

Does daycare harm children? Who can say without more data ^[1]

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Source: Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 29 Sep 2015

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Placing your children in daycare is not going to turn them into axe murderers or put them on the fast track to an early grave.

The news stories declaring that daycare kids go on to have poorer health and commit crimes more often than non-daycare kids are making some pretty big leaps based on research that is of limited value.

Three university researchers, in a working paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, concluded, in the deliciously obtuse language of academia, that “exposing children” to a universal daycare program has a “lasting negative impact on the non-cognitive skills of exposed children, but no consistent impact on their cognitive skills. At older ages, program exposure is associated with worsened health and life satisfaction, and increased rates of criminal activity.”

In short, almost two decades after Quebec introduced its universal \$5-a-day daycare program in 1997, Quebec teens are feeling a little worse about themselves and acting up a little more than kids in other parts of Canada – according to information in a couple of databases.

That’s hardly an indictment of daycare, especially when you consider the key fact that the data do not distinguish between the “exposed” and “non-exposed” – between kids who attended daycare and those who did not. Nor does the study consider the socio-economic circumstances of the children or the child care environment in which they were cared for, which is what really matters.

Just over half of Quebec kids have attended daycare since 1997, in facilities of varying quality and cost, in large part because the state-subsidized facilities were overwhelmed and unable to keep up with demand.

The only way to know the real impact of daycare on behaviour is to randomly assign kids to high-quality daycare, poor-quality daycare and staying at home with a parent (read: Mom) and follow them over a long period of time.

It would be great if we had rigorous research that examines the impact of child care on children over the long term. But this new paper does not provide it.

Not surprisingly, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, the research arm of the ultraconservative Focus on Family Canada, jumped on the new study, trumpeting it as proof that “daycare harms children.”

The “pro-family” IMFC is convinced that placing children in group settings like daycare instead of in a home setting with parents leads to an “attachment void.” Young kids who spend time in groups no doubt learn to socialize differently, and maybe their “non-cognitive skills” are affected. But the implied suggestion that non-parental child care negates parental influence is as laughable as the idea that keeping kids at home alone with Mom will magically make them better people.

Let’s not forget that Quebec’s state-subsidized daycare program had a number of goals, including getting more women into the work force, boosting the province’s flagging birth rate, providing a safe environment and nutritious food for young children (particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds), and getting kids “school ready.”

It has done most of those things well (the boosting the birth rate plan was always questionable), but at a considerable cost. At the outset, there were 77,000 daycare spots in Quebec; now there are 230,000, at a cost of \$2.2-billion a year to the public treasury.

No one ever suggested that “universal” daycare would be a panacea for all of society’s ills, nor that it would turn out an endless supply of baby Einsteins and Little Lord Fontleroyes.

Why and how we should deliver child care is a timely discussion. The federal New Democrats are proposing a \$15-a-day program with one million spots, and the Liberals a “National Early Learning and Childcare Framework.” Conservative Leader Stephen Harper, for his part, has said he opposes “one-size-fits-all bureaucratic daycare schemes that ignore the preferences of individual families.”

The quantity and cost of child care spots are important, but the scientific literature shows that what matters most to children’s well-being and development is the quality of care.

There is good care at home, and there is good daycare; above all, we need to ensure no child gets neglectful, second-rate child care.

The new study raises some interesting questions about socialization but it does not provide any real answers about the pros and cons of universal, good-quality child care.

As we have that debate in the years to come, we have to be careful to not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

-reprinted from the Globe and Mail

Region: Quebec ^[3]

Tags: data ^[4]

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