

# Happy in care: it's in the hormones [AU] <sup>[1]</sup>

The Sydney Morning Herald

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

Children from loving homes are stressed when placed in poor quality child-care centres, new scientific evidence reveals. But children from disadvantaged families are better off in child care even if the quality is substandard.

The Australian study measured the levels of cortisol - a hormone produced in response to stress - in 156 children attending 16 centres. Samples of saliva were taken from the children twice a day.

It shows that good quality child care benefited children from both happy and disadvantaged homes. The children's stress levels fell over the day, an indication that their needs were being met by responsive and caring staff. The fall in stress levels was dramatic in the children from disadvantaged homes. Even in poor quality centres, these children showed declining levels of stress across the day, but this was not the case for children from loving families.

"I don't want to say poor quality child care is OK because it's not," Margaret Sims, the author of the study, said. "But for some children poor quality child care is better than what they're getting at home. If they go into really good quality care, however, you see an even bigger drop in their cortisol levels."

...

She said chronically high cortisol levels were implicated in long-term health and behavioural problems, and, in young children, could put at risk the still growing pathways in the brain. Cortisol levels normally peaked just after waking and declined across the day unless children were put under stress.

The study is an extension of Dr Sims's earlier pathbreaking research. It showed that stress levels fell only when children attended centres rated by her evaluators as high quality. Even centres rated satisfactory were not good enough, judging by the children's rising cortisol levels.

A high-quality centre was characterised by warm, responsive, and respectful staff/child relationships and good communication between parents and staff. "A lot of the surface glitz that's marketed as quality - bright toys, slick literacy programs - is not quality. Quality is about relationships," Dr Sims said.

The latest research takes the child's family background into account - after parents completed a survey that evaluated their parenting style. "Where children receive care that is as good or better than they receive at home, they are able to learn in the new child-care environment," she said.

- reprinted from The Sydney Morning Herald

**Region:** Australia and New Zealand <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** poverty <sup>[3]</sup>

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