

Too Much Day Care Adversely Affects Mother-Child Bond

Media Mislead Parents About Child-Care Study

BY LINDA CHAVEZ

Every working mother I know is anxious about having someone else care for her young child while she's at work. Not to worry—a new government study says that placing a preschooler in child care won't hurt and may actually help the child.

At least, that's how the media touted the recent findings of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's \$30-million study of early child care. *Time* magazine headlined its story "The Kids Are All Right," noting that day care is "mostly harmless, sometimes helpful and less important than home."

The *New York Times* heralded "Good Day Care Found to Aid Cognitive Skills of Children," and most other newspapers followed suit.

Oh, that it were so.

In fact, the study itself raised some important concerns about the effect of day care on both children and their mothers. True, high-quality day care improved cognitive development for some children, mainly those from low-income families or whose mothers suffered from depression. But the study also found that too much day care adversely affects the mother-child bond, especially among middle-class mothers and their children.

Day-Care Mothers Less Sensitive to Babies

The researchers observed that middle-class mothers whose youngsters spent more than 10 hours per week in day care were less sensitive and engaged with their babies at 6, 15 and 36 months than were mothers who stayed at home with their children. And the day-care babies were less affectionate to their mothers at 24 months and 36 months, as well. The researchers measured mother-child relations by watching how mothers interacted with their children, how much they talked to their babies, whether they hugged and kissed them, and whether they were sensitive to their babies' needs even when the babies weren't crying in distress.

I suspect—though the study didn't attempt to address this issue—that many of these working moms were less attentive because they were tired and stressed out after spending long hours at work only to come home to more responsibilities. One study of mothers of young children showed these women spend a weekly average of 70 to 80 hours working on the job and at home.

For many mothers, the job may actually prove a haven from the tension at home. As one mother of two described her situation to sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*: "I usually come to work early just to get away from the house. . . . The more I get out of the house, the better I am. It's a terrible thing to say, but that's the way I feel." Hochschild says that increasing numbers of women are finding out what many men

have long known—"work can be an escape from the pressures of home."

No one can predict exactly what all this will mean for the long-term development of this generation of children, but can it possibly be good? For a generation now, academics, government researchers and feminist organizations have been trying to reassure mothers that it was perfectly harmless to

leave their babies in others' care so that they could return to work quickly.

During this time, more and more women have heeded the advice. In 1960, less than 20% of mothers with young children worked. Today, more than 40% of mothers with children under 6 years work full-time, and about another 20% work part-time. Economic necessity drives some of these

women back to work, but it is far from the major reason. Upper-income mothers are just about as likely to return to work soon after their babies are born as are working-class moms.

In barely one generation, we've experienced a revolution in child rearing, with fewer youngsters than ever being cared for in their early years primarily by their mothers. If some of us are feeling anxious and more than a little guilty about our decisions to let others raise our children, maybe we should start heeding our own instincts. Maybe moms intuitively know something the experts are just finding out. ■

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