

Another Academic Salvo in the Nation's 'Mommy Wars'

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WASHINGTON

JAY Belsky was 33 years old, a rising young star in the discipline of human development, when he received what he now calls "my lesson in the science of political correctness and the Mommy Wars."

The year was 1986; Dr. Belsky was an associate professor at Pennsylvania State University. Eight years earlier, he had won accolades for research showing that, despite the anxiety over child care, the children were not suffering. Working mothers everywhere had breathed a sigh of relief.

And then their savior changed his mind.

"A slow, steady trickle of evidence," Dr. Belsky recalls, had built up to persuade him that infants who spent long hours in child care were at risk of behavioral problems later on. He published his views in a little-known newsletter, under the headline "Infant Day Care: A Cause for Concern?" And he opened with a personal disclaimer: his two young sons were cared for by their stay-at-home mother.

It was as if he had advocated infanticide.

"I was a pariah," Dr. Belsky says, "a phantom."

Colleagues shunned him at scientific meetings. A textbook he co-wrote wouldn't sell; the publisher removed his name from the second edition. Critics called him a misogynist, and worse. At the height of the frenzy, Dr. Belsky remembers, he gave a talk in New York. Scanning the crowd, he felt a flash of paranoia: "I thought, somebody is going to walk down this aisle and shoot me."

This week, Dr. Belsky, now 48 and a professor at the University of London, felt those old twinges once again. This time, the city was Minneapolis. There he presented results from a comprehensive study of child care, led by more than a dozen researchers and paid for by the National Institutes of Health, that was initiated a decade ago, largely to address criticisms of his earlier work.

Once again, the news was not upbeat: the more time young children spent being cared for by someone other than their mothers, the more likely they were to be aggressive, demanding and disobedient as kindergartners. (In the group studied — 1,100 children in 10 cities — only a small amount of care was provided by



Steve Wewerka for The New York Times

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fathers, Dr. Belsky said.)

And once again, Dr. Belsky, now feeling ever so slightly vindicated, is ruffling feathers. In an interview, he seemed as though he rather enjoys it. Or at least, he has gotten used to it.

"I'm not a person who is the least bit hesitant to say the politically incorrect thing, to challenge the status quo," he said early Friday morning, having spent the previous day making the rounds on television. "I have a reputation of being a difficult person. But one of the reasons I'm a difficult person is because I won't lie down and play dead."

That difficult streak did not begin in childhood, Dr. Belsky believes; he describes himself as quite straight-laced and dutiful as a boy. He grew up on Long Island, in Valley Stream. His parents owned a luncheonette on 39th Street in Manhattan, and he fondly recalls working summers there.

"I can say, in complete objectivity, that my father's corned beef and pastrami sandwiches rivaled those of all the famous delis."

As a child, he dreamed of attending West Point — not to become a soldier, but "to serve my country." He applied and was accepted, only to decline because he had concluded that the Vietnam War was misguided. He wound up instead at Georgetown University, where, he says, he was struck by "a classic identity crisis" that was resolved when he spotted a

classmate with a bunch of preschoolers in tow.

"Where did you get those?" Dr. Belsky remembers asking, somewhat flippantly. His friend, it turned out, volunteered at a campus day care center.

In short order, Dr. Belsky signed up. He had found his calling. He transferred to Vassar College, because it had a nursery school, graduated in 1974 and went on to obtain a doctorate in human development at Cornell, where he wrote the child care paper that brought him his initial acclaim.

When he joined the faculty of Penn State, he and his wife, Ann, from whom he is now divorced, helped create an infant day-care program. But around the same time, Dr. Belsky said, his review of the literature on child care began to nag at him.

One study, he said, linked child care to tantrums, a finding he and others had dismissed because it was based on mothers' reports. Another connected child

care to problems with the infant-mother bond, but was discounted because it involved only the poor.

"It got to the point," Dr. Belsky said, "where I felt like a pretzel, twisting and turning, trying to explain these things away. By 1986, I said, 'I can't do this anymore.'"

TODAY, some of the same scientists who attacked Dr. Belsky's 1986 warning as ill-considered and flawed are his co-authors on the N.I.H. research. Most of them are women, and Dr. Belsky is not shy about saying he thinks he breeds extra resentment because he is a man.

He notes, quite pointedly, that while he was criticized for keeping his children out of day care, his colleagues were never criticized for putting theirs in.

As for the study's findings, researchers have still not answered the biggest question: what might cause a link between day care and aggression? The study ruled out socioeconomic status and quality of care, although some of Dr. Belsky's co-authors still think quality is a factor. He bristles at the suggestion, yet says at the same time that the days of his "knockdown, drag-out battles" appear to be over.

"At least," he said, "I don't feel like I'm being hung in effigy yet."