



Does child care make a difference to children's development?

Clarifying common assumptions about child care

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Over 70% of children in Canada are in some kind of child care arrangement and this number is similar in other countries. Usually, children are placed in child care because both parents are working. However, sometimes, parents are advised by a professional to enroll their child in child care because this environment will promote their child's development.

Parents have many questions about child care and we thought it would be helpful to identify some common assumptions about the effects of child care and report on what the research actually shows. The first few assumptions relate to typically-developing children, and the final three assumptions relate to children with special needs.

Assumptions about typically-developing children and child care

- Children who attend child care have better outcomes than children who are cared for at home by their mothers

FALSE

A study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) in the US looked at the influence of both child care and the home environment on over 1,000 typically-developing children [1]. They found that:

- “children who were cared for exclusively by their mothers did not develop differently than those who were also cared for by others” [1, p.1]

They also found that

- “parent and family characteristics were more strongly linked to child development than were child care features” [1, p.1].

This means that families have a greater impact on how a child develops than child care does.

Two family features that had a significant influence on children’s development were the quality of:

- **mother-child interactions** – children’s outcomes were better when mothers were responsive, sensitive, attentive, and provided good stimulation during interactions.
- **the family environment** – families which had organized routines, books and play materials, and engaged in stimulating experiences both in and out of the home (outing, library trips, etc.) had children with better social and cognitive outcomes.

The take home message...

Children who attend child care have the same outcomes as children who are cared for at home. Whether a child attends daycare or not, it is the family that has a major impact on their child’s development, with the parents’ interactions with the child being a critically important factor.

- **Child care centres are better for children’s development than home-based child care settings**

TRUE and FALSE

The NICHD study [1] compared children who attended child care centres with children who attended home-based care (e.g. a home-based daycare, or care within the child’s home by someone other than the child’s parents). They found that centre-based child care was linked to:

- somewhat better cognitive and language development
- better pre-academic skills involving letters and numbers
- fewer behaviour problems at ages 2 and 3
- more behaviour problems at age 4 ½ (such as disobedience and aggression)

Therefore, there appear to be pros and cons to both centre-based and home-based child care settings.

- **It doesn’t matter which child care a child goes to since most are of high quality**

FALSE

The majority of child care settings provide children with a warm, supportive environment that protects children's health and safety [2]. However, only a small percentage of children in child care receive caregiving which promotes and stimulates development.

Studies have shown that:

- “most child care settings in the United States provide care that is “fair” (between “poor” and “good”)” [1, p.11].
- only about a third of child care centres and a third of family home daycares in Canada encourage children's social, language and cognitive development [2].
- there is some evidence that child care centres that are inclusive (that welcome and accommodate children with special needs) tend to be of higher quality than noninclusive programs [3].

What contributes to high quality child care? The NICHD [1] found that high quality care was related to the amount of “positive caregiving” provided, which means that caregivers or teachers:

- show a positive attitude
- have positive physical contact with the children
- respond frequently to the children's vocalizations
- ask questions
- encourage the children
- sing songs and read books
- encourage and advance the children's behaviour
- discourage negative interactions

Of all of these factors, the **language used by the caregiver** (e.g. making interested comments in response to what children say, asking questions, responding to vocalizations) is the most important factor that predicted children's cognitive and language outcomes.

The take home message.....

Parents cannot assume that all child care centres are of high quality, and should look for the “positive caregiving” qualities above when choosing a child care. The NICHD provides a “Positive Caregiving Checklist” to guide parents in selecting high quality child care. The checklist is available on their website at

http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/upload/seccyd_06.pdf (see page 36).

- Regulated/licensed child care centres provide better quality child care than centres or home daycares that do not meet such standards

TRUE

In many regions, there are minimum standards outlined by the government known as “regulable features” [1]. These features include factors like the adult-to-child ratio, group size, and the child care provider’s training. In Canada, child care centres or family child care settings that have met these minimum requirements are known as “regulated” [4].

The NICHD study [1] found that:

- children in child care centres that met more standards (such as adult-to-child ratio, caregiver’s education level, and class size) tended have better outcomes than children in centres that met fewer standards.

The NICHD also found a connection between these features that were regulated and the extent of positive caregiving provided at a centre:

- “the more standards a child care setting meets, the more positive the caregiving. The more positive the caregiving, the higher the quality of care and the better the children’s outcomes” [1, p.12].

Therefore, regulated child care centres tend to provide more positive caregiving, which means that the children benefit more from this type of high quality care.

➤ Children who attend high quality child care have better outcomes than children who attend lower quality child care

TRUE

We know that a child’s family and home environment influences his development more than child care does. However, the reality is that many children attend child care. The NICHD [1] compared the outcomes of children in high quality child care with children in lower quality care. They found that the children in higher quality child care centres demonstrated [1]:

- better cognitive, language, and social development
- better school readiness (e.g. reading, writing, number skills)

Therefore, when choosing a child care centre, quality does make a difference.

Assumptions about children with special needs and child care

➤ Children with special needs have better outcomes when they are enrolled in child care

FALSE

Booth and Kelly, two authors from the above NICHD study, followed 156 young children with or at risk for developmental disabilities, to determine if child care made a difference to their development [5].

When they compared children with developmental disabilities who attended daycare and children who were cared for at home by their mothers, they found that:

- children who attended child care did not do any better than children who did not

Furthermore, when Booth and Kelly looked at the children with special needs who attended child care, they found that the quality of the caregiving at home affected the outcomes of these children [5].

Therefore, spending time in child care is not necessarily beneficial (or harmful) for the development of children with special needs [5]. Whether a child with special needs attends child care or not, the interactions that happen at home have a great impact on the child's development.

➤ Children with special needs should be enrolled in child care from a very young age to benefit their development

FALSE

Booth and Kelly found that:

- children who were a little older when they started daycare (over 12 months of age) were better able to control and manage their own behaviour than children who started during the first year of life.

Booth and Kelly were of the opinion that, when children begin daycare when they are a little older, it gives them more time at home with their parents, which allows them to benefit from consistent caregiving and routines. This seems to help them develop behaviour regulation skills.

Therefore, starting daycare early, especially in the first year of life, may not be ideal for children with special needs.

➤ Children with special needs benefit from increased hours in child care

FALSE

Parents of children with special needs sometimes wonder if they should increase the number of hours their child spends in child care in order to boost their child's development. However, Booth and Kelly [5] found that:

- the amount of time spent in child care did not influence the outcomes of children with developmental disabilities

Therefore, more hours in daycare doesn't result in better outcomes for children with special needs.

Putting it all together

What matters most?

Regardless of whether children attend child care, what happens at home matters most in terms of their development. What is most important to a child's development is the kind of interactions he has with his parents. Frequent back-and-forth interactions within everyday activities, during which parents listen to their child, respond warmly and with interest to what he communicates and provide information that he can learn from are what count. In fact, these kinds of parent-child interactions predict a child's development - far more than child care factors do.

No differences between outcomes of children cared for in child care and at home

Contrary to what many people think, children who attend child care have similar outcomes to children who are cared for at home by their mothers. This is true for typically-developing children and children with special needs.

How to choose a child care centre

When choosing a child care, families should:

- not assume that all child care centres are of high quality
- look for evidence of positive caregiving, especially the language used by the caregiver, as this is linked to high quality care and positive outcomes
- find out if a child care is licensed or regulated, as these centres tend to provide higher quality care

- consider the pros and cons when choosing a child care centre versus a home-based setting

If your child has special needs

Families who have a child with special needs should remember that:

- starting child care after 12 months of age may give the child more time at home to learn to manage his own behaviour
- increasing a child's daycare hours has not been shown to improve his development

References

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3. Buysse, V., Wesley, P. W., Bryant, D., & Gardner, D. (1999). Quality of early childhood programs in inclusive and noninclusive settings. *Exceptional Children*, 65(3), 301-314.
4. Parliament of Canada website: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/ResearchPublications/prb0418-e.htm>
5. Booth, C.L. & Kelly, J.F. (2002). Child care effects on the development of toddlers with special needs. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17, 171-196.

For more than 35 years, The Hanen Centre has taken a leading role in the development of programs and resources for parents and professionals to help all preschool children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills, including those children with or at risk of language delays and those with developmental challenges such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, including Asperger Syndrome.

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