

Early child care experiences play role in kids' future

April 21 2015, by Sandra Hutchinson



Dr Chrystal Whiteford has looked at the role child care plays in children's future academic, behavioural and health outcomes.

Children who use centre-based child care and multiple care arrangements across their early years are better prepared for school, a new QUT study has found.

Dr Chrystal Whiteford, from QUT's Faculty of Education, said early child care played an important role in [children](#)'s future academic, behavioural and health outcomes with child care experiences as an infant and toddler having positive and negative effects on children aged 4-5 and 6-7.

"An important finding from the study was that at 4 to 5 years of age, children in centre-based care and multiplicity of arrangements across the early years were outperforming their peers in early academic competencies," Dr Whiteford said.

"However, while the study revealed developmental benefits of early child care, there were also potential negative impacts upon children's social-emotional, academic and [health outcomes](#)."

The study which tracked the milestones of more than 5000 children from birth to seven years, was part of Dr Whiteford's PhD and used data from Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children.

Dr Whiteford said infants and toddlers (under 3), who experienced early centre-based child care had the potential to experience increased emotional problems, behavioural problems and poor health at 6 to 7 years of age.

She said infants in centre-based care might also experience decreased language and literacy skills at 6 to 7 years of age.

"Children who experienced high-dose child care, that is 20 or more hours per week, had the potential to experience behavioural problems and poor health at 6 to 7 years of age, and children enrolled in centre-based arrangements as infants may experience increased ill health at the age of 6 to 7 years."

Her research also found instability in arrangements in the early years had the potential to increase emotional and conduct problems, with multiple arrangements at 2 to 3 years of age being linked to increased conduct problems.

Dr Whiteford cautions, however, that these outcomes were also linked to family circumstances.

"What the study found was there are a number of early childhood factors with the potential to influence children's later development," Dr Whiteford said.

"We know from birth to three years of age is a crucial time period in a child's life and plays a critical role in laying foundations for future development.

"Therefore, of concern is the ongoing debate regarding the role of early child care on a child's development."

Dr Whiteford warned it was important to consider all these findings in the context that every child's experience was individual and every child's circumstances were different.

"It's essential that we don't just take these findings and suggest centre-based care to be a problem," she said.

"Child and family characteristics play a large role in a child's developmental outcomes, above that of their early child care experiences.

"Rather than being alarmist, we need to be taking a closer look at all the risk and protective factors and looking for interventions that can lead to improved outcomes for all children.

"This research provides us with the understanding that early child care experiences are important for children's development, and offers the opportunity for us to gain insight into potential impacts of early arrangements.

"The other good news is that in Australia our quality of child care accessed by infants is reported as being high."

Dr Whiteford said with an increasing number of Australian children in child care arrangements, it was important to understand the relationships between [child care](#) and developmental outcomes.

Now that she has completed her PhD, Dr Whiteford hopes to continue her research in the field of early childcare.

"While this research gives us some answers, it also opens up more questions," she said.

More information: "Early child care in Australia : quality of care, experiences of care and developmental outcomes for Australian children." eprints.qut.edu.au/81298/

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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