

THE BEST FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

by Liz Warwick

On a typical workday in Canada, thousands of children under the age of five will spend anywhere from a few hours to a full day in the care of someone other than a parent. Yet families often question these arrangements, asking if such care will harm the child, what kind of care is best (a relative, a family daycare, a centre) and if they should limit the number of hours spent there.

Scientists are making great efforts to answer their questions. The work is complicated. As Professor Margaret Tresch Owen notes: *"Understanding the effects of early child care requires addressing an array of features of the care experience – the amount of child care, the type of child care, the quality of the care, the age when care was initiated and changes in the care and the caregivers."* Parents also need to remember that it is impossible for scientists to determine the impact of child care on a particular child from a particular family.

MOVING BEYOND THE SIMPLE QUESTIONS

In the United States, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) has started one of the largest studies of child care. *"It will allow scientists to move beyond the all too simple issue of whether early child care is good or bad for children and illuminate the conditions under which child care enhances and/or undermines different aspects of development,"* says Professor Jay Belsky, one of the study's researchers.

To date, the study has found both benefits and risks associated with child care. Children receiving high-quality care show better thinking and language skills at ages two through five. However, the study also found that children who averaged more time in non-maternal care across their first 54 months of life, regardless of the quality or type, may have a less harmonious relationship with their mother and show somewhat higher levels of problem behaviour and aggression as reported by teachers, parents and caregivers. The authors do note that overall mothers, caregivers, and teachers rated the sample well within the normal range on all standard measures of problem behaviour and aggression. Nevertheless, a modest correlation was identified indicating a linear relation between more time in care and poorer socioemotional adjustment.

"However, whether the benefits and risks continue over the lifetime of the children has yet to be established," notes Swedish researcher Bengt-Erik Andersson. *"Some effects may show up only after many years. They are usually called sleeper effects and may be positive or negative."* In his research into the very high-quality Swedish system, Andersson has found that even experience in child care centres in the first year of life had a positive impact on social development that showed up once children reached the teen years.

QUALITY IS PARAMOUNT

If, as Belsky notes, there are some moderate risks associated with long hours in child care, at least some of the negatives can be offset by sensitive care from parents and a high-quality child care program itself. Researchers Lieselotte Ahnert and Michael Lamb point out: *"Whether or not children in care develop and maintain good relation-*

ships with their parents depends on the parents' ability to provide sensitive care at home." They add that parents should strive to provide as much 'intimate interaction' with their children as possible. Despite hours spent in child care, parents matter and will continue to have an enormous impact on their children. Indeed, the NICHD study specified that even though more time in child care (and especially in centres) forecast more problem behaviour, having a more sensitive mother predicted less problem behaviour.

"Recent research has revealed enduring and positive effects of high-quality child care, even on school performance," note Ahnert and Lamb, as well as many other researchers who emphasize the need for top-notch child care programs. Although more research is needed, studies seem to indicate that high-quality care may have an even greater positive impact on children from disadvantaged families. While researchers have yet to define exactly what 'high-quality care' is, many would agree with Professor Ellen Peisner-Feinberg, who states: *"It is associated with well trained and educated staff, high staff-child ratios, low staff turnover rates, good wages and effective leadership."* Studies show that quality of care is not limited to specific kinds of programs (child care centres, for example). Researcher Carollee Howes notes: *"Children can experience high-quality daycare in a variety of settings. What matters most is that the care provides nurturing relationships and stimulating environments that organize and scaffold children's learning."*

Unfortunately, when scientists have evaluated child care programs in the United States, Canada and most recently Quebec, they have found that most programs provide only good-to-mediocre care, with a disturbing minority providing care



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that is downright inadequate. Researcher Kathleen McCartney suggests new policies are needed. *"Governments must be willing to invest in the early education and care of young children. Cost-benefit analyses suggest that these investments will result in better school performance."* Other researchers suggest that new family-leave/family-support programs are needed to ensure that parents who wish to stay home with a child in the early years can do so.

GETTING GOVERNMENTS INVOLVED

To ensure that all children receive excellent care and the best possible start in life, UQAM professor Philip Merrigan urges the Canadian government to revise its current family policies, including child care services. This is particularly urgent when it comes to helping poor children, he says, pointing out that children from the most disadvantaged families rarely use child care services. *"We need other services and programs to reach these children."*

One way would be to create programs modelled after Head Start, an American program providing intensive social and

educational services to low-income preschool children and their families. While child care helps working parents, these Head Start programs would focus on helping disadvantaged children develop in optimal ways and give them a better start in life. *"Intervening early makes sense,"* says Merrigan. *"As an economist, I know that governments can't increase spending everywhere,"* he adds. Targeting the very early years, particularly for disadvantaged children, has proven to be most effective in preventing a host of problems, from school failure to social maladjustment. As the years between birth and five have a huge impact on children's development, researchers have rightly examined the issue of child care, which has become the norm for many kids.

There is still much work to be done before we fully understand the complex interaction between children, parents and outside caregivers. In the meantime, however, studies consistently point to the need for quality. To give our children the best start demands that we offer the best services possible to all Canadian kids.

CONFERENCE

BUILDING A COMPREHENSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

**MAY 25, 2004,
QUEBEC CITY**

This conference, organized by the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development, in collaboration with the Society for Prevention Research, is intended for policy and service planners, and child development researchers. It will offer an opportunity to hear from experts such as Fraser Mustard, David Dodge, Sheila Kamerman, Philip Merrigan and John Godfrey on the biological, psychological and economic importance of Early Childhood Development. International examples of comprehensive Early Childhood Development initiatives will be presented. The conference will also allow discussions on the best ways to implement comprehensive ECD systems in Canada.

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