

## Daycare may help at-risk toddlers' soothe their aggression

SIRI AGRELL  
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Children whose mothers did not graduate from high school are less likely to develop physical aggression if they start daycare before they are nine months old, new research has found.

The study, published in this month's Archives of General Psychiatry, was conducted by researchers at the University of Montreal, who followed a group of 1,691 Quebec babies born in 1997 and 1998 until they were five years old.

The mothers were asked to rate the frequency with which their child displayed aggression, including incidents of hitting, biting, kicking, fighting and bullying. Children of women with low levels of education were three times less likely to be aggressive if they received outside care before nine months.

"Daycare can help these children learn to control their aggression," said Sylvana Côté, lead author of the study and a professor of social and preventive medicine at the University of Montreal.

Previous studies have shown that low levels of education among mothers is a predictor of physical aggression among children, a behaviour that can also be related to low income, parental psychiatric disorders and poor parenting practices.

In Quebec, which offers Canada's only universal, low-cost childcare program, daycare has received intense public scrutiny.

Last year, Quebec pediatrician Jean-François Chicoine stirred controversy with his book *Le bébé et l'eau du bain* (The Baby and the Bathwater), which claimed that putting kids into child care at a young age prevents them from properly attaching to their parents.

Dr. Chicoine did view daycare as beneficial for at-risk children, dedicating a chapter of his book to the distinction.

Children in daycare are exposed to stimulation and educational exercises they might not otherwise experience, Dr. Côté said. "There has been this idea that being away from your mother very early on is bad for children, but we show that it's not bad," she said. "And the impact is more important if daycare begins very early in life."

Many parents worry about the impact of putting their kids in daycare, and Dr. Côté said her research should be comforting to families from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

"It's good news for the general population because child care, even if it's initiated early in life, is not associated with physical aggression," she said.

"Daycare does not create problems, there's absolutely no evidence."

But those most likely to attend daycare, she said, are not at-risk children, whose mothers are usually not in the work force and are more likely to live in poverty.

Her research is not intended to suggest that "all mothers who didn't finish high school are incompetent," she said, but to highlight the importance of increasing access to child care for those who benefit the most.

"The programs have to reach the right families, otherwise it will create more inequalities," Dr. Côté said. "There's not enough money in the network, there's not enough space."

Of the children studied, 40 per cent were being cared for in a household setting by a non-family member, 30 per cent were in the care of a non-parental family member and 15 per cent were attending a daycare facility. The remaining 13 per cent received care in various other settings.

The children were receiving an average of 21.5 hours in outside care each week. Their behaviour was assessed at 17, 30, 42, 54 and 60 months.

Child care advocate Susan Colley said that while research has found many benefits of early daycare, access remains a major hurdle across the country.

"Yes, studies have shown that low-income children benefit more, but all children benefit is really the point."

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