Does the quality of child care make a difference in how your child performs during the early school years? You bet, says a team of U.S. researchers. In a five-year study of four-to-eight-year-olds, they found that children who had better-quality preschool experiences had more advanced language, cognitive and social skills up to second grade. Better-quality child care had an even stronger positive influence on children from less advantaged backgrounds.

More than half of three-to-five-year-old children in the United States attend child care centres. This group represents about 75% of preschool children in out-of-home care. Outside of family, daycare is likely to be the most common environment in which these children spend time, yet few studies have examined the long-term impact of child care quality on their development and early education.

One of the largest studies to tackle this question was part of the Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers Study. It examined the effects of child care quality on the language, cognitive and social skills of 733 four-to-eight-year-old children from preschool to second grade at 160 centres in four U.S. states. About half of the children were boys, and about one-third came from diverse ethnic groups.

The quality of child care has a definite impact on child development through the early school years, the researchers found. Children in better-quality child care were more advanced in their development from preschool through kindergarten, and even into second grade for several aspects of development.

When preschool children had a better classroom environment and a more sensitive and responsive teacher with a child-centered learning approach, they developed better language and math skills over time. Children with closer teacher-child relationships in preschool also had better language and math skills through second grade. These children were more sociable and attentive and had better thinking skills and fewer behavioural problems from preschool through early elementary school.

Child care quality had the strongest effect on children with less educated mothers. When in a higher-quality daycare environment, these children showed the greatest benefit in math skills over time. Those who had a closer teacher-child relationship developed fewer behavioural problems from preschool to second grade.

Better-quality child care is related to better outcomes for children, conclude the researchers. The more child care quality increases, the better off children are.

As women's role in society changed, a revolution occurred in childrearing practices. In 1967, one out of every six mothers with preschool children was in the labour force in Canada. By the year 2000, the proportion had risen to more than four out of six mothers with children under the age of six.

Today, outside-the-home care is a routine experience for most families in Canada. Many children spend over 30 hours per week in child care. How does this early, extensive and continuous care affect child development?

While child care quality appears to have a positive impact on children's social competence and behaviour, more time in child care may mean more problem behaviour in kindergarten, including assertiveness, disobedience and aggressiveness, says the U.S. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network. In a recent NICHD study, mothers, teachers and caregivers reported that children who spent more time in child care were less well adjusted than their peers. They acted out more often in kindergarten, had more conflicts with adults and were less socially competent.

As the average hours of child care per week increased over the first 4.5 years of life, so did the likelihood that children (12 to 16%) would develop problem behav-
This was particularly true for children in child care centres, who had even higher levels of problem behaviour than children in other kinds of care. These findings were consistent regardless of the quality of child care. More hours in child care during infancy and the amount of care in the third and fourth years of life may have an impact on later social adjustment, the researchers suggest. At the same time the NICHD team reports that even children experiencing the greatest amount of non-maternal care do not reach clinical levels of problem behaviour. However, although the detected effects of the quantity of child care were by no means strong, this must be regarded as noteworthy because “even small effects, when experienced by many children, may have broad-scale implications for larger policy discussions.”

While the potentially negative effects of long-term child care were not influenced by family background or when the NICHD researchers took maternal sensitivity and other child care-related factors into account, overall family-related factors seemed to have more impact on the development of problem behaviour than child care. When mothers provided more sensitive care, their children were more socially competent in kindergarten, with fewer problem behaviours and conflicts with adults.


Following a discussion of the results from the two studies, Sandra Griffin, Executive Director of the Canadian Child Care Federation, and Richard E. Tremblay, CEECD Director, came to the following conclusion:

“While these two studies reflect child care in the United States, the results do provide a challenge for Canadians in the development of a comprehensive system for early learning and child care. On the one hand, the studies identify the potential positive effects of quality child care and on the other hand, they identify some potential risks to be considered with respect to the overall amount of time children spend in child care.

Too often, the debate concerning ‘the child care issue’ will focus on using the research to either speak for it or against it. We trust that we are beyond such simplistic arguments. These studies remind us that the development of a comprehensive early-learning and child care system must include family and employment policies. They do not speak against the development of the system – they assist us in developing a system based on the best available knowledge that supports the healthy development of children in Canada. They also show the need for increasing the quantity and quality of research on child care in Canada. Without systematic assessments of the programs for different types of families and in different contexts, we will never be able to know what is working, and what is not working well for our children.”

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