

The hell of American day care: An investigation into the barely regulated, unsafe business of looking after our children ^[1]

Author: Cohn, Jonathan

Source: New Republic

Format: Article

Publication Date: 15 Apr 2013

AVAILABILITY

Full article online ^[2]

EXCERPTS:

Trusting your child with someone else is one of the hardest things that a parent has to do-and in the United States, it's harder still, because American day care is a mess. About 8.2 million kids-about 40 percent of children under five-spend at least part of their week in the care of somebody other than a parent. Most of them are in centers, although a sizable minority attend home day cares like the one run by Jessica Tata. In other countries, such services are subsidized and well-regulated. In the United States, despite the fact that work and family life has changed profoundly in recent decades, we lack anything resembling an actual child care system. Excellent day cares are available, of course, if you have the money to pay for them and the luck to secure a spot. But the overall quality is wildly uneven and barely monitored, and at the lower end, it's Dickensian.

This situation is especially disturbing because, over the past two decades, researchers have developed an entirely new understanding of the first few years of life. This period affects the architecture of a child's brain in ways that indelibly shape intellectual abilities and behavior. Kids who grow up in nurturing, interactive environments tend to develop the skills they need to thrive as adults-like learning how to calm down after a setback or how to focus on a problem long enough to solve it. Kids who grow up without that kind of attention tend to lack impulse control and have more emotional outbursts. Later on, they are more likely to struggle in school or with the law. They also have more physical health problems. Numerous studies show that all children, especially those from low-income homes, benefit greatly from sound child care. The key ingredients are quite simple-starting with plenty of caregivers, who ideally have some expertise in child development.

By these metrics, American day care performs abysmally. A 2007 survey by the National Institute of Child Health Development deemed the majority of operations to be "fair" or "poor"-only 10 percent provided high-quality care. Experts recommend a ratio of one caregiver for every three infants between six and 18 months, but just one-third of children are in settings that meet that standard. Depending on the state, some providers may need only minimal or no training in safety, health, or child development. And because child care is so poorly paid, it doesn't attract the highly skilled. In 2011, the median annual salary for a child care worker was \$19,430, less than a parking lot attendant or a janitor. Marcy Whitebook, the director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California-Berkeley, told me, "We've got decades of research, and it suggests most child care and early childhood education in this country is mediocre at best."

At the same time, day care is a bruising financial burden for many families-more expensive than rent in 22 states. In the priciest, Massachusetts, it costs an average family \$15,000 a year to place an infant full-time in a licensed center. In California, the cost is equivalent to 40 percent of the median income for a single mother.

Only minimal assistance is available to offset these expenses. The very poorest families receive a tax credit worth up to \$1,050 a year per child. Some low-income families can also get subsidies or vouchers, but in most states the waiting lists for them are long. And so many parents put their kids in whatever they can find and whatever they can afford, hoping it will be good enough.

One indicator of the importance that the United States places on child care is how little official information the country bothers to collect about it. There are no regular surveys of quality and no national database of safety problems. One of the only serious studies, by Julia Wrigley and Joanna Dreby, appeared in the *American Sociological Review* in 2005. The researchers cobbled together a database of fatalities from state records, court documents, and media reports. On the surface, they said, day care appears "quite safe," but looking closer, they discovered "striking differences." The death rate for infants in home settings-whether in their own houses with a nanny or in home day cares-was seven times higher than in centers. The most common causes included drowning, violence-typically, caregivers shaking babies-and fire.

-reprinted from the New Republic

Related articles:

Why has American child care failed? A conversation with Jonathan Cohn ^[3], Washington Post, 16 Apr 13

Five shocking facts about child care in the United States, ^[4]Washington Post, 15 Apr 13

Good day care was once a top feminist priority, and it should be again ^[5], The Atlantic, 16 Apr 13

Related link: Look in the mirror: Just substitute "Canadian" for "American child care hell" ^[6]

Region: United States ^[7]

Tags: quality ^[8]

legislation and regulation ^[9]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/13/04/hell-american-day-care-investigation-barely-regulated>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/13/04/hell-american-day-care-investigation-barely-regulated> [2]

<https://newrepublic.com/article/112892/hell-american-day-care> [3] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/04/16/why-has-american-child-care-failed-a-conversation-with-jonathan-cohn/> [4] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/04/15/five-shocking-facts-about-child-care-in-the-united-states/> [5] <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/04/good-day-care-was-once-a-top-feminist-priority-and-it-should-be-again/275027/> [6] <http://childcarecanada.org/blog/look-mirror-just-substitute-canadian-american-child-care-hell> [7]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> [8] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [9]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/legislation-and-regulation>