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Child Care and Mother–Child Relations

At the heart of the long-standing controversy over child care is the concern of scholars and parents that nonmaternal care may undermine the relationship between mothers and their young children, a relationship that is believed by many to be the cornerstone of healthy psychological development in childhood and adolescence. Although nonmaternal child care has been used to supplement maternal care throughout human history, in recent years, use of early child care has been largely the consequence of economic and demographic forces enabling women to work to support their families rather than the result of a need to enhance children's welfare.

Some experts in the area of early development now hold the view that mothers who separate themselves from their children for prolonged stretches of time do not achieve optimal relationships with their offspring. Mothers may not have sufficient opportunities to learn to detect and interpret the nonverbal cues that the young child uses with its caretakers and thus are not able to respond to their children in the most appropriate way. In these situations, babies are believed to experience either overstimulating or understimulating interactions with their mothers. They may find it hard to engage in interactions that are harmonious and that promote enjoyment of their interaction and exploration of their physical surroundings. Other experts fear that mothers who do not provide a continuous maternal presence deprive their babies of the opportunity to grow to trust the availability and sensitivity of their mothers. These babies would be less likely to be securely attached to their mothers, a condition that would interfere with their socioemotional and cognitive development. Still other experts argue that daily exposure to multiple caretakers diffuses the infant's expectations and communications with adults, thereby interfering with effective social development. Nevertheless, a sizable body of expert opinion continues to support the broad use of nonmaternal care owing to the belief that negative

effects on mother-child relationships do not outweigh the benefits that maternal employment provides to families and to children. Specifically, in addition to the increase of material resources that maternal employment brings to the family and to the children in it, maternal time with children is not diminished as much as one would think. Mothers give up on their personal time and spend time with their children when they are not working. Moreover, fathers are more involved with childrearing when mothers are employed.

In this section, we examine the links between characteristics of child care (e.g., child care quality, quantity, and type) and social relations between children and their mothers. Mother-child relations were observed during episodes designed to assess the child's attachment to the mother and also during interactions in which mother and child had a variety of toys available.

The findings presented in Chapter 14 reveal that child care quality, quantity, age of entry, stability, and type of care do not predict attachment security or avoidance at 15 months of age when examined as main effects. These results show, however, that when maternal sensitivity was low, these variables did, indeed, predict attachment security: Infants are less likely to be securely attached when low maternal sensitivity/responsiveness is combined with poor-quality child care, more than minimal amounts of child care, or more than one care arrangement. When children were 36 months old, a similar pattern occurred. When maternal sensitivity was low, more hours of child care per week was associated with increased risk of insecure-ambivalent attachment. As at 15 months, the quantity, quality, or type of care by themselves did not predict the security of attachment when the children were 36 months of age.

When children spent more hours in child care their mothers were less sensitive and the children were less engaged with their mothers during videotaped play recorded over the first 3 years of life (see Chapter 17). Higher child care quality, however, was linked to greater maternal sensitivity. Follow-up analyses of the links between early child care and both maternal sensitivity and child engagement when the children were 3, 4½, and in first grade provide a somewhat more complex picture (see Chapter 18). For all children, however, the negative associations between hours spent in child care and maternal sensitivity diminished over time.

Finally, after researchers statistically controlled for mothers' child-rearing beliefs, they found that mothers who engaged in more "partnership behaviors" with their child care providers were more supportive and sensitive with their children (Chapter 16).

Taken together, the findings show that extensive child care is associated with lower levels of maternal sensitivity. The link between child care and mother-child relations is not the same for all children, however, and its net effect (after controlling for other predictors) is smaller than that of family predictors.