

Children from chaotic homes benefit from time in child care, study finds

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Spending 35 or more hours weekly in nonparental child care may have significant developmental benefits for children from chaotic home environments, suggests a new study of 1,200 children led by University of Illinois education professor Daniel Berry. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Regularly attending child care may have numerous developmental

benefits for children who live in chaotic, disorganized home environments, suggests a new study.

Numerous studies have linked chaotic households - homes that are overcrowded, noisy, unclean and lacking predictable routines - with low academic achievement and attention, social and behavioral problems among [children](#) in poverty.

Children from chaotic homes who spent more time in child care during infancy and [early childhood](#) experienced better cognitive, emotional and social development than peers from similar home environments who attended fewer hours of weekly child care, the researchers in the current study found.

More than 1,200 children from predominantly low-income families in rural Appalachia and North Carolina participated in the research, led by developmental psychologist Daniel Berry of the University of Illinois.

Berry and his co-authors tracked the children's development from the age of 7 months to 5 years, observing children's interactions with their primary caregiver at home and with their caregivers in child-care centers or other settings.

Children in the current study spent an average of 21 hours weekly in nonparental care prior to age 3, according to their families' reports. About one third of the children spent 30 or more hours weekly in nonparental care, either in child-care centers or informal settings, such as relatives' homes.

When the children turned 4 years old, they were administered a battery of executive functioning tasks, which measured their abilities to regulate their thoughts and attention, abilities that impact learning and social development.

At age 5, the children were tested on their vocabulary and [academic achievement](#), and their pre-kindergarten teachers assessed them on their social behavior - how well they could control their emotions and get along with their peers.

Higher degrees of household chaos and disorganization across early childhood were associated with less optimal executive functioning, weaker vocabularies and worse social behavior, the researchers found.

However, these detrimental associations were significantly moderated by the amount of time the children attended child care, according to the study.

For children who spent 35 hours or more per week in child care, the links between [household chaos](#) and adverse developmental outcomes were eliminated. The researchers' analyses suggested that the mitigating effects of child care on the broader age-5 social and cognitive outcomes were explained largely by the buffering role that child care played in protecting children's executive functioning.

"The exposure to greater hours and higher quality care may provide a mitigating effect on the impact of chaos in the home," Berry said. "We don't understand the mechanisms fully, but we hypothesize that minimizing young children's exposure to highly chaotic environments may provide some relief."

Household chaos such as constant noise from a television, or frequent comings and goings by household members and visitors, may negatively impact a child's [executive functioning](#) by frequently diverting the child's attention, impairing their ability to regulate their attention and modulate their arousal, the researchers hypothesized.

Prior research findings on the effects of child care on children have been

mixed, with some studies suggesting that children who spend greater time in child care are prone to more [behavioral problems](#).

However, families in poverty were underrepresented in many of these studies' samples, and the developmental implications of [child care](#) may differ substantially for children from high-risk home environments, Berry said.

"One of the biggest take-home messages for me is that this emerging body of research highlights the critical importance of considering the interplay of children's experiences across the multiple ecologies of early childhood," Berry said.

The paper, published recently in the journal *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, was a component of the Family Life Project, an ongoing study that has followed nearly 1,300 children from two rural, high-poverty regions in the U.S. since the children's birth in 2003.

More information: The study "Household chaos and children's cognitive and socio-emotional development in early childhood: Does child care play a buffering role?" is available online www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S088520061530003X

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