

QUALITY ISSUES IN DAY CARE

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INTRODUCTION

Child Day Care is an industry that has grown dramatically over the past 25 years. The number of working mothers with children under six years of age has almost doubled, and increasing numbers of children receive care from someone who is not a family member. This new social phenomena provokes questions about the influence of this service on children's growth and development. Research on the effects of non-parental care began in the mid 1970's, and over 30 such studies have been done.

The first question was whether child care was harmful to the development of young children. The answer is that it is not, if the care is of good quality. Most of these early studies were done in demonstration or university settings, which tended to be of high quality, but most of the children in care were in family day care settings which are largely unregulated or unmonitored and, therefore, of uncertain and probably variable quality. Moreover, the studies show that the effects of day care on young children's development are influenced by these variations in practices.

A second question concerned the security of attachment between mothers and their infants who are in child care.

Those studies, while still inconclusive, seem to suggest, that day care might interfere with maternal attachment, at least for some children, especially for those children who begin care before their first birthday. Generally, day care did not seem to compromise attachment.

The next questions focused on the variations in day care environments and their effect on children's development. These studies were conducted at multiple sites looking at more representative samples of care than the demonstration settings used previously. Two major findings emerged from these studies. First, good quality day care can positively affect children's behavior and development. Second, however, more and more child care settings delivered care of such low quality that it did not foster developmental progress.

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY

Quality early child care and education have been documented to have positive short- and long-term effects on children's lives. Children in high quality programs are more social, less aggressive and have better language and cognitive skills. These children tend to make more friends and do better when they enter elementary school (cited in Doherty-Derkowski, 1995). In subsequent years, school dropout, crime and violence, and juvenile delinquency are less prevalent in children who

have attended high quality early child care programs (Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, and Weikart, 1984).

Quality of care seems to be the crucial element. While there is still debate about the overall effects of day care on children's development and social relationships, there are emergent patterns in the research that should not be ignored:

- Quality day care, as determined by assessment tools which measure quality (e.g., The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale), can affect children in positive ways, especially in the lives of children from at-risk and less economically advantaged environments.
- Poor quality care can have harmful effects on children's development. Children in low-quality care have lower skills in language and social competence, and their parents might not be able to make up for these negative effects.

It is important to address the issue of quality because of the nature of the children and the increasing number of children who use early childhood services.

Nature of children

Children are different today than in years past. For example, observations in classrooms and conversations and interviews with early childhood staff indicate that increasingly children are bringing concerns about family and community issues and other stressful events, including violence, to their child care settings.

Early childhood services

At the same time, child rearing has become more difficult. There are growing numbers of single parent families and more women in the workforce. Fifty-two percent of mothers with children under the age of one are in the work force. In the United States, it was estimated in 1990 that 13.5 million children under age six received care from someone outside the home; six million of these children were infants and toddlers (Hofferth, 1992). These social trends underscore the need for increasing amounts of good quality, affordable child care and early childhood staff trained in child development.

WHAT IS QUALITY

A high-quality program provides teaching and supervision that promote mental health and well being as well as physical health and safety and supports parents in their child-rearing efforts.

Over the past 20 years several major studies have been done on child care and early childhood services (cited in Doherty-Derkowski, 1995). A summary of the dimensions and their impact on children's development are presented below.

Health and safety

Children's health and safety are the foundation of any quality child care program. They are necessary but not sufficient conditions. Sanitary practices such as frequent hand washing and having different staff perform different care functions, diapering and food preparation for example, should be at the heart of a foundation for quality. Health and safety alone will ensure no more than custodial care. It is the quality of activities, materials, and interactions that contribute to children's development.

Program structure

Program structure includes such features as staff to child ratio and group size. These features are generally covered by regulation and influence caregiver behavior and child development. The National Academy of Early Childhood Programs recommends group sizes of 6 to 8 infants; six to 12 toddlers; and 14 to 20 preschoolers. They recommend ratios of one staff for three or four infants and toddlers, or eight to ten preschoolers (Bredekamp, 1986).

- When groups are small, caregivers are more involved in the activities with the children. They play with them and talk to them about their play activities, and they help children interact and play with others. When groups are large caregivers spend more time in managing behavior and talking or engaging with other adults.
- When adults have responsibility for fewer children (low child-to-staff ratio), they tend to engage children in more stimulating and age-appropriate activities. They also talk and play with the children. When caregivers have too many children to look after they tend to become detached and withdrawn.

When groups are small and ratios low, children engage with materials, and talk and play with peers more. Children seem to learn more school readiness skills, and show less emotional stress. Under these conditions children are more directed, less aggressive, and more able to control impulses and keep their own behavior in check. They seem to sense the availability of the caregiver, feel freer to explore and try new things, and don't have to use negative behavior to "get attention."

Caregiver education

Better educated staff are associated with better outcomes for children, and staff who are trained specifically in Child Development and Early Childhood Education are more likely to provide more developmentally appropriate materials, activities, and interactions. Training should be further specialized depending on the age of the children with whom the staff work. One cannot expect a teacher of school-age children to know very much about infants and toddlers. Also, the day care director should have training in child development as well as administration. It seems that directors with this combination of knowledge and skills are more aware of the indicators of quality and support these elements in their programs.

Caregivers with specialized education in early childhood development not only plan and provide appropriate activities. They also respond to the children's behavior with a level of

understanding that considers the child's age, personality, and the situation at hand. They are able to modify activities and expectations when it is necessary to meet the developmental needs of a specific child.

When caregivers are more responsive to children's needs, when they have positive interactions, and when they talk to them, the children are more attentive and cooperative. They are also more verbal and more social.

Working conditions

Employees who are more satisfied with their jobs are likely to be more invested in their work and perform at a higher level. One of the most important contributors to job satisfaction is salary. Higher salaries make staff feel more professional. When staff are satisfied with their jobs, they tend to stay longer and turnover rates are lower. More consistent staff and lower turnover rates are linked to quality care and positive outcomes for children.

When staff are inconsistent, through high turnover or center practices (e.g. moving caregivers from group to group, not assigning regular caregivers), children are more detached from caregivers and less involved in activities.

Turnover rates are high, ranging from thirty to fifty percent on average in the country. But staff leaving is not the only problem. Staff are not being drawn into the field. In some centers, the staff who leave were there only on a temporary basis, until a 'real' job came along.

But conditions of work, other than salary, are also important. Staff feel more satisfied when they are given opportunities to contribute to program development, and are given regular time off for preparation and staff training. Such consideration also contributes to feelings of professionalism. Caregivers are then more likely to pay attention and provide meaningful activities for the children.

Teacher behavior

The above characteristics influence caregiver behavior, and it is the way caregivers plan for and respond to children that makes the most difference in the outcomes for children. Teachers with fewer children in smaller groups who have specialized education in child development and child care, and with greater job satisfaction, are more likely to engage in behavior that promotes the development of children. In quality centers teachers plan appropriate activities for the children, but do not stop there. They engage the children in the activities and then talk to the children about what is happening, calling attention to expected and unexpected events.

Teachers in quality centers listen to the children and try to accommodate their requests. They treat them with respect and pay attention to what they say and what they do. When they have to set limits, they consider the children's level of understanding and avoid harsh punishment and humiliation of the children. They also do not take children's behavior personally. They take into account, not only the situation at hand, but the child's personality and mood, and past experiences.

When teachers are responsive in positive ways, children are more likely to make secure attachments to them, relying on them for emotional comfort as well as cognitive stimulation. When children feel secure they tend to have more energy and motivation for exploration, experimentation, and learning.

Parent involvement

Children are less confused and anxious when there is consistency of expectations between the child care setting and their home. Consistency is more likely to exist when parents and staff exchange information about the children on a regular basis. This does not mean that staff tell parents only of the times when children misbehave, or that parents only tell staff of the times when something unusual occurs in the child's life. Rather, parents and teachers exchange knowledge about the child's behavior, likes and dislikes, reactions to events, and general information about development and expectations. Sharing information is particularly important when the child is under three years of age.

When parents and caregivers have positive interactions with each other there is a tendency for children to have more positive interactions with caregivers and, more often, with their playmates.

Good parent/caregiver relationships could enhance quality in other ways by giving parents the opportunity to comment on, raise questions about, and support best practices.

State regulations

Each state is responsible for setting minimal standards for care, and for monitoring and enforcing these standards which vary from state to state. These standards do not ensure quality, but the higher the standards the higher the quality of care in that state. Pennsylvania standards are among the highest in the country.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

There is enough evidence in the studies on child care quality to underscore its importance in children's development. It can no longer be viewed as a benign force on children's well being. Good care promotes developmental progress and learning. Poor quality care can interfere with both. These findings have implications for families, and also for communities, who will experience the social and economic effects when these young children are not well served. Parents, professionals, and the public at large can take steps to insure quality.

- **Support strong state regulations.** The higher the state standards, the more likely centers in that state will deliver higher quality care. Health and safety, as well as all of the important dimension of quality -- ratios, group size, caregiver training -- are usually regulated. We can continue to argue for higher standards in these important areas.
- **Conduct a consumer and public education campaign about the importance of quality.** Consumers of child day care (e.g. parents, government agencies, corporations) should visit

the centers before entering into any agreements for child care. During the visit, they should ask questions about caregiver education, training, staff development plans, and staff turnover. They can observe ratios, group size, activities, and caregiver/child interactions for adherence to best practice standards.

- **Provide ongoing quality training for caregivers.** Many states have funding for training child caregivers. The training should be organized, focused, and occur on a regular basis over longer periods of time.
- **Find creative ways to adequately finance child care.** High quality child care is expensive, but mediocre care costs almost as much. The cost of child care cannot be subsidized by low worker wages and families cannot be expected to carry this burden alone. Tax credits and government subsidies, corporate sponsorship and private funding are all important to support child care. But more and more creative funding streams have to be identified.

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This report, written by Ethel Marie Tittnich, M.S., is based on the above-referenced publications. It is not intended to be an original work, but a summary produced for the convenience of our readers.