Future Directions for Day Care Research: An Ecological Analysis

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ABSTRACT: The present state of our knowledge regarding the impact of child care outside the home is summarized in order to highlight our limited understanding of the day care phenomenon. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) recently postulated model of the ecology of human development is then presented in terms of day care to provide the foundation of a theoretical analysis of the potential influences of this approach to child rearing. With this ecological model described, important, but as yet generally unresearched and thus unanswered questions regarding the effects of day care are considered at each ecological level of analysis: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The issues raised highlight the need to look beyond the influence of day care on the developing child to its possible impact upon the family, community, and society.

Increasing rates of single parenthood and maternal employment over the past decades have sparked concomitant increases in the need for and utilization of alternative care arrangements for children (Child Care Data and Materials, 1978). Not surprisingly, these changes have themselves generated a great deal of concern in the minds of policymakers, program administrators, human developmentalists, and parents about the short- and long-term consequences of day care. Ever since the publication in 1970 of the first empirical study dealing with this issue (Caldwell, Wright, Honig, & Tannenbaum, 1970), a large body of research has been generated in an attempt to determine the consequences of this approach to child rearing.

Given the initial fears of many that such substitute care outside the home might detrimentally impact young children, it is not surprising that the available research data on day care primarily concerns its effects upon children’s social, emotional and intellectual functioning. With the exception of Peters (1973) early, and thus noteworthy Pennsylvania study,
relatively few investigations have evidenced an appreciation of the fact that the effects of substitute child care may extend beyond the development of children experiencing such care. There is clear need, then, for day care research of an order different from that which has generally characterized the first decade of study of this relatively modern approach to child rearing. The primary purpose of the present paper, therefore, is to explore some potential effects of day care which have not as yet received sufficient empirical attention in hopes of stimulating, and guiding future inquiry in this field. Before proceeding to this task the present state of our knowledge regarding the effects of day care will be briefly summarized and critiqued.

Present Knowledge

The summary of research findings to follow is derived from a recently completed review, commissioned by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, concerning the effects of day care (Bronfenbrenner, Belsky, & Steinberg, 1977; Belsky & Steinberg, 1978). Following the outline of this review the present summary will consider the impact of day care on the child’s intellectual, emotional, and social development. It should be noted that no attempt will be made to empirically document the conclusions that follow as the critical analysis of day care research upon which these statements are based is available in published form elsewhere (Belsky & Steinberg, 1978). The interested reader is encouraged to pursue this work.

Intellectual Development: In general, the available research evidence indicates that day care has neither beneficial or deleterious effects upon children’s intellectual development. Some qualification of this statement is in order, however, as there is some recent evidence indicating that center based day care services do attenuate the repeatedly observed declines in IQ of children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. More simply put, poor children enrolled in day care centers in the infant years perform better on standardized tests of intelligence at two and three years of age than do their home reared counterparts.

Emotional Development: The weight of the empirical evidence clearly indicates that day care is not disruptive of children’s emotional ties to their mothers, even when child care outside the home is initiated in the first years of life. Furthermore, there is no indication that exposure to day care decreases children’s preference for mother in comparison to an alternative familiar caregiver.

Social Development: In regard to social development, defined as interpersonal relations with persons other than the child’s parents, the existing