

[Child Day Care Comes Under Fire](#)

Category : [December 1988](#)

Published by Anonymous on Dec. 02, 1988

Child Day Care Comes Under Fire

Zinsmeister, Karl There is a growing conviction that modern parents need more help from society in bringing up the next generation of Americans. Yet the national day-care debate often ignores a central question: What effect does it have on our children?

Research indicates that as much as half of one's adult character may be formed by the age of four. And a growing and worrisome body of evidence suggests that when infants and toddlers go into full-time day care, long-term emotional, intellectual and cultural damage can result.

A number of investigators have found that when babies less than one-year old placed in day care, many of them - perhaps half - develop weak and insecure bonds with their parents, bonds that are thought to be crucial to healthy later development.

One recent study in Chicago examined 110 children of affluent, intact families. Half were cared for full-time by parents; half had stable, high-quality caretakers in their homes because both parents worked. The substitute-care infants turned out to have significantly less secure relationships with their mothers, as measured by a standard scored psychological test. The researchers concluded that many infants interpret repeated daily separations from their working mothers as rejection, which they cope with by withdrawing. Related studies elsewhere have found similar alienation problems.

Other follow-up those studies of children as old as 10 have shown that those with a record of early non-parental care tend to exhibit more serious aggression, less cooperation, less patience, more misbehavior and a pattern of social conflict or withdrawal. A study of 5- to 8-year-olds who had spent of their first years at a

highly regarded day-care center at the University of North Carolina found them more likely to hit, push, kick, threaten, swear and argue than children who were not in day care or who started later. Research on middle-class third-graders in the Dallas, Texas, area found that children who had spent extensive time in day care were more uncooperative, less popular and had lower grades, poorer study skills and less self-esteem than their counterparts who were cared for predominantly by a parent.

Of course, individual circumstances such as a child's temperament and family status can have a lot to do with how well he or she adapts to day care. The nature and quality of the program makes a difference too; so does whether the care is full-or part-time. Age at enrollment also seems to be critical. What might be disorienting for a child under three often can be handled adequately by an older preschooler. In addition, large numbers of children apparently suffer no negative effects; and there remains much that we don't know. But the findings already accumulated ought to give us pause in our uncritical plunge toward more child-raising by hire.

Even before the latest troubling evidence appeared, many leading child-development experts were expressing doubts. Penelope Leach, the British psychologist and author of perhaps the most influential child-raising handbook in America at the moment, *Your Baby and Child*, speaks out regularly against group care for infants, insisting that babies need one-on-one tending.

Dr. Benjamin Spock has for years resisted infant day care. He states, "It is stressful to children to have to cope with groups, with strangers, with people outside the family. That has emotional effects, and, if the deprivation of security, is at all marked, it will have intellectual effects, too."

Burton White, the former director of the Harvard Preschool Project and author of *The First Three Years of Life* says that "After more than 30 years of research on how children develop well, I would not think of putting an infant or toddler of my own into any substitute-care program on a full-time basis, especially a center-based program. "Unless you have a very good reason," he writes, "I urge you not to delegate the primary child-rearing task to anyone else during your child's first three years of life. Babies form their first human attachment only once."

The deepest truth about paid child rearing is that it is rarely more than a weak stand-in for parental care. Someone is being asked to do for money what few of us are able to do for any reason other than love. It will always be difficult to find persons who feel such affinity for an unrelated child that they will repeatedly go out of their way to do the tiny, precious things that make children thrive rather than merely survive: giving a reason rather than just saying no; rewarding a small triumph with a joyful expression.

A child and a parent are bound eternally, by blood and destiny. A day-care worker in doing a job. If he or she manages simply to be a kind friend and reliable guardian, that is all anyone ought to expect. Giving the child the rest of what he so urgently needs - a self-image, a moral standard, life ambitions and a sense of permanent love - is too much to ask of anyone other than parents.

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