EFFECTS OF CHILD CARE ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT:

GIVE PARENTS REAL CHOICE

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March, 2009

Exactly how early nonmaternal child care experience affects children's development has been of scholarly concern for a half a century (Belsky & Steinberg, 1978; Lamb & Ahnert, 2006). And, needless to say, research on this subject figures prominently in discussions about maternal employment, maternity leave and related family and employment policies. Because the evidence is so vast, there are certainly findings to please almost everyone, no matter what one's attitudes and values toward the multiple issues surrounding child care happen to be: What is best for children? Should mothers be employed out of the home early in their child's life? Is child care bad (or good) for children?

In this brief essay, I seek to make just a few points. The first is that no matter what the evidence does or does not indicate, at least to some of those who remain open minded to it, to my way of thinking there is not and should not be a one-to-one correspondence between evidence and policy. At the very least, policy is a two-variable equation in which evidence sits side by side with values in determining what policies should be promulgated; and certainly there are more than just two variables in any policy formulation. The core point to be drawn from these remarks is that because values should and do matter *all by themselves*, it is a fundamental error of thinking to view evidence through a value-laden lens. And this is because even when evidence is

strikingly inconsistent with one's values, there is no reason to presume it should or will dictate policy. After all, it is well established that smoking kills, yet we let people smoke, nevertheless, because as students of the enlightenment we value freedom.

Therefore, policy-oriented people need to stop doing what they all too often do when it comes to processing scientific evidence pertaining to the effects of child care (or anything else for that matter)—selectively embracing the data consistent with their pre-existing viewpoint while dismissing, disregarding or denigrating that which is not in line with it. Shooting the messenger is a further mistake. As I like to say by way of analogy, having been shot at myself so many times for calling attention to scientific evidence that indicates that child care can have what are widely regarded as negative effects on children, "just because the weatherman says it is going to rain tomorrow, does not mean—and should not be interpreted to mean—that she or he is against sunshine"! So being critical of a scientist who detects and reports evidence contrary to one's own beliefs and values does not mean that she or he wanted to find the evidence or even likes it. But a scientist's obligation is to report it, nevertheless. By the same token, not liking findings that emerge from research does not make it "bad research" any more than liking something that research finds makes it "good research". In other words, scientific evidence should not be processed through the lens of a lawyer or solicitor, whose job it is to be an advocate, marshalling only the evidence consistent with his client's best interest.

As it turns out, and as implied above, there is probably evidence for all to love and hate when it comes to the effects of child care. Indeed, these days I find it easiest to talk about the "good news" and the "bad news", with most of this derived from the collaborative research I have been involved in for more than 15 years, following some 1,000 American children growing up in 10 locations across the USA, from birth to age 15. I am referring here to the NICHD Study

of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD) (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network [ECCRN], 2005); NICHD stands for the American government agency that is funding the research, The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The child care experiences, along with the family and schooling experiences, of the children involved in the research have been studied intensively, and to a tune of more than $150,000,000, in what is indisputably the largest and most intensive investigation of the effects of child care ever undertaken. But all this is not to say that the findings I will be referring to are necessarily applicable to the countries of Europe. That remains an empirical question.

The Good News

The good news today is actually the same as it has been for quite some time, at least a quarter century (Lamb & Ahnert, 2006) and so is not terribly controversial. And that is that when children of all ages experience high quality care, they benefit, relative to those experiencing poor quality care; and this seems especially true with respect to cognitive and language development and academic achievement (NICHD ECCRN, 2005; 2006). But what does "quality of care" refer to? Specifically, it refers to the extent to which those providing daily care for the child are attentive to his needs, responsive to her verbal and non-verbal signals and cues, stimulating of his curiosity and desire to learn about the world, and emotionally warm, supportive and caring. In the NICHD SECCYD, we have measured quality by repeatedly going into whatever child care arrangement the child finds himself in—a center, the private home of a childminder, the child's own home when being cared for by a nanny or relative—when the child was 6, 15, 24, 36 and 54 months and carefully observing the encounters the child had with those in his presence for several hours on each of two days. Important to appreciate with respect to both the good and bad news under consideration is that effects of child care were not estimated until child and family

background factors were taken into account. In other words, the statistical analyses undertaken evaluated the effects, in this case of quality of child care, over and above effects of background factors.

The Bad News

For more than 30 years evidence linking early child care experience with increased aggressive and disobedient behavior has been reported (e.g., Schwarz, Strickland & Krolick, 1974). When attention was called to a continuing "slow steady trickle of disconcerting evidence" of this kind in the case of children beginning child care very early in life and for long hours in the 1980s (Belsky, 1986, 1988), many contended that failure to statistically control for family background factors, take into account variation in quality of care and/or distinguish aggression from independent assertiveness were likely responsible for the disconcerting findings being reported (Fox & Fein, 1990). Nevertheless, in the ensuing two decades, evidence has continued to accumulate linking early and extensive child care experience, sometimes especially center-based care, with elevated levels of aggression and externalizing problem behavior (e.g., Belsky, 2001; Cote, Borge, Geoffroy, Rutter & Tremblay, 2008; Loeb, Bridges, Bassok, Fuller, & Rumberger, 2007). Never, however, has child care experience been linked to diagnosed conduct disorder and some investigations discern effects opposite those described (e.g., Cote, Boivin, Nagin, Japel, Xu et al.,
2007).

Evidence from the NICHD SECCYD, which was designed to address many limits of prior work, documents associations between early and extensive child care experience, sometimes especially center-care exposure, and externalizing behavior problems, including aggression, from age 24 months (NICHD ECCRN, 1998) through the child's 11th year (Belsky,

Vandell, Burchinal, Clarke-Stewart, McCartney et al., 2007). As was the case with the good news, these findings emerged when (a) a host of family background factors were taken into account (i.e., statistically controlled), as well as when (b) when quality of care was controlled and (c) disobedience and aggression were distinguished from one another and from assertiveness. Also noteworthy is that more hours spent in child care across the first 4.5 years of life increased children's probability of scoring in the "at-risk" range of externalizing problems just before and soon after school entry, according to teacher *and* parent reports (NICHD ECCRN, 2003).

Conclusion

So what do these good-news and bad-new findings imply for policy? Before answering that question, one further finding needs to be shared. And that is that whatever the effects of early child care experience discerned in my collaborative research in the USA, family factors and processes proved more predictive of children's well being than any feature of child care. So it appears that what matters to a child most is the kind of family he comes from, that is, whether the family is economically viable, parents are partnered, mother is not depressed, and her parenting is itself sensitive to the needs of the child. Knowing these things tells us more about a child's life prospects than does her child care experience.

In fact, as it turns out, effects of child care prove to be rather modest in magnitude, if not small. Some are inclined to dismiss child care effects, as a result. I think this is misguided for reasons to be made clear shortly. But before doing so, let me make clear that what is especially problematic is dismissing findings that one does not like, because effects are small, while embracing others that one likes; and this is because the preferred findings, whatever they may be, are equally small! Evidence cannot or should not be embraced or discarded because it confirms

beliefs or is consistent with values. Given the acknowledged role of values in decision making, we should be open to whatever the evidence indicates. Evidence can be over-ruled, so to speak, when it comes to policy making.

Returning to the issue of small effects, it needs to be kept in mind that even small effects can have larger consequences because they add up and accumulate. Consider the air pollution of major cities. No single car makes much contribution to the city's dirty air; what matters is that there are so many cars. Now apply this simple form of analysis to children and child care when, perhaps, more and more children at younger and younger ages are spending more and more time in child care, often of limited quality. The more children there are whose academic achievement has been undermined by poor quality care and the more children there are whose aggression and disobedience has been promoted by early and extensive child care, perhaps especially center-based care, the more we might expect classrooms, schools and perhaps even communities and societies more generally to function poorly. That is, small effects can aggregate and even become sizeable when many children are affected only modestly. Of interest in this regard are findings from one study showing that the more children there were in kindergarten classrooms who had extensive histories of child care, especially in centers, the more aggressive and disobedient were all the children in the class (Dmietriev, Steinberg & Belsky, 2007; Belsky, 2009). Indeed, what the study findings revealed was that even children with limited child care experience could end up behaving more like children with lots of child care experience than like other children with limited child care experience if they were in classrooms made up of lots of children with early and extensive child care histories. In other words, child care effects in this research proved to be contagious!

So what is the appropriate policy to promulgate in the face of the good and bad news summarised in this essay? Here, as has been made clear repeatedly, values certainly come in to play and open-minded people can and surely do have honest differences of opinion. But the value I am inclined to champion is that of choice. So rather than implement policies that promote certain choices, be they to enable mothers (or fathers) to remain at home caring for their youngest children, as surveys indicate parents want to do (and as children surely want them to do), or to enable them to enter the workforce and rely on child care, I would encourage policymakers to offer families real choice. Payments made directly to families with children would seem to be an excellent way of enabling parents to exercise true freedom of choice. They could use the money to supplement family income should mother (or father) choose not to seek paid employment. Or the same money could be used to purchase child care should both parents (or the single parent) seek paid employment.

But if policies of this kind are to be implemented, then parents need to be educated about the importance of quality of care, what to look for and how to find it, with the government insuring that such care is available. But to be clear, this is not simply because good care is (somewhat) good for children and poor quality care is (somewhat) bad for children. It is because providing good quality care to children is the humane thing to do! How children turn out eventually, down the developmental road, is not the only thing that matters, though too much policymaking rhetoric would have you think it is, if not the only thing that should matter. Finding daily life tolerably pleasant, to say nothing of stimulating, is what our children deserve. Nothing less should be tolerated.

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