

# **The Effects of Day Care on Children's Emotional, Cognitive, and Social Development**

*by Gina Lalli*

There have been many concerns in the past decades as to whether attending day-care during infancy produces negative or positive effects on the development of children (Belsky and Steinberg 1978, Booth et al. 2002, Egeland and Hiester 1995, Farran and Ramey 1977, Field 1991, Lamb 1996, Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2001, Schwartz 1983). Many of these concerns are influenced by the fear that separating infant from their mother may cause emotional harm to the child or disrupt the mother-infant bond (Belsky and Steinberg 1978, Booth et al. 2002, Egeland and Hiester 1995, Farran and Ramey 1977, Lamb 1996, Schwartz 1983). It is also questioned as to whether home-based maternal care or nonrelative day-care provides the child with more opportunity to develop cognitively and socially (Belsky and Steinberg 1978, Field 1991, Lamb 1996, Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2001). In order to ensure that day-care is not creating adverse effects on children, research on day-care institutions and on the outcomes of children who attend them have been done. The intent of this paper is to explore the concerns adults have regarding the negative effects that children may experience from attending day-care, and how these perceptions are higher than the actual risks in some cases, as well as to describe how high-quality day-care may even benefit certain groups of children. The purpose is to create a better understanding as to how day-care influences children and impacts their development.

One aspect of the sociological relevance of this topic stems from socially constructed ideas of women being the primary provider for children and the influence of their presence in their children's lives. The concern of day-care having adverse effects

on children began to emerge when social change allowed women to break from the traditional role of care-taker and instead participate in the workplace. Now that there has been a transition in the gender role of women it is important to consider how other institutions such as day-care effect the development of children. With more and more children attending day-care because of the increase in women gaining full-time employment, research on the day-care institution is also sociologically relevant because of the mere fact that it has provided policy makers with criteria to create standards and regulations for licensed childcare facilities to abide by to help promote positive and healthy development in children.

It seems that the ‘quality’ of the day-care received is an extremely important variable in the outcomes of children (Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2001), however, defining high-quality and low-quality is usually left out of many studies. The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2002) has provided several factors that are included in their criteria of the quality of a day-care center. It seems that ‘process’ or ‘dynamic’ variables of quality have a direct impact on children’s development, for instance, the understanding and sensitivity of a caregiver. ‘Structural’ variables such as the ratio of child to staff and the amount of education and training that the day-care provider has seem to have indirect effects of child development. Consequently, children who attended ‘high quality’ day-care were probably under the care of educated and sensitive providers, in a small teacher-child ratio.

### ***The effects of day care on emotional development***

When examining the effects that day-care produces on the emotional development of children, which is defined as learning to perceive, appraise, and express emotions

accurately and appropriately, to use emotions to facilitate thinking, to understand and analyze emotions, to use emotional knowledge effectively, and to regulate one's emotions to promote both emotional and intellectual growth (Gerrig and Zimbardo 2002)), the attachment bond between the infant and their mother is often evaluated. One assessment of this bond is the Ainsworth Strange Situation, a method widely used in psychological child development studies. The Strange Situation takes place as an observational experiment in which the infant and mother are situated in a room with a stranger. A series of uncomfortable and slightly distressful episodes occur including the mother leaving the child with the stranger and shortly returning (Schwartz 1983). The behavior of the child and their interactions with the adults are observed as well as their reactions to their mothers' absence and the following reunion. Their responses to the situations are assessed to determine whether the child has a secure or insecure bond with their mother (Schwartz 1983).

When the Ainsworth method was used in a study done by Egeland and Hiester (1995) interesting conclusions were made when comparing the attachment types of children who attended day-care to those infants who were home-reared. Findings revealed that children who were considered to have secure attachments to their mothers experienced negative effects from day-care, while insecurely attached infants appeared to benefit from the out of home care. Insecure infants tend to show little stress and ignore their mother or are angry with her when she returns. With this in mind, a plausible theory for Egeland and Hiester's findings is that day-care may provide a stable and consistent environment that make children feel safe but allows them to experience missing their parents and looking forward to the reunion with them. Thus, insecure children may be

benefiting from the day-care experience a little more than children with secure attachments.

In a study that examined mother-infant quality time (Booth et al. 2002) the Ainsworth Strange Situation was used as well, along with many other measurements. Using this measurement, however, is highly critiqued by Belsky and Steinberg (1978) in their review on the effects of day-care. It is certainly questionable as to whether or not this method is accurately assessing the state of the mother-infant relationship. It may not be a valid appraisal when exploring the effects that day-care may have on the bond between a child and their mother because it only examines the short term effect of a mother leaving their child with a stranger in a stressful situation, where day-care experiences are in an environment with other children, in a consistent day to day atmosphere, and usually are not as confusing to the child.

To avoid the ambiguity of the Ainsworth assessment, other methods are utilized to examine the mother-infant bond. As applied in Farran and Ramey's study on infant attachment behaviors (1977), one way to do this is by not only observing the mother-child bond, but also investigating the relationship that is formed between the infant and their day-care teacher. By creating a situation similar to that of the Strange Situation but including the presence of the day-care provider, the researchers were able to gain insight as to whether or not children who attended day-care formed bonds that replaced the relationship they had with their mother.

The results revealed that children spent significantly more time near their mothers than with the stranger or day-care teacher. When faced with a problem of opening a sealed box of cookies, they overwhelmingly sought out the help of their mothers and

interacted with them on a much higher level than with the other adults. However, it was importantly noted that when the mother took absence from the room, the children felt comfortable with the day-care provider and were not highly distressed. This finding indicates that children in day-care usually do form relationships with their teachers but these bonds do not replace and are not stronger than the attachment they have to their mothers.

It is also beneficial to consider the mothers of day-care children and the quality time they spend with them. When comparing the quality and quantity of time spent with their infant between mothers with careers to mothers who raised their children at home, it has been found that the effect of the separation of mother and infant is much smaller than anticipated (Booth et al. 2002). Researchers were able to assess the quality of mother-infant time together by using a number of measures including interviews with mothers, the HOME measurement of observation in the home environment, Bayley Mental Developmental Index, and the Ainsworth Strange Situation. The findings revealed that although the quantity of time spent together was greater for the stay at home mothers, the quality did not differ between them and the working mothers. The working mothers usually compensated for their time away from their child by spending more social quality time on the weekends. Fathers of day-care children also appeared to be more involved with parenting and interaction, perhaps as another means of compensating for the nonmaternal care.

In general there has been no solid data to suggest that day-care attendance in infancy produces negative effects on the emotional development of children or the bond that they have with their mother. There are studies that result in findings that are

contradictory to this, but as Belsky and Steinberg state, (1978) many of the results cannot be generalized and have several limitations. The research that has found positive correlations between day-care attendance in infancy and security behaviors also find that these correlations decline over time and are not true of children past kindergarten or first grade (Egeland and Hiester 1995).

### ***The effects of day-care on social and cognitive development***

A great deal of speculation has been drawn on the implications that day-care might have on the social and cognitive development of children. Social development can be defined as “the ways in which individuals' social interactions and expectations change across the life span” while cognitive development involves the processes of learning problem solving, reasoning, imagining, and perceiving (Gerrig and Zimbardo 2002). Many studies that research these aspects of development use longitudinal studies to exemplify the day-care child's performances later in their early school years (Gerrig and Zimbardo 2002). Field (1991) used two longitudinal sets to explore the grade school performance of children who received infant day-care. Parents filled out a questionnaire packet that included the Buck Internalizer/Externalizer Scale and the Behavior Rating Scale, while the children filled out the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, as well as, the children's version on the Buck Internalizer/Externalizer Scale. The amount of time spent in high quality day-care was positively related to the number of peers the child had in grade school and the number of extracurricular activities they were involved with. The measurements revealed positive ratings from teachers and parents and the children were also observed to have a low amount of behavioral problems.

These results support the idea that day-care does not have negative effects on children's social development and even suggest that high quality day-care may produce positive effects. However, the strength of this finding declines over time. It is also important to note that studies of this nature often do not make comparisons to the performance of grade school children who were home-reared, thus excluding evidence that may reveal similar grade school behaviors in both sets of children. Social development may also be a product of cultural ideals taught in day cares. Characteristics such as aggression, impulsivity, and egocentrism may reflect the American values that are often promoted or approved of by teachers and day-care providers (Belsky and Steinberg 1978). It is plausible, however, that these same cultural ideals may be taught just as much in the home.

Many studies in the area of cognitive development produce inconsistent and contradictory findings. In an update of the effects of day-care (Lamb 1996) a compilation of studies are compared and although some report correlations between day-care attendance in infancy and lower test scores, others find results to be quite contrary. Peisner-Feinberg et al. (2001) conducted extensive research on day-care children's cognitive development and assessed the children's outcomes in preschool, kindergarten and second grade. Evaluations were made of the quality of the day-care received in preschool and outcomes of the children were calculated through parent surveys, standard test procedures and teacher ratings.

Quality of care seemed to have an impact on the outcomes of the children and those who received higher quality care tended to have higher and more positive ratings in most of the skills assessed. Most of the results that relate high language, math, cognition

and attention skills with receiving high quality day-care in infancy, seem to decline over time and are only correlated through kindergarten, rarely though the second grade (Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2001). Again these studies do not compare the cognitive skills of non-day-care children.

The research that finds positive effects of day-care on children's social and cognitive development suggest that perhaps child-care centers encourage more social interaction than the environment of a home-reared child. There may be more stimulation in day-care and more communication and sharing to be learned, therefore enhancing these abilities of the children who attend them. Day-care centers that are school oriented also probably facilitate cognitive skills early on, at a consistent rate.

#### ***Certain Groups of Children Benefit From Day-Care More than Others***

The research on the effects of day-care has not only produced results concerning the emotional, cognitive and social development of children but has also revealed that there are certain types of children that tend to benefit from out of home care more than others. These findings reveal that children from disadvantaged homes are often given a chance to enhance their development through day-care attendance while their development may be hindered in a variety of ways in their home setting (Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2001). Lamb (1996:339) points out these findings in his review on the effects of day-care and also notes that "High quality day-care from infancy clearly has a positive effect on children's intellectual, verbal, and cognitive development especially when the children would otherwise experience impoverished and relatively unstimulating home environments."

Children who are at higher risk usually come from low class families in which the parents may not have the availability to engage the child in cognitive and social stimulation. The stress levels in these homes often tend to be high as well, creating a negative emotional environment for a child to develop in. Most day cares provide children with appropriate examples of behavior and skills as well as encourage the development of children, indicating that day-care settings are beneficial for those coming from disadvantaged families.

Although not widely studied, there has also been evidence claiming that there are more girls attending day-care than boys, perhaps because they may benefit from day-care more than boys for various reasons. Research done by Hiedmann, Joesch, and Rose (2004) has indicated that mothers appear to make different decisions regarding childcare for their sons than for their daughters. They studied about 1,500 mothers who had children under the age of 13 and observed that daughters are significantly more likely to attend regular out of home day-care.

Hiedmann et al. (2004:156) offer many theories as to why mothers might feel more comfortable with putting their daughters in day-care than their sons. They have found evidence from other research indicating that the birth of a son is often correlated with more father involvement. This provides the child with a wider network of day-care providers, mainly the paternal grandmothers and other relatives on the father's side, eliminating the need for day-care. Another reasonable argument for this phenomenon is that parents often use maturity as a measurement to determine when they should start sending their child to day-care. Since girls have been found to mature behaviorally at an earlier age this may account for the higher numbers of girls in day-care than boys.

With regards to the benefits of day-care Hiedmann et al. (2004:157) also found evidence suggesting that the higher numbers of girls in day cares may be related to the more positive effects that day-care has on them compared to boys. There are a number of possible reasons for this, one relating to research that finds boys in day-care to form insecure attachments to their fathers while girls in day-care form secure attachments to them, thus parents avoiding regular day-care attendance for their sons. Also past studies have also found that girls tend to receive higher quality care from unrelated day-care providers than do boys. For example, the way many adults interact with a baby they perceive to be male is much more rough and not as gentle as the way they might respond to or take care of a baby girl. Consequently, parents may be more reluctant to send their son to day-care than their daughter (Hiedmann et al. 2004:157).

### ***Conclusion and Discussion***

When reviewing the research concerning the effects of day-care attendance at an early age on the emotional, cognitive, and social development of children, a wide spectrum of results are found. However, overall there is no solid evidence revealing disruptive effects of day-care and some research appears to support the idea that day-care is a predictor for positive outcomes in children. Most of this evidence declines over time and is not valid for older children. In large scale, there appears to be neither negative nor positive effects of day-care on children's long-term development, but this depends on the quality of the facility and the child's home environment as well.

The larger implications of the effects of day-care should be carefully considered with particular concern to the reasons for why day-care has become so widely used and why theorists are so concerned with nonrelative childcare. In the past decades the

women's equality movement has made drastic changes in the way gender roles are viewed. More women are now employed full-time than ever before, eliminating 'mother' as the master status for many women and providing an extra income for the family. This shift from stay-at-home mother to working mother is the foundation for the use of nonmaternal day-care and is a fairly recent development in society.

Research on the effects of day-care were first done as a result of the speculations that separating a child from their mother for extended time periods would cause detrimental effects on the emotional development of children. It is interesting to note that theorists were not concerned with the bond between infant and father, perhaps because men in history have always been the providers for the family and have usually been separated from their child while they are working. With the change in gender role expectation, there comes a need for change in the way society views mother and father relations to the child. The socially constructed idea that women have closer bonds with children and are 'naturally' more maternal than are men is widely assumed. As sociology has progressed, however, there has been evidence to suggest that fathers can be just as affectionate and nurturing to their children and this is an extremely important discovery when examining why society is so concerned with children being brought up outside the home.

It seems reasonable to assume that a high quality day-care has more positive effects on development than a disadvantaged home would, and that children do not often suffer long-term consequences for being separated from their mother for extended periods of time. It is however, important to note that there can be negative effects on the development of children if they are in a low quality day-care. Standards for established

day-care centers are for the most part fairly high and there does not seem to be many ‘low quality’ day cares open to the public. Parents should nevertheless make their own assessments of a day-care before enrolling their child in order to ensure their safety and healthy development.

With regards to further research on the effects of day-care on children, other aspects should be taken into consideration. Perhaps researchers should take the opportunity to interview children and ask them what their feelings on their day-care are, or ask parents of day-care children their personal opinions of out of home care. This may help get a better idea of where our society stands today in our views of nonmaternal care and the public’s perspective on working mothers in general. We cannot make concrete or conclusive arguments as to what the effects of day-care exactly are but evidence found through present research certainly does suggest that the quality of day-care is an important factor in child outcomes. We can speculate on account of this, that day-care is so commonly used that the focus should be on how to make child care centers as beneficial as possible to the development of children.

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