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Introduction

Infant day-care: Short-term and long-term implications for mother–child interaction and child development

It is difficult to imagine what researchers in the field of non-maternal care can add to the body of knowledge that the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network is creating. The unprecedented, large-scale, and cooperative effort of 10 research groups spending many millions of dollars on a longitudinal investigation covering the first 7 years of more than 1,000 children seems impossible to beat. In terms of the evolutionary metaphor: the NICHD study looks a bit like a dinosaur leaving little room for other species in the search for their own unique niche. However, if the mechanism of variation and selection is applicable to scientific development as Donald Campbell has argued, we need alternative studies on day care badly even though the NICHD consortium is setting the standards and the agenda. In this special issue, we present some research projects that may become important variations on the powerful theme that the NICHD is presenting.

The study by Aviezer and her Israeli colleagues is an excellent example of additional insights and findings to be produced with research on non-maternal care at the low end of the quality range. Although the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network did invest much time, energy, and money to include the whole spectrum of socio-economic status families as well as quality of care, their selection still is somewhat biased in the direction of better day care centres. In Israel, the quality of center day-care is generally extremely low, which is in itself an amazing finding considering the dominant child-centered ideology in that country. In their contribution to this special issue, Aviezer and her colleagues show the impact of extremely low quality center care on the interplay between maternal sensitivity and infant attachment. They find that bad quality non-maternal care may constrain the effectiveness of the parent to shape her child's attachment security, and may disrupt the intergenerational transmission of attachment.

In the NICHD study little attention has been paid to the daily experiences of children involved in various care arrangements. More specifically, their feelings of well-being seem to have been neglected in favor of developmental outcome assessments. This emphasis is, of course, legitimate as users of daycare facilities wonder which positive and negative consequences these facilities may have for child development. But children are not only raised for the future: they also live in the present, and have the right to feel comfortable. DeSchipper and her colleagues focus on non-maternal care from the perspective of the child. They present new measures for well-being and 'flexible care', and address questions like: How stable or flexible are care

arrangements as experienced by the participants, and how do varying degrees of flexibility affect the child's feelings of well-being? Unexpectedly, more flexible center care does not seem to be incompatible with the child's well-being, as long as the child is able to interact with stable and available caregivers.

The third paper by Spieker and her colleagues depart from the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network's focus on a heterogeneous SES sample, and they only include low-SES families in their investigation on the influence of center care. Families from various socio-economic backgrounds may be differentially affected by center care, and radically different processes might be observed. Center care may be particularly powerful in shaping low-SES children's language and cognitive development. Interestingly, the authors present supporting evidence for the so-called compensatory hypothesis that center care mitigates the adverse effects of children's insecure attachment on cognitive and language development by providing children with a more stimulating environment than they would have experienced with their mothers at home. For secure children time spent in center care does not add to nor takes away from the positive effects of their home environment.

'If you can't beat them, join them' is a famous dictum, even without Peter's apocryphal extension 'and then beat them'. This dictum was, of course, not the reason to invite the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network to contribute a paper to this special issue. Nevertheless, a scientific discussion about child care cannot anymore be conducted without taking into account the many contributions of this unique collaborative research group. We are pleased that Tresch Owen and her many colleagues present here for the first time some of their latest findings on the development of the participating children into first grade. The crucial question is of course how the earlier influences of home and day care affect the child's functioning even in the first grade, about 7 years after the start of the project. The most important outcome may be that for all children the negative associations between hours of care and maternal sensitivity diminish over time. Through time the earlier influences seem to fade away somewhat, but in different ways for different sub-sets of children. For example, children of depressed mothers still enjoy the advantages of good quality child care in their early years when they reach first grade.

The papers in this special issue originate from various countries (U.S.A., The Netherlands, Israel) and include a large range of socio-economic strata. The findings show how fruitful cross-cultural variations may be in trying to gain deeper insight into the complex and fascinating world of child care, and they also may remind us of the challenges involved in generalisations from single, mono-cultural studies.

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