

NEW ZEALAND FAMILIES' BELIEFS ABOUT WHAT CONSTITUTES
SUCCESSFUL MANAGEMENT OF UNSUPERVISED CHILDCARE:
A QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explored what some New Zealand families believe constitutes the successful management of unsupervised childcare. It was designed to increase social understanding and practitioner knowledge of the issue by exploring families' beliefs, practices and perspectives. A qualitative descriptive approach was used to obtain a straight description of successful unsupervised childcare, using the everyday language of the participating families. Data was collected in semi structured interviews with five family groups, and subjected to content and thematic analysis. Findings suggest unsupervised childcare is both choice and solution, though parents are fearful of the legal and social consequences of using it. Context of the care is important, with the child's preference, community context and availability of adults through distal supervision critical components of its success. Trust between parent and child, the use of rules and boundaries to regulate child behaviour, the teaching of skills and strategies to build child competency, and parental support of children while unsupervised are identified by parents as factors linked to success. Parents identify increasing child independence and self responsibility as positive outcomes from the successful use of unsupervised childcare. The findings from this study, while not conclusive, provide an insight into the New Zealand experience of successful unsupervised childcare. This study has helped to identify positive factors resulting in good outcomes from which successful interventions could be developed, provides information that will be of particular interest to practitioners and policy makers, and provides a platform to launch larger studies into the issue of unsupervised children.

Keywords: Child Care, Successful Unsupervised Childcare, Public Health, Qualitative Description, Child and Family Health, Social Health, Family Group Interviews, Semi Structured Interviews.

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GLOSSARY

Afterschool care: Arranged childcare provided in the afterschool hours. In New Zealand, for parents to receive government childcare subsidies this childcare has to have Child Youth and Family Services (CYFS) approval.

Beliefs: Ideas, practices and perspectives of an individual or family.

Childcare: Care and supervision of children whose parents are working, provided by a child-minder or local authority (Makins, 1996). Three different types of childcare described in this study.

- **Supervised childcare:** Childcare that is delivered by an adult, or adults, who take responsibility for the children in their care (Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Ochilree, 1992).
- **Unsupervised childcare:** Childcare where children are caring for themselves without any adult presence or direct adult supervision (Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Ochilree, 1992).
- **Successful unsupervised childcare:** Describes the situation where children are caring for themselves without any adult presence or direct adult supervision, and where families are experiencing positive and successful outcomes.

Successful unsupervised childcare (for the purpose of this study) involves the following criteria: parents believe it is working successfully for their family, distal supervision and boundaries are in place, it is the chosen form of childcare of both parents and children, parents believe children are happy and thriving in the context of the unsupervised care, and the duration of the unsupervised episode is less than three hours.

Distal supervision: Supervision provided by an adult but occurring from a distance. This can be in the form of a parent making contact by telephone, a child having access to another adult, i.e. neighbour or friend, or parents taking an interest in their child's unsupervised time and discussing it with the child.

Home-alone: An emotive phrase to describe children who are unsupervised. Has a negative overtone.

Latchkey children: A term used to describe children going to school with a door key on a string around their neck. This phrase was first used in a 1944 British documentary about unsupervised children (Belle, 1999)

Self-care: A positive phrase referring to children who are caring for themselves without any adult presence, or direct adult supervision.

Supervisory neglect: Describes the situation where children are inadequately supervised while in the care of an adult, or where a parent or caregiver has failed to make adequate provision for the safety or well being of the children in their care (Coohey, 1998; Coohey, 2002; Kasida et al., 2001).

Chapter One: Introduction

This is a qualitative descriptive study about what a small number of New Zealand families believe constitutes the successful management of unsupervised childcare. I have focused on several key areas as I explore and describe the New Zealand experience of successful unsupervised childcare. These key areas are family beliefs about successful unsupervised childcare, why families choose to use unsupervised childcare, what struggles and dilemmas they face as a result of this choice, and what they do to make unsupervised childcare work successfully for them.

BACKGROUND

The phenomenon of children returning home from school to empty houses is not new. In Britain, in 1944, the term ‘latchkey kid’ was coined to describe children who were going to school with a door key on a string around their neck or returning home to find the key hidden under the doormat (Belle, 1999). This was a common scenario during and after World War 2 due to one parent being enlisted and the other working. Articles published at this time voiced concern at the number of children who were unsupervised after school, and the effect this unsupervised time was having on them (Belle, 1999).

Sweeping economic and social changes occurring around the globe in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in many women re entering the workforce, and as well an increase in the number of one parent families. The phenomenon of unsupervised children again became a topical issue as working mothers juggled the demands of work, children and childcare (Galston, 1991; Hubbard, 1994; Revell, 1997; Stirling, 1997). Today unsupervised childcare remains an issue of concern. Work hours that are inflexible and incompatible with school hours means that for many working parents childcare becomes an issue (Ochiltree, 2002; Vandivere, Tout, Capizzano & Zaslow, 2003a). Arranging suitable childcare that is accessible, affordable, and acceptable to the child is a problem for parents across the globe.

As a working mother I have always had an interest in this topic. I married a farmer and have lived in rural locations of varying degrees of isolation ever since. I have worked off the farm for most of my married life and with four sons childcare was always an issue. We had no immediate family members living nearby and our neighbours were always a good distance down the road. With no childcare facilities available to us, at times my husband and I were left with no choice but to use unsupervised childcare for our sons. Our boys were at home unsupervised, from the time my husband left for the milking shed, until I arrived home from work about an hour later. In this time they were expected to complete their homework, and do any chores their father had set them. Once these tasks were completed they were allowed to watch television. There were strict rules in place to guide their behaviour. Our sons had proven they could be trusted to follow these rules. The boys always knew where both their father and I were, and knew how to contact us if they had to. My husband and I always believed our sons were far safer in their familiar home environment, than outside on the farm. Had they gone to the cowshed with my husband they would have been exposed to the dangers of machinery, large animals, and an uncontrolled farm environment, where it would not have been possible for my husband to supervise or monitor them closely all the time. For our family unsupervised childcare was a highly successful option; our sons all thrived from the increased responsibility and expectations we had of them.

Despite the fact that unsupervised care was successful for our family I often felt guilty that I had to leave my children. I worried my children might in some way be emotionally damaged by the fact that I left them alone. There was also the terrible fear that some harm might befall them while they were home alone. These fears were heightened by sensational media reporting of stories of children being left alone at home. Graphic portrayal of tragic consequences included chilling details of fiery deaths, shocking accidents, deviant behavior and sexual molestation and abuse (Garret, 2001; Hubbard, 1994; Revell, 1997).

Despite this negative portrayal of unsupervised childcare the reality is that many children of working parents will spend at least a part of their day unsupervised. In America it is estimated that 14.8% of children under the age of 12 years are unsupervised for part of their day (Vandivere et al., 2003a). In New Zealand there is a similar scenario, with an estimated nine percent of children aged between 10 and 14 years of age left unsupervised (Stirling, 1997). While it is fair to say this is a minority of children, in 2007 this equated to 27,330 New Zealand children being home unsupervised for at least a part of their day. It is perhaps then not surprising that there are increasing reports of unsupervised children being made by community based practitioners, e.g. DHB community nurses (Public Health Nurses (PHN), District Nurses, Paediatric Homecare Nurses, and Preschool Nurses), Social Workers, volunteers, etc, which in turn is raising awareness of the issue.

As reports of unsupervised children increase, community based practitioners are being asked to make judgments about families using unsupervised childcare. There is very little supporting evidence to assist practitioners in these judgments. Parents who leave their children unsupervised tend to be regarded quite negatively by many practitioners, the media and society in general. Due to the negativity and bad publicity associated with unsupervised children many child health agencies and organisations require their workers to immediately report any case of unsupervised childcare to either the police or CYFS, without regard to the circumstances of the unsupervised episode.

However evidence suggests that unsupervised children can experience two very different outcomes from the use of unsupervised care. These outcomes can be either positive or negative. It is because children can experience such different outcomes that community based practitioners need to have a good understanding of the issue. They also need to be supported with soundly developed policies and evidence based protocols to guide their responses and decision making.

My own experience using unsupervised childcare showed it could be a positive experience for children. This had also been the case for many of my friends. However, accepting that some children experience negative outcomes from the use of unsupervised childcare, made me begin to wonder. What is it that makes unsupervised childcare such a negative experience for some families, yet proves a rewarding and beneficial experience for others? What is it that families using this form of childcare successfully do to make it so? Why do families choose this form of childcare when there is such a negative stigma attached to it, and when parents leave themselves open to allegations of being neglectful parents? What strategies do families employ to address the specific concerns and needs that arise from the use of unsupervised childcare for their family? To answer these questions I have chosen to undertake a descriptive qualitative method of inquiry that will explore the experiences of New Zealand families who consider themselves to be using unsupervised childcare that is resulting in positive outcomes for their children.

UNSUPERVISED CHILDCARE

There has been some debate amongst my fellow students and tutors about my use of the term unsupervised childcare to describe children at home unsupervised. I make no apologies for this. A review of the current literature describes two forms of childcare; supervised and unsupervised.

Supervised childcare is described as childcare where an adult is present and responsible for the wellbeing of the child or children. This adult can be a parent, family member, neighbour, friend or baby sitter. Children in formal afterschool programs, attending sport practice, music or club activities are also considered to be in supervised care, i.e. an adult is responsible for the child. This form of childcare is perceived by society as responsible parenting and is seen as being positive for the child.

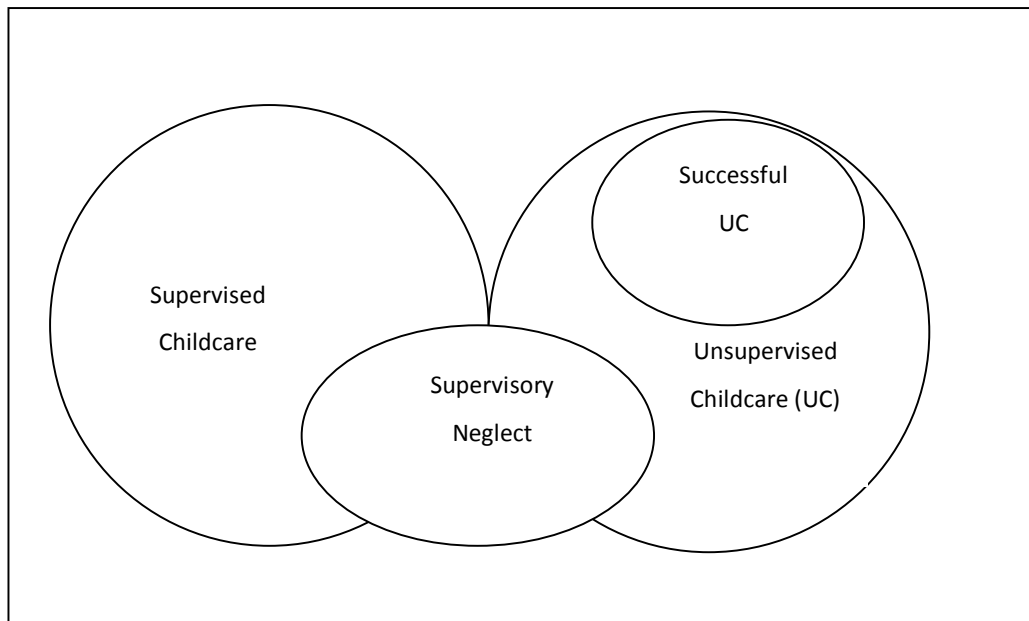
In contrast, unsupervised childcare is where children care for themselves without an adult present or any immediate adult supervision. This unsupervised care can occur

in the home or out in the community. Children have access to adults through distal supervision (parental monitoring from a distance, by phone and through parents showing an interest in the child's unsupervised experience), and experience self care in a supported environment. This is a form of childcare that is a choice of both children and adults, and can result in very positive and beneficial outcomes for families.

Unsupervised childcare is a very separate issue to that of supervisory neglect. Supervisory neglect describes the situation where children experience inadequate supervision while in the care of an adult, or where a parent or caregiver has failed to make adequate provision for the care and well being of the children in their care (Coohey, 1998; Coohey, 2002). As a result of supervisory neglect, media reports of unsupervised children tend to be reported very negatively, often linking a lack of direct parental supervision to poor outcomes for children (Garret, 2001; Hubbard, 1994; Revell, 1997). In media reports there is no distinction made between supervisory neglect and the use of unsupervised childcare that is proving very successful and beneficial for families. However, while supervisory neglect by definition can occur in both supervised and unsupervised childcare, it cannot be present in successful unsupervised childcare.

For unsupervised childcare to be deemed successful the following criteria are required: it is the chosen form of childcare of children and parents; there are successful and positive outcomes occurring for the children and family; distal supervision and boundaries are in place; the family believe it is working successfully for them; the parents believe the children are thriving and happy; and, the duration of the unsupervised episodes lasts less than three hours. By its very definition supervisory neglect is exclusive of successful unsupervised childcare. The definition of supervisory neglect is opposite in this study to successful unsupervised childcare. For the purpose of this study I have constructed a diagram to depict the relationship between supervised childcare, unsupervised childcare, supervisory neglect and successful unsupervised childcare (See Figure One, p.6).

Figure One: Childcare Model Depicting Supervisory Neglect Relationship



Despite the negative image attached to unsupervised children, parents still choose to make use of unsupervised care as opposed to other forms of childcare. For this reason I choose to use the term unsupervised childcare when I describe the situation of children at home unsupervised.

CHILDCARE OUTCOMES

For children who are left in unsupervised childcare two very different outcomes are described in the existing literature. While the media have used sensational headlines to describe the negative consequences for children left unsupervised, existing research suggests that the outcomes for children left unsupervised differ dependent on the context in which the care occurs (Galambos & Garbarino, 2001; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1990; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 2003; Vandivere, Tout, Zaslow, Calkins, & Capizzano, 2003b). For example, children that live in supportive environments, who have parents that show an interest in how they spend their unsupervised time, and where the unsupervised childcare is the child's own choice, are more likely to experience positive outcomes (Belle, 1999; Galambos &

Garbarino, 2001). Positive outcomes described in the literature include high self esteem, independence, self responsibility and high academic achievement.

In contrast the negative outcomes linked to unsupervised childcare include physical and emotional developmental delay, poor academic achievement, behavioural problems, social isolation, drug and alcohol abuse, early sexual experimentation and sexual and physical abuse. These negative outcomes are more likely to be experienced by younger children (under the age of 10 years), children from lower income homes where there are drug, alcohol or mental health concerns with the parents, and where children are experiencing long periods of unsupervised care on a regular basis (Belle, 1999; Cooney, 1998; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Vandivere et al., 2003b).

The outcomes of unsupervised care can also differ depending on where the unsupervised care occurs. Overseas research clearly illustrates that the risks associated with unsupervised care differ between rural and urban areas, and between poorer and middle class communities (Belle, 1999; Galambos & Garbarino, 2001). Positive outcomes from the use of unsupervised childcare are more likely to be experienced by children living in rural or wealthier suburban areas (Belle, 1999; Galambos & Garbarino, 2001; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Ochiltree, 1999).

The contrasting and contradictory findings described in the existing literature illustrate the complexity of the issue of unsupervised childcare. Recurring themes in this literature are that there is no one solution that will suit all families, and there is a need for more research.

CHILDCARE AND THE GOVERNMENT

The difficulties that parents encounter when trying to provide adequate supervision for their school age children are well documented in the existing research. These difficulties include inflexible work hours that are incompatible with school hours, work environments that have prohibitive rules regarding family contact during work

hours, employers that are indifferent to the problems parents face in providing care for their children outside school hours, the child's own wishes about where they spend their out of school hours and a lack of appropriate childcare facilities that are accessible, affordable and acceptable to the child.

These difficulties have been acknowledged by the Labour Government in New Zealand. In September 2006 a *Choices for Living, Caring and Working* action plan was announced (Choices for Living, Caring and Working, 2006). Two of its key activities are to “ensure families have better access to quality, affordable and age appropriate out of school services for their school age children” and to “encourage flexible work practices”. This action plan was in addition to the *Working for Families* package (www.workingforfamilies.govt.nz) which was introduced in 2005. This was an initiative developed by the New Zealand Government, Work and Income and Inland Revenue. It is an ongoing initiative designed to assist low and middle income wage earners. This package includes a Childcare Subsidy for children under the age of five and an Out of School Care and Recreation (OSCAR) subsidy for children aged five to thirteen years to assist families with the costs of before and after school care and care during the school holidays. This subsidy is paid for up to 20 hours per week during the school term and up to 50 hours in school holidays.

However to qualify for the OSCAR subsidy the child has to be attending a childcare facility that is approved by the Child Youth and Family Service (CYFS). In communities that are outside main centres a lack of approved childcare facilities means that many families are unable to access this financial assistance and have limited choices in childcare available to them. This holds especially true for rural communities where the difficulties in providing adequate care and supervision for children are exacerbated by distances involved, isolation and a lack of resources and facilities within the community (Hobbs & Chang, 1996; Stevens & Karns, 1996).

CHILDCARE AND THE LAW

Many parents choose to make use of unsupervised childcare, allowing their children to be alone at home for short periods of time without adult supervision. Children are allowed to experience a degree of independence and self responsibility in their home environment, with parents providing support through distal supervision. In New Zealand, parents choosing to use this form of childcare do so in the knowledge that their legal position is uncertain. Section 10(B) (Leaving Child Without Reasonable Supervision or Care) of The Summary Offences Act states “Every person is liable to a fine not exceeding \$1,000.00, who, being a parent or guardian or a person for the time being having the care of a child under the age of 14 years of age, leaves that child, without making reasonable provision for the supervision and care of the child, for a time that is unreasonable having regards to all the circumstances” (Section 10B, Summary Offences Act, 1981). Put simply this means that in New Zealand it is not illegal for a child under the age of 14 years to be left at home alone but the circumstances of the unsupervised episode must be reasonable.

In New Zealand CYFS are responsible for responding to and investigating any reports of unsupervised children. Incidents are judged on a case by case basis (Tania Hemara, CYFS Supervisor, personal communication, 1st May, 2008). In unsupervised cases involving children under the age of 10 years CYFS involve the police to uplift the children to a place of safety (in New Zealand only the police have the statutory authority to uplift children and remove them from their home). CYFS will then contact parents or caregivers to determine the reasons why the children were left unsupervised. In cases where there is a reasonable explanation for the unsupervised incident, e.g the parent’s caregiving arrangements fell through, or the parent’s work hours created a problem, CYFS issue the family with a formal warning and the children are allowed to return home. In cases of supervisory neglect, e.g where parents are found to have been out drinking, or where CYFS records show families have a history of neglect, children will not be immediately returned to the family.

In unsupervised cases where children are older than ten years CYFS will not necessarily have the children uplifted from their home. If an adult known to the children (i.e. parent, adult relative, neighbour or family friend) can be contacted, a distal supervision arrangement is found to be in place, and children are happy, safe and secure with the arrangement, the CYFS social worker may decide to leave the children in the home. However the parent will be spoken to about their childcare arrangement and a warning will be issued. This decision is made on a case by case basis (Tania Hemara, CYFS Supervisor, personal communication, 1st May, 2008).

The dilemma facing any professional person dealing with an incident of unsupervised childcare is in determining what is reasonable. As my own personal experience suggests, this type of childcare can be a very positive experience for children and families. For any professional person, (i.e. CYFS social worker, police, community based nurse or other health professional) to be able to make good evidence based decisions on incidents of unsupervised childcare a better understanding of this issue is needed.

WHAT IS THE NEW ZEALAND EXPERIENCE OF UNSUPERVISED CHILDCARE?

The existing overseas research into unsupervised childcare is notable for its contradictory and conflicting findings. One recurring theme is that the outcome for children is very dependent on the context and circumstances of the unsupervised care. What is missing from the current research is any analysis of the New Zealand experience. Very few New Zealand articles on unsupervised childcare could be found; and those were essay and opinion articles (Hubbard, 1994; Revell, 1997; Stirling, 1997). The transferability of research findings from research conducted in the ghettos of New York to suburban or rural areas in New Zealand is questionable in its applicability or accuracy, given the very different societies and physical surroundings being compared.

The contrasting and contradictory findings in the overseas research are intriguing. Given the lack of New Zealand research available I wanted to find out what is the New Zealand experience of unsupervised childcare? Why do parents choose to use this form of childcare and what are the dilemmas and struggles they face as a result? How do parents and children make this form of childcare work for them? What are the strategies they employ and why are they successful? Will the New Zealand experience mirror the overseas findings? As yet this question cannot be answered, which indicates to me that this research is needed to increase our knowledge and understanding of unsupervised childcare.

RESEARCHER'S POSITION ON UNSUPERVISED CHILDCARE

This research into the successful management of unsupervised childcare arose from my own interest in the topic generally, but also as a result of the very opposite viewpoints being expressed about its validity as a form of childcare. I was aware that the development of 'home alone' policy and protocols were being considered, and I was concerned that policy and protocols were about to be written that would result in DHB community based nurses (i.e. PHNs, District Nurses, Paediatric Homecare Nurses, Preschool Nurses, Adolescent Health Nurses) having to mandatorily report any child under the age of 14 years found unsupervised or 'home alone'. My concern was that the very negative connotation placed on unsupervised childcare could influence those persons who would be responsible for the development of this policy and protocols. This negativity was in direct contrast to my own position on unsupervised childcare.

My own experience of successfully using unsupervised childcare, and the knowledge I have gained from my general reading about the topic, suggests to me that there are several key factors associated with achieving positive outcomes for children. I am curious as to what factors I will find in the stories my participants tell me about successfully managing unsupervised childcare.

It is my intent to use descriptions of my participants' stories to increase social understanding and practitioner knowledge about the issue of successful unsupervised childcare. While I acknowledge the small size of this study, my hope is that it may lead to more research into the issue of unsupervised childcare. With the accumulation of more evidence, I would like to see the development of best practice guidelines that can be used to assist families to achieve positive outcomes for their children in unsupervised care.

Despite the small size of this study I am hopeful that the findings from this study can be used as evidence to support my argument that community based nurses are in an ideal position to support families using unsupervised childcare to achieve positive outcomes for their children. I believe it is imperative that any policy or protocols written for unsupervised childcare needs to guide and support nurses to achieve this.

ORGANISATION OF THIS THESIS

In this thesis I describe, using the outcomes from my participants' stories, what five New Zealand families believe constitutes the successful management of unsupervised childcare. I have presented my study in seven chapters, which detail the background to this thesis, a literature review, the study design, research process, findings, discussions, and a summary of the research.

In this first chapter I have commenced with an introduction to the phenomenon of unsupervised childcare, and the background to this study. I differentiated between supervised and unsupervised childcare, describing the characteristics of both and talking about the two very different outcomes unsupervised children can experience. To finish I have described how my intrigue with the contradictory findings of the overseas research into unsupervised childcare, coupled with the lack of any analysis of the New Zealand experience, has led me to want to explore and describe New Zealand beliefs and practices of successful unsupervised childcare.

In Chapter Two I review the existing literature about unsupervised childcare. I describe my search strategy and the keywords I used to obtain the literature. I discuss the merits and limitations of the literature, and identify six key research studies which sought to predict, examine or prove factors associated with unsupervised childcare. I build and expand on the findings from these key studies using expert discussion articles, opinion articles, studies that I believe are important to the topic, and government releases. I conclude the chapter with a discussion about the implication these findings have for this research.

Research methodology and design is the focus of my discussions in Chapter Three. I describe the aims and objectives of this study, and discuss my rationale for using a qualitative research design; acknowledging the influence of Margarete Sandelowski (2000) on the methodology chosen for this study. Key features of the study are discussed, and I include a table of the study design to provide readers with a visual map of the research process. I conclude the chapter with a report from the fieldwork that includes a description of the study setting, and a discussion about my experiences during the research process.

Chapters Four, Five and Six present the research findings, and contain detailed descriptions provided by the research participants. Semi-structured interviews with family groups are the medium used to gather this information, and the descriptions provided by the participants give an insight into the New Zealand experience of unsupervised childcare. In Chapter Four the focus is on what the families who were interviewed believed makes unsupervised childcare successful. Chapter Five explores why the families interviewed choose to use unsupervised childcare, and Chapter Six reports what the families talked about on how they managed the anxiety and risk. At the end of each of these chapters is a discussion about the themes and key findings coming out of the research.

In Chapter Seven I summarise the findings, and discuss the implications of these for families, practitioners and policy makers. I am able to justify my use of a qualitative

descriptive approach, and I discuss the value of the findings arising from this study. As a result of the evidence presented in this study I highlight the need for creative legislative and policy changes, increased and ongoing education of practitioners, and the need for more research. This study concludes with my final thoughts on what this study has achieved.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In the previous chapter I shared my interest in researching the topic of unsupervised childcare. To plan and undertake appropriate research study requires a thorough examination and analysis of the existing knowledge in relation to the topic. In this chapter I share the search strategy I used to conduct an investigation of the literature and I share the findings from this process.

As this chapter reveals, the research that has been undertaken in this general area is predominantly from international sources and the research findings are contrasting and contradictory. This is due not only to the complexity of the issue being researched, but also to the differing definitions within the literature as to what constitutes unsupervised childcare, and the differences in how the reported research studies were conducted.

What became apparent in this review of the literature is that there are two very different outcomes for children who are unsupervised (positive or negative), and that evidence suggests it is the context of the unsupervised episode that is crucial to the type of outcome the child experiences.

Most of the literature and research originates from North America and the United Kingdom. New Zealand is conspicuously absent from this international voice which left me as a reader wondering about the New Zealand experience of unsupervised childcare. I found myself wondering how families achieve the positive outcomes that make unsupervised childcare successful. How do parents and children in New Zealand manage their use of unsupervised childcare to achieve successful outcomes? What can be done to ensure New Zealand children experiencing unsupervised childcare do so in a supported environment that leads them to experience positive outcomes?

In this review of the current literature, research findings and discussions are critically analysed to identify key factors in the use of unsupervised childcare in general.

SEARCH STRATEGY

Most of the material used in this study was found through Internet searches using databases from both the Waikato Institute of Technology (WINTERC) and Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) Libraries. A number of articles were also found using both the Google and Google Scholar search engines. Both WINTERC and VUW libraries were sources of reference books, and some of the journals used. Most of the journal articles were located through database searches, and are representative of a wide range of interests that include nursing, family, parents, social work, psychology, law, education, marketing, economics and child welfare. There is a mix of research and discussion articles referenced.

A discussion of the key terms used in the literature search occurs later in the chapter. Unsupervised childcare was not a term used in the literature search as this term was created by me after a review of the current literature on unsupervised children.

The literature search was conducted with an open date selection due to the early searches being unproductive. The majority of literature used in this review is less than ten years old. However a number of interest articles written in the very late eighties (Cole & Rodman, 1987) and early nineties (Galston, 1991; Hubbard, 1994; Krazier & Witte, 1994; Ochiltree, 1992; Wilwerth, 1993) are used, as they provide good information relevant to this study. Database searches resulted in the identification of approximately 90 articles that appeared to have some relevance to the topic of unsupervised childcare. However, some of these were double ups of articles, some were irretrievable, and some were actually not pertinent to this study. From the original 90 articles identified, 48 were selected and analysed for their content, validity, and pertinence to this study. Of these 33 articles were selected to be included in this review of the literature on unsupervised childcare.

What was missing from the literature data sets was any systematic review or meta analysis of the available evidence about unsupervised childcare. Despite extensive searches through internet data bases such as the Cochrane Library, Joanna Brigg Institute, the VUW Journal Finder, CINAHL, Proquest, and Ebscohost I was unable to uncover any such reviews or analyses. Findings from systematic reviews or meta analysis are considered by the scientific community as the most credible data, because they are a statistical synthesis of all available evidence in a given field of research (Gillis & Jackson, 2002).

While systematic reviews and meta analysis are missing in the literature on unsupervised childcare, six key research studies were found that sought to predict, examine or prove factors associated with various aspects of unsupervised childcare by quantifying findings and providing statistical analysis of them. These six research articles are referenced frequently throughout this literature review. They are all quantitative studies involving large numbers of participants (Coohey, 1998; Coohey, 2002; Casper & Smith, 2004; Coley, Morris & Hernandez, 2004; Vander Ven, Cullen, Carrozza & Wright, 2001; Vandivere et al., 2003b). These papers were reviewed systematically and considered for their sample size, rigour of the research and validity of their findings. Study designs vary but include preference and restraint models (Casper & Smith, 2004), national surveys (Vander Ven et al., 2001; Vandivere et al., 2003b), developmental systems approaches (Coley et al., 2004), comparative studies (Coohey, 1998), and case control designs (Coohey, 2002). What they all share in common is that findings are subject to a rigorous statistical analysis, which is available to the reader to check. The methodology of the research is also clearly explained, which enables the reader to make sense of the findings and follow the arguments in the discussions provided. The value of this research is that it provides very strong statistical evidence of the key points being discussed.

I have continued to build on and expand these key points, using a number of studies I believe to be important that all investigate various aspects of unsupervised

childcare (Belle, 1999; Galambos & Garbarino, 2001; Hobbs & Chang, 1996; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Krazier & Witte, 1990; Mertens, Flowers & Mulhall, 2003; Stevens & Karns, 1996). These studies are all referred to later in the chapter. Surveys and questionnaires are the primary sources of data in these studies with findings supported by some form of numerical analysis which is made available to the reader. I consider these studies to be important, rather than key studies, due to missing or incomplete data presented within the research, making it more difficult to interpret the study results. For example, Stevens and Karns (1996), Hobbs and Chang (1996), and Mertens et al. (2003), all present their study results using graphs and percentages. The actual numbers, or break down of the responses are not available to the reader, thus it is difficult to interpret the findings. In their study of the adjustment of unsupervised children in a rural setting, Galambos and Garbarino (2001) describe their analysis, but do not include any data that can be checked. Despite these limitations I believe these studies to be important as they all contain robust discussions of their data which is well referenced. The value of these studies is that their results combine with the statistical evidence of the key studies to build up a very powerful picture of unsupervised childcare.

Throughout this literature review, key research findings are argued in a number of discussion articles written by experts in their respective fields (Cole & Rodman, 1987; Galston, 1991; Garret, 2001; Ochiltree, 1992; Riley & Steinberg, 2004; Scott, 2002; Vandivere et al., 2003a). The value of these expert opinion articles is that key points are argued with the support of numerous references (which can be checked by the reader). The conclusions presented in these articles continue to build onto the knowledge of unsupervised childcare being generated through the research findings.

While most of the material used is made up of research or expert discussion articles, a number of popular media and magazine articles are also referenced. These include items from *The NZ Listener*, *Next*, and *Time* (Hubbard, 1994; Revell, 1997; Stirling, 1997; Willwerth, 1993). These lay sources have been included as they provide very powerful emotive perspectives indicative of popular opinion. The articles by

Hubbard (1994), Revell (1997), and Stirling (1997), are of particular interest to this study as they provide a New Zealand voice in the midst of all the overseas research.

Government releases (*Choices for Living, Caring and Working*, 2006; *Working for Families*, 2005) provide an additional source of information for this review. The government releases give a good indication of the importance the New Zealand government attaches to the issue of childcare, and the need to find a workable solution for parents and families.

KEYWORDS

A large number of key words were used to search out literature for this study. Many of the words are notable for the negative image they portray. Initially the terms ‘unsupervised children’, ‘home alone’ and ‘parental lack of supervision’ were used to start my database search. Due to the very poor search result the search parameters were widened. ‘Self care’, ‘latch key children’, ‘lack of supervision’, ‘supervisory neglect’, ‘unsafe caregiving’, ‘inadequate supervision’, and ‘children and accidental injury’ were key words used to conduct database searches. Using articles found in these early searches more searching was conducted using keywords such as ‘childcare needs’, ‘after school care’, ‘working mothers’, ‘working parents and childcare’, and ‘school age children’. When trying to find articles pertaining specifically to rural children in unsupervised care the keyword ‘rural’ was added to search terms.

LIMITATIONS

Reviewing the evidence, and research findings, being presented in the literature on unsupervised childcare was made difficult by a number of factors. These included the widely varying definitions of unsupervised childcare within the research, the age range of the children being studied, a lack of consistency in the patterns or duration of unsupervised care being researched, the use of data that varied widely depending on whether adults or children were being interviewed, and the use of pre existing national survey data sets (without a primary focus on unsupervised childcare), to

extract data on unsupervised childcare. Each of these factors impacted on the studies, resulting in contrasting and contradictory findings.

Widely varying definitions of unsupervised care make it difficult to accurately compare research findings. As an example, Kerrebrock and Lewit (1999), conducted a study into the prevalence of unsupervised childcare in America. A variable in their study was the comparison of a survey that defined unsupervised childcare as one period of unsupervised care in the past month, with another study that defined it as regular periods of unsupervised care that could include children in afterschool programs, or at home with older siblings.

The age of the child in unsupervised care is also a variable in the existing research. The wide age range of the children in the studies (pre-school to 17 years) makes data comparison difficult. Obviously, the care needs and the risks factors will differ dramatically between a three-year-old and a 17-year-old (Belle, 1999; Kisida, Holditch-Davis, Miles & Carlson, 2001; Mertens et al., 2003). Therefore care must be taken to identify the age groups of children within the research, and interpretation of the research findings must be considered in light of this knowledge.

It is difficult to accurately assess the patterns of frequency or duration of unsupervised care in the studies as only two of the studies are longitudinal - involving repeated visits to the families occurring over a period of time (Belle, 1999; Vander Ven et al., 2001). This factor is important, as a number of the studies conclude that the duration and frequency of the episodes of unsupervised care have a definite impact on the outcomes for the child (Coley et al., 2004; Coohy, 2002; Mertens et al., 2003).

A number of the studies that investigated the issue of unsupervised childcare use existing national population data sets to extract new primary data (Casper & Smith, 2003; Kisida et al., 2001). There is no way of checking back on the original data to validate the research findings. As an example, Kisida et al. (2001) conducted a study

into unsafe caring practices of parents. They explain, however, that unsafe caring practices were not the foci of the original data used by them for their study. In the description of data collection methods it is postulated that observers in the original study were asked to describe all positive and negative interactions between mother and child, so it was likely that all cases of inadequate supervision were recorded. As a result it is difficult to judge the basis of the original data collected, which then makes it difficult to follow the conclusions in the current study.

Much of the data that were analysed in the research were collected from nationally representative surveys (Hobbs & Chang, 1996; Kisida et al., 2001; Mertens et al., 2003; Stevens & Karns, 1996; Vandivere et al., 2003b). In the reported findings it is impossible to decipher how many of the families interviewed were from rural or urban communities. It is possible that these surveys fail to identify the particular strengths or difficulties that are characteristics of smaller communities. This would also be true for rural communities (Hobbs & Chang, 1996; Stevens & Karns, 1996).

The data that was generated by the participants in the studies varied widely depending on who was being interviewed about the use of unsupervised childcare. In studies where both child and adult were interviewed, there was a marked difference in the description of the amount of time spent in unsupervised care between the adult and the child (Belle, 1999). This is thought to be due to adults under-reporting the use of unsupervised childcare because they were fearful of the social and legal consequences, while children (and especially boys) exaggerated the use of unsupervised childcare as they see it as a status symbol (Hobbs, 1995; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Krazier & Witte, 1990; Revell, 1997; Vandivere et al., 2003b).

The outcomes of unsupervised childcare varied widely depending on the focus of the research being conducted. The focus of the existing research falls into three broad categories which are research that focuses on child outcomes, research that looks at why parents choose unsupervised childcare, and research that determines risk to

children. Comparing research findings has been made more difficult due to the differing foci and resulting outcomes of the various types of research.

The limitations, identified in this review of the literature, contribute to contrasting and contradictory research findings. Despite these limitations, systematic reading of the literature has resulted in a number of key features of unsupervised childcare being identified. These are reported in the remainder of this chapter.

SUPERVISED AND UNSUPERVISED CHILDCARE

Childcare falls into two broad categories: supervised and unsupervised (Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Ochiltree, 1992; Vandivere et al., 2003a). Despite unsupervised childcare often being viewed quite negatively by society in general, families opt to use this form of childcare. It is often a solution to a childcare problem, and is seen as a developmental milestone for children.

Supervised childcare can be described as childcare that is delivered by an adult or adults who take responsibility for the children in their care (Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Ochiltree, 1992). The adult caretakers are responsible for the general care of the children and as well the activities undertaken by the children during this time. Examples of supervised childcare include care given by parents, grandparents or other adult family members, care given in dedicated childcare facilities or after school programs and care provided by baby sitters (who in New Zealand must be over the age of 14 years). Supervised childcare also includes children in the care of older siblings; again who must be over the age of 14 years, and children attending activities, such as sport practices, club activities and music lessons. Supervised childcare is perceived generally by society to be responsible parenting and the outcomes for the children are seen as positive.

Unsupervised childcare describes the situation of children who care for themselves without any adult presence or direct supervision (Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Ochiltree, 1992; Vandivere et al., 2003b). Unsupervised childcare can occur in the

child's home or out in the community, and it is a form of childcare that is the choice of parent and/or child (Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Stevens & Karns, 1996; Vandivere et al., 2003b). For many families, using unsupervised childcare is a choice that is seen as a solution to the difficulty of finding accessible, affordable, and acceptable childcare; as a means of advancing developmental milestones for their children; and as a way of positively encouraging their children's self responsibility, maturity and self esteem (Cole & Rodman, 1987; Coley et al., 2004; Riley & Steinberg, 2004; Stirling, 1997; Vandivere et al., 2003a).

Unsupervised childcare is a very different issue to that of supervisory neglect, for which there is a large amount of literature available (Coohey, 1998; Coohey 2002; Kisida et al., 2001; Scott, 2002). Supervisory neglect refers to the situation where children are inadequately supervised while in the care of an adult, or where a parent or caregiver has failed to make adequate provision for the care and well being of the children in their care, (Coohey, 1998; Coohey, 2002; Kisida et al., 2001; Scott, 2002). In the previous chapter it was shown that while supervisory neglect can be present in both supervised and unsupervised childcare, by its definition supervisory neglect is totally exclusive of successful unsupervised childcare (See Figure One, p 6).

Examples of supervisory neglect include children roaming the streets while parents are at home, children left alone in shopping malls while a parent shops, children playing with hazardous items while unattended in back yards, and children left alone in cars while parents visit bars or casinos. In these situations the parent is seen as failing to provide the child with adequate protection from harmful people or situations. Supervisory neglect cases represent the largest proportion of child maltreatment cases reported to authorities (Coohey, 2002; Scott, 2002). In the research studies that explored this issue, supervisory neglect was found to be more likely to occur where the parent or parents have a substance abuse problem (which can be due to alcohol, drugs or both), and where there are mental health issues with

the parent (Coohey, 1998; Coohey, 2002; Vandivere et al., 2003a; Vandivere et al., 2003b).

In all the studies researching factors associated with unsupervised childcare, the common correlate was parental employment. Unsupervised childcare is more likely to occur in homes where both parents are working, or in solo parent homes where that parent is employed (Casper & Smith, 2004; Hobbs, 1995; Hubbard, 1997; Revell, 1997; Stirling, 1997; Vandivere et al., 2003a; Vandivere et al., 2003b). This reflects the complex problem of providing adequate childcare that working parents face worldwide. Childcare becomes a major problem, due to inflexible work hours that are incompatible with school hours and school holidays, work environments that have prohibitive rules regarding family contact during work hours, employers who are generally indifferent to the difficulties employees face in providing childcare during out of school hours, and their child's own preference as to how they want to spend their out of school hours. A lack of acceptable, accessible, and affordable childcare facilities compound the childcare problem that parents face.

PARENTAL REASONS FOR CHOOSING UNSUPERVISED CHILDCARE

While the reasons parents choose to use unsupervised childcare varied widely throughout the literature, a number of common themes emerged. The age of the child, the parent's perception of the child's maturity and sense of responsibility, and safety of the environment, are all major factors influencing a parent's decision to use unsupervised childcare.

Younger children under the age of seven years are 10 times more likely to be in a supervised form of childcare than 11 and 12 year olds, as they are seen by parents to be more vulnerable to harm and in need of adult supervision (Casper & Smith, 2004; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Vandivere et al., 2003a). However, the middle school age years are seen as a time to teach children to be increasingly independent and responsible for their own self care (Belle, 1999; Cole & Rodman, 1987; Ochiltree, 1992; Riley & Steinberg, 2004). The opportunities for increasing autonomy and self

reliance that unsupervised care presents are seen as positive and beneficial towards an older child's development (Cole & Rodman, 1987; Riley & Steinberg, 2004). This is often reflected in the child's own preference for after school care.

Their children's own preference as to how they would like to spend their out of school hours influences a parent's decision to use unsupervised childcare (Belle, 1999; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Ochiltree, 1992; Riley & Steinberg, 2004). For older children the type of childcare that is available in the community can be seen as childish and inappropriate for them. In contrast, unsupervised childcare presents them with opportunities for independence, which reflect the developmental milestones of autonomy and self responsibility that are characteristics of middle childhood (Riley & Steinberg, 2004). Unsupervised childcare is more likely to be used when the child has chosen this option as the preferred method of childcare (Belle, 1999; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Ochiltree, 1992; Riley & Steinberg, 2004).

While unsupervised childcare is more likely to be used for older children who have chosen this type of care, younger children are more likely to be unsupervised when an older sibling is present in the house (Riley & Steinberg, 2004; Vandivere et al., 2003a; Vandivere et al., 2003b). The presence of older teenage siblings in the house increases the likelihood that a parent will opt to use unsupervised childcare for their younger children. This is possibly due to younger children arriving home first and being allowed to be unsupervised for the short period of time before the older sibling arrives home from school. It is also suggested that a parent is more relaxed about younger children caring for themselves when an older child is available to either care for or check in on the younger children (Riley & Steinberg, 2004; Vandivere et al., 2003a; Vandivere et al., 2003b). Regardless of the age of the child, the child's preference about childcare, or the presence of older children, safety remains a major concern for parents.

How a parent perceives the safety of the environment in which a child will spend their unsupervised time is a major factor influencing a parent's decision to use

unsupervised childcare. Parents are more likely to choose to use unsupervised childcare if they consider they live in a cohesive community (close knit with similar values and beliefs as the family), and have supportive neighbours who will be immediately accessible to the child should a problem occur (Casper & Smith, 2004; Cole & Rodman, 1987; Coley et al., 2004; Galambos & Garbarino, 2001; Riley & Steinberg, 2004; Vander Ven et al., 2001; Vandivere et al., 2003b). This type of community is more likely to be found in wealthier or suburban areas or in rural communities (Galambos & Garbarino, 2001).

The age of the child, the child's preference, the presence of older siblings and the safety of the environment are all strong correlates to a parent's choice to use unsupervised childcare. However, a contrasting body of research suggests that children from lower income families, where there is a history of drug, alcohol or mental health problems with the parent(s), are more likely to be unsupervised, and at a younger age (Coohey, 1998; Coohey 2003; Vandivere et al., 2003a; Vandivere et al., 2003b). In their study that explored out of school care and problem behaviour, Coley et al. (2004) suggest that it is the adolescents from the most 'disadvantaged homes' who are most likely to be in unsupervised care outside the home. They use the term 'disadvantaged home' to describe a low income family with a 'poorly educated' solo mother, who is not working. It is suggested that these mothers are the least able to structure their adolescents out of school time due to a lack of personal and financial resources.

INCOME AND UNSUPERVISED CHILDCARE

There is no agreement in the existing research into unsupervised childcare about a link between a parent's ability to pay for childcare and their choice to use unsupervised childcare. In fact it is more likely that children from wealthier families will be in unsupervised childcare.

Poverty is seen as a factor in the decision to leave a child unsupervised in some, but not all, of the research with a focus on parental reasons for choosing unsupervised

childcare (Coohey, 1998; Davis, Wood & Wilson, 2003; Hubbard, 1994). Other studies looking at parental reasons behind the use of unsupervised childcare suggest that low income parents, living in poor urban areas, view their communities as high risk because of factors such as traffic, strangers and crime. Children from these poorer areas are more likely to be supervised after school because parents are fearful of the danger these risk factors pose to them (Casper & Smith, 2004; Galambos & Garbarino, 2001; Vandivere et al., 2003b).

Contradicting a link between poverty and the use of unsupervised childcare is evidence from research that looks at child outcomes which suggests that unsupervised childcare is more prevalent amongst higher income families (Casper & Smith, 2004; Krazier & Witte, 1990; Mertens et al., 2003; Vandivere et al., 2003a; Vandivere et al., 2003b). Possible reasons for this are that wealthier families live in neighbourhoods that are considered safe, parents earning high incomes due to having established careers also have older children, and higher income parents tend to be better educated and embrace a parenting style that places more emphasis on independence and self reliance; hence the use of unsupervised childcare (Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999).

In research looking specifically at the childcare needs of rural communities; while cost was an issue for rural families in providing adequate and suitable childcare for their children, it was not identified as a major influence in a parent's decision to use unsupervised childcare. Families where both parents were fully employed were just as likely to be using unsupervised childcare as were families where parents were not fully employed (Hobbs & Chang, 1996; Stevens & Karns, 1996). While cost did not play a key role in a rural parent's decision to use unsupervised childcare, it was suggested it was identified as a childcare issue for rural families because of the lower socioeconomic status of many rural families, the additional costs to them such as the distance to the nearest childcare facility, the hours care is required for, and the type of childcare needed (Hobbs & Chang, 1996; Stevens & Karns, 1996).

While cost may be a factor in the decision to use unsupervised childcare for some families, it is not seen as a major influence in the use of unsupervised childcare. Children from wealthier homes are more likely to be in unsupervised childcare and the outcome for these children more likely to be positive.

CHILD OUTCOMES AND UNSUPERVISED CHILDCARE

Outcomes for children in unsupervised childcare can be either positive or negative in terms of development, behaviour, and academic achievement. The outcome experienced by the child is dependent on the context of the unsupervised episode. It is important that community based practitioners understand the factors that create the positive context that allows children to experience positive outcomes from unsupervised childcare. We cannot hope to assist families to achieve positive outcomes for their children without this knowledge.

Positive outcomes described in the literature include high levels of self esteem, increased independence, increased motivation, and high academic achievement. Children thriving in unsupervised care demonstrate higher self regulatory behaviours and increased levels of maturity than their fully supervised peers. This is thought to be due to the increased opportunities for personal growth and development that unsupervised childcare provides (Belle, 1999; Ochiltree, 1992; Riley & Steinberg, 2004). In contrast, negative outcomes linked to unsupervised childcare include developmental delays, social isolation, poor academic achievement, behavioural problems, drug and alcohol use, early sexual experimentation and physical and sexual abuse (Belle, 1999; Casper & Smith, 2004; Galambos & Garbarino, 2001; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Riley & Steinberg, 2004; Vandivere et al., 2003b). Children experiencing negative outcomes are more likely to be disengaged from school, and be participating in risk taking behaviours. The outcome experienced by the child was found to be linked to the context in which the unsupervised episode occurred.

A major theme to emerge from this literature review on unsupervised childcare is that the outcomes for the child differ, depending on the context in which the unsupervised care occurs. Research findings also suggest the risks and outcomes associated with unsupervised childcare differ between urban and rural areas, and also between poorer and middle class communities (Belle, 1999; Cole & Rodman, 1987; Coley et al., 2004; Galambos & Garbarino, 2001; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Mertens et al., 2003; Ochilree, 1999; Riley & Steinberg, 2004; Vandivere et al., 2003a, Vandivere et al., 2003b). Strong correlates associated with children experiencing positive outcomes are the community context in which the unsupervised childcare occurs and the degree of parental monitoring. A positive outcome for a child is more likely when the child is unsupervised in a community where there is access to supportive adults such as neighbours, teachers, or local business owners (Cole & Rodman, 1987; Coley et al., 2001; Galambos & Garbarino, 2001; Riley & Steinberg, 2004), where there is a low risk environment, i.e. suburban streets, low crime area, population is known to one another (Belle, 1999; Galambos & Garbarino, 2001, Vandivere et al., 2003b) and where the child is unsupervised in their home (Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Mertens et al., 2003).

Parents that show an interest in how their child spends their unsupervised time, who are able to communicate openly with their child about their activities, and who are able to influence their child's behavior, are more likely to create an environment that supports their child to experience a positive outcome from being unsupervised (Casper & Smith, 2004; Cole & Rodman, 1987; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999). Several authors suggested this style of parenting, which encourages child participation in a more equal manner, is characteristic of 'better educated' parents, who value independence, motivation and self reliance in their child (Casper & Smith, 2004; Cole & Rodman, 1987; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999). This type of positive parental monitoring is thought to be particularly protective for unsupervised adolescents; moderating the effect of peer pressure and influencing appropriate behavior choices (Coley et al., 2004, Riley & Steinberg, 2004). Children from higher income families, living in wealthier suburban and rural communities are more likely to experience

this supported unsupervised childcare which results in positive outcomes for the child.

In contrast, children from lower income families and poor urban areas are less likely to experience this type of supported unsupervised childcare; and the consequences are more likely to be negative (Belle, 1999; Cole & Rodman, 1987; Riley & Steinberg, 2004; Vandivere et al., 2003b). These children are more likely to be living in poorer urban areas, where there is a greater likelihood that social networks have broken down, and where neighbour support is absent. Parents are more likely to be less educated and working in low wage jobs. In research exploring the impact of maternal employment on delinquency, results suggest that work conditions affect parenting styles (Vander Ven et al., 2001). The often coercive nature of the work available to uneducated and low wage workers can result in parents enforcing a very controlling pattern of parenting. As a result, children are more likely to have difficulties in their relationship with their parents. In addition, low wage parents are more likely to be working longer hours and less available to monitor or support their children. These vulnerable children, therefore, spend longer periods unsupervised, have greater exposure to peer pressure, and increased opportunities to engage in problem behaviours; all factors which influence negative outcomes (Cole & Rodman, 1987; Coley et al., 2004; Vander Ven et al., 2001; Vandivere et al., 2003b).

Existing research into unsupervised childcare indicates that the duration of the unsupervised episode is linked to the outcome for the child. A study conducted by Mertens et al. (2003) which examined the effects of unsupervised childcare on children, reported that children left alone for less than three hours per day rated almost identically to children who were fully supervised. This was a very large study involving 121,000 students who completed a survey tool. The survey was designed to investigate student reports of self-esteem, academic achievement, behaviour and depression, and found that students were most affected by the amount of time spent unsupervised rather than the frequency. Children who experienced regular

unsupervised childcare, for periods of longer than three hours at a time, all reported higher levels of depression and low self-esteem. They also rated poorly in terms of academic achievement and demonstrated higher levels of problem behaviours. Poverty was not seen as a factor, as children from both high and low income families reported similar findings. Long periods of unsupervised care provide susceptible children with increased opportunities to be negatively influenced by peer pressure, disengage from school, and experiment in delinquent and risk taking behaviours (Belle, 1999; Coley et al., 2004; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Riley & Steinberg, 2004; Stirling, 1997; Vandivere et al., 2003a; Vandivere et al., 2003b). Outcomes for children are influenced not only by the duration of the unsupervised episode but also by who has decided on the use of unsupervised childcare.

A factor associated with positive outcomes for children is when the use of unsupervised childcare is the child's own choice (Belle, 1999; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Ochiltree, 1992; Riley & Steinberg, 2004). These researchers agree that a child who chooses to be in unsupervised care is less likely to be distressed at being home alone, and is more likely to have demonstrated to their parent that they have the maturity and skills to cope with being unsupervised. Older children are more likely to lobby for the use of unsupervised childcare as they strive to be more independent and self reliant. However, children left unsupervised before they are emotionally ready to be left alone are more likely to suffer negative consequences from the experience (Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Krazier & Witte, 1990; Vandivere et al., 2003b). Younger children are more likely to be adversely affected by unsupervised childcare across all settings (Casper & Smith, 2004; Kasida et al., 2001; Wilwerth, 1993). Constant parental supervision is seen as the most significant factor in protecting younger children from harm.

Outcomes for rural children experiencing unsupervised childcare are more likely to be positive. Research looking specifically at rural children found that rural children in regular unsupervised childcare did not perform or respond any differently to their fully supervised peers (Galambos and Garbarino, 2001). This study looked at the

characteristics of unsupervised children, patterns of school adjustment, academic achievement and fear levels. It is suggested that a rural environment is a relatively safe and crime free area that presents little risk to an unsupervised child. The cohesive nature of a rural community, and the proximity to familiar neighbours, provides an unsupervised child with a protective mechanism that allows them to experience unsupervised care in a positive and secure manner.

DISCUSSION

A critical review of the literature on unsupervised childcare was undertaken to analyse existing research and discussion about the issue. Systematic reading of the literature has produced evidence that there are two very different outcomes for unsupervised children, and that the outcome for the child is strongly influenced by the context in which the unsupervised childcare occurs.

Comparison and analysis of the research was difficult due to the limitations created by the differing definitions of unsupervised childcare, the wide age range of children studied, the use of national data sets for data extraction, and the varying foci of the research. In spite of these limitations, the strength of the evidence generated in this review of the literature stems from the commonality of the themes identified across the various research studies. The result is multiple strands of evidence emerging through the literature creating an evidence base which can inform this study.

This review of the literature produced evidence to support the concept of unsupervised childcare as a distinctive form of childcare. Successful unsupervised childcare is an entirely different issue to that of supervisory neglect. As argued in the previous chapter supervisory neglect, by its very definition, cannot be present in successful unsupervised childcare. While the outcomes from unsupervised childcare can be very positive for children in terms of development, behaviour and academic achievement, there can also be a very different and negative outcome for children experiencing unsupervised childcare.

What is revealed in this analysis of the literature is that the context of the unsupervised care is instrumental in determining the outcome for the child. The community context and the demographics of the family are key factors influencing how a child will be affected by the use of unsupervised childcare. Children thriving in successfully managed unsupervised care demonstrate higher levels of maturity, self-esteem and academic achievement than their supervised peers. Evidence in the existing research suggests that unsupervised childcare that is the child's own choice, a high degree of parental monitoring and involvement, and unsupervised episodes that are less than three hours duration, are indicators of successful outcomes for children.

Identification of these factors associated with positive outcomes for children provides an emerging account of what creates successful unsupervised childcare. However, all the existing research that was reviewed was conducted outside New Zealand; therefore the transferability of these findings to the New Zealand context is unknown. For example, results from research conducted in low income neighbourhoods in San Antonio, Boston and Chicago (Coley et al., 2004), may not be applicable to suburban, urban or rural communities, in New Zealand. They also may not be applicable to particular cultural or social demographic groups in New Zealand

There appears to be no New Zealand research available into the phenomenon of unsupervised childcare, which is being seen increasingly by nurses working in New Zealand communities.

Given the lack of New Zealand research it begs the question "What is the New Zealand experience of successful unsupervised childcare?" Does the New Zealand experience in any way mirror overseas findings? What makes New Zealand parents opt to use unsupervised childcare? What are the struggles and dilemmas facing New Zealand families who choose to use unsupervised care; and how do they make this form of childcare work? What strategies do they employ to achieve successful

outcomes? I am intrigued by both the evidence emerging from this literature review, and the lack of any New Zealand voice within this research.

The literature review has demonstrated the need for a study into New Zealand families' beliefs about what constitutes successful unsupervised childcare. This is important to increase social understanding and practitioner knowledge of the issue

In the next chapter I present the design and rationale for a qualitative descriptive study into New Zealand families' beliefs about what constitutes the successful management of unsupervised childcare

Chapter Three: Research Methodology and Design

In this chapter I discuss key features of the study design, pay attention to how I plan to achieve congruence between the research question and aims, and the data collection and analysis. The inclusion of a table, depicting the congruence of the study with the methodological approach, provides a visual path for readers to follow, and outlines the study design.

I detail the aim and the objectives of this qualitative descriptive research into what New Zealand families believe constitutes the successful management of unsupervised childcare. I describe my research approach, explaining how my research methodology has been influenced by the work of Margarete Sandelowski (2000).

A detailed discussion is provided of the study details, and the chapter concludes with a discussion from the study field. This includes a description of the study setting, and my experiences with the participants as I conducted the research.

RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The general purpose of this study was to increase social understanding and practitioner knowledge about New Zealand families' experiences of successfully using unsupervised childcare.

The research aimed to describe and capture what it was that New Zealand families believe constitutes the successful management of unsupervised childcare.

The objectives were to explore and describe the beliefs, perspectives and practices of some New Zealand based families in four key areas. Specifically to:

- 1) Explore and describe what families believe constitutes successful unsupervised childcare.
- 2) Explore and describe why these families opt to use unsupervised childcare.

- 3) Explore and describe what struggles and dilemmas these families face as a result of making this choice.
- 4) Explore and describe what it is that these families do (practices) to make unsupervised childcare work successfully for them.

For the purpose of this study successful unsupervised childcare is characterised by the following features:

- Parents believe this form of childcare works successfully for them and their children.
- Parents have made provision for distal supervision, and rules and boundaries are in place for their children.
- Unsupervised childcare is the chosen form of childcare of both parent and children.
- Parents believe their children are thriving and happy in the context of the unsupervised childcare.
- The duration of the unsupervised episodes is between 30 minutes and three hours.

These features were all identified, through review of existing literature on unsupervised children, as being associated with positive and successful outcomes. Selecting families, using unsupervised childcare characterised by these features, enabled this study to focus on success.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The lack of any New Zealand voice had been identified in the review of existing literature about unsupervised childcare. I wanted to explore the New Zealand experience because of the lack of any empirical knowledge of it. A qualitative descriptive research approach was used to assist me to capture and describe the participants' ideas, practices and perspectives about successfully managing unsupervised childcare. Qualitative descriptive research is described as the approach

of choice when what is required is a straightforward description of the phenomenon being studied (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Sandelowski, 2000). It is also recognised as an effective method for identifying factors that result in positive outcomes, and in doing so provides a foundation on which successful interventions can be developed (Grypdonck, 2006). It is a method ideally suited to providing information relevant to policy makers and practitioners (Sandelowski, 2000).

The goal of qualitative descriptive research is to produce a detailed and accurate summary of the event being researched, with a focus on answering the questions of what and why in relation to the event being studied (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Grypdonck, 2006; Sandelowski, 2000). This qualitative descriptive study does not intend to provide solutions to unsupervised childcare, but to increase understanding of the issue by describing what is happening in some New Zealand families using the participants' accounts. A qualitative descriptive approach enables the researcher to stay close to the data, and is less interpretive than other qualitative research such as phenomenology, grounded theory and ethnography (Sandelowski, 2000). Sandelowski argues that the strength of the approach is that the features of the event being described are presented in the everyday language of the event in a manner which makes it easy for readers to concur with the description being presented. Qualitative descriptive research is the least theoretical of all the qualitative approaches, in that the researcher is the least constrained by any theoretical or philosophical positioning (Sandelowski, 2000). Researchers may use theory, methods or techniques from other qualitative approaches to enable them to produce the most natural and pure description of the event being studied as possible.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Drawing on the key principles of qualitative descriptive research, a design for this study was constructed. In this section details of the design are presented. Initially, I outline key features of the design in a table format, before moving into a more detailed discussion about each of these features.

Overview of the Research

An important aspect in research design is achieving coherence and congruence between the research question and aims, and the data collection and analysis. This is important as issues with these interfere with the quality and strength of the research. As well, the measures of validity and scientific rigour enhance the strength of the analytic processes; in this study these are established around trustworthiness, credibility, and confirmability. In this section I present a summary of the key features so that the relationship between these aspects of the study is shown.

The aim of this study was to increase social understanding and practitioner knowledge of what New Zealand families believe constitutes successful management of unsupervised childcare. A qualitative descriptive approach was chosen because there is an established lack of knowledge about the New Zealand experience, and the goal of this research approach is to produce a detailed and accurate summary of the event being studied answering the questions of what and why that relate to the event.

An overview of the key features design are summarised in Table One which is shown on the next page (p.39). Methodological features of the design are explained, and the congruence, rationale and theoretical derivation of the study explained to demonstrate the congruence of the study with the methodological approach.

The table provides a visual path of the study that the reader can follow and links the features of the method with the study plan.

Table One: Key Features of the Study Design

Heading	Methodological features & design of the study	Congruence, rationale, theoretical derivation
Research Aim & Objectives	Increase understanding and knowledge about successful unsupervised childcare (UC). 1) Explore why families choose UC. 2) Explore what dilemmas and struggles families face. 3) Explore what strategies families employ to make it successful.	There is an established gap in NZ research. We know NZ families are using UC, but little attention has been paid to what constitutes successful care and management. This study seeks to listen and learn from families about their perspectives, experiences and practices.
Research Approach	Qualitative Description Framework: Sandelowski (2000)	Research findings are a straight description of successful UC presented in the everyday language of the participating families. It is an effective method for identifying positive factors that result in good outcomes & provide a platform to develop successful interventions. This approach especially suited to providing answers to questions of interest to practitioners and policy makers.
Rationale for research focus	Little attention paid to what creates success in UC	Research findings unpack what NZ families believe constitutes success in managing UC.
Data Sources & Methods	5 families. Single interview with each family group; children & adults together. Follow up as necessary. Semi structured interview with prompt questions. Interview recorded and transcribed. Field journal entries.	Purposeful sampling to obtain families rich in knowledge of successful UC. Small numbers to keep data generation manageable while ensuring adequate information collected. Data collection aimed at exploring the why and what in relation to UC .
Criteria for Inclusion	Families with children under age of 14 years. Regular use of UC (30 mins-3hrs at least once a week). Parents believe family managing UC successfully.	Identify 'like group' so that UC episode being described by families matches study definition of UC. Successful management of UC is study focus.
Obtaining Families as Participants	Recruited by newsletter/ advertisements/direct approach to Maori families as directed by Kaumatua advisors. Urban and rural families from local area.	Families choose to participate because of their experience of successful UC. Cultural participation and safety ensured. Comprehensive description of UC obtained.
Ethical Considerations	Participant safety paramount. Family anonymity maintained. Family and child participation voluntary-no coercion. Information sheet for adults and for children.	Research guided by principals of autonomy, beneficence & non maleficence. No identifiable information used. Risks and benefits of study explained. Sufficient information given to

	Informed consent process for both adults and children.	participants to allow an informed decision to participate.
Treaty of Waitangi Principles	Principles of partnership, protection, participation honoured. Study question, design and research guided and supported by local Kaumatua . Copy of study findings to be gifted to local Runanga and to Kaumatua advisors.	Guiding principles of Treaty. Cultural safety and integrity of participating families and researcher safeguarded. Families stories and research findings are held by Ngati Manawa for the ongoing benefit and use of their people.
Data Analysis	Systematic review of transcripts & field notes. Review of data in relation to research question & context of data gathering in field. Content analysis. Thematic analysis.	No intent other than to present data in everyday language of the event. Cyclic process where collection and analysis of data shape each other. Analysis concerned with summarising the informational contents of the data.
Assumptions & Limitations of Research	Assumptions Family stories can be told together in fair & reasonable manner. Selection criteria reflects successful UC. Limitations Small number of participants in study. Emphasis on successful management of UC. Children and adults interviewed together. Selection criteria.	The key to understanding UC lies in the descriptions provided by participating families. Factors creating success identified in literature review will be replicated in data generated by families. No data saturation but results will inform further studies into UC. Family experiences captured. Conditions set for study provides taste of data- sets platform for larger study.
Addressing Scientific Rigour	Systematic method of reading and working text. Credibility-participants verify findings an accurate portrayal. Use of field journal. Transferability-addressed in description and detail of study design. Dependability and Confirmability - audit trail provided.	Readers are able to follow decision making trail. Families recognise their story in research findings. Readers are able to transfer findings into meaningful context for them outside study setting. Study findings provide a view of UC while identifying other aspects that would benefit from further research.

Rationale for the Study Focus

The decision to focus this study on the successful management of unsupervised childcare was due to the fact that in the literature there is a huge emphasis on supervisory neglect and negative outcomes for children left home unsupervised. Much less attention has been paid to what creates successful outcomes for these children. While I acknowledge that there can be negative outcomes for unsupervised children, in this small study there is a deliberate avoidance of consideration or exploration into issues of supervisory neglect. Because little is known about

successful unsupervised childcare this study focuses on unpacking the factors constituting success. The small number of families participating in this study means there can be no generalisability to all families in New Zealand; but the outcomes from this study will be able to inform further larger studies into unsupervised childcare in the future.

Data Sources and Methods

Five families were recruited by invitation, for this small exploratory descriptive study. This was done with the expectation that the amount of data generated would be manageable yet give enough information to provide a basis for further larger studies in the future. This small sample size was chosen because qualitative research interviewing generates large amounts of data (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Streubert & Carpenter, 1999; Taylor, 1994). Due to the limited resources available for this study it was not possible to analyse data generated from a large group of participants.

Data were collected from participating families in one unstructured interview of approximately one hour. Follow up phone calls or discussions were used to clarify any unclear points. The advantage of using unstructured interviews is that it enables the participants to tell their own story in their own words, verbalising the issues that are important to them (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Streubert & Carpenter, 1999). Each family group was interviewed with parents and children present at the interview. Family members were interviewed together and were asked to describe their experiences of using unsupervised childcare. Key questions were asked about why they chose unsupervised childcare, what dilemmas or struggles they face as a result of this choice, and how they make unsupervised childcare work successfully for them. Prompt questions in these key areas were used when necessary. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed at the conclusion of the interview. Tape recording each interview helped ensure all the data described were collected, but also provided an instrument to capture the intonations and emphasis of the participant's words which becomes part of the data analysis (Taylor, Kermodé & Roberts, 2006).

In addition to taping each interview I also kept a journal to record my thoughts, impressions, observations and emotions following each interview. This provided data for me to reflect on, as I explored and described the participants' descriptions of unsupervised childcare. These reflections form part of the research findings; providing detail of the choices and decisions I made in the research process. This allows readers to follow my thinking in the research (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Koch, 2006).

Criteria for Inclusion

Families were selected for inclusion in this study if they had school age children under the age of 14 years, used regular periods of unsupervised childcare, and believed their family was successfully managing unsupervised childcare. As identified in Chapter One, and as supported by the findings of the literature review, criteria for inclusion in this study were developed and implemented. These are reiterated as:

- Children must be under the age of 14 years for a family to be included in this study, as this is the age at which New Zealand law recognises a child can be allowed to babysit or be left unsupervised.
- For the purposes of this study the definition of regular unsupervised childcare is an episode of unsupervised childcare of no less than 30 minutes duration occurring at least once a week. This was to ensure comparability of the unsupervised childcare being described.
- The focus of this study was on the successful management of unsupervised childcare. This is because very little attention has been paid to what makes unsupervised childcare successful (yet there is a large amount of literature available with a focus on supervisory neglect and negative outcomes). For this study, families were recruited who were happy with their use of this form of childcare and who could share their success stories with the researcher.

Families were excluded from the study if siblings, over the age of 14 years or any other adults were present in the house during the unsupervised episode, unsupervised care was irregular (less than once a week) or 'one off' incidents, or if any member of the family was struggling or unhappy with the use of unsupervised childcare. These exclusions from the study were to ensure the unsupervised childcare being described by participants matched the definition of unsupervised childcare for this study.

Recruiting Families as Study Participants

This exploratory descriptive study involved five families who believed they use unsupervised childcare successfully. These families were recruited from the town and farming communities through advertisements placed in school and local newsletters, or by direct approaches as recommended by the Kaumatua supporting this study. Families from the area's remote settlements were not included. The convenience sampling of families from just the town and farming communities was necessary due to the restrictions on my ability to travel outside my local area and also for cultural safety considerations. The Kaumatua guiding the cultural aspects of this study are of Ngati Manawa descent. To avoid any insult or injury to other Maori, I needed to restrict recruitment for my study to the area that is home to the Ngati Manawa people. An invitation to take part in this study was offered to both rural and urban families, and included both solo and two parent families. Parents could be self employed, employees or unemployed. These broad criteria were important to ensure a comprehensive description of the New Zealand experience of successful unsupervised childcare for these families was obtained.

Ethical Principles

Participant safety was paramount throughout the duration of this study. Prior to any data collection occurring, ethical approval was sought. Consultation with Ngati Manawa Kaumatua took place, the Northern Y Ethics Committee of the Human Research Council gave full ethical approval (see Appendix One, p.117), and this was duly noted by the Human Ethics Committee of Victoria University of Wellington.

All research was conducted using the guiding principles of autonomy (self determination), beneficence (doing good), and non maleficence (doing no harm) to protect both the participants and myself as the researcher.

Participant confidentiality was maintained at all times. No information was used in the study that could identify any family or individual. Participating families were asked to choose a pseudonym to preserve their identity and all tape recordings and transcripts were identified by this name only. The tapes were returned to the participating families at the conclusion of the study. The original data contained in the transcripts were destroyed by me when the study was completed. The research discussion at the end of the study was not written in any way that could identify participants, but was written to increase social understanding and practitioner knowledge of unsupervised childcare.

No child or family was coerced to take part in the study. No reward or inducement was offered for taking part. However, an explanation of the purpose of the study was included in the newsletter advertisements to encourage participation. Information sheets were given to both children and adults outlining the study prior to any information being sought. A detailed explanation of the possible benefits and risks of the research was given and it was made clear participation was voluntary. Possible benefits of participating will be the increased knowledge the family gain about what is happening within their family due to unsupervised childcare, and the satisfaction of knowing their stories are helping to increase knowledge of the issue. Possible risks include disclosure of unsafe parenting practices that put a child at risk or disclosure by a child of undesirable behaviours while unsupervised. Participants were given a week to decide if they would like to be a part of the study. The safeguards that have been described were put in place to protect the participants; to optimise the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence. These assist to minimise the possibility of unwittingly causing harm.

If the family decided to take part written consent was obtained from both adults and children. This was a very formal process of informed consent, where it was again emphasised that participation was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw at any time. The key element inherent in the informed consent process is the expectation that participants have been given sufficient information about the study, in a format they can understand, that will enable them to make an informed decision to participate or not. Participation is always at the discretion of the participant (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). During this formal consent process an explanation was given to the children that they could withdraw at anytime without fear of repercussion from their parents or from me.

Treaty of Waitangi Principles

A major aim of health research in New Zealand is to address the health inequalities for Maori. Central to this is adherence to the key principles of the Treaty of Waitangi: partnership, protection and participation (Durie, 1998). This study was conducted in an area that is home to the Ngati Manawa people. Local Ngati Manawa Kaumatua were consulted throughout the planning stages of this study to ensure that the guiding principles of the Treaty of Waitangi were upheld and honoured. Their knowledge and wisdom guided the development of the research question and study design to ensure it was of benefit to the Ngati Manawa people, and that it was culturally appropriate. The Kaumatua also pledged their ongoing support and guidance to both me and the participating families for the duration of the study. It was their intent that either they or a representative be present at all interviews with Maori families participating in this study. This was to ensure the cultural safety of the participants, researcher and the research.

The wisdom of the Kaumatua has also guided how the research findings are to be disseminated. It is of huge importance that the descriptions of the participating families stories are not exploited in any way and that they are available as part of the history of the Ngati Manawa people. For this reason a copy of this study is to be

gifted to the local Runanga where it can be accessed and used by and for the Ngati Manawa people.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was the method of data analysis used on the data collected to generate the description of some New Zealand families' experiences of successful unsupervised childcare. This method is recognised as the one of choice in qualitative descriptive studies, as it is concerned with summarising the informational contents of data (Sandelowski, 2000). Transcripts were read and the contents analysed for common words and meanings. Common themes in the data were identified and coded according to what was coming through in the text, i.e. community context, distal supervision. A feature of qualitative content analysis is that it is a dynamic process during which the researcher works to continuously modify their treatment of the data in response to the information emerging from the data. It is a cyclic process where the collection of data and the analysis of it shape and form each other (Gillis & Jackson 2002; Sandelowski, 2000). Qualitative content analysis does include an element of interpretation in that a numerical analysis is done to identify the patterns occurring in the data to assist with understanding the content. However, it is the least interpretive of the qualitative analysis approaches in that there is no intent other than to present the data in the everyday terms of the event (Sandelowski, 2000).

The end result of this qualitative content analysis was a descriptive summary of successful unsupervised childcare in New Zealand, presented in a way that best fits the data collected, and in a manner that accurately conveys the participants' accounts.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Research

This qualitative descriptive study assumes that the key to understanding successful unsupervised childcare lies in the descriptions provided by the participating families. It also assumes that the family stories, shared by children and adults together, can be

told in a fair and reasonable manner which will capture the experience of successful unsupervised childcare. The definition of successful unsupervised childcare used in this study is based on the assumption that the key characteristics (described as creating success in the existing literature) will be reflected in the stories told by the participating families.

The focus of this study is on the successful management of unsupervised childcare, rather than looking at the general area of unsupervised childcare. This has been a deliberate choice, due to the lack of knowledge in the New Zealand context as to what factors create positive outcomes for unsupervised children. Project resources were insufficient to undertake a general study into all aspects of unsupervised childcare. However; it was possible to unpack, from the data collected, those factors which contribute to successful outcomes for children who are unsupervised.

Five families, who believed they were successfully using unsupervised childcare, participated in this study. These families were purposefully selected for the knowledge they could share about their use of successful unsupervised childcare. The inclusion of five families allowed adequate data to be collected while ensuring the amount of data collected was manageable. Due to the small size of this study it was not possible to reach any saturation of the data. However, the results of this study provide an insight into this aspect of unsupervised childcare, and will inform further studies into the issue of unsupervised children.

I have chosen to interview adults and children together as I gather data that seeks to identify those factors contributing to successful management of unsupervised childcare. This is a deliberate choice on my part in the study design as I wanted to promote sharing of the unsupervised experience between family members, but also to aid managing the amount of data I would expect to be generated in the interview process. There is a possibility, however, that the child's voice may have been lost in this study because of this. Being interviewed together may result in children saying what they think their parents want them to say, rather than telling how it is for them.

Lastly, the selection criteria used for inclusion in this study were carefully considered to ensure a 'like group' was recruited. This was to ensure that the unsupervised childcare being described was similar across all participating families. It was recognised that this may also result in some families not being able to fit the definition of successful unsupervised childcare used for this study. The conditions set in the design of this study, will however, provide results that give an insight into what is happening with unsupervised children and provide a platform for further studies.

Addressing Scientific Rigour

The rigour or trustworthiness of this study can be assessed using the qualitative research concepts of credibility (authenticity), transferability (fittingness), dependability (auditability), and confirmability (objectivity) (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Streubert & Carpenter, 1999).

To ensure the credibility of the research findings all participants were asked to verify the transcripts and findings as an accurate portrayal of their experiences, as described by them. This included returning all the transcripts of conversations to participants for verification that I had heard them correctly. Asking participants to check that the descriptions and research findings mirror their experiences is one method of determining credibility of research findings (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Koch, 2006).

To enhance the credibility of the research I kept a journal throughout the research process. This was so that I, as the researcher, could record my thoughts, impressions, emotions and interactions with the project and the participants. Research findings are deemed to be more credible if the researcher is able to describe their experiences as a researcher, and in doing so make the research findings more plausible to the reader (Koch, 2006). In this study I have used entries from my journal to signal to

readers my position in the research findings. While readers may not always agree with the research findings, they will be able to follow how I reached them.

Transferability or fittingness of the study findings will be limited in that there is no saturation of the data due to the small size of the study. A study is deemed to fit or be transferable when readers can transfer the research findings into contexts meaningful to them outside the study setting (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Koch, 2006). While particular attention has been given to describing the participants, study setting, and the context of the unsupervised childcare in this study so that readers can assess the appropriateness of the findings to other settings, it is more likely that the findings will provide an opening for further questions and study.

The dependability of this study can be assessed through the audit trail I have provided of the research process. This includes documentation of all the research stages, data collection methods, data analysis decisions, research notes and journal entries. This audit trail will assist the reader to follow my decision trail and conclusions. Dependability of research refers to the consistency or stability of the research findings. A study is thought to be dependable when independent researchers are able to follow the audit trail provided by the researcher and arrive at similar conclusions (Gillis & Jackson, 2000; Koch, 2006).

Confirmability of a study relates to how research findings can be shown to be accurate so that other researchers would be able to agree with the meanings that have come from the data (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). A study is considered confirmable when the researcher has shown how the research findings were arrived at in the study (Koch, 2006). In this qualitative descriptive study into successful unsupervised childcare I have endeavoured to demonstrate confirmability of the study in the highly visible audit trail I have created to highlight my position and decision making in the research findings.

Across the study design, attention is given to achieving congruence and coherence between the study question and the data collection and analysis. The audit trail created to highlight my decisions and position throughout the research process demonstrates the reasonableness of the data analysis and my interpretations. The focus of the study on successful management of unsupervised childcare will enable me to explore what it is families do to make unsupervised childcare a success. The findings from this study will provide one view of unsupervised childcare, while identifying other aspects that would benefit from further research.

REPORT FROM THE FIELD

This report from the field is written in two parts. In the first part I present a description of the study setting, providing enough detail to enable readers to assess the transferability of the study findings to a context meaningful to them. The second part of this report is given to describing my experiences in the field with the participating families. I describe the participating families and discuss the family interviews, sharing my thoughts about how the interviews progressed.

The Study Setting

The setting for this qualitative descriptive study is a rural region in the central North Island. The majority of the area is forestry plantations or part of a large National Park in native bush, but there is also a large farming community. One rural town with a population of 1800 forms the main service centre for the region. The population of the town is predominantly Maori (the majority being of Ngati Manawa descent), while the farming community is made up by a majority of Pakeha families. It is the closest town to several remote settlements, where the majority of people are of Tuhoe origin (known also as “Children of the Mist”). In these settlements Te Reo Maori is spoken as first language. The nearest city is a forty five minute drive from the town. With the exception of the farming community the region is considered a low socioeconomic area. Employment in the region is predominately forestry or farming, with the associated long and irregular work hours these occupations entail. However unemployment levels in the town and remote settlements are high.

There are three schools in the town. A mainstream primary school caters for new Entrant to Year 8 students while the mainstream college caters for Year 9 to Year 13. A Kura Kaupapa (Maori immersion) school caters for New Entrant to Year 13 students. The combined roll of these schools is less than 500 students. The farming community has a primary school that caters for New Entrant to Year 8 students. The roll in this school fluctuates around 100 students. The remote settlements each have a Kura Kaupapa school that caters for New Entrant to Year 13 students. These schools all have rolls under 100 students. There are four Kohanga Reo (preschool Maori language nest) facilities, a play centre group, and a kindergarten in the town. The remote settlements each have a Kohanga Reo facility while the farming community has access to a local play centre group. However there are no afterschool childcare facilities or afterschool programmes available in the region.

The Participants

The five families participating in this study were recruited from the town and neighbouring rural community. Two were families who chose to live a rural lifestyle, though the parents worked outside the rural community. Two were farming families, and one family lived in the town. During the course of this study one of the rural lifestyle families moved into the town. During the family interview the children from this family spoke of their unsupervised time in the context of both rural and town community.

Four of the families were two parent families, while the other family was headed by a solo Mum. Two husbands chose to take an active part in the family interview. In one family the husband was not present during the interview. In another family the husband was too shy to take part; he was, however, present during the interview and signaled agreement with what was being said with nods and smiles.

The successful unsupervised childcare discussed in this study involved thirteen children. The ages of the children ranged from five to thirteen years, with an even

mix of boys and girls. Eight of these children were nine years or older. This age range was identified in the literature review as the middle school age years. This is noteworthy as the developmental milestones of autonomy and self responsibility are characteristic of this age group (Riley & Steinberg, 2004). The five children who were younger than nine were in the care of their older siblings when the unsupervised childcare took place. One family had a single child, while the other four families had between two and five children. Two families had a child over the age of fourteen, but these older children were not present at home during the unsupervised periods this study referred to.

Four of the families were European and one family was of Maori descent. This family opted to not have Kaumatua representation at the family interview. Each of the interviews was conducted in the family home. Children in four of the families chose to take part in the interviews. The children from the town family were too shy to speak but remained in the room with their parents as the interview took place. While they did not speak, they shared many looks with their parents, laughing and nodding their agreement to what was being said by their Mum.

The Interviews

Generally speaking, I found it very difficult to get the children to speak of their experiences in a manner that gave me usable data. Two children from different families, a boy aged nine and a girl aged twelve, were able to answer my prompt questions in a structured and coherent manner. Their input into this study was invaluable in that the children's perspective was gained.

The depth and value of the interview data increased with each family interview. In the early interviews my inexperience in interviewing techniques may have resulted in missed cues and opportunities to pursue some data in more depth. As the study progressed, and I was more aware of the issues families were raising and sharing in their stories, I was able to draw more information out.

The completed transcripts from the interviews, were verified by each family as a true and accurate record of what they said prior to any analysis occurring. And finally, each family was also given the opportunity to read the findings from this study and verify them as an accurate portrayal of their experiences.

In the next three chapters I introduce the findings of this research into what New Zealand families believe constitutes the successful management of unsupervised childcare. Detailed descriptions, provided by the participating families, are presented, and key findings are pulled through from the data as I explore family beliefs and practices.

Chapter Four: Making Unsupervised Childcare Successful - Families' Beliefs and Practices.

The focus of this chapter is on what families do to make their use of unsupervised childcare successful. Four key themes were identified from the data obtained during the interviews with the families. The families all believed in the importance of trust and responsibility; agreeing and staying within the rules and boundaries; the completion of tasks and chores; and, the importance of making provisions to be available to each other.

In the following sections of this chapter I present these themes, and in keeping with the qualitative descriptive method I have selected quotes from each of the families to illustrate their beliefs and practices. To conclude the chapter, I offer a brief discussion of the findings and link these back to the literature review.

SUCCESSFUL UNSUPERVISED CHILDCARE

Each of the families interviewed believed their use of unsupervised childcare was working successfully. It was their chosen form of childcare which was having positive outcomes for both the children and the parents. The children were seen to be becoming increasingly responsible and independent as a result of being unsupervised, and parents were able to fulfill their work obligations. While the families themselves were quite different when compared directly to one another (i.e. ethnicity, parental occupation, numbers in family, age and gender of children, etc), there were striking similarities in their viewpoints about what made unsupervised childcare successful.

Trust and Responsibility

In each of the family interviews, a very trusting relationship between parents and children was highlighted. Parents described their children as trustworthy and responsible. It was these characteristics which enabled parents to consider the use of unsupervised care for their children, and were considered critical factors in making the use of unsupervised childcare a success for families.

“Well one of the main things for me is just the fact that (child) is the boy he is, and he’s responsible and we feel comfortable leaving him on his own because we trust him and we know that he will do what he’s been asked to do and not do what he’s been asked not to do. Yes we trust him completely and think he’s responsible and will do the right thing.” (Parent, Family 2, p.1)

“We don’t think there’s a problem with it. Yeah, they (the children) are quite responsible. They know what not to touch, what to touch. There’s rules when they come home...I think it’s the way they’ve always had that trust, that responsibility.” (Parent, Family 4, p.1)

“Trusting our kids. That’s probably the biggest thing for me is having trust. That the kids trust us and we trust them back. Yeah that would be the biggest thing.” (Parent, Family 5, p.6)

It was felt that children wanted to please their parents. They wanted to be seen as capable and mature, and responded positively to being trusted. As parents gave them the opportunity to care for themselves, the children strove to show that trust was justified by doing as they were asked and behaving responsibly as their parents expected.

“It starts about seven years of age...then they want to feel a bit special and capable of doing things. It’s (child) that starts. He’s seven now. You can tell him it is just short term and to stay here. As long as he’s not distracted by older ones he’s actually very good. He quite likes to do the right thing...cos he’s naturally at the age he wants to sort of do the right things, I think. Seven years of age sort of is that age when they want to please the parents.” (Parent, Family 1, p.4)

Parents explain that this trust and responsibility develops as a result of how they have brought their children up. Children are taught to differentiate between right and

wrong, and to make responsible decisions. It is because of this that children are considered capable of managing unsupervised.

“Probably the way we’ve brought them up, we’ve told them what they’re allowed to do and they know what’s right and wrong. If they’re allowed to be doing that or they’re not allowed to be doing that, so that they’re quite responsible... Just more to the point we probably trust them more than anything.” (Parent, Family 5, p.1)

“Yes, but I still think it comes down to their upbringing. You know, how you bring your children up. My girls are responsible... They are sensible. I mean they do dumb things like all children, but really at the end of the day I know they’re not tutu (naughty) kids. I know they’re not there lighting matches because they want to see what it looks like when you flick one on the paper. They’re not tutu children. They will listen. And if they don’t, they get grounded.” (Parent, Family 3, p.2)

Trust and responsibility were seen by families as crucial factors in making unsupervised childcare a success. The trust between parents and children, coupled with the responsible nature of the children, allowed parents to make the decision to use unsupervised childcare. As children were given opportunities to be unsupervised, the children responded positively by behaving as expected and doing as they were asked, to prove the trust put in them was justified. Parents were able to leave their children unsupervised due to their responsible nature, and the fact that they could be trusted to remain within the rules and boundaries parents set to keep them safe.

Rules and Boundaries

Rules and boundary setting are methods used by the families to provide a consistent framework in which the children and family exist. Rules were put in place to ensure safe behavioural practices, and boundaries were used to ensure a safe environment for children. They play an important role in ensuring the unsupervised childcare is successful for the family. In each of the families these rules and boundaries were the

same regardless of whether parents were present or not. An example of this consistency in the rules and boundaries occurred prior to the study interview commencing with Family Two. I was talking with the family about my research when the nine year old son, who was listening to the conversation, spoke up and told me it was no different for him if his Mum and Dad were present or not. Nothing changed. During the interview his mother referred to this conversation.

“You know we spelt a few things out but generally he knows what is expected. It’s just the normal household rules and boundaries. It’s like (child) said. It’s no different from when he’s here alone to when he’s here with us...” (Parent, Family 2, p.4)

The fact that children operated under the same rules and boundaries continued to feature in the family interviews. Parents spoke of it being easier when the rules and boundaries were consistent. It meant there was no confusion or misunderstanding. Children knew what it is they were or were not allowed to do.

“The rules are still the same when we get home. That makes it easier I think.” (Parent, Family 4, p.1)

“Pretty much (rules and boundaries the same). Probably not quite as extreme. They (the children) know what they’re allowed and not allowed.” (Parent, Family 5, p.2)

The children interviewed were able to confirm that they knew the rules and boundaries, and that they were no different when parents were present or not present. There was an acceptance that this was the way things were done, and minimal questioning or challenging of these rules or boundaries.

“Pretty much the same rules when Mum and Dad are home. Not allowed to wreck things of course. Not allowed to be really destructive. No fighting but that happens quite a bit. And just make sure they’re

(siblings) keeping out of trouble and doing what we're supposed to be doing." (Girl aged 12, Parent, Family 1, p.1)

One boy was at a loss to explain to me how he shared with his parents what he did at home unsupervised. It was so normal it was not noteworthy at all. His parents knew what he was doing as it was what he always did, regardless of whether they were home or not.

"Because I usually, if I have to tell them a very detailed sentence, I'd usually just tell them about school because I've not really been doing anything at home. It's just the usual stuff which I should be doing."

(Boy aged nine, Parent, Family 2, p.4)

The consistency of the rules and boundaries governing children's behaviour and safety contributes to the success of the unsupervised episodes for these families. Children know what behaviour is expected of them, and what it is they can and cannot do. Because there are no exceptions to the way the rules and boundaries are enforced, children appear comfortable and accepting of them. There was an open acknowledgement by both parents and children that they knew what the boundaries and rules were, and they worked co-operatively to manage these. The completion of tasks and chores is part of the expectations parents have of their children's behaviour, and behaviour considered quite normal and acceptable by children.

Tasks and Chores

Children are given tasks and chores to complete as part of their responsibilities when unsupervised. This helps parents keep their children occupied in the time they are unsupervised, but also encourages independence and responsibility.

"They get a few jobs to do which sort of keeps them out of trouble for a while. Mostly they want to watch TV... so I know where they are. You tell them they are doing things well....go feed the dogs, feed the chickens and otherwise watch the channel on TV. I think they stick with it." (Parent, Family 1, p.3)

“You know they had animals that they had to attend to. A lamb I can remember getting that – and the girls were quite stoked with that. But they pretty much just have something to eat, put their bags away, put their lunch boxes away or they’re meant to. If I needed washing or something brought in, I’d usually leave a note in the morning. When they got home that afternoon to do the dishes or something, and they’d do it. (Child) would help with the little ones.” (Parent, Family 3, p.3)

When discussing the issue of tasks with the children I gained the impression that the children were very accepting of the tasks set for them. They were not seen as a problem and there was no objection voiced at them. Rather they were considered a normal part of their everyday life, and their responsibility when they were home unsupervised.

“One of them (chores) is taking the dog for a walk, doing my homework, watching a TV program, and doing whatever Mum and Dad have asked me to do. It’s good that the dog’s here. Like when Dad takes her out on his work, I’m a bit lonely and bored cos the main thing which is something I do is taking the dog for a walk, which is something I spend a little bit of time doing.” (Boy aged nine, Family 2, p.4)

“We just have to do our homework. Clean our rooms, feed the chickens, feed the dogs and things like that. I need to watch for them (siblings) doing fights and stuff, and make sure they’re not causing mayhem.” (Girl aged 12, Family 1, p.2)

Parents use tasks and chores to encourage self responsibility and independence in children, but also to help them fill their children’s unsupervised time. The tasks and chores are seen by the children as a normal part of their unsupervised time. This acceptance of the responsibility that comes with being trusted to be unsupervised

ensures that children do what is asked of them without objection, and contributes to the success of their unsupervised care.

Children are left unsupervised in a context where parents have high expectations of their behaviour and responsibility. Tasks and chores are set to encourage independence and self responsibility. Rules and boundary setting are used to ensure child safety, and these remain constant regardless of parents being present or not. However while children are unsupervised, parents consider it extremely important that they, or another adult, are still available to their children if needed.

Being Available - Distal Supervision

None of the parents interviewed ignored or forgot about their children when they were home unsupervised. Instead they were very conscious of where their children were, and what they were doing. It was extremely important to parents that they were available to their children if they were needed. This availability took the form of distal supervision, i.e. parents, or another adult, guiding and supporting their children from a distance.

“I worry. I sort of sit there and in fact I quite often ring (child) every day. ‘Sponge Bob’ time. And he’s not good at that. Just to check that he’s OK, if he’s got any issues and that he’s got home alright and has taken the dog and stuff like that. Sort of touching base with him all the time.” (Parent, Family 2, p.2)

“I have rung from church. When I first did it (unsupervised childcare), I sneaked out up the pathway, and asked ‘what’s happening? Oh it’s fine Mum’. Cellphones have made it a lot easier to do it. I don’t know how people did it before really. I think it’s quite important to have a little bit of... you know a little bit of what’s happening. I suppose there’s a lot of things I don’t know that I’m sure happened while I was not here, but generally it gives you a bit more confidence if you know what’s going on.” (Parent, Family 1, p.5)

Children were always made aware of where parents were and provision was made for children to be able to contact them if necessary. In each of the family interviews, at some point the children's telephone or cellphone skills were mentioned by parents. The children interviewed spoke about phoning their Mum if they needed to speak to her, and were also knowledgeable about where their parents would be. Where parents weren't immediately available to the children, they ensured some other adult was.

“And we just tell them where we are, so they know where we are and roughly how long we're going to be. That's probably the biggest part. They always know exactly where we are. And like if I'm down the paddock down there, they know I'm there and if I move to another paddock I always tell them first that I've gone there. And that's probably the big thing is they do know exactly where we are at that time...She knows what the number is and she knows how to use the phone. Like she could ring me on my cellphone quite happily.” (Parent, Family 5, p.2)

“I'd given my kids guidelines. They knew where I was. They had a contact number. They knew if there was trouble to go across to (neighbour) cos we didn't have a landline either. I only had contact through mobile phones.” (Parent, Family 3, p.1)

While children were allowed to care for themselves unsupervised at home, there was always a parent, or another adult, available to them should a need for assistance arise. In this way children experienced independence and self responsibility with the security that adult help was available to them should they need it. The use of unsupervised childcare was only acceptable to parents when they could ensure their own availability to their children, or the availability of another adult.

“We wouldn’t have travelled away...gone further away than staying in (community) if we went anywhere, to know that we can be back quickly if we needed to.” (Parent, Family 1, p.4)

“But if we go out on the road anywhere, if we are going out and we’re going somewhere, they have to come. They have to come no matter what. Even if we’re going to the run off they come with us. Yeah or going to the shops. They come with us. Somewhere where we can’t control. Or can’t see the house or haven’t got bit of a view on it, then they do, they have to come. We won’t leave them at home...” (Parent, Family 5, p.5)

“There’s always a main house (a house belonging to a family member with an adult present) where they (the children) always meet. Yeah they come back from. There’s always someone (an adult) there and then from there they decide.” (Parent, Family 4, p.3)

It is important to parents that not only are they available to their children, but that they are also involved with them. This includes talking with them, sharing the child’s experience of being unsupervised, and being engaged in activities with them. Despite the fact that work demands meant parents were not always able to be at home for their children, they tried to ensure that in every other way they were available to their children. The close and trusting relationship they shared with their children helped make the time they were able to spend together valuable for the family.

“Probably because they are like they are, they do talk to us very well. Like I can go down there and I can actually sit down on the bed and actually talk. And they tell me; they’ll talk to me quite freely about the things they’re not happy with and their problems.” (Parent, Family 5, p.7)

“And then we do a lot of things with them, eh, cos we go fishing. Everywhere we go our kids go with us. We go fishing, we go hunting,

we go on the boat. Yeah and they come with us. Everywhere we go they go.” (Parent, Family 4, p.1)

Parents considered being available to their children an absolute necessity when their children were unsupervised. When a parent could not be available they ensured another adult was. This availability took the form of distal supervision, but ensured children experienced their unsupervised care in a very supported environment. An adult was always available to the children if they were needed. This availability was seen as crucial to ensuring success with unsupervised childcare. While parents’ work commitments meant they could not always be with their children, parents involved themselves with their children by showing an interest in them, talking with them, and ensuring their time together was quality time. This involvement with their children contributed to the success of unsupervised childcare.

DISCUSSION

The families who participated in this study all believed they were achieving successful unsupervised childcare, and they attributed this to four key practices: the importance of everyone having trust and exercising responsibility; the use of consistent rules and boundaries; the setting of tasks and chores; and, the use of distal supervision. The simplicity of the practices which the families linked to their success was quite stunning, and encouraged me to feel that it should be possible for many families to use these practices and similarly achieve successful outcomes in unsupervised childcare.

The close and trusting relationship between parents and children was highlighted throughout the interviews and in the stories told by the participating families as they described what they believed made their use of unsupervised childcare successful. The parents explained their confidence and trust in their children to behave, to do what is asked of them, and to be responsible. The children wanted to please their parents, and reported that they responded positively to the knowledge they are trusted by behaving responsibly and showing initiative in completing tasks and chores.

Reflecting on these themes, it makes sense that the trust and responsibility earned by these children is probably aligned to the values and practices occurring in the wider family context. It is logical that consistency in the rules and boundaries used within the family to ensure acceptable standards of behaviour, and to encourage responsibility, should help children to move seamlessly between supervised and unsupervised care. Also, that the use of tasks and chores as illustrated by these families, encourages self responsibility and independence, and helps children to fill their unsupervised time. The children in this study were all supported in their unsupervised time. The parents all made themselves available to their children through the use of distal supervision, which allowed them to monitor their children's activities and be closely involved in their children's unsupervised time.

The key themes emerging from the data, in relation to what these families believe constitutes successful unsupervised childcare, do reflect the findings found in the literature review conducted for this study. For instance, the very close relationship shared between parents and children was a noticeable feature in each of the family interviews for this study. Throughout my research field journal I commented on the 'good', 'close', and 'solid' relationships that I observed as I spoke with the adults and children (Field Journal, p.4, p.7, p.11, p.14). Children were described as being very responsible and trustworthy, and this was attributed by the parents to the ways in which they were bringing up their children. The families reported that from an early age the children had been taught to differentiate between right and wrong, and encouraged to make their own decisions. Tasks and chores were set to encourage children to be independent and take responsibility for their own actions. These factors, and style of parenting which values independence and self responsibility in children, have been linked with the use of unsupervised childcare in existing research that looks into the issue of unsupervised children (Cole & Rodman, 1987; Coley et al., 2004).

While children were encouraged to be responsible and independent, it was done in an environment where the rules and boundaries guiding expected behaviour remained absolutely consistent. There were no exceptions or variations to the behaviour that was expected from the children. Children knew that the behaviour acceptable when parents were present was exactly what was acceptable when they were home unsupervised. As reported by the families, parents and children worked together to live within, and manage the rules and boundaries which were a normal part of their family life. The consistency of these rules and boundaries also meant that there was no confusion or misunderstanding between parents and children as to what was acceptable and what was not. Children were trusted to be unsupervised but parents made sure the children experienced their unsupervised time in a supported environment. Parents trusted their children to remain within the rules and boundaries set for them, but ensured they were available to their children to provide guidance or assistance if it was needed. These themes are similarly reported by Riley and Steinberg (2004) and Coley et al., (2004) in their discussions about how the parent/child relationship, use of rules and boundaries, and the type of parental monitoring all influence the unsupervised child's behaviour.

In this study, during the periods of unsupervised childcare, the parents and children all had contact arrangements and confidence in each other's availability should it be needed. This availability mainly took the form of distal supervision, and provided parents with the opportunity to be involved with their children while they were unsupervised. Parents considered it imperative that they were available to their children, and could not countenance the use of unsupervised childcare without this availability. Parental use of distal supervision ensured children experienced their unsupervised time in a supported manner, which encouraged them to develop in both responsibility and independence. In existing overseas research into unsupervised children, it is suggested that positive outcomes are more likely to be experienced in environments where children are more equal participants, and where parents take an active role (Cole & Rodman, 1987; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Casper & Smith, 2004). It is also suggested that the type of positive parental monitoring described by

the families in this study, is particularly protective for unsupervised children, moderating peer pressure and influencing child behaviour (Coley et al., 2004; Riley & Steinberg, 2004).

These key findings presented in this chapter are reflected in the existing overseas research. However it is exciting to see two themes emerging strongly from this New Zealand data, which are only alluded to in the existing literature. The use of rules and boundaries to provide a consistent framework within which the families operated, and the setting of tasks and chores to encourage independence and self responsibility were recurring themes amongst all five participating families. The emphasis placed on these factors as being associated with successful outcomes for children, and the strength with which they came through the data make them worthy of further consideration and research.

In this chapter I have identified and described what the families who participated in this study believed makes unsupervised childcare successful. A close parent/child relationship, based on trust and responsibility, was seen as a key factor in creating success. The consistency of the rules and boundaries in which the children and families operate was also seen as crucial. That children understand and accept the high expectations parents have of them, and seek to please and prove their parents trust in them was also identified as a feature that is crucial to the success of unsupervised childcare. Further, parents believed it was important that the unsupervised care occurred in a very supported environment, where the children had access to them or another supportive adult through the use of distal supervision. It was considered equally important that children made themselves available to their parents while they were unsupervised. The involvement parents had in their children's unsupervised time was identified as helping to ensure that the outcomes for their children were positive.

However, what makes a family decide to use unsupervised childcare, given that the law is ambiguous and that parents may leave themselves wide open to accusations of neglect or worse? In the next chapter I explore the reasons that families had behind

their decisions to use unsupervised childcare, and describe the context in which this care takes place.

Chapter Five: Using Unsupervised Childcare - A Family Choice

In this chapter I continue to explore New Zealand families' beliefs and practices about successful unsupervised childcare, but with a focus on the circumstances behind the decision to use this form of childcare. The complexity of the issue of childcare is highlighted in the variety of reasons given by families for choosing to use unsupervised childcare. However, while the reasons for using unsupervised childcare vary, strikingly similar themes emerged in the stories told by the participating families.

Work hours dictating parent availability; community context influencing unsupervised childcare; an evolving form of childcare; the continuing evaluation of their choice of childcare; and, positive outcomes for children are themes presented in this chapter. As in the previous chapter I use quotes from each of the families to illustrate these themes and describe family beliefs and practices. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the themes, which continues to build onto the findings from the previous chapter to increase understanding of successful unsupervised childcare.

UNSUPERVISED CHILDCARE - CHOICE AND SOLUTION

For the families interviewed in this study unsupervised childcare was either a choice and/or a solution to the dilemma of providing alternative care for their children.

“We decided that the kids were responsible enough kids to do what we did. We felt that they didn't need someone to come in and supervise them.” (Parent, Family 5, p.1)

Parents, who were trying to forge a future for their family, and with no other childcare option available to them, made a decision that seemed right for their family.

“It was either we get ahead or...It was either I didn’t take that job and I didn’t leave my children unsupervised or we stayed on the benefit and got nowhere fast. That’s where we were going.” (Parent, Family 3, p.1)

What was very striking in the conversations with these families was the consistent soul searching that they had done prior to any decision being made to allow children to be unsupervised. It was not an easy decision for parents. A lot of thought and deliberation went into the decision to leave their children at home unsupervised. But ultimately it was a choice families made because it felt right for their family, and suited their circumstances.

Choosing Unsupervised Childcare

The reasons behind a family’s decision to use unsupervised childcare varied from family to family, and highlight the very complex nature of the issue of unsupervised children. No family interviewed in this study had the same reason for choosing this form of childcare. Cost, child choice, lack of childcare resources, and parenting styles all featured in the decisions made by parents.

The cost of childcare for one family meant it was impossible for the solo Mum to even consider any other alternative care.

“I couldn’t afford, and that’s what it came down to, I couldn’t afford to pay a baby sitter out of my wage.” (Parent, Family 3, p.1)

She was unable to afford a private nanny or a baby sitter for her children, and there were no childcare facilities in her area. This mother felt she had no other option available to her as there was no childcare subsidy available to her.

“It felt like no options because if you’re going to get childcare cheaper, i.e. somebody was already on a benefit and they wanted to earn cash money, you couldn’t get help for that kind of childcare. You could get help from WINZ (Work & Income New Zealand) for a certified educational place. There was none of those around here. There was no

day care centres to suit working hours for Mums, pretty much. And I couldn't afford to pay like a Nanny to look after four children. That was just out of the question” (Parent, Family 3, p.1)

For this low income family, it seemed very unfair that because of where they were living, they were unable to access any government assistance for childcare. Had they been living in a city, with a CYFS approved childcare facility nearby, they would have easily qualified for this assistance. This family felt disadvantaged because financial assistance available to other low income families like them, was not available to them due to there being no CYFS approved childcare facilities in the area. This limited their options, with the use of unsupervised childcare being a solution to the dilemma of childcare.

In contrast, it was the children's own preference that featured in the decisions made by parents in three of the families interviewed to use unsupervised childcare. For these families it was a conscious choice. However the rationale behind allowing their children to choose this form of care was very different for each family.

The close presence of whanau (family) members made the children's choice of unsupervised care acceptable for one family. This meant that there were always adult family members available to the children if needed, and the children could be unsupervised in a supported context.

“Cos usually all the boys go to my mother's house after school, cos she finishes the earliest. And if she's not there there's an arrangement - one of my brothers is on four days on, four days off, and the other one, so there's always someone there for them. That's how it all works. There's always someone there for them at the main house and from there then if they don't want to stay there the kids will come back here. It's them (the children). They run the show.” (Parent, Family 4, p.3)

Finding a childcare solution that worked for both parents and children was the deciding factor for another family. The children were unhappy, and misbehaved when

kept with the parents in their work environment. This created stress and unhappiness for both children and parents. The children wanted to be at home and independent, so being allowed to care for themselves at home was a practical solution that worked for this family.

“So suddenly we started to leave them a bit here because they wanted to be here and they promised all sorts of things... It was probably just easier on everybody to leave them here watching a TV program or finishing homework than dragging them off to the shed where they were just naughty then cos they didn’t want to be there. It sort of started there...it seemed a bit more practical...easier considerably.” (Parent, Family 1, p.4)

For a third family the decision to use unsupervised childcare was as much about a parenting style that encourages independence and responsibility in their children as it was their children’s own choice.

“It’s become more what they want to do, than actually leaving them at home, you could say. Quite often (son) will say ‘oh yeah I’ll come’ and (daughter) will say ‘oh no I’ll stay at home’. Whatever she’s doing, she wants to carry on. They decide what they want to do. Now we don’t pressure them, just saying you’re coming with us no matter what. You know - especially if we’re not going to be long.... Kids have to be left to do a few things by themselves, it’s quite good for them in a way. They just learn to be responsible. Like there’s a big difference between kids who’ve got no responsibility and kids that have got a lot of responsibility. They become quite different people, I reckon. I think that the biggest thing is that a lot of people in the olden days were left quite a bit more alone and you know they had to do things. They had jobs to do, and like our kids....they don’t really have jobs to do. I suppose their job is coming home and doing a bit of homework and actually being good here I suppose.” (Parent, Family 5, p.4)

Because unsupervised childcare was working successfully for these families, the use of unsupervised childcare would remain the chosen option of care regardless of the availability of any alternative form of childcare.

“Here I probably wouldn’t (make use of any other options of childcare). Here it’s (cowshed) not that far away, you’re sort of on the pulse a bit more. Kids have to be left to do a few things for themselves, it’s good for them in a way.” (Parent, Family 5, p.4)

“Oh, yeah I would (choose unsupervised care even if other options of care were available). The boys are just at the shed anyway...I have tried young girls. I found actually that young girls are actually worse. They are probably the worst baby sitters you can really get I think. It works better than having young girls.” (Parent, Family 1, p.5)

“In all honesty I probably would have still used unsupervised care to save more money. Even though you get subsidised hours, there’s still hours that you need to pay out of your pay.” (Parent, Family 3, p.3)

These families had either tried other alternative forms of childcare that had proven unsuccessful, had house and working environments that were ideally suited to monitoring children who were unsupervised, or had experienced the positive benefits of being able to save money, while also enjoying the successful use of unsupervised childcare. The families were experiencing successful outcomes from their use of unsupervised childcare, and felt that even had they had an option for alternative childcare it would not be considered.

However, for another family there did not seem to be a choice at all. There were no other options of childcare available to them. Had they had a choice of alternative childcare their preference would have been to make use of it.

“And what I’ve said before, just the fact it’s not really a choice. We didn’t know many people here so in the past I’ve always used friends

actually, and it's been like a barter system if you like. You know, if I've had to ask (child) to go to their house, then I've always had their children and things like that. This time we try to do that in the weekends, but during the week we can't and I feel uncomfortable asking people on a regular basis if he can go to their house, so it's just a ...lack of choices. If there was something at the school, a holiday program or an after school program at (rural school), I would rather he spent time there and then came home. Even if he was still home alone, but it cut the hours down that he was here. Like half an hour as opposed to an hour and a half to two. Because that's crept up as well."

(Parent, Family 2, p.2)

For this family the use of unsupervised childcare was a default position, because there was no other choice. They would have liked to have had a choice of options. Unsupervised childcare was working well for them, but it was the amount of time their child spent alone that was a problem for them. They would have liked to have been able to mix some use of unsupervised childcare with afterschool programs where their child would have social contact.

In all the families interviewed, the age of a child was not seen as a major deciding factor in the decision to use unsupervised childcare. Rather it was how responsible and trustworthy the child was to be left alone.

"I don't think there is an age. It depends on the child. Whether you find the child is responsible enough to be left alone by themselves or not."

(Parent, Family 5, p.4)

"The age...that is a tricky one to answer. (Child) was perhaps seven - it didn't happen much then I think. And as he got to eight or nine, it slowly got more often and longer periods of time... That is hard. I mean I think it is OK now for (child). (Child) is the only child that I have that

sort of experience with. I suspect if I was asked to generalise, the age would be much older.” (Parent, Family 2, p.2)

For one family it was a parent’s own family history and experience of using unsupervised childcare that guided their decision about when a child was ready to be unsupervised at home.

“Well depending on the child, but I can remember my parents both working and I was ten...it certainly didn’t do me any harm. I didn’t do any tutuing.” (Parent, Family 3, p.2)

This parent was guided by their own memory of how it was for them as a child being unsupervised. They could remember being quite happy looking after themselves at age ten, and it was this positive experience that guided their own decision to allow their children to be at home unsupervised.

The presence of older siblings was seen as both advantage and disadvantage. While older children were able to assist younger siblings, there was also the worry of sibling rivalry and fighting.

(Homework) “Was a challenge. (Child) would help with the little ones. I found it quite time consuming, coming home from work or doing shopping and having to organise them...Oh God it’s not easy being a single Mum and bringing up a family and trying to work.” (Parent, Family 3, p.3)

“My main worry is when they start great big fights. More than anything, I think. They have been known to do that. And it can be quite sort of physical at times, the fights.” (Parent, Family 1, p.3)

“You know if its one child at home alone it’s different I think from siblings and sibling rivalry and fighting. And it depends on how well

they get on as well. And whether they actually expect the older one to make a judgment call and go, yep that's what we'll do.” (Parent, Family 2, p.2)

What did not become clear, in the answers families gave when talking about the age children were considered old enough to be unsupervised, was if having older siblings present made it easier for families to use unsupervised childcare. Evidence in the literature review suggested this would be so, but this does not emerge in the stories told by the families interviewed for this study. However, families were not asked specifically if the presence of older siblings influenced the decision to use unsupervised childcare which could account for this anomaly.

While the diversity of reasons for using unsupervised childcare suggests that there will be no “one off” solution for dealing with unsupervised children, there were some common themes that appeared in the stories of the participants describing their family use of unsupervised childcare. These themes are discussed in the rest of this chapter.

Work Hours Dictate Parent Availability

In each of the five families interviewed, the demand made on parents by their work hours was highlighted when parents were asked to talk about using unsupervised childcare.

“Cos we're not home. We both work, and that's our main thing. We're not home. We both get home just after 4.00pm. So it's only like they get home. The bus comes in at twenty past three. By the time they walk down here they're only home half an hour at the most if we're a bit late.” (Parent, Family 4, p.1)

“Just the need that with the jobs we were doing, that we couldn't be here to supervise the kids. I was milking. (Husband) was contracting, so that's how it came about. The kids being left unsupervised.” (Parent, Family 5, p.1)

The expectation or requirement of employers for parents to work longer hours compounded childcare issues for families. Work hours that were extended out past what initially suited parents of young children, created difficulties for parents wanting to be available to their children.

“And with the kids at different ages and that I got an hour a day job which I didn’t think was too shit hot, but a least it was a start, and after about six weeks - and it was cool as the hour a day was when the kids were at school. Then it progressed to five hours a day work in (city) which I couldn’t turn down. It was too good an opportunity, too good a job, a really good learning experience. But in saying that, I was in debt from living on a benefit for so long.” (Parent, Family 3, p.1)

“I stayed at home full time until he was six, and then I went to (name) college. And always in (city) I organised people that he stayed with whilst I was in college. Moved up here, (husband) then had six months out of work whilst I got into my job and sorted myself out and felt comfortable. And then like he said any work with (business) was quite strictly ‘oh yeah but I’ve got to be home by sort of three’. And then it did creep up to 3.30. And as they’ve offered him work over the time I think some of them have forgotten that work is not the be all and end all, and this is the priority...him being home.” (Parent, Family 2, p.2)

For farming families the need for both parents to be in a cow shed twice a day created childcare difficulties, as the children did not want to have to be at the shed at all.

“We would both be at the shed milking and the children didn’t always want to come along. And sometimes we would take them along and it didn’t always work that well really.” (Parent, Family 1, p.3)

However the use of unsupervised childcare was considered suitable due to the presence of a parent on the farm. Care was not so much thought of as unsupervised as it was supervision from a distance.

“The boys are just at the shed anyway, milking the cows. I mean the shed’s not that far. They’re not entirely on their own. Somebody’s at the shed.” (Parent, Family 1, p.4)

“I suppose I don’t class it realistically, I don’t class it as unsupervision. I mean to me they are supervised, but I’m just not within twenty metres of them.” (Parent, Family 5, p.5)

Work demands on the parents featured in the stories of unsupervised childcare for all five families interviewed for this study. Work hours that were incompatible with school hours resulted in short periods of time that parents were unable to physically be present with their children. A lack of childcare facilities reduced the childcare options for families. Unsupervised childcare became both a choice and a solution for the families.

While the demands of work hours affected a parent’s ability to be available for their children all the time, this on its own was not enough to influence the decision to use unsupervised childcare. Work hours create the need for childcare but it is the type of community they live in that permits a parent to contemplate the use of unsupervised childcare.

Community Influencing Choice of Unsupervised Childcare

The context of the community a family lives in, and in particular the perceived safety of it, is a major consideration for parents choosing to leave their children unsupervised at home. In each of the families interviewed the parent’s perception of the safety of their community directly influenced their decision to use unsupervised childcare.

A rural community was seen as a safer community than that of a city by those families living in rural areas. This was due to the locals all being known to one another, and the community being considered low risk due to the lack of traffic, strangers and other urban hazards.

“I actually, in terms of bad people out there or living where we live I feel quite comfortable. It’s just the fact that we are out in the country in a very small village. What strikes me as being a safe area as opposed to in a city with a lot more people around and potentially a lot more bad people round. You know, I often go out and leave vehicles unlocked, and doors unlocked and things like that, rightly or wrongly. And so I guess that feeling is there with our property as well to a certain extent, that things are OK because of the location we live.” (Parent, Family 2, p.3)

“I felt safer leaving them in the country where it was not a lot of houses. I felt more comfortable knowing that they were there rather than in say suburbia where there’s... Oh I mean, I don’t know. It was just easy out there.” (Parent, Family 3, p.2)

This view contrasted sharply with a family living in the town who felt it was the close presence of neighbours, whanau and people known to the children that made their community a safer place to leave children unsupervised.

“We used to live down the other end of (town). But it’s this area that’s a lot safer for them and then the family’s just up there. You can look out the doorway and their uncle lives up here. We’ve got a best friend that lives just next door over there. So yeah - over here it’s quite safe. There’s always people and family around.” (Parent, Family 4, p.1)

The children interviewed for this study had contrasting views about what felt safer. For one rural child it was the knowledge that he knew everyone around him that meant he did not feel alone.

“There’s people around who I know, around the area where we live. I don’t feel alone.” (Boy aged nine, Family 2, p.1)

But for one girl it was the lack of nearby people that made her feel afraid. This child had moved with her family into the town in the course of this study. She speaks about her experience being unsupervised with her older siblings when living in the rural area.

“I felt unsafe....especially when I was in (rural community) cos there’s lots of farms and there’s hardly any houses. There were hardly no houses close to us.” (Girl aged seven, Family 3, p.3)

When speaking of her experiences unsupervised in the town area, this same child confessed to having fun, enjoying riding her bike, and playing outside in the section while waiting for her Mum to get home. There was no mention of any fear. She was quite happy at home but would like to be able to go and play with her friends. For her this was not an option, as she and her sisters were not allowed to bring anyone home or leave the section while they were at home unsupervised.

“It’s kind of fun (being unsupervised). We play and ride around here (in the section) but I’d rather go to a friends house.” (Girl aged seven, Family 3, p.3)

When parents were asked what made it feasible to consider using unsupervised childcare, it was the presence of supportive neighbours that would be available to the children. *“Just the fact that (name) has his (business) next door and is always there.” (Parent, Family 2, p.3), “knowing that (name) was not too far away. I mean she was still a bit of a run if the house caught on fire or something ridiculous, but it was good to know she was there.” (Parent, Family 3, p.2), and “It would be quite alright of course. There’s always the neighbours here if you have a problem.” (Parent, Family 1, p.5)*

The perceived safety of the community, both in the context of the physical environment and the inhabitants, was critical to a families’ peace of mind in choosing to use unsupervised childcare. The presence of supportive neighbours, and the

knowledge that the local adults were known and available to the children, made it easier to let children be at home unsupervised.

The community context, and child preference have been identified as major influences in a parents decision to choose to use unsupervised childcare. However it is a decision that is not static, and one that is made carefully. Children must prove they are capable to be unsupervised, and parents are always watching and evaluating the outcome of this decision.

Evolving Childcare but Always Evaluated

The use of unsupervised childcare for each of the study families evolved gradually as parents became confident in their children's ability to cope with being unsupervised. Children were not just left at home for long periods, but rather introduced to being unsupervised for short periods.

“You started off slowly with just ten minutes at a time or so, and then you can extend it to an hour. I don't think we ever went out for a whole evening or so. Can't remember us doing that. Maybe we should have cos its working quite nicely but we've never done that.” (Parent, Family 1, p.4)

As the children were seen to be coping with being alone parents were able to gradually extend the boundaries and duration of the unsupervised episodes. It was a careful process that was monitored carefully by parents.

“Well (daughter) started off with five minutes and ten minutes. She started off when we were milking with sitting in the car. We were both milking and then it would come to the stage where it might have been just out of range and so she might have been playing in the shed, next door to the shed. The boundaries just slowly got, over the years, slowly just got to the stage where she was comfortable just sitting at home , drawing on pieces of paper and colouring in and all that sort of jazz. And then we sort of get to the stage... at first we might pop back every

ten minutes, every quarter of an hour or so. And it just got to the boundaries where now they're quite often, where they could be sitting at home here for an hour or so. Quite comfortable with themselves.”
(Parent, Family 5, p.2)

In the families interviewed the use of unsupervised childcare was not a static decision. Each of the parents interviewed was constantly watching and evaluating the impact that being unsupervised was having on their children.

“Yeah you're always watching. You're always watching to see how they're going and what's happening and you're always... like if it's not working out you try and do something else to make it work. Yeah, if they were uncomfortable with us leaving them here, then we would look at something alternative.” (Parent, Family 5, p.7)

“And then my job hours were strictly one till three and they've slowly been pushed out, so its perhaps evolved and we've considered as we've gone along 'is this still working? is this still working?' and each time we've sort of thought well it seems to be so we've continued with it but it has evolved from strictly 9.00am till 3.00pm, till now virtually 9.00am till 5.00pm or 8.30am till 5.00pm... And we've got more comfortable as he's got older too, I suppose.” (Parent, Family 2, p.1)

Unsupervised childcare is an evolving form of childcare. Parents do not appear to just foist it onto unprepared children, rather it evolves as children prove themselves ready and capable of caring for themselves while unsupervised. The outcomes, for children, from the use of this form of childcare are carefully monitored by parents. The decision to use unsupervised childcare is not a static one for families. Parents are continually watching and evaluating the effects on children, and are prepared to consider alternative care if outcomes are not positive.

Outcomes for children are continually monitored and evaluated by parents. The outcomes being observed by parents in this study were all positive, and reinforced their belief that their decision to allow their children to be unsupervised was right.

Describing Positive Outcomes

Each of the participating families was able to describe positive outcomes they saw in their children as a result of using unsupervised childcare. These outcomes were measured in the increasing responsibility and maturity they saw in their children, and in the new skills they developed as a result of being allowed to be independent. Parents noted that with the increasing trust and responsibility the children were given, there was a corresponding response from the children to want to please their parents.

“They know that it helps us if they’re responsible here and we don’t have to worry about them then it helps us get on with what we have to get done, and get it done. They quite often do things, like they’ll go and get the washing in, or sometimes you’ll come home and (daughter) will have talked (son) into cleaning the house (laugh) they don’t go over the top. They just learn different skills I think. They just seem to look after themselves.” (Parent, Family 5, p.)

“Can I just add something we’ve both noticed actually in the last few weeks, between the end of last term and now, is that (name) is starting to look and see what needs doing. You know we’ll come home a few times and he’s done jobs that he knows needed to be done. Yeah without being asked which has been awesome.” (Parent, Family 2, p.5)

The desire to prove their parent’s trust in them and to please was also evident in the participating children’s stories of being unsupervised. *“They think I can be trusted so I should be.”* (Boy aged nine, Family 2, p.2). When asked how it felt knowing her parents trusted her to be unsupervised and to behave, one young girl responded *“special”* (Girl aged 12, Family 1, p.2). During this particular moment in the interview I observed the interaction between mother and daughter. I note the child

appears to glow and smiles beatifically at her mother (Field Journal, p.5). In another family interview, two young children, when asked how they felt knowing Mummy and Daddy were happy they had done their chores responded “good”. Asked if it meant did they want to do more jobs for their parents, they answered “yes.” (Boy aged six, Girl aged nine, Family 5, p.8).

The children in this study are seen to thrive in the unsupervised environment. The more trust and responsibility they are given, it seems the more the children strive to show that trust is justified and how responsible they can be. The children learn to look for jobs that need to be done, and seem to enjoy surprising their parents by completing jobs without being asked to do so. As the parents react positively to their children’s behaviours, the children appear to want to please them more. The positive outcome for the children is increasing independence and self responsibility.

In addition to the increasing independence and responsibility noticed in the children, parents observe a similar result in their children’s academic performance.

“My girls are responsible. They are mature for their age in ways, as in responsibility. My daughter (name) even though she was the eldest one at home, she was a straight A student. She got the top study award at (name) school at the time, and you know I knew that they weren’t suffering cos their schoolwork was very good.” (Parent, Family 3, p.2)

“Academically they’re quite good. They’re in the higher range. They’re above their average school age so it must be working. They haven’t deteriorated in school.” (Parent, Family 4, p.3)

It appears that children, who are allowed to care for themselves while unsupervised, learn and practice the skills of being independent and self reliant. These same skills, practiced in the school environment, result in children who are self motivated and high achieving students.

The positive outcomes that the parents participating in this study are seeing in their children make it easier for the use of unsupervised childcare to continue. Their children are seen to be thriving and happy. They are seen to be becoming increasingly independent and self-reliant. Academically the children are achieving at a higher level than their peers. Unsupervised childcare is being proven to be a successful option of childcare, with very good outcomes for both the children and the families.

DISCUSSION

Emerging from the interviews and stories told by the participating families, is a picture of caring parents who describe how they are doing the very best they can to provide and care for their families. These parents, due to their work commitments, are unable to physically be available to their children all the time. Parents explain that residing in an area with extremely limited options for childcare, the decision to use unsupervised childcare is both a choice and a solution. Each family tells a similar story of work hours dictating the amount of time parents can be with their children, and how the perceived safety of the community they live in influences their decision to use unsupervised childcare. The families all describe how their use of unsupervised childcare evolves and how it is always being evaluated, and of the positive outcomes they see in the children. These themes, emerging from the interviews and stories of the participating families, provide an insight into the New Zealand experience of successful unsupervised childcare.

The reasons behind the decision to use unsupervised childcare varied widely between the participating families. However a common factor was that in each of the families interviewed, either one or both parents were employed in some form of work outside the home which reduced parental availability. Parents described how the inflexibility of their work hours resulted in periods of time where they were unable to be physically present with their children. Work hours ended up being incompatible with children's school hours. This finding mirrors overseas research which indicates that parental employment is a common correlate to the use of unsupervised childcare. Children are more likely to be in unsupervised childcare when one or both parents

work (Revell, 1997; Stirling, 1997; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Vandivere et al., 2003b; Casper & Smith, 2004).

The lack of childcare facilities, or any form of afterschool programme in the region, compounded the childcare problem that these working parents faced. While cost of childcare appeared not to be a consideration for the majority of the families participating in this study, for one low income family it was a huge barrier that prevented the mother from seeking any form of alternative childcare. She explained that she was unable to afford any form of childcare, and because of where she lived was unable to access any financial assistance. In New Zealand restrictive legislation prevents childcare subsidies being paid to any but CYFS approved childcare facilities (www.workandincome.govt.nz/support-communities/OSCAR-funding.html). This denies low income families, living in areas without these approved facilities, access to financial assistance for childcare. This holds particularly true for rural and low income communities that tend to be disadvantaged in terms of childcare resources and facilities (Stevens & Karns, 1996).

Reflecting on the families' stories about their use of unsupervised childcare, it becomes apparent that unsupervised childcare provides a solution to the childcare dilemma created by a lack of childcare facilities and inflexible parental work hours. The decision to use unsupervised childcare is not made lightly. All the families are influenced by the perceived safety of community they live in. The children's own preference for unsupervised care is a major consideration of parents choosing to use this form of childcare, but the children have to show their parents that they are ready and capable of being unsupervised. The use of unsupervised childcare evolves as the children are able to demonstrate and prove their competency to their parents. Parents continually evaluate the effects on the children, and the family decision to use unsupervised childcare is not a static one. The positive outcomes seen in the children reinforces the family belief that the use of unsupervised childcare is the right decision for their family, and ensures its continued use.

The key themes emerging from the data, in relation to the family decision to use unsupervised childcare, reflect the findings found in the literature review conducted for this study. For instance, as they talked of their experiences each of the parents interviewed discussed how their knowledge about their local community influenced their decision to use unsupervised childcare. The perception of their community as a safe and cohesive community enabled them to consider the use of unsupervised childcare. Child safety was the paramount concern for all the parents in this study. Parents explained how the lack of 'bad people', and the proximity of good neighbours; who were known to their children and who would be available to them if needed, was a critical factor in their decision to use unsupervised childcare. Whether it was a rural family or an urban family being interviewed, it was the nearby presence of familiar adults available to the children that determined how safe parents saw their community. In the overseas research that looked at factors associated with unsupervised childcare, the community context was a very strong correlate to the use of this form of childcare. Communities that were seen as cohesive (close knit), and the presence of reliable neighbours were indicators to the use of unsupervised childcare (Cole & Rodman, 1987; Galambos & Garbarino, 2001; Vander Ven et al., 2001; Vandivere et al., 2003b; Casper & Smith, 2004; Coley et al., 2004; Riley & Steinberg, 2004). However, while the community context was a major influence in a parents' decision to use unsupervised childcare, it was their child's own preference for care that had a deciding role in the decision.

In the majority of the families interviewed child choice was the deciding factor in the use of unsupervised childcare. In the families where the use of unsupervised childcare was a solution rather than a choice, parents described their children as being happy to be at home alone, and the children affirmed this. This reflects findings in existing overseas research that suggests unsupervised childcare is more likely to be used when the child has indicated they prefer, or are happy, to be at home unsupervised (Ochiltree, 1992; Belle, 1999; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999; Riley & Steinberg, 2004).

In contrast to the existing research, the presence of older children did not appear to have a major influence on the use of unsupervised childcare in the New Zealand

families interviewed for this study. This variation is probably due to the fact that parents were not asked specifically if older children made a difference to their decision to use unsupervised childcare. Instead they were asked at what age they thought it was acceptable to use unsupervised childcare. However, as these comments/themes emerged in this small study as a factor in two of the families, it is worthy of consideration and further study. While there were variations in the replies given to the question of what age parents thought it acceptable for children to be unsupervised, the general agreement was children between the ages of seven and ten were ready to shoulder more responsibility, and wanted to be trusted. This reflects existing research findings that indicate the developmental milestones for children in the middle school years (ages seven to twelve years) are increasing independence and self responsibility (Belle, 1999; Cole & Rodman, 1987; Ochiltree, 1992; Riley & Steinberg, 2004).

The children participating in this study all indicated they were quite happy to be at home unsupervised. Frequently they initiated the unsupervised care, even when they had a choice of being with family or with their parents at work. However, when asked if they had a preference as to how they spent their time when parents worked, a number of the children indicated they would prefer to have friends to play with. Despite this, being unsupervised was not an issue for them and they were OK with being at home alone (Field Journal, p.8, p.12, p.22). Even when unsupervised childcare was the child's choice, they were never just left for a long period unsupervised. A common theme that arose from the stories families told was that the children had to show their parents that they were happy being left alone, capable of managing their unsupervised time responsibly, and able to cope with being alone. The use of unsupervised childcare evolved slowly as children proved they could manage, but always parents were watching and evaluating outcomes.

In each of the family interviews, families explained how they started using unsupervised care in a very gradual manner. Initially unsupervised episodes were very short, and parents described how they checked on their children frequently to ensure they were safe, happy and behaving as expected. As the children were able to

demonstrate their comfort and competency at being alone the duration of the unsupervised episodes gradually was extended. This gradual and careful expanding of children's responsibility and freedom has been shown to be a good predictor of developing competence in children as they grow into adolescence (Riley & Steinberg, 2004).

However, all the parents interviewed discussed how they were always watching and assessing the impact that being unsupervised was having on their children. The decision to use unsupervised childcare was not a static one. The affect of this care on their children is carefully monitored by parents. All the parents in the study explained that any adverse affects on their children would result in the use of unsupervised childcare being re-evaluated. The wellbeing of their children is the most important consideration for these parents. As long as the children continued to be happy at being home unsupervised, and no negative outcomes were being experienced by the children, the continued use of unsupervised childcare was considered acceptable. While parents carefully monitored their children for any negative outcomes from the use of unsupervised childcare, it was positive outcomes that were identified and described in the stories they told.

Consistent throughout all the family interviews was the opinion that parents were seeing only positive outcomes for their children as a result of unsupervised care. Parents described their children as growing in maturity and responsibility. New skills were being taught and learnt, and the children were starting to see and complete tasks that required doing without prompting. As the children became more independent and self reliant, parents noted there was a corresponding positive impact on their academic achievement. All the children in this study were achieving at a level higher than their age group peers. The parents all described how they saw their children responding to the trust placed in them with an increased desire to help and please, and the children in this study all confirmed this. Existing overseas research suggests the outcomes described by these parents arise from the increased opportunities for self responsibility and autonomy that unsupervised childcare provides, and reflects a child's need for both support and challenge to develop optimally (Cole & Rodman,

1987; Riley & Steinberg, 2004). For the children and families participating in this study unsupervised childcare was proving a successful and beneficial option for them.

In this chapter I have used descriptions gained from the participating families to illustrate why families in this study choose to use unsupervised childcare. The use of a qualitative descriptive study design has enabled me to stay very close to the words of the participants as I seek to increase understanding about why New Zealand families choose this form of childcare. What has emerged from the data is that unsupervised childcare is both a choice of families and a solution, when parents are unable to be with their children. Inflexible work hours and a lack of childcare resources create a dilemma for parents which unsupervised childcare addresses. A safe and close knit community is essential to parents considering the use of unsupervised childcare, and in particular the availability of good neighbours who can be available to their children. The use of unsupervised childcare can only be countenanced when the children have this support in their unsupervised time. Their children's own preference of care determines finally whether unsupervised childcare is used. It is introduced slowly, and as children prove to their parents they are capable and competent to be unsupervised, it is gradually extended. Children are seen to mature, become more responsible and achieve very highly academically as a result of being unsupervised, but parents are always evaluating its effect; with their children's wellbeing the paramount consideration.

While the themes that have emerged from the New Zealand data in this chapter do reflect the findings of the overseas literature, several additional factors have emerged that appear worthy of consideration as perhaps being unique to the New Zealand context. For instance, one family in this study was unable to access a government childcare subsidy as in New Zealand this subsidy is linked to CYFS approved childcare centres only. It is possible that low income families in poorly or under resourced communities are being disadvantaged by a funding formula that is dependent on specifically rated resources being present.

The presence of older siblings was not shown to be linked to a parents decision to use unsupervised childcare which is a variation to the overseas literature and possibly unique to New Zealand.

One parent in this study suggests it was their own experience of being unsupervised as a child which influenced their decision to use unsupervised childcare. Therefore, exploring how parents' experiences of unsupervised childcare as children has influenced their own use of unsupervised childcare may prove very insightful into the New Zealand experience.

The evolving nature of the use of unsupervised childcare in the New Zealand families, and the family descriptions of how children must prove their competencies for this form of childcare to be used and extended were new themes that emerged strongly from the data in this study.

And lastly, the continual observation and evaluation by parents of the effects and outcomes of unsupervised childcare on their children was a consistent finding amongst the families participating in this study. These are all new findings that would benefit from further investigation if increased social understanding and practitioner knowledge of the New Zealand experience of successful unsupervised childcare is to be achieved.

The parents in this study did not make the decision to use unsupervised childcare lightly. None of the parents interviewed was without concerns or worries. In the next chapter I explore the struggles and dilemmas parents face when making the choice to use unsupervised care, and describe family beliefs and practices to manage these.

Chapter Six: Family Struggles and Dilemmas - Managing Anxiety and Risk

Parental anxiety and concern about risk are the focus of this chapter, as I continue to explore New Zealand families' beliefs and practices of successful unsupervised childcare. Allowing children to be at home unsupervised creates dilemmas for parents, who are acutely aware of the possible risks children may face while they are unsupervised. Emerging from the interviews and stories of the participating families are two key themes: parental understanding of the law about unsupervised children and the pressure this puts on the family, and child safety concerns and the strategies families employ to manage them.

In the following sections of this chapter I explore these themes, and as in the previous two chapters I use quotes from the families to capture and describe the families' beliefs and practices. I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion on these themes, linking the findings back to the literature review conducted for this study. The findings from this chapter continue to build onto the findings of the previous two chapters, further increasing our understanding of the New Zealand experience of successful unsupervised childcare.

MANAGING ANXIETY AND RISK

All the parents participating in this study were seeing positive outcomes for their children from the use of unsupervised childcare, and all believed it to be successful for their family. However, none of the parents interviewed for this study were without concerns or worries at leaving their children home unsupervised. The stories, told by participating families, highlight two major dilemmas facing parents who choose to leave their children unsupervised. These are the guilt and/or pressure that parents experience as a result of their understanding of the New Zealand law regarding leaving children unsupervised, and the concern parents have about managing and maintaining the safety of their children while they are unsupervised at home.

Parental Understanding of the Law

All the parents interviewed believed they were breaking the law leaving their children under the age of 14 at home unsupervised. This was a result of their misunderstanding of the current law. For some parents this created huge amounts of guilt and pressure.

“It played with my conscience, because in my heart I felt I was doing the right thing. I didn’t have any other way of doing it, and that’s what I thought was the best way but still I had little dilemmas of oh my God, you know, I’m not meant to be doing this. If I got into trouble with CYFS...” (Parent, Family 3, p.1)

“Legally, well it is an issue I suppose so that’s another reason why I don’t advertise it. Something to be wary of.” (Parent, Family 2, p.3)

Despite believing they were breaking the law and doing something illegal, these parents felt that choosing to use unsupervised childcare was the right decision for their family. The parents could see the positive outcomes their children were experiencing, and felt that the use of unsupervised childcare was working successfully for them. However, for some parents worry about their legal position left them feeling anxious and guilty, which created a lot of extra pressure and stopped them from seeking any sort of assistance from friends or outside agencies.

The parents were able to justify their use of unsupervised childcare because they knew that a lot of other people used it. For families living rurally, the fact that the parents knew farmers used unsupervised childcare made it easier to justify their decision to do the same.

“Yeah I know. Kids are under sixteen, or is it fourteen are not supposed to be home alone by themselves...yeah, doesn’t bother me. There’s a lot of people that do it, you know. No, I don’t see a problem with it.”
(Parent, Family 4, p.2)

“Then I realised that, well, other people did it too. Why did I get shocked about it? It was not that bad and it seemed to work.” (Parent, Family 1, p.4)

“But I certainly wouldn’t have been the first person to have done it. I mean I heard a lot of farmers had to do things like that too, cos that’s what they have to do.” (Parent, Family 3, p.2)

‘In fact I think it is (unsupervised childcare) quite normal round this valley and more normal that I would have realised...I think a lot of people don’t really mind.’ (Parent, Family 2, p.3)

Believing that lots of other families in the area were using unsupervised childcare appeared to make it easier for parents to justify their own family use of this form of childcare. It was felt that unsupervised childcare was very common in the area, and that people didn’t mind because it was an OK thing to do. This need to justify their decision stemmed from parental concern about how their choice to use unsupervised childcare might be viewed by other people.

The fact that the use of unsupervised childcare was work related made it a more acceptable decision than if children were being left unsupervised while parents were out for leisure activities.

“I had a girlfriend in Invercargill that was telling me once that she left two children, three children alone, and her daughter at that stage was twelve as the eldest. And she would go to the gym at night time, and I was very concerned. Especially as she was off to do her leisure activity.” (Parent, Family 2, p.3)

“Their (friends) view was positive that I was working and leaving them (the children). They knew that I wasn’t out getting boozed or something. Or down at the pub.” (Parent, Family 3, p.3)

The use of unsupervised childcare was justifiable to parents when it was related to their work activities. Children were not being left because they wanted to be involved in social or leisure pursuits, but because work hours dictated parental availability. This was considered a legitimate reason for choosing to use unsupervised childcare, and made the decision acceptable. This contrasted sharply with the disapproval voiced by parents at leaving children unsupervised for the purpose of leisure or social activities, which was considered morally wrong.

The use of unsupervised childcare was not generally discussed outside the family. For a number of families this was because it was considered such a normal form of care that it didn't warrant discussion.

“No, no not really. It's just something that never comes up. Yeah it's no big deal. Because their kids are pretty much like ours.” (Parent, Family 4, p.3)

“Probably the odd person that we know that their children are unsupervised, and they know ours is I suppose. You might talk every now and then. Might come up in conversation, not actually brought up, it more just comes up in conversation. Don't really talk about it. It's just something that we do with our kids.” (Parent, Family 5, p.6)

For others however, it was more about not bringing attention to themselves due to their concern about the legality of what they were doing, and also for the safety of their children.

“But being around here, I've questioned that about myself as whether it's the right thing for me to be doing. I think its more safety, purely safety for me. I think a lot of people don't really mind...Legally...well it is an issue I suppose so that's another reason I don't advertise it.” (Parent, Family 2, p.3)

The use of unsupervised childcare was such a normal part of everyday life for some families that it was never discussed. This was because it was not considered as a topic worthy of any conversation at all. For other families, however, silence on the subject was because of their fear of legal consequences for their family, or because they had concerns about child safety should it become common knowledge their children were home unsupervised. The silence, maintained by families using unsupervised childcare, makes it difficult for families to ask for any assistance or help, and adds to the pressure and anxiety experienced by parents.

Several parents described the conflict they experienced as a result of worrying about what other parents might think of them because they left their children unsupervised. The image of being ‘good parents’, as compared to ‘bad parents’, was debated by a number of the parents.

“But to me it would come in more as...I know it’s illegal that you’re not supposed to do it but it would still come under the good parenting because I know of the skills that I’ve taught those children. That I trust them. I mean it’s not as though I’ve, you know, beat them up or anything like that. That would be bad parenting but to me it’s good parenting because I know I can trust those children, even though I know it’s illegal and you’re not supposed to do it.” (Parent, Family 5, p.5)

“Knowing it was against the law as such to do it and if anybody did make a complaint to CYFS or you know, if they just did, I could get into trouble and I was seeing it as doing the best I could as a mother. I could get into trouble with CYFS and they could say I was a bad mother because I left my children unsupervised.” (Parent, Family 3, p.1)

For one Dad, his internal debate was about how his own belief in what was right for his family might be influenced by other people’s opinions.

“What would influence my decision would be wanting to do the right thing, so if people were telling me what I was doing was the wrong thing, I’d want to do the right thing. So it may influence me that way. But the pure fact that they thought I wasn’t doing the right thing, on its own, isn’t enough. Do you see what I’m saying? It’s my judgment of whether or not I’m doing the right thing and the extent that other people judging me might influence my own judgment of myself and my behaviour. So I guess I’m saying it might indirectly influence me.”
(Parent, Family 2, p.4)

Other parents, while believing they were breaking the law, did not let their understanding of the law bother them. They felt that what they were doing was right for their children, and working for their family.

“I don’t even think about it. Basically the law’s the law but what becomes the question to me is just how you are dealing with the kids. How they’re getting on. How they’re enjoying themselves or not enjoying themselves.” (Parent, Family 5, p.5)

“I know you’re not supposed to do it but it works for us and we don’t seem to have a problem with it. And the kids don’t. And we know they’re safe and we’re coming home, and they’re there, and not roaming the streets. You see a lot of kids with parents at home, roaming the streets. And (the children) they’re happy kids. We come home and they’re not sad or moping around. They’re happy. They haven’t missed out on anything. No they get to spend a lot of time with us and that’s more than what a lot of kids do with parents that stay home. So it works for us.” (Parent, Family 4, p.3)

In this study it appears that parents choosing to use unsupervised childcare do so after a lot of thought and deliberation, and because they believe that this decision is the right one for their family. For some parents, this belief that what they are doing is

right for their family is enough to assuage any feelings of guilt or pressure. However, for other parents concern they might be judged as bad parents creates huge amounts of guilt and pressure, especially as they believe they are good parents making decisions that are in the best interests of their family.

Regardless of whether parents experience feelings of guilt and pressure about their use of unsupervised childcare, all the parents in this study face the dilemma of keeping their children safe.

Keeping Children Safe

In each of the family interviews the major concern of parents focused on child safety. Parents were very aware of the risks children could face whilst unsupervised and made no attempt to minimise or ignore those risks. Risks to children were acknowledged and the parents worked to contain or control for them with the use of rules and boundaries.

“Well, they wouldn’t be allowed to just run off, I mean they have to stay at either the house or go to the shed. They wouldn’t be allowed to go any further. So they wouldn’t be allowed to take their bicycle and go for a bicycle ride or go for a swim to the river or anything like that. They know that.” (Parent, Family 1, p.3)

“I mean they’re not allowed to leave the property. They’re not allowed to light a fire’ No matter how cold it is. I just couldn’t have that on my conscience. If I knew they’d lit the fire or something and I wasn’t at home. They’re not allowed to turn the stove on, so if they’re hungry they have toast or what is in the pantry or anything else. But heating up spaghetti or noodles or anything...they’re not allowed to touch the stove, the fire, and they’re not allowed to go out until I get home.” (Parent, Family 3, p.1)

“They know if they make sandwiches or something like that, they know they’re not allowed to touch the sharp knives. You know, they’re not

allowed near the matches. If the fire is going they don't touch the fire."

(Parent, Family 5, p.1)

These parents were alert to the risks children might face when unsupervised, and set firm rules and clear boundaries to manage or contain these. Children were taught the rules and boundaries, and the parents knew they could trust their children to remain within them. A consistent theme, in the interviews and stories told by the families, was that the children were not allowed to leave the property during their unsupervised time. Safety of the children at home could be managed with rules and boundaries, but risk outside the home was unmanageable and unacceptable to parents. The exception was the children of farmers. They were allowed to move between their home and the cowshed, where their parents were working. However, they were not allowed to roam freely about the farm while unsupervised.

Parents spoke of their concern at the threat strangers could pose to their unsupervised children. While most families thought it unlikely a stranger would appear, due to the remote rural location, it was a possibility that was discussed with their children.

"My biggest worry would be someone coming to the door than actually them being home by themselves. Would be my biggest worry. I could trust them (the children) way more than I could trust someone else coming up here; I suppose you could say... But yeah it's always been easy cos they've all got to come up the driveway to come here and we're at the cowshed. The cowsheds not that far away really. We can see everything that's happening." (Parent, Family 5, p.3)

I suppose sometimes I wonder what if any stranger would knock on the door, but that doesn't happen a lot here... I have talked to the children about that. Probably not so much in the context of them being on their own at home really, but just generally I think so they know what to do. About not letting somebody inside or anything like that...things like that. But the chances are pretty slim I think that anybody with bad

intentions would knock on the door. They probably wouldn't choose a time when somebody is here milking anyway." (Parent, Family 1, p.3)

"And so we have talked about the fact that if somebody came to the door and he doesn't know them, not to go to the door even if they can see him." (Parent, Family 2, p.3)

Children were taught about the possible threat posed by strangers. While the parents felt this risk was minimal due to their isolated location, they ensured their children were educated about the risk so they had the skills to deal with the issue safely.

Parents also organised safety strategies with their children to help keep them safe, and for if they had to cope with the unexpected.

"Yeah it's a code that Mum used to have to ring twice, quite quick. Like one ring and then put the phone down and then ring again....so I know that it's her (Boy aged nine, Family 2, p.3). "I (Mum) didn't want him to be put in the situation of answering the phone and then someone saying is your Mum and Dad there and him not knowing what to say." (Parent, Family 2, p.3)

"Tell your children if you have a problem to hop on your bike and tell Mrs (name). (Daughter) knows the (name) for example. They are our closest neighbours. It isn't that much of an issue cos (husband) is usually around. We have hardly ever been out both together." (Parent, Family 1, p.5)

Children were educated on what they had to do if there was a problem. Using a cellphone, emergency numbers and going to neighbours all featured in these stories.

"Yeah and as for (daughter), like she knows numbers, she knows where we are, she's quite well aware of some emergency things, like if there's a fire to go outside. She's quite well aware of...like emergency

numbers, if she needed to ring an ambulance or fireman or something like that. She knows what the number is and she knows how to use the phone. Probably about since she was four or five she's quite well aware of using the phone. Like she could ring me on my cellphone quite happily." (Parent, Family 5, p.3)

Education was seen as the key to keeping children safe, and the children were considered competent to learn and understand what was needed. Safety responses, emergency services, contact numbers, and use of essential equipment such as phones and cellphones are an integral part of the children's skill base. Parents were able to discuss possible dangers with their children and plan appropriate responses with them. Children were taught to recognise risks, and respond appropriately.

Children interviewed for this study were able to tell me what it was they were expected to do if something unusual happened. *"I'd just ring up Mum on her cellphone number."* (Boy aged nine, Family 2, p.1), and *"try to fix if I can. And if I can't. Mum... the cellphone."* (Girl aged 12, Family 1, p.1). However two families spoke of children not remembering what they had been taught, which at the time surprised the parents as they felt the children were very capable of remembering what they needed to do.

"I told them they can ring up ...but (child) says she doesn't know the number for the cellphone. But she's forgotten it because she hasn't used it for a long time." (Parent, Family 1, p.5)

"I suppose we must have presumed that we had already said that or whether we hadn't reinforced it. It's probably one of those things you'd say and if you'd not said it for a while he thought he was old enough to do it." (Parent, Family 2, p.3)

Parent's assumptions about their children's skills were mainly substantiated by the children's responses throughout the family interviews. However, parents in two of the families did comment on the need to keep reinforcing key safety messages to their

children. Children were very competent, but skills need to be practiced and rehearsed to become second nature.

For all the families participating in this study, it was clearly evident that the safety of their children was the major priority for the parents.

“The boundaries are all around safety? Probably yes. A hundred percent. Their safety first.” (Parent, Family 5, p.7).

DISCUSSION

As I reflect on the stories told by the participating families it is apparent the decision to use unsupervised childcare is not a simple one. Parents describe the dilemmas and struggles they face when they make the decision to use unsupervised childcare. Their stories highlight the personal dilemma they find themselves in, as they struggle with their concept of the law regarding unsupervised children and their choice to do what they believe is right for their family and children. It also becomes clear that the paramount concern of parents is not for themselves. Rather, parents are focused on the safety of their children. Dealing with risk, and teaching children the skills they need to look after themselves feature prominently in the stories told by families as they describe their experiences of successful unsupervised childcare.

The key themes, emerging from the data focusing on families managing anxiety and risk, are reflected in the findings found in the literature review conducted for this study. For instance much of the guilt and pressure parents experience through their use of unsupervised childcare stems from their belief that what they are doing is illegal, and that they will be judged as bad parents should what they are doing become common knowledge. For one parent in this study, the fear of negative consequences was heightened by the fact the family was already under CYFS surveillance. Despite the fact that this parent felt they were doing their very best as a parent, any hint that they were a ‘bad’ parent could potentially result in devastating consequences for the family.

What became clear in the responses of these five New Zealand families was that a lot of this guilt and pressure is a result of their general misunderstanding of the New Zealand law about unsupervised children. The parents all thought they were breaking the law by letting their children, under the age of fourteen, remain home unsupervised. Some of this guilt and pressure was alleviated by me during the course of these interviews, as I was able to explain to parents that while in New Zealand unsupervised care was not illegal, the law does require that all the circumstances of the unsupervised episode need to be reasonable (Section 10B, Summary Offences Act, 1981). However, what this study finding has highlighted to me is the need to remove the ambiguity of the current New Zealand law about unsupervised children. Clarity is needed in the writing of it, and as well a much better education program organised for parents, practitioners and community alike to address the current misinformation and confusion about what is lawful and what is not.

Parents believed that unsupervised childcare was extremely common in the area, and were able to justify their use of unsupervised childcare because it was work related, and lots of people use it. This need to justify their decision appeared to be a result of parental concern at how other people might view their parenting if their use of unsupervised childcare was known. The guilt and pressure described by the parents participating in this study has been described by parents worldwide. Evidence presented in existing overseas research into unsupervised care suggests that parents using unsupervised childcare are fearful of bringing attention to themselves due to fear of the legal and social consequences. This makes it extremely difficult for them to get the assistance they and their family need (Krazier & Witte, 1990; Revell 1997; Kerrebrock & Lewit, 1999).

For the families who felt they had no other option but to use unsupervised childcare, their struggle with the legal and social consequences of this decision created a lot of extra unnecessary pressure. This is significant in view of arguments that highlight the need for support and care, rather than condemnation and punishment, of families that come to the attention of authorities over the use of unsupervised care (Revell, 1997; Davies et al., 2003).

For some parents, the thought of legal and social consequences as a result of their use of unsupervised childcare is not an issue. Their children are thriving and happy, and the use of unsupervised care is proving beneficial to the family. While they have respect for the law, in this instance they firmly believe that what they are doing is right for their family. Yet for all the parents there is a shared dilemma that they all struggle with. This is ensuring the safety of their children while they are home unsupervised.

The safety of their children was a paramount concern of parents. Parents were realistic about the potential risks to their children from being left unsupervised, but acknowledged that their children were capable of learning skills and strategies to cope with them. Boundaries and rules were put in place to ensure a safe environment was provided and guide acceptable behaviour. Appropriate skills were taught, and strategies put in place so that children knew what to do if the unexpected happened. While most of the parents' claims about their children's competencies were substantiated by the children participating in this study, another study has revealed an awareness of the possibility of some parents overestimating their children's capabilities (Krazier & Witte, 1999). This highlights the necessity for ongoing education and skill building for both parents and children as an important part of risk management strategies for families. Parents acknowledged there were risks associated with unsupervised childcare, but considered their children more than capable of being unsupervised due to the skills they had been taught, and the rules and boundaries in place to protect them. The unsupervised episodes were seen as an opportunity for the children to learn new skills as a result of the experience of caring for themselves. This view of the parents is reflected in research that suggests that unsupervised care provides opportunities for children to develop social competency, self regulatory behaviours and independence (Cole & Rodman, 1987; Riley & Steinberg, 2004).

In this chapter I have explored the dilemmas and struggles families face when they choose to use unsupervised childcare. The stories told by participants suggest that parents do not make the decision to use unsupervised childcare lightly. The safety of the children is their paramount concern. Risk is acknowledged, strategies are put into

place to protect children, and children are taught the skills they need to care for themselves while unsupervised. While parents believe they are breaking the law by leaving their children unsupervised, they also believe they are doing what is right for their family. Unsupervised childcare is proving beneficial to their family and their children are thriving in the unsupervised environment. For each of the families interviewed unsupervised childcare was proving a successful option of childcare, despite the dilemmas and concerns associated with it. Positive outcomes were being seen for the children, and families were happy to continue using this form of childcare.

In this and the previous two chapters I have presented the findings of this research. But what is the significance of these findings? What can be learnt from stories that highlight the practices, perspectives and experiences of families successfully using unsupervised childcare? In the next chapter I summarise the key findings in relation to the aims and the limitations of the study, and I discuss the implications and relevance of these findings for practice, policy development and further research.

Chapter Seven: Implications and Conclusion

In this chapter I summarise the key findings of the research in relation to the aims and limitations of the research. I begin with a general discussion about the research, reiterating my interest in the research topic and looking at the use of a qualitative descriptive approach. The purpose of this study was to increase knowledge of successful unsupervised childcare in a New Zealand context. This was achieved by probing into the beliefs, choices, dilemmas and strategies of the families participating in this study. While key findings from the literature review were reflected in the stories and interviews of the participating families, several additional themes emerged.

The evolving nature of unsupervised childcare, the importance of rules and boundaries, the setting of tasks and chores and the continual monitoring and evaluation of the effects are themes emerging strongly as new knowledge from the New Zealand data. I discuss these findings in terms of their implications for practice, policy development and further research. Following this discussion I make a number of recommendations for practice as a result of what has been learnt from this study. I conclude this study with my thoughts on what this study has achieved.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

I embarked on this research into what New Zealand families believe constitutes the successful use of unsupervised childcare, not only because of my concern about the possible development of policy and protocols that could impact very negatively on both families and practitioners, but also because of my genuine interest in the use of unsupervised childcare. My own personal experience of using unsupervised childcare successfully created my initial interest in this topic. However, it was the reading I was doing that identified there were two very different outcomes (positive or negative) for children who were unsupervised, and the lack of any New Zealand voice in this research that indicated to me there was a need for research into the issue.

The literature review conducted for this study identified a number of key factors that were associated with positive outcomes for children who were unsupervised. Across all the existing research the context of the unsupervised childcare was identified as the critical component. The community context and the demographics of the family were shown to be key influences on the outcomes for children. Children experiencing unsupervised care in a supported environment, where the use of unsupervised care was their choice and where parents were monitoring and involved with the children, were all factors shown to be very powerful indicators of successful outcomes for children. I was curious as to whether these findings would be reflected in the interviews and stories told by New Zealand families who believed they were successfully using unsupervised childcare.

This study into successful management of unsupervised childcare was designed to explore and describe the beliefs, practices and perspectives of New Zealand families who believed they were successfully using unsupervised childcare. The purpose of the study was to increase social understanding and practitioner knowledge of the issue, and to achieve this the study explored and described four key areas: what families believe about successful unsupervised childcare, why families opt to use this form of childcare, what dilemmas and struggles families face as a result of this choice, and what it is families do to make unsupervised childcare successful.

A qualitative descriptive approach was chosen for this study as it had been established there was a gap in existing knowledge; the lack of any New Zealand voice. Especially a lack of knowledge in the New Zealand context about the factors associated with creating successful outcomes for children. What was needed was a straightforward description of the New Zealand experience of successful unsupervised childcare answering the questions of what and why relating to family beliefs and practices. This is congruent with the goal of qualitative descriptive research.

Five families, who all believed they were successfully using unsupervised childcare, chose to take part in this research. While this small number meant that data saturation could not be achieved, I believed five families would give rich enough data to be meaningful for the study. Children and adults were interviewed together to promote family sharing of their experience. All of the children participated in the interview process. Two children in particular were very articulate and made a valuable contribution to the study findings. These two children were aged nine and twelve years, with the majority of the children in the study aged between the ages of nine and thirteen. This is significant as this is the age where autonomy and self responsibility are the developmental characteristics, and could be an influence on the successful outcomes described in the research.

As this study is drawing to completion I have actively reviewed the data that was gathered, and reflected on the relationships between this and what took place in the interviews. As the researcher I am satisfied that the processes were clear and the methods of engagement with the participants succeeded in creating an environment to share their knowledge and beliefs. All the families have indicated they are in agreement with the findings of the study and the portrayal of their beliefs and practices. My own sense of the interviews was that families said what they wanted to. Further I believe the processes used were consistent with the principles of qualitative descriptive methods. In accordance with the principles of qualitative descriptive research I presented the findings from the study as themes identified in the data, and using quotes from the families to illustrate their beliefs and practices.

The themes that emerged from the interviews and stories told by the participating New Zealand families reflected the key findings of the literature review. The context of the unsupervised childcare was seen as crucial, with families describing how important trust and responsibility amongst family members was in making the use of unsupervised childcare successful. The community context in which the unsupervised childcare took place was seen to be very important, with the availability of parents or neighbours through distal supervision a key component. Child preference is a major

factor in the decision to use unsupervised childcare, but parents monitor their children closely and are very involved in the unsupervised episodes.

Several additional themes emerged strongly from the New Zealand data. Previously these aspects have only been alluded to in the literature. It was exciting to see the emergence of greater detail and insights into successful unsupervised childcare in a New Zealand context. These key new findings are as follows. The New Zealand parents participating in this study described the evolving nature of their use of unsupervised childcare. As children proved to their parents that they were competent and capable to be unsupervised, the use of this form of childcare was extended. The use of rules and boundaries to provide a consistent framework within which families operated, and the setting of tasks and chores to encourage independence and responsibility were attributed by each of the families to creating success in their use of unsupervised childcare. The constant and careful monitoring of the effects of the use of unsupervised childcare on children and families was a common characteristic of the New Zealand families' stories, as was the attention parents paid to ensuring their children had the skills and competencies to be safely unsupervised. The New Zealand families participating in this study firmly believed all these factors were important in ensuring successful unsupervised childcare. While I understand that no definitive conclusion can be made from these findings, due to the small size of the study and the lack of data saturation, I do believe they are significant findings worthy of further research. This is new knowledge being generated out of New Zealand data that is only minimally alluded to within the existing research.

Another area of difference emerging from this study was that the presence of older siblings was not shown to influence a parent's decision to use unsupervised childcare. This is a contrast to the findings in the literature review. In this New Zealand study older siblings were referred to more in the sense of parental worry about sibling rivalry, fighting, or whether there might be a tendency to expect too much from an older child in terms of responsibility and childcare. This finding is significant in that it is a variation to what is in the existing research, and therefore worthy of more

investigation. Is this a unique New Zealand perspective or is it an anomaly due to the small sample size?

A question has been raised in this study as to how a parent's own childhood experience of being home unsupervised may influence their decision as a parent to use unsupervised childcare. This aspect of childhood experience influencing parental choice does not appear to have been investigated in existing literature, and would therefore be worthy of further research.

And finally, the guilt and pressure experienced by parents through their misunderstanding of the New Zealand law about unsupervised children was a theme that emerged from the data. This New Zealand finding may have a relationship to or be attributed to the ambiguity of the current New Zealand law on unsupervised children. This ambiguity adds to parents' confusion about what is lawful and creates unnecessary added pressure on parents. This finding suggests that there is work to be done in New Zealand in relation to clarification of current legislation and families understanding of it.

The findings which came out of this research have validated my assumptions that families could tell their stories in a fair and reasonable manner, and that it was important to capture and listen to families' beliefs and perspectives. The scope of the method and the shape of the findings have produced cogent information in relation to the constitution of successful unsupervised childcare. The stories told by the participating families have provided insight into their experiences of using unsupervised childcare successfully, and identified the factors which they believe contributes to its success. This provides social information important to practitioners, and provides information relevant to policy makers. While these findings cannot be considered definitive, due to the small size of the study, the significance of the findings is in the description of the New Zealand experience of successful unsupervised childcare they portray. These findings can begin to both inform and guide New Zealand practitioners and policy makers dealing with unsupervised

children. While I believe the data I obtained from both child and adult participants is valuable to my research question, many questions remain unanswered. Obtaining answers to these questions will require a much larger supported study. This research, however, does provide a platform from which a larger study on unsupervised children can be launched.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the findings from this study emerging from the stories of five families, the confluence of these with international literature do create a rich base for practitioners and policy makers to consider as effective new programs and policies for successful unsupervised childcare. In this section I address possible implications for practice, policy development and future research.

The findings from this study reveal evidence that unsupervised childcare as a chosen form of childcare can be very successful for families and children. It is important that, as nurses and other professionals, we understand and acknowledge that unsupervised childcare is a genuine form of childcare capable of delivering very good outcomes for both children and families. Because unsupervised childcare can have two very different outcomes for children, it is important that practitioners are aware of the factors identified in the literature review associated with these outcomes.

This study has identified protective factors associated with good outcomes for children who are unsupervised. These protective factors were established from the literature review (international) and from New Zealand based data (five families) as associated with successful outcomes for children were unsupervised. Based on what is known community practitioners are ideally placed to support families currently using unsupervised childcare to achieve good outcomes, by assisting them to put in place processes that are in keeping with these factors. Community based practitioners have a mandate to care for the children and families who are their clients. As advocates for families and children they are legally, morally, and ethically obliged to

speak up and support policy and practices that are seen to be beneficial and positive for them.

This study into the successful use of unsupervised childcare has highlighted a number of issues of particular relevance to policy makers at both practitioner and government levels. These issues could be amendable to well written policy and/or legislation aimed at supporting families to achieve good outcomes for both family and children.

The findings of this study have the potential to assist the many community based practitioners whose current workplace policies and protocols fail to recognise that unsupervised childcare can be positive and beneficial for families and children. Currently practitioners are required to act under child abuse and neglect protocols which can impact very negatively on both family and practitioner. However, as a result of this study, the knowledge gained about successful unsupervised childcare has the potential to inform and support additional policy and protocols which will assist practitioners to work with families to achieve good outcomes.

Parent availability is affected by the hours a parent has to work. Inflexible hours incompatible with school hours means for many families there are hours when their child will be home unsupervised. Workforce and workplace policies that encourage and support flexible work hours are needed. Employers need to be supported to work with employees to find creative solutions to the childcare difficulties faced by employees.

Many families in New Zealand do not have access to any form of afterschool programme or childcare facility. This is particularly true for rural and smaller communities, and for some of these families the use of unsupervised childcare is chosen as the only solution. Currently, policy that has very complex rules to establish eligibility for government funding is very prohibitive for small community groups trying to respond to local needs. More flexible and creative policy, which encourages and supports locally based community groups to develop afterschool programmes

and/or childcare designed to meet community needs, would be especially beneficial to smaller communities with limited resources.

For some low income families cost is a factor that influences their use of unsupervised childcare. Findings in this study raise the possibility that legislation that links childcare subsidies to CYFS approved childcare facilities may disadvantage low income families living in poorly resourced areas. At present some families may be unable to access any subsidy for childcare which further limits their options. An option could be that both policy and legislation be rewritten to allow childcare subsidies to be paid to low income families using private childcare for their children where no other form of childcare is available. In this way families, where perhaps a parent is not working, could also have the option of earning an income by providing childcare for a local family.

Fear of the legal and/or social consequences of using unsupervised childcare may result in parents being reluctant to talk to anyone about their practices. Much of this fear is a result of their families' misunderstanding of the New Zealand law on unsupervised children. The findings from this study suggest that this reluctance to talk may mean that families are then reluctant to seek assistance from friends, neighbours or the appropriate agencies. I believe the existing legislation on unsupervised children is ambiguous and would benefit from being written in a format that clearly explains parents' responsibilities and what is acceptable and what is unlawful. Widespread education about the legislation requirements aimed at parents, practitioners and the general community could assist in breaking down the barriers that prevent families speaking out and seeking help from the organisations charged with a mandate to support and assist families.

The findings from this study have given an increased insight into some New Zealand families' experiences of successful unsupervised childcare. While any increase in knowledge is valuable, this study has been very small and the findings cannot be considered conclusive. At the very outset of this research I acknowledged the findings

would be limited by the small size of the study. Data saturation was not possible. However, many of the factors creating successful unsupervised childcare identified in the literature review have been restated by the families participating in this study. In addition new evidence has emerged that identifies factors supporting New Zealand families to achieve successful outcomes for their children. What remains unanswered is would these findings remain the same if a much larger pool of participant families was interviewed? Would the findings be replicated if the study setting was shifted into a New Zealand city? There is a need for more New Zealand based research into what constitutes successful unsupervised childcare.

In addition many questions remain unanswered in relationship to unsupervised childcare in general. The international research reveals information about the factors which contribute to negative outcomes for children. We know little about whether these factors hold true for New Zealand families and the New Zealand context. This needs urgent research. It remains my hope that what has been learned from this study will provide a platform for further larger studies into the issue of unsupervised children, the findings from which in turn will lead to the development of best practice guidelines that can be used to assist families and children to achieve positive outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study has shared the knowledge of five New Zealand families who believe they are successfully managing unsupervised childcare. The insights gained into this issue from learning about these families beliefs, practices and perspectives of successful unsupervised childcare has not only the potential to increase social understanding of the issue but also has implications for practice. As a result of what has been learnt I make the following recommendations for DHB community based nursing practice.

- 1) Education and training programmes about unsupervised children become a regular part of DHB community based nurses' professional development.

It is important that nurses working in the community are educated and trained to recognise and deal with the issue of unsupervised children. An education package is needed that will include information on both supervisory neglect and unsupervised childcare. The training of nurses to identify factors associated with both positive and negative outcomes for children would be a requirement of the program. Any education package needs to include clarification of the law about unsupervised children. In particular there needs to be a good nurse understanding of the legal position of families using unsupervised childcare. Interdisciplinary training sessions involving nurses and other community practitioners (e.g. Police, CYFS, community organisations) to ensure a consistent approach across services is also recommended. This would encourage improved interagency co-operation and networking, and help to improve outcomes for families coming into contact with these services.

- 2) Development of policy specifically designed for guiding nurses dealing with unsupervised childcare.

Any policy or protocol written to guide nurses dealing with unsupervised children needs to acknowledge that successful childcare, whether supervised or unsupervised, is an entirely separate issue to supervisory neglect, and that these issues need to be dealt with very differently. Any such policy or protocol must clearly explain to nurses the difference between these two very different phenomena, so that nurses can make an informed decision on which issue they are dealing with. Any such policy or protocol needs to be able to assist nurses to recognise if they are dealing with childcare that is actually positive and beneficial to a family, in which case possibly no action is required, or if child abuse and neglect protocols are the appropriate action to follow. A well written protocol for successful unsupervised childcare would enable nurses to modify their response to the specific needs of the family, assisting them to make sure they have in place the good protective mechanisms that ensure a positive outcome for the family.

- 3) There needs to be a concerted effort made on the part of services involved with children and families to become vocal and persistent in their efforts to bring to the attention of government, the childcare needs and dilemmas of families in under resourced communities.

Lobbying for changes to legislation and policies, that currently are impacting negatively on families in under resourced areas, needs to occur across all the services that work with children and families in the community so that a consistent message is being heard at government level. The possibility of changing legislation or policy can only occur if agencies work together to affect that change.

- 4) While this study has provided an insight into what is happening with families successfully managing unsupervised childcare, there remain many unanswered questions about children in unsupervised care. A need for further research has been identified.

In the current practicing environment nurses are required to make decisions based on the best current evidence available. Evidence amassed from any further research will aid in the development of best practice guidelines, which will assist nurses to make sound evidence based decisions, reduce variations in practice, and enhance the quality of care being provided to children and families.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this qualitative descriptive study was to increase knowledge. As a result of this study, I have been able to present an insight into some New Zealand families' experiences of successfully managing unsupervised childcare. The stories of the participating families have provided a wealth of information about the beliefs, practices and perspectives of families using unsupervised childcare successfully. The knowledge gained from this study, while not conclusive on its own, provides an excellent platform on which to launch larger, more conclusive studies into the topic of successful unsupervised children.

To conclude this study I would like to thank the five participating families for being willing to be a part of the study, and for sharing their beliefs, perspectives and practices about successful unsupervised childcare. It has been my privilege to capture and describe the knowledge and insights they have so generously shared for the general good of society. Protective factors associated with successful outcomes for children have been identified. With this knowledge, I believe it possible for nurses to work with all families using unsupervised childcare, to ensure that beneficial and positive outcomes are achieved.

Appendix One: Ethics Approval Letter



Northern Y Regional Ethics Committee

Ministry of Health
3rd Floor, BNZ Building
354 Victoria Street
PO Box 1031
Hamilton
Phone (07) 858 7021
Fax (07) 858 7070

28 August 2007

Ms Deborah Trenberth

Dear Deborah

An exploratory descriptive study of what New Zealand families believe constitutes successful management of unsupervised childcare.

Investigators: Deborah Trenberth.

Ethics ref: NTY/07/06/057

Locations: Participant's residence or community.

The above study has been given ethical approval by the Northern Y Regional Ethics Committee.

Approved Documents

- Information sheet for adult participants.
- Information Sheet for child participants.
- Consent Form.
- Interview Question Sheet and Guideline.
- School newsletter advertisement.

Accreditation

The Committee involved in the approval of this study is accredited by the Health Research Council and is constituted and operates in accordance with the Operational Standard for Ethics Committees, April 2006.

Final Report

The study is approved until **30 August 2008**. A final report is required at the end of the study and a form to assist with this is available from the Administrator. If the study will not be completed as advised, please forward a progress report and an application for extension of ethical approval one month before the above date. Report forms are available from the administrator.

Amendments

It is also a condition of approval that the Committee is advised of any adverse events, if the study does not commence, or the study is altered in any way, including all documentation eg advertisements, letters to prospective participants.

Please quote the above ethics committee reference number in all correspondence.

It should be noted that Ethics Committee approval does not imply any resource commitment or administrative facilitation by any healthcare provider within whose facility the research is to be carried out. Where applicable, authority for this must be obtained separately from the appropriate manager within the organisation.

Yours sincerely

Amrita Kuruvilla
Northern Y Ethics Committee Administrator

Email: amrita_kuruvilla@moh.govt.nz

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