

Day care report launches misinformed hysteria [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Hold onto your hats. We're in for another round of mass hysteria about day care.

A major federal study has unearthed some good news and what could be some bad news about kids in day care. But, as usual, the bad news gets all the media attention. "Day care turns out bullies" shrieked one headline.

The report, based on a major, long-term study of children in non-maternal care, found that children in high-quality care scored higher on tests of language, memory and other skills than did children of stay-at-home mothers or children in lower-quality day care.

Professor Robert C. Pianta of the University of Virginia, an investigator on the project, told the Los Angeles Times, "There are quite convincing findings that the quality of child care has a positive association with a range of social and academic skills."

But it was the other finding that got the ink. Seventeen percent of children in day care more than 30 hours per week were said to be more aggressive and disobedient than children who were in day care for fewer hours. The media is having a field day with headlines implying that kids in day care are at great risk for becoming aggressive, mean bullies.

Parents worried about their kids need to take a deep breath--and look both at the real facts of this study and at the nature of scientific research and statistics.

The study, of 1,110 children in 10 cities by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, reported that the findings on aggression were the same for children regardless of their income levels or whether they were girls or boys. (Only 6 percent of children who spent fewer hours in child care were regarded as more aggressive to other children, as compared to the 17 percent in longer-hour day care.)

This all sounds quite alarming. But what do these findings really mean?

First of all, this was a large study, looking at many factors about the experience of kids in day care, so does the aggression finding really mean anything? Researchers have to look much deeper to find out. Exactly what was the behavior that caregivers and teachers observed? Was the aggression verbal or physical?

And what about talking back and disobeying? It could be that smart, verbal kids talk back more and are harder to manage than other kids.

There's a big difference between being a bully and being a kid who knows how to test the limits of tired, underpaid teachers--or who is able to use verbal skills to get what he or she wants from other children.

What the study does not say is that most children in long-hour day care are aggressive. While seventeen percent is a large enough number to deserve more study, the great majority of children in day care for over 30 hours are not aggressive, demanding or bullying.

And the children who are more aggressive, are they out-of-control terrors, perhaps destined to shoot up their classrooms in later years? No. The aggression was in the "normal" range, not requiring professional attention.

Perhaps most important, is there an ideological side to the whole issue? The loudest voice about the aggression finding is being made by the controversial researcher Jay Belsky, now at a London University. In 1986, he wrote an article that created a furor. He suggested that day care for very young children could harm the "attachment" (or bond) between mother and child. The media ran wild with that that idea and professionals worried.

In fact, concern about the trauma that daily separation from their working mothers might have on children was one of the reasons that the study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development was launched in the first place.

Guess what happened? The study found out that infants in day care were securely attached to their mothers. We probably should have guessed that result in advance, because in the 1930s Dr. John Bowlby did the studies on which the whole idea of "maternal" deprivation" was based. It came from studies of orphans who lay for hours on end in their cribs with no human contact.

Not surprisingly, they wound up with serious developmental problems. But at the same time, Bowlby studied the children of women who

worked in factories, and these children were perfectly normal.

The whole "attachment" issue turned out to be very much overblown. So we have to ask, is Belsky doing it again?

There's another important issue involved. Does day care "cause" whatever aggression was found, or is it due to other factors? For example, a study might find that more red haired people rob banks than people with blond or black hair.

But that does not mean that red hair causes bank robbing. If kids do have real behavior problems, it could be due not to day care per se, but to the fact that underpaid day care workers aren't trained to deal with children's emotional issues. Researchers also suggest that stressed-out parents could be the causative factor.

The latter would hardly be surprising. Unlike European societies, the U.S. has made little societal accommodation to the fact that nearly 70 percent of parents today are working.

Schools still operate on the same hours as they did in the pre-industrial age. There is little government-subsidized day care, as there is in France and Sweden. Maternity and paternity leaves are short and usually unpaid, and vacation time is shrinking for American workers.

The "stressed-parent" hypothesis is made more likely by the fact that there is no inevitable link between non-maternal child care and aggression. In fact, studies of children raised in Israeli kibbutzes found these children quite the opposite of aggressive. They were more co-operative and peer-oriented than other children. And these kids spent more hours away from their mothers than most kids anywhere, often sleeping at night in "children's houses."

But Belsky, in a press conference announcing the findings, said that parents ought to work less. Another researcher chided him, saying that he shouldn't be making policy statements at this stage. Why not?

If the aggression problem is real, and if it isn't caused by hours in day care, but by parental stress, working less could exacerbate it. That would be especially true if cutting down hours at work meant financial problems for parents, who would then experience more stress, and kids would be worse off.

All these complexities mean we have to know a lot more before coming up with concrete suggestions for how long parents should or should not-work. What we should do is focus our energies on giving day care providers more training in the emotional needs of children.

In the Scandinavian countries, day care workers often have several years of training, and they are well paid. In the U.S., day care is one of the lowest-paid professions, meaning that too many day care workers are ill-equipped to deal with kids' needs.

Raising children is a complex process, and there's no style of parenting that is without problems. When mothers were mostly at home, in the 1950s, social critics coined the term "momism" and said that American children were selfish and spoiled because of their over-protective mothers. Some went so far as to say that indulgent mothers were the reason that American servicemen broke under torture in Korea.

Today, it's working women who are said to be harming their children, by not spending their every waking moment "relating" to their kids. But throughout history, children usually had multiple caretakers, and 50 years of scientific evidence finds that the children of working mothers show few differences in emotional or intellectual development from the children of at-home mothers.

So, if you're a working parent, don't buy the scare stories. Don't panic over day care. Stay tuned to discover out what researchers come up with when they examine these issues more thoroughly.

If it turns out to be good news about day care, though, you may have to look in the back pages of your newspaper to find it--if you can find it all.

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