

Unstable child care can affect children by age four

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FPG's Mary Bratsch-Hines says that changes in child care settings and providers may be inevitable for a majority of families. Credit: UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute.

A new study from UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG) reveals that disruptions in child care negatively affect children's social development as early as age 4. However, the study also shows that the effects of child care instability are not unduly large—and some types of instability appear to have no negative impact on children.

"Our findings showed that when [young children](#) moved between [child care](#) settings, these transitions negatively affected their social adjustment," said FPG investigator Mary Bratsch-Hines. "But when children had a history of changing caregivers within the same setting, we found no significant effects."

Bratsch-Hines explained many experts believe forming stable and secure early relationships with parents and caregivers serves as a working model for children as they form social connections later.

"It follows that higher levels of instability and disruption in establishing strong relationships with caregivers during children's earliest years could lead to difficulties forming trusting relationships down the road," said Bratsch-Hines. "However, we have to recognize that changing child care settings and providers may be inevitable for a majority of families."

Bratsch-Hines said that ups and downs in income, availability of transportation, secure employment, and other factors can result in children moving into and out of different child care settings. But understanding the effects of such transitions on children has remained elusive.

As a result, Bratsch-Hines and her team decided to take a comprehensive look at the impact of child care instability by capitalizing on FPG's long-running Family Life Project. She and her colleagues examined the experiences of nearly 1,300 young children living in high-poverty rural areas, focusing on changes in child care both within and across

settings—an approach few prior studies had attempted.

"In our study, we also included infants and toddlers even if they were enrolled intermittently in child care that their parents did not provide," said Bratsch-Hines. "Previous studies have included only those children who continuously received child care from people other than their parents."

By rigorously accounting for numerous child, family, and child care characteristics, the FPG team determined that a history of changes in child care across settings negatively impacted children's lives.

"Not unexpectedly, children who experienced more changes in child care settings received lower ratings from their pre-kindergarten teachers on social adjustment," said Bratsch-Hines. "This may be because changing child care locations meant children had to adjust to new physical environments in terms of the buildings, playgrounds, and toys—as well as new routines—in addition to disruptions in relationships with peers, primary caregivers, and other adults."

According to Bratsch-Hines, although there was a clear negative impact on social adjustment for children who experienced child care instability across settings, the effect was small.

Furthermore, her team found no evidence that infants and toddlers who only experienced changes in providers within settings later had difficulty with social adjustment in pre-kindergarten. "This could be good news for parents who worry about high teacher turnover and other changes in staff at their chosen child care setting," she said.

Nonetheless, Bratsch-Hines said the practical implications of her team's findings suggest that programs can make additional efforts to integrate children—regardless of their child care history—into their care.

"In addition, child care subsidies could be changed to help parents access stable child care," she explained. "With subsidies often tied to parental employment, unstable employment can lead to unstable child care."

Bratsch-Hines also called for more research in order to better understand the roles of child care instability and other factors on child development.

"It may be that child care instability is another indicator of chaos in families' lives," she said. "We want to be able to best prepare [children](#) for the challenges of schooling, and we have to understand all the factors that stand in their way."

More information: Child Care Instability From 6 to 36 Months and the Social Adjustment of Children in Prekindergarten, fpg.unc.edu/resources/child-ca ... dren-prekindergarten

Provided by Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

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