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Is Your Child in a Center-Based Day Care? Research Shows No Need for Concerns About Behavioral Issues

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Do more hours in center-based care cause more externalizing problems? A cross-national replication study

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Previous research indicates that extensive time in early center-based day care is correlated with high levels of behavior problems in young children. However, the validity of this work has been controversial and its relevance outside of the United States has been called into question. New research used longitudinal databases from Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Canada, and the United States to better understand whether time in early center-based child care centers harms children. The study was released in Child Development by researchers at Boston College, the University of Oslo, the University of Minnesota, the German Youth Institute, the German Institute for International Educational Research, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Utrecht University, the University of Montreal, the University of Bordeaux, and the Norwegian Center for Behavioral Development.

“This is the first study on the topic to bring together analyses of data from multiple countries with diverse sociopolitical contexts, allowing us to address concerns of generalizability and replicability in the literature,” as explained by lead author Catalina Rey-Guerra, Codirector of Fundación Apapacho and Fellow of the Institute of Early Childhood Policy at Boston College. “Testing and research showed almost no evidence that extensive time in early child care centers causes behavior problems in young children. The results are reassuring for parents whose children spend time in center-based care while they are working.”

Researchers examined whether within-child changes in center-based care predicted changes in externalizing problems, such as arguing, biting, or fighting, in 10,105 toddlers and preschoolers (49% female) across data collected from 1993 to 2012. The data were analyzed across seven studies including Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, two from Canada and two from the United States. The countries vary in their relevant social policies for family leave and public provision and regulation of Early Childhood Education and Care (for example center-based care enrollment and maternity leave varies by country). Race/ethnicity data were only collected in the United States (57% and 80% White; 42% and 13% African American; 1.2% and 5% Latinx).

Information from teacher externalizing problems reports were used when available, otherwise parent reports were drawn on. Teacher and/or parent reports varied across country and included assessments of behaviors such as hits, bites, kicks other children" and "fights more," "fights or bullies other children" and "can be spiteful to others," "restless and can't sit still," and "child argues a lot." In most studies, care quantity was measured by the number of hours per week that children attended center-based care excluding any other types of care arrangements (such as home care by a parent, group care by a relative or a nonrelative) reported by the main caregiver (most of the times mothers) at each time point.

Across a variety of statistical tests and across seven datasets from five countries, researchers found almost no evidence that extensive time in early center-based child care causes behavior problems in young children. Additionally, the studies showed no evidence that the association between center-based care and externalizing problems differed as a function of family income or parent education, despite considerable socioeconomic variation in each of the seven samples.

The authors acknowledge several limitations in their research. The research only examined short-term effects so they are unable to address whether longer term harm from center-based care might emerge. Additionally, the samples in the current study were not nationally-representative, although, they represented different populations across the socioeconomic status distribution. Further research needs to explore whether these results might generalize to children living in sociopolitical contexts that are different from those in high-income countries. Researchers were unable to examine what would have happened if children in the studies were not enrolled in center-based care entered care and those with disadvantaged backgrounds (i.e., unemployed parents, low income, and single-parent households) were over-represented among those who never entered center care. Thus, an added measure of caution is needed when generalizing the current study's results to these children.

"Understanding whether time in early child care harms children and how pervasive any such harm may be, is critical for guiding global social and economic policy," said Rey-Guerra. "Healthy economies depend on parents of young children participating in the workforce in ways that ensure healthy development for their children and the future economy. Considering this, continued research into practices and policies that ensure early child care supports the well-being of children, and families should remain an international priority."

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Summarized from Child Development, Do More Hours in Center-based Care Cause More Externalizing Problems? A Cross-National Replication Study by Rey-Guerra, C. (Boston College), Zachrisson, H.D. (Boston College and University of Oslo), Dearing, E. (Boston College and University of Oslo), Berry, D. (University of Minnesota), Kuger, S. (German Youth Institute and German Institute for International Educational Research), Burchinal, M.R. (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Nærde, A. (The Norwegian Center for Child Behavioral Development), van Huizen, T. (Utrecht University), and Côté, S. M. (University of Montreal and University of Bordeaux). Copyright 2022 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.