DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAYS THROUGH MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

Rethinking Contexts and Diversity as Resources

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Child-Care Instability and the Effort to Sustain a Working Daily Routine: Evidence From the New Hope Ethnographic Study of Low-Income Families

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It has never been easy for contemporary parents in the United States to organize stable child care while working, harder for single parents, and harder still for low-income families. Stable child-care arrangements for low-income families are important for both the long-term stability of maternal employment (Hofferth & Collins, 2000), and, when in literacy-enriching settings, in helping preschool and school-age children perform better in school (Fuller, Kagan, Caspary, & Gauthier, 2002, pp. 98–101; O'Brien–Caughy, DiPietro, & Strobino, 1994). Therefore, it is important to understand what aspects of family life can contribute to a greater or lesser amount of stability in child-care arrangements over time.

Of course, some changes in child care are to be expected; but, frequent, unexpected, unwanted, disruptive, and reactive changes that do not fit into families' lives are very difficult for children or parents. Surprisingly, there have been few longitudinal studies of the characteristics of family life that affect the stability of child-care arrangements (Blau & Robins, 1991; Hofferth & Collins, 2000). There are even fewer studies that specifically examine instability in child-care arrangements for low-income working families (Scott, Hurst, & London, 2002). Instability is more likely to be a problem for parents working in low-wage occupations because low-wage work is often episodic, has few benefits, can be inflexible, often requires shift and part-time sched-

ules, and seldom provides on-site child care or allows children to come to work with a parent.

In this chapter, we draw on longitudinal ethnographic information from a sample of low-income families with preschool and school-age children in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We focus on the degree of change and instability in child-care arrangements and what led to these changes. Half of these families were randomly assigned to participate in the New Hope experimental intervention designed to support low-income work from roughly 1995 to 1998 (Bos et al., 1999). The others were randomly assigned to a control group. The New Hope intervention is relevant to the subject of stability of care because the program had strong impacts on families' use of center-based child care (Huston et al., 2001). It appears that at least some parents formed preferences for center-based care because they continued to use more center-based arrangements for their children than did control parents 1 to 2 years after their eligibility for the New Hope subsidies ended (Huston, Miller, Richburg-Hayes, Duncan, Eldred, Weisner, et al., 2003). Older children and adolescents in New Hope families also spent more time than those in control families in such structured activities as team sports, religious activities, lessons, clubs, and recreation centers. An accumulating body of evidence shows that such activities can contribute to positive academic and social trajectories for young people (Mahoney, Eccles, & Larson, 2004).

The effects of New Hope on child care and young people's activities are particularly important because the program produced significant and lasting effects on children's academic achievement and positive social behavior. Boys in New Hope families performed better in school than controls in assessments carried out 2 years and 5 years after families entered the program or control groups (Huston et al., 2001, 2003). Given the fact that families' eligibility for New Hope benefits ended after 3 years, these findings suggest that the experiences created for children during the program had durable effects on their developmental trajectories.

AN ECOCULTURAL ACCOUNT OF FAMILY CONTEXT, DIVERSITY, AND DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAYS

One of the shared goals of our chapters in this volume is to describe and apply a point of view regarding developmental pathways and diversity. We use a cultural-ecological or "ecocultural" framework (Weisner, 2002; Weisner, 2005) for thinking about what features of family context contribute most to the stability of child care over time and how changes in support policies for families can help parents and their children. From the point of view of the ecocultural framework, families everywhere face a common

adaptive project: to create a reasonably sustainable daily routine of family life. They do so in a particular sociohistorical period, neighborhood, and institutional context, with varying kinds of public supports. The daily routines of family life are made up of activities or practices. Activities are the familiar chains of events that make up people's days and weeks—having breakfast together, the morning "getting up" routines, driving kids to school, watching TV, bedtime stories, visiting grandparents, doing homework, household tasks and chores, going to church.

A useful way to think about "pathways" is that the activities in children's daily routines provide the stepping stones along the paths of children's development. The varied stepping stones of everyday activities available to children in different families and communities over time help account for differences in child and family developmental trajectories.

Sustainability of Family Routines and Activities

Activities consist of six key components: the tasks of that activity (e.g., eating together, sociality, cleaning up), goals and values (encourage independence), the script (how to do it, including the better or worse ways of doing it), the resources needed (money, space, tools), the feelings and motives of the participants (highly engaged, happy, indifferent, hostile), and the people who must or should be participants (mother, other kin, certain children). In general, the stability of the activities that make up family routines depends on the integration and coherence of the specific components that make up the activities themselves. One way to think about this is in terms of how sustainable a daily routine is over time. It is better for children to participate in more sustainable routines.

There are several characteristics of sustainable routines (Weisner, 2002). First, there must be some degree of balance among the varied tasks and activities in the daily routine. Constant competition and conflict does not promote sustainability. Second, activities require people who are available and willing to help (social support). Third, the family needs adequate resources to supply the material demands of the activities that make up the daily routine. Fourth, participation in the activities must be meaningful. The activities should be, at least to some degree, what the participants desire and find valuable. Finally, the amount of emotional connection and engagement, or alternatively, emotional conflict people experience when performing the activity can influence the sustainability of the activity.

The activities and practices that make up nonmaternal child care can influence children's trajectories of development. Moreover, these arrangements are a significant component of the package of activities that make up the daily routines of the family (Lowe & Weisner, 2003). Therefore, the amount of stability in child-care arrangements can significantly influence

children's development and the family's ability to forge a manageable daily routine. We now turn to the application of this ecocultural approach to understanding stability of child care among working poor families.

Diversity and Heterogeneity

"No accounts of ontogeny in human adaptation could be adequate without the inclusion of the population specific patterns that establish pathways for the behavioral development of children" (LeVine, LeVine, Dixon, Richman, Leiderman, & Keefer, 1994, p. 12). Diversity within families and within communities in these population-specific patterns is expectable and assumed in ecocultural theory. Cultural communities are predictably heterogeneous, as are the social groups within them. In our view, it is analytically useful to use ethnicity, poverty, neighborhood, and other descriptive social address categories to group together and describe families and children when there also is some way to assess the internal variability of families within those categories, and to know the history and meaning of those categories. In other words, a cultural ecology perspective predicts heterogeneity, due in part to internal variation in social addresses, as well as many shared beliefs, values, and activities. The extent and locus of shared patterns and heterogeneity is an empirical question.

CHILD-CARE QUALITY, STABILITY, AND CHILD OUTCOMES

Child-care quality (as defined by United States and European assessment scales) does matter somewhat when considering the relation between child care and children's developmental outcomes in middle childhood. For example, in a recent report, the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network (2003) found that the quality of adult–child interactions and the overall ambience in the child-care context were modestly associated with better cognitive and social competence ratings of children at 54 months. However, the quality of the maternal caregiving context was a much stronger predictor of these outcomes, particularly for cognitive competence. High-quality child care can improve, on average, the cognitive competence of children from low-income families (Fuller, Kagan, & Loeb, 2002). However, the quality of the child's home environment remains a much larger contributor to children's subsequent cognitive or social competence.

The relation between the stability of child-care arrangements and child outcomes is less well understood. A number of studies have examined the effect of early child-care stability on later social behaviors as well as the quality of child–parent attachments (NICHD Early Childhood Research Network, 1999; Youngblade, 2003). At best, the findings from these studies are equivocal, with some suggesting there may be a link between the stability of child care and child outcomes, and others suggesting that child-care stability, at least in the first year of life, may not be associated with child outcomes. But, stability is generally not well measured and has received comparatively less attention in the literature to date than the relation between child-care quality and child outcomes. Thus, it is not clear how child-care instability might be associated with child outcomes. However, there is at least some evidence that instability can negatively effect a child's social development (Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carroll, 2004). As we see in our New Hope ethnography, child-care instability was a common concern.

THE NEW HOPE SAMPLE

The New Hope experimental evaluation, based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and active between 1995 and 1998, was an antipoverty experiment aimed at moving welfare applicants to work and greater self-sufficiency (Bos et al., 1999). Those who volunteered for the program were randomly assigned either to New Hope or to a control group. The New Hope program offered a wage supplement, subsidies for health insurance, child-care subsidies, and a full-time community service job opportunity for those unable to find work on their own. Members of control and experimental groups were also free to use any federal or state public assistance programs. After 2 years of New Hope, a Child and Family Study (CFS) subsample of 745 families who had at least one child between the ages of 1 and 10 at baseline was surveyed to study the impacts of New Hope on child development and family functioning.

The New Hope Ethnographic Study (NHES) began in the spring of 1998, during the final year of the New Hope experiment (Weisner, Gibson, Lowe, & Romich, 2002). A stratified random sample of 60 families was drawn from the full CFS sample with equal representation of both the experimental and control groups. Of these 60, 45 (75%) were enrolled into the NHES study. One family dropped out very early in the study leaving 44 NHES families in the final sample.

We were unable to use ethnographic data for two of the 44 NHES families for this chapter because sufficiently detailed child-care-related information

TABLE 6.1
Background Characteristics of 42 New Hope Ethnographic Study (NHES) Families
Just Prior to Start of Ethnographic Study (Final Year of New Hope Intervention)

	Full NHES (n = 42)	NHES Sample With Complete Longitudinal Child Care Data (n = 31)	New Hope (n = 16)	Controls (n = 15)
Participant's age—1998—mean (*sd*)	33 (6.1)	33 (6.3)	33 (7.4)	33 (5.0)
Earnings (thousands)—mean (*sd*)	11.1 (7.5)	11.6 (8.2)	12.2 (8.3)	10.9 (8.3)
Percentage Black	50	52	50	53
Percentage Hispanic	33	29	38	20
Percentage White	17	19	13	27
Percentage 12 or more years of education[a]	68	64	56	73
Percentage husband or partner lives with family[b]	55	57	60	53
Percentage three or more children[c]	26	23	13	33
Percentage age of youngest child 0 to 2	19	23	25	20
Percentage age of youngest child 3 to 5	40	32	31	33
Percentage age of youngest child 6 to 10	29	29	19	40
Percentage age of youngest child 11 to 15	12	16	25	7
Percentage used New Hope or welfare child care subsidy prior to start of NHES	41	32	50	13
Percentage used Wisconsin Works (W2) anytime during NHES (Summer 1998–Summer 2000)	26	32	19	47

[a]NHES, *n* = 41, due to missing survey data. [b]NHES, *n* = 40, due to missing survey data. [c]NHES, *n* = 39, due to missing survey data.

was unavailable in the case material. Hence our NHES sample used in this chapter consists of 42 families for whom we had adequate child-care information. Thirty-one of these 42 families had complete longitudinal information across all periods of observation. Table 6.1 presents descriptive statistics for the 42 NHES sample families and the 31 families used in the longitudinal analysis. There are no significant demographic differences between the full 42 families in the NHES and the 31 families used for the longitudinal analysis.

METHODS

Fieldwork Methods

When visiting families, fieldworkers used open-ended interviews to engage parents in conversations and descriptions of their lives, their concerns, goals, and hopes, and their everyday routine of activities. After each visit,

fieldworkers wrote up the conversations and observations they had with the families of the NHES into visit summaries and more complete descriptive fieldnotes. These fieldnote entries were based on tape recordings or written notes made during the day's visit. In this study, we draw on fieldnotes from the period between spring 1998 and spring 2000. During this period, the 31 NHES families used for the longitudinal analysis were visited 10 times on average (range 5 to 15 visits).

Analysis of the Qualitative Data

Excerpts related to child-care choices were extracted from the corpus of ethnographic fieldnotes, stored in our Web-based fieldnote database, EthnoNotes (Lieber, Weisner, & Pressley, 2003). These excerpts include discussions of parental and nonparental child-care arrangements for infants, toddlers, preschool and school-age children (up to age 15). After establishing interrater reliability (alpha = .97), two coders coded the notes for the type of child-care arrangements for all children under age 15, whether the current arrangements were a change from the previous fieldworker visit, and, if there was a change, the reasons for the change. The reasons for change were then coded according to the categories relevant to the sustainability of activities within daily routines (i.e., balance among activities, social support, resources, meaning, and interpersonal conflict), plus the annual school-year cycle and child maturational changes.

Identifying Change and Instability in Child-Care Arrangements Over Time

We specified five distinct time periods in the data and then looked for evidence of change within and across those time periods. The five time periods were summer to fall 1998, school year 1998 to 1999, spring to summer 1999, summer to fall 1999, and the school year 1999 to 2000.

Any change for any of the children in the family under the age of 15 was counted as a change in child care for that family.[1] A change was defined as a shift in child-care arrangements from those in the previous family visit.

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[1]Note that by counting all changes in child care in the ethnographic sample, there is the likelihood that families with more children will have more opportunities to change their child-care arrangements over time than will families with fewer children. The same for child age. Families with younger children, who need child care more, are also more likely to change their child-care arrangements over time than families with older children. Quantitative comparisons within our New Hope Ethnographic Study sample thus weight families with more children and more younger children somewhat higher—but then, those are the families dealing with these issues more often as well. However, our family-level comparisons and case materials are not subject to this differential exposure to change.

Changes could involve shifts from one provider to another or shifts in the addition or subtraction of multiple providers at a given time. Because families in our sample were observed variable numbers of times during each period (two to three visits in the spring–summer–fall transitions and one to seven visits during the school years), we chose to only count the presence or absence of any change within a particular period of observation, so as not to confound the frequency of field visits with our measures of change. We used the same procedures to locate the reasons for change in child care across all time periods. We maintained the temporal organization of child-care arrangements, changes, and reasons for change as part of our longitudinal analysis.

A single episode of change may or may not be indicative of instability for a family because some changes are predictable. Changing arrangements because a child was old enough to begin attending school, for example, was considered a predictable type of change. Changes associated with the typical beginning and ending of the school-year cycle where parents often shifted between afterschool care settings to full-day summer care were also considered predictable. These were distinguished from more unpredictable shifts in child care.

We examined predictable change as well as instability by dividing the number of the five time periods a family changed a child-care arrangement by the total number of the five periods that any data were available for that family. This gives a percentile measure of chronic instability between 0% (only predictable changes or no change) and 100% (only unpredictable changes).

Finally, we selected three exemplar cases from the study to describe in detail. Our goal in selecting these cases was to highlight the shifting nature of the ecocultural features of these families over time and how family accommodations affected the relative stability of their child-care arrangements. The cases were chosen to give a sense of the breadth of issues low-income families contend with over time and how those issues impact the stability of their child-care arrangements.

RESULTS

Quantitative Patterns of Child-Care Change

Quantitative analysis is guided by two questions: (a) How much change and instability in child-care arrangements is there for the families in our sample? (b) What are the reasons for changes in child-care arrangements?

Change in Child Care Over Time. Table 6.2 shows the proportion of NHES families who experienced change and instability in their child-care arrangements in the transition from summer to fall 1998 and 1999, from spring to summer 1999, and within each of 2 school years between 1998 and 2000. These data include any change for any reason, whether or not the precursors of such change were predictable. Overall, 26 of the 31 families (84%) experienced a change during at least one of the five time periods studied. During the summer and school-year transitions, about 55% experienced a change in child-care arrangements. Between one third (35%) and one half (48%) of the 31 families experienced a change in child-care arrangements within 1 of the 2 school years. 29% of the families experienced a high rate of change in child-care arrangements (i.e., a change in four or five of the five time periods). Finally, the families in our longitudinal sample changed child care in half of the five time periods on average.

Table 6.2 also identifies the changes in child care that were due to sudden shifts in the circumstances surrounding the sustainability of family routines rather than more predictable reasons (e.g., school schedules or children's normal age-related changes). These data represent rates of instability rather than change more broadly defined. Instability is quite common for the families in our sample. Typically, between one in five to nearly one half of these families experience instability in child care during any single period. Moreover, the rates appear to be quite consistent, with three of the five periods showing a rate of instability of about 33% to 35%.

The New Hope program did reduce instability in this sample. New Hope families experienced instability in about 24% of the time periods on average; the control group families experienced instability in about 43% of the time periods on average. These findings correspond with evidence from the full CFS sample at 24 months showing that New Hope increased the length of time children were enrolled in formal care settings (such as child-care centers and afterschool programs) by about 3 months on average, when compared to the control group (Bos et al., 1999). However, the impact of New Hope diminished over time. By the summer of 1999, rates of instability between the two groups was not significantly different.[2]

Reasons for Changing Child-Care Arrangements. Table 6.3 shows the major categories underlying the reasons for change for the 26 families who experienced change in any of the five periods observed between summer 1998 and spring 2000. Table 6.3 is organized in terms of the five features that figure into the sustainability of daily routines (activity balance, social sup-

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[2]There are strong experimental impacts on child care 60 months post-random assignment for the larger Child and Family Study sample: New Hope families were more likely to be using formal child care.

TABLE 6.2

Percentage of Families with Changing and Unstable Child-Care Arrangements for New Hope Ethnographic Study (NHES) Families Between School-Year Transitional Periods and Within School Years (Summer 1998–Spring 2000)

	New Hope (n = 16)		Controls (n = 15)		Full NHES (n = 31)		p
	f	Percentage	f	Percentage	f	Percentage	
Change within time periods							
Summer 1998 to Fall 1998	9	56%	8	53%	17	55%	
School Year 1998 to 1999	5	31%	10	67%	15	48%	*
Spring 1999 to Summer 1999	8	50%	9	60%	17	55%	
Summer 1999 to Fall 1999	7	44%	10	67%	17	55%	
School Year 1999 to 2000	6	38%	5	33%	11	35%	
Any change during any period	13	81%	13	80%	26	84%	
Instability within time periods							
Summer 1998 to Fall 1998	2	13%	8	53%	10	32%	*
School Year 1998 to 1999	5	31%	10	67%	15	48%	*
Spring 1999 to Summer 1999	5	31%	6	40%	11	35%	
Summer 1999 to Fall 1999	3	19%	3	20%	6	19%	
School Year 1999 to 2000	6	38%	5	33%	11	35%	
Levels of chronic change and instability	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Average percentage of all periods experienced change related to econiche	44%	31%	56%	32%	50%	33%	
Average percentage of all periods experienced instability related to econiche	24%	26%	43%	27%	33%	28%	+

*p < .05. +p < .10.

TABLE 6.3
Major Reasons for Changing Child Care for
26 New Hope Ethnographic Study Families*

	Summer to Fall 1999	School Year 1998 to 1999	Spring to Summer 1999	Summer to Fall 1999	School Year 1999 to 2000	Any Period
General issues						
Percentage school-year cycles	15	0	23	42	0	62
Percentage child maturation	3	0	0	0	6	9
Family econiche issues						
Percentage balance in activities	19	27	27	15	19	65
Percentage social support	4	12	8	4	19	46
Percentage resources	4	8	12	4	8	23
Percentage social conflict	0	12	0	0	8	15
Percentage meaning	4	0	4	4	4	15

*Five families were dropped from the sample n of 31. These families did not show any evidence of change.

port, resources, meaning, and conflict), from ecocultural theory plus two additional features specific to our topic (shifts associated with the annual school-year cycle and children's maturation). When change was due to predictable school year or child maturation, we never found that changes in one of the five ecocultural circumstances were also causing child-care instability at the same time. Therefore, we could clearly distinguish between predictable changes in child care due to school or child age maturation, versus change due to alterations in the features of the family context that influence the sustainability of the daily routine. Table 6.3 shows reasons for change both within each of the five time periods and across all five.

Two thirds (62%) of the families who experienced any change over the 2 years of observation cited school-year cycles or child maturation as reasons for changing their child-care arrangements. Naturally, the changes associated with the beginning and end of the school year were concentrated in summer–fall and spring–summer transitions. Although school-year changes are an annual event, starting school for the first time or moving to middle school are much less common. Hence, child maturation was cited only in the summer to fall transition of 1998 and in the 1999 to 2000 school year by a total of three families as the primary reason for changing a child-care arrangement.

A total of 89% (or 23 of 26) of the families who reported changing child-care arrangements reported doing so as a result of a shift in one or more of the ecocultural features of sustainability. The most common reasons, cited in 65% of the cases, were associated with changes in the balance in the respondent's daily routine. These were followed by changes in social support

(46%), family resources (23%), and social conflict and meaning issues (15% each). (Because more than one reason could be cited by the respondent for each change in child-care arrangements, these values exceed 100%.)

The ranking of the five features of sustainability associated with change was similar across five time periods. Lack of balance in the daily routine is always the most common reason associated with change. Social support and material resource issues come next. Conflict in the family and the meaningfulness of child-care options (e.g., its fit with parental goals and values associated with child care) are the least frequently cited.

Note that the rates for which these issues are cited are generally lower than the marginal totals. This suggests that different issues come up at different times for these families. Hence, the same sustainability feature does not necessarily account for change and instability in child care over time for any given family, although there certainly are family patterns, as our three cases show.

Ethnographic Case Exemplars of Child-Care Stability

The patterns described so far consider how each feature of sustainability of family routines contributed to the degree of change and stability in child care over time. They also suggest that New Hope did assist in varying ways, to somewhat increase stability of child care compared to control families. In this section, we present three ethnographic cases to qualitatively describe the dynamic relation among various features of the family cultural ecology and how these features produced stability or instability.

Case 1—Katie: Stable, Flexible Child Care. Katie and her two children had relatively stable child-care arrangements for most of the study. Katie was a divorced 39-year-old single mother of a 5-year-old daughter (Erin) and 7-year-old son (Sean) in 1998. Katie was randomly assigned to the control group when she applied for New Hope. For the year and a half leading up to the start of this study, Katie had a stable job as a maintenance person at a local college. This job paid her a low earned income in 1998 of about $13,000.00. Prior to her working at the college, she had been on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) support for about 2 years.

When we met Katie in the spring of 1998, she had a stable child-care situation because her brother Frank was able to help. Frank was a licensed child-care provider who lived with their mother close by, was authorized to receive child-care subsidy payments from Wisconsin Shares, the state child-care subsidy program for low-income families, and restricted his care to Erin and Sean. Katie's arrangement with Frank began a couple of years after Erin was born, when Katie decided that she had to return to work and get off of the AFDC supports she had relied on since Erin's birth.

Katie was particularly glad she could leave her children with her brother because this arrangement fit well with Katie's preferences for quality care. She had tried day-care centers and care with in-home paid providers from the time her son, Sean, was an infant until he was a toddler (and Erin was born), but was never satisfied with his care in these settings. The field-worker wrote, "[Katie] said they wouldn't feed him enough, or play with him, or change his diapers. Katie remembers there was one place in which Sean always had a diaper rash . . . When she had Erin [in 1993], she decided that she will just stay at home and take care of them both."

Having a reliable relative to help out made a huge difference. Katie worked second shift, from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. on weekdays. On a typical day during the 1998 to 1999 school year, Katie got the kids up and took them to school, sometimes staying to watch their classes or help their teachers for an hour or two. Then she prepared dinner and left it in the refrigerator before leaving for work. Frank picked up the children from school and took them back to Katie's house, where he helped with their homework, gave them dinner, put them to bed, and stayed until Katie returned. Katie said she wished she could spend more time with her children, but she was glad to be working and did not want to be "sitting around" at home.

Katie had other family and friends who could help when Frank was not available. On weekends, or when the kids had a day off from school, Katie's ex-husband was sometimes available to watch the children, and Katie's mother worked nights and was available for emergencies during the day. But these backup resources required some vigilance on Katie's part. For example, Katie did not want to take these auxiliary supports for granted when sudden child-care needs came up, particularly when the kids were sick. She said, "I really don't like having people take care of [my kids when they are sick]. I figure they are my kids, I have to take care of them myself." Fortunately, the flexibility of her job helped out in these situations. Katie would take "sick time" when she needed to tend to her children unexpectedly. For example, when her daughter, Erin, was ill with a serious ear infection, Katie was able to use her sick time from work to stay with Erin or bring her to medical appointments. Her son, Sean, also required some special care. He failed the first grade during the 1998 to 1999 school year. At that time, Katie had to meet with teachers and specialists to get him into a speech therapy program. Katie did not like to miss work, but was happy to have an understanding supervisor who gave her the time when she really needed it.

When school ended in 1999, Katie's routine remained fairly stable. Her work hours switched to 2 p.m. to 10 p.m., giving her more time to rest. During the day, Katie played with her children, taking them to the park, swimming pool, or library in the mornings before she left them with her brother and went to work. She got a second raise and promotion, to Shift Supervisor, and no longer did cleaning herself.

Frank continued caring for the children as usual over the summer and into the 1999 to 2000 school year. During this time, his health deteriorated and he began kidney dialysis three times a week. He applied for disability benefits. Because the disability program required him to show that he was unable to work (including work doing child care), he could not receive both the child-care subsidies and the disability benefits. He opted to receive disability and let his child-care license expire. Nevertheless, he continued watching Katie's children as he had before at least through the end of the study.

Of course, the inherent stability of Erin and Sean's child care was partly facilitated by their own participation in the setting with their uncle. Erin and Sean got along well with their uncle and were remarkably compliant, respectful children. Also, because they were both now entering into the period of middle childhood, they were less demanding of Frank than would have been the case only a few years earlier. Often the kids would simply do their homework and watch TV in the evening. They rarely played unsupervised outside of the house and were relatively easy to keep an eye on. They were also capable of keeping their mother apprised of the quality of Frank's care while she was away at work. For example, late in the study, Frank was occasionally teasing Sean when Katie was at work. Sean let his mother know that this was going on and Katie "told him off." Frank stopped the teasing.

Based on Katie's statements about her children over the period of observation, it is difficult to ascertain how Erin and Sean benefited from their regular child-care arrangement with their uncle. Certainly, there is no indication that Erin and Sean suffered from the arrangement. The fieldworker regularly described them as well-behaved, courteous, and respectful of their mother and uncle. Indeed, they seem to enjoy a remarkably harmonious and loving relationship with their mother, although they rarely were able to see her during the week. The child-care relationship was not necessarily benefiting the children academically, but was positive in other ways.

What did benefit these kids was Katie's ability to fashion, with the kids' help, a highly organized and sustainable daily routine that allowed Katie to actively promote her relationship with Erin and Sean. The stability of the children's child-care arrangements was a significant factor in the overall sustainability of the family's daily routine. Even with Katie's late work hours, she found the time to take an active interest in their schoolwork. She also made sure to regularly plan special fun activities with the kids on the weekends. The kids did miss their mother when she was at work, but Katie was attuned to their feelings and would make extra efforts to address their concerns. For example, when Sean complained to his mother that he did not see her enough, she took a day off from work to spend with him as a special present for his eighth birthday.

Case 2—Alicia: From Instability to Relative Stability. Alicia's case involves much more instability in the beginning than Katie's case, but becomes more stable by 2000. Alicia was a single parent in 1998, although she was engaged to her boyfriend of 6 years. She was a 31-year-old mother of two sons, Preston (12) and Conley (10), and her daughter, Sharon (5), at the start of the NHES study. A New Hope program participant, Alicia had been working as a Head Start teacher for the past several years. This work was stable during the school year, allowing her to earn about $13,000 each year. However, she was laid off each summer. During the summer, she typically stayed home with her kids and relied on unemployment insurance for her income.

After being laid off from Head Start in June 1998, Alicia collected unemployment insurance and stayed home with her children. Preston went to summer school and then went to the Boys and Girls Club in the afternoons with Conley and Sharon. Occasionally, Alicia would ask one of her two sisters to watch her children.

In August 1998, Alicia started a new full-time job at a local day-care center run by a relative. She sent Sharon to stay with her mother in Tennessee for the month. The other two children would spend the day at the Boys and Girls Club while she worked. Alicia was happy with the Boys and Girls Club, where her sons could take field trips and play with other children. She also liked her job at the child-care center, because the children were older than at Head Start and her work was not tied to the school calendar. She told Head Start that she had found another position and would not be back in the fall.

This decision was ill timed: once the school year started, enrollment at the child-care center plummeted and Alicia was laid off. During September and October of 1998, she worked a few temporary jobs babysitting and waiting tables, but for the most part she was back home with her kids, getting them off to school in the mornings and watching them in the afternoons.

In November 1998, she started another temporary job, sorting mail for the U.S. Postal Service on the third shift (11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.). Her children were on their own at night with Preston in charge of his younger siblings. Her boyfriend Louis and his sister lived in the apartment upstairs and kept an eye on things at night. Louis got them off to school in the morning and Alicia was home when they returned from school.

During this period, Alicia commented regularly on the difficulties she was having with her children. Her older children did not seem to show her enough respect or appreciation. Preston frequently yelled at or argued with Alicia and the younger children did not necessarily do as they were told. Moreover, the children were constantly arguing with one another and would regularly whine and complain to Alicia about their siblings' behavior when she got home from work or when she saw them after school.

Alicia felt that all of the tension and behavior problems stemmed from her inability to spend more quality time with her kids. She was particularly concerned that their mismatched schedules and the amount of time the children spent without the close supervision of a trusted adult, made it difficult for them to develop open lines of communication with her. Alicia tried to spend more time with her kids, but she was often tired when she was at home and found her children's behavior exhausting.

In January 1999, Alicia and her children moved to Tennessee to live with Alicia's family. Her father was ill and Alicia wanted to be near him. Alicia and her children moved in with her father, two sisters, and her brother—a total of five adults with eleven children. The adults shared responsibility for cooking, cleaning, and child care.

In January, 1999, Alicia married her longtime boyfriend, Lewis. Alicia was not employed during the winter and spring of 1999. Staying at home with the kids and her family was difficult. She said, "I hate it. Being in the house all day, not working. I'm used to working and being about. Sometimes I take my car and go visit my friend who also don't have a job, just to get out of the house."

Alicia did find a job in June of 1999. She started at a manufacturing plant working on the assembly line assembling pieces of wood furniture. She worked the third shift (11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.). She did not worry about child care. There was always a family member available to look out for her kids at night. By April 2000, Alicia continued to live with her extended family and work the same job on the assembly line at night. Her sister, father, and husband were always home at night. Preston and Conley were now 14 and 12 years old. Alicia felt comfortable leaving them home to care for their younger sister.

During this later period, as the child-care arrangements for Alicia's children shifted from the pattern of sibling care at the start of the study to a pattern where any number of close adults were on hand to help supervise the children from within the same household, the children's behavior seemed to improve. Alicia did not mention any feelings of frustration with her children's clingy or whiney behavior during this time. Her children seemed to be doing quite well. She was somewhat concerned that her boys were spending more and more time out of the house with their friends. But she knew her sons' friends fairly well and believed that they were good kids and unlikely to get in any trouble. Her daughter, who was still in elementary school, was less of a concern in this regard because she tended to stay in the house or play in the front yard when she was home from school.

Case 3—Edith: Unstable Child Care. Edith's situation shows the impact of more conflict in the family and instability resulting from inadequate financial resources given her child-care preferences. Her case also reflects

how important it can be for families to have care options available that fit parents' personal values and beliefs regarding what counts as quality care.

At the start of the study, Edith was married and a mother of three young children, Max (6), Liberty (4), and Junior (2). Edith lived with her husband Manny, the father of her two younger children. She worked full time and regularly as a caseworker for one of the firms that administered W2, or the state welfare to work program, in Milwaukee County. Edith earned about $23,000 during the first year of the ethnographic study. She continued to work there for the duration of the NHES study.

In the spring of 1998, Edith described strong values and preferences associated with the various child-care options for her children. She preferred to place her children in formal day-care centers rather than with babysitters. She believed that it is more difficult for a provider to mistreat the children in a center than in a private home. Furthermore, Edith said she and other parents could make unannounced visits to her children's day-care center. But in a house where somebody takes care of children it is harder to monitor the care being given. Edith was particularly concerned about her younger children who could not communicate well enough to tell her about any problems they encountered when in child care. Moreover, Edith preferred formal center daycare to care by a family member, because, as she explained, "A family member takes really good care of the children, but does not offer them an education because they do not have the training. They are more worried about getting the chores around the house finished then concentrating on the children like it is done in a day care. There, the teachers are one hundred percent with the children because it is their job."

Edith was mainly interested in signing up for New Hope because of the offer of child-care subsidies. She had a particular need for child-care help in the mid-1990s because her husband, Manny, who had been caring for the children, was sent to prison for selling drugs (he was released by the time the ethnography began). Edith relied on her mother and her social support network for child care during this time, but she was relieved to have subsidies she could use at a formal center. Once she got the subsidies, "I went to a lot of day-care centers and finally I chose the day care where I saw that my children were more comfortable."

By May 1998, Edith used state subsidies for the day-care center, which she qualified for only by leaving Manny's income off the records. When her caseworker discovered that she and Manny lived together and subsequently reported his income, her child-care subsidy was cut in half. This doubled her copayment at the center, so in the summer, Edith enrolled her two older children in a public school program. She left Junior at home in the care of her niece.

Edith was soon forced to move Max from the school program to the care of a babysitter, a personal friend of hers, because the program refused to

care for him after he hit another child and a teacher. Edith described Max as "hyperactive," because he had witnessed a great deal of conflict and violence between Edith and Manny in his early years (their relationship was now somewhat calmer). Max also had a hearing problem that was not diagnosed or treated until he was 3 years old. As a result, his speech was delayed.

By October 1998, Edith had moved her two younger children to the care of a babysitter recommended by a friend. The baby spent the day there and Liberty went there after school. Manny was home from work by 3:30 p.m. and watched Max after school. In spite of her preference for day-care centers, Edith was satisfied with the babysitter's care, saying that this sitter did not leave her children to watch TV all day as another sitter had in the past. The sitter was also flexible with her time, relatively inexpensive, and understanding about late payments. Unfortunately, the babysitter was only available until January, and Edith worried about what she would do then.

After January 1999, Edith moved her younger children to a babysitter who charged only $100 per week but did not provide her children with any developmental activities and relied on the television to keep the children occupied. Edith was especially unhappy about the situation because Max had increased his behavior problems (he began seeing a psychologist, who linked Max's troubles with the violence in his home). Also, Edith's younger son, Junior, now age 3, was not developing his language skills on schedule. Manny continued to watch Max after school.

Edith was not satisfied with Manny's care. She complained about his parenting. She said he was impatient with the children, yelling at and threatening them, and did not talk to them, help Max with his homework, or express any interest in them. He was also a regular drug user. Edith worried about Manny's impact on Max in particular, who was visibly upset by the violence and conflict between his mother and Manny.

During the 1999 to 2000 school year, Edith sent Junior to the same babysitter who had cared for the children during the previous school year, and Max and Liberty came home after school around the same time as Manny. If Manny was late or unavailable, Edith's mother, who lived in their basement apartment, watched the children. Beginning in January 2000, this babysitter was unavailable and Edith began taking Junior to her sister-in-law's house during the day.

Max, now in second grade, continued to have rather serious behavior problems during this period, particularly at school where Edith was continually receiving complaints from Max's teacher with regard to his inability to complete school work, pay attention, and behave in the classroom. The psychologist Max had been seeing continued to link these problems to the abusive circumstances between Manny and Edith. Nevertheless, school officials strongly recommended that Edith have Max medicated for Attention

Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). She resisted and asked the school to try a behavioral intervention to see how Max responded first. By the spring of 2000, it was clear that Max's problems were not improving so Edith decided to put him on medication. Once he was medicated, his behavior problems at school improved.

Summary of Exemplar Cases

The amount of change and instability in child-care arrangements over time is highly variable in working poor families, and that stability is a matter of the ecocultural family circumstances summarized in the quantitative analysis, as well as related to characteristics of the children and caregivers. Although Katie's case shows relative stability over time, Alicia and Edith and their children experience much more instability. Nonetheless, there are also periods of relative stability for Alicia and Edith. Alicia's child-care arrangements together with her overall daily routine, for example, go through a period of instability earlier in the study but then stabilize toward the end. Edith, on the other hand, seems to have gone from a period of relative stability just before the onset of the study to instability and conflict most of the next 3 years, due to sudden resource loss, low social supports, and chronic conflict issues in the family.

The ecocultural features associated with the sustainability of the family routine are not independent of one another, but operate within a dynamic system interdependent with outside and internal family supports and limitations. The stability of child-care arrangements is less due to having one particularly strong component of sustainability (e.g., having relatively stable financial resources), but rather due to the overall coherence among the components of sustainability. Katie is a good example. State subsidies helped her to pay for the care she preferred (good resource fit) and her brother (a social support) was available and willing to help. The subsidy payments reduced the burden of social obligation and helped promote good relations between Katie and Frank. Katie and Frank generally got along well, and the children were fine with this arrangement (low conflict). Katie, who did not trust babysitters and child-care centers, liked this arrangement; it fit with her goals and values regarding child care as an activity within the daily routine. Finally, there was a considerable degree of balance among the activities that made up Frank's, Katie's, and her kids' daily routines. There were some bumps along the way (e.g., Frank's period of drinking), but these seem to have been resolved and the arrangement was sustained.

There was less coherence among the ecocultural features for Alicia and Edith and it was more difficult for them to sustain their child-care arrangements. Different features seemed to be creating problems for these two

families. Alicia had a reliable set of social supports that helped out tremen-
dously. However, her financial resources were unreliable, her employment
activities unstable for the first year, and she found that staying home with
the children often frustrated her goals and values associated with work and
adult independence. Edith, on the other hand, had very steady employ-
ment. However, her financial resources and resource supports (e.g., access
to subsidies) were inadequate to pay for child care in the high quality cen-
ters she preferred. Edith could afford child care, but not the child-care op-
tions she wanted (quality center care). There also were serious social con-
flict issues in this family: Edith lived with an abusive, drug addicted
husband, and her sons also suffered from severe developmental and behav-
ioral problems.

Both the contexts of care and the relative stability and instability of care
had an effect on the children in these three cases. Katie's kids, Sean and
Erin, and Alicia's kids, Sharon, Preston, and Conley, all seem to be behaving
well during those times when their care arrangements are most stable. Dur-
ing these periods, both parents describe being better able to maintain com-
munication with their kids and are able to monitor their activities during
those times that the children are under the care of others. Moreover, in
both cases, there are responsible adults on hand to supervise the children
while their mother is away. On the other hand, Alicia complains bitterly
about the troubles she was having with the kids in the earlier, unstable pe-
riod at the start of the study. During this period, the children were primar-
ily looked after by their oldest brother, Preston, himself only 12 years old at
the time.

Max's case is more problematic. When various formal options failed to
work out, he spent most afternoons in the care of a step-father who abused
his mother. This is a man Max's psychologists had linked to lasting effects
of the trauma Max experienced watching the violence between his mother
and stepfather. In Max's case, although this arrangement was perhaps the
most stable of the study period, it was also, clearly, the least optimal. The
presence of supervising adults is not in and of itself always beneficial to
these kids. The quality of the relationships between the children and these
adults matters a great deal.

The parents in our study often felt that children who enter middle child-
hood need supervision whereas younger children need more direct, inter-
active care. As we saw in Edith's case, Liberty and Junior both found them-
selves in the care of babysitters for much of the day, and it was important
to Edith that these care providers do more than simply let the children
watch television all day. She wanted a care provider that would interact
with the children, provide them with stimulating activities, and be warm
and caring with them. However, for older children, parents seemed to be
more content when their children were well supervised, and as children

grew into their early teens, children were permitted to spend time in unsupervised settings. This was clearly the case for Preston and Conley, who increasingly spent time with their friends in the neighborhood, away from the direct supervision of their mother or their aunts, uncles, or grandparents who all shared the house. This shows the common shift in middle childhood from interactive adult care to supervisory adult care.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Change in child care occurred frequently for the families in this study. Of course, a great deal of this change was predictably associated with transitions at the start and end of the school year, or with changes in children's needs for care as they grew. When these more predictable changes are removed from the child-care change dataset, change that is associated with the ecocultural features that promote the sustainability of everyday activities still occurred in roughly one third of the sample. Because shifts in child care can have negative impacts on women's employment and on children's development, the possibility that there might be this much instability in a population of children already at risk for developmental problems should merit concern among researchers and policymakers alike.

We found that a lack of balance, particularly a lack of stability and flexibility in the everyday work and employment related activities of these families, was most frequently associated with changes in child-care arrangements. The world of low-wage work can be highly unstable or particularly taxing due to the non-standard hours it can require. Women who work in these kinds of jobs often change shifts frequently or change jobs to find better pay and a more workable schedule. As employment schedules change, so sometimes must child-care arrangements, because paid child-care providers rarely have the flexibility that can accommodate the unpredictable or atypical hours of many marginal jobs.

Perhaps because of the low pay and shift-work schedules for typical lower-wage jobs, many low-income families rely on family and friends as sources of child-care support (Capizano, Adams, & Sonenstein, 2000; Levine–Coley, Chase–Lansdale, & Li–Grining, 2001). Our data fit these wider national trends well: Shifts in the social supports available to the families in our sample were the second most common kind of reasons for changing child-care arrangements.

Resource fit was the third most frequent reason for change. In some cases, mothers changed a child-care arrangement because of added financial support, particularly from boyfriends or new spouses. On the other hand, the loss of financial resources usually signaled a change. Often this situation forced women to choose arrangements for their children that

were of lower quality than they would have preferred, as was clear in Edith's case.

Meeting the values, goals, and priorities parents had for their children, for themselves as parents, as romantic partners, and as workers, related to changing child-care arrangements only occasionally, often when a child-care arrangement did not match the parent's preferences for care. Although parents held strong views regarding child-care quality as they defined it, values and preferences seldom directly led to change in child care because parents' beliefs about good child care did not change much. More commonly, other ecocultural features changed, requiring child care that sometimes went against parental values.

The level of interpersonal conflict in the family was implicated in some of the cases of changing child-care arrangements. Like issues involving values and goals, interpersonal conflicts may have more to do with limiting various child-care options, rather than directly leading to instability. For example, children who act out or who are violent often are removed from or kept from formal child-care centers and programs. Moreover, many parents are loath to leave their children with household members whom they mistrust or dislike. Occasionally we did find that these kinds of conflicts were associated with a mother having to shift child-care arrangements for her children.

The three case studies suggest that it is the coherence among the features of the family cultural ecology that is associated with children's social behavior—not child-care stability taken out of the wider family context. When families are able to fit their resources to their needs, access adequate social support, balance competing activities, participate in activities that are meaningful, and so forth, the children in these cases show fewer behavioral problems. These patterns suggest that child-care stability is better viewed as more of an indicator of other things working well in the family context, more than as a discrete indicator taken alone. The quality and coherence of the everyday family routines in which children participate, including but certainly not only child care, may be the best overall measure of the salutary elements that promote children's development.

Finally, participation in programs designed to help low-income families like New Hope can help the levels of stability in child care. The benefits are not likely to be simply a matter of financial supports, but also the way the program is administered. While the child-care voucher subsidies were invaluable to the New Hope clients who used them, New Hope's expanded child-care assistance services provided by caseworkers were also important in helping parents find the child-care options that best fit their families' needs. New Hope provided more efficient direct payment to providers, flexible provider options including licensed friends and relatives, and in-office provider referral services to parents. New Hope's provision of reliable market information to parents, in addition to the provision of subsidies based

on weekly work effort, may have combined to promote more stable child-care arrangements over time, an impact that seems to have lasted for at least a year beyond the termination of the program.

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