

Experiences with full-time child care attendance on young children in Norway: Parents' and early childhood teachers' views

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of parents and early childhood teachers in Norway regarding the benefits of child care to young children. Both positive and negative benefits were explored. In the autumn of 2009, 41 parents and 35 early childhood teachers of children aged 1.5 years or less, living in the city of Trondheim and nearby communities, were assessed by means of a semi-structured qualitative interview. There was agreement among parents and early childhood teachers that children benefited from child care. Parents, however, tended to overestimate the benefit of socialization and learning for this young age-group. However, early childhood teachers focused more on socialization, in terms of waiting for turns, observing certain rules. One third of parents did not report any negative experiences of child care. The others reported negative experiences on occasion or under certain circumstances such as long hours, poor-quality care or too many children per adult early childhood teacher. All but four of the early childhood teachers suggested that high standards had to be satisfied to make child care good enough for the youngest children.

Keywords

Child care, infants, toddlers, positive experiences, negative experiences

Introduction

As more mothers in industrialized countries join the work force, full time child care from an early age is needed. In Norway, the percentage of children under the age of three in kindergarten increased from 47.8 to 80 % from 2004 to 2008 (Statistics Norway, 2011).

Most mothers in Norway work full time. Maternity leave is fulltime paid for 10 months or 80 % for 12 months, and 80 % of 1–2-year-old children go to child care centers (Statistics Norway, 2011). There is an important political goal in Norway to achieve fulltime child care for all children from age one. The government has supported this development by building a large number of new child care facilities, also for the youngest children, during the past few years. This development has led parents to change from various kinds of private home-based care to bringing their children to child care centers. The city of Trondheim is one of the communities closest to fulfil these goals and also to date has a relatively large proportion of the youngest children in public child care. The Norwegian model is unique in the way that the child care services form part of the overall child care provision for all children under school age. The trained personnel are graduated as Bachelors with 3 years training. However, there is no requirement for special training concerning the youngest children.

The educated personnel constitute only one-third of the staff. The two other thirds are uneducated (Greve & Solheim, 2010).

There are several challenges with non-maternal care for the youngest children. People feel different about leaving their young baby to non-maternal care and some parents feel uncomfortable. This study will have a developmental focus on benefits and challenges of children attending two different care systems. Parents and early childhood teachers both represent important attachment figures as well as stimulating agents.

Existing literature describes the important role of positive relationships between children and care takers from an early age (Bowlby, 2007, Bronfenbrenner, 1989, Sameroff, 2000, Stern, 1985). Newer developmental psychology point out the importance of children's early years as a basis for their further development. For the emotional development these first years is especially important (Stern, 1985). For children also attending non maternal child care, the quality of care therefore is important. According to Bowlby (2007) babies in non-parental care can avoid stress and anxiety if they develop a lasting secondary attachment bond with one carer who is consistently accessible to them.

Aims of this study

Several studies have focused on the effects of child care using multiple informants and reliable measures (Clarke-Steward & Allhusen, 2005); there are still areas in which little work has been done, and where results differ. The goal of this qualitative study is exploratory with open-ended questions. We wanted to focus developmental benefits and challenges of children being part of two different care systems. How congruent are these systems, and do they share the same priorities for children's early development?

While most studies in this area have been quantitative, the present study adopted a qualitative approach and complemented earlier studies, focusing on the views of both parents and early childhood teachers regarding the positive and negative experiences with child care for younger children. Two OECD reports (OECD, 2001; 2006) commended the high quality of child care in Norway. It was therefore of interest to address the following questions in settings that represent generally high levels of child care quality and to assess the experiences of parents and early childhood teachers by means of a qualitative interview, as some factors may be masked when quantitative approaches are taken as questionnaire items more easily lead respondents in certain directions because of suggested categories for answers.

Although studies are increasing, there is little research on the youngest children even though a growing proportion of them spend many hours in care. The aim of this study was thus to examine the experiences of parents and early childhood teachers of young children focusing individual positive attitude as well as worries and doubts on the development towards one-year-olds attending full time child care. It is interesting to know to what extent they share expectancies and goals for children's early development. The advantage of qualitative approaches here is the open questions where no given alternatives might lead the respondents in certain directions. By asking about both benefits and negative aspects of child care one might get insight into parent's and staff's expectations and worries concerning full-time child care. The two open questions asked were 'What are the benefits of full-time child care for young children?' and 'What are the possible negative influences of full-time child care for young children?'

Methods

Procedures

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of children aged eighteen months or less who had recently started child care. Data were collected in the autumn of 2009 by the authors of this paper (half of the interviews) and by two trained research assistants, both of whom hold master's degrees in psychology.

Child care centers in Trondheim city and nearby communities were invited to participate in the study. We enrolled continuously until more than 40 children were included. The parents were drawn randomly from community listings from each of the child care centers that were willing to participate in the study. Thirty-five child care centers participated and either one or two families from each center were included. Parents were interviewed in their homes after work or at another place selected by the parents (e.g., workplace or university). Early childhood teachers were interviewed at their workplace.

The study was approved by the Regional Medical Research Ethics Committee, University of Trondheim. The respondents were explicitly informed about the confidentiality of their answers to avoid socially desirable answers and to protect their privacy.

Participants

Forty-one children aged 2 years or younger (22 boys and 19 girls), with a mean age of 15.6 months, participated in the study. Among them, 20 children were the only child in the family (48.8%), 18 children had one sibling (43.9%) and three children had two siblings. The present sample also included four pairs of twins. The sample reportedly consisted of healthy and normally functioning children. No special resources were necessary for any of these children.

The age of the mothers ranged from 22 to 40 years, with a mean age of 32 years, and the age of the fathers ranged from 27 to 42 years, with a mean age of 34 years. Among the mothers, 92.9% had a Norwegian ethnic origin, as did 88.1% of the fathers. The educational level of the parents was relatively high, and 46.3% of mothers and 43.9% of fathers had finished college or university 3 years or more. Eighty-one percent of the families reported using full-time child care for 8 h or more and 16.7% reported care placement for 6–8 h a day. Some parents reported taking one day off every week when the child was at home.

Thirty-five early childhood teachers from the same child care units were also interviewed. Among them, 17 (50%) had graduated as Bachelors in preschool education, in addition, 12 (35.3%) had one or two years of additional studies on top of their Bachelor. Only three early childhood teachers (8.8%) did not have relevant educational training. The early childhood teachers in the present study were very experienced: 17.6% reported 1–3 years of practice, 32.3% reported 4–10 years of experience and the remaining individuals reported more than 10 years of practice. Almost 42% of the centers reported having one preschool teacher among their staff in the present unit, whereas almost 55% reported having more than one preschool teacher among their staff.

The size of the units in the child care centers ranged from four to 32 children, with 10–14 children being the most frequent number of children enrolled (65.8%). The sample included two home-based care units. The child/adult ratio in this study ranged from 2.4 to 4.7. Four centers reported a ratio <3 (12.5%). A ratio between 3 and 4 was reported by 78.1% of the centers. Only three centers (9.4%) reported a ratio >4.

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Data collection

Qualitative methods were chosen because these are particularly relevant for research questions concerning subjective perceptions of individuals and because we wanted to complement the findings of larger quantitative studies in this field. Semi-structured, open interviews lasted from 45 to 75 minutes. The main topics of the interviews concerned how small children adjust to child care, how parents and early childhood teachers evaluate the child care situation, the relationships of parents with child care staff, and the main characteristics and qualities of child care that are important for the development of young children.

Demographic information was collected regarding the age, nationality and education of the parents. The educational level of parents was rated using a four-point scale (elementary school, high school, three years of college/university and five years or more of college/university). The educational level of the childhood teachers and their years of work experience in child care were registered. The length of the work experience of the childhood teachers was categorized as follows: 1–3 years, 4–10 years, and more than 10 years. The amount of time spent by the children in child care was classified as full-time: more than 8 hours and full-time: less than 8 hours. All the families paid for full-time child care even if they used less. None of the children attended child care for less than six hours per day, according to the parents.

The interviews were taped, transcribed anonymously to text and analyzed.

Data analyses

The data were analyzed using elements taken from a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory is derived inductively from the study of the phenomena it represents. The researchers abstracted the qualitative data into concepts and categories using three major types of coding: open, axial, and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Similarities and differences between concepts and categories are examined systematically using constant comparison. In the open coding process, data are broken down by naming small meaningful units in the text. Similar units are then labeled and grouped to form categories.

Axial coding is the first step toward putting the data together. In this process, the categories are compared and contrasted in order to detect potential similarities and differences. An axial code is an overarching category that encompasses two or more codes. Selective coding is a process of focusing selectively on higher-order categories, in order to extract sense. Relationships between categories are explored and integrated at a more abstract level than in axial coding. The goal of this phase of analysis is to create higher-order categories and, if possible, to develop a theory.

We analysed the transcripts of the interviews and reduced the data by translating into developmental codes. We followed a strategy where we began with a broad outline of a concept that one must revise and narrow down. We narrowed down and the following two distinct categories emerged from the analyses of parents' answers: 'socialization', and 'learning and language development'.

The same procedure was done with the early childhood teachers' interviews. Two categories, both of which involved aspects of social competence, emerged from the sub-categories "learning through play", "peer relationships", "norms and rule", and "respect and sharing".

Two categories of negative influence of child care emerged from our analyses of data from parent interviews: 'no negative experiences', 'negative experiences occasionally or under certain circumstances'. The circumstances highlighted in the second category were 'long hours', 'quality of childhood teachers', 'starting child care at an early age', and 'number of children' all concerning different aspects of child care quality.

Two researchers collaborated in the coding, categorizing and analysis of the data.

Findings

Benefits of child care – the views of parents and early childhood teachers

All parents claimed positive benefit of child care, although one of them did not favour focusing on the benefits for the youngest children, prioritizing a focus on safety and good care.

Socialization

More than half of the parents mentioned the importance of socialization. Examples in this category were: range of stimulation, play with other children, sharing and respect for other children, and use of collective rules. The following are typical statements:

Children learn to share with other children. They get used to collective rules and do not get their own way all the time (mother of 20-month-old girl).

He learns a lot. We could not have given him the same amount of stimulation. The social environment in child care is important (mother of 23-month-old boy).

There are useful benefits. She learns to be with other children, to wait for her turn, and to pay attention to others (mother of 17-month-old girl).

Earlier studies of social functioning show mixed results. Clarke-Steward and Allhusen (2005) showed that children in child care are more comfortable among new adults and get along better with other children than children who stay at home or with babysitters. A longitudinal Swedish study report that children attending a child care centre at the age of eighteen months and three years show better social competence through all their years at school until the age of 15 than children who start later or do not attend child care (Campbell, Lamb & Hwang, 2000). A study by Belsky and colleagues (2007) did not find any relationship, either positive or negative, between early child care and social competence in sixth grade. Gupta and Simonsen (2008) reported that Danish children attending child care were not more socially competent at the age of seven than children who remained at home. Social competence is associated with many different variables in a child's life, of which child care is only one (Campbell, Lamb & Hwang, 2000).

Children's interest in their peers grows during the first years of life, and there is a marked growth in interaction by the third and fourth years of life due to the development of social understanding (Nichols, Svetlova & Brownell, 2010). Infants are interested in their same-age peers, but prior to 18 months of age, children's peer interactions are relatively rare, uncoordinated, and limited in

complexity. In the course of the second and third years of life, children's social awareness rapidly expands as they develop the skills and social understanding that enable them to enjoy cooperative interactions with peers (Nichols, Svetlova, & Brownell, 2010).

Most of the early childhood teachers reported important benefits to children attending child care, although four of the 35 early childhood teachers stated clearly that one-year-olds were too young for full-time child care. Two categories, both of which involved aspects of social competence, emerged from the early childhood teachers' answers: "socialization" and "being with other children". The early childhood teachers did not mention learning and language stimulation as parents did; however, the socialization category that emerged from analyses shared four subcategories: "learning through play", "peer relationships", "norms and rules", and "respect and sharing".

Even if the youngest children do not play together (Nichols, Svetlova, & Brownell, 2010), a third of parents emphasised the importance and stimulation of being together.

Playing with other children is positive. He would not have learnt as much at home (parents of 15-month-old boy).

Playing with other children is positive compared to staying at home. Meeting other children and adults has positive effects. We are not able to give the same amount of stimulation at home (parents of 17-month-old boy).

To be with other children is positive compared to being only with adults. However, there could have been fewer children around in the day-care centre. It gets too noisy (mother of 19-month-old girl).

The early childhood teachers were more detailed in their description of socialization, including both elements of social competence and peer relationships as well as highlighting general social qualities and rules such as respect, sharing and behavioural norms.

The early childhood teachers also evaluated peer relationships. However, they seemed to be more realistic regarding the quality of such relationships at an early age. Early childhood teachers focused more on the differences in maturity and readiness to interact with similarly aged peers, and put more emphasis on the value of being member of a group. Activities such as singing and reading took place within the group settings and allowed for individual levels of interaction according to the individual child's maturity. The early childhood teachers in this study represented high quality in terms of high educational levels and may therefore have found it easier to evaluate the benefit of peer relationships in a more balanced way than parents could do. However, early childhood teachers also tended to overestimate the influence on social development where research results differ on the influence of child care (Belsky et al, 2007; Clarke-Steward & Allhusen, 2005; Gupta & Simonsen, 2008).

On socialization, however, both groups of respondents had distinct points of view. Parents emphasized that being with other children was very important for social development. The early childhood teachers also reported that even if children at one year of age do not play with each other, they do appreciate being together. Studies show the second year of life as representing a growing interest in peers and a marked growth in peer interactions by the third and fourth years of life (Nichols, Svetlova & Brownell, 2010). The same study also shows that toddlers may use the affect of an older peer to inform and regulate their play with novel toys, and that they alter their play with toys depending on the emotions displayed by the peer to the toys. However, it is not until the end of their second year that toddlers become more sophisticated readers of emotional messages as well as of peers (Nichols et al., 2010). Parents expressed very high expectations of care, trusting these early childhood teachers to reduce pressure from society on children's development in different areas. They may therefore overestimate their importance for socialization and peer relationships at a very early age where research results disagree (Lowe et al., 2003). Studies suggest the end of second year

as a more realistic time-point for social relationships to emerge and grow during the following two years (Nichols et al., 2010). The early childhood teachers focused more on social functioning in a group where the children had to observe certain rules like waiting for their turn, sharing and developing empathy with others. The early childhood teachers felt that these skills were easier for children to learn in care than at home, where some of them were the only child and could have their own way more often.

They have to learn rules and routines which represent a good platform for future life (Early childhood teacher9).

They learn to wait for their turn, and to show empathy towards others (Early childhood teacher10).

They become socialised through playing with other children. They learn music, song, rhyme and rhythm (Early childhood teacher13).

Being with others was also seen as a quality in itself by the childhood teachers:

They get more children to pay attention to and learn to be with others (Early childhood teacher9).

Young children are social persons and enjoy being with each other (Early childhood teacher10).

It is very important to be member of a group. Even if they do not play, they are very aware of each other (Early childhood teacher13).

Learning and language development

More than one third of the parents mentioned development and learning as important benefits of being in child care. Some of the parents specifically mentioned language stimulation as an important benefit of child care, although none of the early childhood teachers mentioned these aspects.

They acquire better language competence and have to learn more words (mother of 15-month-old girl).

They learn much more than when they stay at home. The benefit to children is high (parents of 17-month-old girl).

They learn a lot; language as well as general learning. Child care personnel are more pedagogical than parents. We parents try, but sometimes we underestimate the child. Other impulses than parents are good for the child (father of 18-month-old girl).

Good-quality child care is associated with a variety of positive benefits for young children (National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD), 2002). Studies focus the benefit of child care on later education. Children in child care perform better on measures of language and cognitive development than other children (Clark-Stewart & Allhusen, 2005). However, Belsky et al. (2007) reported from their NICHD study that the quality of the care provided by parents was a better predictor of the children's functioning in 6th grade than whether or not child was placed in care, and the same results were also found at the age of 15. Higher-quality child care predicted higher levels of pre-academic skills and language performance, but not social functioning, and more hours in care predicted higher levels of behaviour problems.

Studies such as those of Clarke-Stewart and Allhusen (2005) and Geoffroy et al. (2006) reporting that children in child care perform better on measures of language and cognitive development, may give us reason to regard child care as an important learning agent from early childhood.

None of the early childhood teachers emphasized these learning perspectives, but rather highlighted the caring aspect for the youngest children. However, parents of children even at this early age seemed to be more focused on later effects on learning and stimulation. This is in agreement with earlier studies indicating that parents overestimate the quality of care their children receive (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997). Some of the parents felt that they lacked the right “code” for educating their children, trusting child care attendants to be better trained to provide such important stimulation. Most parents regarded language training as extremely important for later school readiness even if their child was only about a year old at the time of their interview. It is obvious that parents of children at the age of one focused on later educational needs and felt relieved that they could share this responsibility with qualified early childhood teachers. Studies show that as compared with home-based care, centers are more likely to have a predictable daily schedule, a structured curriculum, as well as an environment designed for children and trained early childhood teachers (Crosby, Dowsett, Gennetian, & Huston, 2010). There appears to be a certain pressure on families to stimulate children from an early age, a process that also well educated parents in this study find it difficult to face up to alone. Child care is thus an agent of support that parents need to relay on. This learning aspect may also make it easier for parents to hand over their children to care at this early age; a handover about which some of the parents otherwise expressed some doubts. The existing policy in Norway is to secure all children public child care from 12 months old. Parents expressed that they felt a pressure to leave their child in care because these promises acted like a recommendation that this was the best for the child from that given age. They certainly did not want their child to miss any stimulation that they felt they could not secure themselves at a similar quality as an experienced teacher could.

The early childhood teachers, on the other hand, were not at all preoccupied about matters of cognition and learning matters. They were more inclined to focus on taking care of children, responding to needs and offering a secure environment for the individual child as well as for the whole group of children. None of them mentioned the educational aspects that parents did. It is reassuring that childhood teachers for this age group focus primarily on taking good care of children rather than emphasizing the long-term learning aspect to which they would probably pay more attention when the children are older.

As far as cognitive and language development are concerned, child care seemed to compensate for lack of stimulation in children from less challenging home environments. Canadian studies report that children from families of lower socioeconomic status in particular show positive language development after attending child care (e.g. Geoffroy, Côté, Parent, & Séguin, 2006). These parents more than others may rely on child care for such stimulation. A later study by Geoffroy et al. (2010) suggested that early child care could be a means of preventively attenuating the effects of a disadvantaged home environment on children’s early academic trajectory. Children of mothers with low levels of education showed a consistent pattern of lower scores on academic readiness and achievement tests at six and seven years of age than those of highly educated mothers, unless they were receiving formal child care. That study did not detect any association between child care groups and cognitive outcomes for children of mothers with high levels of education. However, only moderate- to high-quality child care influences cognitive outcomes at 15 across the whole range of socioeconomic status (Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg & Vandergrift, 2010). If the children experience long hours of care, the effects of the home environment may be weakened, because the children may have less of an opportunity to experience maternal care and a home environment, thus lowering the predictability of outcome measures due to parental factors (Adi-Japha & Klein, 2009). Huang, Invernizzi & Drake (2011) found that the benefits of attending pre-kindergarten were greatest upon kindergarten entry and persisted until the end of the first grade for Hispanic and Black students, as well as for students with disabilities.

Negative experiences of child care – the views of parents and early childhood teachers

Parents and early childhood teachers were asked if they thought that attending child care could have any negative influence on the development of young children. About one third of the parents reported 'no negative experience', and two thirds reported 'yes - under certain circumstances'. The circumstances highlighted in the second category were 'long hours', 'quality of childhood teachers', 'starting child care at an early age', and 'number of children'.

It has already been demonstrated that early child care may have negative effects in terms of stress and later conduct disorder, and that such effects might be intensified by the quality of child care, the child's temperament and gender (NICHD Early Childcare Network, 2003). However, the associations between quality of care and social-emotional development have been more mixed (Lowe et al., 2003), and relationship issues is not always discussed. Love et al. (2003) concluded that quality of child care had an important influence on child development, and may be an important moderator of the effects of amount of time spent in care. According to Ahnert, Pinquart and Lamb's meta-analysis (2006), the characteristics of the care settings, such as group size and child/adult ratio, appeared to moderate the association between the behaviour of the early childhood teachers and the quality of their relationship with the children.

Four of the 34 childhood teachers did not find any negative influence of child care on young children. However, twenty-nine respondents suggested that certain standards must be met to make child care good enough for young children. If such standards were not met, child care could have negative developmental influence on the youngest children. Among the early childhood teachers the same categories emerged as among the parents, with quality as an important category. Some of the respondents suggested several aspects as being essential for the quality of care. The most frequently mentioned negative influences of child care were attending long hours in child care and high number of children per adult.

The parents who reported no negative experience of child care were no different in terms of age than the rest of the parents; however, both mothers and fathers had obtained a somewhat lower level of education than the parental group as a whole. These parents emphasized learning and stimulation as very important benefit of child care.

This might be why they needed more than others to trust another agency about their child's development. On the other hand, well-educated parents may be more concerned about what is good-quality care, and they also value proper stimulation from an early age.

Long hours

The most frequent negative influence of child care mentioned by parents concerned the long hours spent in care. Twelve parents identified long days as stressful for young children, and suggested that shorter days would be better for the whole family. One mother, who was a student at the time, was able to work shorter hours. She was dreading having to start full-time work, as this would mean longer child care for her child.

Long hours give too many impressions for the young child (parents of 12-month-old girl).

It is negative if they have to spend too long hours in care. They get too tired. They should be a little older than one year when they start (mother of 16-month-old boy).

I am a student now, and I am able to adjust my days so she stays for 6 hours only. I dread having to start full-time work (mother of 14-month-old girl).

Long hours, which meant tired children, were focused as the most important negative influence of child care by both parents and early childhood teachers. A shorter day would have been preferred by parents, but this would interfere with their full-time work, and for most parents reducing working hours was difficult. The length of the stay seemed to be important. Care for 30 hours or more hours a week is associated with small but statistically significant increases in behavioral problems (Bradley & Vandell, 2007), although the quality of the care provided is also important. Tiredness of young children in full time care is reported both in qualitative research (Undheim & Drugli, 2011) and in quantitative research documented with elevated cortisol levels (Belsky & Pleuss, 2009).

According to Ahnert and Lamb (2003), however, the negative effects of child care in terms of elevated stress levels are not necessarily an effect of child care alone. Belsky and Pleuss (2009) suggested that there are differences in susceptibility to environmental influences and that there exist individual differences in plasticity (as some children are more affected by rearing experiences than others) and, more generally, in environmental circumstances.

More than one third of the childhood teachers pointed to long hours as having very negative influence on young children in child care. They expressed some concern about the youngest children who seemed to spend the longest hours in care, some of them more than nine hours. They were surprised to find that the one-year-olds often were picked up later than the older children. After spending about a year in maternity leave, some of the mothers may be eager to return to work. Many of them then encounter pressure to be a satisfactory employee.

Parents are busy and work long hours. Some of the one-year-olds have to stay nine hours a day which is too long for them (Early childhood teacher2).

Some of the young children need more support than child care can provide. Shorter hours would be much better for these children (Early childhood teacher20).

Long hours are negative for young children. They become very tired (Early childhood teacher26).

Quality of early childhood teachers

One fourth of the parents were also highly aware of the quality of childhood teachers. They emphasised that childhood teachers have to be able to see to all the children in the group properly and to attend to their needs so that every child get a strong sense of security. They also mentioned substitute staff that come and go as being a problem.

The quality of childhood teachers is important. They need to have a high level of education. Childhood teachers need to be interested in the children, and pay attention to how they influence them. It is also important that they see all the conflicts going on and find solutions. Otherwise we will end up with insecure children (parents of 17-month-old girl).

Too low a ratio of childhood teachers to children is negative. Childhood teachers who work only for money and are poorly motivated can also be a problem. They are unable to give the children the security they need. Lower quality care is not good for children (mother of 16-month-old boy).

Too many substitute childhood teachers are a problem that is difficult to deal with (parents of 15-month-old girl).

About one third of the early childhood teachers also emphasised teacher quality as important. Early childhood teachers need to know about the needs of young children and should be able to pay attention to every child. They should also be very dedicated in their work and not be tired of working among young children. Pleuss and Belsky (2010) show that children with an early negatively disposed temperament benefit the most from high-quality care. At the same time, however, they are also most vulnerable to low-quality care.

The childhood teachers are very important people for the child. Children need comfort and support (Early childhood teacher5).

The quality of childhood teachers is important. It is very special to work with young children. Childhood teachers need to be aware of the needs of young children, and offer the care that each child requires (Early childhood teacher13).

It is very important that childhood teachers are suitable for working with young children and are genuinely interested in their work. They need to be conscientious in their work, and they have to know what is important for young children (Early childhood teacher32).

Number of children

Too many children in child care units were also mentioned as a problem by some of the parents. Too many children in each unit make it difficult for the early childhood teachers to supply proper care and sufficient attention to make secure attachment bonds to each child. Another problem also mentioned by the parents was the high possibility of falling sick from being around many different children. Early child care has been associated with children having more airway symptoms until the age of 4 years, although only in children without older siblings (Caudri et al., 2009). Attending child care arrangement with six or more other children increased the likelihood of communicable diseases and ear infections, although those illnesses had no long-term adverse consequences (Bradley & Vandell, 2007). Attending child care increases the likelihood of acquiring communicable diseases (Bradley & Vandell, 2007; Caudri et al., 2009), and the first year in care represents a peak in exposure. Long-term elevated cortisol levels associated with child care may also weaken the immune system in young children (Watanabe, Donzella, Alwin, & Gunnar, 2003). Parents in this study shared these experiences, and valued the 10 days a year that each of the parents is allowed to stay home with sick children. Even so, they felt pressure over staying at home because their children's illnesses occurred very frequently and were perceived as a recurring problem. For some parents, long hours at work could be used to compensate for work absences. Reducing bouts of common communicable illnesses through caring for smaller groups, and training staff in hygiene and environmental sanitary practises would improve the stability of parents' working life (Bradley and Vandell, 2007).

Having too many children in child care units is not good for the child. Children need to be properly taken care of. These child care units need to represent good quality (parents of 17-month-old boy).

They fall sick more when they are going to child care. There are too many children on too few square meters. I often have to stay home with a sick child. There should have been fewer children in each unit (parents of 18-month-old boy).

The adult to child ratio was highlighted as being very important by almost half of the early childhood teachers, and a high adult to child ratio was seen as very important. The early childhood

teachers in this study were highly qualified and appeared to be very dedicated to their work. Some of them also expressed their distrust of new larger child care units in which children had to interact with many different childhood teachers every day at the sacrifice of secure attachment bonds and possibly make looser lasting secondary attachment bonds with childhood teachers (Bowlby, 2007).

Too many children and too few adults are negative for young children. It is important to create a good atmosphere (Early childhood teacher13).

The size of child care units is important, as is a high adult/ child ratio (Early childhood teacher14).

I am sceptical about new child care units with many children in the same area without a permanent group structure, and where there are too many different adults for the youngest children to attend to every day. Parents and children do not meet the same people in the morning as in the afternoons. We are getting children who are being transferred from these units now, because parents do not trust them (Early childhood teacher10).

Starting child care at an early age

Some parents reported that starting child care at a young age was too much for some children. Children who are not yet able to walk might easily feel unsafe on the floor with other children running around. One family suggested that some children under two or perhaps three years age needed more peace than they can get in child care with lots of other children around them all the time. They felt a pressure to send their child to child care at an early age. Another family was still not sure if their one-year-old was mature enough for child care.

For some children starting too early is negative. A friend of mine had a girl who did not want to get down on the floor when she started child care; she wanted to be carried for a long time. Lying on the floor felt too unsafe for her (mother of 16-month-old boy).

When the child is less than two or maybe three years old, child care may not be such a good idea. Children need more peace than child care can provide. There is pressure to send all children to child care. We should be more aware of attachment; our culture is too blind on this subject. However, it may hurt for parents to think too much on attachment when they are sending their child to child care at an early age (mother of 17-month-old girl).

I am thinking of an eight-month-old girl in our unit. She cried a lot for a month. I am happy my child was a year when she started. I would have preferred to have waited until she was two years old. There ought to be part-time child care for the first year (mother of 15-month-old girl).

Some of the early childhood teachers suggested that child care might be tough on certain children.

Some children have problems with being in large groups. They need more one-to-one support. Starting at the age of one year may be too early for some of them (Early childhood teacher8).

Child care is not negative for children in general. However, many children are too young when they start. They need their mother a little longer. I am ambivalent about this (Early childhood teacher37).

Strengths and limitations

This study did not interview a representative population; however, all child care centers in the city were invited, and the children were selected at random from such care units as were willing to participate. None of the families selected refused to participate in the study, which included both highly- and less well-educated families, even if the majority were well educated. The questions were open with no forced categories for answers to lead the respondents in certain directions. Still, respondents might be influenced by existing policy in Norway like attending child care is good for the child. The sample was small, although not small in the qualitative tradition. The study also used two different sources of information, as both parents and early childhood teachers were interviewed. Interview data might not in itself be enough to justify strong conclusions in the field; however, the conclusions need to be seen in conjunction with larger quantitative studies.

Conclusions

This study looked at parents and early childhood teachers' views regarding the positive and negative influence of early child care on the development of children and possible differences between the two response groups. Qualitative data rather than questionnaires with forced categories for answers might reveal the real thoughts and worries of our respondents on the subject, and as such broaden the view obtained from larger earlier studies. Three areas turned out to be important: socialization, learning and quality of care.

The study revealed the parents' two-sided feelings about early child care for the youngest children that are difficult to reveal in qualitative studies. Some of the parents had strong doubts about leaving their child in child care as others were eager to come back to work. Parents also revealed elements of uncertainty about their own qualification to give their child enough and correct stimulation to keep up with classmates in school at a later stage.

Both parents and early childhood teachers stated that being with other similarly aged children brought about important experiences for the child. However, some differences emerged between the views of parents and those of early childhood teachers. Parents highlighted learning and stimulation by the staff as important elements of children's vocabulary and language development that early childhood teachers did not. Some of the parents also pointed out that research favoured language stimulation in child care.

However, parents tended to overestimate the benefit of social and learning stimulation for this young age-group. Early childhood teachers were more balanced and specific, being very optimistic about the social benefits in terms of waiting for turns, practicing certain rules. One third of parents did not report any negative influence of child care. However, most people have a strong tendency to evaluate their decisions positively when decisions are made, and that might also be the case with these parents. The early childhood teachers suggested that high level quality care, with attention being paid to every single child, was important for the wellbeing of children in child care, and most important for the youngest children.

Neither parents nor childhood teachers appeared to focus on the effects of child care on behaviour, even if these relationships are well documented (NICHD Early Childcare Network, 2003). Behavioural problems do not represent a present problem for children of this age, although, later effects, such as on school learning, already seemed to be very present in the minds of the parents we interviewed.

Possible stress reactions (Vermeer & van IJzendoorn, 2006; Geoffroy, Côté, Parent, & Séguin, 2006) of young children in care were also not mentioned spontaneously by any of the respondents. They may not be aware of this possibility, or such matters might be difficult for both parents and

early childhood teachers to relate to and therefore easier to repress. Furthermore, there are comforting studies that suggest that stress is actually reduced by high-quality care (Geoffroy et al., 2006) and most care in Norway is described as such (OECD, 2001, 2006).

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