

Abstract

Child Care During the First Three Years of Life

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Brooks-Gunn, J.; Wen-Jui, H.; & J. Waldfogel. (2002, July/August). Maternal employment and child cognitive outcomes in the first three years of life: The NICHD study of early child care. *Child Development, 73:4*.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COOPERATIVE EXTENSION. Besides the personal implications for extension professionals who are parents of young children, this study has implications of our clients, especially those going from welfare to work and the child care providers we serve as educators. These findings suggest that placing infants and toddlers in child care and sending their mothers to work may not keep the next generation off of welfare. Unless the child care is of very high quality and the home environment is greatly improved, these children may actually lose capability to succeed in school and to join the work force as adults. These findings also have important public policy implications, especially as Welfare Reform legislation is under revision and the current administration suggests longer working hours for welfare dependent families. Parent education that improves relationships, attitudes and environments is a low cost preventative to the outcomes of maternal employment when children are nine months of age or younger.

New findings from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care indicate that children whose mothers are working full time by the child's ninth month have lower cognitive development scores at age three than children of non-working mothers, but that good home environments and high quality child care can help counterbalance these effects.

The specific findings of the study include:

- Children whose mothers were working full time (30 hours or more per week) by the child's ninth month scored 6.5 percentile points lower on a test of cognitive development at age three than children whose mothers were not working.
- Children scored right at the average-the 50th percentile-even though their mothers were working if their home environment and mothers' sensitivity rated highly and they were in above average care.
- Home environment and child care quality can combine to have a greater impact on children's cognitive development than on whether their mother is working. For example, at age three, a child whose mother is not working but who has a poor home environment, a less sensitive mother, and child care of below average quality scored 7 points below the average.
- Children whose mothers had worked part time by the ninth month had scores that were not significantly different from children whose mothers had not worked at all by that point in time.
- While significant differences in test scores at age three were found for children whose mothers worked by the ninth month, children whose mothers were working by the sixth month had only marginally lower scores than children of non-working mothers, and children whose mothers were working by the first, third, or twelfth month scored slightly lower, but the difference was not significant.

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-- Mothers' work had a larger effect for boys. Boys whose mothers worked full time by the ninth month scored 9 points lower on cognitive development tests at age three, while girls scored only 3 points lower-which was not significantly different from the average.

-- Children of working mothers scored lower at age three if their mothers were married at the time of the child's birth (7.5 points lower than children of non-working mothers). However, children with working mothers who were not married at the time of the child's birth actually scored higher (although the difference was not significantly significant). This may indicate that the benefits of employment for single mothers, such as higher income, may outweigh any potential negative impact.

The study has several important implications for policymakers:

-- Children need high quality child care that promotes their healthy growth and development. This requires significant investments in enhancing the quality of care and in helping ensure all parents-including low-income parents-have the resources to afford good quality care.

-- Parents need the flexibility to make decisions about working that are best for their families. This requires paid leave that makes it economically feasible to take time off to care for their very young children as well as options such as part-time work or flex schedules that make it easier to balance work and family.

-- Parents-both those who are working and those who are not-need access to supports to help them provide a high quality home environment for their children.