

# The kids are alright: What the latest day-care study really found [US] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below. Note: The study "Are There Long-Term Effects of Early Child Care?" appears in the current issue of Child Development. Those with access from an academic institution can view the full study at:

<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com> <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

The headlines blared this week. "Does Day Care Make Kids Behave Badly? Study Says Yes" (ABC). "Child Care Leads to More Behavior Problems" (Fox). "Day-care Kids Have Problems Later in Life" (NBC). "Poor Behavior Is Linked to Time in Day Care" (New York Times). And, ironically, "Bad Mommies" (Slate).

It's useless to rail at the press for leading with the bad news and for ignoring the researchers' caveats that no cause-and-effect conclusions can be drawn from their data. Still, coverage like this feels designed to twist working parents. And it turns out that in the case of day care, the headlines and the stories really were alarmist&mdash;even wrong.

The source of the fuss is the latest installment of a long-running \$200 million effort by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Since 1991, a team of researchers has been tracking more than 1,300 children, following them from infancy through various child-care settings (home with mother, home with another relative, home with nanny, or at day care) and into elementary school. In the March/April issue of Child Development, the team asks "Are There Long-Term Effects of Early Child Care?" To answer that question, the researchers report their findings about the kids' academic achievement and behavior through sixth grade. The study controls for a host of variables, like socioeconomic status, quality of parenting (annoyingly, this measure involves only mothers), quality of child care, and quality of the elementary-school classroom.

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But then there is the finding that inspired the headlines: "Teachers reported more problem behaviors for children who spent more time in centers." This effect also held steady over time. And as the New York Times put it, "the finding held up regardless of the child's sex or family income, and regardless of the quality of the day care center." As in, Beware of Day Care. No matter how good you think your kid's is, it's making him unruly and disruptive, two favorite media adjectives for kids who cause trouble at school.

Stop. When I reached the study's author, Margaret Burchinal, yesterday, she asked if she could explain something she feared had been missed. "I'm not sure we communicated this, but the kids who had one to two years of daycare by age 4½&mdash;which was typical for our sample&mdash;had exactly the level of problem behavior you'd expect for kids of their age. Most people use center care for one or two years, and for those kids we're not seeing anything problematic."

In other words, the higher-than-average incidence of bad behavior showed up only among kids who spent three or four years in day care before the age of 4½. Burchinal and her co-authors used a behavior measure on which a score of 50 is exactly average (and the higher the score, the brattier the kid). The mean score of kids who spent one or two years in day care before kindergarten was 50. The mean for kids who spent three years was 51.4. The mean for kids who spent four years was 52. Kids who spent no time at all in day care had a mean score of 49.6&mdash;lowest, yes, but to an extremely small degree. Also, only 5 percent of the kids in the study spent four years in day care, and only 10 percent spent three years.

Here's a key question: What was the quality of the day care this 15 percent received? Were their centers as good? Burchinal ran the numbers for me, and the answer is no. The study rated all child-care arrangements on a scale from 1 for abysmal to 4 for excellent. The mean score for kids who were cared for entirely at home was 2.85. The mean for kids who spent less than a year in day care was 2.84. One to two years in day care: 2.82. Three to four years: 2.76. And four or more years: 2.71. In other words, the kids with more reported behavior problems in elementary school were the ones who spent three or four years in day care and whose care was, on average, of lower quality.

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It probably doesn't matter what the data really show. Day care is supposed to be bad for kids, so it is. The headlines don't change.

- reprinted from Slate

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