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Child Care and Its Impact on Young Children's Development

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Introduction

As the labour force participation rates for mothers of young children have risen over the past few decades, so has the use of child care, including both child care centres and family child care homes. A substantial majority of young children now regularly experience child care prior to their entry into school: rates of care for preschool-aged children are now higher than for infants and toddlers. Recent estimates indicate that nearly two-thirds of all 3- to 5-year-old children in the United States attend some form of regular child care prior to kindergarten.[1] Given these high child care usage rates, both parents and professionals have sought to understand the impact of these experiences on children's cognitive and social development.

Subject

Because children's outcomes are influenced by the multiple environments they encounter,[2] including both family and child care settings, there has been growing interest in research about the effects of child care experiences on children's development. Moreover, the reported average quality of child care in the US falls short of the standards recommended by early childhood professionals,[3-6] leading to concerns about how the quality of such environments affects

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children’s development. Coupled with the widespread interest in promoting children’s school readiness skills, a number of research studies have examined the extent to which variations in the quality of preschool child care experiences influence children’s cognitive and social skills during the preschool years, during the transition to school, and into the elementary school years. Examination of the quality of child care has weighed a variety of factors, including classroom practices (eg, materials, activities, daily organization), teacher–child relationships (eg, teacher sensitivity, warmth and closeness of the relationship with the child), and teacher qualifications (eg, education and training levels).

Problems

One difficulty with examining the impact of child care quality is the issue of family selection factors. Families choose the child care they use, and families with differing characteristics may choose different types and quality of care. In particular, studies have suggested that socio-economically advantaged families tend to choose higher quality care for their children.[7-10] Therefore, it may not be possible to completely separate the developmental effects of child care quality from the effects generated by family factors. While more recent studies have adjusted statistically for these family selection factors, they may underestimate the effects of child care quality when the two are highly correlated.

A second difficulty in this area of research is the need for longitudinal studies which also include varying levels of child care quality and representative samples of adequate size in order to examine the longer-term effects of child care quality on children’s development. While a few studies do exist (most notably, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care; and the Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers Study), the expense and complexities of undertaking this type of research limit the availability of such data.

Research Context

Evidence regarding the effects of preschool child care on children’s development has been derived from two distinct areas of research — early intervention programs for children at risk, and typical community child care. Whereas several studies have explored the longitudinal effects of early intervention programs, few have examined the effects for children attending community child care programs as they make the transition from preschool to elementary school. Several

studies of early intervention programs have found long-term positive effects on children's cognitive development and academic achievement that last until the third or fourth grade, and even longer into adolescence and adulthood for broader indicators of school success, such as retention in grade, special education placement, total years of education, and intellectual functioning.[9-15] These early intervention programs were generally high quality, very intensive, model demonstration programs, and while these studies clearly show lasting positive effects of providing such programs in the preschool years, they do not reflect the typical experiences of most children in child care.

A second area of research has examined the effects of the typical community child care programs utilized by families, which may vary widely in the quality of experiences provided. More specifically, substantial research literature has developed over the past two decades examining the effects of preschool child care quality on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Research studies have included child care programs selected from those existing within the local communities sampled, as opposed to the model demonstration programs included in the early intervention studies. The strongest evidence has been gathered from studies examining the effects of child care quality after controlling for differences in child or family background characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, maternal education, family structure, gender, or ethnicity, with a view to allowing for differences related to both the selection of child care and to children's outcomes.

Key Research Questions

Major research questions in this area include the following:

1. Is the level of child care quality in preschool related to children's cognitive and social development?
2. How long are the influences of child care quality evident?
3. Are there differential effects of child care quality on developmental outcomes for children from different backgrounds?

Recent Research Results

Studies have been conducted in the US as well as other countries, including Canada, Bermuda, and Sweden, to examine the issues around the effects of child care quality on children's

development, both in the short-term, during the preschool years, and over the longer-term, into elementary school. The studies reported below have examined the effects of child care quality after adjusting for family selection factors, in order to disentangle the relations between the selection of child care of a particular quality or type and the effects of the child care itself.

Although there are relatively few longitudinal studies, several studies have found positive associations between child care quality and children's cognitive development and social competence during the preschool years.[3,5,8,16-26] These studies suggest that children who attend better quality child care during the preschool years demonstrate better cognitive and social skills during this time period, after accounting for differences in family background characteristics that are also related to children's development.

A few studies have addressed this issue longitudinally for preschool-age child care, examining the long-term influences of child care quality on both cognitive and social development. Some studies have found modest, positive associations between preschool child care quality and children's school-age cognitive skills.[27,28] Fewer long-term associations have been found for social development, although some studies have found that better quality preschool child care is related to more positive behaviour and fewer problem behaviours in the early elementary school years.[29,30]

Although most studies have found influences of child care quality on children's outcomes, a few have found little effect for either cognitive or social development during the preschool years,[17,30-32] as well as over the longer-term, into elementary school.[33,34] The absence of effects in these studies may be accounted for by sampling issues in some cases (restricted ranges of child care quality and/or relatively small sample sizes) or by the outcomes measured in others (e.g., very low-frequency behaviours such as social withdrawal).

Another issue of interest is whether the effects of child care quality are stronger among some groups of children, such as those who may already be at greater risk for less optimal development. Only a few studies relating child care quality to preschool children outcomes have examined this question, and fewer have followed children into elementary school. The findings in this area have been mixed, with some evidence of stronger effects for children at greater risk during the preschool years[20,35-37] and school-age years,[28] although these differences were not found consistently for all outcomes studied. In contrast, other studies have found no differential effects

of child care quality for children at greater risk.[21,23] Given the likelihood that children at greater risk may be in lower- quality care, however, this issue merits further consideration.

Conclusions

The research evidence supports the contention that better quality child care is related to better cognitive and social development for children. While these effects of child care quality are in the modest to moderate range, they are found even after adjusting for family selection factors related to both the quality of care and to children's outcomes. Numerous studies have found short-term effects of child care quality on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development during the preschool years. Longer-term effects lasting into the elementary school years have also been found, although fewer longitudinal studies have been conducted to examine this issue. Moreover, these results indicate that the influences of child care quality are important for children from all backgrounds. While some studies have found even stronger effects for children from less advantaged backgrounds (suggesting that this issue may be even more critical for children already at greater risk for school failure) the findings indicate that children from more advantaged backgrounds are also influenced by the quality of care.

Implications

As a whole, these findings suggest that policies which promote good quality child care during the preschool years are important for all children. Other research suggests that good quality care is expensive to provide; it is associated with well-trained and educated staff, low staff–child ratios, low staff turnover rates, good wages, and effective leadership.[3,4,38] Given the high cost as well as the relative paucity of good-quality care, consideration needs to be given to both the availability and the affordability of care. The most successful policies will need to take all these factors into account, so that good quality care is a realistic option for all children. Given the high usage rates of child care during the preschool years, such an investment would seem to be an important path to explore in improving children's readiness for and success in school.

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