

# Early Childhood Exchange



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After our Exchange column, this issue of the ECX focuses on infant day care. This is the kind of care that parents have the most difficulty finding, and it's probably the most difficult for caregivers to provide. Some researchers think it is also the most problematic, because of the special psychological needs of infants. We take a hard look at this uncomfortable topic in this issue and the next.

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In an earlier issue we asked about the role of child care providers in "diagnostic screening" of children. Carrie Ezzell wrote back with these observations.

"After a few years of experience a person can usually tell if something's not quite right. Madison's Child Find is a big help in hearing, speech, and sight problems. Most parents do not respond to an 'insist' something be done (my child's perfect, you know), but an 'I wish I were sure your child is seeing (hearing, talking, walking, etc.) correctly; what does your doctor say?' usually works wonders.

"Sometimes a provider is called upon to take the child for the exam. What is important to us is not necessarily important for the parent at the moment. Let something be really wrong and parents cannot act fast enough. We also should keep records of unusual events like 'blue spells', times of falling for no reason on walks, feet that turn in, days a child needs to be 'yelled' at to respond, etc. These clues and circumstances help parent and doctor when a child is seen."

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# Does Early Day Care Affect Infant-Parent Attachment?

The headline in the Wall Street Journal shouted that "Day Care for Infants is Challenged by Research on Psychological Risks" (3/3/87, pg. 37). It's true. Some child development researchers are beginning to warn that day care at too early an age may harm a child. Other researchers strongly disagree. What is the argument about?

The story really begins several decades ago. Researchers in the 1930's noted that infants in orphanages almost always regressed into mental retardation, even when their physical needs were well met. Experiments showed that what they lacked was the consistent attention of a caring adult, what we used to call "mothering". Psychologists warned mothers not to leave their babies for too long during the early months. The employment of mothers was discouraged. (By the way, no one mentioned the father's role in childrearing or whether he should avoid separations from his infant.)

In the 1960's and 1970's, research on the effects of day care eased our concerns. These investigations found that day care and non-day care children looked basically the same. High quality day care even benefitted the intellectual and social development of children from low income backgrounds.

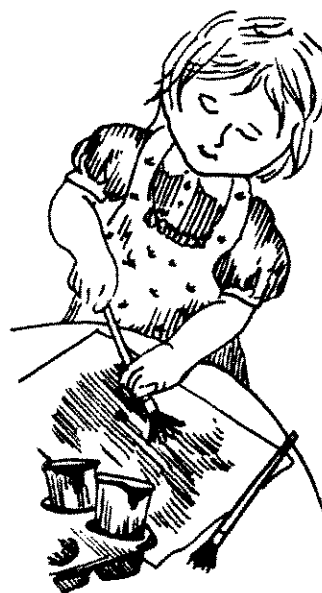
When scholars reviewed all the studies, they could tell parents that there was very little evidence of harmful effects of day care on young children. And, of course, day care benefitted the whole family by making maternal employment possible. Most scholars, however, were also careful to point out that (1) most of the research had been conducted in high quality, university-based day care centers, and (2) the studies were of 2 to 5 year old children, with very few studying infants.

Since then, researchers have conducted more studies on infants, and have studied day care settings that vary

more in quality. Dr. Jay Belsky (of Penn. State University) is one of the psychologists who earlier took the lead in convincing us that day care is beneficial or at least harmless for children. Visiting in Madison last spring, he gave a university lecture in which he modified that position. He now suggested that we should have special concerns about the care of infants. (See interview with Dr. Belsky, this issue.) The reason for his warning was several recent research studies which found increased risk of disruption in the parent-infant attachment bond, when infants were in day care.

## The Attachment Bond

The development of a secure attachment relationship with at least one adult is probably the most important psychological task of infancy. The attachment figure is the person (or persons) who the infant clings to when upset, orients toward following separation, and relies upon as a source of security (as a secure base from which to explore). Infants normally can tell familiar people apart by 6 months, and soon thereafter they actively seek out and use attachment figures for their social-emotional needs.





If day care somehow threatens the parent-child attachment, we should certainly take notice. The quality of attachment at 12 months of age predicts a 2 to 3 year old who is happier and more cooperative with the mother and other adults. It predicts a 3 to 5 year old who is more likely to be sought out by other children for play and leadership, who is more curious and self-directed, and less withdrawn. In other words, secure attachment represents social-emotional competence in infancy, and it predicts continued competence in the years to come.

### When Is There a Risk?

Does infant day care, in fact, pose a threat to attachment? Psychologists are not in agreement. In part, this disagreement stems from the political implications of the question (should mothers stay home with babies?), and in part it's due to the small number of the research studies. Summarizing from the available research, the existence of the following conditions appears to increase the risk of attachment disruption from day care experience:

- Changing, unstable care arrangements as opposed to a durable, consistent care arrangement.
- Day care beginning before 12 months of age, as opposed to after the child's first birthday.
- Full-day care, as opposed to part-day care.

It is worth emphasizing that even when these "risk factors" are present, not every child experiences a disruption in attachment. About half still establish a secure attachment with their primary caretaker (usually the mother). But the risk of an anxious-avoidant attachment is about doubled under these conditions. It is this increased risk that is of concern.

Many researchers also point out that the most important risk factors may be characteristics of the parent or child, not the day care. Perhaps some parents treat their infant differently than others in the evening, after day care. Perhaps some infants, because of their temperament or personality, are less well suited to full day care. Providers of high quality infant care have suggested this. They report that most of their infants are happy and easily comforted, but a small number never seem to adjust to even very good care. The apparent risk of attachment disruption may fall primarily or exclusively on a small subgroup of babies.

### What Are the Implications?

Supposing these conclusions are supported by further research, what do they imply? First, they suggest we should be more concerned than ever about the quality of care when infants are concerned. Infants need sensitive, highly responsive care from a consistent, available caregiver.

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whether at home or in day care. Caregivers who have training and who care for fewer children tend to provide higher quality care. Family day care providers who are licensed and sponsored (belong to a system of FDC providers) tend to provide higher quality care, probably because they have increased opportunities for training. We will have more to say about "quality infant care" in future issues of the ECX.

A second conclusion is more controversial. Until we know more about this issue, perhaps we should recommend to parents that they delay full-time day care, when possible, until after the child's first birthday.

Of course we recognize that this is not always a viable alternative. In 1984, one in every four mothers in the labor force was maintaining her own family. In that year, 60% of all working women had no paid parental (maternity) leave as part of their employment benefits or rights (National Commission on Working Women, 1986). Even if the tentative findings we have reviewed were conclusively proven, we would argue that family poverty poses a greater threat to parent-child relations than does early day care.

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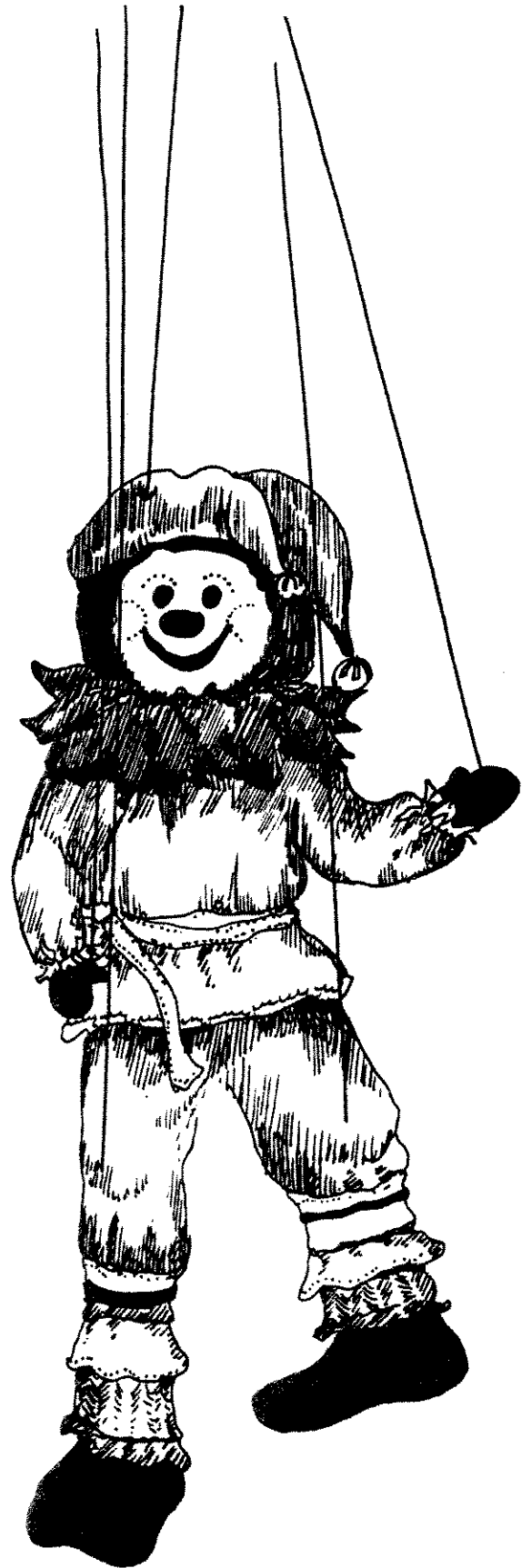
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Is there any danger in our suggesting to people that infant day care may pose a risk not found in day care for toddlers and preschoolers? Yes, there is a risk. First, we may unnecessarily alarm parents who have little choice to stay home with their infants for the first year of life. We have just noted that large numbers of mothers work to support their families, and they work in jobs which usually allow very little parental leave. Similar concerns apply to employed fathers. If these parents have little choice but to use infant care, our best course is to insure the high quality of that care, rather than to make them feel guilty or inadequate as parents.

### **Is This a Woman's Issue?**

A second danger in our warning is that it could be twisted into an argument that "women's place is in the home". This doesn't logically follow, however, unless one assumes that men have no role in childrearing. If we offer the advice that one parent should (when possible) remain available to the infant, by limiting employment during the first year, then fathers as well as mothers are implicated.



Researchers have found no biological imperative, no maternal instincts, that put fathers at a disadvantage in raising young children. Infants develop attachments to both parents, during the same period of time. Furthermore, American men appear somewhat more likely to respond to this challenge today than they have in times past. Those answering recent opinion polls have consistently reported that their family role is more important to them than their work role. When asked their opinion of the most satisfying and interesting way of life, 44% of the men in a 1974 national survey chose "...a marriage where husband and wife share responsibilities more--both work, both share homemaking and child responsibilities" (Roper, 1974: 31). Another study found that most men, and especially those with young children, report they would prefer to work fewer hours even if it meant proportionally less pay. Of course, not all fathers fit this picture, but increasing numbers do. The conclusions we draw are that (1) fathers as well as mothers need to have special concern for the childcare arrangements of their infants, and (2) fathers today are increasingly ready to hear this, and to modify their own lives (including their work lives) to meet family needs.

### In Summary

Based on the available evidence, it seems likely that insecure attachment is caused by the combining of several factors. The quality of parent-child interaction appears most important. The infant's temperament is the second factor; infants with difficult temperaments demand more of their parents, and they may adapt less easily to new day care settings. Third, the extent of day care in the first year of life, and the quality of that care, undoubtedly play a part. Infants with extensive early care (greater than 20 hours per week) before their first birthday, and care that is unstable, appear to carry an increased risk.

This has been said before, of course. The special point of this article is that infancy is a critical period in the development of attachment, and the quality of attachment is a critical predictor of future social development. The quality of day care may be more important for infants than for three year olds (although still important for three year olds!).

The research studies of attachment in day care infants have not yet separated the high quality from the low quality care settings. As is often the case, we cannot afford the luxury of waiting for research to confirm our course of action. The need for the highest quality of care for infants, meeting their socio-emotional needs whether at home or in day care, is evident.

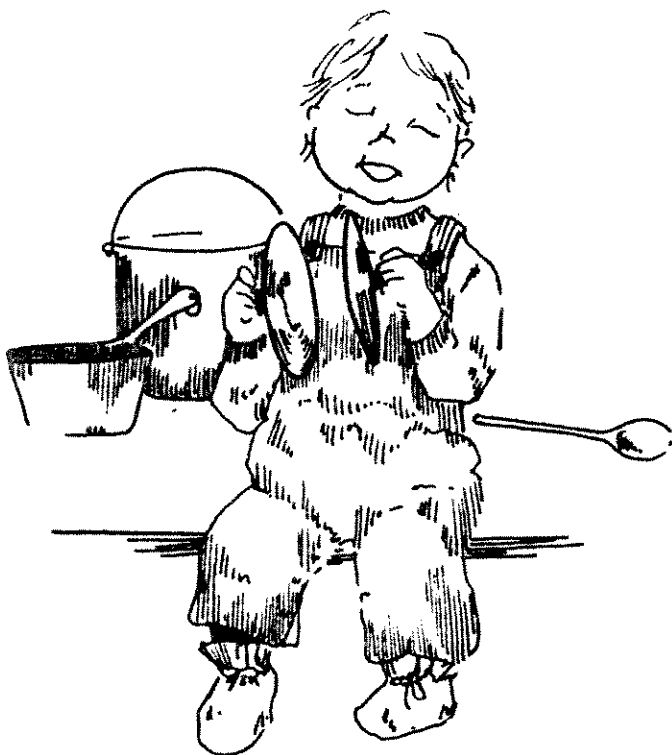
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## INTERVIEW WITH DR. JAY BELSKY

Dr. Jay Belsky (Pennsylvania State University) was one of the psychologists who took the lead in the 1970's in convincing us that day care is beneficial for children (or at least not harmful). He always noted, however, that most of the published research was conducted in university-based centers with two to five year old children. In response to recent research studies, Belsky has modified his position, and created a stir in the process. He now suggests that we should have special concerns about the quality of care of babies. Many babies receive their care from unlicensed, untrained, low quality providers, and this--Belsky warns--may indeed be harmful (see earlier article).

Belsky presented these views at a university lecture in Madison last year. Afterward, we asked him a question about the real world of today's parents.



**ECX:**

*Suppose your neighbor comes up to you, she's holding her ten-month-old infant, and she says: "Jay, I'm going to have to go back to work, we need the income. I've got to put my child in infant day care." What advice do you give her?*

**Dr. Belsky:**

That's the reality of most people out there. The reality of most people, however, is that they can't afford to wait until ten months. What we find in our study is that most people go back to work in the first three months, to preserve the jobs they had.

What I could tell my neighbor, first, is to look for the best quality care you can.

What is quality? I would look for a responsive, affectionate caregiver who wants to be doing what she's doing, as opposed to *having* to do it.

*Belsky went on to note that, while some centers offer top-notch care of infants, and center-based care is probably best for three to four year olds, he would probably tell his neighbor to look for a family day care home first.*

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**Dr. Belsky:**

I'd rather give an infant to a person who can deal with it on an individual basis, who wasn't dealing with too many people, with the hope that we wouldn't have much staff turnover. I'd find a person who I thought would be here and go the distance, who'd be with this kid for at least a year or two.

But there's another possibility. I wonder if what's going on may have nothing to do with the day care arrangement itself. We have data from another study that suggests that anxious-avoidant attachment is associated with

intrusive overstimulation. The baby may be turning away from the parent as the only way to lower his arousal, to keep from being overwhelmed by stimulation.

What may be going on is that mothers, when they come home at the end of the day, miss their babies. They pick those kids up and they hug and kiss them and say "play with me". Because the parent needs that contact. But this may not be best for the child, because it's not tuned-in to the baby's agenda. The baby's had a hard day at work. He's been in care all day. The end of the day may not be the baby's best time for stimulating interaction.

There is some evidence, in fact, that mothers who have their infants in day care do hug and kiss their babies more. And they interact with the child for the same

amount of time each day as non-employed mothers. But that interaction gets squeezed into just a few hours. This may work with a four-year-old, squeezing a whole day's interaction into a few hours. But this may be too difficult for an infant.

The trick, therefore, is for parents to pay attention to the baby's cues and the baby's needs. Try to distinguish them from your own, and then act accordingly.

I don't want to imply that only mothers can care for babies, or that infant day care is inevitably risky for the baby. However, recent evidence does reveal that risks are associated with non-parental care arrangements in the first year of life. And these should be cause of concern for all of us.

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## Thank you, Subscribers!

Several hundred of you mailed in your \$2.50 subscriptions for this year's 3 issues of ECX. The School of Family Resources at UW-Madison is still subsidizing our printing/ mailing costs, but we are close to breaking even (our goal).

A few free copies of each issue are distributed. But if you want to receive our newsletter on a regular basis, you will have to subscribe. If you send in your \$2.50 now, we'll put you on next fall's mailing list, and send this summer's issue as well. That would be four issues (regularly 3) for only \$2.50 total. A bargain at twice the price!

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## **THE NEXT QUESTION**

Do you ever "become attached" to infants in your care?  
Do the infants begin to treat you like mom (or dad)?  
How do you feel about this? How do the parents feel?

**Join our exchange.** Write to us with your thoughts and feelings on these questions. We'll print your responses in the Summer issue of the Early Childhood Exchange.

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