[Archived] The Impact of Child Care on Young Children (0–2)

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Introduction

Increasing numbers of children between birth and age 2 are now being placed in nonparental care during the day and work week, primarily due to increases in maternal employment. In the United States, between 1980 and 1998, the labour force participation rate of mothers with infants rose from 38% to 59%.[1] In 1999, 44% of infants under 1 year of age, 53% of 1-year-olds, and 57% of 2-year-olds were in nonparental care on a regular basis.[2] Research on early social, emotional, and cognitive development suggests that the short- and long-term consequences of care giving contexts are less dependent on the form of care (eg, maternal care versus other care) than on the quality of care.[2] Therefore, to examine the impact of child care on young children is to examine issues surrounding the quality of care both at home and in child care contexts.

Subject

In order to examine the impact of child care on the development of very young children it is necessary to define *child care* and *quality of care*. *Child care* may simply be defined as

nonparental care in a child's own home, someone else's home, or in a centre that can provide children with nurturance and learning opportunities that complement and/or supplement those provided at home. Child care can also provide support services for working parents and, in some cases, can contribute to reducing the number of children living in poverty, and provide respite care for children at risk of being harmed in their own families. Whether child care can enhance children's social and emotional development depends on the quality of the care provided. Quality of care is defined not as the form of care (eg, in the home, or in a centre), but the provision of nurturing relationships, a stimulating environment, and basic health and safety.

Problems

Families with more material, social, and emotional resources tend to use higher-quality child care.[2] In order to determine the influence of the quality of child care on development, quality of care within the family and in child care facilities must be measured. Moreover, there may be both short-term and long-term or "sleeper" influences of child care on children's development. Therefore, measuring the impact of early care requires longitudinal research. Furthermore, since there are no critical periods in the influence of various environments, home, and wider community contexts on children's development, longitudinal research studies should use ecological models that measure influence over time. These are complex and expensive research protocols. Furthermore, although the structural aspects of child care (eg, the formal education of the caregiver) do correlate with child care quality in the short term, since the structural aspects of care tend to be interrelated (caregivers with more formal education tend to care for only a few children at a time), there are no single indicators of quality in child care. There are few race, ethnicity, or home-language differences in the influence of quality on children's development.[2] However, the practices used to create quality in child care do differ in ethnicity and home language.[3]

Research Context

Research studies on links between child care and development for young children are, of necessity, correlational rather than experimental. Furthermore, as more very-low-income parents join the low-wage work force (due to changes in the global nature of work and in welfare policy), more very young children from very-low-income families are being placed in very informal child care contexts. There is scant data on the course of development for these children.

Key Research Questions

Important research questions in this area include the following:

1. What are the short- and long-term impacts of varying quality on child development?
2. Is the association between child care quality and child development different in children of colour or in families with very low incomes?
3. Does the age the child enters child care influence development?

Recent Research Results

There is a solid body of evidence linking child care quality to children's concurrent development and an increasing body of literature regarding further long-term consequences.[2] Such findings are consistent across studies and across families that vary in ethnicity, home language, and income level. Only a few studies[4-6] have attempted to define the level of quality needed to be associated with optimal development. These studies, all conducted in licensed child care centers or family-child care homes, suggest that the threshold of quality is very high, much higher than the modal child care arrangement in the United States. However, when children do experience high-quality care, in some studies child care emerges as a protective factor for children.[2]

Another body of research suggests that the age of entry into child care is not a risk factor, in and of itself.[2] However, very early and extensive care in poor-quality facilities does emerge as disadvantageous. In addition to studies that link poor-quality care to less-than-optimal development, other studies have shown that extensive early child care may interfere with the development of harmonious mother–child interaction. For example, the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network[7] found that infants and toddlers with more hours of care experienced less positive mother–child interaction.

Conclusions

Being in child care, cared for by an adult who is not the parent, does not need to be associated with less–than–optimal development in young children. In fact, it may be associated with enhanced development or even be a compensatory factor. However, in order to enhance development or serve a protective function, child care must be of sufficiently high quality. High-quality child care goes beyond being a safe place for children to include the provision of nurturing relationships and stimulating environments that organize and scaffold children's

learning. Whether or not a child experiences high-quality child care depends in part on the material and social resources of families. High-quality child care is in short supply, accounting for perhaps 10%–15% of all available care. But it should be noted that the quality of child care is not confounded with form of care — children can experience high-quality child care in a variety of settings. Nonetheless, there is very little information on the concurrent and longitudinal consequences for children who experience both very informal child care of low quality in combination with family poverty and mothers whose sensitivity may be impaired by their own difficult working conditions.

Implications for Policy and Services

If the influences of child care on the development of very young children is dependent on the quality of care they receive, it follows that the overall quality of care needs to be enhanced in order to enhance child development.

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