

The “children need full-time care from their mothers when they are young argument”

THE FORM OF THIS ARGUMENT IN THE PUBLIC DEBATE

Some people believe that nothing can substitute, even partially, for the care by parents when children are young. This is reflected in public statements about child care and about parenting:

So, ultimately, the quality of day care in which the child is placed is irrelevant ... From the child's perspective, this is first and foremost the place where he is abandoned by the person he desperately wants to be with ... (Violato & Snow, 2000).

Separation of young children from their parents has negative influences on their bonding, social and emotional development, behaviour, and also influences their ability to learn (Garry Breitzkreuz, Canadian Alliance M.P., 1995).

Social science confirms that children raised in day care centers and similar institutions are often emotionally maladjusted and mentally impaired (Andrew P. Thomas, *Wall Street Europe*, January 1998).

The young of many species in the animal kingdom can hunt on their own within a few weeks or months of birth. The young of the human species stay vulnerable and in need of protection and nurturing for a considerably longer time. It is usually not obvious to parents when infants can, without harm, be left with a supportive non-family caregiver for part of the day. So parents everywhere worry whether they are doing the right thing in going back to employment, in staying at home with the child, or in letting other family members or neighbours or trained caregivers care for the child. These uncertainties, together with the enormous financial and social pressures on families with newborn children, make for a lively public debate about when (or if) mothers should return to employment after giving birth.

In Canada and the United States, some conservative women's organizations and “pro-family” organizations believe that mothers should stay at home full time to care for their children during the entire pre-school period. Those favouring this position want government policy to make this easier and often make proposals that the government should provide pay for women who stay at home. They lament the breakdown of the nuclear family and the changes in roles within the family. According to this view, the massive movement of women and especially mothers into the labour force since the 1960s has been fundamentally negative in its effects. They call for changes in government policy towards children, families, and child care that would return us to the cultural and social habits of the 1950s when most women stayed out of employment after the birth of children.

There are two matching halves to the argument that young children need their mothers full time. The first half addresses the essential role of the mother when the child is young. The second half focuses on the inadequacy of even the best non-maternal care when it regularly replaces that of the mother. Logically, the two halves are equivalent. After all, a mother could hardly be essential if she could be easily replaced. But because the argument is phrased both ways, we will deal with each half in a separate chapter. This chapter looks at the research that concentrates on the role of the mother and on what is, or is not, lost when she goes out to seek paid employment. The next chapter will examine the research that focuses on the effectiveness of child care and on whether child care can make a difference in the lives of young children.

Much of the public discussion about mothers' employment decisions when children are young is ideological. However, proponents of the view that mothers should stay at home do offer two arguments, one focusing on the child's social and emotional development, and one focusing on the child's cognitive development:

1. The attachment argument — The argument here is that when the bonds between mother and child are regularly broken by frequent separations during the pre-school years, the child is said to become insecurely attached to the mother (inadequate bonding), with long-term negative consequences for the child's development.
2. The employment argument — This argument is not completely distinct from the previous one. However, it is less oriented to psychology and focuses on time pressures. When a mother works during a child's early years, this argument suggests that the child will not get enough individualized and caring attention especially if a mother works full time. As a result, the child's cognitive development will be held back compared to children of mothers who stay at home.

THE ATTACHMENT ARGUMENT

The attachment argument is heard in many different forms. It may be suggested that babies who attend regular non-parental child care will experience these daily separations from their mothers as being a form of maternal rejection. It is expected that this will prevent complete bonding between the child and the mother. Or it may be suggested that mothers who spend large amounts of time away from their young children during the day will not be able to quickly adapt when they come home. As a result, these employed mothers will not be sensitive to the child's needs when they return, and the children will become distressed and insecurely attached.

The overall conclusion is that routine amounts of non-maternal care when the child is young will lead to insecure attachment of the child to the mother. Well-developed attachment with a mother is believed to be the foundation of secure emotional and psychological health. As a result, so this argument goes, these young children in non-parental care will bear emotional and psychological scars permanently affecting their development.

The attachment argument started life in the early 1950s with Dr. John Bowlby, a well-known psychiatrist. His work argued that children suffer when they are separated from their mothers throughout the pre-school years. Based on his research on children suffering traumatic separations (in hospitals, for instance), he believed that the attachment bonds between mother and child would be weakened if the child was cared for by other caregivers and that the child would suffer psychological damage. Generally, the research supporting this position is based on a procedure known as the "Strange Situation" developed by Mary Ainsworth, a student of Bowlby's.

By the early 1980s, the results of a number of studies on the effects of child care, mostly conducted in high quality child care centres, had led to a partial consensus that non-parental care begun by the 3rd year of life need not have adverse effects on psychosocial development and indeed, might well have positive effects. Jay Belsky was prominent amongst developmental psychologists drawing this conclusion (e.g., Belsky & Steinberg, 1978; Belsky, Steinberg & Walker, 1982).

In the late 1980s, however, Belsky reconsidered the literature on possible negative effects of child care, this time focusing on infants. He partially reversed his previous approval of child care, and concluded, based on his review of four studies using the Strange Situation, that early non-maternal care in large doses could be negative for very young children. Belsky's work (for example, 1988, 1989, 1994) spawned an immense literature in popular magazines on "the problem with child care".

THE EMPLOYMENT ARGUMENT

The employment argument is less about attachment and more about the idea that mothers are just better than anyone else at providing socialization, emotional support and education for their own pre-school children. As a result, there is concern about the pressures on mothers' time if they decide to be employed in the paid workforce. This argument suggests that even though women may get fulfilment and income from employment, a mother's employment when a child is young will mean the child does not get enough vital parental time, love and attention. This, it is alleged, will harm the child's development, particularly cognitive development.

THE BOWLBY AND BELSKY ARGUMENTS IN MORE DETAIL

The argument that might be suggested by an oversimplified view of Bowlby's work—that children will be weakly attached to their mothers if they are not home with them throughout the pre-school years—is now voiced by few people. In fact, the majority of pre-school children experience a substantial amount of non-parental ECEC at some time before they go to school at age 6. This includes children who have a parent staying at home full time. At the time of the 1988 Canadian National Child Care Survey, fully 75% of children from 18 months to 6 years of age received some form of regular care outside their homes.

In the late 1980s, there was a surge of popular concern about child care's negative effects which was in part generated by Belsky's reconsideration of the issue in relation to infants less than one year of age (Belsky, 1988). Belsky reviewed the results of four studies in which the Strange Situation had been used and reported that the proportion of insecure responses (especially insecure-avoidant responses) was higher among middle-class infants receiving out of home care than those cared for by their parents at home (41% vs. 26%). In this laboratory procedure, the child is separated for a short time (3 minutes) from his/her mother in an unfamiliar context. As the child is reunited with the mother, the child's reactions are observed and recorded. Some children will respond in a warm manner. Others will be detached and apparently uncaring. Still other children will be angry, blaming the mother for the unwanted separation. Thus, researchers classify children into those who respond securely, avoidantly or resistantly. These latter two categories are considered to be insecurely attached. Belsky's analysis found that children who have experienced regular non-maternal care are more likely to respond insecurely in the Strange Situation.

DOES CHILD CARE HARM ATTACHMENT OF CHILDREN TO THEIR PARENTS?

Those who oppose public funding for child care have seized upon the Belsky hypothesis. If children are harmed when they are cared for outside the home, then public policy ought to concentrate on ensuring that this does not happen. However, more recent work on this issue suggests that although poor quality child care can harm children, good quality care has quite the opposite effect.

Other researchers could not reproduce the initial studies using the Strange Situation, which predicted harm to children. Controlled studies of good child care for pre-school children found that children were not, in general, harmed in their psychosocial development by daily short-term separations from their parents and indeed benefited in many ways from the experience.

The most recent and comprehensive examination of the effects of child care on children has come to different conclusions than Belsky did in 1988. This study, in which Belsky was a participating investigator, was carried out by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD). Over 1300 children were recruited at birth in ten different locations in the U.S. Infant-mother attachment was assessed at 15 months of age and data on many other child care and family variables, including child care and home care quality, was collected. Careful analyses indicated that neither the amount nor the quality of child care experience was related to the security of the infant-mother attachment for children in general. Insecure attachment was found to be a problem only when a series of different risk factors were combined for one family. It is only when poor quality care at home (mothers who are rated as less sensitive to the needs of their children) is combined with poor quality or excessive amounts of non-parental child care that infant child care has negative effects on the development of children (NICHD, 1997).

Poor quality child care may contribute to negative effects; the evidence also shows that good quality care benefits children. There is considerable evidence, especially from early intervention studies, that good quality child care can play an important role in protecting children from family-based risk. For instance, good quality child care appears to lessen the negative effects of poverty and maternal depression on the development of infants and older pre-schoolers (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Further, other investigations have failed to discern any significant relationships between early care experiences and compliance, aggression and problem behaviours (Howes, 1988; McCartney & Rosenthal, 1991; Prodromidis, Lamb, Sternberg, Hwang & Broberg, 1995). After a thorough review of the evidence on attachment and child care, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine in the United States concluded that:

[I]n sum, despite persistent concern about the effects of child care on the mother-infant relationship, the weight of the evidence is reassuring, with the possible exception of emerging findings regarding very early, extensive exposure to care of dubious quality.” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 309).

Finally, we should recognize that the question mark raised about attachment applies primarily to children less than 1 year old. In the United States, with only a small amount of statutory but unpaid maternity/parental leave, many infants are in regular non-parental care early in the first year of their lives. For example, according to the NICHD study, 11% of mothers were back at paid work before their child was 1 month old; 55% were employed by 3 months, 71% by 6 months, 75% by 9 months and 78% by the time the child was 1 year of age. In Canada, the Employment Insurance program now provides one year of income-replacing maternity and parental benefits to families with a new child, with 15 weeks reserved for the mother and another 35 weeks that may be divided between mother and father. For countries like Canada, where families generally take nearly all the leave for which they are eligible, many fewer infants are in non-parental care at very early ages. In Canada, therefore, the discussion about whether mothers should stay at home is largely a discussion about the period after an infant reaches 1 year of age. But Belsky’s research focused on children who were under 1 year of age. So his conclusions do not tell us much about the reactions of Canadian children whose mothers choose to enter the labour force.

THE EMPLOYMENT ARGUMENT

It is revealing that there is virtually no public discussion or public concern about the potential impact that fathers’ employment has on young children. Fathers’ employment is just taken as an immutable fact—a necessity for the financial support of the family. However, mothers’ employment evokes a completely different reaction; mothers’ employment is typically not viewed as a simple necessity to which private arrangements and social institutions will have to conform. In fact, concern about whether mothers should work when their children are young has been a hot-button issue for public debate for several decades.

The evidence suggests that questions about negative effects of mother’s employment are (a) not large, (b) confined to when children are quite young, generally covered by maternity/parental benefits and leave in Canada, and (c) can be offset by using high quality child care. Further, the children of mothers who seek employment are in general, by cognitive and language measures, more advanced than the children of mothers who stay at home (thus children of employed mothers start with an advantage). More important still, the financial and social benefits to families from mothers’ employment—due to increased family incomes and job security—can have long-term positive impacts on children.

Much of the public discussion about this issue is emotional and political, sometimes theological, and generally only partly rational. It is difficult to reach a balanced assessment in public discourse. However, there is now a considerable research literature on what happens to children’s development when their mothers work outside the home.

CANADIAN EVIDENCE ON THE EFFECTS OF MOTHERS’ EMPLOYMENT

The most recent Canadian evidence comes from work based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) which began collecting data in 1994–95. On balance, the evidence suggests that mothers’ employment has no significant impact on children’s outcomes.

J. Douglas Willms (2002) summarizes the evidence from the first round of data collection in this way:

The results ... suggest that children whose mothers are at home are at increased risk of displaying cognitive difficulties during the early years, but this diminishes after their children enter school ... There are no apparent effects of either working or not

working outside the home on children's behaviour outcomes. There is a trade-off: mothers who do not work outside the home have more time to be engaged with their child, and this has positive effects.... But stay-at-home mothers generally have a lower family income, and thus their children do not benefit from some of the effects associated with increased income. Stay-at-home mothers also tend to be slightly more prone to depression, which can have detrimental effects on their child's development.... On balance, there are minimal long-term effects of either working or not working outside the home. What matters most is that a child is cared for throughout the day by warm and responsive caregivers, in an environment rich with opportunities to learn. (p. 348)

The same data from the NLSCY has been analyzed by two economists from the University of Quebec at Montreal using different techniques. They concluded that:

...the most important predictors of cognitive scores, behavioural scores, and schooling achievements were the child's personal characteristics as well as maternal and family characteristics and not marginal variations in income or work decisions.... Two of the important findings are positive. First parental work and maternal non-employment do not have statistically significant effects on cognitive outcomes of 4 to 5 year old children. Second, even if maternal full-time work is associated with higher levels of negative behavioural outcomes... of 4 to 11 year old children, these negative effects are small relative to the effects of other covariates. (Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2002, p. 164)

Unfortunately, the NLSCY has few details about the quality of care received by children outside the home. This is significant as research shows that how extra-family child care affects children when their parents are employed is strongly linked to the quality of the child care.

U.S. EVIDENCE

In general, the U.S. evidence has some limitations when considering the outcomes for Canadian children. As noted above, because of limited parental leave, most U.S. mothers return to work when their children are less than 1 year old. And much of the child care in the U.S. is of poor quality, below that of regulated Canadian facilities.

Results from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-Child Supplement in the U.S. have generally found negative effects of first-year maternal employment on children's later cognitive outcomes. However, none of these studies have been able to control for the quality of the child care settings used by the children studied, or the quality of the care they received at home. As a result, it is not possible to conclude that it is mothers' employment that produced the negative effects on children. There are two equally plausible explanations for these negative effects. One is that the average quality of child care used was sufficiently poor that children were negatively affected. The second is that employed mothers were, on average and independent of their decisions to be employed, less capable and sensitive in raising their children and that this harmed their children's development.

One data set in Canada or the United States that is both large enough and contains the right kinds of measures to permit a full examination of the issue of the effects of mothers' employment is the American data set collected by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). This is a unique longitudinal data set that has followed 1364 children from 10 sites around the U.S. since they were born in 1991. The NICHD conducted home visits to the children's homes at 1, 6, 15, 24 and 36 months, supplemented by phone interviews every 3 months to track maternal employment and child care use. At four points in time before children were 3 years old, visits to and assessments of the quality of their child care arrangements were made. The children were assessed at home and in the laboratory several times and the quality of home care and of the mother's sensitivity in caring for her child were also assessed.

The effects of mothers' employment on child cognitive outcomes have been carefully assessed using this data set by Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Wen-Jui Han and Jane Waldfogel (2002). Their findings are worth some close examination. The first thing to note is that the children of mothers who are employed in the first year of their child's life had, on average, higher cognitive scores than did children of mothers who stayed at home. This is not a statement of cause and effect; rather it is possible that mothers who had higher scoring children were more likely to seek and find employment early in their child's life (i.e., mothers with more education, more language skills, etc.)

Second, even though this study eventually did find negative effects of mothers' employment:

- These effects only refer to children of mothers who went back to employment at or before the child was 9 months old. In the NICHD data set, 11% of mothers were back at paid work before their child was 1 month old; 55% were employed by 3 months, 71% by 6 months, 75% by 9 months and 78% by the time the child was 1 year of age.
- The size of the negative effect of mother's early employment on children is about 5 to 7 percentage points on the Bracken School Readiness test. To put this in context, the same NICHD study found a negative effect of about 12 percentage points when the child had older siblings, a negative effect of about 10 percentage points if the child was male rather than female and a positive effect of about 21/2 percentage points for every extra year of mother's education. The study also found the surprising result that there was a negative effect of about 7 percentage points on the test when the child came from a two-parent rather than a single-parent family,
- The study found that any negative effects of employment could be offset by participating in good quality child care and/or by increased sensitivity of care provided while the child is at home evenings, weekends etc. Changing from a below-average quality child care arrangement to an above-average quality child care arrangement has approximately the same size positive effect as early employment has a negative effect. Similarly, a change in mother's sensitivity of care at home from below the median to above the median can improve school readiness by about 5 percentage points.

WHAT SHOULD WE CONCLUDE ABOUT INFANTS, MOTHERS' EMPLOYMENT AND CHILD CARE?

Our balanced assessment of the evidence about child care and infants yields several conclusions:

1. Children need love and support by adults who are consistently in their lives. They need socialization, cognitive stimulation and association with peers. In general, they can get this in a number of environments and with different combinations of caregivers, as was always the case in other generations and other countries. As children grow, a mix of parental and good quality non-parental care is desirable. The key issue is the quality of the care, which should be a continuing concern of public policy.
2. The biggest concern about negative effects of non-parental care on infants comes from the United States. But the U.S. is out of step with most of the rest of the developed world. It is one of the few countries that provides no guaranteed social support to new mothers in the form of paid maternity/parental leave. Generally, countries that fund early childhood services also provide for a significant period of maternity and parental leave, during which parents can stay at home and bond with their infants. The optimal period for parental leave is not obvious but it is clearly not as limited as the U.S. practice would suggest.
3. Family policy needs to make it possible for the needs of the child to be met while parents are employed. This will include provisions to ensure accessibility to good quality early childhood education but will also mean support and encouragement to parents through family-friendly employment arrangements. This implies special family leave arrangements to care for ill children; it may mean making changes so as to give priority to the needs of families in determining work hours and work patterns, etc.
4. It should not be necessary for mothers to avoid having children in order to participate in social life without discrimination. There are consequences of having children which parents have to bear. Children are expensive to raise and require much time from parents, and in our society, particularly from their mothers. These are real costs which parents accept. But there is considerable evidence that the unequal position of women in our society is rooted in their preponderant responsibility for rearing children. This should not be. Part of this can be alleviated by changes in private arrangements between men and women. Society will be more equal if the roles of women and men in caregiving and responsibility for children become more equal. The other part is public support of various kinds to families and to early childhood education services. Public support of early childhood education and care will help encourage the ongoing transition in household roles between fathers and mothers.

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENTS

Opponents of child care argue that young children need to be cared for full time by their mothers for some years. They repeatedly cite the same research that presumably supports this point of view. But we conclude that the best research finds no harm to children who are cared for outside their families when their mothers work, especially when we consider children whose mothers return to work when the child is over 1 year of age. We can summarize the arguments for this position as follows:

- Jay Belsky is a prominent developmental psychologist who states that a child who experiences substantial amounts of child care especially in the 1st year of life is more likely to be insecurely attached to its mother. This primary attachment bond is believed to be of key importance to the early development of the child.
- The most recent and comprehensive study to look at the evidence (the NICHD study) found instead that this negative role of child care for infants only occurs when extensive or poor quality child care is combined with insensitive maternal care. Other evidence suggests that good quality child care in fact plays an important role in insulating the child from family-based risk.
- Since Canada now offers a full year of paid maternity/parental leave to many employed families, the prevalence of extensive child care for infants less than 1 year old is much lower in Canada than it is where these research findings originated—in the United States.
- Beyond these concerns about infant-mother attachment, there are other research findings, particularly in the U.S., suggesting a negative impact of a mother's employment during the first year of a child's life. Most of this research has been based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—a study with no information about the quality of extra-family child care that young children receive, and no information about the sensitivity and general quality of care that young children receive at home. As a result, it has not been possible to determine whether the negative effects of employment were actually due to the poor quality of non-parental child care used or perhaps to the poor quality of care provided in the home.
- The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) study has made a major contribution to sorting out this puzzle because it has provided information on the quality of care inside and outside the home. Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Wen-Jui Han and Jane Waldfogel have found that there are negative effects on school-readiness tests at age 3 of mothers' employment before the child is 9 months of age, even after controlling for these other factors. The negative effects are important but can be offset by the positive effects of good quality early child care or more sensitive care in the home. To put the magnitude of these negative effects of mothers' employment in context, they are considerably smaller than the negative effect of having an older sibling, or of being a male rather than a female child.
- As all parents know, raising a family is a balancing act, particularly when children are quite young. Public policy should be directed at making work and family more compatible—by increasing the support for all families with very young children, by making good quality child care more affordable to families who need it, and by making maternity/parental benefits and leave available to families who are currently ineligible.