

Day care and behavior problems, unlinked ^[1]

Motherlode: Adventures in parenting

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EXCERPTS:

Time spent in day care doesn't link to problems for older children - at least, not when that day-care time is separated from the socio-political context in which the care is provided. A team of researchers from Norway, Harvard and Boston College, examining the varied research that sporadically associates an increase in hours in day care with increased behavior problems, noted that the work was all based on child-care studies done in the United States. And the United States, they argue, is a lousy place to study the impact of early child care on children.

Most parents will remember the headlines from the last round of the "Does day care harm children?" battle here in the United States: "Does Day Care Make Kids Behave Badly? Study Says Yes" (ABC). "Child Care Leads to More Behavior Problems" (Fox). "Day-Care Kids Have Problems Later in Life" (NBC). "Poor Behavior Is Linked to Time in Day Care" (The New York Times). "Bad Mommies" (Slate).

All that (and more) from a single, small finding, published in 2007, based on a study of 1,300 U.S. children from 4½ years old through the end of sixth grade. Among those children, researchers found that those who spent a year or more in day care while of preschool age were slightly more likely to become disruptive in class during elementary school.

That this study set off yet another salvo in the debate over working parents said very little about the research, and far more about the world into which that research dropped. What that headline flurry really revealed was that we, as a society, still considered "whether working parents are good for kids" a topic worthy of arguing about.

While I'm accustomed to using the words "working parents" here, the debate, of course, centered around mothers. No one questions whether fathers should work. No one questions whether moms "should" work anymore, either - instead, we fall back on questioning whether all those various forms of child care are really "good" for children, the universally recognized code for raising that politically incorrect issue.

That debate has advanced since 2007, but not far enough to institutionalize any change. Mr. Mom may be dead, but when it comes to taking the heat for sending the children to day care, the burden still falls on the - married or single, rich or poor - mom. Even the U.S. Census Bureau considers the mother the "designated parent," charged with caring for the children; when fathers stay home, that's (infuriatingly for parents of both sexes) "child care."

It's the fact of the debate, rather than the fact of the day care, that the research team I described above, authors of a more recent study, suggest is primarily responsible for any association between unruly behavior and time spent in day care. In Norway, where day care is subsidized, of a reasonably consistent quality, and an expected part of childhood (in 2009, 79 percent of all 1- to 2-year-olds, and 97 percent of all 3- to 5-year-olds attended publicly subsidized center care there), researchers found little evidence that more time in day care could be associated with "externalizing problems" like defiance and restlessness, in 3-year-olds (a result they hope to confirm in older children).

In other words, when all the energy that goes into debating the merits of day care is put, instead, into ensuring that day care is of a high quality and available to everyone, then any association between time spent in that care and poor behavior essentially disappears.

"Whereas child care in U.S. policy is generally treated as an unintended or unfortunate consequence of workforce participation among women," the researchers wrote, "child care in the Norwegian corporatist economy is part of a broader family policy to promote maternal workforce participation and employment rights ... as well as universal access to high-quality environments for learning and development beginning in the second year of life."

That's consistent with the U.S. research as well. In 2007, Slate's Emily Bazelon contacted the author of that much-publicized earlier study, and asked her to examine the quality of care received by the children who spent more time in day care, and who had a higher-than-average incidence of bad behavior. "The kids with more reported behavior problems in elementary school were the ones who spent three or four years in day care and whose care was, on average, of lower quality."

If, when day care is consistently high quality and embraced by a society, the (already small) negative impact of time spent in that care is erased, then it's hard to argue that it's the fact of the day care itself that causes the problem. But "Socio-political Context of Upbringing Linked to Unruly Behavior in Some Children" makes for an unwieldy headline, and an obvious one. There are a whole lot of factors that play into being a child who enters low-quality day care at a very young age, and stays there. But none of them get people as worked up as "day-

care kids have problems."

Which may be why this latest research study - the one showing that day-care kids are doing just fine - hasn't grabbed any major headlines at all.

-reprinted from the New York Times

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