

Illinois Nontraditional-Hour Child Care Study (INCCS)

A Research-Policy Partnership

Understanding Quality in Nontraditional-Hour Child Care for Children, Families, and Providers: A Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

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Executive Summary

Introduction

With many U.S. families working varied schedules, there is a significant need for child care outside of standard weekday hours. Children who are living in poverty, living with a single parent, or who identify as Black are more likely to have a parent working nontraditional-hour (NTH) schedules (Lee & Henly, 2024). Approximately 40% of young children in the country experience nonparental child care during some NTHs (CCEEPRA Research Translation, 2023) and many of these child care arrangements are likely to take place in a home-based setting, primarily with family members, friends, or neighbors (Lou et al., 2022).

Despite the prevalence of NTH child care, little is known about quality practices and environments for child care during these hours that may contribute to positive child and family outcomes.

This report presents findings from a review of research on NTH child care as well as related research on family routines, rituals, and practices. These findings informed the development of a conceptual framework for quality NTH child care, including key components for children, families, and child care providers.

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Highlights from the literature review

For children, high-quality NTH child care settings are critical contexts for child development and school readiness.

Research indicates that there are aspects of high-quality child care that are essential for children, regardless of setting or time of day, most notably nurturing and responsive relationships and interactions. Yet, some aspects of standard-hour child care quality practices, such as curriculum use and provider-led activities, may not be as relevant in NTH child care (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], n.d.). The limited research on family perceptions of NTH child care quality underscores a belief among parents that the care needs of children during some NTHs may be distinct from needs during standard hours. For example, it may be especially important for bedtime or overnight care to be homelike, individualized to children's schedules, and aligned with families' traditions. In addition, the features and practices that signal these qualities may look different across child care settings (e.g., child care by relatives compared with center-based); across cultural, community, and family contexts; and across different times of day.

For families, high-quality NTH child care settings bring stability, consistency, and support.

NTH child care settings that are responsive to the needs of families may help families with employment stability and family well-being. Families who work NTHs often have little control over their work schedules, and their schedules tend to be unpredictable from one week to the next (Henly et al., 2006). This fragility of care arrangements during NTHs, including the potential for parents' schedules to change or for child care arrangements to fall through, creates challenges for child care providers and families. Responsive child care during these hours may include providers, most likely relatives or friends, who are able to absorb some of the unpredictability in parent work schedules and offer a sense of stability for children and families (Katrass et al., 2004)

For providers, the experience of offering NTH CC may create stress or burdens that are unique among providers who offer care during these hours but that may be similar to the experiences of nontraditional-hour workers in other industries.

The conditions of child care work constitute a critical component of high-quality care (Bromer et al., 2021; Whitebook et al., 2016). Working and caregiving conditions matter because they contribute to child care sustainability, which is a prerequisite for providers' being able to support children and families. Child care providers who offer care during NTHs are, themselves, NTH workers and face some of the same challenges that other NTH workers face. Healthy and equitable working and caregiving conditions for child care providers are likely different in NTH child care settings than in standard-hour child care because of the different types of activities and routines required.

Recommendations

Findings from this research report suggest recommendations around supporting the development and expansion of a high-quality, mixed-delivery NTH child care sector and a thriving NTH child care workforce in the U.S. to meet the needs of families across times of day and week. Recommendations focus on ways that states and localities can invest in and compensate NTH child care providers as well as how programs can offer culturally relevant supports. Recommendations also point to the importance of acknowledgment in policies, standards, and regulations that some aspects of NTH child care quality are distinct from standard-hour child care. Inclusion of providers and families in designing policies, procedures, and standards for NTH child care is critical for ensuring equity and access for all families who need child care during these hours.

Full Report

Introduction and overview

Approximately 40% of all young children in the U.S. are cared for in a nontraditional-hour (NTH) child care arrangement, defined as nonparental child care before 7 a.m., after 6 p.m., or on the weekend (CCEEPRA Research Translation, 2023). Children who are living in poverty, living with a single parent, or who identify as Black are more likely to have a parent working a NTH schedule (Lee & Henly, 2024). NTH child care may take place in a variety of child care settings, including home-based family child care, family, friend, and neighbor care, center-based child care, paid and unpaid care, and relative and nonrelative care settings (National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2015).

In the U.S., families who work during NTHs are more likely to use home-based child care (primarily family members, friends, or neighbors) than child care centers (Lou et al., 2022). Similarly, some limited research on parent preferences across states suggests that many parents prefer for children to be cared for at home or in a home-based setting for very early morning, late evening, and overnight hours with caregivers who are known (Adams et al., 2022; Sandstrom et al., 2018; Schilder, Adams, et al., 2022). National data on NTH child care supply indicates that home-based, family, friend, and neighbor child care providers who are not paid offer more child care during NTHs than any other type of child care setting (Schochet et al., 2022).

Despite the prevalence of NTH child care, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of the supply, demand, and quality of these settings as well as the sustainability of this segment of the child care workforce in the U.S. (Lee & Henly, 2024). This research report addresses gaps in our understanding of quality in NTH child care.

Box 1

Conceptualizing Quality in Formal Child Care and Early Education Settings

Quality caregiving is conceptualized in research on child care and early education as those aspects of formal child care programs that are most likely to have a positive impact on child development and family well-being (Bromer, Porter, Jones, et al., 2021). These aspects are usually categorized into three core areas: (a) quality for children, e.g., provider-child interactions, health, and safety; (b) quality for families, e.g., provider-family partnerships, convenience, affordability, and flexibility; and (c) provider characteristics and working conditions, e.g., compensation and professional development.

Understanding quality in NTH child care is complicated by the types of settings where this kind of care occurs and the lack of research around what families value across different times of the day and week as well as different types of child care arrangements. For example, what families value in evening child care with a grandmother may be different from what families value in evening care with a nonrelative family child care or center-based provider where the child and the provider may or may not share cultural traditions or family rituals. Given the paucity of research on NTH child care, it is difficult to define which quality practices are most likely to contribute to children's equitable outcomes.

This review used a two-phase approach to examine literature related to quality in NTH child care, including experiences of children, families, and providers in these arrangements. First, we looked

for research specifically on NTH child care, most of which is qualitative and has been conducted across international settings, including the U.S. and other Western countries. This descriptive research examines the aspects of NTH child care settings that are experienced by children, families, and providers. Where we could not find literature specifically on NTH child care, we looked to related literature on child care (e.g., children's nutrition in child care programs) as well as child development literature (e.g., healthy sleep practices).

Second, we looked at research on family routines and rituals that take place during NTHs (e.g., mealtimes, bedtimes, personal care practices). Here we prioritized descriptive literature on culturally diverse populations within the U.S. that could help us understand how caregiving during family routines that occur during nontraditional times of the day and week may look different across cultural and community contexts. We acknowledge that what families value and practice at home in their own families may not be the same as what they want for their children in nonparental care. For example, we do not know if families who use nonrelative child care would want the same practices and rituals enacted as those in which they engage at home. However, given that the majority of NTH child care takes place in home-based child care settings, understanding what families value at home may inform a conceptualization of quality in child care during these hours.

In addition to many of the same elements of care that take place during the day, this literature consistently points to features of NTH child care that are distinct from standard-hour child care, especially during mealtimes, evenings, early mornings, overnights, and weekends.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework that was informed by our literature review and provides a road map for this research report. The framework summarizes key components of quality NTH child care for children, families, and providers and

hypothesizes the potential for the development of positive outcomes in these arrangements. While the broad components of quality are consistent with standard-hour child care, our framework suggests that implementation of these components during NTHs may look different. The framework also considers how NTH child care may be influenced by a range of factors, including hours of care needed, developmental needs and ages of children, types of child care settings and arrangements, cultural context, and policies and systems.

In the following sections, we describe the components and features of NTH child care for children, families, and providers that may be distinct from standard-hour care: (a) culturally sustaining, consistent, and nurturing relationships, routines, and environments for children, (b) responsive arrangements for families, and (c) healthy and equitable working and caregiving conditions for providers that may influence how they enact quality features.

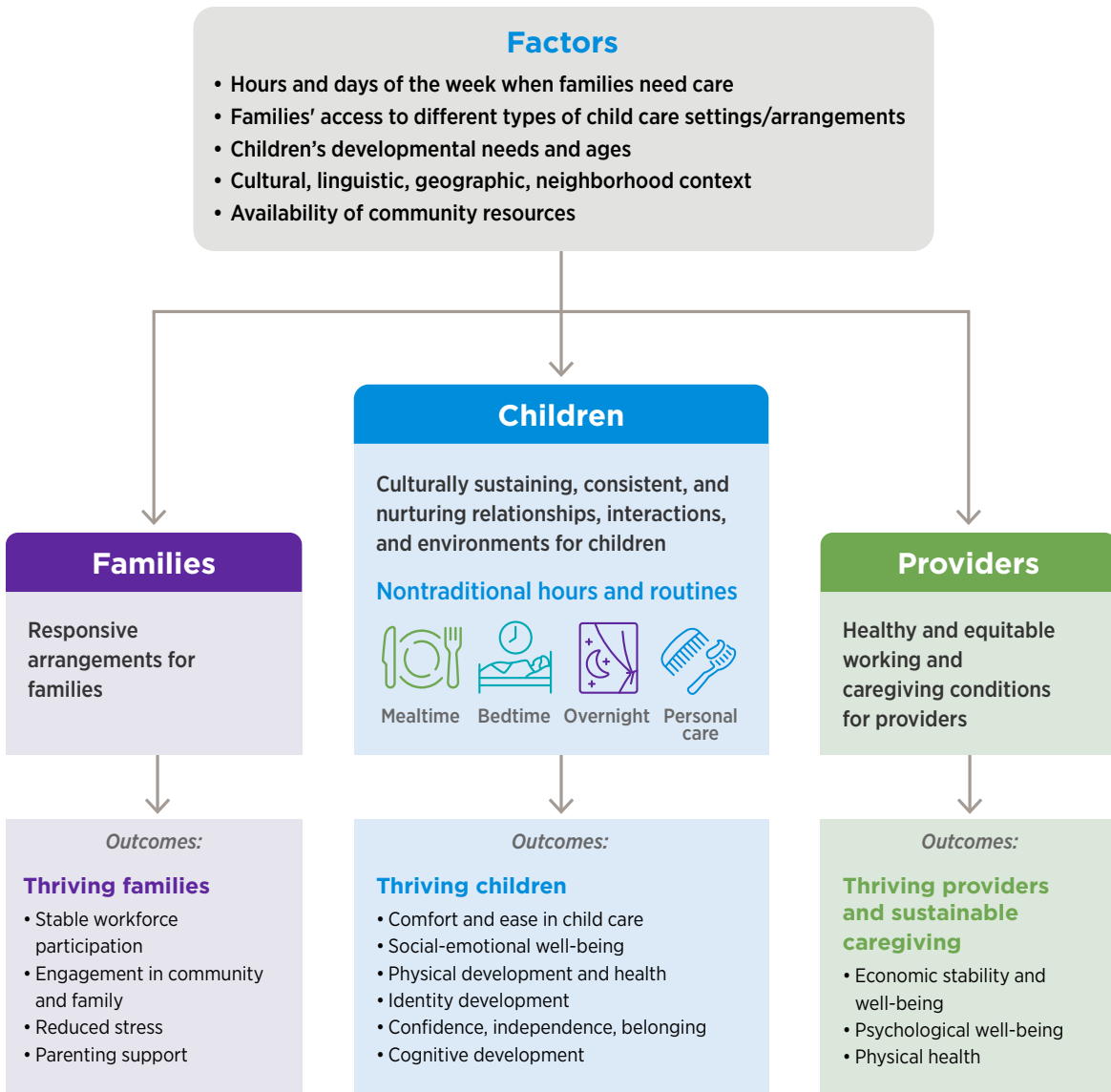
Components of NTH child care: Culturally sustaining, consistent, and nurturing care for children

Research indicates that there are aspects of high-quality child care for children¹ that are essential regardless of setting or time of day. These include responsive and nurturing relationships, predictable routines, and healthy and safe environments that promote children's development (Bromer, Porter, Jones, et al., 2021). Research also indicates that culturally sustaining care, defined as child care that affirms children's cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic identity and experience, is a core aspect of any high-quality child care because it helps children develop a positive sense of identity and belonging (Paris, 2012). Yet, some aspects of standard-hour child care quality practices, such as curriculum use or provider-led activities may not be as relevant in NTH child care (NAEYC, n.d.).

¹ Children, in this review, refers to those ages birth through school-age who may experience nonparental child care.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework for quality in nontraditional-hour child care



The limited research on family perceptions of NTH child care quality (Sandstrom et al., 2018; Schilder, Adams, et al., 2022; Stoll et al., 2015) underscores a belief among parents that the care needs of children during some NTHs may be distinct from needs during standard hours. For example, it may be especially important for bedtime or overnight care to be homelike, individualized to children's schedules, and aligned with families' traditions. In addition,

the features and practices that signal these qualities may look different across child care settings (e.g., relative child care compared with center-based) and across cultural, community, and family contexts. We found few studies that examine whether specific care practices during NTHs contribute to children's outcomes. Instead, the research is mostly descriptive and points to what families and caregivers across settings and communities value for children during

these times. The following sections describe the broad components of NTH child care quality for children and examples of practices that may be enacted during NTH routines.

Broad components of quality child care for children during nontraditional hours

Box 2 presents 10 broad components of NTH caregiving practices that previous literature hypothesizes may contribute to positive child experiences and outcomes. For these components, research indicates an association between caregiving practices and positive outcomes for children or research indicates that these caregiving practices are valued by families and caregivers. Many of these components of quality may be found in standard-hour child care settings. Rather than reviewing the full literature on child care quality, we highlight the ways these components may be particularly important for children during NTHs. We also acknowledge that some of these components may overlap and intersect.

Nurturing and responsive provider-child relationships and interactions are widely documented in the research literature as critical for children’s healthy growth and development (Hamre et al., 2014). The presence of responsive and attuned relationships is also widely cited as an indicator of high-quality child care for young children (Bromer, Porter, Jones, et al., 2021). Relationship stability and responsiveness may be particularly important for children during NTH child care because they may help counter the precariousness and instability of other child care arrangements and aspects of family life when parents work in NTH jobs.

Consistency and continuity of care over time help establish a sense of belonging for children and families who use NTH child care settings (Baxter & Hand, 2016; Bromer, Porter, Melvin, et al., 2021; DiMatteo, 2019; Peltoperä et al., 2020; Schilder, Lou, et al., 2022). Continuity of care may look different across child care settings. For example, in some home-based child care settings, children and

Box 2

Broad components of quality child care for children during nontraditional hours

1. Nurturing and responsive provider-child relationships and interactions
2. Consistency and continuity of care
3. Individualized care
4. Teachable moments that promote children’s learning
5. Predictable routines and rituals
6. Unhurried and unstructured time
7. Time for child-directed play
8. Culturally sustaining care
9. Comfortable and calm caregiving environments
10. Health and safety practices

caregivers have relationships that exist and continue beyond the child care arrangement. In center-based child care programs, provider-child relationships may be attenuated by age restrictions and groupings and classroom staffing constraints as well as by families leaving the arrangement due to subsidy instability, work disruptions, or family schedules (Kim et al., 2022; Pilarz et al., 2022).

For children living in low-income families who may be more likely to experience multiple child care arrangements (Chaudry, 2004), continuity of care and a close relationship with one provider (e.g., a grandmother or close relative) may help offset instability in other arrangements.

Individualized care, including one-on-one attention to children, may look different in large, group child care settings compared with smaller, relative and nonrelative, home-based arrangements where only a few children or even one child is in care. Some research suggests that the small numbers of children in family, friend, and neighbor care settings are associated with more sensitive caregiving practices compared with group family child care homes (Susman-Stillman & Banghart, 2011).

Small groups of children in NTH child care may be particularly important for supporting social-emotional well-being, especially for children who experience feelings of stress and vulnerability during hours when they would typically be cared for at home (Peltoperä et al., 2018, 2020; Rönkä et al., 2019; Salonen et al., 2018, 2020; Sevón et al., 2017; Tahvanainen, 2015).

Teachable moments that promote children's learning can be an integral part of routines that occur during NTHs outside of formal learning and teaching times. Many families use daily activities at home to support children's language and cognitive development, although research has not examined how these informal practices contribute to children's outcomes (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2019).

Research on school readiness activities used by families who have recently immigrated to the U.S. from Central America finds that mothers use daily household activities such as cooking, laundry, and other evening chores to teach concepts to their preschool-age children (Coba-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Denmark & Jones Harden, 2012). For example, mothers may prompt their children to count ingredients while cooking or ask children to identify shapes and colors during outings (Coba-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Research on children's language development finds that infants and toddlers learn language in context and through frequency (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2019). For example, families may teach young children food words during dinnertime and sensory words during bath time. Some families may also value more formal educational activities during the hours outside of school and work. Families may use evening hours for academic preparation, such as visiting the library, helping children with homework, and other academic tasks (Denmark & Jones Harden, 2012). Some descriptive research on NTH child care for children across age groups finds that families of school-age children would like their child care arrangements (regardless of setting type) to offer time for children to complete homework (Baxter & Hand, 2016).

Predictable routines that occur during NTHs are natural contexts for children's learning across developmental domains (Romano et al., 2022; Spagnola & Fiese, 2007; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2019). Just as daytime routines during standard-hour child care (e.g., snacks, meals, toileting and diaper changing, getting dressed for outdoor play, and cleaning up) create consistency and learning opportunities for children, the same is undoubtedly true in NTH child care settings. Consistent daily routines may be predictive of fewer negative and challenging behaviors in children (Rijlaarsdam et al., 2016) and may serve as a protective factor for children experiencing poverty and/or trauma (Bocknek, 2018; Romano et al., 2022). Adults may use everyday activities and routines to nurture children's development as valued and productive members of their communities (Miller & Harwood, 2002). Rogoff (2014) suggests that opportunities for informal learning within families, such as helping with household tasks, may support children's collaboration with peers, emotional regulation, and perspective taking.

Unhurried and unstructured time are described by families and caregivers as important for children, especially during evening as bedtime approaches and weekends when children and families may need downtime as well as during morning routines before transitioning to the school or child care day (Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Salonen et al., 2018; Salonen et al., 2020; Schilder & Adams, 2022). Unhurried time in the evenings may include opportunities for unstructured activities such as relaxation, laughing and chatting, and peer-to-peer interactions across age groups (Salonen et al., 2020). Unhurried time in the mornings may help children make an easier transition to formal care settings (Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Salonen et al., 2018), although the demands of work and family schedules may limit the capacity of families to create unhurried experiences during morning hours.

Time for child-directed play may also be a valuable component of NTH caregiving. Research suggests that providers and families also value fewer adult-led activities during NTH child care (Sosinsky, 2020; Statham & Mooney, 2003). Literature on after-school care for school-age children also describes the importance of programming that encourages a combination of autonomy and structure for children during these hours of the day (Little, 2007). An extensive body of child development literature describes the importance of play for children's positive development (Zosh et al., 2017).

Culturally sustaining care may be particularly important during NTH child care rituals and routines that typically take place in families such as during mealtimes and bedtimes. None of the research on NTH child care addresses what families want or value for their children around cultural congruence when it comes to caregiving practices during these hours or how NTH child care providers think about these aspects of care. Yet, research suggests that culturally sustaining child care, in general, that intentionally seeks to support and to “perpetuate and foster” the cultural and linguistic traditions and values of children and families may support positive identity development and sense of belonging (Paris, 2012; Shivers & Farago, 2016).

Comfortable and calm caregiving environments are particularly relevant for evening and overnight child care. Some research on center-based NTH child care suggests the importance of mimicking home-based environments in institutional, center-based settings (Salonen et al., 2020). These aspects include comfortable and soft furnishings and spaces, warm or dimmed lighting, and transitional objects for children during evening and nighttime hours (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019; Peltoperä et al., 2018; Statham & Mooney, 2003). A study of Finnish center-based evening child care suggests that when children feel comfortable and at ease in child care, they experience a strong sense of belonging (Salonen et al., 2020).

Health and safety practices are mentioned less frequently in the descriptive literature on NTH child care, yet a substantial body of research describes the importance of healthy and safe child care and family environments for young children during sleep and mealtime routines (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019; Sosinsky, 2020). Health and safety practices are also at the core of all state child care licensing regulations.

Specific examples of quality caregiving for children during nontraditional hours

In this section we describe examples of NTH caregiving practices that families across cultural contexts in the U.S. value and enact. These are presented to illustrate further how the broad components of quality may be implemented across a range of NTH child care settings and across specific routines and times of the day and week, including mealtimes (e.g., breakfast and dinner), bedtimes, overnights, personal care routines (e.g., dental hygiene, bath time, hair combing and styling), and weekend activities (see Figure 2).

Research conducted in family settings and, in some cases, in child care settings suggests that meals, sleep, and personal care routines are necessary for children's healthy development (e.g., Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Yet the specific rituals that families and caregivers engage in during these routines are understudied, especially in families and care settings in marginalized communities. In the following sections, we report examples from descriptive and conceptual research on family routines and rituals across cultural contexts in the U.S., with a particular focus on families of color and immigrant families. This literature suggests that specific rituals are often used by families during routines for passing down family and cultural traditions. The extent to which families would want their NTH child care providers to replicate these rituals and whether replication of these specific rituals is important for children's positive outcomes in nonrelative child care settings are not known.

Mealtime routines

NTH child care likely includes mealtimes such as dinners, breakfasts, and weekend meals and may be similar to mealtimes that take place in standard-hour child care. Research on standard-hour child care indicates that family-style meals where adults eat with children and children are allowed to serve themselves contribute to positive interactions between child care staff members and children (Malek-Lasater et al., 2022).

Research on family routines suggests that mealtimes are important times of day for children's learning and healthy physical development (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Discussions at the dinner table, for example, may support children's language, social-emotional development, and positive behavioral outcomes (Bocknek, 2018; Ely et al., 2001; Spagnola & Fiese, 2007; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2019; Yoon et al., 2015). Consistency around mealtime routines in families has also been linked to lower levels of parent-child conflict and positive parent-child relationships (Ren & Fan, 2019).

The ways families feed their infants and toddlers may vary across cultural contexts. For example, studies of parent-infant mealtime practices across cultural groups find that some parents emphasize compliance with authority and good manners by holding young toddlers in their laps during mealtimes, while others emphasize self-reliance and autonomy by encouraging toddlers to feed themselves (Martini, 2002; Miller & Harwood, 2002). Some families may view mealtimes as a relational event, engaging in spoon-feeding, for example, as a way of transmitting values around interdependence and care (Miller & Harwood, 2002; Tubbs et al., 2005).

In a descriptive study of Puerto Rican, Mexican American, and Central American immigrant families living in low-income neighborhoods in Chicago, families describe mealtimes as opportunities for connection, engagement, and conversation that offer opportunities for emphasizing values around interdependence between adults and children

Box 3



Mealtime routines

Broad components of care during mealtimes that may support children's healthy development

- **Individualized care**
(e.g., honoring children's food preferences)
- **Teachable moments***
(e.g., language development through dinnertime conversations)
- **Predictable routines and rituals***
(e.g., consistency around dinnertime routines; family-style meals)
- **Culturally sustaining care**
(e.g., serving family-preferred foods and enacting mealtime traditions; nurturing interdependence and autonomy around feeding)
- **Health and safety practices***
(e.g., promotion of nutrition and healthy eating)

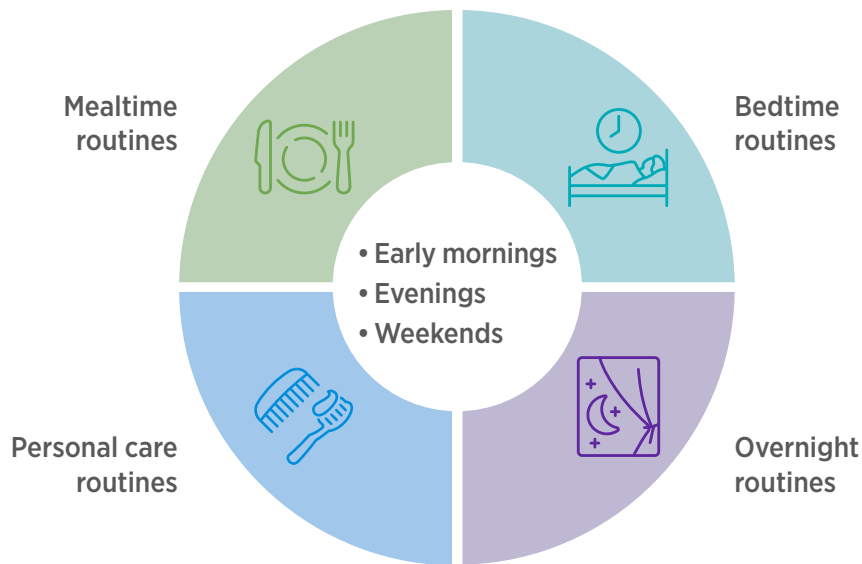
**Indicates relationship to positive child outcomes*

(Tubbs et al., 2005). In an ethnographic study of Black families living in a high-poverty Chicago neighborhood, parents describe dinnertime as an opportunity for family cohesion and togetherness (Jarrett, 2014).

Healthy nutrition and eating habits in child care settings have been shown to contribute to children's physical development, including lower rates of obesity (Francis et al., 2018; Larson et al., 2011). Research on the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which reimburses child care providers for healthy meals and snacks, further suggests that participation by child care providers in CACFP is associated with improvements in children's dietary quality (Kenney et al., 2023). However, systemic barriers, such as lack of access to fresh produce and healthy foods in some disinvested neighborhoods, may create challenges, especially for home-based child care providers living in

Figure 2

Routines and rituals that may take place during early mornings, evenings, and weekends



neighborhoods with food deserts who want to provide healthy and nutritious meals for children in care (Larson et al., 2011).

Families may value when NTH child care settings provide dinners and breakfasts that honor children's preferences (Sloane et al., 2019). Families may also value when child care providers share cultural traditions during mealtimes. In faith-based child care settings, for example, families may value the sharing of traditional foods, prayers, and customs during certain days of the week or times of year. Research on family routines and rituals suggests that families may use mealtimes as occasions for sharing preferred family traditions and cultural practices. Dinner and breakfast may serve as contexts for transmission of generational values and cultural traditions through culturally meaningful rituals that families create as well as involving children in the preparation of foods that represent cultural heritage and identity (Trofholz et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2015). Yet the extent to which families want nonrelative child care providers to replicate family mealtime rituals is an area for further research and understanding.

Bedtime routines

Bedtime routines and rituals during evening child care arrangements may look different from routines that occur around naptime in standard-hour child care. For example, bedtime routines in home-based child care settings, and especially in relative care arrangements, may be integrated into the child care family's own regular bedtime rituals and may be familiar to children who have a familial or prior relationship with their provider. In center-based programs or nonrelative family child care homes, bedtime routines may not be the same as children's home routines. No studies in our review specifically talked about evening bedtime routines in child care settings. Child development research on the importance of bedtime routines for children in family settings suggests potential quality practices for evening child care arrangements.

Research on child development and sleep in the U.S. indicates that regular and consistent bedtime routines are important factors for establishing healthy sleep patterns (Jiang, 2019). A bedtime

Box 4

Bedtime routines



Broad components of care during bedtime routines that support children's healthy development

- **Nurturing and responsive provider-child relationships and interactions***
(e.g., cuddling, infant massage, rocking)
- **Consistency and continuity of care**
(e.g., familiar caregiver; same caregiver over time)
- **Teachable moments***
(e.g., using bedtime for shared book reading)
- **Predictable routines and rituals***
(e.g., consistent sequence of bedtime activities)
- **Culturally sustaining care**
(e.g., prayer, storytelling)
- **Comfortable and calm environment***
(e.g., quiet activities before bedtime)

**Indicates relationship to positive child outcomes*

routine has been defined as the “same 3-4 calming and relaxing activities in the same order” (Jiang, 2019) or as the “the predictable activities that occur in the hour or so before lights out, and before the child falls asleep” (Mindell & Williamson, 2018). Studies have found that adherence to a bedtime routine is associated with increased sleep duration and fewer nighttime awakenings (Mindell & Williamson, 2018; Staples et al., 2015).

The specific types of activities or practices occurring before sleep may also affect the quality of children's sleep. Quiet activities, less technology use, high parenting sensitivity, and long parental presence during bedtime have been associated with longer sleep minutes and greater sleep quality (Philbrook et al., 2022). Physical contact at bedtime, including cuddling, infant massage, and rocking, may

support children's behavioral regulation and the development of positive caregiver-child bonds (Mindell & Williamson, 2018).

In their literature review and conceptual framework for bedtime routines in the U.S., Mindell and Williamson (2018) find that communication and literacy as well as physical contact at bedtime are associated with positive outcomes for children. Communication and literacy practices at bedtime are associated with positive emotional development, strong caregiver-child relationships, and literacy and language development (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007).

Ethnographic and qualitative research suggests that literacy practices are common across cultural communities but may be implemented in different ways. A study of family, friend, and neighbor child care in Minnesota illustrates how some Indigenous caregivers use oral traditions and storytelling during child care routines to support children's understanding of their cultural heritage and values (Emarita, 2008). Ethnographic research with Black families living across low- and middle-income urban communities, finds that families use shared book reading, shared television watching, and prayer as part of bedtime rituals and rely on extended and fictive kin to participate in bedtime rituals for younger children (Jarrett et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2016). Research with Puerto Rican, Mexican American, and Central American immigrant families living in low-income neighborhoods in Chicago, describes families' use of bedtime stories and prayer to promote caregiver-child conversations and opportunities for “transmission of religious values” (Tubbs et al., 2005).

While book reading and storytelling may be common practices that families would want in evening child care arrangements, the extent to which families want their child care providers to replicate family rituals such as prayer likely varies depending on the type of child care arrangement (e.g., relative or nonrelative, home-based or center-based, faith-based or secular).

Overnight routines

Overnight sleep practices in child care settings may share some similarities with naptime practices in standard-hour child care but may also have unique considerations. The Caring for Our Children standards (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2019) describe a specific set of practices for sleep routines in child care settings, which include supervision of sleeping children and the management and maintenance of sleep equipment (Sosinsky, 2020).

Research on nighttime sleep and children's outcomes, more broadly, suggests that features of a safe and comfortable nighttime sleep environment include calm, quiet, dark, and cool temperatures (Jiang, 2019). Promotion of healthy overnight sleep for children may contribute to positive health and developmental outcomes for children. A literature review on children's sleep finds that nighttime sleep may affect learning, memory, emotional regulation, and general cognitive and brain development (Jiang, 2019). Conversely, greater nighttime sleep awakenings or disturbances may have a negative impact on children's cognitive outcomes (Jiang, 2019).

“Sleeping time is a very sensitive time for infants and young children. Attention should be paid to individual needs, transitional objects, lighting preferences, and bedtime routines.”

—American Academy of Pediatrics, *Caring for Our Children*, p. 390

Sleep disruptions may be a particular concern during evening, overnight, and even early morning child care. Halfon & Friendly (2015) discuss a concern for school-age children in child care programs that run until midnight or later, when children may have their sleep disrupted, creating challenges in waking up for school the next morning. Research on child care centers that operate overnight care in Japan notes the importance of overnight child care routines reflecting the natural circadian rhythms of children (Anme et al., 2010; Anme & Segal, 2009, 2003).

Box 5



Overnight routines

Broad components of care during overnight routines that support children's healthy development

- **Individualized care**
(e.g., overnight routines match children's natural rhythms)
- **Unhurried and unstructured time**
(e.g., uninterrupted sleep)
- **Comforting and calm environment***
(e.g., dark environment and cool temperature)
- **Health and safety practices***
(e.g., age-appropriate sleep equipment and environment; supervision of sleeping children; security at night)

**Indicates relationship to positive child outcomes*

A small body of research that examines the preferences and perspectives of families who need or use overnight child care finds that families cite safety and security—within the child care setting as well as the neighborhood—as top concerns in considering overnight child care options in center-based or family child care settings (DiMatteo, 2019; Sandstrom et al., 2018). Safety features in NTH center-based settings may include security guards (Sandstrom et al., 2018) and security cameras (Sloane et al., 2019).

Some parents may make a distinction between overnight safety and overnight comfort in NTH child care. Close to two-thirds of parents (59%) in a California study report that they would have concerns about children's safety in an overnight center or family child care home but would feel less concerned about children's comfort during overnight hours (DiMatteo, 2019). Families who use informal home-based child care arrangements, such as relative, friend, or neighbor care for overnight hours,

may make tradeoffs between convenience and familiarity versus neighborhood safety, especially when the child care arrangement and the family home are in the same neighborhood that families perceive of as dangerous. Schilder, Adams, et al. (2022) find that parents mostly trust caregivers they know and are more concerned about safety and security measures for providers they do not know.

Personal care routines

Personal routines that take place during NTH child care may include waking up, getting dressed, brushing teeth, bath time, and hair combing and styling. Except for oral health, no studies in our review specifically talked about child care practices during these routines. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (2016) has recommended oral health policies for child care programs, including daily teeth brushing after meals and snacks as well as not putting babies or toddlers to sleep with bottles or sippy cups. Research on health practices in child care programs finds that daily teeth brushing is associated with children's positive health outcomes (Fináncz et al., 2023).

Parenting literature provides additional evidence that nutrition and hygiene at bedtime are associated with positive health outcomes for children and include healthy snacks in response to children's hunger, teeth brushing, and bathing. They note that bathing before sleep, for example, may help regulate body temperature and promote healthy sleep.

Personal care routines around hair combing and styling may be particularly important in some families. Lewis (1999) conceptualizes hair routines as a culturally significant context for Black child development and racial socialization in Black families. Doing hair may be experienced in Black families as an opportunity for engagement in close caregiver-child interactions and passing down of cultural traditions (Lewis & Weatherston, 2021; Warren, 2021). Given the personal nature of routines

Box 6



Personal care routines

Broad components of care during personal care routines that support children's healthy development

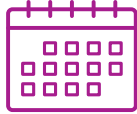
- **Nurturing and responsive provider-child relationships and interactions** (e.g., using routines such as hair combing for close provider-child relationship building)
- **Individualized care** (e.g., provision of healthy snacks before bedtime if children are hungry)
- **Predictable routines and rituals** (e.g., predictable rituals around bathing, getting ready for bed, waking up, hair combing)
- **Culturally sustaining care** (e.g., passing down traditions, racial socialization during hair combing and styling routines)
- **Health and safety practices*** (e.g., dental hygiene before bed and in the mornings, bathing)

**Indicates relationship to positive child outcomes*

such as bath time and doing hair, it's not known if families would want their child care providers (relatives or nonrelatives) to replicate these personal care routines and how this may vary across different child care arrangements.

Weekend routines

Child care during weekend hours likely includes some of the routines described above, including mealtimes, bedtimes, overnights, and personal care routines, yet weekend child care may look different, or parents may want something different for their children than care offered during the week. In their three-state study of NTH child care in the U.S., Schilder, Adams et al. (2022) surveyed 41 parents with young children working NTH jobs about



Weekend routines

Broad components of care during weekend routines that support children's healthy development

- **Teachable moments**
(e.g., community outings, formal weekend programming; recreational and extracurricular activities for school-age children)
- **Unhurried and unstructured time**
(e.g., social time with peers, creative and fun activities, cross-age interactions)
- **Time for child-directed play**
(e.g., free play, mixed-ages playtime)
- **Culturally sustaining care**
(e.g., formal cultural, language, religious, and academic weekend programs)

what types of child care arrangements they would recommend to other parents working NTH jobs. They found that parents recommend that children who are cared for in a formal arrangement during the week could benefit from a home-based and more relaxed child care environment and schedule on the weekends. On the other hand, parents recommend that children who experience more informal, home-based child care during the week may benefit from a formal, activities-based child care program on the weekend.

Parents also report that school-age children would benefit from center-based care on the weekends that offers “fun” activities. Studies outside the U.S. find that parents value opportunities for their children to socialize with peers during weekend child care arrangements. For example, parents in a Finnish sample report that their children experience joy when weekend child care includes opportunities for social interactions with peers (Salonen et al., 2018).

Parents in England report that weekend child care should include creative and fun-filled activities and opportunities for cross-age interactions (Statham & Mooney, 2003).

Our review of research on family routines identified an array of specific activities and rituals that families engage in that may be distinct to weekend time, including peer interactions with friends and family across age groups, community engagement and outings, attending religious services, time for homework and extracurricular activities for school-age children, and unstructured time (Denmark & Jones Harden, 2012). The extent to which child care providers who care for children on weekends try to replicate family routines is not known. Home-based child care providers, for example, may integrate children into their own family routines, although how this is negotiated with parents has not been documented in the literature.

Weekends may also be times that families prioritize extracurricular and recreational activities, especially for their school-age children. Research on out-of-school time among children living in Chinese and Korean immigrant communities in California describes children's participation in culturally sustaining language heritage schools that teach cultural traditions through recreational activities (e.g., calligraphy, martial arts) as well as offer additional academic preparation outside of formal public schools. Many families in these communities report enrolling their children in formal language schools on weekends to help them maintain and sustain their home languages, to nurture ethnic pride, and to socialize with peers from similar cultural backgrounds (Zhou & Kim, 2006). Whether these types of weekend programs also provide child care for families beyond the hours in which educational components are offered is not addressed in the literature.

Components of NTH child care: Responsive arrangements for families

Many families with low incomes work in jobs with nonstandard, unpredictable schedules resulting in the need for child care that mirrors these schedules (Harknett et al., 2022; Henly & Lambert, 2005). Many of these families rely on the informal child care sector to meet their child care needs (Henly & Lyons, 2000).

Responsiveness to the needs of families of children in care is a critical component of high-quality child care (Bromer et al., 2011; Forry et al., 2012) and may be particularly important in NTH child care arrangements. Families who work NTH jobs often have little control over their work schedules, and their schedules tend to be unpredictable from one week to the next (Henly et al., 2006). This fragility of NTH care arrangements, including the potential for parents' schedules to change or for child care arrangements to fall through, creates challenges for child care providers and families. Responsive child care during these hours may include providers, most likely relatives or friends, who are able to absorb some of the unpredictability in parent work schedules and offer a sense of stability for children and families (Katrass et al., 2004).

Logistical considerations: Flexibility and convenience

Logistical supports in NTH child care arrangements may include: (a) flexibility to accommodate families' changing schedules and (b) access to transportation or a convenient child care location.

Families value NTH child care arrangements that allow flexible child care schedules aligned with their job schedules (DiMatteo, 2019; Schilder, Lou, et al., 2022). Descriptive research suggests that many home-based child care settings—including family child care as well as more informal relative care arrangements—are able to provide this type of scheduling flexibility for families (Bromer & Henly, 2009; Porter, Jones, et al., 2021). Flexible child care

Box 7

Broad components of responsive NTH child care arrangements for families

- Logistical supports: flexibility and convenience
- Child care arrangement and relationship stability
- Understanding, respecting, and honoring families' traditions, cultural values, and preferences around child-rearing
- Close family-provider relationships
- Transparent family-provider communication
- Trust

scheduling may support parental job stability and reduce stress. Descriptive studies of informal child care in Australia, for example, find a relationship between mothers who use home-based child care settings that offer flexible schedules (e.g., variable hours during the week and nontraditional hours) and strong employment pathways and reduced parental stress (Brady, 2016; Craig & Churchill, 2018).

However, some job-related precariousness and schedule unpredictability experienced by families may make it difficult for even home-based child care providers to respond. Single mothers in a Chicago study of NTH child care (Stoll et al., 2015) report preferring family, friend, or neighbor providers whom they trust on a personal, relational level, yet they also acknowledge that these providers are often unable to be available when care is needed.

Logistical considerations in NTH child care also include convenient location of care. Parents across studies on NTH child care report that finding locations close to home or work is important for these hours (Baxter & Hand, 2016; Early Childhood Australia, 2014; Sandstrom et al., 2018; Stoll et al., 2015). Latine families in a Chicago study say proximity to home or to family members is a core consideration when searching for child care (Pacheco-Applegate et al., 2020).

Child care arrangement and relationship stability

Families who work NTH schedules are more likely to experience challenges with child care arrangements not meeting the demands of their work schedules, which may lead them to use multiple child care arrangements or make changes in current arrangements (Harknett et al., 2022; Hepburn, 2018; Rachidi et al., 2019). Depending on circumstances, preferences, and resources, families may experience child care stability and instability of NTH child care in different ways (Speirs et al., 2015; Pilarz et al., 2022). Stability of an arrangement may not necessarily be a positive experience for families and children needing child care during nonstandard hours. For example, child care instability may be positively experienced by parents and children when changes in child care arrangements are both desirable and intentional, while instability may be experienced as a negative event when child care transitions happen abruptly and are not desired (Pilarz et al., 2022). The extent that NTH child care arrangements are intentional and desired by families may offset the potential destabilizing effects of NTH work schedules for both parents and their children.

Families may also consider relationship stability as a component of quality in NTH child care arrangements. For example, research indicates that mothers who only work NTH schedules experience significant instability in their daily lives. As such, they are more likely to rely on relative caregivers because they may offer relationship stability for their children (Rachidi et al., 2019). Carrillo et al. (2017) describes the importance of a “family anchor,” most often a grandparent or close relative, who is able to absorb some of the instability in a parent’s job schedule by offering flexible child care hours as well as a stable relationship for children.

Understanding, respecting, and honoring families’ traditions, cultural values, and preferences

Responsiveness to families may also include understanding, respecting, and, when possible, honoring families’ preferences around specific routines, rituals, and practices during nontraditional hours. As our review has described, NTH caregiving routines may look different across family, cultural, and community contexts and may be used to enact and transmit important values and traditions to young children. However, the extent to which families want child care providers to replicate rituals and practices from home during child care hours is not known, and these preferences may differ across families and across times of day and specific routines.

Respect for and recognition of cultural child-rearing models may be particularly important for child care offered during hours when families may want care that is aligned with their home and family values (e.g., evenings, bedtimes, weekends). For example, some families may feel more strongly about child care providers using familial rituals around bedtime than around mealtime because children often experience meals outside of home. Responsiveness to families in more formal, nonrelative child care settings where providers care for diverse groups of children from different cultural backgrounds may include an understanding and respect for each families’ child-rearing models and values, even if specific practices cannot be implemented. Additionally, understanding how experiences with systemic racism and inequity may influence family practices and values is important for child care providers to consider (National Black Child Development Institute, 2013).

Box 9

Examples of cultural models across families and communities

- In Latine families, cultural values may include being *bien educado* (e.g., self-reliance, displaying obedience), *familismo* (e.g., increased family cohesiveness), or *respeto* (e.g., displaying good manners, respecting elders) (Bridges et al., 2012; Calzada et al., 2010; Fuller & García Coll, 2010; Lopez et al., 2022; Valdés, 1996).
- Among some Native American families, child-rearing practices may include culturally situated values, such as respect for elders and creation, individual freedom, generosity, and an emphasis on extended family involvement, that hold both traditional and spiritual significance (Glover, 2001; McKinley et al., 2022).
- For East Asian families, including Chinese and Korean families, the philosophies of Confucianism may shape parenting goals, such as the cultivation of filial piety and collectivism, emphasis on obedience to authority, the pursuit of knowledge through education, and conformity to moral and ethical values to maintain the harmony of home, community, and the state (Park & Chesla, 2007).
- For some African American families, cultural models may include transmitting values to children around an ethic of care, extended family and kin, spirituality, optimism, and future orientation (Bromer, Turner, et al., 2023; Green, 2023; Lloyd et al., 2022).

Close family-provider relationships

Close family-provider relationships have been recognized as an important aspect of quality across formal child care settings, including center-based programs and family child care homes (Forry et al., 2012). Research on family-provider partnerships in child care settings identifies responsiveness and collaboration as key dimensions of positive family-provider relationships (Kim et al., 2015). In studies of NTH child care, researchers find that families emphasize the importance of knowing providers on a personal level (Sandstorm et al., 2018; Schilder, Adams, et al., 2022). Specifically, Schilder, Adams, et al. (2022) find that families prefer relative care arrangements for overnight and late evening hours because of the familiarity of the environment and close relationships. Research on center-based programs in Finland that offer evening care, suggests that when care at home is not an option, close family-staff partnerships are valued by providers and families during these hours (Tahvanainen, 2015).

Transparent family-provider communication

Transparent family-provider communication has been identified in prior research as a key component of family responsiveness across child care settings, including centers and child care homes (Forry et al., 2012; Shivers et al., 2016). Research on NTH child care suggests that, given the many considerations around family preferences and practices for NTH routines, transparent and regular family-provider communication may be particularly critical in child care settings during these hours (Sloane et al., 2019). Some studies suggest that family-provider communication may be particularly challenging during NTHs.

Studies of 24-hour child care centers in Finland, for example, find that unpredictable and unaligned schedules among both parents and child care staff make regular communication and sharing of information difficult (Rönkä et al., 2019; Tahvanainen, 2015). For example, Tahvanainen (2015) describes how shift work at child care centers makes it difficult for staff to easily share information about

children with parents. Research on parent-provider relationships in relative child care arrangements, suggests that communication between caregivers and parents who have prior relationships may be more informal and more regular but also may be more constrained or conflicted (Bromer & Henly, 2009; Kinsner, 2017).

Trust

Trust is often considered an important quality feature of child care for families. A recent review of home-based child care quality cites descriptive research across racial, linguistic, and economic groups of families on trust as a “key factor” in families’ child care decisions (Bromer, Porter, Jones, et al., 2021). Studies with families who use NTH child care in Washington, DC, Philadelphia, PA, and Chicago, IL, find that parents report trust as an important aspect of quality child care especially during evening and overnight hours (Sandstrom et al., 2018; Schilder, Adams, et al., 2022; Sloane et al., 2019; Stoll et al., 2015).

Components of NTH child care: Healthy and equitable working and caregiving conditions for providers

The conditions of child care work constitute a critical component of high-quality care (Bromer, Porter, Jones, et al., 2021; Whitebook et al., 2016). Working and caregiving conditions matter because they contribute to child care sustainability, which is a prerequisite for providers’ being able to support children and families. Healthy and equitable working and caregiving conditions for child care providers are likely different in NTH child care settings than in standard-hour child care because of the different types of activities and routines required.

NTH child care that is paid, like other employment sectors that involve NTHs, is part of the low-wage, poorly compensated labor market. As such, there are important challenges that paid NTH child care providers face that are shared with other NTH

Box 10

Broad components of healthy and equitable working and caregiving conditions for providers

- Stress and child care–family balance
- Flexibility and control
- Compensation
- Support and sources of knowledge

workers. For example, in addition to low wages and limited benefits, NTH work poses important risks to worker health and well-being, such as sleep disturbance and mental health challenges (Vogel et al., 2012). Moreover, given many child care providers have their own family lives and parenting responsibilities, NTH work may create challenges for the management of work-family roles and parenting (Henly & Lambert, 2014).

The extent to which unpaid family, friend, and neighbor caregivers who offer NTH child care share the challenges of the NTH employment sector more broadly is not known. Some aspects of NTH child care work, such as long hours, may similarly influence the physical and mental health of informal caregivers (Kinsner et al., 2017). Yet work-family conflict and balance, commonly measured constructs in the NTH work literature, may not be as salient for many home-based caregivers, for whom there may not be a distinction between child care work and family responsibilities. Different stressors, such as difficult family dynamics and negotiating child-rearing values and practices within a family, may contribute to or create stress around providing child care (Bromer & Henly, 2009; Kinsner et al., 2017). Yet close family relationships and shared caregiving responsibilities and reciprocity around basic needs within a family may also buffer some of the stressors for unpaid caregivers offering NTH child care.

Stress and child care–family balance

Child care providers across studies report stress and exhaustion, especially those who offer flexible hours or are “on call” for families during late evenings, overnights, or early mornings (Baxter & Hand, 2016; Bromer, Porter, Melvin, et al., 2021; Carrillo et al., 2017; DiMatteo, 2019; Sandstrom et al., 2018). Family child care providers, who care for children during standard hours, for example, may be particularly at risk of burnout and exhaustion when they offer additional nonstandard hours of care. Providers in a study of NTH child care in California report that they would prefer to work either nontraditional or standard hours, but not both. Home-based child care providers report they would like an assistant or helper during hours outside of standard schedules (DiMatteo, 2019).

Turnover is a concern in the formal child care sector because many providers (family child care and center-based teachers) experience burnout because of low compensation, lack of benefits, and difficult working conditions, thus creating additional instability and lack of continuity for families. Home-based child care providers, in particular, who offer NTH child care may experience additional stress related to work-family balance, especially for those who live with a partner or have their own children at home (Corr et al., 2014; DiMatteo, 2019). Descriptive research suggests these providers may face challenges around home spaces that are used for both child care and their own family during evening and early morning hours as well as navigating relationships and needs within their own family alongside the needs of child care children and families that they serve (Bromer, Porter, Melvin, et al., 2021).

Relative and other informal child care providers may also face an array of stressors related to offering NTH care. For example, research finds that grandmothers who offer child care alone, without the support of their spouse, and who offer full time child care, may experience conflicts with family

members around child-rearing practices as well as marital strain related to caregiving responsibilities (Kinsner et al., 2017).

Flexibility and control

Control over caregiving hours and schedules as well as flexibility may be important considerations for NTH child care providers and may hinder or support positive work and caregiving conditions (Sosinsky, 2020). Research on the NTH employment sector finds that unpredictability in work schedules is associated with work-family conflict in terms of time available to meet family needs as well as the stress and strain that may be part of NTH work (Henly & Lambert, 2014; Lyness et al., 2012). When child care providers accommodate parent schedules, including last-minute changes in child care hours, they may themselves experience the same instability that families who work NTH jobs experience.

As one researcher notes, for NTH child care providers, “precarity is passed along” (Petrucci et al., 2022). Four in 10 providers offering NTH child care in California (including centers, family child care, and family, friend, and neighbor caregivers) report receiving no advance notice about parent schedules and need for care (DiMatteo, 2019). However, relatives and informal child care providers may experience instability differently than more formal providers. For example, relative providers who live with the children in their care, may be better able to accommodate instability in scheduling.

Compensation

The paid child care workforce (including licensed and unlicensed home- and center-based providers) is systematically undercompensated and likely includes many NTH child care workers (Whitebook et al., 2018). Some providers, especially those who extend their standard hours to accommodate families, may offer care during NTHs for free. For example, Petrucci et al. (2022) finds that family child care providers in Philadelphia offer extended hours

for school-age children who have aged out of the subsidy program because they know parents cannot afford to pay out of pocket.

For unpaid home-based child care providers, issues around compensation are harder to determine because little is known about how these caregivers negotiate and think about reciprocity with families for the child care offered and how they experience fluctuating and unpredictable schedules. Research by Adams et al. (2022) also notes child care rates vary widely across types of providers, making the true cost of child care difficult to determine.

Support and sources of knowledge

Descriptive and correlational research suggests that child care provider participation in professional organizations, support groups, networks, communities of practice, or other learning communities may be related to positive caregiving outcomes and provider knowledge and efficacy (Bromer, Porter, Jones et al., 2021; Hatfield & Hoke, 2016). No research exists on the types of professional development or areas of knowledge that child care providers need to offer high-quality NTH child care.

As this review suggests, these hours may require implementation of routines, activities, and practices that look different from standard-hour child care and may vary across different cultural communities. Identifying the competencies and practices needed to ensure positive outcomes for children in NTH child care arrangements could help providers nurture positive outcomes for children. In a study of routines and daily activities in families, Dunst (2020) finds that when caregivers enjoy and feel competent in implementing daily routines and activities, they are more likely to use routines as opportunities for engaging children in learning.

Child care providers who offer NTH child care may also need additional caregiving supports and resources beyond what they may access

during standard-hour child care operations. Researchers from Finland, for example, find that staff members who work in center-based NTH child care programs need better coordination with staff members and directors who work standard hours. NTH child care staff members report that other child care staff members and directors do not understand the realities of NTH work shifts and distinct job needs and pressures during those hours (Tahvanainen, 2015).

A national survey of NTH child care in England finds that providers lack access to supports during emergencies or for other needs during evening, overnight, and weekend hours when support organizations or resources may be closed (Statham & Mooney, 2003). Research on grandparent child care providers (Kinsner et al., 2017) finds that when support is offered, grandparents may face barriers to participation and may need additional support with transportation, internet access, and child care. Grandparent caregivers who are older may also experience isolation from their peers if they are spending long hours caring for grandchildren and may benefit from peer supports.

The needs for support around offering NTH child care among informal, relative caregivers may look different from those of the formal child care workforce. Relative caregivers are likely to have greater congruence with families and children in care around cultural values and practices that occur during nontraditional hours and may need less support or training around understanding family preferences. These caregivers, however, may benefit from training on health and safety practices related to sleep, oral hygiene, and nutrition. Little is known about the needs of these caregivers for support and their sources of knowledge around offering NTH child care.

Additional considerations

Considerations beyond the child care setting may also influence potential outcomes for children, families, and providers in NTH child care arrangements. Some families who need NTH child care may use a different arrangement, such as a child care center, for standard-hour care (Schilder et al., 2023). The packaging, alignment, and transitions across multiple arrangements may influence the experiences of children and families as well as the providers offering care across settings. Transportation between arrangements, alignment of routines, multiple caregivers, and relationships may all be considerations that are part of a holistic view of quality child care.

Recent research suggests that families' perceptions of quality NTH child care may depend on their child care usage patterns across multiple arrangements. For the hours just before and after standard-hour child care, families in the U.S. who use formal child care would prefer that these programs extend their hours, rather than having to find a separate child care arrangement. However, for dinner, evening, overnight, and early morning, parents prefer children to be cared for in their own home (Schilder, Adams, et al., 2022). Similarly, research from Canada finds that families who use multiple child care arrangements and NTH child care want a focus on education and structure in one setting and a more relaxed, flexible focus on nurturing in another setting (Lero et al., 2019).

The number of days and hours per day of formal child care—center-based child care in particular—may also be considered part of quality caregiving for children and families. For example, what may be good for children may not always align with what is best for working parents' schedules.

A small body of research on center-based early morning and evening child care in Europe (Finland and England) finds that children may be particularly vulnerable to stress during these hours if they are not in their own home settings. Educators in a

Finnish study of center-based evening and 24-hour child care report that children exhibited signs of anxiety, stress, separation issues, anger, and exhaustion when they were in center-based NTH child care for many days in a row or experienced standard-hour child care followed by NTHs in the same center-based setting. They explain that routines around bedtimes and waking times in center-based programs are often unattuned to the natural rhythms of young children (Salonen et al., 2018, 2020). The cascading effect of families' unpredictable schedules may lead to inconsistent and fluctuating attendance in child care, making it difficult for formal child care programs to create routines and schedules that meet the needs of all children in care (Rönkä et al., 2019; Salonen et al., 2018; Statham & Mooney, 2003; Tahvanainen, 2015).

Summary

This research report describes potential quality features and aspects of NTH child care across different hours and routines and types of child care settings that may be likely to influence positive child, family, and provider outcomes. Our review of descriptive research on NTH child care, supplemented by a targeted review of child development and family routines and rituals during NTHs and NTH working conditions, led to the identification of specific caregiving practices, environments, and conditions that are hypothesized to benefit children, families, and providers. We also consider how multiple child care arrangements, including those offered during NTHs, may complement and align to best support the developmental needs of children, the work schedules of families, and the sustainability of caregiving and child care jobs.

This review points to the lack of research on families' preferences and experiences around what NTH child care should look like across different types of child care settings and hours. While research suggests families prefer familiar, home-based settings for

NTHs in general, we lack studies on how families and providers negotiate the routines and rituals that take place during specific hours of care. When providers are not related to children, we do not know what families' experiences entail and whether they want their own home routines replicated in nonrelative or nonresidential settings. For example, we do not have research on whether enactment of familial, home rituals matter for families and for children's well-being in nonrelative child care, nor do we have research on the experiences of unpaid, relative providers who may be most likely to offer NTH child care for their own families.

Quality child care has historically focused on center-based and school-based settings with much less attention on home-based and relative child care settings, including informal and unpaid arrangements. Findings from research on NTH child care in center-based programs in Western Europe, for example, may not be applicable to the experiences of families across cultural communities in the U.S. or to child care systems and policy contexts in the U.S. This review emphasizes the importance of considering the full range of settings and arrangements that families may use during different NTH schedules and routines.

Needs for future research

There are many gaps in our understanding of how NTH child care supports children and families. For example, we lack information on appropriate adult-child ratios in NTH child care settings and how optimal ratios and group sizes may differ from standard-hour group child care settings. For example, overnight care in a center-based setting may not require the same ratios as daytime care, given the fewer responsibilities and interactions that providers may need to monitor. Another gap in knowledge is around how NTH child care arrangements accommodate and support children with disabilities or children with experiences of trauma. One study on home-based child care settings that allow children to stay overnight

suggests these arrangements may be particularly beneficial for children experiencing homelessness (DiMatteo, 2019).

Our review intentionally searched for research focused on non-Western and minoritized populations in the U.S. We examined literature on family routines in diverse Black, Latine, Asian, and Indigenous populations. We found few descriptive studies on families' practices with young children across these cultural contexts. Research on Indigenous populations is particularly scarce in the U.S. Future research on NTH child care should intentionally consider issues around identity, race, immigration status, language, and experiences of families, children, and providers living in minoritized communities.

Our review highlights the strengths and assets that families across communities draw on to support their children through daily routines and rituals that may be models for NTH child care practices. New perspectives outside traditional child care and early education paradigms are needed to understand what high-quality NTH child care can look like for children and families as well as the providers who offer this care.

Given the demand for NTH child care among working families and the current child care shortage in the U.S. (Khattar & Coffey, 2023), it is imperative to understand how to support and build the supply of a thriving NTH child care sector. Future research could look at the extensive body of research on NTH shift work, which has examined the relationship between features of job quality and a range of outcomes for workers. Understanding NTH child care providers as part of the NTH workforce, more broadly, may be a promising framework for studying the experiences of these caregivers.

Some research suggests that a thriving NTH child care sector may include a different population of workers than those employed or working in standard-hour child care settings. Expectations



for the current workforce to shoulder NTHs by extending hours and shifts may be unrealistic and may not meet the needs of families during all the hours when they need care. More research is needed to fully understand how to develop a thriving, multifaceted NTH child care sector that offers responsive care for children and families as well as stable and sustainable experiences for caregivers.



Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Findings from this research report suggest that there may not be one set of policy solutions to increase access to high-quality NTH child care. As this review has shown, a multipronged approach is needed that considers the values and scheduling needs of

families, the developmental needs of children during different hours of the day and week, and the working and caregiving conditions of the full range of center- and home-based child care providers.

Additionally, different approaches and policies may be warranted depending on the specific nontraditional hours of care needed by families and the ages of children in care. For example, overnight child care solutions may look different from early morning or early evening care strategies. Weekend child care approaches may look different from weekday NTH child care practices. The following recommendations aim to inform state and local program development and expansion of high-quality NTH child care programs and a thriving NTH child care workforce in the U.S.

<p>Recommendations for state and local child care subsidy agencies</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentivize existing licensed centers and family child care homes to extend child care services before and after standard operating hours, including incentivizing family child care homes to offer late evening and/or overnight care, by offering grants or higher reimbursements to cover additional costs such as rent, staffing, security measures, utilities, and equipment. • Consider differentiated reimbursement structures and payment contracts for paid NTH child care providers that cover the full cost of offering NTH child care, including higher compensation for staff, staffing ratios that match the needs of providers, children, and families during NTHs, and equipment, utilities, and building maintenance costs. • Allow families who receive a subsidy for daytime child care to also be eligible for a subsidy to cover NTH child care needs.
<p>Recommendations for state and local child care licensing and quality improvement agencies</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage families and providers who offer NTH child care to participate in the design of NTH child care policies, procedures, and standards. • Identify promising approaches to regulation and quality assurance in NTH child care by collecting data from families and providers about what they prioritize, reviewing regulations and standards across states, and gathering information from licensing staff across states to understand the opportunities and challenges in supporting high-quality NTH child care.

<p>Recommendations for state and local professional development and support programs</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer differentiated support that recognizes different provider needs at different caregiving hours. For example, providers who offer child care during late evenings and overnights may require different supports from those for providers who offer child care on the weekends or during early mornings and evenings. • Facilitate partnerships between center-based programs and home-based child care programs to offer NTH child care (e.g., evening care) following standard-hour care; offer transportation between settings. • Offer relevant training and information on health and safety topics, including promotion of safe sleep practices, bath time routines, dental hygiene, and healthy meals. • Offer training and technical assistance on how to use daily routines and rituals to support children’s learning, identity development, and racial and cultural socialization. • Develop and offer support and training for nonrelative providers focused on honoring and respecting family cultural values and traditions. • Offer providers training and tools to facilitate positive and responsive communication with families around personal care routines, transitions, meal times, and other activities that occur during NTHs. • Develop training and information in the preferred languages of providers and families served. • Offer trainings at times of day that are accessible to providers.
<p>Recommendations for new initiatives to support expansion of and access to high-quality NTH child care.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in family child care networks that coordinate across a group of affiliated providers to increase available NTH child care for families. • Invest in on-call services for overnight and evening child care providers to offer care in the child’s home during NTHs (similar to a nanny service). • Consider developing incentive and compensation structures for informal family, friend, and neighbor caregivers who may not currently receive payment.

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Methods Appendix

We conducted the literature review in two phases. First, we reviewed studies that focused on describing quality in NTH child care settings across international contexts. We limited our search to English language publications. We looked beyond literature in the U.S. because there is a more robust focus on nontraditional-hour child care in other Western countries, including Canada, England, and Finland. Our search included peer-reviewed and gray literature. We used a variety of databases (see Box 11) and selected relevant articles cited in the reviewed literature.

In our second phase, we conducted a focused review of research on related literature, including safe sleep practices, family routines and child development,

Box 11

Journal databases and websites used for literature searches

Google, Google Scholar, EBSCO: ERIC, Academic Search Complete, Professional Development Collection, ProQuest Multi-Database: PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Social Science Premium Collection, PTSD Pubs, Sage Premier, Pubmed

and family routines across cultural contexts. We focused specifically on routines that may look different during nontraditional hours from those that occur during standard-hour child care. For example, we focused on bedtimes, dinners, and personal care

Phase 1 search terms

Types of nontraditional hours	Nontraditional/non-traditional hour, variable hour, weekend care, overnight care, flexible hour care, nonstandard/non-standard, off hours, after hours, weekend hours, schedules, evening care, 24-hour
Types of child care settings	Child care, childcare, early care and education, informal care, grandparent, family, friend, and neighbor, home-based child care, day care, early childhood education, nonparental care, centers, daycare, day care
Quality	Quality, child development, child health, child wellbeing, child outcomes, family health, family wellbeing, parent wellbeing, family stress, working conditions, burden, burnout, stress, maternal employment

Phase 2 search terms

Routines	Safe sleep, overnight, bedtime, bath time, meals, dinnertime, breakfast, waking up, early mornings, weekend time, leisure time, transitional objects, spoon feeding, co-sleeping, interdependence, autonomy, dental hygiene, hair styling, cultural model
Settings	Family/families, child-rearing, child development, family wellbeing, parent wellbeing, family stress, child and family health, parenting, family routines, out of school time, sleep environment
Cultural contexts	Black, African American, Latine, Latino, Latina, Latinx, Hispanic, native American, American Indian, indigenous, Asian, Asian American, immigrant, south Asian, East Asian, Chinese, Korean, Desi, Japanese, Vietnamese, Indian

routines because many of these do not take place during standard-hour child care. We also included a select review of research articles on nontraditional-hour workers to better understand the working conditions of paid child care providers who offer nontraditional-hour care. We relied on reviews of research when available (e.g., on safe sleep and child development) as well as articles recommended by our research advisors.

To understand how nontraditional-hour routines and rituals vary across cultural contexts, we searched for literature on family routines in several cultural groups living in the U.S. (see Phase 2 search terms).

About us

The Illinois Nontraditional-Hour Child Care Study (INCCS) is a collaborative research-policy partnership led by Erikson Institute in collaboration with the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy and Practice, and Illinois Action for Children. The study addresses critical gaps in knowledge about what quality looks like in nontraditional-hour (NTH) child care; the experiences of families who search for and use NTH child care; the lived experiences of providers who offer care during these hours; and the types of supports needed to maintain, sustain, and grow the supply of NTH care. This research project will provide new knowledge to inform policy development aimed at building supply and increasing equitable access, enhancing quality, and sustaining a thriving NTH child care workforce. All products will be shared with our state partner, the Illinois Department of Human Services.

Learn More

For a research-to-policy brief based on this report, please see: Bromer, J. & Melvin, S. A. (2024). *Quality in nontraditional-hour child care: A research-to-policy brief*. Erikson Institute.

This report is available to download at:
<https://www.erikson.edu/inccs>.

For more information about this study, contact:
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