

**Background**

Media coverage of a recent study from NICHD Early Child Care and Youth Development<sup>1</sup> has sounded the alarm about the relation between early child care experience and children's behavior in later elementary school. The study itself clearly states, "no claim can or should be made on the basis of this report that center-based child care contributes to or predicts" behavior problems in children (p. 697). However, providers, parents, policymakers, and others would like to better understand what this study means and what, if any, ramifications it has for policymaking and child care decisions.

**What does the study say?**

This study examined the effects of early child care on what children know and can do from age 4 ½ through the end of sixth grade. This study is an extension of other NICHD work that examined associations among the quality, quantity, and type of child care to children's skills and behaviors<sup>2</sup>. The current study has three major findings:

- Parenting is more strongly associated with children's academic achievement and behavior than is the early child care experience.
- Higher quality child care before school entry is associated with higher vocabulary scores in fifth grade.
- Attending child care *centers* (as opposed to other types of care) in the early years is associated with higher reported rates of aggressive behaviors in sixth grade.

**What does this finding about increased aggressive behavior mean?**

Specifically, the current study finds that more time in center-based child care between birth and 54 months, was associated with children being rated by sixth grade teachers as having more aggressive behaviors on a standardized teacher report (the *Achenbach Teacher Report Form*). There are 18-19 items (18 for boys, 19 for girls) that make up the Aggressive Behavior subscale on this measure, and they range from "talks too much" and "easily jealous" to "gets in many fights" and "screams a lot." The current findings do not tell which of the individual items are seen, only that the overall area of Aggressive Behavior is rated as higher. Importantly, this increase in aggressive behaviors is still well within the normal range for 12-year-old children. In addition, some have suggested that some items in the Aggressive subscale may reflect assertive behaviors, not aggressive behaviors, per se.

**As always, when interpreting research findings, keep in mind:**

- Correlation is not causation. Two variables that are found to be associated with each other cannot lead us to conclude that one causes the other. For example, shoe size and reading skill have a strong positive correlation. Children with larger shoe sizes also have better reading skills, not because shoe size influences reading ability, but because both are related to a third variable: age. Wearing bigger shoes does not make one a better reader. The current study does NOT mean that being in center-based child care will make a child aggressive.
- Research studies tell about groups, not individuals. What is true "on average" for a group may not be helpful in making individual decisions. The best way for parents and providers to decide what is appropriate for a particular child is to take into account the singular child's skills, needs, interests, and personality and to make decisions and subsequent changes in response to the child's development and the family's available choices.
- Look at the big picture. One study doesn't tell a whole story. What does the vast amount of literature tell us about child care and children's outcomes? Quality matters. Early childhood environments with appropriately trained and compensated grown-ups, low child-teacher ratios, activities that are interesting and individualized, and settings that respond to both the child's and parents' needs lead to the best outcomes for children.

<sup>1</sup>Belsky, J., Burchinal, M., McCartney, K., Vandell, D. L., Clarke-Stewart, K. A., & Owen, M. T. (2007). Are there long-term effects of early child care? *Child Development*, 78(2), 681-701.

<sup>2</sup>NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development website: [www.nichd.nih.gov/research/supported/seccyd.cfm](http://www.nichd.nih.gov/research/supported/seccyd.cfm)

