to find, and mothers using part-time care felt that their options were very limited. To secure and maintain quality child care, mothers often had to pay the full-time cost of a child care spot even if the mother wished to work only part-time and have their child attend non-parental child care only part-time. Because of the high cost of care, this sometimes created a financial need for the mother to work full-time to cover the cost of child care. The challenges associated with finding child care on a part-time basis are articulated in the following quote:

Yeah we struggled to find a part time day home that we thought was a good place because all the daycares only take full time or drop in and it depends on the day, right? So we couldn't...how can you schedule your work life around like maybe not having care that day? So we just had to, yeah, and I think we kind of skimmed on quality a little bit just

because we knew he might only, he would only be there two days a week. (mother from urban centre)

4.3 Trust in Child Care Choices Made a Difference

The quality of child care was clearly associated with some of the negative aspects of the experience of using child care. In looking carefully at mothers' discomfort with non-parental childcare, we discovered that lack of confidence in the quality of their child care option was a main factor associated with the experience of stress and anxiety about having their children in child care. The following passage illustrates the negative emotions that mothers experience when they are uncertain of the quality of their child care choice:

I just find it sad that our kids don't all get the best care and we have to, like, put them on lists for this and this and this, right? It should be just something standard where you know where you're leaving your child is safe and affordable and like affordability should be like the second factor. Like I feel like everybody that takes care of children should be trained and know all of the stuff... And then it's just such a stress, right? Like to leave your child with somebody that you think, well, I hope that they're okay. Like I just, I feel like it's just so unfair and I feel like every one of my friends is dealing with the same thing and I don't know. It's just such a hard choice to make and you feel guilty, as a mother, having to make that choice. (Mother from Urban Area)

In contrast, when mothers were confident that their children were in a high quality child care situation, they felt that their child's well-being was enhanced by being in child care. This, in turn, enhanced the mothers' well-being. The relationship between high quality non-parental child care and parental confidence and well-being is illustrated in the following passage:

I mean the problem as I see it is simply that if you're in a daycare that's facilitating early childhood education the best way and there's good staff retention and you've got that consistency and they do have that commitment to really scaffolding children's learning in a really well-educated way, then you are going to walk out the door everyday feeling like my child is potentially going to have a better day here than they would with me, actually. (mother from urban centre)

Mothers who felt uncertainty about the quality of their child care choice experienced stress and ambivalence and mothers in this situation, out of concern for their child's well-being, often considered leaving the labour force to provide stay-at-home care. A key finding, then, is that issues of trust were at the heart of many women's child-care decisions. As illustrated by the following quote, mothers who chose stay-at-home or friend or family care often did so because of the trust that they felt in these known individuals:

With my first child, I went back to work and had her, and my mother-in-law actually volunteered to take care of her full time, which was wonderful and with your first child, it's very hard, obviously [laughingly]. So I was, you know, to have another family member as opposed to, I just couldn't fathom daycare, but a family member felt like, okay, I'm not really abandoning her. She'll be okay. (mother in urban centre)

4.4 Communication between Child Care Provider and Mothers Facilitates Parental Well-being

Mothers felt more secure and satisfied with their child care arrangements when child care providers prioritized communication with mothers and built a relationship with them. When child care providers made a point of keeping mothers informed about and involved in their children's experiences during their time in care, mothers felt a strong connection with the child care provider. This enhanced mothers' trust in their child care arrangements and this trust, in turn, enhanced work/family integration. When mothers and child care providers did not have a strong relationship based on open communication, mothers felt stress and dissatisfaction in relation to their child care arrangement. In the following passage, one mother mentions communication with her child care provider, when asked to describe the best features of her current child care situation:

So I think that it's kind of good for him that way, and that she is very diligent about like, you know, letting me know things and keeping in touch and talking to all the mothers and stuff. (mother in urban centre)

Commenting on the most challenging feature of her child care situation, a mother in an urban area states:

I think mine is lack of communication and it's, it's not an awful thing but it's just like, I have to ask everything. Like our very first dayhome did like yours where she had a little journal and she would tell me what his mood was like and what he ate and that kind of thing. And I don't get any of that unless I ask very specifically, which I kind of feel like a pest doing, every single day. Like, you know, "Did he poop? Did he eat? Did he...?" whatever. And so there's a lot that I don't know about what's going on. So it's kind of the lack of control also, that I don't know what's happening all day long. I don't know what he's eating or how he's doing or if he had a good nap and so.

4.5 What Type of Child Care? Day Homes versus Day Care Centres

Mothers made their decisions about child care type based on many factors. One of the decisions that mothers faced is whether to choose a day home or a day care centre. Mothers who chose day homes often felt that a home-like atmosphere was ideal relative to an institutional-like setting. Mothers who chose day care centres often did so because of a perceived consistency in quality, programming, and service and because of the accountability that child care workers had to other child care professionals in day care centres. The following quotes are illustrative from those who favour a daycare environment:

I like the accountability that you get with a daycare as opposed to a dayhome, because there's multiple people working there. But for my first daughter, I ended up using a dayhome for six months until she was old enough to get into a care centre that would take eighteen month olds and higher. (mother from urban centre)

With my current daycare with my three year old, the workers there are fantastic as well and there's a really a high level of consistency in the workers [Moderator: Okay.] and in her room and stuff, which I think is really important for probably all age groups, but especially from infant to four-ish, I think they really love having the same people there everyday. (mother from urban centre)

Like, I need a daycare because I know it's not going anywhere and I know it has the structure and the stations and my daughter is really active. Like she used to be busy, and I've seen in the dayhomes that they just weren't, the ones I had her in just weren't, I didn't find the agency was really monitoring the development of the child very well, and I felt like I was paying for two kids, it was \$1200 for a dayhome or \$1500 for a daycare where I felt like they were at least going to get outside, they were going to be monitored more, there were just more eyes on the kids all the time, right? (mother from urban centre)

In contrast, there were those who preferred a day home environment for their children, as shown below:

Like I said, I was really, like especially for my babies, you know, a home-like feel was really important to me. Like a lot of the places, they can't help it, they're in institutions. They're in cinderblock buildings which they can paint any colour and drape things but it's still cinderblock. So that kind of thing. Like for my little guy, I was really conscious of it feeling like a home at that point. It didn't matter so much when they got older, but yeah. (mother from urban centre)

I really wanted a home atmosphere for my child. I did look into, like for hours and stuff with daycares, and I wasn't really going to work right, with daycares. I feel like he's going to be in school for, hopefully, sixteen years [laughingly]. So I just felt I wanted him to have the kind of childhood I did, so. Fun and outside and covered in mud. Kids need to be covered in mud all the time. (mother from urban centre)

I think the home, especially when kids are younger, I like that idea so it's that transition when they're younger, they're used to a home and their own crib and their own bed and that kind of stuff, versus in daycare is when there's like 17 cots lined up and so I don't want that centre to have that feel, sort of thing. When there's, yeah, and like the...it's super noisy because there's all the...it's, yeah, it kind of has that small group feeling. (mother from urban centre)

4.6 Need for Respite or Drop-In Care

Most mothers, whether from urban or rural regions or using stay-at-home or non-mother care, described a need for trustworthy, quality drop-in, child care that could be utilized in the event of unexpected or irregular events. These events could include, for example, the temporary illness of a mother or child. Not having care in place for such unexpected events was a source of considerable strain in mothers' lives. In rural regions, mothers often reported having friends and

family that could provide drop-in care but in urban centres mothers often described a lack of options for unexpected and irregular child care needs. Many of these mothers didn't have extended family close by to rely on; others had family members around but they were not available to babysit. This is illustrated in the following quote:

It just gets kind of crazy when we have to coordinate things that pop up last minute or anything on the weekend that we both have to do or takes me out of town and things like that. Those are the ones, well my husband has all his family in Edmonton, but none of them are willing to take the children. It's not that they're bad children, it's just that they're that much older than him and so they're just sort of past that looking-after-a-kid time. They're got teenagers. They don't want children. So there's not a lot of help, even though people always assume that your family will just help you out [laughingly]. Totally not the case. [laughter] But yeah, so it's a constant juggle. It's, you know, just what you have to do, right? (mother from urban centre)

Another mother described how she relies on friends to help her with child care, but is aware that these arrangements are fragile and can fall through unexpectedly. She states:

I think you have to have that in the back of your mind at all times... That things pop up and things that sometimes you, you know, family emergencies and whether it be the childcare side, the person, you know, giving you childcare or yourselves, you know, I think it's something I always keep in the back of my mind. (mother from rural region)

4.7 Different Urban and Rural Child Care Experiences

Our one pilot site in a rural farming area of Alberta, at which we conducted two focus groups, showed evidence of strong friend and family networks, providing child care for mothers, many of which were stay-at-home mothers with different child care needs. Mothers in these groups indicated that they had trust in friend and family care providers and did not indicate stress related to their child care arrangements. This is in marked contrast to the child care experiences of mothers in major urban centres in the province. Urban mothers described a lack of availability of affordable, quality child care options. For these families, lack of access to desired child care options was a source of considerable strain. One mother from the rural area we collected data in describes her situation:

I grew up just east of town... and plus on my dad's side, there's 10 in his family and all the aunts and uncles all kind of live around here, so I didn't want to move away from all the family because I enjoy them and we'd always have get-togethers and ... then they have been very supportive with childcare. Yeah. I'm a stay at home mom and any time I want to go have a break or do errands or, [pursue my hobbies] my husband watches her. During the day, even my aunt will come or I take her to [a nearby town] and my dad's at home. My mom's at work right now. So my dad will watch her or we've got a couple friends, close friends close by for an hour or two, so.

In contrast, the reality for mothers in our study from urban areas was markedly different. One mother clearly describes her frustration:

That's what blows me away, is just that people have to be on waiting lists for years for childcare? Seems really quite ludicrous, that there isn't enough available. So it sort of discourages, I think, mothers from going to work because it's such a hassle, because it's...and I mean, and besides the whole emotional part of actually going back to work and leaving your children in the care of someone else, the fact that you might not even have anything. So sometimes you're just scrambling and taking whatever you can get rather than actually wanting to, you know, talk and meet with the daycare providers or the caregivers to make sure that they're adequate for what you want for your children. So I found that very frustrating.

5. FURTHER RESEARCH

We initiated this study with the intent of conducting some preliminary focus groups in order to gain insight into research questions for the development of a comprehensive provincial survey. Since that time, we have been inspired to change our course somewhat. One reason for us to rethink our plans is that the focus groups have been so fruitful that we would like to continue with this data collection method as it has far exceeded our expectations in delivering rich, in-depth, and comprehensive data. The data collected in focus groups not only builds knowledge about what parents are doing regarding child care, but also shows why and how they are doing it. The complexity of parents' child care decision-making is not able to be captured in self-complete surveys. In addition, we found in this study that the discussion *between* parents in the focus groups often raised important issues and highlighted contradictions and inconsistencies that would be more difficult to access in an individual interview. As such, focus groups would play an important role in future research as they reveal the complexity of parents' work-family life and provide insight into the relevance of policy developments that seek to address the multi-faceted needs of working families.

A second reason for us to rethink our next steps is that Laurel Sakaluk and I have since joined the research team for the Benchmark Survey 2: Parental Knowledge About Child Development and have developed numerous questions on child care and work-family integration for inclusion in this survey. If this is approved, we may not need to conduct the survey component for this study in Alberta as we originally conceptualized, as the Benchmark Survey questions will provide a more cost effective way to produce the generalizable findings this are needed to describe the *scope* of childcare experiences in the province. Therefore, we plan to delay the development of our survey. Instead, we propose to continue the current study with additional focus groups with a more diverse sample. We believe that this is warranted, due to the fact that our pilot study points to some important but still preliminary findings about the diverse child care needs of parents in Alberta, and the complexity of parents' work-family-care decisions. As such, in this larger, qualitative study, we will focus on *how* parents understand and respond to the incentives and disincentives within Alberta's current child care system and explore the implications of parents' decisions on their work-family integration, including sites where policy reform can provide wellbeing and productivity benefits. Future data collection will provide an in-depth but more diverse perspective on the child care experiences and needs of Albertan parents, thereby

providing meaningful policy recommendations to the Ministry of Human Services. Based on our preliminary findings from the pilot study, we propose to do more focus groups to target a range of parents based on the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Parents in rural and remote regions of the province have different child care needs than urban regions.

To explore this hypothesis, we would like to conduct focus groups in more diverse regions of the province including: Northern parents, parents in “boom towns” developed by Alberta’s resource-based economy, parents in remote locations, and parents in Aboriginal communities. We think that further investigating the experiences of parents in various regions of the province will provide more insight in the potentially diverse needs of parents in the province, offering insight to policy makers about where to focus policy reforms.

Hypothesis 2. Parents are using different types of child care in part due to lack of choice based on child care availability, and in part due to values and belief systems.

To explore this hypothesis, we would like to conduct focus groups with parents who use a more diverse range of child care. In these focus groups we will explore the beliefs and contextual factors that lead to particular child care choices, examining how these choices ultimately impact child and family wellbeing. In particular, we will recruit parents using the following types of child care:

- a. employed parents using in-home nanny care
- b. employed parents using grandparent care
- c. stay-at-home parents
- d. employed parents working alternate shifts to maintain parental care of their children.

Hypothesis 3. Parents with different socio-economic statuses have diverse child care needs.

To explore this hypothesis, we would like to conduct focus groups with parents who have a diverse range of socio-economic circumstances and employment experiences such as working poor parents, parents working shifts, parents working non-standard jobs and non-standard hours.

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Appendix A

Table 3. ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES FOR KEY FINDINGS

Child care challenges affect mothers' labour force attachment and well-being

Parent' work hours do not coordinate with the hours of child care centres

I work out of town a lot ...or my husband works 'til six thirty and day home closes at five, so I have to have my brothers or my sister in law or my friend come and pick him up for an hour and a half and come to our house and stay there and it's just... [Exhalation] Well, yeah. It's my biggest challenge. Endlessly frustrating and on the phone, calling people and, "Can you pick him up? Can you pick him up?" (Parent from Urban Area).

Some mothers leave paid employment because of the cost of high quality child care.

My work is the one that gets sacrificed. Like I have to leave, or else, you know. And so I'm just [sigh] it's silly, it gets really silly and so I'm actually, I'm changing. I'm leaving my job and I'm going to start a day home, which I never thought I'd do but I got to the point where I was paying for... and I thought, this is like exactly half of what I take home each month, pretty much. (Parent from Urban centre).

Transition between child care and kindergarten

The other interesting thing is my middle child was then in kindergarten, so she's only there for half days, well then how do you get a child to kindergarten and then to daycare for the other half of the day? [laughingly/many murmurs of agreement] Please tell me I don't have to transfer her in my half hour lunch to another location and so that's why it was really important to try and get them all in the same building and you know, and it just, I was very grateful. I don't think I've ever been fall on my knees grateful like I was the day they told me I had [laughingly] all my children in the same building, (Mother of three children from Urban Area).

Child care ideal

That every work place would have its own childcare as part of the requirement of, you know, like benefits. That there's a daycare right there where you can see your children, they can see you, it's convenient and, you know, maybe, you know, it's part of your, it's included in your paycheque, you know, a slight deduction or something like that, but just that it's understood that it's just, it's part of our society. (Parent from Urban Region).

Having to settle for available care

Waiting lists and lack of part-time child care

I think my one frustration with looking for care was when you have, when you're going back to work and your child is twelve months old, a lot of centres don't take children under eighteen months. ... And so for my eight year old, I had her on some waiting lists for both kinds of daycare centres. But yeah, for both of my girls, I ended up putting them on wait lists while I was still pregnant, multiple wait lists. It is really stressful, just playing the waiting game and phoning and seeing where you are on the wait list and stuff. And now that I have a daughter who's in grade three, I need part time care, but that's almost impossible to get and so my husband and I juggle a little bit (Parent from Urban Centre).

That's what blows me away, is just that people have to be on waiting lists for years for childcare? Seems really quite ludicrous, that there isn't enough available. So it sort of discourages, I think, mothers from going to work because it's such a hassle, because it's...and I mean, and besides the whole emotional part of actually going back to work and leaving your children in the care of someone else, the fact that you might not even have anything. So sometimes you're just scrambling and taking whatever you can get rather than actually wanting to, you know, talk and meet with the daycare providers or the caregivers to make sure that they're adequate for what you want for your children. So I found that very frustrating (Parent from Urban center).

The cost of high quality care is prohibitive

When I was at Childcare Society I was paying \$1300 a month for one child. So yeah, the food was all approved by a dietician and everything was great, but as soon as we had our second, it was like, whoa, we just can't continue this. (Parent from Urban Centre).

Importance of quality for parents' trust

Honestly, a quality daycare over location would be my first priority. I would pick one that's farther away if I found it to be better than something that was closer to home (Parent from Rural area).

We went to this one woman's house who had like tools on one side of her shed and a snow fence on the other side and she had ten children there, and she was like, we asked her, "Do you have first aid?" And she was like, "Oh, no." And we were like, "Well, do you have a child safety check?" And she was like, "What's that?" [laughingly]. (Parent from Urban Area).

I didn't find the agency was really monitoring the development of the child very well...it was \$1200 for a day home or \$1500 for a daycare where I felt like they were at least going to get outside, they were going to be monitored more, there were just more eyes on the kids all the time, right? But it's so hard, you know? Because now I'm going full time just so I can pay for my kids to be cared for and raised for someone else. Like it's insane. It's totally insane [laughingly]. (Parent from Urban Area).

I just find it sad that our kids don't all get the best care and we have to, like, put them on lists for this and this and this, right? It should be just something standard where you know where you're leaving your child is safe and affordable and like affordability should be like the second factor. Like I feel like everybody that takes care of children should be trained and know all of the stuff... And then it's just such a stress, right? Like to leave your child with somebody that you think, well, I hope that they're okay. Like I just, I feel like it's just so unfair and I feel like every one of my friends is dealing with the same thing and I don't know. It's just such a hard choice to make and you feel guilty, as a parent, having to make that choice. (Parent from Urban Area).

If I found a daycare that was like, affordable, not too far, like, trusting like the people, the workers there. Well, just seeing them interact with the kids, just like playing with them, like reading stories at least like asking them questions, teaching them stuff and everything and just like taking care of them. Like doing their job really good and just like, not ignoring them or something. And actually listening to the parents, like telling them what happens, what they do, what's the, like, just like filling them with information and everything. (Teenage-mom from Urban area).

Day homes vs. day care centres

I really wanted a home atmosphere for my child. I did look into, like for hours and stuff with daycares, and I wasn't really going to work right, with daycares. I feel like he's going to be in school for, hopefully, sixteen years [laughingly]. So I just felt I wanted him to have the kind of childhood I did, so. Fun and outside and covered in mud. Kids need to be covered in mud [many murmurs of agreement] all the time. (Parent from Urban Region).

I like the accountability that you get with a daycare as opposed to a dayhome, because there's multiple people working there. But for my first daughter, I ended up using a dayhome for six months until she was old enough to get into a care centre that would take eighteen month olds and higher. (mother from urban centre)

Relationships between parents and their caregivers (being informed of and involved in their children's care experience):***Lack of communications***

Yeah, you kind of feel like, where is the line sometimes? Because you're like, I know this is your job but like, this is my child and I'm really interested and I know you have other children, but yeah ... and then they come home and they're like in a really bad mood and you're thinking, like, did something happen today? Like, what's...you

know and as a parent that's kind of upsetting because my son can't talk yet, you know, so like to communicate it's kind of like, I don't know. Like how do I find out what happened, right? ... I don't know how to deal with that.

Parents are involved in their children's care experience:

They get to know us on a personal basis. It's not like a parent-daycare worker relationship, it's more like we're dropping our kid off with a friend, someone we can trust, someone who we can leave our kid with and we don't have to turn around and go check our kid in five minutes, which we probably will because our kid is so close. Like I did just because he was so close and I love to. But I didn't have to. (Teenage-mom from Urban Region).

Need for respite or drop-in care

I think some of the challenges, even with the flexibility that being at home full time provides, there are certainly some challenges in terms of having made that commitment to being home full time and then looking for flexible childcare for anything from, you know, a dentist appointment to maybe appointments at the bank or just environments where it's not always appropriate or totally suitable to have a crazy 5 year old running around [laughingly] because that, of course, would be the time she choose to be at her most outgoing [laughingly]. (stay-at-home parent from urban centre).

Different urban and rural child care realities

Child Care Realities for Parents from rural area:

I just work one day a week and my mom has that day off, so she and my dad watch the kids, mostly my mom, but [laughingly] sometimes she'll take them up to her house and dad will help. And then other than that, if I need a hand, her aunt or my brother, I do have family around close and friends too... So, lots of aunts and uncles. (Parent from Rural Area).

Child Care Realities for Parents from Urban centres:

I tried desperately to get him into any daycare because I thought, daycare, he's two now, it would be good for him to maybe get a bit of schooling or something. And the wait lists are just ridiculous or it sounds like the daycares are awful. So we tried Kijiji and that was horrifying. I can't believe where people leave their children (Parent from Urban centre).

Appendix B (Research Documents)

CHILD CARE POLICY AND THE EXPERIENCES OF EMPLOYED ALBERTA FAMILIES WITH PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

Interview Guide For Participants (revised Sept. 21, 2012)

Purpose: the purpose of these focus groups is:

- to elicit experiences and perspectives from parents of preschool children about the availability, accessibility, quality of current child care services.
- To inquire about parents' experiences in integrating work and family.
- To explore parents' perspectives on what child care would look like in an ideal world.

Child Care Experiences

1. What is your current child care situation?
2. How did you choose this? What influenced the choice? What were the steps that you took to find this child care?
3. Did you choose the child care option that was closest to home? [Why/why not?] How do you organize travel to and from child care? [Who is primarily responsible for this? What is the travelling to/from child care like for you? When and why do travel arrangements change?] Or do care-givers travel to your home?
4. Who made your child care arrangements? How did you decide who would do what?
5. Is there anything you would do differently when choosing your child care?
6. What is the best feature of your current child care situation? What is the worst?
7. Please tell us about your level of satisfaction with your child care arrangement.
8. If you were to change your child care arrangement what would you be looking for in a new child care option?
9. In an ideal world, what would your child care look like? Where would it be provided?

Concluding Comments

1. Is there anything related to childcare that you would like to talk about before we finish the focus group?

Information Letter for Child Care Study Focus Group Participants

Purpose of the Study:

Parents in Alberta use a variety of child care strategies to meet their child care needs. The purpose of this study is to find out what strategies Alberta parents of preschool children are using for child care and to understand how those strategies impact child and family well-being.

Who is doing this Study:

A team of professors from the University of Alberta and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) are conducting this study. Dr. Rhonda Breitkreuz is an assistant professor in the Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta; Dr. Damian Collins is an assistant professor in the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences (Human Geography), University of Alberta; and Dr. Rebecca Gokiert is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta and is assistant director of the Community-University Partnership for the study of children, youth, and families (CUP). Dr. Kay Cook is a senior research fellow at the Centre for Applied Social Research at RMIT, Australia.

Methods:

The information for this study will be collected through focus groups. The focus groups will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete. Each focus group interview will be audio recorded and typed out to ensure the accuracy of the data and assist with data analysis.

Consent:

Participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. You are free to leave the focus group at any time. You may also choose not to answer particular questions within the focus group interviews. Once the focus group interviews are transcribed, all identifying information, such as names and child care providers, will be removed from the transcript. No one will be able to connect your data with any identifying information. Due to the nature of the recorded focus group data collected, where specific individuals' contributions are not distinguishable, it will not be feasible to remove your contribution.

Confidentiality:

The data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet/password protected digital file for five years following the completion of the study, after which time the data will be destroyed. We will not share the original interviews with anyone other than the researchers.

Members of the research team will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research. They will sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure confidentiality.

Benefits of participating in this study:

While participating in this study may not benefit you directly, the information we gather will help us to better understand how parents in Alberta are managing their child care responsibilities. This knowledge may help other parents and may be used to plan family policies that support parents requiring child care for their preschool children.

Risks of participating in this study:

A risk of participating in this study is that you may feel upset about the information that you have shared. If this occurs, the focus group facilitator will talk with you after the focus group and help you to decide how to deal with your feelings. The focus group facilitator can also provide information about services that you can go to for help.

There is also a risk that another focus group participant might share what you have said in the focus group with someone outside of the group. Before and after each focus group, all participants will be reminded that information shared in the group is confidential and shouldn't be shared outside of the focus group.

Reimbursement of expenses:

To acknowledge your time, you will receive a \$20.00 gift card for participating in the focus group interview.

Ethics Approval:

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, please contact the Research Ethics Office, University of Alberta at 780-492-0459.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Rhonda Breitkreuz (phone: (780) 492- 5997) at the University of Alberta.

**Appendix
Focus Group Consent**

Title of Research Project: Child Care Policy and the Experiences of Employed Alberta Families with Preschool Children

Investigators:

Rhonda Breitkreuz, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta
(phone: 780-492-5997)

Damian Collins, Assistant Professor, Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, University of Alberta
Rebecca Gokiert,, Dr. Rebecca Gokiert , Assistant Professor, Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta and
Assistant Director , Community-University Partnership for the study of children, youth, and families (CUP)

Kay Cook, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Applied Social Research, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology,
Australia

Consent:

Please answer the following questions by circling yes or no.

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study? YES NO

Do you consent to being audio-taped? YES NO

Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet? YES NO

Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study? YES NO

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? YES NO

Do you understand that you can quit taking part in this study at any time? YES NO

Has confidentiality been explained to you? YES NO

Do you agree to keep what is said in the focus group confidential? YES NO

Do you understand who will be able to see or hear what you said? YES NO

Do you know what the information you say will be used for? YES NO

Do you give us permission to use your data for the purposes specified? YES NO

This study was explained to me by: _____

I agree to take part in this study:

Signature of Participant Date Witness

Printed Name Printed Name

I am confident that the participant who has signed this form understands what is involved in participating in this study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

Signature of Investigator

Demographic Information for Child Care Study

1. How many children do you have? (please circle) one two three four five

2. What are the ages of your children? _____

3. What is your age? (please circle age range)

16-20 21-29 30-39 40-49 Other

4. What is your family income? (please circle correct response)

under \$20,000	\$50,000-59,999	\$90,000-99,999	\$130,000-139,999
\$20,000-29,999	\$60,000-69,999	\$100,000-109,999	\$140,000-149,999
\$30,000-39,999	\$70,000-79,999	\$110,000-199,999	\$150,000 and above
\$40,000-49,999	\$80,000-89,999	\$120,000-129,999	

5. What is your personal (individual) income? (please circle correct response)

under \$20,000	\$50,000-59,999	\$90,000-99,999	\$130,000-139,999
\$20,000-29,999	\$60,000-69,999	\$100,000-109,999	\$140,000-149,999
\$30,000-39,999	\$70,000-79,999	\$110,000-199,999	\$150,000 and above
\$40,000-49,999	\$80,000-89,999	\$120,000-129,999	

6. Are you currently employed? Yes No

7. How many hours per week are you employed? _____

8. If you are employed, what kind of paid work do you do? _____

9. Do you co-parent with your husband, spouse, or ex-spouse or are you a single parent?

10. What kind(s) of child care do you use? (please circle all that apply) day care day home
nanny babysitter neighbour friends grandparents other relative parents take turns

11. How many hours per week is/are your child(ren) in each child care arrangement that you utilize? Please elaborate. _____

ARE YOU CURRENTLY USING CHILD CARE OR LOOKING FOR SOMEONE TO CARE FOR YOUR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN?

**Are you interested in talking to researchers
about your child care experiences?**

- **We would like to talk with mothers and fathers with preschool children who are looking for child care or who are currently using child care such as day care, day homes, nanny care, grandparent care, informal care (care by neighbors or friends), etc.**
- **We invite employed parents with any number of children and with various employment situations: shift-work, full-time, part-time, self-employed, or returning to work within the next three months, to participate in this research study.**

**If you or someone you know is interested in
participating in this study, please call:**

**Laurel Sakaluk. Child Care Policy and the Experiences of Employed Alberta Families with
Preschool Children. Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta. 780-492-1612.**