



Factors Contributing to Well-Being of Mothers in a Childcare Group

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Abstract

This study aimed to clarify, through an interview survey, what exactly a child-rearing network is and how it is perceived by mothers as a change in the sense of burden. A survey was conducted on two child-rearing circles, Circle X and Circle Y, based in City A in the Kanto region of Japan. The results showed that mothers managed their own time, obtained the necessary information for child rearing, and ensured their own well-being by being a part of the network. Additionally, although the mothers were obligated to raise children alone at home, they found the activity itself “enjoyable,” which can be seen in their use of language that positioned their network as similar to that of a “family.” It was found that the participating mothers experience fun and satisfaction themselves, and that supportive relationships within the network lead to this positive experience.

KEYWORDS: PARENTING CIRCLES, NETWORKS, LIFE RESOURCES, LIFETIME, COMMUNICATION

Research Background and Objectives

Research Background

During Japan’s period (1950-1970s) of economic growth, it became common for full-time housewives to take on the sole responsibility for housework and childcare as families in urban areas became increasingly family-oriented (Ochiai, 2019). According to government statistics, in the 1990s, 0.12% of men took childcare leave, a surprisingly low figure. This rate has gradually increased since the late 2010s, reaching 13.97% in 2021 (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, 2014, 2021), but there is no indication that male participation in childcare in Japan will become significantly more active. In Japan, more than 80% of households with children under the age of 18 are nuclear families. Mothers with infants and toddlers are not only unable to obtain support from relatives, but also cannot expect support from their husbands.

Makino (1987) emphasized the high sense of burden and isolation of mothers while raising children and argued that mothers are becoming increasingly isolated. Ochiai (2019) argued that the sense of burden felt by full-time housewives who devote themselves to childcare is due to the fact that urban families have lost much of their family network (relatives) and must build

networks with their immediate neighbors. Matsuda (2001) conducted a quantitative survey of mothers' networks and child-rearing anxiety and found that the larger the child-rearing network and the more moderate its density, the less child-rearing anxiety the mothers felt and their life satisfaction was higher.

Japan has various policy measures in place to address this isolation of mothers. One of these is the childcare support system. In addition to financial support such as child allowances and subsidies for medical expenses for infants, the government has strengthened its policy of providing information and services necessary for child rearing. The Cabinet Office's "New System for Supporting Children and Child Rearing," launched in 2015, clarifies the government's policy of actively providing childcare counseling and opportunities for parents and children to interact with each other (Cabinet Office, 2015). The actual support in local governments is provided by child-rearing circles, which are group activities organized by mothers for the purpose of sharing experiences of child-rearing. These gatherings are based on neighborhood networks and are expected to expand the scale of the child-rearing network. Socializing with other mothers has several elements for mothers and can be considered a burden or a pleasure in itself (Toe, 2011). Difficulties associated with maintaining circle activities have been pointed out in the past, including a sense of burden, relationships among members, and changes in relationships over time (Shinagawa, 2005).

Research Objectives

This study addresses the following research questions. What exactly is the neighborhood childcare network, which can be obtained through participation in a childcare group? How have mothers perceived the change in burden (from joining these childcare networks)? To date, quantitative assessments have been conducted on these points, but in this study we examine the in-depth perspective using a qualitative methodology. This study examines the activities of childcare groups using interviews, whose impact had been measured from a network perspective in previous studies. The other objectives are to study the management of lifestyle resources and analyze the current state of mother-centered networks.

In the National Women's Education Association (2007), a survey was conducted regarding the social networks of child-rearing in various countries. In this survey, individuals involved in child-rearing (e.g., partners, childcare facilities, neighbors, separated parents, etc.) were compiled, and in Japan, partners, separated parents, and coresiding parents ranked prominently. In other words, the size of the network is not particularly large. On the other hand, when examining the results from Sweden, the United States, France, South Korea, and Thailand, partners and separated parents also ranked high, making it difficult to claim that the network size is large. By revealing the current status of parenting circles as elucidated in this study, we believe it can provide insights for the development of international social parenting networks.

Methods

The study was conducted with two childcare groups based in City A in the Kanto region, Groups X and Y. Development has been underway in City A since the 1960s. In the 2000s, a railway network was developed, bringing the commute time to Tokyo down to an hour. City A has 84 public, private, and certified private nursery schools (including Early Childhood Education Centers and smaller nursery schools) serving a population of approximately 200,000 residents. City A has a proportionate number of facilities with other comparable cities. While the

population has increased due to enhanced transportation, the city faces typical commuter town problems in terms of childcare, such as the high number of children on waiting lists to enter schools.

We conducted a group interview in December 2019 with eight mothers participating in Groups X and Y at a daycare center run by a Non-Profit Organization (NPO) in City A. The interviews were conducted twice, once for each group comprised of four people. The interviews lasted about 1 hour each. Semistructured interviews were used and the questions asked were: family situation, reasons for joining the group, and changes brought about by group participation. The mothers' profiles are presented in Table 1.

This study was conducted after receiving approval from the Ethics Review Committee on Research Involving Humans at Hyogo University of Teacher Education (Approval No. 2018-51). In line with the ethical guidelines of the General Incorporated Association for Social Survey, a written document was provided to explain our privacy policy and other relevant details. Consent for participation in the study was obtained in writing from all informants.

Table 1 Profiles of surveyed individuals

| Interview Group | Age of Firstborn (as of December 2019) | Prior experience with childcare group |
|-----------------|--|---|
| 1 | Mom A | 10 Years 3 years' experience as Group Y Staff 7 th year in Group X |
| | Mom B | 3 Years Carried out activities for approx. 10 years as caretaker of Group X |
| | Mom C | 18 Years Approx. 10 years membership in Group X The NPO representative of City A |
| | Mom D | 10 Years 3 years membership in Group Y |
| 2 | Mom E | 10 Years 3 years as staff of Group Y |
| | Mom F | 12 Years 7 th year as member and 2 nd year as staff of Group Y |
| | Mom G | 3 Years 2 nd year as staff of Group Y |
| | Mom H | 2 Years 3 rd year as member and 2 nd year as staff of Group Y |

Survey Results and Analysis

Finding the Time to Dedicate to Group Operation and Mutual Support for Family Life

Group X was started by a couple raising their children in City A. The group was originally started to support children's outdoor activities at a cost of 500 yen per day. In addition, the group conducted activities in a way that parents can mutually monitor children's outdoor activities at city parks. The group has been active for over 30 years with the participation of local mothers.

Group X is characterized as a “childcare co-op,” a structure lacking the intervention of a childcare professional with specialized skills and knowledge, but where the member mothers together take care for the children. In particular, a unique characteristic is that children under the age of 2 are accompanied by a guardian but children aged 3 and older are left in the care of other mothers. Mothers mark their availability of when they can care for the children on a calendar and coordinate schedules. In addition to these daily “co-op activities,” the group hosts a voluntary monthly staff meeting to share the details of care, children’s behavior during care hours, and any concerns.

It was stated in an interview that such a network created, through continuous activities, a relationship among mothers, where they covered for each other, and that this network differed from mothers of elementary school classmates.

The other moms cover me a lot in various aspects, and everyone treats that like normal. So, it’s like being in a really big family, and we all naturally leave our kids with each other. For example, I’d pick other kids up from school and keep them until dinner. Or they’d sleep over that day, unplanned. When I chat with moms of kids who have graduated kindergarten, they say that if one of their kids’ elementary school friends suddenly ask for a play date, they hesitate and think, “Wait, let’s hold on a minute.” But nursery school friends have become a totally different category (Group X, Mom D, 2019 transcript).

Mom B’s statement that the mothers “cover each other in various aspects” is not limited to the daily “childcare co-op” duties typified by transportation to/from outdoor play areas. Mom B mentioned that the Group X network, which was formed during her firstborn, continues to support her even after the birth of her second child, and has become a trusted network akin to a “really big family.” This special feedback about Group X is also reflected in Mom D’s statement that “nursery school friends [Group X network] are different from elementary school friends.” These statements suggest the valuable and special nature of the relationships cultivated through the group activities.

It is likely that the mothers have formed such networks to counter a lack of public/private support systems for childcare in City A. Mom C talks about the lack of private services as follows: “There aren’t many services here [in City A] like there are in urban areas that let you to pay money to solve your logistical problems. When that’s the case, you have no choice but to make things work somehow.”

In contrast to Group X, which carries out activities as network activities (literally, “childcare co-op”), Group Y collects membership fees and elects steering committee members and is characterized by a daycare-like management by volunteers.

Group Y is a long-established childcare group that has been around for 25 years. Their primary activity is hosting various workshops and learning sessions related to childcare. Group Y creates opportunities for information exchange by inviting instructors to speak about breastfeeding, cloth diapers, children, and medicines, in addition to regular monthly meetings and fortnightly newsletters published by the staff. The regular meetings are hosted by approximately 10 officers, whose terms last one year. The mechanism shows the systematic operation of Group Y in contrast to Group X. The mothers of Group Y formed a network based on trust similar to Group X, but they remarked on the difficulty in selecting caretakers, as the group operates as an organization.

Group Y generally secures staff through recruiting. Then, what are the desirable skills in a potential recruit? According to the discussion between Mom G and Mom H, staff are recruited not only in terms of participation but also their plans to not return to work.

Interviewer: What kind of person is likely to do well as staff?

Mom G: Most importantly, someone who won't go back to work. It'd be good to have that...

Mom H: And someone who participates a lot. A person with high participation rate.

Mom G: You're right, probably someone with a high participation rate.

The group activities of City A support the findings of previous studies that mothers who are overwhelmed with childcare reduce their burden by forming a network with neighbors, which in turn has a positive impact on parenting anxieties and quality of life. However, the reality is that for mothers to maintain a network of childcare co-op, Group X mothers must tie up most of their daily activities with the activities of the childcare group. Instead of "pay[ing] money to solve" (Mom C) their logistical problems, Group X mothers invest their time, and as a result, develop a special relationship akin to a "really big family" (Mom B). Behind the formation of this network is the close communication between mothers. As seen in the story of the Group Y caretaker, the presence of full-time housewives, who may not work but are enthusiastic about the group and their activities, is absolutely essential.

Distribution of Parenting Information

In addition to a childcare co-op, Group X has set up a monthly tea party for mothers to share information about children's status and behavior as noticed during childcare activities and daily life. The tea party is incidental to the primary task of planning and executing the childcare co-op but is an important occasion for mothers to exchange information on parenting.

There's a meeting once a month. Also, there's participation in daily childcare activities and something called a "tea party." It's not part of the schedule but we can talk about things that are currently going on with the children, as well as our concerns and interests. It's optional, but once a month.

In addition to the tea party, mothers try to gain parenting information during the daily childcare co-op. A common issue for mothers is how to approach their children. Information about parenting, is abundant in the Information Age and mothers face difficulties in filtering and selecting the correct information. The increase in nuclear family households makes it difficult to naturally make new friends, and mothers seek a place to create a network they can rely on. By observing how other mothers interact with children at the childcare co-op, new mothers are able to learn about parenting ("Oh, I should have said it that way."). In other words, all of the group's activities become a source of information about parenting and form a solid base from which mothers can form their own parenting philosophies.

When I'm sometimes unable to explain things nicely to my own child, other mothers rephrase it for me, and it really resonates. I think, "Oh, I should have said it that way." I'm learning a lot about parenting. If you live with a nuclear family and don't have any friends, the only way you'd be able to research parenting is by looking online or in books...

Group Y hosts regular study sessions on childcare. Mothers who are members of Group Y learn from childcare specialists. Group Y's activities become a source of information on childcare. Similar to Group X, mothers use staff meetings as a place to exchange information. Mom F attended the staff meeting at the invitation from the representative of the group. She shared her parenting concerns and her own views and received advice in return (e.g., "There's this type of story," "There's this type of opinion," "I think this way," "I was blown away that there were such views"). She expressed that she was "blown away" by the advice; we can assume that the advice she received facilitated a deep understanding.

The person who is the representative of the group [invited me and] said to "come along because you seem to have deep concerns on your mind." At the staff meeting, others were able to suggest, "There's this type of story," "There's this type of opinion," or "I think this way." I was blown away that there were such views.

Identity Formation Through the Operation of Childcare Groups

Group X dedicates weekday daytime to childcare, and the mothers plan and manage the co-op activities themselves. As symbolized by Mom B's statement ("It's definitely more fun to do things myself than be told to do them"), the staff dedicate a lot of time to the childcare co-op but find it "rewarding" to plan and implement childcare activities. Mom A also views the childcare activities positively, stating that she is able to "try all sorts of experiences."

Mom B: It's definitely more fun to do things myself than be told to do them.

Mom A: They let me try all sorts of experiences.

In the interviews, all of the mothers spoke positively about the operation of the childcare group and commented on its merits and rewards, and a sense of fulfillment. The mothers of Group X spend a lot of time with their own children, other mothers, and other children through the childcare co-op. By sharing a lot of time, Mom A mentioned that "[other children] become as cute as their own." In addition, the affection the mothers felt for the other children held a unique intimacy, as perceived in the statement, "I feel as if I were everyone's mother." In the narrative above, Mom B described the members of the childcare group as a "really big family," but here she describes herself as "everyone's mother." The structure of Group X, in which all children are cared for by all the mothers, likely fostered Mom B's perception that she is "everyone's mother."

My child, well, at the beginning I was so overwhelmed that I just watched my own child, but after going every day, I started to see what other children were like. Yes, I could see some kids were like me, other kids started to become endearing to me like my own child. I began to sense all the kids' growth as if I were everyone's mother.

In Group X, as mentioned above, the participants all develop a close relationship through the planning and operation of the childcare co-op, sharing long periods of time and childcare information with each other. By forging such close relationships, mothers are able to overcome the isolation felt during child-rearing. This sentiment is represented in Mom B's comment that she can "experience this leisurely growth together."

For me, I can experience this leisurely growth together, and it is meaningful that I have partners who can share this joy.

In the previous section, Mom B described the members of the group as “a really big family,” but here she describes the friends she gained through the group activities as “partners who can share [her] joy [of watching the children’s growth].” The mothers of the group help each other dispel their feelings of isolation and support each other’s family lives. It can be said that the mothers have a very close relationship which goes beyond descriptors such as “family” or “friends.” This is based on interdependence, which is the belief of “ethic of care” (Gilligan, 1982). This is especially true for women who are responsible for raising children alone in the home and are connected to each other as if they were family. Furthermore, these women describe their situation positively, despite the harshness of their situation.

Mom F, who is a member of Group Y, states that the group activity has been “so much fun that [she’s] completely absorbed.” So, why did she describe the group activity as “so much fun”? Mom G says that a characteristic of Group Y is “how much fun the mothers are having.” Regular parenting circles focus on activities related to childcare and growth. Group Y is a place for mothers to learn skills for their children, and it focuses on the satisfaction of mothers. The group believes it is not ideal to have activities where the children are having fun, but mothers are not. The premise of activities is the “mother’s well-being,” that is, as Mom H states, “If the parents are satisfied, they can pass on the fulfillment to the children.” Therefore, Mom F may be expressing her satisfaction as “so much fun that [she’s] completely absorbed.” The satisfaction can also be explained by Mom H speaking about her well-being, and that she is “blessed to be a member.”

Mom F: It’s been so much fun that I’m completely absorbed by it. [The sentiment of] joy is winning.

Mom G: That’s what I felt the most. Other childcare groups are made for children. But these childcare meetings focus on how much fun the mothers are having.

Mom H: The meetings made me realize that if parents are fulfilled, they can give that much more to their children. I felt proud [to be in Group Y]. I’m blessed to be a member of such a great group.

Since the concept of the group is based around the mother’s well-being, the mothers had fun with the activities themselves. Improved well-being of the mothers affected their values toward parenting. Mom F stated, “If I hadn’t been a part of Group Y, the third child wouldn’t have been born, and the fourth definitely wouldn’t have been either.” She was able to assert this due to the knowledge of parenting methods, support system among mothers, and satisfaction gained through the group activities. Having many children means more time dedicated to childcare over a much longer duration. It is inferred that Mom F was able to feel secure in giving birth to a third and fourth child “because she is a member of Group Y,” that is, because she has a close network of other mothers. Furthermore, she has adopted a positive view of parenting through the group activities, and states that her “outlook on life has changed.”

I was supposed to be done with having children after two. My hands were completely full with two kids and I would cry while caring for them. But then suddenly, I felt like wanting a third. After the third was born, before I knew it, there came the fourth. If I hadn’t been a part of Group Y, the third wouldn’t have been born, and the fourth definitely wouldn’t have been either.

My parenting outlook completely changed. Not just parenting, but my outlook on life probably changed.

Conclusion and Future Challenges

This study conducted a group interview of full-time housewives engaged in childcare groups in City A and examined how their lifestyle resources are allocated and how the activities relate to the mothers' identities.


It is clear from the interviews that, although Groups X and Y conduct different types of activities, both have assisted in network formation among mothers through the accumulation of time and communication. With regards to time, both Group X, where activities last long hours on a daily basis, and Group Y, which presents numerous opportunities for gatherings entailing responsibilities, such as staff meetings, and various study sessions, require that members dedicate a lot of time to activities. The prerequisite for staff selection is being a full-time housewife who can manage the time commitment. In addition to time, mothers who participate in Group X and Group Y conduct their own information management. Due to an overabundance of parenting information, mothers struggle to filter and seek a foundation they can rely on. Under such circumstances, an opportunity to observe interactions between other mothers and children becomes an invaluable, tangible experience in an information-oriented society. Using the interviews to delve deeper into specific cases allowed us to verify the mothers' efforts to seek and forge human relationships with their children. The childcare group activities also served as a source of information on general family life such as clothing, food, and shelter, in addition to human relationships.

By managing time and information and obtaining parenting tips, mothers are enhancing their own sense of well-being. Although the burden of raising a child alone in a family is high, the interviewed mothers cited child-rearing activities as being "fun" and referred to their network as being equivalent to "family." Childcare groups in this study place the mother at the center stage, and do not solely focus on the activities of the child. Thus, the participating mothers themselves create supportive relationships to realize a setting in which mothers can experience fun and fulfillment themselves.


This study targeted only mothers in City A with strong commitment to Group X and/or Group Y. However, we believe the childcare community likely presents a different meaning for casual participants (not staff) and fathers. Future studies may clarify these problems by increasing the number of study participants.

Biographies

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