

Research Obscured by Politicized Debate

by Mark Penninga

Dr. Jay Belsky never thought he would be at the centre of a socio-political controversy that would classify him as an 'anti-daycare' academic. In fact, the well-known daycare researcher had no interest in defending or opposing the ethics of daycare. Little did he know that his findings would clash with popular social and political ideology that promotes daycare over parental care, making him something of a pariah in the field of child care research.

Belsky, now the director of the Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues in London, England, detailed his experiences in an article for *Family Policy Review* in 2003.¹ He explains how he started his research on daycare back in the 1970s when he helped with a report that was prepared for the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Based on the limited research available, this report was seen as giving daycare a gleaming "green light" and was consequently given much public support.

After gaining popularity, Belsky published a review in 1984 on child care and its effects on child development.² To the delight of daycare proponents, his findings supported high-quality daycare. His research led to an award from the American Psychological Association. However, as more research was carried out on the effects of daycare in subsequent years, Belsky began to notice more evidence "linking nonmaternal care in the first year of life with greater levels of insecure infant-parent attachment and increased level of aggression and disobedience when children were three to eight years of age."³ He published some of his findings in an article in 1986⁴ which resulted in scores of protest from fellow academics and controversy with daycare advocates in the popular media.

This response was only amplified in the following years as he conducted more research. Looking back on the many years of opposition to his findings, he concludes:

"It has become my view that all too often social policy – politics – corrupts the process of science and the scientific imagination. It does this by making certain

findings 'wrong' and others 'right.' As a result, the scientist who is willing to report unpopular results is all too frequently blamed for generating them and accused of wanting to find them and designing his or her research to reveal them. These blame-throwers thus routinely commit the very sins they accuse others of – in the service of what they presumptuously regard as good causes."⁵

Throughout his many years as a researcher and academic, Belsky had no intention of either promoting or opposing the subject of his studies. He writes, "I had never written about daycare in order to curry favour with my colleagues or anyone else, and I did not change my views simply because others were displeased with them. My research was the result of the same kind of analytic skills and reasoning that had previously led me to conclusions that had pleased so many."⁶

Belsky is not alone in his child care observations. More studies conducted in recent years support his findings. In an article produced by the Early Child Care Research Network and the US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in 2003,⁷ the authors sought to answer the question that forms the title of their report: "Does amount of time spent in child care predict socioemotional adjustment during the transition to kindergarten?"⁷ The study examined data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care which tracked more than a thousand children through the first four and a half years of their life.

The findings revealed that the more time

children spent in non-maternal care, the more conflicts they had with adults when they were four and a half years old as well as when they were in kindergarten. Further, the more time a child spent in child care, the more likely he or she was to be at risk of displaying problem behaviour, disobedience and aggression. Caregivers, teachers and mothers provided the reports of the children. The study accounted for the quality, type and instability of child care as well as for factors involving the background of the family in which the child was raised.

Another study that added more fuel to the daycare controversy was conducted by Sarah Watamura, Bonny Donzella, Jan Alwin and Megan R. Gunmar, also in 2003. This study explained how the context in which a child or infant is raised has a significant impact on the psychological and physical health of the child. The authors examined the levels of saliva cortisol, a hormone that can indicate levels of stress, in 20 infants and 35 toddlers who were in daycare.

Normally, the level of cortisol will peak about 30 minutes after a person wakes up and then declines through the rest of the day. However, this study revealed that in the child care context, 35 per cent of infants and 71 per cent of toddlers had cortisol levels that increased through our the day. The study warns that "the most likely consequencw is that daily increases in cortisol may contribute to the heightened susceptibility to illness that is well documented particularly among toddlers in childcare."⁸

Belsky's experience indicates that when topics of objective research have implications for politically-correct values—or go against the current zeitgeist within unions, government or lobby groups—objectivity faces the risk of becoming secondary to ideology. Motivations and interests that skew research to support a political or social agenda only further weaken the dialogue and lead to poor policy decisions. Maintaining as high-quality research as possible is essential for a debate that has significant implications on the well-being of children. 🍁

ENDNOTES

- ¹Belsky, J. (2003). The politicized science of day care: A personal and professional odyssey. *Family Policy Review*, 1(2), 23.
- ²Belsky, J. (1984). Two waves of day care research: Developmental effects and conditions of quality. In R. Ainslie (Ed.), *The child and the day care setting* (pp.1-34). New York: Praeger.
- ³Belsky, J. (2003). The politicized science of day care: A personal and professional odyssey. *Family Policy Review*, 1(2), 26.
- ⁴Belsky, J. (1986). Infant day care: A cause for concern? *Zero to Three*, 7(1), 1-7.
- ⁵Belsky, J. (2003). The politicized science of day care: A personal and professional odyssey. *Family Policy Review*, 1(2), 40.
- ⁶Belsky, J. (2003). The politicized science of day care: A personal and professional odyssey. *Family Policy Review*, 1(2), 26.
- ⁷Early Childhood Care Research Network & The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2003). Does amount of time spent in child care predict socioemotional adjustment during the transition to kindergarten? *Child Development*, 74, 976-1005.
- ⁸Watamura, S.E., Donzella, B., Alwin, J., & Gunmar, M.R. (2003). Morning-to-afternoon Increases in Cortisol Concentrations for Infants and Toddlers at Child Care: Age Differences and Behavioral Correlates. *Child Development*, 74(4), 1017.