

# STUDYING INFANTS

## TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF FAMILIES



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**Identifying at-risk children to help them develop beyond dysfunctional family environments has brought Sylvana Côté international recognition. The publication of a paper in the best psychiatry journal last year<sup>1</sup> confirms the importance of her work for the early prevention of mental health problems.**

In the early years of Côté’s career, high-profile research about conduct disorder in teens and differences in gender attracted substantial attention, as has her current research about the effect of public day care.

Since completing a psychology degree at McGill University in 1994, Côté has obtained a master’s in clinical psychology from *Université Laval*, a doctorate from the *Université de Montréal*, a postdoctoral fellowship at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and the *Belle van Zuylen* chair at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. She is now a professor at the *Université de Montréal’s* Faculty of Medicine and a researcher with CHU Sainte-Justine.

Sylvana Côté’s success began when she was a PhD student. She received a McConnell award for Excellence in Public Communication of Research after a presentation at the Canadian legislature on the importance of the early years for children’s future social development. Since then, she’s received operating and salary awards from the *Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture* (FQRSC), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation (CPRF). Her latest grant and award are from the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR). She leads a team of researchers who follow more than 500 children through day care centres to find out whether the quality of child care settings affects children’s social and physical development. This new long-term study represents the achievement of a dream for her. *“I’ve always been interested in people’s life trajectories. They depend so much on how people’s personalities and their life situations work together to make what people become. This research is about that. How people develop has a lot to do with their family*

*and their early life experiences. When you study young children, you really are studying their parents.”*

According to Côté, her early work in substance abuse and violence led naturally to her current study of day care use and quality. *“I started my career studying the development of children from kindergarten to 16,”* she says. *“But I noticed that at-risk children already had problems by then.”*

*“With increased evidence, it’s clear that among children who exhibit physical aggression in the preschool years there is a group of children who have levels that are atypically high. Not all children who display physical aggression will follow this pattern, but there’s a high probability that some will. When low education comes together with family dysfunction and low levels of stimulation in the home, future problems are born.”*

Côté has become so convinced that the preschool years are the most important developmental stage for children, that she has taken time out to make presentations to legislative committees in Quebec City. *“Child care is not babysitting,”* she says. *“It should be scheduled as a stimulating educational experience. The preschool years are when the brain develops at the highest speed and is malleable. It makes no sense to not invest most of our money in that period as a society. If we invest in our kids at that age, we invest in our future human resources.”* 🦋

#### BY TRACEY ARIAL

1. Côté SM, Boivin M, Nagin DS, Japel C, Xu Q, Zoccolillo M, Junger M, Tremblay RE. The role of maternal education and nonmaternal care services in the prevention of children’s physical aggression problems. *Archives of General Psychiatry* 2007;64(11):1305-1312.