

# Allocation of Child Care in Two-Parent, Two-Job Households: A Research Note

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Cet article étudie les facteurs qui déterminent la division des responsabilités entre deux parents travaille-leur/leuse/s quant à la garde des enfants. Les résultats sont, pour en dire le moins, décourageants.

Responsibility for the care of young children has traditionally been a female role. One of the most dramatic changes in recent years has been the increasing participation of mothers of young, pre-school-age children in the labour force. It has been speculated that this trend corresponds with an increase in egalitarian division of family and household responsibility. Does out-of-home employment of women affect the allocation of responsibility for the care of children?

Day-care responsibility, that is the arranging for and monitoring of substitute child care arrangements, is one important aspect of responsibility for child care. Though not particularly time-consuming when such arrangements work smoothly, it is a critical responsibility, and we may expect that the allocation of responsibility among parents on this issue can serve as an index of household division of labour in general. It is thus assumed that those two-parent, two-job families in which the parents share responsibility for children's day-care arrangements represent families with egalitarian division of household responsibility; families in which one parent (generally the mother) has primary responsibility for child care represent families with a generally uneven division of household responsibility.

In a recent survey<sup>1</sup> of over twenty-five hundred Toronto families with pre-school-age children, data were collected on maternal employment patterns, the educational backgrounds and socio-economic occupational status of both parents, and the allocation of child-care responsibility between both parents.

Parents were asked to indicate 'who in the household usually takes care of making child-care or other arrangements for the child?' Three-fourths of the respondents reported that the mother made such arrangements; one-fifth reported that the mother and the father shared such responsibility; 3.8% stated that the arrangements were made by the father; and 0.9% reported that some other household member made the arrangements.

Data from a subsequent survey of private, unsupervised caregivers (relatives or other individuals who provided in-home child care), however, indicated that only some six per cent of caregivers dealt with both parents when discussing child care arrangements.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that such caregivers provide the most prevalent form of substitute child care, accounting for approximately 90% of the arrangements made by working parents in Toronto.

The vast majority of working mothers merely add their work role to their family role, rather than sharing parenting responsibilities. In only a minority—something between six and twenty per cent—of all two-parent, two-job families were child-care responsibilities reportedly shared.

What are the characteristics of this minority? Are there other significant differences between these families and those in which parents do not share child-care responsibili-

ties? The survey data permit examination of two other variables which might be expected to have some effect on the division of responsibility between parents: education and socio-economic status.

Socio-economic status was calculated for both the wife's and the husband's occupation using the Blishen Index.<sup>3</sup> Examination of the data failed to indicate any relationship between socio-economic status, measured by the occupation of either spouse, and allocation of child care responsibility within the family.

On first sight, the findings of the data on educational background revealed little that is new: the median educational level of all the parents surveyed was some high-school training; on average, the educational level of the fathers slightly exceeded that of the mothers; and a minority of the families reported significant differences between the educational levels attained by the parents.<sup>4</sup>

It is only when these data on educational background are examined in relation to patterns of allocating child care responsibility that some striking conclusions can be suggested.

The educational level of either parent by itself was not seen to be significantly related to patterns of allocating child care responsibility. Nor was the educational level attained by the mother the most significant factor in determining these patterns. In other words, it was *not* necessarily the case that the higher the educational level of the mother the more likely she was to enjoy shared responsibility with her husband in organizing and monitoring child care arrangements.

This study finds that the critical factor in predicting how responsibility for child care is allotted is the educational level of the mother *relative* to that of the father. Where parents were near-equals in educational attainment, they were more likely to be near-equals in sharing responsibility for child care. Where there were significant differences in their educational backgrounds—whether the mother's educational attainment was significantly lower or higher than the father's—it was



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more likely that one parent bore principal responsibility for child care arrangements. The figures cited earlier in this paper indicate, in the vast majority of cases, that that one parent was the mother.

The disheartening conclusions of the *Project Child Care* survey, and Laura Climenko Johnson's examination of its data, beg an obvious question: 'How can we use the information from these two studies to increase the likelihood that working parents will share child care responsibility?'

One can hardly insist that women who wish to enjoy egalitarian child care responsibilities must marry men with the same educational background as themselves. And we must not concede that if a woman has married a man whose formal education is significantly lower or higher than her own, she is doomed to bear the burden of making and monitoring child care arrangements by herself, on top of pursuing her career.

The short-term answer, it appears, lies with the most unsettling data cited in Johnson's paper: only six per cent of the caregivers examined in a study she conducted this past year dealt with both parents when discussing child-care arrangements. Presumably, a Catch-22 operates here. It is probable that in most cases only one parent came forward to discuss child-care arrangements with the caregivers.

However, if day-care givers and day-care centres insisted on interviewing both parents when outlining the services they offered; if they encouraged both parents to rotate in dropping off and picking up their children; if they outlined the advantages to the two-job household and to the child of shared parental involvement in child care; if they even pointed out that it is not the case in all families that child-care arrangements must be overseen by one parent only, more families might enjoy the benefits of an egalitarian division of child-care responsibility.

Furthermore, as the *Project Child Care* study was made possible by federal, provincial, and municipal funding, a fact which must indicate that governments are now concerned, however tentatively, with the child-care facilities available to Canada's growing female labour force, it is not unreasonable to suggest that governments could make available to two-job families information on the benefits of shared parental responsibility in child care and all other household duties. As long as governments are investing public funds in such institutions as Manpower and Outreach programs, as long as they create make-work programs, and as long as they place limits on the time one is allowed to subsist on UIC benefits, they are clearly on record as committed to improving the opportunities for all Canadians who wish to work to do so.

The government already provides us with little how-to brochures and public service announcements on, for instance, how to save energy and how to cut down on our heating, electricity and gasoline costs. Information on how to make two-job households more work-efficient could follow similar lines without falling victim to charges that the government is interfering in the private lives of private citizens. One can only speculate on how many women have been forced to leave the work force, or have been persuaded not to enter it, by the prospect of

having to assume all household responsibilities on top of full-time or part-time jobs. One can only speculate on the number of women who have been fired, passed over for promotion, or criticized for poor job performance because of fatigue from assuming all household responsibilities on top of their jobs. And one can only speculate on the number of women who would demonstrate with their votes, with their increased spending power, and with their revitalized contribution to every area of the labour force in which they participate, that government initiatives to provide adequate day-care facilities for working women should prove one of the cheapest and most creditable investments the government has made in years. By definition, these initiatives should include providing information on how to exploit such facilities for the benefit of all members of the family; in other words, information on the benefits of shared child-care responsibility to mothers, to both parents, and to the child.



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#### FOOTNOTES

- 1 The data reported in this paper are from *Project Child Care*, a study of child care in Metropolitan Toronto, with a special focus on private, unsupervised care for pre-school children. The research is jointly sponsored by the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto and the Children's Day Care Coalition. The project is funded by Health and Welfare Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, and the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto. The present paper represents the views of the author, and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the funders or sponsors. For a detailed description of research methods and results of this survey, see: Ernie S. Lightman and Laura Climenko Johnson, *Child Care Patterns In Metropolitan Toronto: Project Child Care Working Paper #2*, (Toronto: Social Planning Council, July 1977).
- 2 For a complete description of the caregiver survey, see Laura Climenko Johnson, *Taking Care: a Report of the Project Child Care Survey of Caregivers in Metropolitan Toronto*, (Toronto: Social Planning Council, April 1978).
- 3 Bernard R. Blishen and Hugh McRoberts, 'A Revised Index for Occupations in Canada', *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 13, 1 (February 1976), pp. 70-9.
- 4 Methodological note: educational level was coded into nine categories ranging from 'no formal education' to 'post-graduate'. Parents were considered to have similar educational background if they were within one educational level of one another. They were considered to have disparate educations if they differed by two or more levels.