



Don't be in the Dark About Child Care



3 studies assess effects of child care Research bolsters group care's link to better reading, math skills, worse social skills.

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For most working parents, no other issue is so fraught with worry as the choice of child care.

In a field long plagued by overheated headlines and complicated political overtones, three new studies offer some solid information on the pros and cons of different arrangements.

Two bolster research that found that long hours in group child care are linked to better reading and math skills but worse social skills and more behavioral problems. The third suggests that children in child care centers are safer than those who receive care in private homes, whether in a neighbor's home or by a nanny in the child's own home.

Four years ago, the nation's most ambitious and longest-running child care study generated a firestorm with its findings that 4 1/2-year-olds who had spent more than

30 hours a week in child care were more demanding, more aggressive and more noncompliant than others, regardless of the type or quality of care, the family's socioeconomic status or the sensitivity of the mother's parenting.

Now a new report from that research -- the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Child Care -- has tracked the same children through early elementary school and found that by third grade, those who had spent long hours in child care continued to score higher in math and reading skills and that their higher likelihood of aggressive behavior had dissipated.

But it also found that they still had poorer work habits and social skills.

Researchers cautioned that the findings should not be a cause of alarm, since the effects of child care were found to be small.

Generally, the effects of child care were much smaller than the effects of good or bad parenting.

A separate study, being released today and based on a nationally representative sample of more than 14,000 kindergartners, found that while center-based day care programs modestly benefited middle-class children in early language and mathematics learning, youngsters from poor families experienced double those gains.

"Compared to many homes, preschool centers are richer settings in terms of enriched language, reading and math," said Bruce Fuller, a co-author of the report, "The Influence of Preschool Centers on Children's Development Nationwide: How Much Is Too Much?"

But it also found that on average, the earlier a child enters center-based care, the slower the pace of social development.

Another study, being published today in the *American Sociological Review*, is apparently the first broad research into safety in child care. It found that the rate of death among children receiving care in private homes was 16 times as great as that of children in child care centers.