

THE IMPACT OF DIFFERENT FORMS OF DAY CARE ON CHILDREN'S SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, INCLUDING THE EFFECTS ON AGGRESSION AND PEER RELATIONS

Introduction

People are very concerned about the effects of separation when parents go out to work, and their children are placed in day care. Psychologists are interested in whether different forms of day care affect children's social development, especially how **aggressive** they are and how well their **peer relations** develop. In terms of the impact that psychology has on our everyday lives, it is also interesting to see how research into attachment and day care has influenced child care practices (if it actually has).

What is day care?

Day care includes all varieties of non-maternal care of children who normally live with their parent(s) or close relatives. So, it *excludes* foster care and institutional care, but it *includes* the following: **crèches**, **nurseries**, **childminders**, **non-resident nannies**, and **grandparents**.

In most industrialised societies, women's increasing participation in the workforce and the rise of single parenthood in recent decades has meant that substantial proportions of young children (of school age or under) now spend parts of their week in day care. So, non-maternal shared childcare is now actually a **normative** experience, and is driven entirely by the economic need for women in the workforce. At present, around half of women in the UK with children under the age of five work. At one point, day care was at the forefront of British government policy. The last Labour government's *National Childcare Strategy* aimed to provide good quality, affordable day care for children up to 14 years of age.

What is 'good quality' day care?

It is widely agreed that the following criteria (from the *National Association for the Education of Young Children*) can be used to assess 'good' quality day care:

- **Physical setting:** Clean, well-lit, ventilated and uncrowded environment; fenced outdoor play space available

- **Adult-child interaction:** Responsive and warm interaction between children and staff (e.g. responding to distress, reading)
- **Developmentally appropriate curriculum:** Appropriate play materials, both for indoor and outdoor play, are available and within reach of the children
- **Child-to-care ratio:** Ratio of no more than 1:3 for infants and 1:6 for toddlers
- **Carer qualifications:** Training in child development, first aid, and safety
- **Daily activities:** Schedule includes active play, quiet play, naps and meals; flexibility to meet children's individual needs in a structured and stimulating environment
- **Relationships with parents:** Parents are welcome at any time; carers discuss children's behaviour and development with them
- **Continuity and stability:** Continuous care is vital, even if it is of a slightly lower quality. Familiar routines and environment also help give continuity and stability

How does day care affect children's aggression levels?

The research findings in this area are *conflicting*. Some research shows that day care is associated with **lower** levels of aggression:

Phillips et al (1987): Children attending high quality centres engaged in *less* negative play than children attending low quality centres.

Vandell et al (1988): Children who attended good quality day centres were observed to be less argumentative and engage in less conflict with their peers, compared with children who attended poor quality day centres.

Baydar & Brooks-Gunn (1991): Children whose mothers postponed employment until late in the child's first year and worked 10 hours per week or less had fewer behavioural problems compared with mothers who returned to work earlier and worked longer hours.

However, other research suggests that even good quality day care can be associated with **higher** levels of aggression:

Vliestra (1981): Teachers judged those children who had been in full day care to be *more* aggressive than those.

Belsky et al (2001): The *more* time children spend in day care, the *more* likely they are to show aggressive behaviours during the early primary school years.

Belsky et al (2007): The negative effects of day care on aggression levels are not short-lasting, and can persist into the early teenage years.

How does day care affect children's peer relations?

The term 'peer relations' refers to children's abilities to make friends, behave co-operatively, and generally 'get on' with others. As with research into aggression, research into the effects of day care on peer relations has also produced conflicting findings. Some research shows that day care is associated with **better** peer relations:

Andersson (1992): Andersson followed up Swedish children at the ages of 8 and 13, and found that those who had entered day care before the age of 1 for at least 25 hours per week, were performing *better* at school and attained *higher scores* on measures of adjustment and social competence.

Phillips et al (1987): Children attending high quality centres were rated as *more* cooperative, sociable and confident, and less dependent than children attending low quality centres.

Vandell et al (1988): Children who attended good quality day centres were observed to be *more* socially competent (more cooperative) and *generally* happier than children who attended poor quality day centres.

Other research shows that day care is associated with **poorer** peer relations:

Vliestra (1981): Teachers judged those children who had been in full day care to be *less* able to get on with their peers.

Belsky et al (2001): The *more* time children spend in day care, the *less* likely they are to behave co-operatively during the early primary school years.

Belsky et al (2007): The negative effects of day care on peer relations as well as aggression are not short-lasting, and can persist into the early teenage years.

How can research into the effects of day care on aggression and peer relations be evaluated?

One way of evaluating this research is in terms of its failure to provide a simple answer about the effects on day care on children's aggression levels and peer relations. The major problem with this area of research is the sheer number of **variables** that seem to be involved. For example, the following have all been shown to be important:

Quantity of day care: Some research shows that full-time day care is positively related to better social relationships and lower levels of aggression (Field, 1991). However, other research shows that children who spend long hours in day care from an early age are at risk of developing behavioural problems.

Age of entering day care: Haskins (1985) found that children who began day care during their first year of life showed greater levels of aggression than children who began day care after their first year.

The child's home background: Good quality care is beneficial when children come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bradley & Vandell, 2007).

The child's temperament: It is possible that children who are more aggressive or otherwise 'difficult' are more likely to be put in day care, because their parents need a break. Some parents may opt to go out to work because their interactions with their offspring are less than satisfactory.

The parent's temperament: Some infants may be unwanted or its parents temperamentally unsuited to looking after children.

Because of all of the above variables, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the effects of day care. The evidence *seems* to suggest that behavioural problems are more likely (a) the younger the child is placed in day care, and (b) the longer the time the child spends in day care per week. However, as the findings indicate, this is not always the case, and many variables interact in different and complex ways.

Another way of evaluating this research is **methodologically**. For example, 'aggression' can be defined and measured in many different ways. Studies may show different results because researchers are using different ways of defining and measuring aggression. The same can be said for 'peer relations'. Likewise, this research relies on the accuracy of observers with respect to the behaviour being measured, and when self-report measures are taken those doing the reporting may not be truthful about what they report.

Another methodological issue in this area of research is that most studies are correlational. We will deal with this type of research method in detail on another part of the course, but the following summarises the method and its major weakness. How would this weakness affect research into the effects of day care?

CORRELATIONAL RESEARCH

Some years ago, a researcher measured how many ice creams were eaten in Hunstanton every day for a year. The researcher also measured how much crime was committed every day in Hunstanton over the same time period. The researcher found that on those days when people ate lots of ice cream, lots of crime was committed. He concluded that eating ice cream causes people to commit crime and, as a result, ice cream is now banned in Hunstanton.