

# The latest information on the daycare nation [US] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

What working mother hasn't agonized over child care, and worried that all those hours at daycare will harm her child's social development?

Two studies released this week by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in the United States vindicate those fears. It turns out child care can have a negative impact on young children. Parents are right to worry.

But before working mothers quit their jobs en masse, give up their paycheques and careers and fire their nannies, there are important caveats. For one thing, the studies validate the role that other factors (education, a mother's sensitivity to a child's needs) can have on a child's development. And accompanying research points to the need for qualitatively better daycare options rather than none at all.

Still, the studies are bound to generate controversy as well as consternation. That is why *Child Development*, the scholarly, peer-reviewed journal that published the research in its July-August issue, printed nine accompanying commentaries putting it into context.

The studies are the most comprehensive ever undertaken on the long-term effects of daycare on a child's development. Investigators tracked more than 1,000 children for a decade and had mothers, teachers and child-care providers measure their social behaviour.

The first study found that child care is linked to assertive and aggressive behaviour in some children. The more time they spend away from their mothers being cared for by others during the first 4¼ years of their lives, the more disobedient they are and the less likely to get along with others in kindergarten.

There is an important qualifier: The vast majority of children remain within the normal range of behaviour. The researchers also found that family characteristics influence a child more than daycare does. For instance, children whose families are well-heeled and better-educated or whose mothers are more sensitive to their needs showed more competent social behaviour.

The second study found that in children under 3, levels of salivary cortisol (a stress-sensitive hormone) rose in the afternoon during full days spent in daycare, but fell as the hours passed on days they spent at home. It is unclear whether these higher levels are related to the strain of being away from home or to the social challenge of interacting with other children. The researchers concluded that daycare is especially challenging for shy children, who are slower to develop social skills.

So, not only do we have to worry about our children being raised by others, but we must also acknowledge that forcing them to socialize at a younger age can be extremely stressful.

Recognizing the political sensitivity of these findings, the editors of *Child Development* delayed publication while they circulated the material to more than 1,000 child-development experts for input. Several of those experts focused on the importance of the quality of child care, suggesting that this is key in fostering positive social development.

Indeed it is. Daycares that allow children to take longer naps in the afternoon may be able to reduce the levels of stress experienced by toddlers. Centres with high ratios of caregivers to children may be able to placate aggressive youngsters, or teach them to express their frustration in a more productive way.

The decision to place a child in daycare should depend on the youngster's needs. A shy toddler may be better off at home with a nanny, if that's affordable. A social one may actually look forward to daycare.

Mothers who choose to work and raise children may take comfort in another key finding. Family income plays as important a role in a child's social development as child-care arrangements. In other words, a mother may not be able to afford to stay home, and deny her offspring the fruits of her labour.

-Reprinted from The Globe and Mail

**Tags:** child development <sup>[2]</sup>

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