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Low-income parents' adult interactions at childcare centres

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about the extent and nature of low-income parents' interactions with other parents and staff at childcare centres, despite the potential for these interactions to provide emotional, informational, and instrumental support. This study interviewed 51 parents at three childcare centres in low-income neighbourhoods in New York City. Twenty-six per cent of parents reported talking with other parents at drop-off and pick-up, and another 35% reported meeting with parents outside the centre in addition to talking with them at the centre. Parents' extent of interaction was related to how long they spent at drop-off and pick-up, their participation in centre activities, and their sociability in general. All parents reported interacting with teachers and administrators, and described them more often than other parents as good sources of information and advice. We discuss the implications for parents and centre-based childcare providers.

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Childcare; parents; social support; centre-based care; parent-teacher interactions

For decades, scholars have noted that childcare centres are an important locus of interactions for parents, both with other parents and with teachers (Bromer & Henly, 2009; Pence & Goelman, 1987; Small, 2009). Parents who see each other regularly while dropping off and picking up their children have opportunities to socialize. Additional opportunities are created by classroom activities that invite parent participation, such as field trips (Small, 2009). The relationships that parents establish with each other on site may be enriched off site during social visits and playdates with children. By serving as 'brokers' of social connections among parents (Small, 2009), childcare centres may ameliorate the social isolation, that is, more commonly found among residents of lower income than higher income communities (Campbell & Lee, 1992; Fischer, 1982; Rankin & Quane, 2000). Moreover, parents may communicate regularly with their child's teacher at the centre, particularly when they drop off and pick up their children (Endsley & Minish, 1991; Owen, Ware, & Barfoot, 2000).

Yet, little is known regarding the extent, location, and content of these interactions. For example, it is unclear how often parents socialize on site and off site, and if off site, where they do so. Furthermore, past research has not determined whether and how parents who tend to communicate with other parents and centre staff differ from those who do not, and whether parents who interact with other parents also tend to interact with teachers and administrators. In addition, the content of social interactions (i.e. topics discussed), and the type of support they may confer, has not been explored, nor has whether parents discuss similar topics with both parents and staff.

Because other parents, teachers, and administrators can provide social support to low-income parents, it is important to understand the content and location of their interactions. This paper expands the current knowledge based on low-income parents' interactions with other parents,

teachers, and administrators at childcare centres via interviews with parents at three child centres in low-income neighbourhoods in New York City.

The importance of social support for low-income parents

Social capital theory (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001) posits that social ties with others confer rewards by bestowing information, norms, and social support. These predictions have been supported empirically with respect to parents, in particular. Overall, parents who have social support, or who belong to a social group, tend to find parenting less difficult than parents who do not have such social support (Harris, 1995). Access to more social support, whether among friends or family, is associated with better parenting skills, lower rates of child maltreatment, and lower rates of depression and psychological distress (Brugha et al., 1998; Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Kalil, Born, Kunz, & Caudill, 2001; Lee, Anderson, Horowitz, & August, 2009; Li, Godinet, & Arnsberger, 2011; Lyons, Henly, & Schuerman, 2005; Martin, Gardner, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012). To the extent that childcare centres can provide parents with opportunities for social support, it is important to understand how social interactions at childcare centres can be facilitated.

On the other hand, the family stress model of parenting draws our attention to the constraints economic hardship places on parental behaviours (Conger & Elder, 1994; Edin & Lein, 1997; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Low-income parents, who are disproportionately likely to be unmarried (Shattuck & Kreider, 2013) and to have unstable jobs (Smith, Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, & Lee, 2000), may have more trouble meeting their work and family responsibilities than higher income parents. The former may have less time to interact with other parents – or even teachers – because they are rushed at drop-off and pick-up, and may be less able to participate in events at the childcare centre. Such barriers may reduce the opportunity for interactions in childcare centres.

Types of social support

Three types of social support have been identified: expressive, instrumental, and informational (House & Kahn, 1985). Emotional support includes actions related to caring, empathy, or sharing between trusted individuals (Thoits, 2011). Instrumental support includes the provision of practical assistance in the form of small favours or more substantial commitments. Informational support is the provision of knowledge or information that enables people to help themselves. According to Britner and Phillips (1995), parents may view childcare centres as sources of all three kinds of support.

For example, parents might obtain informational support from each other by exchanging tips about local resources that improve child's well-being, or by learning about other children's progress towards milestones to assess their own child's developmental status. Parents may find emotional support with one another by commiserating about their children's challenging behaviours. Finally, parents may be a source of instrumental support; another parent, for example, could offer to pick up a child from childcare if a parent's work schedule suddenly prevents him or her from doing so.

Similarly, parents may find teachers and administrators to be useful sources of emotional, instrumental, and informational support. For example, parents may turn to their child's teacher or a centre administrator to gain information about parenting strategies. They may also receive advice and solace regarding their child's progress and challenges, hear ideas for after-care activities, and obtain help with applications to kindergarten and elementary schools, all forms of social support that can reduce parents' isolation. According to one study, teachers even lend or give money to low-income parents (Bromer & Henly, 2009).

Despite the potential for parents to develop socially supportive relationships with other parents and centre staff, strikingly little research has addressed the extent to which such relationships are formed and how. Based on the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Small (2009) found that 60% of parents using a childcare centre reported making friends with another parent there.

He posited that centres encourage parents to form social ties with one another by eliciting parent participation in both on- and off-site activities. However, in a smaller study of New York City childcare providers, Small (2009) found that the proportion of centres that offered such activities varied. For example, the proportion of centres that held trips for parents ranged from 30% that offered a trip to a park outside the city to 79% that offered a trip to a museum or zoo. Parent participation in those trips ranged from 54% to 98% (Small, 2009).

Because parents in need of social support may vary greatly in their opportunities or abilities to participate in centre events, it is important to understand other factors that contribute to their interaction with other adults. For example, the most social parents might be the parents with the shortest commutes to and from childcare, who may consequently be the least rushed. Similarly, the most social parents may be least likely to go to a job or school after dropping off their child. It is also possible that the most social parents may be the same parents who communicate most with teachers and administrators as well. Indeed, the parents who talk with each other may tend to be more sociable in general.

The current study classifies parents into three groups according to their degree of social interactions with other parents (low, moderate, or high) based on their reported interactions at drop-off, at pick-up, and outside the centre. We examine the characteristics of parents in these three groups in an attempt to probe possible correlates and explanations for less or more interaction, such as lack of time at drop-off and pick-up, general sociability, and opportunities for interaction via participation in centre events. We also examine the extent and location of parents' interactions with each other outside the centre.

In addition, this study examines the content of parents' discussions with each other and with teachers and administrators. Of primary interest is the extent to which parents rely on each other for emotional, informational, and/or instrumental support, and whether the topics they discuss with each other resemble the topics they discuss with teachers and administrators, a question that has not been previously addressed in the childcare literature. One intriguing older study found that the primary topics of discussion between teachers and caregivers are the child's behaviour, the child's physical health, and activities that day at the centre (Endsley & Minish, 1991). The child's home life and activities outside the centre were discussed far less frequently (Endsley & Minish, 1991).

It is unknown whether similar patterns are evident in parents' discussions with each other. Like teachers, parents may be valued sources of information about parenting and child development, but unlike teachers, they are not intimately familiar with every child and are not viewed as authorities. On the other hand, unlike many teachers, parents have young children of their own, and parents may be more demographically similar to each other than to teachers. Moreover, parents may be more candid with one another than with teachers, with whom they may strive to promote a favourable opinion of themselves and their child.

The present study

The present study examines the nature of interactions, both with other parents and with centre staff, among parents whose children attend childcare centres in low-income neighbourhoods in New York City. (The identity of the centres is hidden to protect parents' and teachers' privacy.) We address the following questions:

- (1) To what extent do parents enrolled at the centres talk with other parents during drop-off and pick-up and outside the centre? What characteristics differentiate parents who do and do not interact with other parents?
- (2) To what extent do parents enrolled at the centres talk with teachers and administrators? What characteristics differentiate parents who do and do not interact with teachers and administrators?

- (3) What is the location of parents' interactions with each other outside the centre, and what topics do they discuss? Are these the same topics that parents discuss with teachers and administrators?

Method

Participants

The sample was drawn from caregivers at three childcare centres (termed Centres A, B, and C) that are co-located with newly built affordable housing sites in New York City. All centres were open to both residents of the affordable housing site and to others. All three sites are in predominantly low-income neighbourhoods. For example, 34%–63% of the residents across these neighbourhoods (defined by census tract) receive public assistance, and the unemployment rate ranges from 8% to 23% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

Centre A is part of a for-profit corporation, and Centres B and C belong to non-profit childcare chains. Centre A serves children from infancy to age five; Centres B and C serve only preschool-age children. In all, 229 children were enrolled at the centres at the time of data collection. Most of the caregivers spoke either English or Spanish fluently.

Because the centres are located in newly constructed affordable housing sites, they themselves are generally clean and new. Each has a front door past which caregivers need to be 'buzzed in' by an employee who monitors the entry. Caregivers then walk through a lobby area to drop off or pick up their child in his or her classroom. In Centre A, this lobby area is fairly small and sometimes crowded at drop-off and pick-up times. In Centres B and C, it is spacious and generally uncrowded. While most caregivers drop off their children between 7:30 and 9:00 am, pick-up times begin as early as 2:30 pm and extend to 6:00 pm.

Each centre was given \$3000 to offset the costs associated with helping to recruit participants and providing a private location at the centre where they could be interviewed. We personally distributed a letter to caregivers asking them to participate in the study. Recruitment letters and flyers were provided in both English and Spanish. The letters described the nature and goals of the study, and invited caregivers to participate in a 45-minute interview for which they would receive \$60 remuneration. The letter emphasized that participants' responses would never be shared with centre staff to assuage possible fears of recrimination for criticism of the centre. Caregivers were also told that their names and the name of the centre would never be used in the presentation of results. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer made the same assurances of confidentiality and began the interview only after the respondent signed the consent form. No respondents declined to participate at the time of the interview. Each centre had between 20 and 25 participants. All procedures were approved by the Teachers College IRB.

While we welcomed all caregivers as potential respondents, we did favour those who most often dropped off and/or picked up the child. In almost all cases (98%), participants were parents or step-parents, and one was a grandparent. For the sake of simplicity, we refer to participants as 'parents'.

A total of 66 parents consented to participate. For the present study, we excluded 15 parents who did not personally pick up and drop off their child at least one day in the previous week. Thus, our analytic sample is 51 parents. The majority of parents in our analytic sample were black (55%). Over half (53%) described themselves as Hispanic. Twenty-five per cent were married, 31% were cohabiting, and 43% were single. Thirty-one per cent of parents were immigrants, and 43% received public assistance. The mean annual household income was \$27,219 (SD = \$23,947).

Procedures

Interviews were conducted privately at the centre and required between 30 and 45 minutes. The instrument included both closed- and open-ended questions. With the exception of items collecting demographic information, the interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed. Interviewers were

fluent in both English and Spanish, and gave respondents the choice of either language. Interviewers were encouraged to use prompts to allow respondents to elaborate on their answers. The present study draws on open-ended questions that asked parents: (1) whether they talked to parents, teachers, or administrators at drop-off and pick-up, and what they discussed; (2) how often they spoke with other parents in their child's class, and what they talked about; (3) whether any parents or staff members had been good sources of information or advice, and if so, what about; (4) whether they themselves had provided information or advice to other parents, and if so, what about; (5) whether they socialized with other parents outside the centre, and if so, where; (6) whether their child played with other children from the centre outside centre hours, and if so, where; (7) how many friends parents had inside and outside the neighbourhood (which were summed); and (8) how many parents at the centre they knew on a first-name basis. Closed-ended questions included how long parents spent at drop-off and pick-up (<5 minutes, 5–10 minutes, >10 minutes), whether parents participated in specific centre activities, and demographic characteristics.

The open-ended responses were coded by the lead author using NVivo (version 10.2.2). The coder identified themes in the transcribed text, guided by the research questions. Using a grounded theory approach, the coder identified and revised themes as indicated by the respondents' answers, and then re-read the transcripts to assure that all text was assigned to appropriate coding themes in their final form. The results of the coding process were analysed using NVivo matrix analyses.

Results

The extent of parents' interactions

We began by looking at the extent to which parents said that they interacted with other parents and with teachers and administrators. While there were distinct differences in the degree to which parents socialized with other parents, all parents in the sample reported speaking to teachers and/or administrators at drop-off and/or pick-up. Therefore, we categorized parents only according to their degree of interaction with other parents.

To explore the nature and the extent of interactions among parents, and how they may vary, we looked for clusters of behaviours that might characterize parents who were more or less socially engaged with other parents. Specifically, we classified parents into three groups according to whether parents reported that they talked with one another at drop-off or pick-up and whether they met with other parents to socialize or arranged for their children to have playdates outside the centre. The first group (termed 'Low Interaction') consisted of parents who did not talk with other parents at either drop-off or pick-up and did not socialize with parents or do playdates outside the centre. This was the largest group of parents ($n = 20$, or 39%). One parent in this group, when asked whether he talked with other parents at drop-off, said, 'No, it's hi-bye, I got to go. I'm very hi-bye and got-to-go,' and at pick-up, 'No, usually by that time a lot of kids will be gone ... [and] when I pick up my kids, we go straight home. Straight home.' Another parent explained, 'I say hi and bye [to parents]. I don't really talk. I don't really have like a warm conversation with them ... I don't know nobody. I stay to myself.'

The second group (termed 'Moderate Interaction') comprised parents who talked with other parents at drop-off and/or pick-up but did not socialize with parents or do playdates outside the centre. This was the smallest group of parents ($n = 13$, or 26%). One parent in this group said, 'I talk to parents here because they have a lot of African people here and you know, some people speak my language,' but she did not socialize with parents outside the centre, saying, 'After I pick up [my son], I just go home.' Another parent said that she talked with other parents at drop-off, but when she described hearing other parents making plans for socializing outside the centre, she said, 'Most likely they be talking about doing playdates, but nobody tells me anything, so. But I'm okay with it.' Yet another parent, when asked whether he talked with parents at drop-off and/or pick-up, responded, 'I do ... with parents, something like, "hi, how are you doing?" We talk about

the kids,' but when asked about doing playdates or other activities in the neighborhood after pick-up, said, 'No not really at all here – it's not great ... the neighborhood itself, I don't really like it.'

The third group (termed 'High Interaction') comprised parents who talked with other parents at drop-off and/or pick-up and socialized with parents and/or did playdates outside the centre ($n = 18$, or 35%).¹ One parent in this group said that at pick-up, she would say to other parents, "How are you?" You know, "How's everything?" I might know a little bit about what's going on in their, you know, personal life that's like a funny event or something and I'll be like, "How did it go?" This parent also reported frequent socialization outside the centre, saying, 'Oh my god, I'm gonna be honest with you – almost every day we're doing something, you know.' Notably, several parents in this group indicated that they had forged relationships with other parents. For example, one parent said, 'I have gained and started friendships.' In some instances, these relationships extended to activities outside the centre, typically in playdates for children at the park. One parent indicated, 'We meet at the park with kids,' but not at other places without children, 'because we don't have babysitters'.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of parents in the three groups describing their degree of social interactions with other parents. There were some differences in the demographic characteristics, but tests for statistical significance were not run due to small sample sizes; thus, findings should be interpreted as suggestive. Parents in the Low Interaction group were more likely to be married, slightly younger, and less likely to be immigrants than other parents. Parents in the Moderate Interaction group had lower annual incomes than parents in the other two groups, but were also less likely to report that they or their children received public assistance. They were also more likely to be immigrants and identify as an 'other' racial/ethnic group, and less likely to speak English or Spanish at home. Parents in the High Interaction group were less likely to be single and their children were slightly older, on average, than those of the parents in the other two groups. Parents at Centre B were far more likely to be in the High Interaction group than parents at Centres A and C (69% vs. 30% and 11%, respectively). Interestingly, at Centre B, all parents were in either the Low or High Interaction group.

Table 1 also presents the three groups according to several characteristics – time constraints, involvement in centre activities, and sociability – that might explain their degree of interaction with other parents. For example, it might be that parents who do not talk to other parents at drop-off are rushed because they must go to work or school or have longer commutes because they do not live in the neighbourhood where the centre is located. We found, in fact, that parents in the High Interaction group were indeed most likely to live in the neighbourhood (61% vs. 30% and 31% in the Low and Moderate Interaction groups, respectively). Nevertheless, the High Interaction group reported having the longest average commute times (34 minutes, compared to 25 and 11 minutes in the Low and Moderate Interaction groups, respectively), which suggests that commute times were not a deterrent to parents who chose to socialize. We also found that while the majority of parents went to work or school after drop-off, parents in the Low Interaction group were most likely to do so (90% vs. 69% and 72% in the Moderate and High Interaction groups, respectively), suggesting that pressures to get to work or school on time might have discouraged interactions at drop-off.

The plurality in all three groups reported spending 5–10 minutes at drop-off and pick-up, with the exception of the High Interaction group at pick-up. Nearly half (47%) of that group spent more than 10 minutes at pick-up, compared to 30% of the Low Interaction group and 31% of the Moderate Interaction group. Also notable was the small proportion of parents in the Low Interaction group who spent more than 10 minutes at drop-off (15%), compared to parents in the Moderate (31%) and High (33%) Interaction groups.

Parents who interacted more with each other may have gotten to know each other by participating in centre or classroom events. Parents in the High Interaction group were more likely than parents in the Low and Moderate Interaction groups to go to a meeting or open house for parents (95% vs. 45% and 54%, respectively) and to attend a parent–teacher conference (100% vs. 65% and 69%, respectively). Parents in the Moderate and High Interaction groups were more likely to go to a centre event such as a fundraiser, party, or play (54% and 50%, respectively) than parents in the Low Interaction group (40%). They were also more likely to attend a field trip or help out in the

Table 1. Characteristics of parents by degree of interaction with other parents.

	Low Interaction: Does not talk with parents or socialize outside centre N (%) / M (SD)	Moderate Interaction: Talks with parents but does not socialize outside centre N (%) / M (SD)	High Interaction: Talks with parents and socializes outside centre N (%) / M (SD)
Demographics			
How related to child			
Mother	18 (90%)	11 (85%)	16 (89%)
Grandmother	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)
Father	2 (10%)	0 (0%)	2 (11%)
Stepfather	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)
City help pays for childcare	18 (90%)	11 (85%)	15 (83%)
Parent helps pay for childcare	12 (60%)	7 (54%)	12 (67%)
Family on public assistance	9 (45%)	4 (31%)	9 (50%)
Annual household income	\$28,375 (\$27,607)	\$21,089 (\$27,268)	\$30,361 (\$16,410)
Marital status			
Married	7 (35%)	2 (15%)	4 (22%)
Cohabiting	4 (20%)	4 (31%)	8 (44%)
Single	9 (45%)	7 (54%)	6 (33%)
Race/ethnicity ^a			
White	0 (0%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)
Black	11 (55%)	7 (54%)	10 (56%)
Hispanic	11 (55%)	6 (46%)	10 (56%)
Other	2 (10%)	1 (8%)	3 (17%)
Speak English at home ^b	16 (80%)	9 (69%)	16 (89%)
Speak Spanish at home	11 (55%)	5 (38%)	10 (56%)
Number of children in household	1.9 (0.9)	2.1 (1.3)	2.0 (1.1)
Number of adults in household	0.8 (0.6)	1.2 (1.0)	1.6 (1.0)
Age in years	30 (5)	32 (11)	33 (8)
Immigrant	4 (20%)	6 (46%)	6 (33%)
Child's age in years	3.3 (1.3)	3.1 (1.0)	3.6 (0.8)
Location			
Centre A	8 (40%)	4 (31%)	9 (50%)
Centre B	6 (30%)	0 (0%)	7 (39%)
Centre C	6 (30%)	9 (69%)	2 (11%)
Time constraints			
Lives in the neighbourhood	6 (30%)	4 (31%)	11(61%)
Length of commute in minutes	25 (27)	11 (6)	34 (38)
Goes to work or school after drop-off	18 (90%)	9 (69%)	13(72%)
How long spends at drop-off			
<5 minutes	6 (30%)	3 (23%)	2 (11%)
5–10 minutes	11 (55%)	6 (46%)	10 (56%)
>10 minutes	3 (15%)	4 (31%)	6 (33%)
How long spends at pick-up			
<5 minutes	4 (20%)	0 (0%)	3 (18%)
5–10 minutes	10 (50%)	9 (69%)	6 (35%)
>10 minutes	6 (30%)	4 (31%)	8 (47%)
Centre involvement			
Went to a meeting or open house for parents	9 (45%)	7 (54%)	17 (94%)
Went to parent-teacher conference	13 (65%)	9 (69%)	18 (100%)
Went to centre event such as fundraiser, party, or play	8 (40%)	7 (54%)	9 (50%)

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

	Low Interaction: Does not talk with parents or socialize outside centre <i>N</i> (%) / <i>M</i> (SD)	Moderate Interaction: Talks with parents but does not socialize outside centre <i>N</i> (%) / <i>M</i> (SD)	High Interaction: Talks with parents and socializes outside centre <i>N</i> (%) / <i>M</i> (SD)
Went on field trip or helped out in classroom	4 (20%)	4 (31%)	7 (39%)
Sociability			
Number of friends	13 (10)	15 (16)	18 (11)
Number of parents at centre known on first-name basis	1.0 (1.6)	1.4 (1.6)	3.4 (3.5)
How often talks to other parents in child's classroom			
Rarely or never	17 (85%)	4 (31%)	3 (17%)
Sometimes	2 (10%)	5 (38%)	8 (44%)
Every day or often	1 (5%)	4 (31%)	7 (39%)
<i>N</i>	20	13	18

^aCategories not mutually exclusive.

^bNot mutually exclusive with speak Spanish at home.

classroom (39% and 31%, respectively, vs. 20%). Thus, it appears the parent involvement in centre activities is associated with greater interaction with other parents.

Our hypothesis that parents who interacted more with other parents might be more sociable in general was confirmed. As shown in Table 1, the Low Interaction group had a lower average number of friends in New York City ($M = 13$) than the Moderate Interaction group ($M = 15$), who in turn had fewer friends than the High Interaction group ($M = 18$). The Low Interaction group knew the fewest number of parents at the centre on a first-name basis ($M = 1.0$), while the High Interaction group knew the greatest ($M = 3.4$). Finally, parents in the Low Interaction group spent the least time talking to other parents in their child's classroom. Almost all (85%) of parents in the Low Interaction group said that they rarely or never talked to other parents in their child's classroom (vs. 31% and 17% in the Moderate and High Interaction groups, respectively). Only 5% in the Low Interaction group reported talking to other parents every day or often, compared to 31% in the Moderate Interaction group and 39% in the High Interaction group.

The location and content of parents' interactions with other parents

As shown in Table 2, the park was a common location for parents to socialize outside the centre, with 18% of all parents doing so. Ten per cent of parents reported that they socialized with parents in their homes, and 20% reported that they socialized at various other sites, such as birthday parties, movies, or restaurants. In addition, 29% of parents did playdates with their children in the park. Twelve per cent reported that they did playdates at home and 8% reported that they did playdates at other sites such as restaurants and movies.

To discern the content of parents' interactions with each other, both in and outside the centre, and whether they might represent emotional, informational, or instrumental support, we asked parents what they talked about and whether they found other parents to be good sources of information or advice. We also asked parents whether other parents had asked them for information or advice, and if so, on what topic.

The results (Table 2) suggest that interactions among parents who were in the same classroom primarily involved conversations about their child's well-being and/or parenting strategies (41% of all respondents). For example, one parent said that she and another parent, 'talk about each of the kids to see how similar they are with each other. And that's pretty much it, 'cause we both have grown toddlers that are not well behaved all the time, so we try to see like, you know, different things to try to change the behavior and stuff.' In this example, commiseration regarding the

Table 2. The locations and content of social interactions between parents ($n = 51$).

	N (%) ^a
Locations for social interactions with parents outside the centre	
Socializes with parents at:	
Home	5 (10%)
Park	9 (18%)
Other	10 (20%)
Playdates with children at:	
Home	6 (12%)
Park	15 (29%)
Other	4 (8%)
Content	
Content of social interactions with parents at the centre:	
Child's well-being and parenting strategies	21 (41%)
Class/centre activities and social planning	15 (29%)
Satisfaction with centre/teachers	8 (16%)
Pre-k and schools	2 (4%)
Other parents have been a good source information or advice regarding:	
Child's well-being	2 (4%)
Centre activities	1 (2%)
Personal issues	1 (2%)
Other parents have asked respondent for information or advice regarding:	
Child's well-being, parenting strategies, and outside activities for children	3 (6%)
Childcare, pre-k, or schools	4 (8%)
Satisfaction or experience with centre	9 (18%)
Employment	1 (2%)

^aCategories are not mutually exclusive.

Note: For socializing with other parents, 'Other' includes birthday parties, restaurants, stores, the gym, the library, and movies. For playdates, 'Other' includes restaurants and movies.

challenges of parenting toddlers appears to represent emotional support, while information on parenting strategies and possible resources appears to represent informational support.

The second most common topic of conversation was class or centre activities, as well as social activities outside the centre (29% of all respondents). One parent described planning birthday parties, saying, 'Like we talk about celebrations, like their birthdays, what we could do for their birthdays, if we could have parties for them in school, and like, if we would all like to join in.' Another parent said that she and other parents talk about, 'what's our plan for the weekend,' and another said they talk about, 'if we can do some playdates, you know, things like around that.' Fewer parents talked with other parents about their satisfaction with the centre or teachers (16%) and about pre-k or schools (4%), the latter representing informational support.

Despite these conversations, only four parents (8%) reported that other parents were a good source of information or advice. A higher proportion (34%) said other parents had asked them for information or advice. These interactions regarded satisfaction with the centre or teachers (18%), information on childcare, pre-k, or schools (8%), or child's well-being and parenting strategies (6%), all of which may be considered examples of informational (and possibly emotional and/or instrumental) support. One parent said,

We were all kind of, not all, maybe one or two parents ... was also asking about pre-k to find out all the options due to the fact that they only have limited seating here, and it was a big class where [my daughter] is attending. So we were also asking [about] other pre-k schools around the neighborhood.

Only one parent reported being a source of information about a topic not related to children, and this topic was finding employment.

The content of parents' interactions with teachers and administrators

We had speculated that the parents who interacted with other parents might be the same parents who interacted with teachers and administrators. However, *all* respondents reported

that they talked with teachers and/or administrators at drop-off and/or pick-up. For example, a parent in the Low Interaction group drew a distinction between interactions with parents and interactions with teachers: 'I do talk to teachers and aides. The parents – "hi" in passing when they're dropping off their kids – but that's as far as it goes. [But] I do talk to the teachers.' Similarly, another parent in the Low Interaction group said, 'Well, [I talk to] teachers and aides more than parents. Parents, we all have different times when we see each other. So, more teachers and aides.'

As shown in Table 3, a strong majority of parents (76%) talked with teachers and administrators about the child's well-being and parenting strategies. For example, one parent said that teachers helped by providing 'ideas [on] where to take my daughter as far as museums and stuff. Just giving me things to do with my daughter, taking her different places and things like that. Things to expand her education.' Another parent said that when she tells her son's teacher, '[My son] gave me a hard time today,' She'll say, 'Oh, this is what I did,' or she will talk to me about 'maybe you need to work on shapes with him,' or 'try this or 'try that.' So she always does that. Or like potty [training]. She'll either interact with me first, or I'll interact with her, but I talk to them all the time. A small proportion (20%) talked with teachers and/or administrators about centre activities, questions, or concerns. For example, one parent said she talked with teachers and administrators 'about how did [my daughter] do today, what did she need, what activities they have going on within the week or so'.

Parents also reported receiving informational support about local services. For instance, one parent said, 'I was looking for a dentist for the children, a paediatric dentist. She gave me information about that.' However, most often, the interactions focused on the child's progress and how to foster development. A parent cited support from a teacher regarding

my son's progress. His teacher's number one. If she sees a problem, if there's something I can do to make him better at what he's lacking, [she is] hands on, all the time, telling me what needs to be done, all the time.

This type of parenting advice could represent both emotional and informational support.

Nearly one-third of respondents (31%) said that teachers were good sources of information and advice regarding child's well-being, and 29% said that they offer helpful parenting strategies and advice on activities for their children. A smaller proportion (16%) received information from teachers and staff regarding class or centre activities and enrolment, and 14% received information regarding pre-k enrolment and schools. One parent described input from teachers as follows:

[She] provides us with information for [my daughter's] advancement... And all the other teachers... they always tell us how to help her advance and give us information for the future, such as putting her in school or pre-k, so we'll be prepared to keep up with her and make sure she's alright and for her education in general.

In general, parents appear to receive informational and to a lesser degree emotional, but not instrumental, support from staff.

Table 3. The content of social interactions between parents and teachers/administrators.

	N (%) ^a
Talks with teacher and administrators about:	
Child's well-being and parenting strategies	39 (76%)
Centre activities, questions, or concerns	10 (20%)
Teachers and administrators have been a good source information or advice regarding:	
Child's well-being	16 (31%)
Parenting strategies and activities for children	15 (29%)
Class/centre activities and enrolment	8 (16%)
Pre pre-k or schools	7 (14%)
Personal matters and advice	5 (10%)

^aCategories are not mutually exclusive.

Discussion

Based on interviews with low-income parents at three childcare centres in New York City, we characterized one-third (35%) as having a high level of interaction with other parents, namely talking with them at drop-off and/or pick-up and also socializing with other parents and/or arranging playdates outside the centre. One-quarter (26%) of parents were characterized as having a moderate level of social interactions because they talked with other parents at the centre but did not socialize or do playdates. More than one-third of parents (39%) were characterized as having a low level of interaction because they did not talk with parents at drop-off or pick-up and did not meet outside the centre. Despite this variability in how much parents socialized with each other, we found that all parents interacted with teachers and/or administrators at drop-off and pick-up.

The content of parents' interactions, both with other parents and with teachers and administrators, focused mostly on child's well-being and parenting strategies, childcare, pre-K, and schools. The results thus indicate that parents receive what appears to be informational and emotional support at childcare centres. Even so, only a minority of parents cited other parents, teachers, or administrators as good sources of information and advice. Curiously, far more parents reported giving advice and information to other parents than receiving it themselves. If parents find it more palatable to view themselves as givers than receivers of advice, they may be primed to remember instances of the former more than the latter. Alternatively, parents may perceive themselves as being helpful sources of advice or information, but other parents may view them as uninformative or even intrusive.

Small (2009) reported that 60% of parents at childcare centres formed friendships with at least one other parent. While we did not ask parents whether they had formed friendships per se, we found that the Moderate and High Interaction groups, both of whom talked to other parents, together constituted 61% of our sample. Small defined friendships between parents who exclusively focus on child-related topics of discussion and activities 'compartmental intimates', and noted that such friends can provide key social support. We find that of the 61% of parents who had relationships – if not friendships – with other parents, virtually all reported discussing topics restricted to children.

Small (2009) argued that parent ties are most effectively fostered when childcare centres actively promote parent engagement, and when there is a narrow time window for drop-off and pick-up, which creates opportunities for parents to interact. Consistent with this, we found that parent involvement in centre activities was associated with greater interaction with other parents. However, the centres in our study had relatively wide time windows for pick-up – as long as 3½ hours, which could reduce the opportunities for social interaction. Although we did not ask centre administrators about their efforts to promote parent engagement, it is possible that their efforts were more limited than those in Small's analytic samples. Notably, Small's parent samples were largely low-income, as was ours, but his included parents at Head Start centres, while ours did not. Head Start centres are, by design, required to actively promote parent participation. It is possible that our findings would have reflected higher rates of socializing had we sampled Head Start centres.

Parent participation was not the only characteristic that differed across the Low, Moderate, and High Interaction groups. Our results confirmed our hypothesis that parents who do not interact with other parents are less sociable in general. Parents with low levels of social interaction with other parents had fewer friends outside the centre than parents with moderate or high levels of social interaction, suggesting that low-interaction parents tend to be more socially isolated generally than high-interaction parents. Parents with moderate or high levels of social interaction talked more frequently to other parents and knew more of them on a first-name basis.

We further hypothesized that parents with low levels of interaction may have been more pressed for time than other parents, perhaps because they were struggling to meet the daily challenges of parenting as single parents with limited economic resources, because they had to go to school or work, or because they had longer commutes. Findings indicated that low-interaction parents were no more likely to be single or low-income than other parents; moreover, their commutes were

shorter than those of high-interaction parents. Yet, low-interaction parents tended to spend less time than other parents at drop-off or pick-up, perhaps because they were more likely to go to school or work after dropping off their child. High-interaction parents were most likely to spend more than 10 minutes picking up their child, despite having the longest commutes home. However, high-interaction parents had the greatest number of adults in their household, suggesting that additional caregivers may have created time for them to socialize at the centre, and perhaps outside it as well. Together, these results suggest that the demands of work, school, and family may exert significant constraints on parents' ability to socialize with other parents. It is also possible, however, that parents who go to work or school may simply have less need for social contact with others.

Parents reported turning to teachers and administrators more often than each other for information and advice regarding their child. Consistent with Endsley and Minish (1991), we found that parents most often sought reports about their child's progress and appeared to respect teachers' opinions and guidance. Even the parents who talked little to other parents talked to teachers, and valued these interactions, consistent with past research (Britner & Phillips, 1995; Weigel & Martin, 2009). These results are heartening because parent-teacher communication may be indicative of higher quality childcare. Two studies have found that parent-teacher communication was more common in centres with higher quality child-teacher interactions (Owen et al., 2000; Perlman & Fletcher, 2012), and another study found that it was associated with greater teacher knowledge of child development (Swartz & Easterbrooks, 2014). Moreover, communication between parents and teachers may facilitate continuity of care, in which teachers and parents who exchange information about a child are better prepared to provide supportive and sensitive care (Owen et al., 2000).

We find that the most frequent topic of discussion between parents and teachers or administrators is the child's well-being and parenting strategies, and that these are also the most common subjects of teachers' advice or information. It is unclear from our data whether parents or teachers more frequently initiate these exchanges. In their analysis of interactions between parents and teachers at drop-off, Perlman and Fletcher (2012) found that parents initiated information exchanges more often than staff, though they were equally likely to initiate small talk. This finding is consistent with our impression that parents value their interactions with teachers because they are perceived to advance the child's development. Indeed, Owen et al. (2000) refer to parent-teacher communication as a key component of the 'caregiving partnership' between parents and teachers.

Taken together, the findings have important implications for low-income parents, who are typically more socially isolated than higher income parents, and the childcare centres that serve them (Campbell & Lee, 1992; Fischer, 1982; Rankin & Quane, 2000). The promotion of parent participation in centre activities appears to be a potent mechanism for fostering parent interactions. The time pressures of work and school, however, may demand that centres adapt to tight parent schedules when choosing times for such events. More narrow pick-up windows might also foster parent interaction, though we recognize that childcare centres understandably seek to accommodate the wide-ranging work and school schedules of the parents. Certainly, childcare staff – teachers and administrators – could initiate extensive and ongoing interactions with their parents, as parents seem particularly receptive to this form of social support.

Finally, we found that parks are a common location for socialization and playdates outside the centre. Parents reported stopping at parks between picking up their child at the centre and going home, as well as making appointments with other parents for their children to meet for playdates outside the centre. Parks located near childcare centres may therefore be particularly beneficial for community residents by providing opportunities for parents and children to socialize simultaneously.

Limitations

Because we relied on parents' voluntary participation, it is unclear how representative our respondents were of all parents whose children attended the three centres we sampled. It is possible that the most isolated or busy parents were inclined not to volunteer for our study, which would

lead us to overestimate the amount of social interaction experienced by parents at these centres. Our exclusion of parents who did not both drop off and pick up their child was also likely to contribute to an overestimate of parents' interaction. Another shortcoming of our study is that we did not collect information from centre directors about their efforts to encourage parent participation in their centres. Last, it is ultimately unclear whether, in our sample, parents who did not interact with other parents lacked the time to do so or merely preferred not to do so. It is possible, for example, that although low-interaction parents had the fewest friends in general, they were satisfied with their existing social networks and simply chose not to invest in relationships with other parents at the centre. Further research is needed to explore the extent to which parents are satisfied with their degree of interaction with other parents.

Note

1. One parent did not talk with parents at drop-off or pick-up, but reported doing playdates twice a month. Because this represented fairly regular socialization, we included this parent in Group 3.

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