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Where does the end of maternity leave.... leave the baby?
Investigating factors which facilitate the infant’s well being in childcare

Recent debates in the media, pioneered predominantly by the current Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward, have highlighted the need to reassess maternity leave entitlements. Whilst debate of this kind is much needed, we need to also address what happens beyond the period of maternity leave. Given that 1 in 2 women in Australia with children aged 0-4 years return to work after the birth of their child (ABS, 1999), and 27% of these working women return to work within the first 12 months of their baby’s life (Work and Family, April, 2000), maternity leave is just one small part of a family’s requirements after having a baby. Another very important requirement for the mother, and indeed, for the whole community, is the care of the child while she is working.

The issue of childcare has been on the social and political agenda over many decades, and there has been a plethora of research work addressing the effects of non-parental care on the development of children (see reviews by Belsky, 2001; Lamb, 1998; McGurk, Caplan, Hennessy, & Moss, 1993; Scarr & Eisenberg, 1993). Attempts to move on from this debate are emerging in the literature, and our research program in the School of Psychological Science at La Trobe University is in line with the call for a moratorium on the search for negative results of childcare (McGurk et al., 1993; Silverstein, 1991). As a community, our focus should not be on looking for the negative effects of non-parental care but rather on exploring the factors that lead to the best care for our children.

There is still a perception in the wider community that it is best for the mother to look after her children (Probert, 2001), and this view has been endorsed by mental health professionals (Leach, 1997). However, given that the number of working women in Australia with children aged between 0-4 years is increasing, we cannot ignore the fact that an ever increasing number of infants and young children are placed into non-parental care. Assuming the highest degree of quality, parents, childcare workers and employers should be well informed about the factors related to the infant’s transition to the childcare environment in order to facilitate this transition.

There is a dearth of literature on the transition of infants into childcare. In particular, the critical factor of age-of-entry into childcare has been largely overlooked as a factor that may impact on the process of the infant settling into the childcare environment, especially within the first year of life. This question is of relevance considering that in Harrison and Ungerer’s (2000) Sydney based study, in excess of 60% of infants were in regular non-parental care by 12 months of age. This issue of age-of-entry into care is necessarily associated with the issue of maternity leave that is currently dominating media attention.

Currently, in Australia, the allocation of (unpaid) maternity leave for working women covers a period of 12 months, whereby the employee is expected to return to work at the termination of this period. Dr Gay Ochiltree (1998), a leading Australian researcher on childcare and its effects on children and parents, claims that the greatest concern for parents is leaving their infants in non-parental care when they are under 12 months of age. It is possible that the structuring of maternity leave leads to a perception that 12 months or sometime thereafter is the best time to introduce the infant to non-parental care. However, from the viewpoint of attachment theory and the development of the attachment relationship (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Schaffer & Emerson, 1964), the second half of the first year may be one of the most difficult periods in which to place infants in care.

While the development of the attachment relationship begins at birth, it is from 6 months onwards that the relationship begins to consolidate. The onset of stranger anxiety at about 8 months means that maternal separations may be most stressful during the last quarter of the first year of life (Ainsworth, Blehar,
Waters, & Wall, 1978; Gunnar et al., 1992). This latter period is thus marked as a potentially sensitive one in which to place infants in care. Erel, Oberman, and Yirimya (2000) have also suggested that starting an infant in care before 6-months-old may be less disruptive to the attachment bond than waiting until the second half of the first year.

The issue of attachment has been researched extensively, thus in our work we have not examined the attachment bond between the mother-infant dyad. Instead, based on "attachment theory" and the onset of stranger anxiety as outlined above, we asked the question "Do infants who enter care prior to six months settle more easily than infants placed into care after 8 months?" The question was inspired by anecdotal evidence (provided by numerous childcare workers and childcare centre directors) that infants younger than 6 months settle into childcare faster and more easily than infants older than 7 or 8 months. The mothers of 40 infants who were placed into care prior to 6 months of age and the mothers of 40 infants placed into care between 8-14 months of age were recruited for a pilot study. The mothers of each of the two infant age groups did not differ in terms of demographic background and all infants had been placed into childcare sometime during 2002. Each mother completed the Daycare Experience Questionnaire (DEQ, Skouteris & Dissanayake, 2001) retrospectively. The DEQ consists of both open-ended questions and Likert-type scales pertaining to the settling process of the infant into childcare. The items inquire about the infant's daily routines at childcare and at home as well as his/her behaviour during the daily drop-off and pick-up.

The findings of the pilot study revealed that infants placed into childcare before 6 months of age settled faster, were happier at childcare, and were more likely to maintain their sleep routine at childcare than infants placed into care after 8 months. Mothers of the younger infants (0-6 months) also rated the overall process of settling into care as more positive than mothers of older infants (8-14 months). These preliminary data, albeit based on a relatively small sample of women, support the hypothesis, based on attachment theory, that children younger than 8 months will settle faster and have a more positive transition into childcare than infants aged 8 months or older. A prospective longitudinal study is now needed to replicate and extend these findings to ensure their veracity. Retrospective data must necessarily be treated with caution because of the memory load associated with the participant's responses.

If indeed infants are more unsettled as a result of entry into care in the second half of their first year, the mother's transition back into the work place may also be disrupted, thus impinging on work productivity and affecting her decision to remain in the work force. There is currently no prospective longitudinal data on this issue either. Given that the success of the infant's transition into care has implications for parental well being, and in particular, for the success of the mother's return to the workplace, the association between the infant's settling into childcare and the mother's transition into the work place also needs to be investigated.

Currently, we are conducting a small-scale prospective study to explore these issues of transition for both the infant and the mother, and hope to apply for funds to extend this work and to follow-up these dyads longitudinally. To date, we do not know about the effects on the mothers of placing their infants in care. The underlying rationale here is that if the mother and baby are both happy and settled in their respective settings outside of the home it is more likely that this positive relationship will continue at home. The interaction between the primary caregiver (usually the mother) and her infant is argued to be important for modifying the course of development (Bernstein, Hans, & Percansky, 1991). Fostering this dyadic relationship is of obvious importance in the long-term socio-emotional adjustment of the child.

The results of the proposed study will inform parents, childcare workers and employers about the infants' transition process into childcare and will help to identify how the process may be made easier. It will identify the optimal time in which to enter infants into non-parental care and the implications of this on the return of the mother to the workplace. Clarke-Stewart (1988) argues that while specific recommendations should not be made regarding whether or not parents place their children in care, they do need to be informed about if, when and how much to work, should they decide to return to work. Unless a holistic approach is taken to understanding the factors that lead to positive outcomes for both the baby and the mother, a complete understanding of the effects of non-parental childcare will not be established.

It is expected that the results of this study will have implications for the policies and strategies that both government and non-government organizations put in place to meet their 'equal opportunity for women in the workplace' obligations. The needs of parents, in terms of a successful return to work, include factors such as flexibility in the workplace, availability and access to quality childcare, and the structuring of maternity leave. The ultimate beneficiary of such policies and strategies, if well considered, should be the child.

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N.B. References listed on this article appear on pages 18 & 19.