

In addition to our regular features, this issue of *Family Matters* highlights two significant events.

The first is the conference on family health, sponsored by the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund, which was held in Canberra 22–25 May 1996, and which is extensively reported as the principal theme of this issue of *Family Matters* (see pages 6–7 for my overview of the conference). The Institute is pleased to have been associated with Rotary Australia in the organisation of this important conference and in the dissemination of its outcomes.

The second event highlighted in this issue is the publication, on pages 33–35, of the report concerning a major US longitudinal study of the effects of day care on the development of infants and young children. This report originally appeared in the *Newsletter* of the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) and is reproduced in *Family Matters* with permission of the Society. The SRCD is the principal learned society in the United States for social scientists concerned with human developmental processes.

US Child Care Research

The reprinted SRCD article reports the preliminary results from a study, sponsored by the Washington based US National Institutes for Child Health and Development (NICHD), of the developmental impacts on young children of their exposure to experiences of non-maternal child care.

Over the past half century the controversy over the effects of placing young children in non-maternal child care settings has waxed and waned (see McGurk et al. 1993 for a recent review). Most recently the controversy has provoked lively, sometimes acrimonious debate in the research and policy literature on child care, as well as in the mass media, concerning the likely consequences for the development of secure attachments between infants and their mothers of exposing infants to non-maternal child care during the first year of life.

The hypothesis that such exposure might be damaging to the development of secure infant–mother attachments was most forcefully advanced by the US researcher Jay Belsky. Belsky (1988) used research evidence existing at the time to argue that infants exposed to an average of more than 20 hours per week of non-maternal care were at risk of developing insecure attachments. Since, based on John Bowlby's theory of attachment, insecure infant–mother attachment was believed to be predictive of later developmental pathology, Belsky went on to argue that early exposure to non-maternal child care was thereby a risk factor for subsequent developmental pathology.

The day care controversy has been conducted (frequently at fever pitch) without reliable longitudinal data available, collected from representative samples of infants and young children, on which to base a considered judgement.

Accordingly, given the increasing numbers of American women from both dual parent and sole parent families entering the paid workforce, and, in consequence, the increasing numbers of infants and young children who are experiencing non-maternal child care, it was decided by NICHD to establish a major longitudinal study of the effects of non-maternal child care.



DIRECTOR'S REPORT

HARRY MCGURK

This was to be achieved by recruiting, during the immediate post-partum period, a nationally representative sample of mothers, their infants and their families, by maintaining as complete records as possible of the infants' experiences of maternal and non-maternal child care, and by making regular developmental assessments of the infants, across a broad range of cognitive, social and personal characteristics over the first years of life.

Data collection for the study, the largest and most generously funded investigation of the effects of day care ever undertaken, started in 1992. The report we have reproduced elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters* is the most extensive public presentation thus far of the initial findings from the investigation.

Debate about the effects of early exposure to non-maternal day care on the development of infants and young children has been as lively in Australia during recent years as it has been elsewhere in the world. Here too, increasing numbers of mothers are returning to the paid workforce and increasing numbers of Australian infants and young children are spending time daily in formal and informal care settings outside the home.

Are there lessons for us here in Australia from these data from the NICHD early child care research project? There are, perhaps, four points to be made in this respect.

One concerns the importance of quality in child care and the confirmation which the US findings provide for the positive relationships between such structural aspects of formal child care settings as environmental conditions, group size and child–adult ratios on the one hand, and the quality of the actual care experienced by children on the other: 'Across these (formal) child care settings, smaller group sizes, lower child–adult ratios, less authoritarian child rearing beliefs, and clean/safe/stimulating physical environments were consistently associated with positive care giving behaviours.'

A second point concerns the extent to which, in the United States, access to quality child care is related to family income. Generally speaking, families which were less reliant for their economic wellbeing on maternal income had access to care of higher quality: 'Higher non-maternal (family) incomes were associated with families utilising higher quality child care.' However, this relationship does not apply linearly across all forms of child care. Among families using centre based care, because of the pattern of US subsidy of day care, children from the poorest families (who have access to federally subsidised child care centres) and children from the wealthiest families (who, because of their levels of

spending, are eligible for child care tax credits) attended higher quality centres than children from middle class families.

In reflecting upon the possible relevance of these findings to the child care scene in Australia, there are two important caveats to bear in mind. Firstly, throughout the States and Territories, child care in Australia is more widely regulated than in the US where some States have no regulations and in others the existing regulations are not enforced. Secondly, in recent years the operation of the Australian child care Quality Improvement and Accreditation System has served to raise consciousness generally about the importance of quality in child care and to encourage the pursuit of high standards of quality in child care services throughout the country.

Thus, in Australia, regulation and accreditation should be combining to reduce the variability of quality in child care compared to the United States; national standards for the regulation of day care, agreed within the COAG process, should, when implemented, contribute to similar outcomes. Moreover, the availability of federally funded Child Care Assistance is intended to render quality child care more affordable in Australia, so that access to quality child care here should not be as dependent upon family income as appears to be the case in the United States. However, we must not complacently assume that these desirable objectives have already been achieved. The question of equity in access to quality child care services in Australia is an empirical one and should be empirically investigated.

A third major point to emerge from the NICHD study concerns its contribution to resolution of what many have come to regard as the American question in day care research: is infant exposure to regular non-maternal child care damaging in and of itself to the development of infant–mother attachments? The NICHD researchers employed the so-called 'Strange Situation' procedure, which enables observers to assess the security of infant–mother relationships, to address this question.

The answer yielded by this large scale investigation of a representative sample of American families seems fairly clear cut: 'Variations in amount of infant child care, age of entry, number of child care arrangements, or the observed quality of child care did not, in and of themselves, increase or decrease a child's chance of being securely or insecurely attached to mother.'

The findings, however, do indicate that when mothers are insensitive in their own interactions with their infants, the resulting insecurity of infant–mother attachment can be further exacerbated by long exposure to poor quality day care or to unstable day care arrangements.

With respect to the development of attachments, the NICHD study confirms that the security of infant–caregiver attachment is a multi-dimensional phenomenon to which day care does not make a direct, determinate contribution; however, quality day care is critical in the case of infants who are otherwise at risk of developing insecurely, if only to prevent further relationship deterioration.

These are but the preliminary outcomes from an investigation of major significance. Future reports from the NICHD study will be awaited with interest by researchers, service providers and policy makers in the children's services area. As they become

available, findings from the NICHD longitudinal study of the effects of day care on child development will provide a fundamental resource for the development of evidence based policy and practice in the provision of child care in the United States.

That brings me to what I consider to be the fourth and most important lesson we in Australia can draw from this project.

In this report I have identified a number of ways in which findings from the NICHD child care study might have relevance for Australia. However, I have also drawn attention to differences in the context in which day care services are delivered and are experienced in Australia compared with the United States. Such differences place severe constraints on the extent to which it is sensible to generalise from US research on child care to what might obtain in Australia; at best, the former can only provide pointers to the latter, hypotheses to be tested rather than conclusions to be assumed.

Australia has made enormous investment in child care over the past decade and is set to continue to do so to the end of the century and beyond. The trend for increasing numbers of mothers of young children to participate in the paid workforce will continue, with commensurate need for additional child care provision. Moreover, investment in early

childhood services, of which child care is part, is increasingly being acknowledged as an essential investment in human capital in its own right (Powell 1995).

It is critical that future development and expansion of early childhood services in Australia should be evidence based. We need to be assured that our early years provision is delivering what we intended – that our children are indeed enjoying quality service provision. Most importantly, we need to know what impacts our early years services are having on the subsequent social, cognitive, educational and personal development of our children. Longitudinal outcome data of this kind is sadly lacking in Australia. There is an urgent need here for a study such as that sponsored in the United States by NICHD.

This is a time of much debate about how child care services in Australia should be resourced and delivered – see, for example, the Interim Report of the Child Care Task Force of the Economic Planning and Advisory Commission (EPAC 1996). Unfortunately, much of the kind of evidence which should inform that debate is unavailable, particularly as to the effects of current provision and practice on the development of our children.

As I said earlier, overseas research can provide hints as to what we might look for. But

we cannot make valid generalisations for Australia based on findings from the United States or elsewhere. It is critically important that planning for the future of early childhood services here in Australia should be informed by outcomes from Australian longitudinal research.

Harry McGurk

References

- Belsky, J. (1988), 'The "effects" of infant day care reconsidered', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol.3, pp.235–272.
- Bowlby, J. (1969, 1973, 1980), *Attachment and Loss, Volumes 1–3*, Hogarth Press, London.
- EPAC (1996), *Child Care Task Force: Interim Report: Future Child Care Provision in Australia*, Economic Planning and Advisory Commission, Canberra.
- McGurk, H., Caplan, M., Hennessy, E., and Moss, P. (1993), 'Controversy, theory and social context in contemporary day care research', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 34, no.1, pp.3–23.
- Powell, D.R. (1995), *Enabling Young Children to Succeed in School*, American Educational Research Association, Washington DC.

FIFTH

Australian Family Research Conference

At the Novotel in Brisbane, 27–29 November 1996.

Family Research – Pathways to Policy

The Australian Institute of Family Studies invites registrations from those wishing to attend the Fifth Australian Family Research Conference, at the Novotel in Brisbane, 27–29 November 1996.

The Conference will provide a valuable forum for those who are interested or involved in family research and the development of family policy in Australia. The Conference will focus on family issues in Australia, and feature the presentation and discussion of findings of the Institute's own studies and work from other researchers, government bodies and community organisations.

Conference Themes

In all, over 90 presentations will be made during the course of the Conference. The Conference will include keynote addresses, plenary sessions, paper and poster presentations, as well as symposia, grouped into the following broad themes:

- **Economics and family Life**
Budget standards
Welfare and poverty
Living standards
Income support for families

- **Young people and families**
Sibling relationships in adolescence
Parenting values
Children and well being
Surveys of children
- **Family diversity and well being**
Divorce: outcomes for children
Family forms: the outcomes of different family forms
Rural families
Ethnicity
- **Values and families**
Relationship values and education
Family values
Families and the media
- **Work and Family**
Domestic labour
Gender, Power and money
Work and family preferences
- **Family violence**
Violence and family processes
Processing family violence
Domestic violence
Legal processes
- **Caring in families**
Disabilities and caring
Elder caring
Families in later life
- **Service delivery and family programs**
- **Approaches to research**

In addition there will be workshop sessions on:

- Using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI)
- Using the Internet for family information and research

Who Should Attend

Those who have a professional or personal interest in Australian family research and policy, including:

- Interested members of the public
- Community and Church group representatives
- People working with children and young people, families or the aged
- Educators and researchers at all levels in the field of family studies
- Policy makers or service providers planning for the future needs of families
- Lawyers and others with an interest in family law
- Human resource managers
- Psychologists, social workers and health professionals

REGISTRATION

If you would like to register for the Conference or receive a Registration Form or further details, contact Annette Dowie, Conference Registrations, Australian Institute of Family Studies. Tel: (03) 9214 7808.

Registration Fees

Full conference

- Registration prior to 15 September 1996 – \$290
- Registration after 15 September 1996 – \$310

Day registration

- Registration prior to 15 September 1996 – \$150 per day
- Registration after 15 September 1996 – \$160 per day

Travel & Accommodation

Special arrangements have been made for Conference delegates to receive discounts on air travel and accommodation at selected hotels. Please refer to your registration form.

The closing date for registrations is 31 October 1996



Australian Institute of Family Studies

Australian Institute of Family Studies
300 Queen Street
Melbourne, Victoria 3000, Australia
Phone (03) 9214 7888 Fax (03) 9214 7839