

Forget the guilt, daycare does your kids no harm ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Eight years after telling mothers that going out to work and leaving their children in substitute care was harmful to children's development, academics combing through the same research material said this week that mothers should not worry after all.

This newest study was published last week by the U.S. Society for Research and Child Development. It was based -like the 2002 study -on data collected over several years on more than 1,300 children.

This year's findings showed that when the overall impact of a mother's participation in the paid workforce on her child's mental and social development was measured, the effect was neutral. The positives -higher family income, better child care, the mother's improved mental health -outweighed the negatives, such as less time for mother and baby to interact.

But the best of all worlds was not when mothers of young children stayed at home full-time, but rather when they work part-time. As the London Telegraph reported, children whose mothers worked fewer than 30 hours a week benefited from the higher household income, better quality daycare, a happier home-life, plus interaction with their mother.

This conclusion is a stunning turnaround from 2002, when the U.S. National Institutes of Health warned that children who spent long hours in child care could experience more stress and be at increased risk of developing behavioural problems. As the New York Times reported, problems included disobedience and aggressiveness.

The 2002 study, by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, seemed categorical: The longer a child spent in daycare, the more likely he was to have behaviour problems and the worse those problems would be.

For working mothers there was no getting away from the guilt. A British study suggesting that children whose mothers went to work within the first three years were slower learners was particularly brutal.

What woman would dare go out to work within the first years after her baby was born, knowing that she was jeopardizing her child's mental and social development?

Lots of women, statistics show. In the U.S., 60 per cent of mothers of children under age 6 are in the workforce. In Canada, the figure is 66.4 per cent.

Last month's study should help put their minds at ease, if they trust it. Jane Waldfogel, a Columbia University professor and co-author of the most recent study, explained to the London Telegraph why women should believe the study results: "Prior research has asked a somewhat artificial question: If the one thing that changed in a family was that the mother went out to work, what difference would it make for the child?"

"But in reality, lots of other things change the minute she goes out to work, including the quality of childcare, the mother's mental health, the relationships within the family and the household income. We've examined all those things."

And what they found is that although infants raised by mothers with full-time jobs scored a little lower on cognitive tests, that effect was offset by their mother's greater sensitivity to them, the family's higher income and its ability to pay for better quality daycare.

One of the most painful things about these conflicting studies -even one that suggests it won't ruin your child's life if by choice or unforeseen circumstance you have to be in the workforce - is the expectation that women should look after these issues on their own. Or, if not mothers only, then certainly families.

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