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Is childcare good or bad for children's socio-emotional development? Context matters

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An important question in the field of early childhood education and care involves the effect of attending childcare on the socio-emotional development of children. Put simply, is childcare good or bad for children's socio-emotional development? This question became highly relevant after the growth of childcare in various western societies, including the United States (US) and Europe.

Several US studies have investigated the effects of childcare on the development of youth, reporting slightly lower levels of social competence and cooperation of children, more problem behaviors, negative mood and conflict.^{1,2} In the public debate, these adverse outcomes were often framed as 'Childcare makes children aggressive' and a heated discussion about non-maternal care followed, both in the USA and Europe. The field relied heavily on US samples.³ However, from 2000 onwards, longitudinal studies into the effects of early childhood education and care from European countries have been conducted.

Building on this European movement, in this issue of *The Lancet Regional Health—Europe*, Barry et al.⁴ from the EU Child Cohort Network further advances the field with their individual participant data meta-analysis of six European child cohort studies from five European countries (Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom). Their study, which includes more than 80,000 children, shows that children who attend center-based childcare have lower levels of internalizing symptoms (for children between 5 and 13 years, the average effect size β is -1.03) and lower levels of externalizing symptoms (for children between 7 and 13 years, average effect size β is -2.51), compared to children who were exclusively cared for by their parents prior to school entry.

Context matters in childcare research. Based on US studies, childcare seemed to cast a dark shadow far into the future of young children. The robust outcomes of the European study of Barry and colleagues provide a convincing case that attending center-based childcare has a positive impact on children's emotional development. Seen from this perspective, this study is a ray of

sun for European stakeholders, acknowledging the diversity of early childhood education and care systems in Europe.⁵ A possible explanation for the contrast between the negative conclusions from previous US studies versus the positive findings from Barry and colleagues⁴ may be, according to the authors, the regulation of structural quality characteristics which govern center-based childcare in various European countries. The fact is that meta-analytic evidence supports the vital role of structural quality characteristics like staff qualification and child-to-staff ratios,⁶ which predict both process quality and child outcomes and which are regulated in European childcare systems.

There are still some gaps in the map. In the prevailing structure \rightarrow process \rightarrow outcome paradigm in childcare research,⁷ process quality is the mediating variable and linking pin from structural characteristics to child outcomes. This variable is missing in Barry et al.⁴ Future comparative studies should, therefore, explore childcare in Europe, US, and other places to find out how different childcare systems, with varying levels of regulation (structure), lay the foundation for process quality (process) and, finally, affect children's development (outcome). Second, the researchers have focused on center-based care. This raises the question whether alternative home-based care may result in similar outcomes as center-based care or not; possibly, this depends on the level of regulation for this type of care. Finally, after comparing national regulations for structural quality characteristics like qualification and child-to-staff ratios, it remains an open question whether the reported results from Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom can be generalized to other European countries. Obviously, individual outcomes may also be related to the quantity, quality and timing of childcare and the complex interplay between children's home and childcare contexts. To conclude, researchers from Europe and elsewhere have new answers and face new challenges as well in their exploration of different childcare systems in different societies.

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Declaration of interests

None.

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