

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Stabilise, balance and adjust—Framing the early years transitions of children whose parents work non-standard hours

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Academy of Finland, Grant/Award Numbers: 293049, 314317; University of Jyväskylä

**Abstract**

This study examined talk by parents about the early years transitions of their children ( $n = 7$ ) in the context of parental non-standard working hours and Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. Parents were interviewed at three time points: when their child was aged one, four, five or six years (a total of 21 interviews). The third interview was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article focuses on the children's ECEC transitions and the interpretative frames used by parents when talking about their work and childcare. The frames used by the parents to discuss the children's transitions were stabilising the children's lives, balancing between staying at home and attending ECEC and adjusting to norms and rules. The diversity of families' experiences and their children's transitions during the early years should be considered when developing family policy and ECEC services.

**KEYWORDS**

childcare arrangements, COVID-19 pandemic, discourse analysis, early childhood education and care, early years transitions, horizontal transitions, life transitions, non-standard working hours, vertical transitions

**INTRODUCTION**

In most western countries, children's daily life is made up of the time they spend at home and the time they spend in various kinds of childcare and early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions. Children's institutional settings change quite often on a daily basis, especially in countries where childcare and education are provided by different organisational sectors (Kammerman, 2006). Previous research has shown that smooth transitions support the well-being of both children and their parents (Balduzzi et al., 2019). The present study investigated how parents

understand and justify the ECEC transitions of their children in the context of parental non-standard working hours and the COVID-19 pandemic. The results may assist in improving transition practices and the policies regulating them.

In the literature on early years education, children's moves from one growth environment to another have been conceptualised as transitions (Balduzzi et al., 2019; Rutanen & Hännikäinen, 2017; White et al., 2020). The best predicted, recognised and most studied types of transitions are *vertical transitions*, which typically refer to moving from one level to another in the education

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system, for example, from homecare to ECEC services and from pre-primary education to primary school (Balduzzi et al., 2019; Vogler et al., 2008). *Horizontal transitions*, such as moving between and within childcare arrangements, including home, informal childcare and institutional ECEC, are less pronounced than vertical transitions as they routinely occur on an everyday basis (Karila & Rantavuori, 2019; Rutanen & Hännikäinen, 2017; Vogler et al., 2008). Transitions of a third type, identified by Fabian and Dunlop (2007), include transitions to parenthood, transitions caused by divorce and transitions in the work–family boundary and hence have indirect associations with children's transitions. We refer to these types of transitions as *life transitions*.

Early years transitions have been viewed in the educational sciences from the perspective of the lived experiences of professionals and children as well as of policies and practices. Some studies have focused on assessments of children's development and readiness for new transitions. Parents' perspectives, namely their experiences and perceptions of their children's early years transitions, have been recognised and studied especially from two perspectives. Firstly, the studies consider parental and child coping practices with transitions to be interdependent. Secondly, the studies recognise some implicit exclusion mechanism of the current practices. Studies have shown that the voices of parents are not equally heard if the child has special needs or if the family belongs to a socio-economically disadvantaged group. (A systematic literature review can be found in Balduzzi et al., 2019.) Rather often, the transitions are analysed as one-point events (Vogler et al., 2008). In the current study, we took a longitudinal perspective and considered early years transitions in relation to the social policy debate by examining the transitions in the context of families where parents work non-standard hours, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our longitudinal research design, in which we gathered interview data from parents about their child's ECEC transitions when the latter was one, four, five or six years old, enabled us to describe the three types of transitions that occurred during the children's years of ECEC. We applied discourse analysis to further investigate the culturally and socially constructed frames that parents utilise when describing, rationalising and justifying their choices of childcare transitions. Through investigating these frames, we obtained knowledge about the cultural expectations of parents when seeking to combine work and family. This knowledge can assist in developing family-centred policies and ECEC services for working parents.

Specifically, this study examined Finnish families where one or both parents work non-standard hours and whose children attend ECEC services. In this study,

'non-standard working hours' refers to paid employment that is conducted outside so-called office hours, such as early mornings, late evenings, nights and weekends (Li et al., 2014; Presser, 2003). Working non-standard hours typically increases the number of childcare arrangements parents have to make (Enchautegui et al., 2015; La Valle et al., 2002; Plantenga & Remery, 2009; Repo et al., 2022) and, subsequently, the number of transitions their children experience. Alongside parents' work schedules, the global COVID-19 pandemic afforded scholars the opportunity to investigate early years transitions in a situation in which almost all the standard practices of working life, family life and ECEC institutional life underwent abrupt change.

### **Childcare arrangements in the context of parental non-standard working hours and the COVID-19 pandemic**

Parents working non-standard hours typically use formal and informal childcare arrangements more often than those working standard hours both in Finland and elsewhere (Enchautegui et al., 2015; La Valle et al., 2002; Lammi-Taskula & Siippainen, 2018; Plantenga & Remery, 2009). In dual-earner families, parents' non-standard working hours may enable tag-team parenting, that is, the parents work at separate times so they can alternately perform childcare (Presser, 2003). Parents may be steered towards tag-team parenting for several reasons, such as their perception of homecare as the ideal, the high costs of childcare (La Valle et al., 2002) or the lack of the local provision of institutional ECEC (Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Jordan, 2008; Moilanen, 2019; Plantenga & Remery, 2009; Statham & Mooney, 2003).

The lack of institutional ECEC may lead to the use of informal childcare (Enchautegui et al., 2015; La Valle et al., 2002; Plantenga & Remery, 2009), the accessibility and quality of which are often more random and unpredictable in nature (Pilarz & Hill, 2014; Stoll et al., 2015; Vincent et al., 2010). However, the use of several institutional and informal modes of childcare may also reduce the stability of childcare arrangements, a factor commonly regarded as important for children's well-being (Claessens & Chen, 2013; De Schipper et al., 2003; Morrissey, 2009).

The use of informal childcare may increase the number of horizontal transitions in children's daily life. For example, multiple childcare arrangements, and the transitions between these arrangements, compel children to adjust to the different rules, routines and expectations set in different environments (Claessens & Chen, 2013; Pilarz & Hill, 2014). Ultimately, these issues are closely connected to national and local childcare policies and the ECEC services available to parents (Karila et al., 2020). According to

Vandenbroeck and Lazzari (2014), demand-based opening hours are one factor in increasing equal access to ECEC.

Besides non-standard working hours, the COVID-19 pandemic was a novel societal event that abruptly changed daily life in workplaces, families and ECEC institutions. During the first COVID-19 wave in spring 2020, the regulations governing the use of ECEC changed rapidly and were interpreted differently by ECEC providers in Finland (Nurhonen et al., 2021). During the pandemic, many children were taken care of at home instead of in ECEC institutions (Nurhonen et al., 2021; Saranko et al., 2021).

To the best of our knowledge, there is a research gap on the impact of the pandemic on childcare and ECEC transitions. However, from the point of view of families working non-standard hours, earlier research has shown that the pandemic has affected the respective share of duties in working life and at home. Many studies show that women's attendance in the workforce has suffered from the lack of out-of-home childcare during the pandemic (Petts et al., 2020; Sevilla & Smith, 2020). In dual-earner families, the division of household tasks and childcare narrowed—but did not remove—the gaps between genders, meaning that even though the involvement of fathers in childcare increased, so did that of mothers (Craig & Churchill, 2020). Working from home and multitasking childcare duties have been stressful for women in particular, since their workload increased more than that of fathers during the pandemic (Sevilla & Smith, 2020). However, the more resilient the parents were (i.e. capable of recovering quickly from stressful situations), the less burn-out symptoms they had during the pandemic (Sorkkila & Aunola, 2021). Except for the stress of organising and multitasking work and childcare, parents felt less time-based stress during the pandemic, probably owing to the increased flexibility brought about by the absence of additional out-of-home schedules (Craig & Churchill, 2020).

Recent studies have found increased paternal involvement in childcare to be a positive consequence of the pandemic for both parents and children (Proulx et al., 2021). However, increased paternal involvement in childcare in families working non-standard hours had been reported before the pandemic (Mills & Täht, 2010), indicating that the childcare-related consequences of parental non-standard working hours may not necessarily be adverse but may promote paternal involvement instead.

## THE FINNISH CONTEXT

The challenges that non-standard working hours present for families are influenced by national and local childcare policies and the availability of ECEC services (see

e.g. Verhoef et al., 2016). In Finland, legislation and the provision of ECEC during non-standard hours have made it possible to reconcile non-standard working hours and family life and thus meet the needs of parents with non-standard work or study schedules (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018).

ECEC in Finland is primarily organised by the public sector, although the proportion of privately provided ECEC has increased in the present millennium (Ruutiainen et al., 2021). ECEC services with extended opening hours are provided in Finland in ECEC centres, family day-care centres and family day-care or children's homes depending on, for example, the size of the municipality (Malinen et al., 2016). Typically, extended hours and overnight ECEC are available only in some ECEC centres in municipalities (Rönkä et al., 2019). How extended hours ECEC services are organised may affect the number of transitions children undergo.

While ECEC is regulated at the national level, municipalities are responsible for its organisation and provision (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018). Municipalities are required to provide ECEC services to all children under school age (7 years) in their administrative area after the period of parental leave is over, except in cases where a parent is receiving child home-care allowance. Besides taking children to ECEC, parents can also choose to take care of their child at home until the child is three years old. Both choices are financially supported by the state. These policies influence the childcare choices parents make and the types of transitions their children experience during their early years.

In Finland, the main vertical transitions in the early years are from homecare to ECEC services, from ECEC services to pre-primary education at age 6 and from pre-primary to primary education in the year of the child's seventh birthday. Children also typically face transitions related to changes in various ECEC services or their groups. Traditionally, the composition of children's groups is based on age, and so as the children grow older, they enter a new group. The main horizontal transitions are the daily transitions from home to ECEC services and back (Karila & Rantavuori, 2019).

The rights to ECEC and the use of ECEC services during extended hours end when children start school. Thereafter, organising childcare during non-standard hours falls to the parents themselves. Municipalities may provide pre- and after-school care for the youngest children during regular hours, but the provision of such care is not mandatory (Basic Education Act 628/, 1998) and thus varies across municipalities.

About 88 per cent of Finnish four-year-olds attended ECEC in 2019 (Säkkinen & Kuoppala, 2020). However, parents tend to arrange their families' daily schedules in

such a way that the child spends as much time at home and as little time in ECEC as possible. Sevón et al. (2017) found that the children of parents working non-standard hours spent slightly fewer hours of their day in ECEC than did the children of parents working standard hours. The children also had fewer negative emotions associated with mornings compared to those in regular ECEC (Sevón et al., 2017).

## CULTURAL FRAMES RELATED TO CHILDCARE AND ECEC

Parents' solutions regarding their working lives and childcare arrangements are socially and culturally constructed and reconstructed (Halrynjo & Lyng, 2009; Närvi et al., 2020; Stone, 2007) in accordance with the cultural norms related to childcare, family life, parenthood, working life and gender (Järventausta et al., 2021). Families where parents work non-standard hours form an important context in which to study children's transitions. For example, Moilanen (2019) found that despite the subjective right of children to institutional ECEC in Finland, many Finnish parents working non-standard hours continue to face childcare-related problems to the same extent as their counterparts in the UK and the Netherlands, where institutional childcare during extended hours is extremely limited. These problems may have to do with the negative stigma attached to institutional childcare during non-standard hours that has been observed in some Finnish (Moilanen, 2019; Peltoperä, 2021; Peltoperä et al., 2017) and international (Anme et al., 2010; De Schipper et al., 2003; De Schipper et al., 2004; Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Jordan, 2008; Statham & Mooney, 2003) studies as well as the strong cultural ideals favouring informal homecare (Verhoef et al., 2016).

In this study, we explored the cultural frames informing childcare transitions in the context of parental non-standard working hours and Finnish ECEC services. By cultural frames, we mean socially shared tools that can be used when talking about a certain topic (see Goffman, 1974), which in this study include parents describing, rationalising and justifying the early years transitions of children. To render visible the early years transitions and cultural frames in the contexts of non-standard parental work and the COVID-19 pandemic, the following research questions were set:

1. What types of early years transitions do parents working non-standard hours describe in longitudinal interviews?
2. How do parents working non-standard hours frame the early years transitions of their child?

## METHOD

### Data

The data were collected as part of the research project 'Early Childhood Education and Care and the COVID-19 Pandemic' funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland. The aim of the project was to examine potential sources of inequality in Finnish childcare and ECEC policies. The project used multiple methodologies to analyse longitudinal data from parents in 10 municipalities differing in the combinations of cash benefits paid to families for childcare at home or for purchasing private ECEC services.

The sample was chosen from among the participants in the larger dataset according to two criteria. Firstly, one or both parents in the family had to be working non-standard hours and, secondly, at least one parent had to be willing to be interviewed three times (i.e. when their child was one, four, five or six years old). The third interview was conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seven families were selected for the study. In two families, both parents were interviewed; hence, a total of nine parents were interviewed. Of these nine, seven had received higher education (four had a master's degree and three a bachelor's degree) and two had vocational qualifications. Three were in a managerial position in the labour market. Since all the families were dual earners, the total number of parents in the data was 14 and the total number of interviews was 21. At least one parent in each family worked non-standard hours. The labour market status of the parents varied from working full- to part-time or studying part-time to staying at home either on parental leave or owing to being laid off due to the pandemic. The labour market status of all the parents during the longitudinal study is described in the results section in Table 1.

All seven children participated in either family- or centre-based ECEC, and all of them attended ECEC part-time at least one cross-sectional point in the longitudinal study. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, in accordance with the official recommendation to remain at home if possible, none of the participating children attended ECEC. However, despite avoiding institutional care because of the pandemic, all the children retained their place in institutional ECEC or family day care.

The interviews were semi-structured and concerned, for example, childcare decision-making processes and arrangements, everyday family life and the labour market participation of parents. Questions in the third interview were especially related to the COVID-19 pandemic and

TABLE 1 Summary of the families participating in the study

	1st cross-sectional point (2016) Interview when child was aged 1	2nd cross-sectional point (2019) Interview when child was aged 4	3rd cross-sectional point (2020–2021) COVID-19 interviews	
Parents (n = 14)	9 Full-time work 2 Part-time work 2 Studying 1 Laid off/Studying	12 Full-time work 1 Part-time work 1 Parental leave	5 In-office work 5 Remote work 1 Parental leave 1 Laid off 2 Laid off in same family 2 Change to working regular hours	1 Change of industry and to working regular hours
Child (n = 7)	3 ECEC 2 ECEC with extended opening hours 1 Family day care 1 Family day care with extended opening hours	3 ECEC 2 ECEC with extended opening hours 1 Family day care 1 Family day care with extended opening hours	7 Home care due to the emergency regulations and parental leave	6 Return to same ECEC setting 1 Return to ECEC, in a new centre

its effects on parents' working life and childcare. While discussing these topics, the parents likewise described the early years transitions of their children.

## Analysis

Data were analysed using discourse analysis with special focus on the explanations and justifications used by parents to describe, rationalise and justify their family life transitions and the vertical and horizontal transitions in their children's ECEC attendance. The analysis started with reading and coding the transcribed data. We extracted all the parts of the interviews where parents described changes in their work situations and childcare transitions. By doing this in all 21 interviews, we were able to construct a 'timeline' describing each parent's work and life situation in general and the transitions of each child.

In analysing the different transitions, we applied the three types of transitions discussed earlier. We considered a transition to be a life transition when it occurred on the macro level of the child's daily life, such as in society generally, in the working life of their parents or in their family form, and was only indirectly associated with the child's transitions. Vertical transitions involved a chronological transition from homecare to institutional ECEC, from one ECEC institution to another or from ECEC to pre-primary or primary education. Horizontal transitions comprised daily transitions from home to the ECEC setting and back or from one caregiver to another.

After identifying the three types of transitions present in the parents' interview talk, we analysed in greater

depth *how* parents talked about these transitions. We used the analytical term *interpretative frame* (see Goffman, 1974) to describe the overall perspectives from which, in this instance, parents constructed the transitions they had experienced. The frames were formed from the parents' explanations and justifications for the early years transitions of their child.

The analysis yielded three interpretative frames that parents used when talking about the early years transitions of their child. In social constructionism, interpretative frames are socially available tools that can be used to talk about a given issue. In this study, the parents' frames revealed the broader socially shared values and topics of interest in the society in which the parents live (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2009). The three frames—stabilising, balancing and adjusting—were identified in the different explanations on the child's early years transitions and described, rationalised and justified how active a role the parents had in the transitions.

## Research ethics

The Ethical Committee of the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, approved the study. Parents first answered a research questionnaire, at the end of which they were asked about their willingness to be interviewed later. They were informed about the research project not only in the invitation to participate but also at the beginning of each interview, when they also repeated their informed consent to participate. To protect participant anonymity, we only used general terms to characterise the informants and their families.

## RESULTS

### Life, vertical and horizontal transitions in the context of parental non-standard working hours and the COVID-19 pandemic

Many changes occurred in the families' lives during the study (Table 1). Such changes were related to work, family composition and childcare arrangements and were analysed as life, vertical and horizontal transitions. Life transitions occurred mainly at the societal or parental level and, unlike the vertical and horizontal transitions, only indirectly concerned the children. Table 1 presents the parents' working patterns and the children's ECEC arrangements as the former described them at the three cross-sectional points.

#### Life transitions

The life transitions related to parents' work included changes in parents' employers, working hours and shifts and shifts between staying at home and participating in the labour market due to studying, taking parental leave and being laid off from work. Between the first and second cross-sectional points, three parents had transitioned from studying to working and one from part-time to full-time work. Between the second and third cross-sectional points, one parent was on parental leave, one remained in part-time work and the other 12 parents were working full-time.

In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused changes in the standard routines of work and childcare. At the third cross-sectional point, one parent was on parental leave, five remained at in-office work and five had transitioned to working remotely. Two parents had transitioned to standard working hours and three had been laid off, two of them in the same family. One of the parents had changed industry and transitioned from non-standard to standard working hours because of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic.

During the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020, all the children faced the same transition from ECEC to homecare owing to the national recommendations to avoid social contacts when possible. We interpreted this change as a life transition, where a macro-level societal issue beyond the family unit unpredictably changes the course of daily life. Aside from the working patterns of the parents and the pandemic, a third type of life transition occurred in two families: the arrival of a new child. As the mother now remained at home with the baby, the older sibling no longer needed extended hours ECEC and either received homecare or attended ECEC part-time.

One question in the interviews was about the plans and hopes of the parents for the future. They all talked about the start of school as a natural transition that was imminent for all the children. Talking about the start of school led the parents to ponder the future life transitions they may have to undergo to manage childcare, as institutional ECEC would no longer be available for parents working non-standard hours. Possible solutions included reduced working hours, moving to a regular day job or working in a different industry. Relocating to be closer to relatives or the possibility of grandparents moving closer to the family to be able to help more easily with childcare was also discussed by the parents.

#### Vertical transitions

The ECEC arrangements of the children remained stable across the three cross-sectional points up to spring 2020, when all seven children received homecare because of the recommendations to stay home due to the pandemic. Only one child's ECEC setting changed during the study period: the child transitioned from family day care to an ECEC centre and from there to another ECEC centre after staying at home during spring 2020. Thus, the most typical vertical transition was from homecare to institutional care, followed by the transition from one age-based child group to another.

Some life transitions, such as a new birth in the family or being laid off, aroused parental concerns about vertical childcare transitions. One parent was worried about the possibilities of retaining the child's place in the ECEC centre during a temporary period of homecare and that their child might have to face a new transition when ECEC resumed. However, in this case, the place was reserved for the child, as it was expected that the family's need for non-standard hours ECEC would continue after the end of parental leave.

In another case, the child was absent from the ECEC centre for several months during parental leave. After the temporary period of staying at home, a vertical transition to a new ECEC centre would take place. This new imminent transition was due to the national education policy that children should attend primary school in an institution close to their homes in their predefined school district. It is therefore also recommended that children attend a local pre-primary school. The transition to the new ECEC centre was timed to take place immediately after parental leave to avoid additional vertical transitions.

#### Horizontal transitions

Whereas vertical transitions were infrequent, horizontal, daily transitions were more common. In the morning or

early afternoon, the child was typically transferred from home to the ECEC setting by the parent who started work later. In the afternoon or evening, the child underwent a further transition when picked up and taken home by the other parent. This type of tag-team parenting was used by all the interviewed families to partially cover the parents' childcare needs.

When possible, parents enlisted members of their extended family, such as grandparents or aunts, to help with childcare by taking the child home from ECEC and spending time with the child. The use of extended family members added another transition before the parents came home together or one at a time and took over the childcare role. Thus, the use of informal childcare increased the number of horizontal transitions.

To sum up, while the three types of transitions have been presented separately in this paper, they overlapped in everyday life. For example, a new birth in the family was interpreted as a life transition that indirectly influenced the horizontal, daily transitions of the child, since the parents in two such families had decided to keep the older child at home instead of in ECEC. However, according to the parents, the many life transitions related to changes at the societal and working-life levels did not directly increase the number of their children's transitions. The analysis results indicated that children seemed to undergo fewer transitions in their ECEC lives than their parents did in their working lives.

### Interpretative frames parents used in interview talk about early years transitions

The analysis of the parents' interview talk revealed that they used three types of socially and culturally available interpretative frames when describing, rationalising and justifying the early years transitions of their children. These frames were named *stabilising*, *balancing* and *adjusting*. The first referred to parents maintaining stability in childcare arrangements and children's lives, the second to parents striking a balance between the time spent at home and in institutional ECEC and the third to parents accommodating cultural norms and rules. The interpretative frames and their explanations and justifications given by the parents are presented in Table 2.

#### Stabilising childcare arrangements

The main principle parents mentioned when talking about their child's transitions was their desire to keep the early years of the child as regular and predictable as possible. Although the parents reported many life transitions

TABLE 2 Interpretative frames and their explanations

Interpretative frame	Explanations and justifications
Stabilising childcare arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arranging working patterns and schedules to maintain children's lives as stable as possible</li> <li>• Making childcare arrangements predictable</li> </ul> <p>Wishing that life would continue along the same lines in future transitions</p>
Balancing the time spent at home and in ECEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing peaceful moments at home (especially mornings) before going to 'school'</li> <li>• Desiring more time with one's own child vs. less time with the whole family</li> <li>• Getting to know one's own child "well"</li> <li>• Recognising the pedagogical benefits of ECEC</li> </ul>
Adjusting to norms and rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describing age-related institutional transitions as natural (transitioning from one group to another, from pre-primary to primary education)</li> <li>• Adapting to the transition from ECEC to homecare due to the COVID-19 pandemic</li> </ul>

related to their work patterns, these transitions had no direct influence on the vertical or horizontal transitions of the children (Table 1). The frame of stability in the children's vertical ECEC transitions, which was foregrounded in the parents' talk, was also supported by the stability maintained in municipal ECEC services despite temporary confinement to the home.

Aside from vertical transitions, the stabilising frame was also present in the parents' talk about their desire to minimise horizontal transitions and ensure everyday predictability for the child. In the following extract, the parent had increased the children's attendance at ECEC from part-time to full-time. The parent described the consequences of full-time ECEC for the child and the family:

Well, maybe it's clearer for children when they know that they will be going to family day care every day. Earlier they were there, for example, on Mondays and not on Fridays, so that varied ... Now it's an awful lot clearer for the kids. They used to ask, especially the older one, whether we are going to the family day carer today or not ... It seems like children require much more at the

weekend than if they've been playing the whole week in the family day-care place. (Interview when child was age 1)

In the extract, the parent explained how changing from part-time to full-time ECEC clarified the daily transitions of their children, as they no longer needed to ask whether the day would be spent at home or in family day care. This situation made it 'clearer for the kids' and made daily life more stable and predictable.

In all cases, the respondents talked about future transitions in the educational path of their children from the perspective of stability:

Interviewer: Is there something you wish for or dream about so that if everything goes well?

Respondent: Well, if everything goes well, then we'll have a life very much like the one similar we have now. We probably won't have more children, so we'll live a peaceful and natural basic life with each other and our everyday circle. I don't wish for more than what we have now, I think we already have the kind of life that I would like us to have. (Interview when the child was age 4)

In the extract, the parent expressed the hope that life would be the same in the future as it is now. However, the data contained many other views about future events that could change existing childcare arrangements, such as possible changes in the parents' work schedules or the possibility of having relatives living closer. Parents' talk about such arrangements was interpreted as within the frame of providing stability in children's lives. Changing the family's location (e.g. relocating to be closer to relatives), which is contrary to the ideal of stability, was interpreted here as a strategy to better combine work and childcare in the future.

### Balancing the time spent at home and in ECEC

Parents used the frame of balancing when talking about the time children spent at home and that spent in ECEC. The balancing frame was related above all to the daily organisation of work and family life, and hence especially to horizontal transitions. The parents primarily sought to achieve balance by regulating their working hours, although they differed in their level of autonomy in this respect. The parent in the next extract described how she was able to minimise the family's use of institutional

ECEC by adjusting her working hours to the non-standard hours of her spouse:

And it has also been easy to organise at work because I have been able to influence my working hours. And with my husband on shift work, I have organised childcare so that our child didn't need to be in full-time care at all. (Interview when the child was age 1)

In the previous extract, the parent emphasised her aim of ensuring as much time at home as possible for her child. Their objective was achievable by adjusting their working times. Some parents on shift work reported not taking their children to ECEC during regular office hours when they were at home, for example. As one interviewed parent said in the first cross-sectional interview, this was a '*basic principle*', which could be interpreted to mean that reducing the amount of institutional ECEC was a question of values rather than a practical issue. The same parent repeated the same goal in the next interview three years later by saying that '*at best*' the children are in institutional ECEC for only '*a few hours*'. Part-time ECEC was also justified by reference to the mandatory years of pre-primary and primary education to come:

But still, even though I'm studying myself, I wouldn't want the child in full-time ECEC. Yes, it's one, at most two days a week, so let the child be at home whenever possible. There'll be enough time in ECEC and school [laughter] when their '*career*' starts. (Interview when the child was age 1)

The above presented quote shows that the parent separated the goals of homecare and institutional ECEC. The use of the modal verb 'want' here described the parent's ideal of choosing homecare instead of ECEC that would also have been available for the child. Viewing ECEC as a career represents it as something demanding and the converse of the more leisurely state of '*being at home*'.

The parents often performed so-called tag-team parenting. The balance between time spent at home and in institutional ECEC was optimised by the parents in the following extract. They described the family's situation in which they work overlapping shifts:

Well, we actually have two types of week-days; on some weekdays one of the parents is at home before noon and then the other one in the afternoon, and on other weekdays, we are at home together in the evening. One leaves earlier, and the other one later, and



we come home so that we are both at home in the evening. (Interview when the child was age 1)

Thus, the family balances between tag-team parenting (*'one of the parents is at home before noon and then the other one in the afternoon'*) and working similar schedules, meaning that the child spends a longer time in institutional ECEC on those days. Balancing between tag-team parenting and working similar schedules was for them one strategy to ensure that they also have time together as a whole family (*'so that we are both at home in the evening'*). Spending time together as a whole family was possible owing to the non-standard but foreseeable work schedules of one parent and the autonomy of the other parent over their working hours. However, other respondents reported that tag-team parenting often meant that they spent less time as a whole family.

The parents talked about the importance of spending time with their children at home in several ways. Firstly, they valued unhurried time spent at home and contrasted it with the start of ECEC and school, when flexible schedules would no longer be possible for the child. The importance attached to a relaxed atmosphere in the mornings before going to the ECEC centre is shown in the following example:

... so the kids can wake up peacefully according to their own rhythm ... They have time to watch some children's programmes and play and eat peacefully and be at home and then dad takes them [to the ECEC centre]. (Interview when the child was age 4)

In this extract, time spent at home is described as calm and unhurried and focused on spending time and engaging in leisure activities, such as daily chores and play, with family members. Notably, the consequences of the COVID-19 restrictions were mainly discussed in the data as providing possibilities for spending calm and unhurried time at home. This was also reported when one parent was on parental leave with a younger sibling. In such cases, the older children also either stayed at home or attended ECEC for fewer hours than before the pandemic.

Secondly, the reason for regulating the amount of time spent in ECEC was to allow parents to spend more time with their child. Such time is highly valued, as exemplified below:

But on the one hand, despite corona, we thought that spring was a rather pleasant and intense time in that, as we were all at home the whole time, we spent a lot of time

together, which is quite rare. Eating all our meals together and spending time outdoors as a family and so on. So, it was actually a pretty nice time. (COVID-19 interview)

In the extract above, the parent described the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic favourably as a cosy time, because family members enjoyed spending time together. The father had been laid off at the beginning of the pandemic, while the mother continued working remotely from home. Thus, to say *'we were all at home the whole time'* was something of an exaggeration since the mother was still working full-time. However, this might be intended to illustrate how significant a difference it made to family life that the parent who regularly worked non-standard hours remained at home, which allowed for more family time in the evenings.

Thirdly, the parents also highlighted that having the possibility to spend more time with their children in everyday life enabled them to get to know their children better:

... and then of course, I think it's really nice to be with the kids when you kind of get to know them all the time, or when you see the kid all the time, you're able to read the kid really well and get to know your own kids really well. That's a pretty important thing. When you're at work, you don't necessarily have the energy, and home life is different. (Interview when the child was age 1)

In this extract, time spent at home is perceived as something parents enjoyed a lot. This parent highlighted the importance of spending time with the child to properly get to know the child. The parent also explained how different working life is from staying at home from the viewpoint of parents' own resources (*'you don't necessarily have the energy'*) after a workday.

While the interviewed parents appreciated family time and the unhurriedness of everyday life, the importance of ECEC also informed the balancing frame. The parents also reflected on the time spent at home in relation to ECEC and its benefits for the development, education and well-being of the child. For example, how to meet the children's needs for physical activity at home and the importance of attending pedagogical activities and belonging to a group were issues discussed in the data. In a COVID-19 interview, one parent talked about the benefit of ECEC especially for her child with special educational needs. In the next extract, the child was in part-time ECEC since both parents worked non-standard hours. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the father was

laid off and the child continued attending ECEC part-time:

Of course, his dad has been pretty much at home, and when he's been home, the child is not in care much. The child goes to the ECEC centre a couple of days a week. And I think it was in October, and he was working in another job. That's when the child was in care three days a week. Now of course we have tried to take the child when they do these pedagogical tasks for five-year-olds so they wouldn't be left out [of the ECEC group]. (COVID-19 interview)

This parent referred to the principle of keeping the child at home when one of the parents is at home. At the same time, the parent was talking about taking the child to ECEC to benefit from its educational objectives. By repeating the saying '*of course*' in justifying both the time spent at home and in ECEC, the parent reconstructed both situations as something culturally and socially expected for a child of that age. This extract clearly showed how the parent's justifications are sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, parents valued having the child at home as much as possible, while on the other hand, they recognised the educational value of ECEC. To sum up, in the balancing frame, the parents reflected variously on the content of a balanced daily life for their children: providing peaceful moments at home, spending time with family members and meeting the various needs of their children at home and in ECEC.

### Adjusting to norms and rules

The adjusting frame differed from the previous frames in that the parents spoke about transitions as 'natural' and did not challenge certain institutional transitions. Many vertical transitions, such as transitions from home to ECEC and from one child group to another within an ECEC setting, were observed in the data. The parents were aware of the age-related expectations in childcare and ECEC, and many of these were hardly questioned. The parents' speech, for example, indicated that the future transitions to pre-primary and primary school were unquestionable, inevitable parts of the child's educational path.

However, one parent argued for the necessity of a 'natural' transition from family day care to ECEC centre:

Well, our children are in family day care so maybe what changes is that other children are

coming into family day care. If there are going to be very young children in the future [in the child group], we will probably consider moving ours to an ECEC centre. The nurse will have more to do in that case, because small children in family day care don't have the same needs. Especially for our older boy, he would need quite a lot of physical activity. (Interview when the child was age 1)

Family day care in Finland is quite often seen as the most appropriate form of ECEC for the youngest children. In the above extract, despite these thoughts in the first interview—when the child was age 1—of transitioning in the future to an ECEC centre, the child remained in family day care throughout the longitudinal study. In the example, in contrast to the adjustments made by other parents to facilitate age-related transitions, mainly in ECEC centres, these parents preferred the stability and practicality of their private family day-care service.

Besides the age-related norms in Finnish ECEC, the transition from ECEC to homecare during the COVID-19 restrictions in spring 2020 was also discussed. The national recommendation to avoid social contacts was clear, and in these data, all families adhered to it and kept their children at home during that time. However, in one case, the transition to homecare was not perceived as smooth:

Then in the spring they transitioned to home from ECEC. It was a hard time for all of us. Because our child has these challenges. - - - So when daily life changes, it is difficult for this child. And then the activities and support from ECEC were suddenly gone. (COVID-19 interview)

In the given extract, the parent highlighted the importance of ECEC in supporting a child with developmental challenges. Nevertheless, the family adjusted to the national regulations and kept their child at home during the first wave of the pandemic.

## DISCUSSION

Smooth transitions are crucial for the well-being of both children and their families. In this article, we analysed the life transitions of both parents and children as well as the vertical and horizontal ECEC transitions of children. The transitions in the data were discussed through the frames of stabilising childcare arrangements and daily life, balancing between time spent at home and in ECEC and adjusting to societal norms and rules. By studying

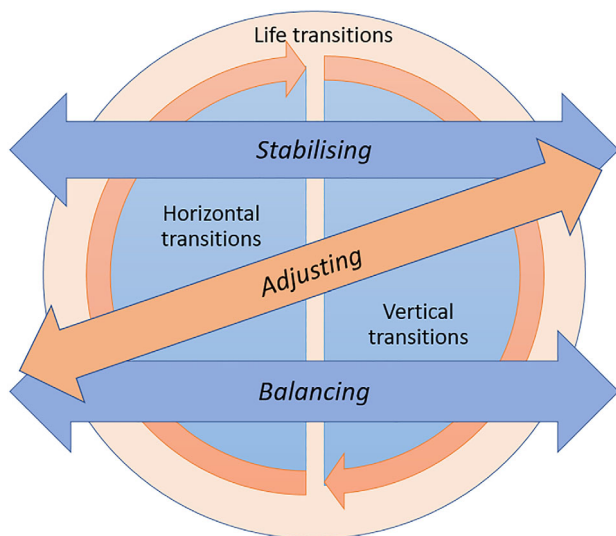


FIGURE 1 The entity of the transitions and frames

the frames parents used when talking about their transitions, we managed to capture how parental employment, family life and childcare transitions are closely linked to form a confluent entity. Although parents' work often defined their organisation of childcare, parents were also accommodating their working life to family life and childcare (Figure 1).

The vertical transitions observed in this study were few, probably owing to the strong motivation of parents to minimize disruptions to existing childcare arrangements. Thus, children experienced many horizontal transitions. The parents' wish to reduce the amount of time (whether daily or weekly) spent by their child in ECEC may, as the data showed, increase unpredictability and the number of horizontal, daily transitions. This study supports earlier findings that parental non-standard work might lead to multiple childcare arrangements and transitions between them (Enchautegui et al., 2015; La Valle et al., 2002; Plantenga & Remery, 2009). The use of multiple caregivers means that children must adjust to the different rules, routines and expectations set in different environments (Claessens & Chen, 2013; Pilarz & Hill, 2014).

These results show that providing a rich growth environment for children, and supporting parents to balance family and working life at the same time, requires comprehensive national and local family and ECEC policies. The earlier literature indicates that the childcare decisions of parents are closely linked both to the needs and cultural values of families and the options open to them (Karila et al., 2020; Peyton et al., 2001; Siippainen et al., 2022; Vandebroek et al., 2008; Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014). When developing ECEC services, the early years transitions of children must be recognised and considered along with the diverse situations and needs of families and their children.

## Implications for policy and practice

On the basis of our findings, we would like to suggest the following considerations for family and ECEC policies. Since stability in vertical transitions was important to these families, it is important to provide stability in the existing ECEC services that meet both childcare and educational needs. The frame of adjusting to rules and norms revealed that national and local recommendations guide parents' choices and are therefore important tools for combining work and childcare. However, the frame of balancing between the time spent at home and in ECEC provided us insight to the different needs and values of families. Parents working non-standard hours are a heterogeneous group with respect to their individual schedules as well as their values and practical wishes for childcare. It seemed that non-standard working hours enable children to spend more time at home with at least one of their parents, which was highly valued in these families.

Balancing between homecare and ECEC is familiar topic in Finnish family policy, where both homecare and ECEC are financially supported by the state and therefore promote both dual-earner and male-breadwinner family forms, which might lead to polarisation in ECEC usage. In Finland, there is a political will to increase enrolment in ECEC (see Kuusiholma-Linnamäki & Siippainen, 2021). However, the internationally well-known benefits of attending ECEC (Melhuish et al., 2015), namely, its ways of supporting the development, education and well-being of children, were rarely mentioned in the data and thus warrant more attention in future research. The pedagogical aspects of extended hours ECEC should be a focus of future research and development of ECEC policies and practices.

It is possible that the wider use of extended hours ECEC would lead to less horizontal transitions if the ECEC centres have organised their schedules so that children do not have to move between groups or centres. The question for future investigation is how to develop the ECEC services to make them an appealing childcare choice for parents working non-standard hours. The results show that parents do not use available services to their full potential, which may be related to the negative stigma associated with extended hours ECEC (Anme et al., 2010; De Schipper et al., 2003; De Schipper et al., 2004; Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Jordan, 2008; Moilanen, 2019; Peltoperä, 2021; Peltoperä et al., 2017; Statham & Mooney, 2003). Therefore, the cultural expectations in general society with respect to non-standard hours of both work and childcare could be more accommodating (see also Krapf, 2014; Moilanen, 2019; Peltoperä, 2021).

In addition to developing ECEC services, parents' possibilities to influence their working hours could be better considered, as these vary across work domains, occupations and gender (Immonen, 2020). Therefore, smooth transitions require improvements not only in ECEC and family policies but also in work cultures. Future research should pay more attention to children's experiences of their transitions to also consider children's voices in policy making.

## Limitations of the study

When reading this study, it is important to keep in mind the following issues. Firstly, related to the transferability, our findings refer to the Finnish context, which has certain unique features related to family and ECEC policies. Compared to countries such as the United States, where ECEC is limited (if offered at all), ECEC services in Finland are widely available to families with young children. In addition to the wide ECEC services, homecare is common especially for children under three years old. Both ECEC and homecare are financially supported by the state. Secondly, all the families in this study were dual-earner families. Moreover, the results cannot be generalised to all parents working non-standard hours since there are differences between families' lives. For example, lone parents face triple demands: the demands of parenting alone, attending the workforce and working during non-standard hours (Moilanen, 2019). Thirdly, the third interviews were gathered after the first wave of the pandemic, in spring 2020, when institutional ECEC had reopened for all children irrespective of their parents' labour market status. The parents might have reported matters differently if the interviews had been conducted during or immediately after the acute phase of the pandemic. Fourthly, the sample of interviewees was rather small; however, the longitudinal design enabled us to gain a deeper insight into the parents' perceptions.

## FUNDING INFORMATION

This study was funded by the Academy of Finland [293,049 and 314,317] and by the SOSUS profiling area developed in the University of Jyväskylä.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the article.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Anonymised data will be made available in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive upon completion of the CHILDCARE project.

## ETHICS APPROVAL

The research was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

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**How to cite this article:** Peltoperä, K., Siippainen, A., & Karila, K. (2022). Stabilise, balance and adjust—Framing the early years transitions of children whose parents work non-standard hours. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12563>