



VOICES FROM THE FIELD - Policy Implications of Child Development Research for Early Childhood Education and Care Policy

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Policy perspective

The CEECD summaries of child-care research are written from the perspective of child care's impact on child development. Nine prominent researchers sum up research concerned with the use of child care by two age groups; Belsky,¹ Howes² and Owen³, with a commentary by Andersson,⁴ consider zero to two-year-olds and Ahnert and Lamb⁵ McCartney,⁶ Peisner-Feinberg,⁷ with a commentary by Barnett,⁸ write about the two-to-five age group. Overall, there are two main conclusions to be drawn from the diverse studies reviewed: one, as Kathleen McCartney concisely notes, "the main conclusion is that the effects of child care are complex"⁶ and two, as Barnett comments, "overall, the research reviewed provides support for our hopes while it puts to rest the most serious fears."⁸

From a policy perspective, it is useful to consider this body of research from several points of view: first, understanding the importance of particular policy contexts; second, within the frame of broader social and family policy; third, considering the care/early education tie; and finally, fully acknowledging social and economic changes in families and gender roles.

First, the context of almost all the papers is primarily the United States, which – while its child development research is much more extensive than other countries' – is at the low end of the spectrum of social and family policy. The papers summarize contemporary, mostly American, child development research to respond to such key policy questions as: What are the short- and long-term effects of varying quality on child development? Does the age at which child care begins influence development? Are there differential effects of child care on children of different backgrounds?

There are several good examples that illustrate the importance of understanding the context in order to be able to interpret research. For example, most of the papers' data about the labour force participation of mothers of young children (pertinent to the question about the age of entry to child care) are from the U.S., and Belsky comments that "a growing number of children seem to be spending more and more time at younger ages in child care arrangements."¹ While the National Institutes of Child Health and

Child Development (NICHD) study found that 72.8% of children were in child care before the age of six months, and 58.1% by the age of three months,⁹ the Canadian trend is quite different. In the past few years, fewer very young Canadian children have been in child care, as the extension of paid maternity/parental leave to one year in 2000 has encouraged longer leaves. The proportion of Canadian women returning to work after about a year has jumped from 8% to 47%, with more fathers likely to take leave as well.¹⁰

In another context-specific point, Belsky comments that “placing children in an average nonmaternal care facility for long hours does seem to be associated with some (modest) developmental risk.”¹¹ Here it is important to be specific about the term “average.” The quality of “average” child care in the U.S. appears to be quite different from average child care in Sweden^{11,12} and different even from Canada where, while research finds that centre-based child care is often less than exemplary, it is still less likely to be very poor quality (using the same measures) than American child-care centres.¹³

The point here is not that the research findings are not valuable but that – as Andersson, a Swede, emphasizes in his paper - the social/economic/policy context needs to be taken into account when drawing conclusions.⁴

Second, as Canadian social policy groups such as Campaign 2000 and Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) have described, a social program like child care is best considered as part of a larger “mix” of social and family policy. This is alluded to several times in the papers, for example by Belsky, who proposes “that parental leave be extended (and preferably paid) to mark the duration provided in some Scandinavian countries.”¹ But discussion of concern about very long hours of child care as a possible risk factor could well include consideration of why parents work such long hours in North America. Labour policies such as minimum wages, legislated hours of work and length of holidays; income-security programs such as child benefits; flexible and well-supported leave provisions for child illness or to permit part-time work (as in Sweden); and policy-driven efforts to address work/family balance issues are all part of broader social and family policy, of which child care is but one part (albeit an essential and central part).

A third policy-related perspective on child care is that the dual purpose of high quality child care – enabling parents to work and providing educational/social activities for children – is now well accepted; indeed, “child care” is often called “early childhood education and care” (ECEC). Barnett’s paper addresses this issue. He points out that “even children whose mothers are not in paid employment also commonly participate in similar arrangements” and that attendance for much of the day is nearly universal in some countries by age three.⁸ This point is very pertinent to any discussion of “quality” as it is hard to argue that poor or inadequate quality child care provides early childhood education. Generally, while all the papers consider the social and cognitive benefits of high quality child care, they tend to concentrate much more on the “care” part of the picture than on the “education.” Barnett links “an inadequate appreciation of the educative function of child care” to the reluctance of some governments to assume responsibility for it.⁸ In a country like Canada, which – like the United States – has two

separate policy and program streams for “care” and “education,” with the “care” stream garnering poor government support, this perspective is very pertinent.

Finally, one of the most salient points almost all the papers make from a policy perspective is that mothers of young children in all countries are in the paid labour force in large numbers – even higher proportions in Canada than in the United States.¹⁻⁸ While at one time it was fairly well established that mothers were the primary caregivers and educators of young children, economic circumstances and social norms have changed, so that it is unlikely that large numbers of mothers will go back into the home to care for young children on a full-time basis. But some countries have not yet worked out new mechanisms, institutions or social arrangements to provide what mothers and families once provided on their own.

The research presented in these papers makes it apparent that – while the details may be complex – much is known about the effects of child care and the factors associated with its effects.¹⁻⁸ High quality child care, provided by well-educated, sensitive early childhood educators, well-supported and accompanied by a good mix of other family policies, is a benefit, not a danger, to the social and cognitive development of children across the economic spectrum. As McCartney points out, “child care is now an ordinary part of life for children in most western countries.”⁶ The key policy challenge is to take the knowledge from the research presented in these papers and put it into practices and public policies that ensure that the effects of child care on children and families are the best they can be.

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