

Unanticipated gains: Origins of network inequality in everyday life ^[1]

Briefing of research

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AVAILABILITY

- Video briefing on research findings ^[2]

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Excerpts from the University of Chicago news release:

Besides caring for children, many child care centers have another overlooked function—they connect parents with each other as informal advisors in child rearing, and with agencies that help with the challenges of parenting, research at the University of Chicago shows.

The centers become locations where parents can build "social capital"—the contacts they need to navigate through problems, such as concerns for a child's development and finding good health care and schools. The concept of social capital, developed at the University over decades, helps explain the powerful effect of personal connections on social status and financial success.

Unacquainted parents often become dependent upon each other through networks at their children's day care centers, said Mario Small, Professor in Sociology at the University of Chicago and author of *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life*. The book, one of the first to look at the impact of child care centers on parents, finds a wide range of different outcomes for parents depending on their day care or preschool of choice.

"Parents come to school to find someone to care for their children, and they end up learning ways of taking care of each other," Small said. "When you are a parent, particularly a first-time parent, the best resource you have is another parent."

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The research showed benefits for poor and non-poor parents. Mothers with children in child care centers had at least one more good friend than other mothers, for instance. Non-poor mothers who made friends at day care centers were nearly 60 percent less likely to be depressed than those who did not make friends. Poor mothers were less likely to experience homelessness if their children were enrolled in day care centers, even if they had experienced homelessness before.

Small found that not all the networks are equal, however. Some centers encourage connections by organizing parties and events around Mother's Day. Child care centers that have strict pick-up and drop-off times are more likely to have strong parent networks because more parents gather at the same time and likely know each other.

The differences emerged from research based on Small's "Childcare Centers and Families Survey" of 300 randomly sampled centers in New York in 2004. In addition to interviews with parents and center staff, the research also included data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study of 3,500 mothers of children born between 1998 and 2000 in the nation's 20 largest cities.

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Non-profit organizations, for instance, interested in reaching disadvantaged children with opportunities such as exposure to arts programs, or gifts at Christmas, find it convenient to work through day care centers, he found. Agencies providing health care assistance and information about domestic violence also find it useful to visit day care centers and post notices of their services on bulletin boards, he found.

"The reason this happens is because of the professional ethos of the centers. Over and over I heard center directors say, "You can't take care of the child without taking care of the family,"" he said. Some centers, such as Head Start, receive government funding and are required to provide resource information.

Small found that centers in poorer neighborhoods, at least in New York, are more likely to get services than those in more well-to-do neighborhoods. The experience may vary in other parts of the country.

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As a graduate student, Small worked with famed sociologist William Julius Wilson, a professor of sociology at Harvard, who built his career at the University of Chicago following a tradition of careful study of neighborhoods and the poor. Famed sociologist James Coleman, also a University of Chicago professor, developed the concept of social capital to explain how parents are able to use their involvement in school to provide opportunities for their children.

Small's work has revealed a new understanding of networking. "People often think of network as a verb, meaning that the success of networking depends on a person's individual effort to make connections," Small said.

Small's work shows that the quality of the framework and the members of a network matter a great deal and can develop in unexpected ways. "What we found was that often the most useful friends, completely unexpected valuable contacts, come from people we meet when we have volunteered, in the case of these parents, who assisted in a field trip or helped raise \$200 for the center."

- reprinted from the University of Chicago

Tags: outcomes ^[4]

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