



LESSONS IN LEARNING

Why is high-quality child care essential? The link between quality child care and early learning

May 31, 2006

Prepared by the Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre

In Canada today, there are over 2 million children under the age of six. Two-thirds of these children have a mother who works.

The most recent Statistics Canada figures on working mothers show that women with children under the age of three are participating in the paid labour force in ever-increasing numbers, rising from 28% in 1976 to 63% in 2003. The percentage of women with children between the ages of three and five in the paid workforce in 2003 was even higher, at 69%.¹

The majority of these working mothers depend on child care—on non-parental care either informally in the child’s home (by a grandparent or a nanny, for example) or in someone else’s home (by a relative, friend or paid child-care provider in an unregulated family child care), or formally in a child-care centre or regulated family child-care environment where caregivers provide both care and education.

The latest Statistics Canada figures on child-care use—released April 5, 2006 (see *The Daily*)—show that in 2002–2003, 54% of children aged six months to five years were in some form of non-parental child care. This is an increase of 12 percentage points since 1994–1995.

Child care is now undoubtedly a significant factor in the way many Canadian children live, learn and grow.

What the studies show about the effects of child care

Recent studies examining the effects of early child-care experiences on young children have focussed primarily on:

- the impact of the amount and quality of child care on how children develop socially, intellectually and emotionally; and
- whether the effects of child care vary according to a child’s age, temperament, relationship to his or her parents and socio-economic background.

The results reveal both advantages and disadvantages to child care, but the strong consensus is that while parents continue to have the most influence on their children’s lives, non-parental care can also have a significant impact.²

Whether that impact is positive or negative, good or bad, depends on a variety of factors. For example, there is evidence that for some very young children (0–2 years old), the more time they spend in child care the greater the chance they will be less attached to their mothers³ or develop behaviour problems

Quality Matters

“Results from a number of studies demonstrate that child-care quality matters. In fact, the importance of child-care quality is one of the most robust findings in developmental psychology. Children who experience high-quality care have higher scores on achievement and language tests, show better social skills and fewer behavioural problems [than children who experience low-quality care].”

—McCartney

such as aggression and disobedience.⁴ These results are, however, influenced by such factors as a child's own temperament and the quality of parenting the child receives at home.⁵ The results also vary depending on the quality of care the child is receiving: the higher the quality of care, the fewer the disadvantages, regardless of how many hours a child is spending in care or the type of care provided (in a home or in a child-care centre, for example).⁶

Right now, whether or not a child receives high-quality child care depends greatly on the child's family situation. Families with higher incomes and greater social and emotional resources tend to use higher quality care.⁷ Poorer parents are the ones who most often rely on poorer quality care—most likely because they cannot afford the higher fees for better care or because high-quality care is not available within their local area⁸—yet some research shows that children who come from a lower income bracket benefit even more from high-quality child care, and that high-quality child care can help to protect children from the adverse effects of living in at-risk families or disadvantaged homes.⁹

Other research shows that quality child care is equally important for both advantaged and disadvantaged children¹⁰ and that quality child care can result—for all children—in better, more cooperative relationships with adults, improved relationships between mother and child, fewer behaviour problems and better social interactions with other children.¹¹ Further, even after accounting for differences in family background, a child who receives higher-quality child care during the preschool years will demonstrate better cognitive skills and better social skills.¹²

Other significant research results:

Regulated child care—where child-care providers in a child-care centre or family child-care home are licensed by the government to provide child-care services—is generally of higher quality than unregulated care.¹³

- Care provided through a high-quality, structured child-care centre actively promotes the skills a child needs to be ready for school, especially memory and language.¹⁴
- Not-for-profit child-care centres provide higher quality care than for-profit centres.¹⁵

The Benefits of Quality

“Higher quality child care (in the form of responsive and stimulating care) is associated with better cognitive and language development, positive peer relations, compliance with adults, fewer behaviour problems, and better mother–child relations.”

—Owen

At the same time, however, only an estimated one-third of child-care centres and one-third of licensed family child-care homes in Canada are truly of high quality—providing the type of care that contributes to children's social, language and cognitive development.¹⁶

The elements of quality child care

Children can experience high-quality child care in any type of child-care setting: at home, in a child-care centre or a family child-care home.¹⁷ High-quality child care begins by protecting a child's health and safety, but goes much further to provide an experience that actively supports the child's development. Research¹⁸ tells us that the following characteristics are fundamental to high-quality care:

- **A high adult-child ratio.** The fewer children under one adult's care, the better. A high adult-child ratio is associated with closer attachment between the child and the caregiver, and to children who are more considerate and less aggressive towards other children. A high adult-child ratio—ideally, 1:3 for children under two years, 1:6 for children aged two to three and 1:8 for preschoolers—is also linked with children being more independent when they reach grade one, with better cognitive development, communication and social skills. Children who attend child-care centres with higher adult-child ratios also see themselves as more competent.
- **Small group sizes.** Small group sizes are associated with children who are more cooperative, less hostile and better behaved than children in larger groups. The children in small groups also talk and play more with other children and score higher on tests of social ability and readiness to read.
- **Post-secondary training/education.** Child-care providers with college diplomas or university degrees in early-childhood education are more responsive to the needs of the children in their care. Their training helps them to provide the children in their care with activities that are both stimulating and appropriate to their levels of development; as a result, the children under their care score higher than others of the same age on standard tests of language development.
- **A positive care provider–child relationship.** When child-care providers spend a lot of time with the children, are sensitive and responsive and actively interested in them and encourage them to talk, the children:
 - are more engaged with the world around them;
 - spend less time in aimless wandering; and
 - have higher levels of language development and play.
- **Well-defined spaces.** Children thrive in settings where there are clear boundaries between group space and activity areas, whether indoors or outside. Well-defined spaces are associated with positive interactions among children and between adults and children, and are associated with more time spent exploring the environment.

Responsive Care

Responsive care recognizes both a child's physical and emotional needs (for food, sleep, attention, for example), and a child's limits (how many new experiences the child can take in or cope with at a particular time).

Responsive care responds to a child's own needs and signals—verbal and non-verbal—and helps to build the child's tolerance for stimulation and new experiences gradually. It does not over-stimulate or force the child into dealing with more than he or she is ready for.

- **Well-structured, well-planned curricula.** Children like routine and respond well to a familiar daily schedule. Children who attend child care that provides organized and age-appropriate activities—while offering children the chance to pick and choose what they want to do—score higher on cognitive and language tests and show greater levels of creativity. Children who are asked to do things that are not appropriate to their age or stage of development are likely to show higher levels of stress.
- **Significant parental involvement.** A good relationship between a child-care provider and a parent—where each respects the other, there is good two-way communication and the parent is involved as a partner in the child's care—helps the child-care provider to interact more with the child and the child to interact better with other children.

Inter-connections

“Centre-based care providers are more likely to provide developmentally appropriate activities when they have education related to children, are working in a situation with a favourable ratio, have a small group of children, and are satisfied with their job. Larger group sizes in family day care are associated with providers who provide fewer individual activities for the children.” (Doherty)

Lessons in learning, in Canada and elsewhere

Research clearly establishes both the importance of quality child care to the intellectual, emotional, language and social development of young children as well as the elements that are essential for delivering high-quality care. It also establishes the need for:

Well-trained and well-educated child-care providers who are compensated fairly for their work

Training requirements currently vary across Canada for licensed child care (centre-based or regulated). Most provinces require at least some staff to have a one- or two-year post-secondary diploma. No province requires all staff to have a post-secondary credential in early childhood care, but some provinces are now working to raise education levels. For example, in 2002, Newfoundland began encouraging more well-trained child-care providers by offering an education supplement to anyone who completes a one-year certificate or two-year diploma. Quebec provides financial support for current child-care staff who enrol in a college-level course.¹⁹

In Sweden, by contrast, where child care is integrated into the educational system, children are cared for either by preschool teachers with three-year university training or by child minders with vocational three-year training.²⁰

However, while training is essential, training alone is not enough. Studies have also shown that quality child-care work is also dependent on good wages.²¹ A fair wage is linked to greater job satisfaction and better performance (including more responsive and higher quality relationships between care providers and children), as well as lower staff turnover. In turn, lower staff turnover is associated

with calmer, less aggressive children, stronger attachment between children and caregivers and better language development.²²

In New Zealand, teachers in half-day kindergarten programs for three- and four-year-olds are paid the same rate as elementary school teachers; teachers in full-day early child-care and development centres are currently paid less than kindergarten teachers, but the difference will be reduced by 2007.²³

In the early 1990s, Ontario became the only Canadian jurisdiction to include child-care-centre staff in provincial pay equity legislation and specially earmarked funds to raise wages to specified levels. Over the past eight years, five other Canadian provinces have set aside funds to improve wages for child-care staff.²⁴ Quebec is the only province with a province-wide wage scale.

Enough child-care spaces and enough child-care providers to ensure a high adult-child ratio and small group sizes

In Canada today, there are not enough child-care spaces—particularly the regulated spaces shown by research to be of higher quality—to accommodate all the children who need care, let alone enough staff to ensure the good adult-child ratio or small group size necessary to provide all children with ample time and attention.

Only about 15.5% of Canadian children who need child care can find licensed spaces,²⁵ as opposed to nearly 64% in New Zealand.²⁶

Quebec, the only Canadian province with a highly developed system of early child-care programs, is also the province that provides the most regulated child-care spaces. Approximately 40% of preschool (0–5) children had access to regulated child-care services in Quebec in 2004.²⁷

Child-care centres in Quebec are required to have a ratio of one adult to eight children aged 18 months to 4 years, and one adult to ten children aged four to five years. In family child-care homes, child-care providers may care for no more than six children at a time. Throughout the other Canadian provinces, the child-care centre ratios are similar, but the ratios for family child-care homes vary greatly, with some provinces allowing up to 12 children under one adult's care.²⁸

Child care that is affordable for all parents

Studies show that high-quality child care can help to compensate for a child's economic disadvantages, particularly by helping the child get ready to learn in school.

The Big Issues

"The [You Bet I Care!] study found that in the centres and regulated family child care homes observed, care by warm, supportive adults who protected the children's health and safety was the norm. However, the study reports that only about a third of the centres and a third of the homes provided the children with the types of experiences that research shows supports children's social, language and cognitive development." (Doherty, Friendly, Beach)

In countries such as Sweden and France, where child care is an integral part of the educational system, all children automatically have the opportunity to participate in it, regardless of their parents' income.

In Canadian provinces other than Quebec, low-income parents may apply for a subsidy to help cover child-care costs, but all other parents must pay full fees. In these provinces, parent fees typically account for up to 80% of the costs of child care, while governments provide most of the remaining funds through grants to child-care providers. However, all Canadian parents who are working or studying may claim a tax deduction up to a maximum of \$7,000 per year for each child under the age of seven. In addition, the federal government has announced a new initiative, the Universal Child Care Benefit, under which families will receive \$100 per month for each child under six years old, starting in July 2006.

In Quebec, the provincial government provides base funding for child-care spaces (about 83% of operating costs) while all parents pay the same \$7 per day user fee. The situation is similar in New Zealand, where the government funds up to 85% of basic operating costs for early-childhood-care programs and parents pay a nominal fee. The programs themselves cover any remaining costs through fundraising.²⁹

The role of government

Child care is often associated more with child-minding than with education. Throughout Canada, responsibility for the very young tends to be split among a variety of ministries responsible for such issues as health, the status of women and child or family development; ministries of Education, at either the provincial or territorial levels, have little or no responsibility for preschool child-care programs. Yet experts today are unanimous in believing that child care can be a vital component of early learning, contributing to greater social and academic success in later years.

From an economic standpoint, a number of recent benefit-cost analyses have shown that even small-to-moderate benefits from quality child care are important enough to warrant government both regulating and financially supporting child care.³⁰ A 2005 examination of the costs and benefits of universal preschool in California that focussed on the benefits of child care for disadvantaged children notes that quality child care can lead to the participants staying in school longer, earning higher wages later in life and committing fewer crimes.³¹

Quebec Results

"The results of the QLSCD[Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development] indicate that children from families with lower socio-economic status are less likely than those from affluent families to be in child care. In addition, when such children do attend a child care setting, it is often of poorer quality than the settings attended by children from high-income families. This quality gap seems to be linked to the type of setting most accessible to many of these children – for-profit and home-based daycares, whose quality varies greatly according to the physical and social characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which they are located." (Japel, Tremblay, Côté)

Through regulation, governments can set standards and ensure consistent levels of quality across all child-care services through such measures as requiring child-care providers to meet minimum levels of training and education, and child care centres to meet basic standards for staff-child ratios, group size and range of available activities.

Many advanced, developed countries—such as Sweden, France, Denmark and New Zealand—have accepted early child care as a government responsibility and an appropriate government function, and built a system of fully regulated, universal (or near universal), community-based child care services. In New Zealand, for example, all child-care programs for preschool children are administered centrally, through the federal Ministry of Education, alongside and equal to elementary, secondary and post-secondary programs. To ensure consistency and quality, the education ministry provides direct operating funds, develops curricula, trains teachers and regularly evaluates programs.³²

In contrast, each province in Canada has a different approach to overseeing and regulating early childhood care and education.

Within the past few years, five Canadian provinces—Newfoundland, Quebec, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick and Manitoba—have taken steps to strengthen their child-care regulations (and improve child-care quality) by introducing or increasing training requirements for centre-based and/or family child-care workers. At the same time, however, two provinces have increased the number of children who can be cared for in an unregulated family child-care home. Today, four provinces allow family child-care providers to care for up to 12 children without following the stricter regulations that apply to child-care centres.³³

Implications for the future

Child care is essential for parents who work. Child care makes it possible for women to pursue jobs and education—boosting the Canadian economy while ensuring greater economic security for their families. But even parents who can provide full-time care themselves occasionally need help or believe it is good for their children to play and learn with other children: these parents, too, can find themselves searching for child care.

However, parents should not settle for just any child care.

Research shows that the quality of the child care is key, that quality is the most powerful promoter of positive child development, early learning and school readiness. Further, quality child care can also serve as a family support program, providing parents with valuable and up-to-date information on child health, development and nutrition, and how they can help prepare their children for school. It can help families, particularly those at risk, to create a more supportive and caring home environment.

Cost-Benefits of Child Care

“A one-year, universal, high-quality preschool program in California would, for a \$4,300 per-child cost ... generate \$11,400 in benefits per child for California society, for a net benefit of \$7,000 per child, or \$2.62 for every dollar invested.” (Koroly, Bigelow)

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