

# As child care dream comes true, the backlash begins [GB] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Ten years ago, it was inconceivable that child care would be one of the central themes of the public spending review. This time it was, and for Margaret Hodge, minister for children, it was "a dream come true". The announcement of 120,000 new child care places by 2008, together with 2,500 children's centres by 2008 "epitomises what New Labour is about" she says, and shows the government at its "boldest, most radical and best".

It has been a battle, over the years, by women in the government to push child care and nursery education even on to - let alone up - the political agenda. But now, there it is.

Except that it's not that straightforward. Mrs Hodge and her fellow ministers may have won the battle for significant improvements in child care and flexible working. But there's now a backlash from those who think that putting children into daycare or nurseries isn't what we should be doing. A whole new debate has opened up: should mothers of new babies return to work quickly; and, specifically, are nurseries actually damaging children?

Like all of us, Mrs Hodge draws on her own experience as a working mother: "When I first had babies, I thought all I ever wanted in life was to be a mum and I actually did give up full-time work." Yet, she says, "when I came home with my bundle of joy, hugely proud - all the things we all go through with a first baby; you've produced the most beautiful, wonderful, highly intelligent child - I went into a terrible gloom because I realised it wasn't enough in my life."

She continued to work, balancing her life around the children's, and believes the quality of her parenting was better as a result: "I think I'd have gone potty if I'd stayed at home full-time."

Mrs Hodge is determined that the government will do even more to support better maternity and paternity rights - but she shies away from the idea of urging new mothers to stay at home for a year. "How would you have felt if someone had said to you, 'You've got to stay at home for the first year of your child's life?' For the state to dictate that parents have to stay at home, I think is wrong."

Equally, Mrs Hodge insists, she does not want to be seen as someone who forces mothers to put their children into daycare so that they can return to work. "I am absolutely, absolutely cross," she fumes, after recent stories - most prominently in the Guardian last week - quoting research that suggested that day nurseries for the very young increased antisocial behaviour and aggression.

"What we are absolutely not about is providing warehousing for children in child care," she says. But surely she has to accept, as the research says, that young children can suffer adverse effects if they are sent to daycare nurseries at too young an age? Mrs Hodge has seen the research - The Effective Provision of Preschool Education - in full, together with every other piece of research on this issue - "Not a week goes by when I don't see some research." This particular claim, she says, is based on a very small sample and shows that "if under the age of two they [the children] spend 40 hours a week in a nursery, it has a slight impact on their behaviour". Yet, she points out, although nearly 70% of women now return to work within a year of childbirth, eight out of 10 of them work part-time. Most children are not stuck in nurseries for 40 hours a week.

What is more, she's adamant that if the care is of a high enough quality, a day nursery can be of great benefit. Quoting the Swedish example, where child care infrastructure has been developed over 20 years, Mrs Hodge points out that 85% of young children there attend day nurseries: "Their research shows that children in day nursery settings actually do better than children who are either cared for at home by their parents, or in homecare."

But what of the US study, also quoted in the Guardian's report, from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, which seemed to find a similar link between time spent in daycare and aggressive behaviour? "You go to American nurseries and the quality is awful," says Mrs Hodge, "and we know from the American research that if you put poor children in poor-quality homes they will get poor outcomes."

So, is she really happy that the government's new scheme - to pilot free nursery education for two-year-olds in 500 areas - is the right way forward, given that it is very young children who apparently suffer the most adverse effects from nursery? Yes, yes, yes, she says, this proposal is absolutely based on the evidence: "What the EPPE [Effective Provision of Preschool Education] research shows is that for

children from disadvantaged background, high-quality, integrated child care - educare - as we know call it, has enormous benefits."  
She stresses constantly the importance of quality child care, and points up the government's efforts to raise standards.

- reprinted from the Guardian

**Region:** Europe <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** child development <sup>[3]</sup>

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