

## Child Care and Its Impact on Young Children (2-5)

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### **Topic**

*Child care (0-5 years)*

### **Introduction**

Through the ages and across cultures, nonparental assistance with child care has been an enduring norm. All over the world, children typically live with and are cared for primarily by their parents but also receive care from extended family members, neighbours, friends, and paid care-providers.<sup>1,2</sup> In industrialized countries, increased reliance on paid child care, often provided by publicly subsidized child care centers, has fostered intense research over the past 20 years on the effects (both positive and negative) on children's health, cognitive capacity, adjustment, and social relationships. Although there is consensus that parents remain the most important influences on children's adjustment, it is equally clear that nonparental care can also have a substantial impact.

### **Subject**

The nature and extent of public support for nonparental care facilities varies depending on whether or not

1. the lack of child care is considered necessary to promote women's participation in the labour force
2. child care is viewed as a public responsibility or private concern
3. child care is viewed as a social welfare program or an early educational program.<sup>3</sup>

Within any culture, moreover, a variety of family circumstances, multiple types of nonparental child care, and the complex effects of temperamental differences among children all ensure that child care in and of itself is unlikely to have clear universal effects, either positive or negative. As a result, researchers have focused on the nature, extent, quality, and age-of-entry into child care, as well as how the combined impact of these factors affects children from different family backgrounds, with different educational, developmental, and individual needs.

### **Problems**

Students of early development have typically sought to explain the impact of *parental* care on child development and have only attempted more recently to consider the impact

of *nonparental* care. According to attachment theory, for example, successful early socio-emotional development depends on the development of trusting relationships (attachments) with a few reference figures, such as parents. Attachment theorists initially proposed that continuous care was necessary to build and maintain those primary attachments, and that such attachments also influence children's emotional regulation and social behaviours, even later in life.<sup>4,5</sup> Infant–parent attachments are formed in the first year of life<sup>4</sup> and thus attachment theory has particular relevance to *infant* care practices, which are not the focus of this article.

According to many theorists, child care may also be problematic for toddlers and preschoolers. Because nonparental child care necessarily disrupts the continuity of access to primary attachment figures, first of all, it can damage primary attachments and thus hinder socio-emotional development. In addition, many theorists argue that unrelated care providers are, on average, not as committed to their child care responsibilities as parents would be. Sociobiologists further argue that quality of care is a function of the degree of relatedness between care providers and children,<sup>6,7</sup> such that the poorest quality of care should be expected from unrelated care providers, including paid teachers, babysitters, and nannies. A much more positive view of child care has been advanced by cognitive theorists who stress the value of well-designed stimulation and instruction on the mental and communicative development of children.<sup>8</sup>

### **Research context**

Despite a voluminous body of literature on the effects of early child care, the big picture is often ambiguous or unclear. In part, this confusion underscores the need to focus, not only on children's experiences when they are in nonparental care facilities, but also on other aspects of the broader ecology, including the intersection between parental and nonparental care. For example, children in child care have different experiences at home than do children who only experience parental care.<sup>9-13</sup> Thus, research must determine whether differences between children at home and children who also attend child care settings are attributable to their experiences in care or to their different experiences at home. Research must also seek to improve the clarity of the findings by conducting meta-analyses that summarize the results of multiple smaller studies,<sup>14-16</sup> or by carrying out multi-site studies with large numbers of participants (NICHD Early Child Care Network<sup>17</sup>; CQOS Cost Quality and Outcome Study<sup>18</sup>).

### **Key research questions**

Researchers have explored the effects of child care on many aspects of development, although research on cognitive and language development (especially in the context of compensatory educational programs) and social-emotional development has been of greatest interest. Scholars and politicians who question the value and appropriateness of child care have been particularly interested in determining whether children can maintain supportive relationships with their parents when they attend child care centers. Meanwhile, those who value child care emphasize the need to develop good relationships with care providers and socialize with their peers to take full advantage of the enriching experiences at their disposal. Such a view would also suggest that stimulating care at home is valuable or necessary and should be born in mind when studying the effects of

educational strategies and programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

### **Recent research results**

Whether or not children in child care develop and maintain good relationships with their parents depends upon parents' ability to provide sensitive care at home.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, it is important that parents establish a balance between home and child care settings, and that they themselves continue to provide types of intimate interaction seldom available in child care centers.<sup>9,20,21</sup> Long hours in child care and stressful parent-child relationships are associated with angry aggression in preschool children,<sup>22,23</sup> whereas good relationships with care providers help minimize behaviour problems and aggression.<sup>24</sup> Care providers, of course, are able to develop significant relationships with children but the quality of those relationships depends on the care providers' behaviour towards the group as a whole, rather than on the quality of interactions with individual children. Indeed, the emerging relationships between care providers and children reflect the characteristics and dynamics of the group whereas infant-parent attachments seem to be influenced more directly by dyadic interactions.<sup>14,25,26</sup> From age 2 on, children are able to interact more extensively with peers. Such encounters provide excellent opportunities for learning the rules of social interaction: how to evaluate social offers, to conduct dialogues, and most importantly, to resolve conflicts with peers constructively.<sup>27</sup>

Despite contradictory earlier findings about the effects of child care on cognitive and linguistic development, more recent research has revealed the enduring and positive effects of high-quality child care — even on school performance.<sup>28,29</sup> Almost all children (not only those from less stimulating home environments) can benefit cognitively, especially when they enjoy positive relationships with their care providers.<sup>30</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Do children in child care develop differently from those without child care experiences? In the past, many scholars worried that nonparental child care might be risky for children and thus sought to determine whether children in child care were as well adapted as children cared for exclusively at home. This line of research was somewhat surprising in light of the striking differences between parental and nonparental care contexts. Only recently have researchers begun to explore the advantages of good-quality care and its potential benefits for children. In particular, child care offers opportunities for more extensive social contacts with peers and adults, and thus may open an extended social world for children. Positive child care experiences may also enhance later educational opportunities, such that those experiencing early nonparental care are better able to benefit from education, adjust to routines, and resist conflicts. Nevertheless, home remains the emotional center of children's lives and it is important that supportive parent-child relationships not be harmed by child care experiences even when children spend considerable amounts of time in care.<sup>20</sup>

### **Implications**

Because children can profit from experiences in nonparental child care, child care needs to be of good quality and should provide access to a variety of positive social

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relationships.<sup>3,31</sup> To ensure that care environments are developmentally appropriate, however, adult–child ratios in child care must be kept low. Group size and composition also need to be considered as mediators of the quality of individual care provider–child relationships.<sup>18,32,33</sup> It is also important that regulations and informed parents ensure and demand the highest possible quality of care. Because minding the children of others (in groups) requires different care strategies than parental care, providers’ care giving activities need to be supported by society, well compensated, and enriched by serious and careful education or training.

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