



## RESEARCH SUMMARY

**Jay Belsky's "Emanuel Miller Lecture:  
Developmental Risks (Still) Associated with Early Child Care",  
Journal of Child Psychology, vol. 42, no. 7, pp. 845-859, 2001.**

This is a comprehensive survey of the literature that has come out on the controversial topic of child care in the past 15 years or so. Written by one of the most eminent scholars in the field, the report deserves to be taken seriously.

Belsky reports "[B]y the spring of 1999, 53% of British mothers with a child less than 5 years of age were employed, the corresponding figure for mothers with infants under 1 year of age being 49% (Office for National Statistics, 2000)" (p.845). The importance of the effects of child care in these circumstances can hardly be overemphasised. The focus of concern in this report is the effect that non-maternal care has on the *behaviour and emotional development* of the children rather than their cognitive development. It is acknowledged early on that "...higher quality of care is associated with enhanced language and cognitive development during the first 3 years of life (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000a)" (p. 847). However, cognitive development alone is too often highlighted as "development" for the children and this is a welcome effort to stress that development must also encompass proper nourishing of positive personality and character traits, or emotional development.

The author considers a wide range of data culminating in the findings of a large-scale, collaborative American investigation of Early Child Care by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. This study longitudinally follows 1300 children and their families in 10 different American communities from the time of the children's birth. The study is also important because it has received contributions from both pro-and anti-child-care scholars and, therefore, can be expected to be a balanced effort in this contentious field. It has been carefully designed to address the main shortcomings of research on child-care till date. The quality of child care experienced by the children has been taken into account as have been such background factors as the timing and amount of child care experienced, socio-economic status of the family, the gender of the child and mother's education amongst others and the results have been checked at several points (6,15,24,36 and 54 months of age) and behaviour reports gathered from carers, mothers and teachers to rule out bias from a single source.

The paper takes a detailed look at existing literature relating to the parent-infant relationship (encompassing infant day care and Attachment security, day care and parent-child interaction and day care and father and infant relationships) and then discusses the topic of infant day care and Adjustment. An effort has been made to present data from both sides of the day care wars.

The main findings of the paper may be summarised as follows. Regarding the effects of child care on children, the NICHD-SECC results support the theory of "a dual risk model of development" (p.849). More specifically, where the mothers themselves provided "...relatively insensitive care for their infants, a variety of features of care (independently) increased the rate of insecure attachment. These included more than 10...hours of care per week, more than a single child-care arrangement across the first 15 months of life, and lower quality child care" (p. 849). Two careful studies are cited to throw light upon the issue of early entry in child care and the mother-child interaction. Clark, Hyde, Essex & Klein( 1997), after instituting extensive background controls, found that it was not early return to work by

itself that negatively affected mother-child relationship but the combination of “a brief maternal leave coupled with high levels of depressive symptomatology” (p.849). The latter in isolation did not affect positive mothering. The NICHD-SECC also meticulously controlled for selection effects but found that a consistent, cross-age finding was that more time in non-maternal care predicted less sensitive mothering and less positive engagement and responsiveness on the part of the child. It is noteworthy that follow-up studies suggest that more time in child care seems first to have affected maternal sensitivity and then child responsiveness (p. 850). Lower quality of child care was also found to predict less sensitivity in the mother’s behaviour. Examining the data, Belsky shows that it is the combination of lots of time in care, for multiple years, beginning early in life that seems to pose the greatest developmental risks to children (p.852).

These risks relate to “adjustment, particularly aggression and noncompliance, during the toddler, preschool, and early primary school years” (p.850). While there is a plethora of studies that have either considered the effects of the quality of child care upon children or the quantity of it, there have been only two that have tried to tackle the two issues simultaneously (p.854). The first (Howes, 1990) found that it was “the dual risk condition of (1) low-quality care (2) initiated in the first year (rather than thereafter), which forecast increased noncompliance in the laboratory and in child care during the toddler period, greater child difficulty during the preschool years, and less consideration of others during the first year of school (as well as heightened distractibility and lower task orientation)” (p. 854). The second, the NICHD-SECC, found that at the age of 2 greater time in non-maternal care across the first 24 months predicted less cooperation on the part of the children as reported by their mothers and more behaviour problems as reported by their caregivers (p. 854). At the age of 3, however, there was no significant difference in behaviour to be predicted by the quantity of child care experienced though higher quality child care almost always predicted greater self-control and compliance. These results changed dramatically at age 4.5 years. At this stage the rate of children exhibiting problem behaviour, on the basis of caregiver ratings, was 5% for children who had averaged under 10 hours of non-maternal care in the first 54 months of life as compared to 16% for children who had averaged 30 or more hours of care in that same span. At kindergarten age, the rates showing high levels of problem behaviour for the two groups were 9% and 17% respectively. The children in care for a long time were not found to be independent and assertive as posited by some scholars but showed signs of neediness, assertiveness, disobedience/defiance and aggression (p. 855). Equally important, quality of care failed to moderate this effect (p. 855). Also, “almost no findings from the NICHD-SECC suggest that effects of child care are restricted to some particular racial, ethnic, or demographic group.” (p. 855).

At the end, Belsky makes the relevant point that while some of these findings may not seem highly dangerous or threatening “...even small effects, when experienced by many children, may have broad-scale consequences” (p. 856) as is the case for a variety of risk behaviours in the field of public health.

Summary by Dr Sasmita Sinha

## REFERENCES

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