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Drop the hyperbole! New childcare research is not as categorical as it appears

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How do the children of mothers who work outside the home in the first year of life fare? This was the subject of two recent newspaper columns, one based on an August 2010 release of new research. [1] That was the main meal, anyway, the appetizers, drinks, desserts, salads and aperitif 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 Janet Bagnall did so with gusto in the *Vancouver Province*, as did Leah McLaren of *The Globe and Mail*. Drop the guilt, they both screamed with glee, because the kids are *better* than fine. They might as well have added a triumphant “so there” in caps.

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

Earlier research, using the same detailed dataset from the American NICHD Study of Early Child Care, spoke to *high quality* care having 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. [2]

The very recent August 2010 *First-year maternal employment and child development in the first 7 years* actually says something similar. [3] Of course, the headlines didn’t come from nowhere: the (lengthy) verbiage around the research takes a different tone and does conclude in the abstract that the results of mothers of infants working outside the home are completely neutral. “Our SEM results indicate that, on average, the associations between 1st-year maternal employment and later cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes are neutral,” write the authors, “because negative effects, where present, are offset by positive effects.” [4]

This neutrality statement is what the media picked up on. But the study itself is well over one hundred pages and is more complicated than that. The authors consider an array of possible moderators to maternal employment outside the home in the first year. They consider the child’s gender (boys may be more affected by their earliest experiences than girls) and child temperament. They consider what the mother’s job is, hypothesizing that “professional jobs would be less detrimental to child outcomes than would be 1st-year maternal employment by women in nonprofessional jobs because women in professional jobs would be more likely to be in positions that are challenging and satisfying and that afford flexibility to address child and family needs.” [5] They consider the mother’s

earnings, hypothesizing that mothers who work in the first year of their child's life will always have higher earnings, and that those higher earnings "will be associated with better child outcomes." [6]

Buried on page 63 lies an interesting section 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 work, be it at 3, 6 or 9 months. And here, the outcomes are not perfectly rosy. "At age 4.5, children whose mothers had worked FT [full-time] by 3 months, 6 months, or 9 months have significantly more externalizing behaviour problems than children whose mothers did not work in the 1st year as rated by their caregivers," the authors write. They go on: "A similar pattern is seen at first grade, where children whose mothers worked FT by 3 or 6 months have significantly more externalizing behaviour problems than children whose mothers did not work in the 1st year as reported by their teachers but not by their mothers." [7]

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 were hoping for. Neither is there explanation for this seemingly contradictory result to the neutral conclusions of the abstract.

The study also indicates that the optimal situation is mothers in the labour market part-time. These families fare better, they say, than both stay-at-home mothers and those working outside the home full-time. However, "full-time" in the study is defined as 30 hours a week or more (part-time is less than 30 hours). There's (not yet, keep fingers crossed) no job that's called full-time at 30 hours a week, and we don't know whether those mothers working "full-time" are working 30 hours, 38 hours, or 60 hours a week. Neither do we know whether the part-time working mothers are doing 2 hours a week from home or 29 from an office, for example, which would surely affect outcomes.

Of course, this is not the definitive child care study—should such a thing ever exist. Another, equally credible study published in the May/June 2010 *Child Development*, using the same detailed dataset, looks at the consequences of early child care to age 15, far beyond grade one. [8] It concludes that high-quality early child care can mean improved academic outcomes, and that high quality care helps mitigate bad behaviour; at the same time, more hours of non-relative care predicted greater risk taking and impulsivity at age 15. This is worthy of note, considering the teen years are times of impulsivity (read high drama) under any circumstances.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Back to the media: Janet Bagnall predictably looks at this American research and concludes that in Canada, Quebec's public policy solutions are optimal: a provincial daycare program. This tired, old, dinosaur refrain belies the experience of the low-quality system in that province. [9] Neither does government-run daycare in Quebec lend itself to the flexibility advocated for in the research. If working part-time is optimal, reports from Quebec indicate that parents can't use the system part-time for fear of losing their daycare spot. A one-size-fits-all government program is ill-equipped to offer uniquely-crafted, part-time solutions tailored to a family's individual needs.

However, Bagnall also advocates for more parental benefits and this is certainly an area to consider. Family taxation (family income splitting) would allow parents (or for single parents, a parent and child) to split their incomes for tax purposes and decrease the tax burden. Allowing parents to keep more of their own money is a definite benefit, and would allow them to choose how to spend it. A provincial daycare scheme raises taxes, and makes everyone pay whether parents choose to use it full-time, part-time or not at all.

In the end, a not inconsequential problem remains. Parents—perhaps especially mothers—worry. The childcare research field does not lend itself to unequivocal statements, or easy (guilt-free) policy solutions. The reality is that much as the earlier research did not mandate that mothers working outside the home should feel guilty, this latest research is not releasing parents from responsibility for their choices.

Endnotes

[1] Bagnall, J. (August 9, 2010). Drop the guilt trip: Daycare doesn't hurt your kids. *The Province*, p. A16. Retrieved August 11, 2010 from <http://www2.canada.com/theprovince/news/editorial/story.html?id=dc098256-87c2-48bb-b538-64c1044bce65>

McLaren, L. (August 6, 2010). Ditch the guilt, working moms: The kids are all right. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved August 11, 2010 from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/style/ditch-the-guilt-working-moms-the-kids-are-all-right/article1664820/>

Janet Bagnall wrote about the August 2010 American release, while Leah McLaren referred to a 2009 study from England.

[2] Belsky, J., Vandell, D., Burchinal, M., Clarke-Stewart, K. A., McCartney, K., Owen, M., et al. (2007). Are there long-term effects of early child care? *Child Development*, 78, pp. 681-701.

[3] Brooks-Gunn, J., Han, W., & Waldfogel, J. (August 2010). First-year maternal employment and child development in the first 7 years. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 75(2), 1-145.

[4] *Ibid*, p. ix.

[5] *Ibid*, p. 15.

[6] *Ibid*, p. 18.

[7] *Ibid*, p. 63.

[8] Belsky, J., Burchinal, M., Lowe Vandell, D., Steinberg, L., Vandergrift, N. (May/June 2010). Do effects of early child care extend to age 15 years? Results from the NICHD study of early child care and youth development. *Child Development*, pp. 737-756.

[9] Japel, C., Tremblay, R., Côté, S. (December 2005). Quality Counts! Assessing the Quality of Daycare Services Based on the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development. *IRPP Choices*, Institute for Research on Public Policy, vol. 11, no. 5. Retrieved August 11, 2010 from <http://www.irpp.org/choices/archive/vol11no5.pdf>