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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF DAY CARE  
ON THE PRE-SCHOOL CHILD AND THE FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

Maternal employment has increased dramatically over the last two decades. The result of this increase in the number of working mothers is the expanded use of day care programs for children. Examined in this paper are research findings on the impact of day-care on the child and the family. The implications of these findings for policy development are discussed.

Currently in the United States, over 50 percent of mothers work outside the home; this figure is expected to rise to 75 percent by 1990. The fastest growing segment of the working mother population is among those with children under two (Zigler and Gordon, 1982). This increasing rate of maternal employment of the last two decades has created the need for alternative arrangements for infants and young children. There is some concern among child development specialists that these alternative arrangements of care may have detrimental effects on a child's social and psychological development.

Much of the concern about substitute care

is based on the theory and research related to the negative effects of institutionalization on young children, (Bowlby, 1951; Spitz, 1945). This body of literature, however, tells one little about the typical forms of substitute care experienced by most children. Obviously, children generally do not experience the extreme physical and social deprivation reported on in the institutional literature (Advisory Committee on Child Development, 1976:117). Consequently, the quality of substitute care received by the majority of children is not comparable to the type of care studied in the institutional literature.

Still, the possibility remains that even with high quality care, differences may be found in the behavior and development of children as a function of the type of substitute care received. The literature reports numerous studies on the impact of various forms of substitute care; however, most of these studies are not well designed (Advisory Committee on Child Development, 1976:118). The typical form of substitute care focused on in the literature has been high quality, university based day-care settings, a form of substitute care most children do not have access to (Santrock, 1983:159). Even though the majority of these studies have weak methodological designs and are based on day-care settings not experienced by most children, some meaningful findings have emerged in the literature. This paper will focus on those relevant studies reporting on the impact of one very common form of substitute care, day-care for the pre-school child. The major emphasis of the review will be on how day-care impacts the pre-school child's intellectual development, emotional development, social development, and the child's family system. The authors will draw from these findings several major policy implications.

### Review of Major Findings

Keeping in mind the limitations concerning the current research on day-care for pre-school children, this section of the paper will focus on four major areas: effects of day-care on the child's intellectual development, emotional development, social development, and on the child's family.

### Intellectual Development.

Studies on intellectual development generally conclude that advantaged children are not impacted positively or negatively by the day-care experience. However, those children coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often show positive gains. It must be kept in mind, however, that the vast majority of these studies were conducted in high quality, university based day-care settings.

Among those studies focusing on advantaged children, the majority conclude that these children differ little in intellectual development from those not experiencing day-care (Caldwell, Wright, Honig, and Tannenbaum, 1970; and More, 1975). Fowler and Khan (1975) did find some initial gains in intellectual development among advantaged children experiencing day-care versus matched controls; these gains, however, gradually disappeared over time.

Herber, Garber, Harrington, Hoffman, and Falender (1972) and Robinson and Robinson (1971) report that children from disadvantaged backgrounds made significant gains on standardized tests after experiencing enriched day-care programs. Ramey and Smith (1976) found that disadvantaged pre-school children not only improved their intellectual development through enriched day-care, but also their motor development. The major limitation of these studies is that they tell little about the typical forms of substitute care experien-

ced by the vast majority of disadvantaged children.

One significant exception to these studies is research by Golden, Rosenbluth, Grossi, Policare, Freeman, and Brownlee (1978). These researchers report that disadvantaged children in non-university based day-care settings were found to make significant intellectual gains when compared with children experiencing other forms of care. The importance of this research is that it provides evidence about the possible intellectual benefits of day-care for children from disadvantaged populations who are enrolled in modal (rather than model) care programs (Pardeck and Pardeck, in press).

### Emotional Development.

Researchers concerned about the impact of substitute care on children's emotional development have primarily focused on the mother-child bond. Research by Baer (1954), Bowlby (1951), Goldfarb (1943), and Spitz (1945) suggests that any arrangement that deprives the child of continuous access to his or her mother impairs the child's emotional development. Since day-care by its very nature entails the daily separation of mother from child, researchers have investigated the influence this separation has on the child's emotional bond with the mother.

A research strategy that has helped to explore the impact of mother-child separation is the "strange situation" experiment (Stroufe and Waters, 1977). This experiment involves separating the child from the mother, thus creating a stressful situation, then introducing a strange adult. The key assumption is that the child's approach-avoidance response to the stranger and the child's exploration of the environment during the "strange situation" will be an index of the mother-child relationship. There are some limitations to the use

of this research strategy.

Blehar (1974) presents evidence supporting the disruption of the mother-child relationship in a study of 40 children ranging from two to four years of age. Blehar's research found that the "strange situation" produced increased anxiety, less exploratory behavior, and increased crying among day-care reared children versus those children reared at home. Cochran (1977) and Ricciuti (1974) also report similar results in their studies.

Even though these studies support the differences between home care and day-care children in their attachments to their mothers during the "strange situation" experiment, several basic concerns must be raised: 1) does the "strange situation" reflect a situation likely to be experienced by a child in everyday life? 2) does the "strange situation" really assess the quality of the child's enduring relationship with the mother? and 3) does the "strange situation" give insight into how the child might act in other situations? (Belsky and Steinberg, 1978). These limitations must be kept in mind when viewing the evidence reported on the reactions of children to the "strange situation" experiment.

Moskowitz, Schwarz, and Corsini (1977) found little difference in children having the day-care experience versus home reared children when confronted with a "strange situation." Brookhart and Hock (1976), Doyle (1975), Roopnarine and Lamb (1978), Portnoy and Simmons (1978), and Kagan, Kearsley, and Zelalzo (1976), in their investigations employing the "strange situation," also report little difference between home and day-care reared children. Therefore, a number of studies have conversely found the "strange situation" to have little impact on either population of children.

As another way of measuring emotional development, Caldwell, Wright, Honig, and Tannenbaum (1970) used an assessment instrument rating mother-child attachment. They reported no significant difference between home and day-care reared children as measured by the scale. These findings imply that the child's emotional well-being is not adversely impacted by the day-care experience.

Ricciuti (1976) and Farran and Ramey (1977) have attempted to explore the emotional attachments that day-care reared children develop for their substitute caretakers. The core issue studied by these researchers was to uncover whether children develop a greater attachment to the caretaker at the expense of the attachment to the parents. No evidence found to support a change in emotional attachment in these studies.

In summary, most studies do not report a decline in a child's emotional development because of the day-care experience. Obviously, more research needs to be done on using other types of measurements assessing the impact of substitute care on the emotional development of children reared in day-care. As mentioned earlier, research on day-care has been typically conducted in university based day-care settings -- much research on other forms of substitute care should be conducted to explore how these modal forms impact the child's emotional development and well-being.

### Social Development.

The main thrust of the research dealing with the social development of day-care reared children concerns the impact of such care on peer group relations and on behaviors toward adults (Belsky and Steinberg, 1978).

Research has suggested that day-care and

non day-care children appear to differ in their peer group relations. Ricciuti (1976) found day-care children were more oriented toward other children, less toward their mothers, and engaged in less physical contact with their mothers than their home reared counterparts. Kagan, Kearsley, and Zelazo (1976) also found results similar to those reported by Ricciuti. Lay and Meyer (1974) concluded in their research that day-care children interacted more with age-mates than adults as a general category. McCutcheon and Calhoun (1976) also found that day-care children interacted more with peers than home reared children and were less likely to interact with adults.

Caldwell, Wright, Honig, and Tannenbaum (1970), Lay and Meyer (1974), and Schwarz, Krolick, and Strickland (1973) in a series of important studies on the day-care on impact of day-care on children's social development reported significant differences between day-care and home reared children in three areas. Day-care children were found to be more aggressive, both physically and verbally, than home reared children toward peers and adults. The day-care children were also found to be less cooperative in their relations with adults. Finally, the day-care children appeared to have less tolerance for frustration than home reared children.

Moore (1975) found similar findings to those reported above concerning daycare and home reared children plus several other significant differences between these two populations. These additional differences are that day-care children versus home reared were found to be more assertive, less conforming, less impressed by punishment, less averse to dirt, and more prone to toilet lapses. Lippman and Grote (1974) also found day-care children exhibited less cooperative behavior in several game situations that demanded cooperation for



participants to be successful.

The findings concerning social development suggest that several significant differences have been found between day-care and home reared children. The key differences between the two populations of children appear to be in the area of peer relations, in behavior toward adults, and in behavior toward other children.

### Impact on the Family

Only a limited number of studies have focused on the impact of the day-care experience on the family. Several important findings have emerged from these studies concerning this critical issue.

Falender and Heber (1976) and Ramey and Mills (1975) report that mothers with children in day-care interacted more with their children once they were home than mothers of home reared children. These findings obviously imply that day-care may positively impact the family through increased mother-child interaction.

Lally (1973) reports findings concerning the wider effects of day-care on the family. Lally found mothers of children in day-care were twice as likely to earn high school diplomas as mothers with children in the control group, home reared children. Peters and Elliot (1973) also reported that those families with employed mothers and children in day-care had higher median incomes than families with children waiting to get into care. Other researchers reporting on the same data used by Peters and Elliot looked at the spousal relationship. They found that as satisfaction with day-care increased, so did marital satisfaction and maternal employment satisfaction. This clearly suggests that the effects of day-care could possibly be far reaching for

the family.

One research study mentioned earlier by Golden, Rosenbluth, Grossi, Policare, Freeman, and Brownlee (1978) concluded that day-care had little or no impact on the family. The factors they examined were related to family income, family structure, and family functioning. Golden's findings are inconsistent with the other studies reviewed on day-care and the family. Considering the other studies reporting a positive impact of day-care on the family, it appears further research is needed in this area.

### Summary

Rising rates of maternal employment have resulted in a dramatic increase in the use of out-of-home care, particularly day-care settings, for infants and young children. Whether one sees this trend as positive or negative, potentially reversible or here to stay, it is a demographic reality of tremendous import (Zigler and Gordon, 1982).

During the last decade or so, there has been an outpouring of empirical studies exploring the effects of day-care on the child and a limited number concerning the child's family. Much of this research has been conducted in high quality, often university based, day-care settings and may therefore not be representative of the day-care the majority of pre-school children receive. However, despite this limitation, some important conclusions can be drawn concerning the findings of these studies:

1. For children of advantaged backgrounds, studies have found no differences in intellectual development, as measured mainly by standardized tests, between home reared children and those experiencing day-care. For high-risk chil-

dren (i.e., those from low income families), day-care appears to have a positive impact on their intellectual development.

2. With a few exceptions, studies have not found major differences in mother-child attachment between children reared at home and those reared in day-care. This suggests that day-care does not have a negative impact on a child's emotional development.

3. Day-care appears to impact a child's social development. Compared to home reared children, those children experiencing day-care seem to be more peer oriented and less likely to interact with adults. Behavioral differences related to aggression, assertiveness, and cooperation were also found between home reared and day-care children.

4. A few studies suggest that day-care may have a positive impact on the family system in terms of family income and several other significant areas.

### Policy Implications

It must be remembered that research findings do not exist in vacuo, but have social implications. Underpinning the studies just cited is a distinction that must be made between custodial and developmental day-care. Specifically, the benefits that accrue to those who are enrolled in day-care are available only in high quality programs. For if programs only offer minimal activities, they are nothing more than glorified babysitting services. As noted by the authors of a Women's Liberation document, these types of day-care centers instruct children to be passive through routinizing their curriculum (Steinfels, 1973:29). True education, in-

stead, requires that a challenging and enriched environment be provided for children on a regular basis.

In order to insure excellence among day-care facilities, however, adequate funding must be available for these programs. Throughout the history of day-care, this has not been the case. Many writers blame this situation on the sexist charter of society (Ellis and Petchesky, 1977:101-110; Feinstein, 1979:177-193; Steinfelds, 1973:224-244). That is, if women are conceived to be merely secondary workers, then the need for expanded day-care services is by definition marginal. Clearly this sentiment was centrally important to Nixon's veto of the Comprehensive Child Development Act in 1972.

Conservative economists have a penchant for believing that persons do not choose to work out of economic necessity. Instead, they contend that workforce participation is the result of persons freely choosing among numerous alternatives, one of which is to work. In this case, it is no wonder that the presence of women at the workplace is considered to be temporary, and therefore does not necessitate any serious policy changes with respect to family life. Contrary to this misconception, the majority of women who work outside of the home do so to assure the economic survival of their families (Roby, 1973:3-9). Thus, serious decisions are going to have to be made about future childrearing practices. Particularly, significant improvements will have to be made in terms of funding day-care or many of the current problems such as sexual abuse of children in day-care centers will become commonplace.

Day-care, in short, can no longer be viewed as a luxury. Since many mothers of young children must now seek work, overall shifts in our social priorities must be under-

taken. As Steinfels puts it, day-care is no longer a personal but a political issue, What she means by this is that social decisions about women working must be made on the basis of social values. The fact is that an economic "reality" is shaping attitudes toward work, and thus their changing views toward economic survival must be given appropriate political consideration. Unfortunately the current Reagan administration, along with its conservative economic attitudes, is out of touch with the economic state of American families,

Short of a complete restructuring of society, the following policy considerations must be implemented or quality day-care will not be available to family systems where both parents work.

### Funding

The recent Reagan budget cuts have decimated the budgets of most social service programs, and day-care is no exception. Therefore, money for salary increases and the training of day-care workers is no longer available. The annual wages of day-care workers during the last decade ranged from \$3500 to \$6000 per year (Steinfels, 1973:107). While not diminishing the importance of para-professionals, such low salaries tend to attract only marginal workers. And without the funds necessary to provide these individuals with on-going training, children may be placed in jeopardy. All that may be hired are persons who are concerned with their own survival, as opposed to the welfare of children.

Increased taxes for the general public, however, is not necessarily the only remedy for this situation. Quite frankly, there is only a limited amount of resources that are available, which suggests that current fiscal priorities may have to be re-examined. Al-

though many persons have an aversion to real-locating the funds that are earmarked for the military, the present economic "reality" dictates that this is imperative. That is, if economic reasons mandate that most family members must work, then social solutions to the resulting problems must be sought. Consequently, in order to avoid cutting further social services which are already inadequate, non-social programs might have to be trimmed. This is essential if daycare workers are to receive proper training and wages, so that children are placed in comprehensive programs (Hoffman, 1978:111-112).

Additionally, giving tax rebates to those who can afford to pay for day-care is not an appropriate method for funding this service. Stated simply, this is because it assumes that everyone has the ability to pay their children's matriculation fees. Policies which are based on this assumption are ineffective for two reasons, First, low income persons are not assisted by this procedure, while secondly, the rebate that is received by moderate income families is not sufficient by itself to fund day-care at a proper level. Only through a social, as opposed to an individual, funding strategy can day-care be extended throughout our society. However, taxation and budget reallocations are not the only sources of funding for day-care.

### The Workplace

Employers must become increasingly involved in offering day-care facilities. In order for this to take place, however, this service must be viewed as more than merely a fringe benefit, which employers may or may not elect to provide. Instead, workers must be understood as creating social wealth which can be utilized in any manner they desire. Following this shift in thinking about work, both male and female employees have the right to demand

day-care services as part of the remuneration which they receive for their labor. For if an economic "reality" determines the rate of participation in the labor force, then the products of work should be channelled toward meeting the needs of workers. Most important, this approach to funding social services is predicated upon socially created wealth, as opposed to private philanthropy. This allows women, along with workers in general, to have more control over their lives.

In terms of a family policy, this approach to organizing day-care allows fathers and mothers to remain in close proximity to their children. This does not, however, imply that the traditional images of the family and the female worker are being surreptitiously resurrected, thus requiring that women fill their traditional roles. Because work and the process of allocating the fruits of labor are democratized, women are able to participate fully at the workplace and in any family arrangement that may be chosen. Yet without democratizing work, day-care will only be implemented as part of a policy of securing cheap female labor through tethering women to roles which underutilize their talents (Kanter, 1977). A clear example of this was witnessed during World War II when most factories had day-care services, yet neither women's roles nor their social position improved appreciably. In short, if women are viewed as creating a country's wealth through their labor, then it only makes sense that they must share equally in terms of how these products are distributed. This is possible, however, only when when social wealth is used to facilitate personal growth such as allowing parents to work knowing that quality day-care is available. When conceived in this way day-care is "normalized," or understood to be a legitimate right of every worker (Steinfels, 1973:247).

## Labor Unions

Labor unions must also become more seriously involved in procuring this service for workers than in the past. Labor leaders, consequently, must change their current approach to contract negotiations. Specifically, they must begin to see themselves as caring for the social well-being of workers, instead of merely securing higher salaries for union members. In other words, workers must be able to control the wealth which they generate, thereby enabling social institutions to reflect their needs. As noted in the past, salary increases may not be translated readily into improving the total quality of life for workers. This is because their wages only represent a small portion of the wealth which they actually produce. Unions, therefore, must demand that workers receive all the services which their labor is able to support, which requires that organized labor alter its perception of the purpose of work. If work is understood to further a person's well-being, as opposed to generating only wages, then the outcome of this activity must be used to support workers' claims.

Bronfenbrenner (1970) notes that such an expanded conception of work begins to break down the distinctions which are typically made between play, education, productive work, and the roles traditionally assigned to men and women. Additionally, when persons begin to recognize that their work roles are intimately related to how they interact with their children and other family members, increased social integration is possible. Individuals are able to realize that any personal problem requires a global solution, one which promotes social solidarity. By promoting the idea that work is related closely to family life, unions may inadvertently correct the social fragmentation that is threatening the family system. This type of social unity, moreover, enriches



both family and community existence.

### Community Control

Local control of day-care must be instituted, This means that those who use these services must be directly involved in their planning and organization. In the mid-sixties this type of proposal was quite common, yet community control of day-care was a dismal failure. These programs failed, not because community members were disinterested, but because their efforts were constantly frustrated by both local and federal bureaucrats. Community persons were invited to participate in organizational meetings until they began to take their newly discovered power seriously. Once they became too aggressive, they were hurriedly dismissed from their positions and excluded from any further involvement in community planning (Steinfels, 1973:207-247).

Many social activists argue that community members were easily intimidated simply because their initiatives were not sufficiently politicized. This approach to community activism can be successful only if it is understood against the backdrop of political disenfranchisement in the United States of low and moderate income persons. Individuals must be made aware that they have the right to be self-determining, while also recognizing that this ambition may be blocked by those who hold power. Community control, in other words, must be accompanied by a policy of social democratization, or local control of services will not be achieved. Because day-care in general demands many social reforms, direct community participation in planning various approaches to this issue may stimulate the political awakening that is necessary for these changes to be inaugurated.

### Changes For The Future

Changes must be forthcoming with respect to what is believed to be the functions of the family. Specifically, the family cannot be portrayed in the usual functionalist manner if day-care is to flourish. According to functionalists, the family is supposed to be a microcosm of the larger society and reproduce its goals in children. And as functionalists note, the nuclear family is most appropriate for this undertaking. Yet overwhelmingly it has been documented that children who are enrolled in high quality day-care programs are more peer oriented, less fearful of authority, and more aggressive than is normally expected. In terms of the functionalist ideology, these are undesirable characteristics for families to be instilling in children.

Nonetheless, day-care introduces an entirely new, democratic, or as Habermas suggests, dialogical approach to socialization. The impact of this will certainly be experienced socially. This shift in socialization is commensurate with the general theme which underpins day-care, the need to break with traditional role imagery. Accordingly, day-care is a sort of double-edged sword, as it simultaneously opens society and makes new demands on the citizenry. Persons must be able to meet these challenges to traditional societal imagery for day-care to survive.

In sum, day-care raises many political issues which must be addressed in novel ways. The success of day-care depends upon a correct apprehension of its political implications, so that appropriate supportive policies are formulated. Without such an understanding, this social program will be instituted without the necessary accompanying changes in social values, only to be undercut by traditional social structures.

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