

When Are Children in Child Care Too Long?

Ideas from the field

In recent weeks *ExchangeEveryDay* readers have been challenged twice to “Sound Off” on questions about the length of time children are in child care arrangements. The first invitation involved a nursery school operator in Indonesia who was asking if she should expand her program offering infants and toddlers four days of morning services to a fifth day (*ExchangeEveryDay*, May 4, 2005). The second came when we reported long-time child care critic Jay Belksy’s interpretations of the NICHD Study of Early Care where he claimed that children who participated in child care in later years were aggressive to a level requiring therapy (*ExchangeEveryDay*, May 16, 2005). Over 120 readers responded by expressing their views on these two items in the Sound Off section of the Exchange web site (www.ChildCareExchange.com). Here are a few examples of their views:

Ken Weslake, SPD,

Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

In an ideal world the children would be happy at home interacting within a family dynamic. I don’t think it is a question of how long as much as a question of why they are there? What are they doing? and How appropriate are the activities for the development and enjoyment of the children? Once these questions are answered, then a suitable time and program can be set up. Early childhood programs are only ever second to a loving, secure, and supportive family environment.

Margo Sipes, Downtown Baltimore Child Care, Inc., Baltimore, Maryland

I am very curious if the \$100 million study differentiates between high quality, early education and care centers that are accredited, have small class sizes, and are well staffed by experienced, trained teachers AND other centers that only meet states’ minimum requirements in terms of staff training and adult/child ratios. We can only get a clear picture of the effect of group care on children if we contrast and compare among four possible combinations: high quality centers versus: centers that only meet minimum requirements; high quality home environments with loving, nurturing adults with adequate resources to care for children; and home environments with absent or abusive adults or adults without adequate resources to care for children.

That is the only kind of study that will give us any usable information; otherwise we are just throwing good money after bad, instead of making sure that whatever environments young children are in have caring adults who can meet their needs physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. And, of course, none of this addresses the issue of the compensation of child care providers in the United States. How can we expect child care workers to provide the services needed to enhance children’s development when we pay them on par with parking lot attendants and animal handlers.

Roslyn Duffy, Better Living Institute, Seattle, Washington

It seems counterproductive to be fussing over ‘whether’ child care is good or bad. What are the alternatives? Homelessness? Inability to afford food, shelter, health care? Taking children to the workplace? What is needed is a focus on what makes it work well and what are the most positive aspects of child care. Is Belsky staying home changing diapers these days?

James Strickland, Child Inc. and the Dad Show, Austin, Texas

I have been concerned about the negative effects of child care for the last 30 years. It may be too soon to tell, but when combining this with some of Lynn Kagan’s conclusions and the ramifications of the Hart/Risley findings on verbal interaction we should at least be open to the real possibility that we may be causing harm.

Jane Scott, Infant Development Programme, Surrey, British Columbia, Canada

Neuro-developmental principles and attachment research indicate that children under three learn through interactive play and daily activities within their family grouping. Structured learning in a “school” environment is not developmentally appropriate or effective for younger children. In fact, development may be delayed or deterred the more time babies spend in a group setting with unfamiliar adults and many other youngsters. Infants learn through direct experience, engaging in

interactive activities with people who love them and are immediately responsive to their needs. To fully understand when it is appropriate to enroll children in nursery school settings, one must first understand brain development in the early years. Just as adult health care practices are not effective in pediatric care, adult learning principles cannot be applied to very young children. I recommend early childhood educators read articles on infant attachment and brain development when developing curriculum and structuring formal learning environments for children under three years of age.

Sibylle Rotach-Hunt, *La petite ecole*
Charlottesville, Virginia

It seems to me that the key sentence in this discussion is “Children, however, benefit by spending time in non-maternal care when its quality is high.” It seems to me that without having to do much research, common sense would tell us that children who are in a child care environment that is nurturing, stimulating without being over-stimulating, that provides space for child-initiated activities, that gives some control of schedules to children, that gives time for privacy during a full day — in short what we consider high quality care — will be beneficial for children. Being around other children and being exposed to experiences outside the home, after all, are generally considered beneficial, even to very young children.

Gwen Morgan, *Wheelock College*,
Boston, Massachusetts

These are very young children who need a lot of responsive attention. However, how long they should be in a group setting depends on what the rest of their day is like. No matter what the school is doing, each child has the same long day.. It might be worthwhile to consider the schedule of the child’s day, from the time of waking up, all the way through to the bedtime at home. If the child is not at home with a mother or other close relative for the rest of the day, then it is very

important that children this young not go to another center type of group program. Two “schools” in the same day is stressful. They would need to be in an after-school or extended day program at the same place that they were in the first group program, or in a home based program, which we call family child care.

The other consideration is the pacing of the child’s day. If the child is going to be in the same group program for longer hours, we know that the day has to be paced differently. The pace of a short morning program goes faster, has more transitions, than the pace of a high quality longer day program. The same scheduling doesn’t work at all, which may be why some part-day nursery school programs think that quality cannot be achieved in a long day — what worked for the short day doesn’t work for the long day.

The last consideration is to be sure that the program, short or long, meets all the child’s developmental needs, especially the need for relationships, social-emotional development, and not just cognitive needs.

Dana Forest, *Tasman Daycare*,
Hobart, Tasmania

This research along with the brain studies coming out about how little ones develop empathy and self control through responsive interaction, are starting to add up to the conclusion many of us have felt all along — that daycare is not for the under twos. I wonder when we are going to get honest with ourselves, and the parents about this. We can care our best, but it’s not the same as a loving parent. We shouldn’t pretend otherwise.

Thom Kermes, *Child Care Center, Inc.*,
Miami, Florida

I once worked in a program in which we had children attending five mornings, three mornings, and two mornings a week. We got to know and understand the children best who came five morning a week. It took longer to get to know the children coming three days a week. It took “forever” to get to know the children

coming two days a week. From this perspective only, five days a week is best.

Rachel Friedman, *United Kingdom*

From my own experience (and that has been in the eastern end of Asia, Israel, and the western end — Taiwan) as a parent, the five days was fine for my children and for my own sanity. However, for me it was always important to make sure that the program met the needs of my child. My older child was a very active and busy child, yet could spend an hour with little figures. He was not interested and not able to sit with a pencil. My second was a child who loved to talk and be with friends and could write the letter A the multitude of times requested by her teachers (on Guam). I am not sure that these comments help; my answer is that there is no real answer — culture, parental desire, community pressure, expectations, needs, etc.

Ping Ong-Coates, *Buttercups Montessori*
Kindergarten, Singapore

Parents often have the impression that more than three hours is too much. I would have to say that it depends on the quality of care and the program that is being offered. I have seen programs where half an hour is too much. However, if the program is stimulating then six hours can be a good amount of time. It allows children to settle in and work at their own pace. Having a shorter program means that you are constantly rushing the children from one thing to the next to ensure that it’s all covered, but it is stressful!

Singapore has a very competitive academic environment and parents will sign their children up for multiple programs in different centres to ensure that their children are “well-prepared” for primary school. If you could find one place that is stimulating in all the right ways then what’s the problem with staying in that place for an extended amount of time? Shuttling children from one place to another is not fun for parents and children alike.