

THE CHILD CARE PUZZLE

by Richard E. Tremblay, CEECD Director

When Marie and Henri had their first child, they were both leading very active lives. So they decided to hire someone to take care of their son, and were fortunate to find an educated widow who had raised three children of her own. Although their son, Louis, was prone to temper tantrums, he managed to become a successful king, and to have a son, Louis Jr., who became the great Louis XIV.



Most 21st-century parents lead busy lives and need help to take care of their children, especially before they start school full-time. A good education helps everyone, not just royalty, to be successful in life. Wealthy parents can always hire the best tutors, but defining

and finding "the best" is still not an exact science. Louis' tutor, Madame Montglat, was convinced that whipping was the best way to educate a future king bent on temper tantrums.

For those with limited resources, the choices are obviously much more difficult. The best solution for parents is not necessarily the best solution for the child. How much do we know about quality early education? Should one or both parents sacrifice their career to stay home with their children? For how long and when?¹ Should someone be hired to stay home with the children? At what age is this an appropriate solution? What makes a good daycare centre? How many hours per day should children spend in a daycare centre? Does the type of children they interact with matter? What is the best training for educators of young children? Is early education really that important? If so, how much should we pay for early education? How long does it take for a country to develop a universal high-quality early education system?

Although we managed to get input from international experts, you will not find definitive answers to most of these ques-

tions in this issue. There is a wide consensus that early childhood development is the foundation for the later years. James Heckman, winner of the Nobel Prize in economics, even suggests that we should pay more for preschool education than university education. However, experts often disagree on what should be done with young children, where, when and by whom. Clearly, we are just starting to take the early childhood years seriously, and there is not enough reliable information to provide definitive answers.

The pressure to find better information has increased because most parents have become consumers, rather than providers, of early education services. They want "the best" for their child, and they want answers to their questions. To get answers, we need to substantially step up the pace of research. This will only happen if more resources are found for early childhood education along with more rigorous evaluation of practices.

¹The doctor who attended the young Louis XIII counted the number of days his parents were with him between the ages of one and eight: 573 for Marie and 606 for Henri. ❧



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THE BEST FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

by Liz Warwick

On a typical workday in Canada, thousands of children under the age of five will spend anywhere from a few hours to a full day in the care of someone other than a parent. Yet families often question these arrangements, asking if such care will harm the child, what kind of care is best (a relative, a family daycare, a centre) and if they should limit the number of hours spent there.

Scientists are making great efforts to answer their questions. The work is complicated. As Professor Margaret Tresch Owen notes: *"Understanding the effects of early child care requires addressing an array of features of the care experience – the amount of child care, the type of child care, the quality of the care, the age when care was initiated and changes in the care and the caregivers."* Parents also need to remember that it is impossible for scientists to determine the impact of child care on a particular child from a particular family.

MOVING BEYOND THE SIMPLE QUESTIONS

In the United States, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) has started one of the largest studies of child care. *"It will allow scientists to move beyond the all too simple issue of whether early child care is good or bad for children and illuminate the conditions under which child care enhances and/or undermines different aspects of development,"* says Professor Jay Belsky, one of the study's researchers.

To date, the study has found both benefits and risks associated with child care. Children receiving high-quality care show better thinking and language skills at ages two through five. However, the study also found that children who averaged more time in non-maternal care across their first 54 months of life, regardless of the quality or type, may have a less harmonious relationship with their mother and show somewhat higher levels of problem behaviour and aggression as reported by teachers, parents and caregivers. The authors do note that overall mothers, caregivers, and teachers rated the sample well within the normal range on all standard measures of problem behaviour and aggression. Nevertheless, a modest correlation was identified indicating a linear relation between more time in care and poorer socioemotional adjustment.

"However, whether the benefits and risks continue over the lifetime of the children has yet to be established," notes Swedish researcher Bengt-Erik Andersson. *"Some effects may show up only after many years. They are usually called sleeper effects and may be positive or negative."* In his research into the very high-quality Swedish system, Andersson has found that even experience in child care centres in the first year of life had a positive impact on social development that showed up once children reached the teen years.

QUALITY IS PARAMOUNT

If, as Belsky notes, there are some moderate risks associated with long hours in child care, at least some of the negatives can be offset by sensitive care from parents and a high-quality child care program itself. Researchers Lieselotte Ahnert and Michael Lamb point out: *"Whether or not children in care develop and maintain good relation-*

ships with their parents depends on the parents' ability to provide sensitive care at home." They add that parents should strive to provide as much 'intimate interaction' with their children as possible. Despite hours spent in child care, parents matter and will continue to have an enormous impact on their children. Indeed, the NICHD study specified that even though more time in child care (and especially in centres) forecast more problem behaviour, having a more sensitive mother predicted less problem behaviour.

"Recent research has revealed enduring and positive effects of high-quality child care, even on school performance," note Ahnert and Lamb, as well as many other researchers who emphasize the need for top-notch child care programs. Although more research is needed, studies seem to indicate that high-quality care may have an even greater positive impact on children from disadvantaged families. While researchers have yet to define exactly what 'high-quality care' is, many would agree with Professor Ellen Peisner-Feinberg, who states: *"It is associated with well trained and educated staff, high staff-child ratios, low staff turnover rates, good wages and effective leadership."* Studies show that quality of care is not limited to specific kinds of programs (child care centres, for example). Researcher Carollee Howes notes: *"Children can experience high-quality daycare in a variety of settings. What matters most is that the care provides nurturing relationships and stimulating environments that organize and scaffold children's learning."*

Unfortunately, when scientists have evaluated child care programs in the United States, Canada and most recently Quebec, they have found that most programs provide only good-to-mediocre care, with a disturbing minority providing care



"Recent research has revealed enduring and positive effects of high-quality child care, even on school performance"

that is downright inadequate. Researcher Kathleen McCartney suggests new policies are needed. *"Governments must be willing to invest in the early education and care of young children. Cost-benefit analyses suggest that these investments will result in better school performance."* Other researchers suggest that new family-leave/family-support programs are needed to ensure that parents who wish to stay home with a child in the early years can do so.

GETTING GOVERNMENTS INVOLVED

To ensure that all children receive excellent care and the best possible start in life, UQAM professor Philip Merrigan urges the Canadian government to revise its current family policies, including child care services. This is particularly urgent when it comes to helping poor children, he says, pointing out that children from the most disadvantaged families rarely use child care services. *"We need other services and programs to reach these children."*

One way would be to create programs modelled after Head Start, an American program providing intensive social and

educational services to low-income preschool children and their families. While child care helps working parents, these Head Start programs would focus on helping disadvantaged children develop in optimal ways and give them a better start in life. *"Intervening early makes sense,"* says Merrigan. *"As an economist, I know that governments can't increase spending everywhere,"* he adds. Targeting the very early years, particularly for disadvantaged children, has proven to be most effective in preventing a host of problems, from school failure to social maladjustment. As the years between birth and five have a huge impact on children's development, researchers have rightly examined the issue of child care, which has become the norm for many kids.

There is still much work to be done before we fully understand the complex interaction between children, parents and outside caregivers. In the meantime, however, studies consistently point to the need for quality. To give our children the best start demands that we offer the best services possible to all Canadian kids.

CONFERENCE

BUILDING A COMPREHENSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

**MAY 25, 2004,
QUEBEC CITY**

This conference, organized by the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development, in collaboration with the Society for Prevention Research, is intended for policy and service planners, and child development researchers. It will offer an opportunity to hear from experts such as Fraser Mustard, David Dodge, Sheila Kamerman, Philip Merrigan and John Godfrey on the biological, psychological and economic importance of Early Childhood Development. International examples of comprehensive Early Childhood Development initiatives will be presented. The conference will also allow discussions on the best ways to implement comprehensive ECD systems in Canada.

For more information:

Amanda Mayer,
(514) 343-6111, ext. 2566,
mayera@courrier.umontreal.ca

THE DILEMMA OF BALANCE



by Heather Pengelley

CHILD CARE QUALITY

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.¹ 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.

TIME SPENT IN CHILD CARE

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,² 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-

PHOTO: FRANCE LACAS



ious. 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.

Ref.: 1. Peisner-Feinberg ES, Burchinal MR, Clifford RM, et al. The Relation of Preschool Child-Care Quality to Children's Cognitive and Social Developmental Trajectories through Second Grade. *Child Development* 2001;72(5):1534-1553.

Ref.: 2. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network. Does Amount of Time Spent in Child Care Predict Socioemotional Adjustment during the Transition to Kindergarten? *Child Development* 2003;74(4):976-1005.

CONCLUSION?

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.” 🐾

WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CHILD CARE?

See our experts' papers in the CEECD Encyclopedia:

CHILD CARE (0-2 YEARS)

<http://www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca/theme.asp?id=24&lang=EN>

CHILD CARE (2-5 YEARS)

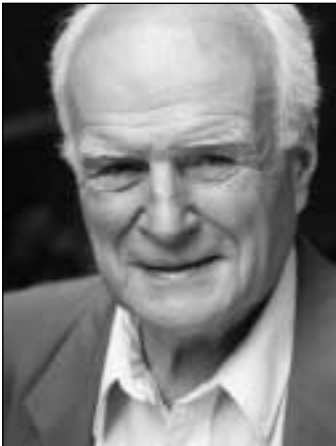
<http://www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca/theme.asp?id=25&lang=EN>

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS: WHY INFANTS' BRAINS NEED THE BEST START

by Liz Warwick

"Brain development in the early years sets the patterns for behaviour learning, and physical and mental health later on"

Fraser Mustard



"It is very costly to reverse years of damage and neglect"

James Heckman



Fraser Mustard points out that economists have shown that investing in the early years provides more benefits than investing heavily in remedial programs later on. To help parents provide that optimal care, he suggests creating early childhood development and parenting centres within, if possible, walking distance of parents' homes.

During the first year, at least one parent (probably the mother) would be involved heavily without having to pay a penalty at her outside work. During years two and three, parents would be involved for two days a week—again with their workload at a paid job being adjusted accordingly. "These centres would allow families to become part of a support system for their child's

development and help parents learn about parenting by doing." By supporting parents and children, society benefits in the long run. "If we don't invest in young children, who is going to run the economy?"

PAYING THE PRICE FOR NOT HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN

"It's never too early to start investing in children," says Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman. "It is very costly to reverse years of damage and neglect. Many of the important skills, abilities and motivations in life are set at a relatively early age. Skill begets skill and motivation begets motivation."

Heckman argues that society's investment must begin in the very early years,

preferably in the prenatal period so that babies have a healthy start in life. Then, children need environments that reinforce their innate curiosity. "If curiosity is stimulated, it brings the child to stand on his own feet and provides a way of encouraging learning. Studies suggest that early reinforcement of curiosity has a huge impact on subsequent learning ability, command of the language and the ability to do mathematical operations."

Unfortunately, parents do not always know how to provide an enriching environment or do not understand the importance of doing so. "The family is the greatest source of inequality in modern society," Heckman says. "But if we offer parents the opportunities to enrich their children's lives, most parents will take it." Society should not expect that schools will be able to make up for years of neglect and a lack of stimulation. By age five or six, too many negative patterns have been set. "If we neglect the child, then we create a problem child," Heckman says. "Solving their problems is typically much more costly than solving the initial problem." ❦

GIVING FAMILIES THE SUPPORT THEY NEED

by Liz Warwick



When Sandra Griffin, Executive Director of the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCCF), talks to parents about child care, she emphasizes the idea of partnership. “The community has a role to play in raising the community’s children,” Griffin says. “And the research tells us that child care does not interfere with the attachment to parents. What’s most important in developing that attachment is how sensitively a parent responds to a child.”

For Sandra Griffin and Judith Maxwell, founder and President of the Canadian Policy Research Networks, child care must be embedded in broad array of services and programs that ensure the optimal development of children and their families. “We need good, accessible parenting resources in the community,” says Maxwell. “Parents need these resources so that when problems come up, they can access the best-practice information. You want to avoid a

build-up of cognitive and behavioural problems.” Maxwell also suggests that a major “research transfer” must happen between people studying children’s development and the policy-makers, government officials and community workers trying to develop and implement programs.

QUALITY IS THE KEY

Both women agree that child care can play an important role in helping parents give their children the best possible start in life. However, Griffin points out that: “If you look at the data from various studies, the strongest results are in the better thinking and language skills of children who are in high-quality care.” Ensuring quality means looking beyond the health and safety requirements established by each province. “Children may be physically safe but you’re not optimizing their development.” High-quality care should have low child-to-adult ratios, so children receive plenty of attention. The adult caregiver must understand child development and the differences in children’s temperaments. “Those first years are so important,” says Griffin. “I know it has

been said before, but can we really afford not to invest in high-quality care?”

Maxwell notes that Quebec has taken a major step forward on the issue of quality care by ensuring that family child care providers be licensed through and affiliated with an early childhood centre. “It helps raise the standards of care,” she says. However, Griffin also suggests that early childhood training must be available and accessible, and providers must be well paid for their services to avoid high turnover rates in care arrangements.

Given the pressing need in all provinces for more quality child care spaces, Maxwell suggests provinces might want to consider using under-utilized schools as the hub of a community family-support program. Child care services and parenting resources could be grouped under one roof, thus making clearer the link between child care and education. Such a system might eventually see the introduction of junior kindergarten for three and four-year-olds. “We need to exert more time and effort to come up with innovative child care models,” says Maxwell. 🐾

MARK YOUR CALENDARS

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON QUALITY OF CHILD CARE

JUNE 3 TO 5, 2005, REGINA

Don’t miss this opportunity to join in the exchange on Quality of Child Care between Canadian and international leaders in research, practice and policy. From June 3 to 5, 2005, attend this national conference in Regina, Saskatchewan, co-hosted by the Centre of Excellence on Early Childhood Development, the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association, the Canadian Child Care Federation, and the provincial/territorial directors of early learning and child care.

Check out the CEECD Web site www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca for further details in the weeks to come.

WHY NOT EVALUATE CHILD CARE SERVICES?

by Sophie Payeur



Hélène Potvin is not worried about child care service quality evaluations. However, the President of the Association québécoise des centres de la petite enfance (AQCPÉ – Quebec Association of Child Care Centres) thinks that, for fairness' sake, we need to look at developments leading up to the evaluation.

The Government of Quebec introduced its family policy in 1997. One of the policy's goals was to develop child care and education services for young children. The cornerstone of this reform was, without a doubt, five-dollar child care. According to the President of the AQCPÉ, "The reform is a vast visionary building ground.

It has paved the way for an educational program in child care facilities that focuses on children's overall development through play, and consolidates practices already adopted by all child care workers." The family policy was accompanied by an increase in wages and the introduction of a pension plan. Potvin feels that these initiatives represent more than just better working conditions: "The government recognized how important our mission was, and showed that it shared our beliefs, our vision."

Today, the President of the AQCPÉ is philosophical about the findings of the study on the quality of the province's child care services conducted by Dr. Richard E. Tremblay and his team. "We would like to have seen better performance results for all child care centres (CPEs). Nevertheless, I think the findings are encouraging. They show that

there have been several improvements in the services provided by CPEs, and by the family child care services supervised by CPEs."

Potvin believes that these evaluations are essential points of reference. "What weak points or strong points can we work on to improve services? The evaluation is an essential tool to keep going in the right direction."

She is determined to do what it takes for all child care workers to obtain their college degrees, and for them to receive ongoing training. She also intends to work hard to improve the quality of educational child care services, and hopes that the government will come on board: "I am worried about how the government will deal with the evaluation's findings. I hope our politicians will use them first and foremost to support our efforts, so that we can increase the accessibility and quality of services." 🐼

PHOTO: COURTESY OF CCECD / LISA PHIPPS

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Editors:

Collaborators:

Proofreading:

Scientific Proofreading:

Translator:

Layout:

Printing:

Lucie Beaupré and Richard E. Tremblay

Sophie Payeur, Heather Pengelley,
Liz Warwick

Valérie Bell, Kathe Lieber, Tammy Martin

Christa Japel

Marie-Catherine Chiasson

Guylaine Couture

QuadriScan

Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development

GRIP-Université de Montréal

P.O. Box 6128, Succursale Centre-ville

Montreal (Quebec) H3C 3J7

Telephone: (514) 343-6111, extension 2541

Fax: (514) 343-6962

E-mail: cedje-ceecd@umontreal.ca

Web site: www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca

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