

Child care worries adding up: New study finds staffing problems [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

First there was the report that toddlers in child care are more likely to be aggressive and disobedient by kindergarten than those who stay at home with their moms.

Now, a study released yesterday says child-care centers are losing well-educated teaching staff and administrators at an alarming rate and hiring replacements with less training and education.

But further analysis of the aggressiveness study and some calming words from experts in child care have soothed parents who work outside the home at least a little -- and confused them about what's best for their children.

"Oh, great, more guilt for working mothers," Diane Seltzer recalled thinking when a friend e-mailed her a story about the report on aggressiveness.

"Most of us can't take our kids to work with us, so why make us feel worse for a situation that everybody already has some tension with?" said Seltzer, a lawyer who works part time and whose 2 1/2-year-old son, Adam, spends some time at a District preschool and with a nanny. "It's bad enough without thinking, 'Oh, my God, in five years I'm going to have a child in reform school.' "

Mothers who work inside and outside the home are reacting viscerally -- in parks, via e-mail and in day-care center parking lots -- to the latest chapters in the national debate about child care. The debate has been underway since women began entering the workforce in greater numbers in the 1970s and promises to intensify as more research is conducted and as that trend continues -- well over half of the mothers of school-age children work.

Eleanor Balloff Seline, 41, who worked full time in retail before giving it up two years ago to stay home with her son, Jay, now 4 1/2, quit work because the nature of her job "was not conducive to being the kind of mother I wanted to be."

But she, like many other stay-at-home moms, said she is tired of reading the studies bashing child care. "There is a great deal of bias against people who have any sort of child care," she said. "If these researchers had any experience with child care, they would know there is a relationship that has to exist between the parent, the caregiver and the child. And if that relationship is good, then day care works."

Adding fuel to the debate is the study released yesterday by the University of California at Berkeley and the Washington-based Center for the Child Care Workforce.

The study says that 75 percent of teaching staff employed at centers studied in 1996 and 40 percent of the directors were no longer on the job when the centers were revisited in 2000. Teaching staff and directors reported that high turnover hurt their ability to do their jobs, and for some, contributed to their decision to leave.

Pay also has been a problem. "Despite recognition that higher wages contribute to staff stability, compensation for the majority of teaching staff positions has not kept pace with the cost of living," the study says. Centers paying higher wages had more success in retaining better-qualified teachers. The study covered a sample of better-than-average child-care centers, including many programs accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Yesterday's analysis came just a couple of weeks after new results of a study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development -- the largest and most authoritative report ever. The research, which has tracked more than 1,300 children at 10 sites across the country since 1991, was launched to answer some of the same questions still being asked about child care's effects.

Unfortunately, experts say, parents got the wrong message on the connection between day care and future aggressiveness.

"It is totally blown out of proportion," said Duane Alexander, director of the institute that conducted the study.

"Psychologists are driving parents crazy," said Edward F. Zigler, a professor of psychology at Yale University, who is considered the godfather of child-care research in the United States.

What made headlines was that 17 percent of the children in the longitudinal study who spent more than 30 hours a week in child care demonstrated problem behaviors between ages 4 1/2 and 6. Six percent of those who spent less than 10 hours a week in such care had the same problems.

Concerns about the 17 percent were quickly highlighted to reporters by one of the study's researchers, Jay Belsky, of Birbeck College in London, who had previously angered many of his colleagues by emphasizing negative aspects of child care.

"When I raised cautious concerns about developmental risks associated with lots of time in child care begun in the first year of life 15 years ago, I was cast as a misogynist. I was cast as a stupid scientist," he said in an interview last week. "Well, here we are 15 years later, and we find exactly what I had said then."

But Kathleen McCartney, a principal investigator of the study and a professor at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, said her colleagues heard a more nuanced version of the findings -- nuance that parents did not hear.

According to Alexander and others, the study also showed: That the 17 percent of the children with behavioral problems still fell within the normal range, albeit at the high end. Aggressiveness was measured on a continuum of behavior, Alexander said, and "almost none of it" was clinically significant. "Kids push their way in line. They try to get toys from other kids. This is not necessarily pathological."

That 83 percent of the children who spent more than 30 hours a week in child care did not demonstrate such aggressive behavior.

That researchers did not prove that child care causes aggressive behavior -- nor did they try. Children react to the same situation in very different ways and may have sensory or developmental issues that prompt such behavior.

That when the same group of children was 2 years old, there was a spike noted in aggressive behavior when they spent more time in daycare. It disappeared at 3 and came back at 4 1/2 and in kindergarten and is present again in first grade. "It might go away again or it might get worse, in which case we do need to pay attention to this. But I can't get too excited about this until we look more long term," Alexander said.

That quality of child care was not part of the study. "That was the piece of that report that was most upsetting to me, because it flies in the face of the evidence," Zigler said. "Quality does matter. We have study after study proving that. . . . And people make the mistake of thinking that home is always great. Home for many kids is no bargain. We have a million abused children, mostly by their parents."

Peg Willingham, who works for a trade association and whose 5-year-old daughter, Rebecca, spent 10 hours a day in an Arlington day-care center before entering kindergarten, heard about the study on the radio and took it "like a knife to the heart." Then she became indignant, recalling that "some studies show day care is good."

Zigler and other experts said the debate should not be about whether day care is good or bad but about how to improve what exists.

"Child care is a reality in our society for many parents," said Matthew Melmed, of Zero to Three, a Washington-based nonprofit. "What we should be doing is providing more help for parents and child-care providers to deal with these kids before they enter school."

Indeed, kindergarten teachers often say they have a tougher time with children who are emotionally or socially unready for school than with those who don't know their numbers or letters.

"Yet the large political debate that we are hearing about is an emphasis on literacy," Melmed said. "And my question is, if as a society we are truly concerned about literacy in young children, then we need to be paying attention to their emotional and social literacy. . . . What young kids need is unhurried time with people who know them and care for them and can read their cues."

Meredith F. Small, a professor of anthropology at Cornell University and an author, said parents spend too much money on college education and not enough on the early years.

"Let's refocus and spend it when they are little, to build a solid foundation for them," Small said. "Because so much of this is emotional and social."

As it turns out, that is what Gerry Olivetti, a lawyer and teacher who decided to stay home with her two sons, 3 1/2 and 1 1/2, came to believe as she and other mothers in her Arlington neighborhood talked about the study on aggressiveness in recent days.

Their experience didn't jibe with the results, she said. They saw no difference in aggressiveness between their children and friends' kids at day care. And they found their stay-at-home kids had better language skills than those in day care.

In the end, she and a number of the researchers agreed that it is difficult to figure all of this out because there are so many variables.

"It all depends," she said. "That's what it comes down to."

-Reprinted from The Washington Post

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/03/06/child-care-worries-adding-new-study-finds-staffing-problems-us> [2]
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