

## **Day-Care or Home-Care: Does one pose more of a Risk for Developing Aggression?**

### **Full Reference**

Borge, A. I. H., Rutter, M., Cote, S., & Tremblay, R. (2004). Early childcare and physical aggression: Differentiating social selection and social causation. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 45, 367-376.

### **Keywords**

Physical aggression, family, risk, homecare, day-care, toddlers, social selection, social causation, age, gender

### **Main Questions**

Is homecare or day-care more risky for children in terms of the development of aggressive behaviour? What aspects of each environment contribute to the risk for learning aggressive behaviour? Is it the type of care (social causation) that leads to aggression or the circumstances under which a family uses either type of care (social selection) that leads to aggression?

### **Background**

In both society and research, a debate has existed for approximately 50 years about the effects of day-care versus homecare in rearing children. The debate initially focused on the mental health of children reared in the two different environments. Then the debate turned to issues around attachment and security in the care environments. Today, the debate often focuses on the topic of aggression. The larger peer group in day-care facilities may provide more opportunities for children to learn aggressive behaviours. On the other hand, a day-care environment may provide children with more opportunities to learn ways of resolving interpersonal conflict without the use of aggression.

Toddlerhood and early childhood are a periods of development in which aggressive behaviour both peaks and is a risk factor for later anti-social behaviour. Thus, it is necessary to analyze the potential effects of various child-rearing environments.

### **Who Was Involved**

The mothers of 3,431 Canadian toddlers (ages 2-3 years) completed a home interview about their child's physical aggression, quality of family functioning, number of siblings, maternal education, socio-economic status, type of child care, how many types of care the child had been in since birth, stability of type of care, and hours per week child attended the current type of care. The participating families were representative of the Canadian population.

## What We Found

Four risk factors were identified and included low income, low educational attainment, large family size, and poor family functioning. The combination of these characteristics is referred to as family risk variables.

Aggression was more common in children who were looked after by their own mothers in homecare than in children who were in group day-care. Upon closer examination, families with high risk characteristics (social selection) were more likely to raise their children in homecare than families with fewer children, improved family functioning, higher income, and educational attainment. After taking this social selection phenomenon into account, physical aggression was more common only in children from high-risk (i.e., socially disadvantaged) families looked after by their own parents. No differences in physical aggression were found in the majority of children from low-risk families raised in homecare. Any risks associated with homecare that do exist for physical aggression only apply to high-risk families.

The nature of the risk factors indicates the strong effect of social selection rather than social causation. For example, household income and maternal education are more likely to predict aggressive behaviour than any decision to use homecare or day-care. Interestingly, even when the social selection effect was taken into account, children from high-risk families who received homecare were more likely to show physical aggression than those in day-care outside the family.

## Implications

When caregivers are considering the possible risks associated with group day-care, there is a danger in overlooking the risks associated with the homecare of children in socially disadvantaged families under stress. It is important to consider the pattern of childcare provided for children living in such high-risk families. Rather than asking the blanket question of whether homecare or day-care is superior, it is necessary to ask what are the circumstances under which group day-care decreases the risk and what are the circumstances under which the risk increases. The findings from this research suggest the possibility of protective effects of group day-care under certain conditions.