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early developments Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

Spring 2000 | Volume 4, Issue 1

Long-Term Consequences of Child Care

From the Director's Office: Long-Term Consequences of
Child Care

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Mussorgsky

Depression

Relationships, Child & Teacher

NCEDL News: Georgia Conference

NCEDL News: Nearly 1,000,000 Served

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Children of depressed mothers score lower on measures than children of mothers who are never depressed

The on-going nationwide Study of Early Child Care by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), continues to provide significant data for parents, professionals, and policymakers about the relationship between early child care and children's development.

Data released in the September 1999 issue of Developmental Psychology shows that at age three, children whose mothers are chronically depressed fare significantly worse on tests and other measures of school readiness, verbal comprehension and language skills than children of mothers who are never depressed. Those whose mothers are sometimes depressed fall somewhere in between.



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Here are other findings from this report:

- Depressed mothers in general were less sensitive to their children, their children displayed poorer verbal and language skills and showed more problem behaviors.
- Children whose mothers were more sensitive, however, did better on measures and behaved better regardless of their mother's level of depression.
- Women with higher incomes and other advantages were more responsive and played better with their children despite their depression possibly because they were less stressed.
- Income made no difference in sensitivity and responsiveness among mothers who were not depressed.
- Women who were despondent most of the time not only were least sensitive but also were the only group to show a decline in sensitivity between the 15-month and 24-month assessments. As toddlers emerged from the period some call the "terrible twos" and became less willful, interactions with mothers grew more positive.

Other data released last year from the NICHD Child Care Study shows that higher quality child care is related to less problem behavior.

Here are highlights from that report:

- Day care in the United States is "fair," but not outstanding.
- Such factors as a family's income, mothers' psychological well-being, and maternal behavior have more of an influence on children's social competence at two and three years of age than does the children's day care arrangement.
- Quality child care was related to children displaying greater social competence and cooperation and less problem behavior at two and three years of age.

- More experiences in groups with other children predicted more cooperation with other children and fewer problem behaviors at both two and three years of age.
- The consistency of the day care setting also played a role in the development of social competence. At age two, children who had been in a number of different day care arrangements showed more problem behaviors than did children who had been in fewer day care arrangements.
- Child care experience has no discernible influence on the security of children's attachments to their mothers by age three.
- In general, the education of the mothers was more strongly related to positive qualities of maternal care than was the amount or quality of child care. However, mothers were slightly more positive and supportive with their children when less child care was used or when child care quality was higher.
- Parents have an important influence on children's development regardless of how much child care their children experience. Comparisons between children in child care and those experiencing exclusive care from their mothers tell us little until we consider the quality of care. High quality child care offers an advantage to children and low quality care a disadvantage for cognitive and language development as compared to care from the average mother. 

The researchers suggest possible ways for improving the nation's child care:

by improving the ratio of child care givers to children, lowering group sizes, increasing care givers' levels of education, and increasing the safety and intellectual stimulation of child care settings.

Investigators who are working on the NICHD team includes **Martha Cox** and **Margaret Burchinal** from FPG and the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL), also based at UNC-Chapel Hill, and **Robert Bradley** and **Robert Pianta** from NCEDL. Bradley is with the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and Pianta is with the University of Virginia at Charlottesville.

Besides UNC-Chapel Hill, other data collection centers are located at the universities of Arkansas at Little Rock, California at Irvine, Kansas, New Hampshire, Pittsburgh, Virginia, Washington at Seattle, Wisconsin, and Temple University. The overall NICHD study began in 1991.