

Child Care and the Development of Young Children (0–2)

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Topic

Child care (0-5 years)

Introduction

Given the importance attributed to maternal care in cultural ideals¹ and psychological theories,² and the working role assumed by growing numbers of mothers with very young children, there has been widespread concern about effects of non-maternal child care for young children, and for infants in particular.

Subject

Rates of employment for the mothers of infants and preschoolers have tripled in the US since 1969. In fact, in the US, the majority (63%) of women with children under 3 spend time in the labour force and their children experience considerable amounts of nonmaternal care. Reliance on nonmaternal child care beginning in the first year of life has become normative.^{3,4} The number of weekly hours of paid employment among mothers has also grown, along with the number of hours of child care. In 1998, 32% of women with children under 3 worked full time throughout the year, compared with 7% in 1969. The very young children of nonemployed mothers experience child care on a regular basis too.³ Figures from the National Household Education Survey in 1999 indicated that 53% of 1-year-olds and 57% of 2-year-olds received regularly scheduled child care in the United States (according to tabulations reported in Shonkoff and Phillips⁵). Are there systematic effects for young children whose care experiences take place with the first two years of life?

Problems

To understand the effects of early child care, we must address many facets of the care experience — the amount, type and quality of child care provided, the age at which care was initiated, and the stability or changes introduced regarding care and caregivers. Moreover, the effects of child care may depend on characteristics in individual children (especially child temperament and gender) and families (such as income, attitudes towards working, and quality of parenting). For example, longer hours of child care during infancy or more changes in care may be harmful for children with certain temperamental characteristics, but beneficial or benign for others. Measuring the effects of early child care must rely largely on non-experimental, correlational designs that disentangle the true effects of early child care from differences among the families who use child care services.

In the early 1990s, the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development initiated the NICHD Study of Early Child Care, a large-scale longitudinal study of children and their families. Children were monitored from birth to investigate the short-term and long-term effects of the child care experience by following a sample of over 1,200 children beginning at birth, from all over the United States. This study carefully examined the characteristics of the child care contexts chosen by the children's families, the characteristics of the families, the children's experiences within the family, and multiple domains of child outcomes over time (see NICHD Early Child Care Research Network⁶ for a comprehensive overview). The families were representative of the various local populations from which they were recruited. Most of the children experienced child care beginning early in their first year.³ Greater use of child care in infancy was related most strongly to family economic factors, but the mothers' education, personality, and beliefs, as well as family size were also associated with child care use. A variety of types of care were used in infancy, including centre care, family child care, relative care, in-home care, and father care. Both low-income and high-income families had their children in higher-quality child care centres in infancy; higher-quality care in homes was associated with higher incomes.

Research Context

Recent research has emphasized the long-lasting effects of early environmental influences⁵ and their significance for emotional security, cognitive development, and learning skills. Indeed, the effects of child care need to be addressed by examining the nature of child care experiences and accompanying family experiences. Early research on the effects of child care has largely ignored selection biases, and such biases may still be undercontrolled in research. But attempts to disentangle family from child care effects may also lead to underestimating child care effects,^{5,7} given the reciprocal effects between child care and families. Thus, for the past decade, research into the effects of early child care for infants and toddlers has been based on an ecological model of development that addresses environmental influences in family and child care contexts in conjunction with child characteristics and how experiences in one setting may shape the effects of experiences in the other.

Key Research Questions

Widespread concerns about the effects of routine nonmaternal care in a child's first 2 years of life have focused primarily on how such experiences may affect the developing mother-child relationship, but have also addressed effects on a child's developing language and cognitive development, social competencies, problem behaviours, and peer relations. An additional focus has been the concern that parents may suffer a loss of influence over their children's development when non-parental caregivers provide significant amounts of care on a daily basis.

Recent Research Results

Child care and the mother-infant relationship. The NICHD Study of Early Child Care is considered to be the most thorough investigation to date of the effects of child care on infant-mother attachment. Contrary to meta-analytic findings of the earlier literature that

focused only on the effects of the amount of care provided without adequately controlling for selection effects, the NICHD Study found that a number of features in the child care experience (the amount of child care, age of entry into care, and the quality and stability of the child care experienced) were unrelated to the security of infant–mother attachments or to an increased likelihood of avoidant attachments, except when mothers were relatively less sensitive in their interactions with their children.⁸ For these children, extended experience with child care, lower-quality child care, and more changes in child care arrangements were each associated with an increased likelihood of developing an insecure attachment with their mothers. The strongest predictor of security in the infant–mother attachment, regardless of children’s experiences with child care, was the sensitivity in a mother’s care of her infant (which includes a positive regard for her infant, responsiveness, and lack of intrusiveness or hostility), suggesting that it is the quality of mother–child interactions rather than maternal absence or child care experiences *per se* that determine the quality of attachment.

A recent study of Israeli infants has indicated that infants’ experiences with very low-quality centre care was associated with increased rates of insecure infant–mother attachment,⁹ regardless of the mothers’ sensitive parenting of their infants. The quality of care observed in the Israeli centres was generally poorer than that typically observed in the NICHD Study in the US, thereby enhancing our knowledge regarding the associations between the child care conditions and the mother–child relationship.

Other evidence from the NICHD Study indicates that child care bears some relation to the mother’s abilities to respond with sensitivity to her child and the child’s positive engagement with mother in mother–child interactions. Mothers were somewhat less sensitive with their infants and their children were consequently less positively engaged in interactions with their mothers when they experienced more child care.¹⁰ But mothers were more sensitive when children were placed in higher-quality care. These subtle effects have not been found consistently across studies, but other studies have rarely tackled such a large and diverse group of young children with such careful controls, and have not observed mother–child interactions throughout the preschool years.

Some studies have found that nonparental care experiences appear to lessen links between parent–child relationships and child development.¹¹⁻¹³ However, recent evidence from the NICHD Study and other studies have indicated that families continue to matter, and family influences are consistently stronger and more pervasive than the effects of child care in child development.¹⁴⁻¹⁷

Effects on cognition and language.

Positive associations have been consistently demonstrated between higher-quality child care and greater cognitive and language development in children’s first 2 years of life, even after taking into account associations with family selection factors, and other potentially confounding correlates, such as the cognitive stimulation received in the home, and a mother’s language abilities.¹⁸⁻²⁰ In addition, more experience with centre-based care was found to be related to greater language development (more language

production) at 15 and 24 months as well as better cognitive development at age 2, controlling for family factors as well as language stimulation in the care setting.²⁰

Effects on peer relations, compliance, and behaviour problems.

Early child care experience is generally accompanied by greater exposure to peers at early ages and possible associated effects on early peer competencies. Indeed, more experience in child care settings with other children is associated with positive skills with peers in those settings but is also associated with caregiver ratings of negativity.⁶ The effect of child care on child compliance and behaviour problems has been controversial but fairly consistent. More hours of child care, care with multiple peers, and poorer-quality child care have each been related to heightened behaviour problems, beginning at age 2; higher-quality care has been related to 2-year-old children's cooperation and compliance with adults and social interaction skills.^{21,22}

Conclusions

The positive linkages between child care quality and a variety of positive outcomes in the first 2 years are among the most pervasive findings in developmental science. Higher-quality child care (in the form of responsive and stimulating care) is associated with better cognitive and language development, positive peer relations, compliance with adults, fewer behaviour problems, and better mother–child relations. While there have been fewer consistent relations to different types of child care experiences, centre-based care appears to be beneficial to children's cognitive development (although it may also be associated with problematic social relations). Unless child care quality is poor, or the mother is insensitive to a child's needs, nonparental child care does not appear to undermine the security of the infant–mother attachment per se, but there are indications (in some conditions) that this relationship may be more vulnerable.

Implications for Policy and Services

Nonparental child care is experienced by a majority of young US children beginning at very early ages. The implications of research into the effects of child care clearly support the provision of high-quality care and parental access to such care. Poorer-quality child care may be harmful to children's healthy development and relationships with their parents, while good-quality care appears to be beneficial to their development and relationships. Research implications regarding which type of care should be promoted and which type of care parents should choose for their infants and toddlers are not clear. Indeed, the benefits of centre-based care in the cognitive and language development of children, even when the quality of care is high, may be accompanied by problems in social development. The effects of child care are manifested in the first 2 years of life and can be given greater meaning by examining subsequent developmental outcomes in the context of child care and family experiences.

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