

Associations Between Nonparental Care Experience and Preschooler's Emotion Regulation in the Presence of the Mother

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This study tested predictions concerning the associations between children's nonparental care experiences and emotion regulation. It involved 53 participants (21 girls and 32 boys) of preschool age and their mothers. The children's care experiences ranged from those who were raised exclusively at home to those who had nonparental care experience beginning in early infancy. The participants were observed in a laboratory playroom, and their mothers were asked to complete questionnaires regarding their children's care histories and their current care situations. The children with extensive nonparental care backgrounds were found to be more likely to use self-directed emotion regulation behaviors when faced with a mildly frustrating situation. In the same situation, the children who had experienced minimal nonparental care were found to be more likely to use other-directed emotion regulation behaviors. Additionally, the children who had experienced care settings with large numbers of children in each care group or who had experienced many caregiver changes were more likely to use self-directed emotion regulation behaviors, whereas those who had experienced settings with smaller care groups and fewer caregiver changes were more likely to use other-directed emotion regulation behaviors.

Considerable debate has arisen over the past several years regarding the impact of nonparental care on children's socioemotional development. Some researchers have reported negative effects of nonparental care (e.g., Barglow, Vaughn, & Molitor, 1987; Belsky, 1988; Belsky & Rovine, 1988; Sroufe, 1988). Schwartz, Strickland, and Krolick (1974), for example, found evidence that preschoolers with day care experience prior to 2 years of age were more aggressive, more noncompliant, and showed a lower tolerance of frustration than did children who entered day care after age 2.

In contrast, however, other researchers have argued that evidence for negative effects of nonparental care per se is inconclusive or nonexistent when the quality of care is taken into account (Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1990; Thompson, 1988). In some contradiction to the Schwartz et al. (1974) paper, for example,

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Howes and Olenick (1986) found that children who attended high-quality day care centers were likely to display more behavioral self-regulation, operationalized as a child's ability to refrain from touching forbidden toys while in the presence of the mother, and to resist eating during the mother's absence from the laboratory, than were children without such day care experience.

One area of particular controversy has involved the issue of nonparental care and the quality of attachment. It has been suggested that entry into nonmaternal care in the 1st year of life is a risk factor for a child's socioemotional development because it may affect the quality of the infant-mother attachment. More specifically, infants who experience frequent separations from their mothers may develop insecure-avoidant attachment relationships with them because of their frequent unavailability (Belsky, 1988; Bretherton & Waters, 1985; Sroufe, 1988). Belsky (1988; Belsky & Rovine, 1988) has suggested that there appears to be an emerging pattern in which 20 or more hr per week of nonmaternal care, particularly if initiated during the 1st year, is associated with the tendency of the infant to avoid or maintain a distance from the mother following separation. The validity of this contention has been vigorously debated (Belsky, 1988; Belsky & Braungart, 1991; Belsky & Rovine, 1988; Clarke-Stewart, 1988, 1989; Hoffman, 1989; Richters & Zahn-Waxler, 1988; Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1990; Sroufe, 1988; Thompson, 1988).

One area that has received less attention concerns the associations between nonparental care and emotion regulation. A number of researchers have suggested that a child's ability to regulate emotion is based, in part, in early infant-parent interactions (Kopp, 1989; Thompson, 1990; Tronick, 1989). Those interactions, in turn, may be affected by other experiences, such as nonparental care (Field, 1994; Thompson, 1990). The study presented here was designed to examine how the duration of, and timing of entry into, varying child care situations affect the development of emotion regulation during the preschool period.

A general definition of emotion regulation is that it involves the monitoring of emotion and the implementation of various techniques or strategies to control one's emotional state (Bridges & Grolnick, 1995; Calkins, 1994; Kopp, 1989; Thompson, 1994). More specifically, Bridges and Grolnick (1995) have defined emotion regulation as the set of processes involved in initiating, maintaining, and modulating emotional expression and experience. These researchers have further suggested that emotional responsiveness and the use of particular behavioral strategies are two interdependent component processes involved in emotion regulation.

Emotional responsiveness refers to the extent to which individuals express and experience various emotions. Individual differences in emotional responsiveness are demonstrated by differences in the intensity of emotional expressions and in temporal properties of emotion such as the latency of response to, and recovery from, an arousing stimulus (Bridges & Grolnick, 1995). Moreover, individual

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