

Worried about sending your baby to daycare? Our research shows they like being in groups ^[1]

Author: Bradley, Ben & Selby, Jane Margot

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Excerpts

When parents are starting their babies in daycare, a common concern is whether it is good for little ones to be away from their primary carers for long periods of time.

But as our recent book *Babies in Groups* shows, babies as young as six months respond to and enjoy being in groups with other babies.

This can reassure parents their child will gain something at daycare they are mostly missing at home: opportunities to enjoy supervised time in small groups of their peers – eating, learning and playing together.

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In previous research psychologists found strapping a babies of this age into a chair in a sterile recording studio with just their mum to talk to usually produced a frustrated baby within a minute or two – unless mum entertained her baby with games or toys.

But we found if you introduce babies to two or three other unfamiliar babies the group can run happily for anything up to 25 minutes, even though there are no toys to play with.

This shows us babies have a competence in groups well before they have worked out how to maintain one-to-one attachments to adults. These first appear around eight months of age and continue to develop throughout the second year of life.

What does this mean for daycare centres?

This finding has important implications for babies going to daycare and other early childhood services.

We have seen how centres which organise babies into groups can be less stressful for infants – and educators – than when the top priority is to forge one-to-one bonds between infants and educators.

For example, when several babies are lined up to be fed one-to-one by an educator, mealtimes soon end in tears. Put highchairs in small circles and mealtimes last for up to forty minutes of conversation, imitation and laughter.

So, for parents thinking about how to develop and care for their young child, look for centres which acknowledge and promote babies' normal interest, pleasure and capacity to engage with others of their own age.

And don't be worried that you are doing something "bad" for your baby by sending them to be with other children of the same age.

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