

# What is the 'childcare damage' debate really about? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

About two months ago, a very important piece of child development research was published with little fanfare.

The research examined whether the amount of time a child spends in child care has an impact on their development.

To say that this is a polarising topic is to understate the feelings that child care can conjure in some people. Eye-bulging, vein-popping, Jerry Springer-style arguments are known to break out when a working mother dares to utter those two forbidden 'c' words. But more on that later.

The study

This study investigated 75,000 children from Norway. Mothers were asked to report how often their children went to child care at 18 months of age, and then again at 36 months of age. Mothers also completed a questionnaire regarding their child's behaviour. The researchers were particularly interested in what are known as 'externalising problems', which are those behaviours that we typically associate with a child 'acting out' (e.g., attention and aggression problems).

To cut to the chase, no matter which way the researchers examined the amount of time that children spent in child care, there was very little evidence that this caused behavioural problems. This is by far the largest and perhaps also the most rigorous study that has been conducted in this area, and I believe the findings are of huge importance to all parents.

Here's why:

The idea that child care may be 'bad' for children first gained prominence in the 1980s. The view was based on studies conducted in the US, which found that more than 20 hours per week of non-parental child care may pose a risk for infant-parent bonding, and for the psychological and behavioural adjustment of the developing child.

Subsequent research conducted predominantly in the US found similar results, which lead to a string of headlines that quite understandably scared the living daylights out of parents.

What this Norwegian study adds into the mix is a vastly different socio-political context to the US. Consider just two Norwegian policies:

1. Near universal access to child centre care
2. Regulated child-care quality standards;

The key ingredient here is the quality of child care. There is a world of difference between good and bad day care. And just like poor teaching and lousy parenting, low-quality child care can absolutely lead to behavioural problems among children. There's no question about that.

However, the Norwegian policies not only ensure that high-quality child care is the norm, but also that these standards of care are available to all parents - both wealthy and poor. Good child care - the kind that can provide a wonderful play and learning environment for children - is available to almost every parent.

Interestingly, Australia's policies are slowly catching up to the Norwegian standards, and studies of Australian children have also found no association between hours spent in child-care and behavioural problems.

When we compare Norway and Australia to the US - a country in which there is no guarantee of access to high-quality child care - we can see why there are differences in the findings of studies between these countries.

What is the debate really about?

High-quality child care does not lead to behavioural problems in children - this much I believe we can conclude. Yet the debate over whether child-care is harmful still rages on. Why?

Without question, some of this debate boils down to how a society views workforce participation of mothers. The researchers of the Norwegian study write:

'Whereas child care in US policy is generally treated as an unintended or unfortunate consequence of workforce participation among women, 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.'

Is it possible that when people say that 'child care is bad for children', they are really meaning that 'mothers should not be in the work force, but at home with their children'?

If this is the case, then opponents of child care must step out from the mirage that 'science says' that all child care causes behavioural problems in children. This is incorrect. High quality child care can be a wonderful environment for children.

The argument that 'mothers should be at home with their children' is a judgement that smothers its targets with remorseless guilt.

People can continue this emotional blackmail if they must. But please don't do it under the smokescreen that all child care damages children. It just simply does not.

-reprinted from the Women's Agenda

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