

The Effects of Childcare on Social Development

The following extracts are taken from the article 'Nursery Tales' written by Madaleine Bunting, published in The Guardian 8th July, 2004. The full article is available at <http://education.guardian.co.uk/earlyyears/story/0,,1367593,00.html>

Too much too young - what the experts say

On the bookshelves of most parents there will be a tatty copy of at least one of Penelope Leach's books on raising children. She has picked her way carefully through the changing expectations of mothers, adapting earlier advice to a new generation of working mothers. She chooses her battles carefully, but she believes the day nursery debate is one she now has to get into. Since 1998, she has been co-director of the largest ever UK study of childcare from birth to school age, Families, Children and Child Care (FCCC). The first results are only now being submitted for academic publication, but initial findings fit with those from other studies in the US and the UK: "It is fairly clear from data from different parts of the world that the less time children spend in group care before three years, the better. Infants spending as little as 12 hours a week in day nurseries - this is such a low threshold that it covers almost all infants in this childcare setting - showed slightly lower levels of social development and emotional regulation (less enthusiastic cooperation, concentration, social engagement and initiative) as toddlers.

"The tendency of government policy for more day-nursery provision to the exclusion of other types of childcare is extremely short-sighted; it's easier for an infant to catch up on cognitive skills later on, but they can't catch up on insecure attachment. The trend towards more day nurseries is out of kilter with what the research is finding.

"We know from research that staff in nurseries tend to be firstly, more detached - less sensitive and responsive - towards the children and there is more "flatness of affect", a subtle but very important characteristic which means that there is no differentiation in response to a child, a sort of blandness.

"Somewhere after two years, as the children begin to relate more to each other than to the adult, then high-quality, group-based care becomes an unequivocal benefit. But for the first 18 months, all the international research shows us the importance of lots of attention from a carer who thinks the infant is the cat's whiskers. It may even be less important that those caring for the under two-year-olds are trained, as that they have the right attitude to children - that they are warm, responsive, talkative and funny."

Leach's conclusion is that while it might be possible to provide good-quality nursery care with well-paid, highly motivated staff for the under-threes (and some, including the well-funded government's centres of excellence, manage it), it is very expensive because the ratio of carers to infants needs to be as close to one-on-one as possible. At present, the state-regulated ratio is one adult to three for the under-tuos, and one to four for two-year-olds. Instead of the government expanding nursery daycare for infants, Leach has been urging Treasury officials in her submissions to their childcare review to give parents a range of choices including longer and better-paid parental leave policies. She also argues strongly in favour of giving parents a choice of childcare, with more support for non-group based care such as childminders and nannies, which both come very well out of the research. As president of the National Childminding Association, she advocates a shift in tack to support these Cinderellas of the British childcare system. Their numbers dropped dramatically in the late 90s from 120,000 to 70,000, hit by a few dramatic cases of children who died while being cared for by people described as childminders, even if in fact they were au pairs. Her concern is that the adverse publicity of a dramatic case of abuse gets headlines; an increase in emotional insecurity of children spread across thousands of children does not.

The two biggest longitudinal studies in the world on the impact of childcare on infants have come to strikingly similar conclusions. In America, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) published conclusions last summer that were remarkably similar to those of the UK study, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE). Both make for uncomfortable reading. The NICHD, which has been following more than 1,000 children since 1991, concluded that, "The more time children spend in childcare from birth to age four-and-a-half, the more adults

tended to rate them as less likely to get along with others, as more assertive, as disobedient and as aggressive. It also found that group care is more punitive than other forms of childcare. The EPPE study focused predominantly on the impact of pre-school education on three- and four-year-olds. It concluded that it was of great benefit for cognitive and social skills, but buried in the small print it acknowledged that "high levels of group care before the age of three (and particularly before the age of two) were associated with higher levels of anti-social behaviour at age three" (interestingly, it can improve infants cognitive skills). But the EPPE study acknowledged that while high-quality group care could reduce the level of "anti-social/worried behaviour", it could not eliminate it.

All this research is grist to the mill of Professor Jay Belsky, of the Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues at Birkbeck, University of London. An American with a florid turn of phrase, he has cast himself since the mid-80s in the role of the Jeremiah foretelling doom as day-nursery provision first took off in the US. He claims that his career has been blighted ever since. Initially, he found no evidence that daycare carried risks, but, "In 1986, I began to see a slow, steady trickle of disconcerting evidence which I could no longer explain away and maintain my intellectual honesty. I pointed out that the evidence indicated risks firstly, when care was initiated in the first year of life, secondly, when infants received daycare of more than 20 hours a week and which was continuous until school. At the time, both were rapidly becoming the norm in America. I was portrayed as someone who wanted women in the kitchen; people who had lauded my career now said I had manipulated and distorted the evidence."

Belsky's concerns and the ensuing row was one of the factors which led to the setting up of the NICHD study at the cost of more than \$100m (£54m). Belsky worked on the study; he argues that it has vindicated his concerns. The team observed mother-infant interaction for the first 36 months of the baby's life: "We found that the more time the infant spent in care, the less sensitive and harmonious relations were between mother and child at six, 15, 24 and 36 months."

"The biggest risk factor for insecure attachment is insensitive mothering and the impact of that is significantly increased by any one of three risk factors: more than 10 hours of nursery daycare a week in the first year; a change in the childcare arrangements in the infant's first year, and low-quality daycare."

"In the late 1990s, the NICHD studies concluded that the more time children spent in childcare, irrespective of its quality, the more aggressive and disobedient they were between two and six years old, especially so for group care. The mantra in childcare became quality, quality, but the outcomes we saw were not just a function of low quality. What we found was that good quality care predicted better cognitive and linguistic functioning - there's good news as well as bad here - but the more time in care, the more aggressive the child was at two. That aggression disappeared by three but was back at four-and-a-half and older. Those kids scored higher for aggression, disobedience and neediness." Belsky concedes that he is talking about small average increases - day nurseries do not lead to an increased number of psychopaths - but argues that if large amounts of care in day nurseries for infants are now the norm of American childhood, and likely to become the norm in the UK, the incremental impact has to be considered.

"We have to ask whether a teacher with a class of 30 children, most of whom have been in daycare, is likely to find half of them are a little more aggressive and disobedient? Would that mean the teacher has to spend more time managing the class rather than teaching it? We have to consider the consequences of more and more children spending more and more time in group childcare arrangements, most of which are not high quality. No one wants to be responsible for making mothers feel guilty, but this has to be openly and honestly discussed."

What concerns Belsky since he arrived in the UK in 1999 is that the UK is gradually adopting the American model of high maternal employment, mothers going back to work earlier and high levels of daycare. He has made himself the bete-noire of many researchers on both sides of the Atlantic with his tendency to use inflammatory metaphors; he talks of "a steady trickle of pollution seeping into a lake" as cohorts of daycare children grow up.

While Belsky seems happy to stir up controversy and is, therefore, anathema in some government policymaking circles, his close colleague at Birkbeck, Professor Ted Melhuish, picks his words more carefully. He is probably the most respected academic in the field of childcare in the UK; he worked on the EPPE study, and is heading the £16m

evaluation of the government's flagship programme for pre-school children, Sure Start. He has just completed a review of all the international research on childcare for the National Audit Office, which found other studies, such as one from Norway, substantiating the Anglo-American research.

"The quantity of daycare under the age of two affects some aspects of social development - there's a slight risk of increased disruptive, anti-social behaviour and children less likely to obey rules and be less cooperative," he tells me. "You start to see it once children are spending 20-25 hours in daycare and the risks increase when they are spending more than 40 hours in daycare, which is not atypical if the woman is in full-time employment with two commutes." What preoccupies him is whether it is possible to identify what causes these negative consequences, and if they could be reduced: "We know the importance for infants in the first two years of responsive, individual attention for significant parts of the day to develop their socio-interactive skills. We also know that the responsiveness of group care is much less than in other childcare settings such as childminders. To improve the responsiveness of group care requires maintaining very high staff-infant ratios and keeping staff turnover down to an absolute minimum: both are very expensive."

High turnover is a persistent problem in day nurseries in the UK and it typically runs at 30 to 40%. Low pay, low status and poor training combine to attract what one researcher described as the "dregs of the labour market". Quality childcare will, simply, not be widely available unless the right people can be attracted to do the job.

Melhuish agrees with Leach that, "for the first 18 months to two years of life, the cost of good-quality care is potentially very high, and is comparable in cost to paid parental leave for two years." Like Belsky and Leach, he has been giving advice to the government that unless you compromise on quality, the cost of subsidising childcare for the under-twos is broadly comparable to generous parental leave. He points to the case of Sweden as evidence of what parents might want if they had a real choice: "The Swedish case is very revealing - there was high-quality infant care available to all and heavily subsidised. It was widely used in the 70s and 80s, but in the early 90s, parental leave was increased and now there is remarkably little use of childcare under 18 months. Parents voted with their feet."

Fresh air and open fires - how the Danes do it

The scene at the Haven nursery in Aarhus, Denmark, epitomises Denmark's reputation for innovative, pioneering childcare. A 14-month-old crawls slowly down wide-spaced wooden steps while the childcare worker watches from a distance. Children aged from one to six years play in the sand and among the bushes which surround this large playground. Much of their time is spent outside and the emphasis on fresh air is very evident in the Danish childcare system; these toddlers take their afternoon nap in waterproof steel cots outdoors, winter and summer.

In one corner of the playground is a hearth surrounded by big stones for open fires; the children often bake bread there. In another corner, there are hens, while another has vegetables growing; the pedagogues, as the staff are called, might be talking quietly with a small group or working alongside a few children on the garden. Their role is not to dominate or organise the children; their intervention is subtle, gently ensuring the children's welfare and play without being too intrusive. Inside the nursery, there are few toys, no computers and few displays; the idea is that the children play more with each other and develop more imaginative games without toys.

Denmark and Sweden are frequently cited as the trump card in the nursery debate; they have universal nursery provision from six months to six years, and there have been no detrimental effects. Nurseries have huge popular support and are an established feature of every community, runs the argument. It is true that Denmark has one of the highest maternal employment rates in the world and one of the highest birthrates among industrialised nations; of all the developed countries, Denmark can probably lay claim to having solved the conundrum of women working and child-rearing. More than 90% of children over the age of three are in full-time childcare, and more than 50% of children under three. The state heavily subsidises childcare and the staff are well paid and very well trained.

But look more closely at the Danish system, and it is not quite the trump proponents of nursery care claim it to be. Childcare starts late; most mothers stay off work for the first year under generous paid parental leave. Plus, two-thirds of

children under three in state-subsidised childcare are not in nurseries, but looked after by childminders in their homes. Growing financial pressures on the system are evident, too. There have been staff cuts at the Haven, and the staff-children ratios have dropped to shockingly low levels; in the afternoons, two adults are responsible for 18 children aged from one to six. Recent research shows that the amount of time staff give to each child has dropped by 30% in recent years.

Despite some of the recent negative findings, Benedicta's faith in the system is unshaken. A mother of two sons, she is currently unemployed but it never occurred to her to look after the children full-time: "They are with their friends. At home with me they would very quickly become bored. It's important for children to learn social skills and they learn that better in a neutral place than at home."

There are some in Denmark who believe that the system might have deskilled parents and reduced their confidence in their own capacities, but the faith in the childcare system to more than make good that deficit is still unshaken, and given the high investment in the system and the strong ideals which underpin it, it's probably justified. A generation ago, parenting in Denmark became a profession and a paid job.

What you need to do...

This article contains a range of views on the childcare debate. Read the article and then summarise the views of:

- (a) Penelope Leach
- (b) Jay Belsky
- (c) Ted Melhuish

Which do you think puts forward the most convincing view? Explain your answer.

How does daycare differ in Sweden and Denmark? Does this shed light on the debate?