Long term and short term effects of child care

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In the field of early childhood education in New Zealand/Aotearoa there has been much research conducted on the long term as well as short term effects of full time day care on infants. I have chosen this topic as I hold an interest in this area, and personally feel that it is sometimes not in the best interests of an infant to be placed in full time day care. I do understand that there is often not a choice in this for parents, but I would still like to know what effect early childcare may have on the child in their early years and later years as well, to see if my feelings on this topic are justified.

Belsky and Rovine (1988), conducted a study on the effects that non maternal care in the first years of life have on children as they continue to develop. From the study that it was found that if an infant, especially in the first year of life, spends more than 20 hours in non maternal care they may be at a higher risk of developing an insecure attachment with their mother and the infant-mother bond will not be as strong. With extensive non parental care the study showed that the child may even develop an avoidance of their mother and in some cases children start to develop insecure attachment issues with the mother and the father (Belsky & Rovine, 1988). The research goes on to say that the findings from their research is consistent with other research performed using similar testing methods during a similar time frame (Belsky & Rovine, 1988).

Brandtjen and Verny (2001) also undertook an analysis of the many different research projects and from their analyses they drew several conclusions. The main finding was similar to that of Belsky and Rovine (1988), that full time day care can be very stressful on infants as well as toddlers and that this stress can cause negative affects on the brain development of the child (Brandtjen & Verny, 2001). Some of the other effects found in this study showed children; experiencing low self-esteem, anxiety, fear, depression and often a sense of rejection from their mother. It was believed by Brandtjen and Verny that a child who experiences non maternal care may not have a strong and secure child mother attachment, although this contradicts many culturally based studies on child rearing. For example in the Māori culture, child rearing is viewed as a community based task where all in the whānau and community get involved (Ka’ai, Moorfield, Reilly & Mosley, 2004).

Dettling, Gunnar and Donzella (1999) have studied the cortisol levels of children included in full time day care. Cortisol is a hormone that can be used as a stress indicator. Tests both in the home environment as well as the day care environment found that within the home environment stress levels decreased in the afternoon, shown as an indicator of a largely stress free environment, but tests during the day at a day care centre showed children being stressed at this time. Unfortunately no evidence could be given as to what the cause of the stress was, but it can be proven that it was increased (Dettling et al., 1999). This raises the issue of course as to how ethical this research can be, as there is no
guarantee that the same circumstances and scenarios will occur in both the home and day care environment.

Vandell (2004) held the belief that the quality of the child care service in which the child is enrolled can determine the effects that this has on a child’s development. She felt that there can be many positive outcomes for children’s development if they experience a high quality environment (Vandell, 2004). Some of the benefits listed by Vandell (2004) are: academic, social, and cognitive as well as language. Vandell (2004) points out that the more time a child spends within a day care centre away from maternal care, the more behavioural issues arise with the children. Nomaguchi (2006) also carried out a study focusing on the association between non parental care, maternal employment, mother and child interactions and the child’s development/outcome in preschool. This research indicated that the more positive experiences between the mother and the child the less incidence of behavioural problems, such as those listed by Brandtjen and Verny, (2001) occurred. According to Nomaguchi (2006), once a mother works there is often a decrease in the positive interactions between mother and child, though this only becomes apparent once the child is over 4 years of age.

Stamm (2011) looked at children being placed in day care and parents, especially mothers, returning to the work force. She observed that non parental care of a child for small amounts of time during the day away from the family did not seem to have any negative effect on a child’s development in the day care years (Stamm, 2011). It was noted however that once an increase of days and hours spent in a day care occurs it can begin to have an impact. It may cause the child, as stated by Stamm (2011), to have an increase in aggression. Other factors that can be detrimental are: the quality of the day care the child has been placed in, the amount of time the child is spends at the centre and the age at which the child started attending the centre. Starting too young Stamm (2011) says, can impact the growth of social development within children.

**Longitudinal Studies of Early Childhood Care**

Vandell, Burchinal, Vandergrift, Belsky and Steinberg (2010) undertook a study to see what effects, if any, were seen on children in their mid adolescence (age 15) if they had been placed in full time day care as young as four. The findings showed that if the child had attended full time day care there was a quality enhancement in the social, cognitive and academic development of children at an early age (Vandell et al., 2010). Testing was undertaken on children at ages 1, 6, 15, 24, 36 and 54 months old, and again in Grades 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 as well as Grade 6, followed by final testing at aged 15years. During the testing Vandell et al., (2010) looked at the quality of day care, the type of day care and also the quantity attended. The final testing looked at cognitive ability, tests of achievement, picture vocabulary and verbal analogies.

This research shows a consistency with other studies that high quality care may increase academic and social development in both disadvantaged and middle class participants. Vandell et al., (2010) and Steinberg (2010) noted that if a child had been in a high quality early learning centre as a child then at 15 years of age they saw an increase in their achievement, shown through a variety of tests conducted. It was also found that students at age 15 years who had more
hours of non relative care between birth and 4.1 years had a higher level of risk taking and larger level of impulsivity (Vandell, et al., 2010). This was tested through an audio computer assisted self-interview (drawn from prior studies on adolescents). However Vandell et. al. (2010) add, that a child care centre could not be directly linked to overall academic achievement or behavioural problems.

Ispa, Gray and Thornburg (1987) looked at college students to see how non relative/parental care effected their social, emotional and academic achievement. The group were broken up into seven groups based on the amount of non relative care they had, and what kind of care they received at infancy, age 2 and age 4. The results showed an increase in test results for children who had been in full time parental care from infancy until age two and then full time or part time care after that (Ispa, et al., 1987). This was compared to children who had part time infancy care and full time centre care at ages two and four. Ispa et al. (1987) stated that full time parental care in infancy followed by full time day care at ages two and four, showed that most stood out with the highest test results in higher functions as well as higher ratings in both male and female participants with their school grade point average. The next group with higher scores showing the second best result was the infants who had parent only care then part time care as of age 2 and 4 (ibid.).

Belsky and Steinberg (1978) performed a similar study to see what effects full time day care had on the cognitive and emotional development of children. They came to the determination that in relation to the cognitive development for an infant under 18 months, it made no difference whether they where in full time parental care or centre care. However after 18 months positive effects could be seen in children entering a high quality care centre especially from children in the higher risk population (ibid.). When it came to looking at the emotional development Belsky and Steinberg noted a difference could be seen in the child’s relationship with his or her mother if they were not in a day care. A stronger bond was evident and no attachment issues seen. For those in a centre an infant great distress could be seen, especially when it came to separating the child and the mother (ibid.).

**Conclusion**

The research into long and short term effects of full time day care for under three’s has been very interesting. I have seen that for every story there are two sides and many of the studies are ‘on the same page’ with this topic. It was noted by almost every article that day care at a very young age can be detrimental to the child but it seems that after the age of 18 months or two years, benefits become evident in a child’s social and cognitive development. I have also found it interesting to see the research of Vandell et al. (2010) compared to the research of Ispa et al. (1987). Even though there is a time lapse between the two published articles, the outcomes and conclusions drawn are very similar. The two studies assert that day care can hold a positive effect to mid adolescence if children have had parental only care for the first two years of life. I have now come to the conclusion, according to the research that I have read, that there are most definitely benefits to day care for children over the age of two and these benefits include cognitive and emotional development. For under two year olds day care can be a very stressful experience if the quality of care is at variance.
References


