



Discussion

Moving beyond the child care debate toward implications for social and political agendas

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 September 2012

Received in revised form 12 October 2012

Accepted 15 October 2012

Available online 30 October 2012

Keywords:

Child care

Daycare

Child development

Social policy

ABSTRACT

Early nonmaternal child care, for at least some portion of the week, is now the reality for most families in the United States. Ongoing debates surrounding what these changes mean for our society have focused on the possible negative consequences of extended nonmaternal care and the potential impact of such arrangements on children's later development. The NICHD-Early Child Care Research Network (ECCRN) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development has made great strides toward addressing methodological limitations in previous research through a series of landmark examinations of child functioning from transition to school through 15 years-of-age. The primary goal of this commentary is to put the child care findings into a broader developmental, social, and political context by reframing the discussion to move beyond the current daycare debate and consider implications for social policy and research agendas. Given that daycare has become a normative social institution, we first consider what the research findings mean for the healthy social-emotional and cognitive growth of children. Second, we articulate the implications of the data for social interventions to improve those outcomes. Finally, we address the issue of what political changes are necessary to produce those improvements.

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1. Introduction

Major societal changes over the past few decades have dramatically increased the provision of early child care. Discussions about these changes have often focused on the possible negative consequences of extended nonmaternal care on later development. As an example, analyses of data from the landmark NICHD Study of Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD-ECCRN) provided some evidence that greater quantity of early nonmaternal care was associated with greater levels of problem behavior, disobedience, and aggression, as reported by teachers, caregivers, and mothers at 4.5 years-of-age, even after controlling for selected family, child, and care characteristics (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). Subsequent analyses by the NICHD-ECCRN have become more differentiated, demonstrating that increases in externalizing behavior at the transition to school were moderated by quality of care and the proportion of time in child care spent in large peer groups (McCartney et al., 2010). Recent evidence from the NICHD-ECCRN has underscored the importance of quality, showing positive effects extending through 15 years-of-age, in terms of lower levels of youth self-reported externalizing behaviors

and higher cognitive-academic achievement (Vandell et al., 2010). And, in effects similar in scope to those of earlier studies, quantity of nonrelative care also predicted greater risk taking and impulsivity into adolescence (Vandell et al., 2010).

The NICHD-Early Child Care Research Network (ECCRN) had made great strides toward addressing methodological limitations in previous research and, as a collaborative effort involving researchers with diverse opinions, it serves as an example of how scientists should approach empirical questions as controversial and important as this one. We suggest, however, that it is time to reframe the discussion, moving beyond the current daycare debate, to consider what the policy and research agenda should be in light of such findings about an institution that will not readily disappear.

Scientific efforts to understand child development are directed at determining how processes affect outcomes. However, to translate the results of empirical research into changes that affect the lives of children, it may be that other paradigms are necessary. Sameroff and colleagues have proposed three agendas for developmentalists—the academic, the social and the political (Sameroff & Bartko, 1998; Sameroff & Seifer, 1995). The academic agenda, as exemplified by the NICHD-ECCRN, is to describe and understand development, e.g., that those children in more hours of daycare exhibit more problem behavior. The social agenda is to change the developmental outcomes for family members toward the more positive (e.g., intervention programs). The

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political agenda is to determine who is responsible for creating the situations that lead to negative developmental outcomes and who controls the resources for improving the lives of children and families.

Scientific considerations may be relevant to understanding the contemporary effects of child care, but if one were concerned with more overarching child development issues, like how we organize ourselves as a society to provide care for children, political issues may be far more salient. Understanding differences in agendas or models of development is important for understanding what resources are available for children, and the most relevant models may not be scientific paradigms, but rather social and political ones.

The primary goal of this commentary is to put the child care findings into a broader developmental, social, and political context, rather than provide an exhaustive review of the child care literature. First, we must consider what the findings mean for the healthy social-emotional and cognitive growth of children. Then we must articulate the implications of the data for social interventions to improve those outcomes. Finally, we must address the issue of what political changes are necessary to produce those improvements. Here we will address such questions as given that daycare is here to stay, and given that maternal sensitivity and SES factors have a greater impact on problem behavior than daycare quantity, should we be focusing our attention on increasing sensitivity and reducing SES effects rather than on debating the effects of quantity of child care. It is unfortunate that the rapid changes we have seen in the provision of child care have outpaced thoughtful consideration of what these changes mean for our society.

The tendency to focus on outcomes offers us little towards addressing important remaining questions, and the move toward exploring developmental mechanisms should facilitate a shift toward those questions. These include questions for researchers (e.g., What are the processes by which extended daycare impacts child behavior?), questions for interventionists (e.g., What can be done to diminish early child care's effect on children's negative behavioral outcomes?), and questions for the public (e.g., What are policy makers, care providers, and perhaps most importantly, parents to make of these results?). When our research involves questions with such direct relevance to families, who are struggling to do the best they can for their children and searching for advice and reassurance, it is imperative that we provide as clear a message as possible.

2. Extant research findings

As recognized by the [NICHD Early Child Care Research Network \(2003\)](#), placing these child care findings into a broader developmental context necessitates a more thorough examination of the processes through which child care has its effect. For example, what do the effect sizes that were found for quantity of care and child behavior mean for long-term outcomes? The public will want to know if we are creating young adults who will be robbing store clerks, or more simply failing to say thank you when handed their change. Based on the findings of both the landmark 4.5 year [NICHD Early Child Care Research Network \(2003\)](#) analysis and a recent follow-up study ([Vandell et al., 2010](#)), it appears that in addition to the early emphasis on quantity that quality, maternal sensitivity, SES, maternal depression, and infant temperament impact children's outcomes in an additive risk model. This is consistent with work highlighting the importance of the accumulation of risk at all levels of the ecology ([Sameroff & Bartko, 1998](#); [Sameroff, Seifer, & Zax, 1982](#)). Given that an additive risk model accounted for the findings at the transition to school age, interventions aimed at any one of the risk factors have the potential to counteract, at least in part, the negative effects of the other risk factors, including greater quantity of child care. In an ideal world, public policy would be implemented focused on addressing all of the risk factors. Some risks, however, may be more amenable to interventions, and our policy should focus limited resources for social programs on those areas where we have the

greatest potential to effect change. The academic agenda here should be to determine the relative costs of changing the identified negative influences, i.e., quality and quantity of day care and sensitivity and stress in parents. [Garbarino and Ganzel \(2000\)](#) have noted that our goal for children need not be a totally risk free environment, instead it may be both more realistic and effective to reduce the total level of risk to a level with which an individual family and child can cope.

The only thing that parents can take from a finding that greater time in child care is associated with greater behavioral problems, is that they should utilize less of it for their children. We often use the language of "child care effects," but perhaps the effect has more to do with family factors in the home than any process that actually occurs in the place of care. To this end, the [NICHD-ECCRN authors \(2003\)](#) reviewed the literature that highlights the potential for factors outside of the child care setting to contribute to the association between amount of time in care and child adjustment. Earlier waves of their study ([NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1999](#)) had indeed demonstrated that more time in care is accompanied by lower maternal sensitivity and more disturbed mother–infant interactions, even after controlling for family selection variables. Once again, at 4.5 years-of-age, maternal sensitivity emerged as the strongest predictor of child outcomes into kindergarten ([NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003](#)).

[Vandell et al. \(2010\)](#) highlight an important reality in the distribution of children in care, demonstrating that most children are in child care of not very good quality, and that those who are in low quality care spend more time in it. The distribution of children across the quality of care spectrum is strongly associated with measures of both family and community resources, and it is thus not surprising that [Vandell et al. \(2010\)](#) find evidence of amplified cognitive gains for higher quality care. With uneven distribution across quality, this is suggestive of the likelihood of amplifying Matthew Effects, with those children who are already ahead getting even further ahead.

A recent monograph from [Brooks-Gunn, Han, and Waldfogel \(2010\)](#) also illustrates the important connections between family resources, quantity, quality, and public policy around child care and parental work leave. They examined important questions about parental leaves and the flexibility in parental choice that more affluent families have in comparison to families of lesser means and fewer options around leave and child care quality. The authors highlight the potential for policy initiatives allowing for part time or flex hour work choice to allow a better match with parent choice, supported by their data showing part time work having no effect on cognitive development.

The evidence thus far does not warrant a claim that children should have less nonmaternal care, in part because of the non-experimental nature of the studies. We cannot know that for those families selecting child care that their children would have been better off at home, and in turn, we cannot conclude that those families selecting to have a parent stay home prevented their child from having worse outcomes.

3. Implications for families and policy

Parents struggle to do the best they can for their children. Certain proximal aspects of a family's ecology, such as problematic relationship history, domestic violence, mental illness, poverty, and lack of education, accumulate to increase the challenge ([Sameroff, Bartko, Baldwin, Baldwin, & Seifer, 1998](#)). But there are also more distal macro influences in the U.S., which serve to complicate the already difficult task of parenthood. These include, but are not limited to, minimal parental leave options as compared to other industrialized nations ([Kamerman, 1996](#); [Kamerman & Kahn, 1995](#)), punitive social assistance policies aimed at demonizing welfare moms ([Shonkoff, Lippitt, & Cavanaugh, 2000](#)), and mandated work requirements for welfare recipients that may run counter to the developmental needs

of the child and wishes of the parent (Kamerman, 1996). In some jurisdictions these begin as early as three months of age.

Changes in economic policy could reduce the need for child care for those parents that use it because of economic necessity, but not for those who use it to further their own development. Perhaps we would be best served then by heeding the advice of those that suggest looking beyond daycare effects alone to a more complete picture of the child's world (Hungerford, Brownell, & Campbell, 2000; Rutter & O'Connor, 1999), including other risk variables from the NICHD-SECC data set in our attempts to improve child outcomes, namely; quality of care, SES, income support, and maternal sensitivity.

Quantity of care may in fact be the one domain included in the study of early childhood where families have the least flexibility or potential for change. For most families, hours in care per week is not an arbitrary number that parents select for their child. Instead, most parents pick the amount of time in care to match their weekly work schedule. In some cases this is made necessary by poverty, increases in divorce rates, government and industry policy regarding leaves, and "workfare" requirements that accompanied welfare reform legislation in many jurisdictions. Even affluent parents frequently choose early child care in order to pursue careers.

A common research limitation is that we have few adequate experimental designs because of ethical concerns about forcing people to be randomly assigned to daycare, but our political system does make those assignments. One wonders what our society would be like if our government's social welfare policy had to pass an IRB evaluation. The lack of high quality care works against those who would push both for a purging of the welfare rolls in the absence of stronger subsidy of child care, as it is less likely for mothers leaving welfare for low-wage jobs to obtain and retain employment if they cannot find affordable and reliable care (Schumacher & Greenberg, 1999).

The failure to attend to the shifting social realities has created a situation where there is a high cost associated with motherhood (Crittenden, 2001). In fact the lifetime income loss for mothers who leave the workforce can be so great that one wonders if the improved SES effects achieved by staying in the workforce may in the end offset any negative child care effects that may have been avoided by staying home (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2010). In addition, the lack of funding and regulation necessary for widely available high quality day care sets the U.S. apart from almost all European countries (Kamerman, 2000), and the direction that our North American neighbor, Canada, had until recently been pursuing with their proposed National Children's Agenda (Whittington, 2003).

These aspects of the political and social milieu all conspire with conflicting messages that mothers are receiving about an already difficult personal decision. Messages such as "You must work or you're not a complete woman" are pitted against the opposing position "If you choose work over your baby you must not love your child." Unfortunately, much of the rhetoric on either side of the issue seems to be based more on a desire of people to justify their own decisions or situations than it does from any evidence for what is in the best interest of individual children and families. This approach serves to create a situation where mothers feel damned if they do and damned if they don't, and that is only for those with the luxury of actually being able to make a choice regarding how they want to raise their child.

In a democratic society families should have the choice to do what they feel is best for their particular situation. This requires a system that provides some degree of flexibility to families, including longer and paid parental-leave policies for those who would choose to use them, greater government support of options for part-time employment for new parents, improved tax policies for dual-earner couples, and increased funding for higher quality care for those who would choose to use it. The current lack of real choice for mothers of more limited means (Crittenden, 2001) may pose one of the greatest risks to child outcomes.

It may be more damaging for children in the long-term to have a mismatch between what their parents' desire for their family and the reality of their situation. A mother who values her career and wishes to work, but who feels compelled to stay home due to familial/societal pressures, tax policies that discourage employment, and lack of affordable care with which she is comfortable, may grow to be resentful of her situation leading to negative attributions regarding her infant and creating the potential for a significant impact on her mental health and sensitivity during interactions. On the other hand, a mother who would choose to stay home, but who is forced to work due to familial/societal pressures, financial necessities, limited parental leave possibilities, or because of punitive social assistance requirements, may feel very guilty about her decision, which again may impact her capacity to provide necessary structure and effective discipline during what she feels is the limited time with her child. Both of these situations have the potential to lead to negative parent-child relationships and child outcomes that may be far greater and longer lasting than the quantity effects in the literature. Eliminating mismatches between what parents want for their family and what they are forced to "choose," should improve developmental outcomes.

Following this theme, Shonkoff et al. (2000) presented two distinct policy options, either (1) subsidize high-quality nonparental care, or (2) make it more financially viable and socially acceptable for a parent to stay home. For greater family choice these two policy approaches should be separated by a "both/and" instead of an "either/or" to provide a flexible support system, whether parents choose to provide stay-at-home care or to pursue high-quality affordable care. As their children develop, families often make new decisions, and a system that supports both parental leaves and quality child care would make this less difficult than the current policy.

Effecting change in the way our society conceptualizes early child care will be a difficult undertaking. The current state of social programs in the U.S. did not arise by accident; they developed over time driven by cultural and political forces, and thus reflect the value we place on other people's children and our focus on individual responsibility. For these reasons change will require more than just a new government policy, it will require a fundamental societal shift in the way children are valued. The higher proportion of private-for-profit care centers in the U.S. and the limited leave opportunities in private employment will also limit the capacity of government regulations to lead to change without private sector cooperation.

The international review by Kamerman and Kahn (1995) of government subsidy of operating costs revealed some disturbing differences. In the U.S., fees paid by parents for child care were forced to cover up to 76% of the operating costs, whereas fees in more highly subsidized European systems reached a maximum of 20–25%. Greater government support and regulations regarding quality also lead to higher salaries for child care providers (Kamerman & Kahn, 1995). In the decade following Kamerman and Kahn's review, the United States continued to lag behind other high income countries in its provision of public support for early childhood education and care (Bennett & Tayler, 2006).

We will not have high-quality care in the U.S. until public policy acknowledges that staff compensation is a powerful predictor of quality (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1999). It is of interest to compare the salaries of individuals who care for our most valued family assets over the time the NICHD study cohort was underway through present day. In 2001, the median wage for a daycare service worker was \$7.71 per hour or \$16,980 per year (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002), and in 2009 that had only increased to \$9.09 per hour or \$18,900 per year (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). In contrast, in 2009 those nonfarm animal caretakers who care for our pets earned \$21,830 and the parking attendants who watch our cars earned \$20,600.

Higher salaries bring with them dramatic reductions in staff turnover and thus better continuity of care. The average annual turnover

rate in the United States was 26% in 1992, and by 1997, had risen to 31% (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1998), and increased staff turnover has negative consequences. The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2003) measured instability in care only as the number of changes in caregiving arrangements experienced by the child, but with the high levels of staff turnover in the United States it is doubtful that even a child staying in one child care center is receiving truly stable care. Improvements in wages also have the potential to attract staff with better training and education. According to one national estimate, only about 18% of infant care providers in the U.S. have a bachelor's degree or higher (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996). Furthermore, high-quality care benefits not only socioemotional development, but also cognitive development at transition to school (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1999, 2000) and into adolescence (Vandell et al., 2010).

4. Conclusion

When we review the three agendas of those invested in improving the lives of young children and their families – the academic, social, and political – we can place the research on child care findings in a broader developmental framework. From the perspective of an academic agenda more information about child care effects has been provided but often isolated from the overarching social ecology of families. The development of the children in the family needs to be placed in the context of the development of the family and of the community. Each family is a balancing act between the needs of all members over the life course (Elder, 1996). The optimal developmental needs of parents often come into conflict with the optimal developmental needs of their children. These needs must be taken into account when the alternative is for parents to give up a professional career or live in poverty rather than place their children in child care.

As for the social agenda, focused on public policy changes aimed at improving the quality of child care, such as setting standards for quality of programs, increasing funding and wages, and subsidizing fees, international data may not be necessary because there are some groups in the U.S. for whom quality child care has become an entitlement. In less than a decade after the 1989 Military Child Care Act, the military achieved major improvements in their child care system by implementing such improvements and is considered a national model (Campbell & Appelbaum, 2000). The military child care programs are affordable and of higher than average quality, with well-trained and well-paid caregivers.

In regard to the political agenda it is not enough to simply point out the advantages of policies in other countries, we must also realize that there are reasons that particular programs developed elsewhere but failed to take hold in the U.S. If we hope to truly change the way society organizes itself to provide care for children and the value placed on fulfilling that role, we must recognize the socio-political milieu in which our advocacy efforts operate (Sameroff & Bartko, 1998). Translating research findings into policy requires a common message both for concerned parents and for policymakers. The legitimacy of scientific research can be used to increase awareness in the policy domain of the complexities involved in development. To further a social agenda supporting the positive development of children, we should support a political agenda that places our youngest in only the highest quality hands. Should our children deserve anything less?

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