

INFANT DAY CARE

TAKES GOOD CARE OF OUR YOUTH

A 5-year study conducted throughout the province of Quebec clearly showed that nonmaternal care of infants prior to the age of 9 months can help “at-risk” children control physical aggression as they age. Yet parents of at-risk children rarely took advantage of publicly offered day care services, probably because the mothers didn’t work outside of the home.

“This study suggests that we have to encourage child care use by high-risk families,” says the study’s lead author Sylvana Côté. “People think that if they don’t work they don’t need child care. That perhaps makes sense in the short term, but it makes no sense in the long run. These kids start school way behind. If we catch them early enough, they can catch up, but 4 years old is too late to do that.”

Côté and her colleagues used data from a study of 1,759 infants selected from Quebec birth registries to provide a representative sampling of the province’s babies born in 1997 and 1998. Annual interviews were conducted with the mothers as the children progressed from 5 to 42 months. Information collected about the mothers included age, educational level, job, and incidence of depression or anti-social behaviours in adolescence, such as starting fights or stealing. Each child’s sex, race, gestation and birth weight were noted. Family statistics, such as annual income, urban or rural life style, marital status and number of siblings were also recorded. Every year, interviewers asked about changes in family circumstances or the child’s general health. They also asked the mothers pointed questions about their child’s behaviour, family functioning and parenting perceptions.

After 5 years, researchers had complete data sets for 1,691 children and identified 17% of the children as exhibiting higher-than-usual levels of physical aggression. When they compared these children with the others, they



discovered three facts. First, children with mothers who hadn’t finished high school were significantly more likely to be among the highly aggressive group unless they had been cared for by someone other than mom before they reached the age of 9 months. Second, for the same children, the benefits of being cared for after 9 months by someone other than a mother who had not finished high school were also significant, though somewhat less so. Third, there were no similar benefits for children of mothers with higher levels of education, but there was no evident harm from nonmaternal care either, as some previous studies had suggested.

“There’s an idea out there that if you’re growing up in an underprivileged environment, it’s better to have some quality day care,” says George Tarabulsky, who specializes in infant and adolescent developmental psychology at Université Laval. “This is quite a convincing study.”

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In designing an upcoming study on prevention with vulnerable families, Tarabulsky acted on Côté’s results and included active encouragement for at-risk parents to use community day care as part of the prevention program. “It seems to be good advice in two ways. In quality settings, day care provides good stimulation for kids. It also gives parents the time to organize their family life, their schooling and their professional life. Time is one of the resources missing in these families.”

BY TRACEY ARIAL