

Selecting a Quality Day Care for Young Children: A Cross-Sectional Survey of Parents in Karachi Pakistan

Shelina Bhamani^{*}
Waliyah Mughis^{**}
Sarah Fahim^{***}

Abstract

Early childhood is a critical period for developmental milestones, yet in regions like Pakistan, limited access to quality daycare due to socio-economic constraints poses significant challenges. This study explores the impact of daycare quality on child development, focusing on the structural, systemic, and cultural factors that influence childcare in a low-income Pakistani context. This cross-sectional study involved 56 participants recruited from a tertiary care hospital early childhood parenting education club. Data were collected through online structured questionnaires assessing parental perceptions of daycare quality based on several criteria including proximity, safety, curriculum, and staff qualifications. Results highlight a significant discrepancy between parental expectations and the actual qualities of daycare services available. Key preferences of parents when choosing daycare services demonstrated a strong demand for proximity, safety, enriched curricular offerings, and qualified staff. Participants prioritized daycare proximity (73.2% very important) and transport convenience (71.4%). A vast majority valued a clean, safe environment (96.4%) and preferred balanced curricula with enrichment programs (96.4%). Qualifications of staff (92.8%) and outdoor play areas (87.5%) were also regarded as highly important. The study underscores the urgent need for regulatory frameworks that standardize daycare services to improve child developmental outcomes. Implementing national guidelines and enhancing caregiver training are recommended to elevate childcare quality, thus fostering better developmental environments for children in Pakistan.

Keywords: Early Childhood Development, Daycare, Childcare, Parental Perceptions

* Begum Nusrat Bhutto Women University, Sukkur, Email: sheema.gohar22@alumni.aku.edu

** IBA Public School Sukkur. Email: gohar.chang@iba-suk.edu.pk

*** IBA Public School Sukkur. Email: ayazlatifsiyal@ibacc.edu.pk

Introduction

The early childhood years are critical for a child's development, as they set the foundation for physical, cognitive, and socioemotional health. A child's life trajectory is significantly influenced by the quality of care and early learning experiences received during this formative stage. In Pakistan, where many parents lack sufficient knowledge of child rights, particularly in education and health, the ramifications for children can be severe, leading to restricted access to education, poor health outcomes, and delayed developmental intervention. Enhancing parental awareness of child rights is crucial for ensuring children's well-being and advocating for their rights. Amidst this, day care emerges as a vital service that not only supports children's growth but also aids parents in balancing work and family life (Benette, 2024).

Literature Review

Quality day care programs are essential for providing children with opportunities for socialization, cognitive stimulation, and emotional support, which are essential for their comprehensive development. High-quality day care can enhance children's language development, school preparedness, and socioemotional skills, laying a solid foundation for future academic and social success. These experiences also help develop critical abilities like problem-solving, cooperation, and self-regulation among young children (Markitors, 2021). Despite the recognized benefits, the provision of private day care services in low- and middle-income countries like Pakistan is limited (37%), with only 57% of children under three years of age having access to these centers (Raikes et al., 2023).

Key factors contributing to day care quality include process-related elements such as like interactions between caregivers and children, curriculum content, family engagement practices, as well as structural elements like caregiver-child ratios, location, staff qualifications, safety measures, licensing and accreditation, health/nutrition practices, record maintenance, and physical environment (Shpancer, 2020). Guidelines for evaluating and promoting quality in day care centers are provided by international frameworks like the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) certification standards. These indicators if not maintained lead to poor child development outcomes and negative effects overall (Pinto et al., 2013).

Staff recruitment and retention in childcare present significant hurdles, emphasizing the importance of a robust structural system and conducive working conditions for fostering healthy interactions between staff and

children. Optimal staff-child ratios and space requirements are crucial for ensuring quality care and supervision (Miho et al., 2012). A strong structural system and quality working conditions both work in favor of staff and child as healthy and effective interactions occur between them. The ideal child-to-staff ratio is recommended to be 5:1, excluding ancillary staff for younger children as they require close supervision and maximum to 7:1. Moreover, the ideal space requirement for these centers is 3.6m² per child while 8.9 square meters per child for indoor and outdoor space respectively. In addition to, qualified staff and their ongoing professional development are directly proportion to pedagogical quality and optimal child outcomes. Measuring the quality standards of these childcare center a study conducted reviewed 11 instruments assessing these global indicators for quality daycare services indicated critical aspects of high-quality daycare services reinforcing the need of extensive and all-inclusive measuring tools (Ishimine & Tayler, 2013).

Another major aspect in selection of quality daycare for young children are parents' perceptions as they are vital decision-makers. Utilization patterns and children's experiences in care are greatly influenced by their views, preferences, and satisfaction with day care services (Das et al., 2018). It is fundamental to fully understand how parents see aspects like cost, accessibility, safety, educational possibilities, and cultural sensitivity to design daycare programs that satisfy the demands and expectations of families. Parents as collaborators in the daycare process not only allows open communication among childcare staff and caregivers but also brings uniformity, encouraging continuity of care and favorable results for the kids (Chandler & Dilmaghani, 2023). A survey study conducted in Bangladesh revealed that job performance and work efficiency of employed parents was impacted with quality of childcare facilities accessible to them (Moon & Hasan, 2022). Another survey conducted on working Australian mothers reported higher levels of satisfaction to maintain work-life balance among mothers who had access to quality child-care facilities (Luppi & Arpino, 2020).

According to National Assembly of Pakistan (2023), the Day Care Centers Act, 2023, daycare refers to care during day when parents at work, employing 70 employees and promoting women work force. This clearly indicates the existence of law for childcare services in Pakistan. A survey study conducted with 140 organizations revealed 58% of organizations did not provide any childcare facilities regardless of high employee demand and need. While all the respondents who provided childcare support reported positive impact and better job performance by employees on business (IFC, 2021). Moreover, Lack of access to quality day care centers and uncertain city crises were reported as a major barrier to parents' choice

for utilization of childcare centers in a study conducted in Karachi, Pakistan (Premani et al., 2021).

However, there is still lack of empirical research carried out on questions about accessibility, security, the quality of learning opportunities offered, and the minimum standards fulfilled by daycare centers. Moreover, in Pakistan, caregivers' views about childcare facilities and how they make choices are not well-researched despite need due to increased participation of females in workforce and modernization. Exhaustive and in-depth studies covering a range of structural, systemic, cultural, and ethnical, socioeconomic, and location in order to improve service delivery, support the wellbeing of young children and families in Pakistan, and influence policy decisions, it is imperative that this research vacuum be filled.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to explore the preferences, challenges and expectations of selecting a quality day care for young children. The focused objectives were to:

- To survey the preferences of parents regarding the selection of quality day care services
- To explore if there is a gender association with preference of transportation, proximity, operating hours on the weekdays and the weekend.

Methodology

Design

A cross-sectional online survey was designed and planned to explore parents' preferences, challenges, and expectations in selecting a quality day care for their young children in Karachi Pakistan. Data were collected through structured questionnaires assessing parental perceptions of daycare quality based on several criteria including proximity, safety, curriculum, and staff qualifications. The survey was a part of a parenting education webinar series whereby parents who are interested in attending the webinars are sent a survey link.

Research Setting & Sampling

Karachi is a metropolitan city with a wide range of people from different socioeconomic, ethnic, educational, and professional backgrounds. A simple non-random universal sampling was administered. Urban-residing parents primarily from Karachi, Pakistan who are part of a

tertiary care hospital early childhood parenting education clubs were approached for participation.

Participants

Of the 58 attendees completing the survey, 56 consented to their responses to be used for research purposes, with 48 female (85.7%) and 8 male (14.3%) respondents. Participants attended as parents (20, 35.7%), teachers (11, 19.6%), educators or care providers (21, 37.5%) or other (4, 7.1%). Most participants were post-graduates (28, 50%) or graduates (23, 41.1%), while 2 had completed undergraduate level education and 3 had completed matriculation/intermediate (high school/college).

In terms of monthly household income, 11 (19.6%) reported PKR 10,000 to 50,000, 13 (23.2%) reported PKR 50,000 to 100,000, 10 (17.9%) reported PKR 100,000 to 150,000 and 22 (39.3%) over PKR 150,000. Most participants had 3 to 6 family members in their household (28, 50%), while 15 (26.8%) had 1 to 3 family members, 10 (17.8%) had 6 to 9 family members and 3 (5.3%) reported over 9 family members residing in their household. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of N=56 participants.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of participants (N=56)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Participant gender		
Male	8	14.3%
Female	48	85.7%
Participant attending as		
Parent	20	35.7%
Teacher	11	19.6%
Care Providers	21	37.5%
Other	4	7.1%
Education level		
Matriculation/Intermediate	3	5.3%
Undergraduate	2	3.6%
Graduate	23	41.1%
Postgraduate	28	50%
Monthly household income		
PKR 10,000 – 50,000	11	19.6%
PKR 50,000 – 100,000	13	23.2%
PKR 100,000 – 150,000	10	17.9%
PKR 150,000 and above	22	39.3%

Number of family members in household

1 – 3	15	26.8%
3 – 6	28	50%
6 – 9	10	17.8%
9 and above	3	5.4%

Tools and materials

A self-reported questionnaire consisting of two sections was administered. The data collection tool was self-designed considering the questions that would focus on day care quality perceptions of the caregivers. The tool was reviewed by three experts from the field and a pilot was conducted on 10 participants. Since the tool does not have any response scale specific category no psychometric analysis could be performed. Section A focused on demographic indicators, while Section B contained questions related to day care preferences, including a quality composite of 14 items. The questionnaire primarily gathered information on preferences for day care proximity, fee structures, and choices related to teachers, curriculum, environment, and infrastructure. The reliability of the scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a value of .096 indicating high internal consistency of the scale.

Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.26) to explore simple descriptive trends for the preferences and Pearson r correlation for gender association. This analysis aimed to explore the phenomenon under investigation.

Ethics

The online survey link included a notice stating that the data collected may be used for scholarly and research purposes. Parents were informed that they could freely consent to or decline participation in the survey. The form did not include any identifiable information such as names or contact numbers.

Results

Participants were asked about their needs, opinions, and preferences regarding aspects of childcare, such as 'How important is the proximity of the daycare to your home or workplace?'. Their responses are summarised in Table 2. Participant preferences regarding daycare services highlighted the importance of proximity to home or workplace, with 73.2% (41

participants) deeming it very important. The majority preferred daycares with convenient transportation options (71.4%, 40 participants) and valued a clean, safe environment (96.4%, 54 participants). Curriculum preferences leaned towards a balanced approach (66.1%, 37 participants), with a strong interest in additional enrichment programs (96.4%, 54 participants). Qualifications and experience of daycare staff were considered very important by 92.8% (52 participants), and nearly all respondents expressed a desire for outdoor play areas or access to green spaces (87.5%, 49 participants). Majority parents considered staff qualifications as most important elements of a day care center quality (92.8%, 52 participants), also majority preferred standardized ratios for child care center i.e. 1:7 and shared regularized communication with parents and their participation as prime importance.. When asked about quality of the programs participants elicited program quality as one of the major factors in selecting a day care.

Table 2

Participant preferences regarding daycare services (N=56)

Question	Frequency	Percentage
How important is the proximity of the daycare to your home or workplace?		
Not important	2	3.6%
Somewhat important	13	23.2%
Very important	41	73.2%
Do you prefer a daycare with convenient transportation options nearby?		
Yes	40	71.4%
Neutral	12	21.4%
No	4	7.2%
What are your preferred daycare operating hours?		
Part-time	12	21.4%
Full-time	18	32.2%
Flexible	26	46.4%
Are extended hours or weekend care options important to you?		
Yes	32	57.1%
Neutral	9	16.1%
No	15	26.8%
What type of curriculum do you prefer for your child?		
Balanced	37	66.1%
Play-based	17	30.4%
Academics-based	2	3.6%
Are you interested in additional enrichment programs (music, art, or language classes)?		
Yes	54	96.4%
Neutral	2	3.6%

Question	Frequency	Percentage
No	0	0
How important is a clean and safe environment to you when selecting a daycare?		
Not important	0	0
Somewhat important	2	3.6%
Very important	54	96.4%
Do you prefer a daycare with outdoor play areas or access to green spaces?		
Yes	49	87.5%
Neutral	7	12.5%
No	0	0
How important is it for daycare staff to have relevant qualifications and experience?		
Not important	0	0
Somewhat important	4	7.2%
Very important	52	92.8%
What is your preference regarding staff-to-child ratios?		
Low ratios (more one-on-one attention)	12	21.4%
Neutral	5	8.9%
Standard ratios (meeting regulatory requirements)	39	69.6%
How important is regular communication and updates from daycare staff about your child's day?		
Not important	1	1.8%
Somewhat important	7	12.5%
Very important	48	85.7%
Are you interested in opportunities for parental involvement, such as parent-teacher meetings or volunteer opportunities?		
Yes	51	91.1%
Neutral	5	8.9%
No	0	0
What is your budget range for daycare expenses per month?		
Below PKR 5000	14	25%
PKR 5,000 – 10,000	29	51.8%
PKR 10,000 – 20,000	11	19.6%
PKR 20,000 and above	2	3.6%
Would you consider daycare centres that offer financial assistance/subsidy programs?		
Yes	38	67.9%
No	2	3.6%
Maybe	16	28.5%
What is the most important factor for you when selecting a daycare for your child?		
Program quality	31	55.3%
Staff qualification	9	16.1%

Question	Frequency	Percentage
Location of centre	7	12.5%
Cost/fees	3	5.4%
Other	6	10.7%

There was an attempt being done to explore if the gender is correlated with preference of proximity, transportation services, operating hours, weekend operations. Gender was found to have very low correlations with all four variables: -0.041 for proximity; -0.096 for transportation; 0.13 for operating hours; and 0.034 for weekend operations according to Pearson correlation coefficients. The p-values (Sig. 2-tailed) of these correlations were not statistically significant. Table 3: Gender correlation with proximity, transportation, operating hours and weekend operations.

Description	Proximity	Transportation	Operating Hours	Weekend Operations
Pearson Correlation	-0.041	-0.096	0.13	0.034
Sig.(2tailed)	0.763	0.484	0.339	0.805

Discussion

The first few items elicit responses about proximity and transportation/traffic conditions. Caregivers quoted proximity to be most important with transportation facility availability. These findings are common in studies of (Compton, & Pollak, 2014; Premani et al., 2021, Sollars, 2016). Traffic delays and unexpected incidents are also very common due to which parents prioritize daycare services with proximity close to their homes with flexible hours to accommodate their work schedules. The increasing participation of women in the workforce further underscores the demand for more daycare centres. The findings are also validated by a study conducted in Bangladesh (Tonmoy & Islam, 2021). There was also high preference shown by the participants for the weekend operations for the day care. One of the reasons of high demand of day care centers is the increasing inflation the caregivers are working twice the efforts to make living happen in Pakistan (Durrant, & Sathar 2000).

Feedback from participants of the study indicate a preference for a balanced curriculum, enriched environment that support young children, clean and safe centers, outdoor play and access to green spaces. The similar indicators are also provided in different literature (Blau, & Currie, 2006; Elicker & Mathur, 1997; Kärrby & Giota, 1995; Taguma, et al., 2013; Rentzou, 2013). This is because caregivers of young children are aware of the children development needs and provide preferences to have

a stimulating, safe, rich and responsive environment for their children which is hard to provide in home settings. There is lack of such guidelines available in all provinces of Pakistan and lack of monitoring bodies to accredited day care centers based on standardize indicators. While, Punjab government has issued some guidelines, these barely address curriculum standards, leaving a significant gap in early childhood education quality (Women Development Department, 2018). Also, one of the reasons is that many daycare centers in Pakistan operate within residential buildings, lacking access to green spaces. This discrepancy highlights the need for standards that ensure child-friendly environments (Early Childhood Development Agency, 2019). The absence of licensing requirements for daycare staff poses a critical issue, allowing individuals without proper qualifications to work as caregivers. This lack of regulation compromises the quality of care and education for young children (Slot, 2018). Parental preferences also leaned towards affordable daycare options, yet Pakistan's per capita income and lack of public daycare services limit access for many families, especially those with low income.

Many caregivers' rated program quality as one of the most important factors and day care educator competency as second most indicator of day care services. This is in line with the studies conducted globally (Blasberg et al., 2019). One of the major reasons for this is lack of standardized quality day care facilities in Pakistan, having less to no monitoring on daycare centers, no licensing and registration for the care providers and day care educators.

Nurturing care, which includes quality early childhood education and daycare, plays a crucial role in promoting early childhood development by providing environments that are rich in cognitive and emotional stimulation (Britto et al, 2017). Long-term effectiveness of early educational intervention in improving not just academic achievements but also socio-emotional skills during early childhood (Barnett, 2011). Interventions in lower socio-economic settings need to be particularly robust to overcome the additional barriers to development faced by children in these environments (Votruba-Drzal et al, 2016). In Pakistan there are a wide range of day care services from very high-end quality ones to the ones operated in small rooms in a flat (IFC, 2021) There is a bill passed by Pakistan which quotes the quality of day care in Pakistan that talks about proximity, service quality, teacher child ratio, environment etc (Women Development Department, 2018) . Notwithstanding these laws, there is still reason for concern over the poor quality of many day care facilities. This study therefore underscores the critical need for high-quality daycare facilities that can provide comprehensive developmental

support to mitigate the disadvantages imposed by socio-economic constraints.

Policy Recommendations

There is a need to provide capacity development to the early childhood workforce regarding the day care quality and how day care can be established in different settings. To bridge these gaps, national guidelines on quality daycare services, including standardised monitoring of and licensing for daycare practitioners, are essential. Additionally, public services such as free-of-cost daycare for low-income groups are vital for ensuring that all children, regardless of their family's socioeconomic status, receive quality care and early education.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical need for childcare services in Pakistan that align with parents' preferences for proximity, curriculum, environment, and staff qualifications, within an accessible budget range. Implementing national guidelines and regulatory measures for daycare services is imperative to support the emerging workforce and to ensure the well-being and development of the next generation.

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Author Note

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