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Origins of Attachment Security in Day Care and at Home: Comments on Belsky

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Introduction

Child care experience affords developmental opportunities as well as risks for young children. An expanding research literature indicates that child care is associated with stronger cognitive, language and math skills when children are in school, especially if the quality of child care is high. The same research also indicates, however, that child care experience may be a risk factor for problematic social behaviour with adults and peers. Equally important, these studies have highlighted the influences that can moderate these outcomes, including the quality of care, setting, age of onset and duration of care, the child's relationships with care providers, and even the child care histories of peers.[1,2,3,4] Beginning with a straightforward question- “what are the effects of child care experience on children's development?”- researchers have moved to more complex questions concerning the contexts of care and other influences on these developmental outcomes. As Belsky’s[5] analysis shows, the same is true concerning the effects of early child care experience on infant-mother attachment security.

Research and Conclusions

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What is the most important influence in determining whether infants and young children develop secure attachments to their mothers? Whether children are in child care or not, the research consistently shows that the sensitivity of maternal care is most important.[6] In the child care literature, this is a significant confirmation of a core hypothesis of attachment theory. Regardless of whether infants and young children are in care of high or low quality, or have begun care from an early age, have experienced many or few transitions in care arrangements, or are out of the home for extended hours, the security of infant-mother attachment is primarily guided by the sensitivity of maternal care.

When mothers are sensitively responsive, their children are more likely to develop secure attachments. When mothers are insensitive, children are more likely to become insecure, and this is when (as Belsky notes[5]) stress from child care arrangements can shift the odds further in the direction of insecurity. When the mother-infant relationship is compromised, children are more likely to become insecure if child care arrangements are poor quality, of long duration, or involve multiple transitions between settings. But these child care processes are not very influential in the context of sensitive maternal care.

Maternal sensitivity and the quality of child care experience are not independent, of course. Mothers are less likely to be sensitive caregivers when they are stressed, and economic and social stressors for the family are often associated with poor quality child care involving turnover in child care providers and long hours out of home. Indeed, the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD)[7] found that poorer child care quality and longer child care hours were associated with lower maternal sensitivity. Other results from the NICHD SECCYD[8] suggest, furthermore, that high quality child care can buffer the effects of maternal insensitivity. Young children in high quality care settings experience support that they may not find elsewhere, and this might be developmentally most important when infants and young children experience maternal insensitivity and family stress. Unfortunately, in light of the generally poor quality of care in the U.S. and the strong association between the quality of care and its cost, it is difficult for families who need the best care for their children to find it at a manageable price.[9] This is where broader public policy that enhances investments in early childhood development can enable such families to find the quality of care they seek at a cost they can afford.

In general, the effects of child care on children’s attachment security are not strong.[10] Compared especially with the effects of maternal care, child care experience does not account for considerable variance in infant-mother attachment. This does not mean that child care is an

unimportant influence, especially when its developmental effects are considered in population terms. Rather, it suggests that the influence of child care should be considered not only in a direct, main-effects model, but also in terms of its moderated (sometimes mediated) effects and how child care experience may itself moderate other developmental influences. As noted earlier, for example, the association between child care and child-parent attachment may be affected by the sensitivity of maternal care, the quality of child care, the presence of other stressors in family life, and other influences. In addition, as Belsky notes, this association may be further influenced by broader sociocultural values concerning out-of-home care for very young children, the participation of women in the workforce, the normativity of dual-career families, and the extent to which early child care is perceived as custodial or development-enhancing. In addition, there is evidence in the findings of the NICHD SECCYD[11] that child care had a moderating effect on the association between maternal sensitivity and the security of attachment: children in lower-quality child care were more strongly affected by the quality of maternal responsiveness than were children in higher-quality care settings. This is consistent with the view that high quality child care can buffer the effects of maternal insensitivity on the security of attachment. These more complex developmental portrayals deserve more consideration in research on the effects of child care experience on child-parent attachment.[12]

Contributing further complexity to the understanding of the effects of child care experience is that young children also develop attachments to their child care providers, with the security of these attachments based on the care provider's sensitivity, and the security of these relationships predicting some of the same developmental outcomes associated with child-mother attachment.[13] This is important because there is increasing evidence that child care settings are stressful for children, especially younger children,[14] a concern that has historically been voiced by pioneers of the growth of child care for infants and toddlers in the United States and Europe.[15] In this context, secure relationships with care providers in the setting, as well as with the mother, may help to buffer stress and contribute to the positive outcomes that are also associated with child care experience.[16]

Finally, it is important to recognize that the security of infant-mother attachment is a multi-determined developmental outcome. One of the reasons that child care experience explains so little variance in the security of attachment is not only that maternal sensitivity is the preeminent determinant but also that, independently of maternal sensitivity, other influences are also important. One study with families in poverty[17] reported, for example, that the effects of

economic stresses (such as joblessness or poor education) on the security of attachment were mediated by maternal sensitivity, consistent with the view that family stress heightens insensitive caregiving which, in turn, undermines attachment security. However, emotional stresses (such as domestic violence or substance abuse problems in the family) were another kind of stressful experience directly associated with attachment independently of maternal sensitivity. Controlling for differences in maternal sensitivity, a family climate with high levels of emotional stress was associated with the child's insecurity. Understanding the effects of child care must be considered in the context of the multiple, overlapping, sometimes cascading developmental influences contributing to the development of attachment relationships.

Implications for Development and Policy

In light of these considerations, it is apparent that child care experience is associated with the security of attachment, but its association is most often indirect and small. The influence of child care must be understood in the context of many other developmental influences, family processes, and broader cultural values concerning out of home care. As Belsky[5] concludes, there are probably no inevitable effects of day care on attachment.

But when child care experience is viewed within the broader context of the influences that lead to secure or insecure infant-mother attachment, there are nevertheless important implications for policy. If high quality child care can potentially buffer the effects on infants and young children of insensitive caregiving and family stresses, then efforts to improve the quality of care normatively available to children, especially from difficult family settings, seem warranted. This is especially so in light of the well-established conclusion from this research literature that high quality child care also strengthens cognitive, language, and math skills in young children. The availability of affordable high quality child care is also the best, and most obvious, answer to the question with which Belsky[5] closes: what would children want? Fortunately, with widespread recognition of the importance of early childhood development for later school achievement (fostered by advances in developmental neuroscience and studies of the long-term benefits of high quality early child care), public discourse concerning child care quality is increasingly regarding child care as an important developmental influence warranting public investment.

With respect to developmental research, findings from many large-scale research studies of child care influences are highlighting the complex, multidimensional influences that guide socioemotional and cognitive development in the early years. Understanding child care

experience as a network of developmental influences that can buffer or exacerbate other influences in a young child's life is a useful orienting approach to the next generation of research in this field.

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