

Review compares methodology of US and Norway child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A new study from scientists in Norway studied the relationship between behavioral issues and day care, determining that there is little evidence to show that there is a direct correlation in the increase of behavioral issues due to a higher amount of time spent in day care.

In the past, a number of studies in the U.S. have looked at the link between time spent in day care and a child's behavioral issues. Researchers believed that, with an increase amount of time spent in day care, there was a rise in the number of behavioral problems. However, the study from Norway disputes those earlier results and the findings of the new study were recently featured in the journal *Child Development*.

"In Norway, we do not find that children who spend a significant amount of time in child care have more behavior problems than other children," remarked Eric Dearing, an associate professor at Boston College who served as a co-author of the report, in a prepared statement. "This runs counter to several US studies that have shown a correlation between time in child care and behavior problems."

The research project was a collaborative effort by investigators in Norway and the Harvard Medical School. The researchers believe that the approach to child care in Norway could be the underlying reason as to why there are fewer behavioral problems with Norwegian children. In particular, the Scandinavian country's parental leave policy makes it so that children do not have to enter child care until they are one year old. Furthermore, the country has national standards and regulations for child care providers that allows for child care that is of better quality. Unfortunately, the U.S. does not have these same policies.

"Norway takes a very different approach to child care than we do in the United States and that may play a role in our findings," continued Dearing, a researcher of child development.

In the study, the scientists utilized a variety of statistical tests to look at methods utilized in previous U.S. studies. The common approach used in the studies compared children from different families who spent different amounts of time in child care due to choices made by this family; this method showed that there was a connection between behavior and child care hours. However, this method made it difficult to control for external influences such as education and income, intelligence, as well as mental health. With the common approach, there was the possibility that other differences could have been the basis for behavioral problems.

On the other hand, when the researchers used the Norwegian method, they were able to efficiently compare the children who were from the same families but who spent different hours in child care. The Norwegian approach took out the external influences, and demonstrated that there was no connection between the amount of time spent in day care and the number of behavioral problems. For example, children who were in day care for more hours displayed the same behavior as their siblings who were in day care for fewer hours.

"The biggest surprise was that we found so little evidence of a relation between child care hours and behavior once we introduced conservative controls in an effort to ensure that any association was in fact causal," commented Dearing in the statement. "With such a very large sample, even very, very small correlations would be statistically significant. But we found no association in our most sophisticated models."

In the future, the study authors plan to continue with the research by conducting follow-up studies of Norwegian children into adolescence and later phases in childhood; they also want to collect data from countries outside of the U.S. to understand the effects of specific policies on children and families.

The findings of the study are similar to the results from past studies. A report from the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) published last year stated that families in 27 states were worse off under one or more key child care policies in 2012, compared to the policies that were in place in 2011. The authors of the paper noted that the lack of funding is one reason why child care is faring so poorly in the country.

"Lack of child care assistance is jeopardizing parents' ability to get and keep a job and their children's learning opportunities during the critical early years," remarked Nancy Duff Campbell, co-president of the NWLC, in a prepared statement. "So many families are trying to gain a more stable financial footing, but they cannot do it without safe, reliable, and affordable child care. Child care assistance is a lifeline for low-income working families."

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