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Research unclear on how daycare affects child development

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By Andrea Mrozek

How do children in the first year of life fare when their mothers work outside the home? This was the subject of Janet Bagnall's column on this page last Friday.

The column was based on the publication this month of some new research. That was the main meal, anyway; the appetizers, salad, and dessert were spent addressing the guilt factor -should working mothers of infants feel bad about it?

Now certainly it is the job of newspaper columnists to inject opinion, and Bagnall did so with gusto. Drop the guilt, she said, because the kids are better than fine.

There are two problems with this, however. First, earlier research did not mandate guilt, but rather stressed both positives and negatives in various environments. Second, upon closer examination, this most recent research actually echoes the earlier results.

Using the same detailed data (from Study of Early Child Care of the U.S. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development), those earlier findings indicated that high-quality care has positive outcomes for some children, particularly with regards to improvements in math and vocabulary. Some of the same research also said that longer amounts of time spent in care increased problem behaviours, like aggression.

The most recent research appears to turn those results upside down, but it actually says something similar.

The abstract says that the results when mothers of infants work outside the home are completely neutral, and this neutrality statement is what the media picked up on. But on Page 63 we learn about child behaviours after the mother works full-time outside the home in the first year of life, together with consideration for the timing of the start of that work, be it at three, six, or nine months after birth: "At age 4.5, children whose mothers had worked (full-time) at three months, six months, or nine months have significantly more externalizing behaviour problems than children whose mothers did not work in the first year," the authors write. They go on: "A similar pattern is seen at first grade."

In short, the problem behaviours mentioned in prior research appear to remain. This is not quite the get-out-of-jail free card that some media commentators might have been hoping for.

The study also indicates that the optimal situation is for mothers to be in the labour market part-time, a point Bagnall acknowledged.

These families fare better, they say, than stay-at-home mothers or those who go to work full-time. However, "full-time" is defined as 30 hours a week or more (parttime is under 30 hours). But few jobs are called full-time at 30 hours. And we don't know whether the "full-time" mothers are working 30 hours a week, or 60. Neither do we know whether the part-time working mothers are doing two hours a week from home or 29 from an office, for example, which would surely affect outcomes.

This is not, of course, the definitive child-care study, should such a thing ever exist. Another, equally credible one published this June, using the same detailed data, looks at the consequences of early child care to age 15. That study concludes that high-quality early child care can mean improved academic outcomes, and helps mitigate bad behaviour; at the same time, more hours of non-relative care predicted greater risk of bad behaviour, even at age 15.

Bagnall looked at this latest U.S. research and concluded that in Canada, Quebec's public policy solutions, including the provincial daycare system, are superior. This old refrain defies the research showing Quebec's system to provide care of mediocre to low quality.

Neither is Quebec's daycare flexible. If working part-time is optimal, Quebec parents can't use the system part-time, for fear of losing their spot. Government programs are ill-equipped to offer uniquely-crafted, parttime solutions tailored to a family's individual needs.

(It is true, however, as Bagnall noted, that Quebec has a generous parental-insurance plan allowing a parent to stay home for some time after the birth.)

In the end parents -perhaps especially mothers - will always worry. The childcare research field does not lend itself to unequivocal statements, or easy guilt-free policy solutions.

The reality is that while the earlier research did not require that mothers working outside the home should feel guilty, this latest research is not releasing parents from responsibility for their choices.

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