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I just want my Mummy

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The trend to put very young children in long-day care is leaving us with a behavioural time bomb, writes Anne Manne

LIKE the old force field of privacy around dark secrets of family life such as child abuse, a force field of ideology now protects and places beyond scrutiny an important new industry.

Anyone challenging child care as an unquestioned and highly desirable part of modern life risks being considered on a continuum with the Taliban and clitoridectomies.

Once a cherished figure for the progressive side of politics, beloved for his depictions of vulnerability and the dehumanisation of modern life, Michael Leunig's cartoon "Thoughts of a baby lying in child care" transformed him from a loved to a hated figure. All sorts of unpleasant discoveries about Leunig's character were instantly made; he was a misogynist with "his head up his arse", to quote the thoughtful contribution from Don Edgar, the former head of the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

When Australian researcher Kay Margetts reported her study, finding that more than 30 hours of care meant poorer adjustment to school, she was attacked on every media outlet; academic colleagues even suggested she be disciplined for publishing her results. It is enough to make any prudent person who desires a pleasant life keep silent.

Which, of course, is precisely what is intended. Why persist?

The first answer is that there is a much more humane path to women's equality. When conflict over childcare was most bitter in the US, Britain and Australia, Scandinavian nations, which also promoted women's employment as a central public policy aim, were quietly junking infant day care and turning to paid parental leave for infants and toddlers to best protect their physical and emotional health.

It is unusual in Sweden for children under 18 months to be in public child care, which exists not within a long-hours work culture but within a culture that values time with family.

Swedish children don't spend 10 hours every day in child care because parents can work a six-hour day.

The second answer is that there are real risks with child care as we presently practise it. Consider, for example, the recent findings on cortisol in childcare children. Cortisol is a potent stress hormone. Normally it is highest in the morning and lowest in the afternoon. Since the late 1990s, researchers have discovered that a full day in centre-based care, compared with children not in child care or in home-based childcare settings, is associated with a significant increase in cortisol levels for the second half of the day. The effect of chronic stress on the still developing infant brain is considered especially damaging. US researchers have warned "animals who as infants have been exposed to [such] conditions as adults exhibit heightened fearfulness and greater vulnerability to stressors".

One recent US study (2003) into cortisol found the effect was particularly strong in the toddler age group. (Other studies have found it also present, though less strongly, in ages three to four.) The children were in medium to very high-quality centres. The lower the quality the stronger the finding, but higher cortisol was also clearly still present in centres judged by careful measures to be excellent. (The centres studied had one caregiver to two or three infants, far better than what Australian childcare regulations allow, of one to five.) In new Australian research, Margaret Sims, Andrew Guilfoyle and Trevor Parry studied 117 children from 16 centres across Australia. Their research on the infants and toddlers -- the group overseas scholars have shown to be most vulnerable -- has yet to be completed. Even for older children, aged three to six, however, those in centres considered satisfactory showed elevated cortisol. Only at the highest level of care quality did children's cortisol levels show the normal pattern. Higher cortisol, they suggest, may "have contributed to the negative

outcomes associated with childcare attendance demonstrated in much of the literature". What kind of negative outcomes?

Since the late 1980s, what developmentalist Jay Belsky called a trickle of evidence, now a steady stream, linked extensive hours of infancy in child care with increased aggression: a "more anxious and angry child". The new evidence created a firestorm of controversy. To resolve the "daycare wars", a study group of 28 of some of the world's eminent child psychologists (overwhelmingly women) from the US National Institute of Child Health and Development was set up. It examined care quality, the quantity (age of entry and number of hours) and whether the behavioural problems noted were really assertiveness or aggression. The study, which began in 1990, is one of the most comprehensive and sophisticated longitudinal studies of child care undertaken. It involves more than 1100 children from 10 US cities.

Early NICHD findings, when the children were 0-3, were mixed (some negative, some positive) and inconclusive.

Poorer mothers and less sensitive mothers were more likely to have an insecurely attached infant. Children's cognitive development was better in high-quality child care compared with poor-quality child care. Working mothers could take heart, too. When the children were aged three, no negative effect was found on mother-child attachment for kids with sensitive mothers in high-quality care.

Enthusiasts who broadcast such results, however, neglected to mention there were negative findings too. The fine print showed all kinds of caveats. Rather than child care compensating for insensitive parenting, insecurity of attachment increased when mothers were low on sensitivity and the child care was for more than 10 hours a week or of relatively poor quality, or was unstable (that is, more than one start at child care). These supported the formulation of child care as a risk factor.

The study also found longer hours in child care negatively affected mother-infant sensitivity and attunement; "more time in care predicts less harmonious mother-infant interaction and less sensitive mothering at six, 15, 24, and 36 months of age, even when quality of child care and family selection variables are controlled."

The sanitised reports that finally met the press, however, led with good news about quality child care, dismissively burying negative results in later pages. That is one reason in 2001 the results were a shock.

High-quality child care again showed some cognitive benefits. But the quantity effect (of longer hours) on emotional and behavioural problems was now worryingly clear. When the study children were assessed at age 4 1/2, those children who had experienced more than 30 hours of care per week were three times as likely to show aggressive behavioural problems compared with children who had been in care for less than 10 hours per week (17 per cent compared with 6 per cent).

All relevant variables such as stability, quality and type of care, and parent attributes were carefully taken into account. Quantity, not quality, was the issue.

There was a straightforward linear, dose for dose relationship: the more time in care, the higher the aggressive behaviour problems, such as "getting into many fights, showing cruelty, bullying or meanness to others, physically attacking other people and being explosive, showing unpredictable behaviour".

The evidence on risks associated with longer hours of child care has continued to gather. The NICHD study group, after reviewing other recent studies, concluded "the timing and-or amount of early child care have repeatedly, though not always, been related to problem behaviour in the early school years".

By 2004, (from as yet unpublished data) as the NICHD study children reached the third grade, the results showed a continuance of some cognitive gains from better quality child care. Other results were troubling. Some media claims of a wash-out of difficulties were false. In fact, the statistical significance of behaviour problems had declined by Grade 3 not due to decreases among childcare children but due to the increase in behaviour problems among children with less childcare experience.

Belsky had warned of the consequences for teachers as they coped with more and more children with the negative behavioural problems associated with extensive early infant child care. Investigators called for more work on the so-called "contagion effect" of children being in classrooms marked by high levels of aggression. New effects were detected. More time in centre care was associated with "more conflictual relationships with teachers and mothers. More hours of child care were associated with poorer work habits and poorer social skills through third grade."

This year Marinus van Ijzendoorn and his colleagues in The Netherlands examined the NICHD data again, using the criteria of non-familial rather than non-maternal care to include fathers and grandparents. This is important when so many young women want more egalitarian relationships of shared care with fathers. The Dutch team found the link between childcare quantity and aggression was "indeed robust". Their re-analysis -- separating out fathers and grandparents from commercial child care -- predicted even more strongly the link between increased "problem behaviours and aggression in preschool, especially in boys". They found the NICHD had underestimated the link between more child care and aggression.

Other recent research has also linked early child care with problems. The most decisive contribution, however, were the results from two large, longitudinal British studies published and reported in 2003 and 2004 which again raised concerns about group care for the under twos while also giving very favourable results for

educational programs for children over three. In 2003, a new government-funded study by the University of London concluded that "high levels of group care before the age of three [and particularly before the age of two] were associated with higher levels of antisocial behaviour at age three". Higher-quality care reduced "anti-social/worried behaviour" but did not eliminate it.

One of the lead researchers in that project was Ted Melhuish, an internationally respected British scholar on child care. When Melhuish reviewed all the international childcare research for the British National Audit Office, he found other studies, even in Scandinavia, confirming the Anglo-American research.

In September last year, the British press was reporting an Oxford University study, the Families, Children and Childcare project, co-directed by Kathy Sylva and childcare expert Penelope Leach. Following 1201 British toddlers from birth to school age, it also found difficulties for the under-twos, in some cases even as little as 12 hours a week.

The less time infants spent in daycare the better and they could be "at risk even in a good nursery". One headline read, "If you want what's best, wait until she's two."

Thankfully, the worrying evidence on early infant child care has forced a dramatic about-face in British family policy. Jettisoning an earlier emphasis on mothers returning quickly to work and child care's expansion (British Trade and Industry Secretary Patricia Hewitt once described mothers at home for their child's first two years as a "real problem"), the British Government shifted decisively, extending unpaid leave to two years, aiming to extend paid leave from six months to one year by 2007.

As Belsky commented: "I am delighted that this [Blair] Government seems to be listening to the research. I'm an American and I can tell you that President George W. Bush is not listening. The attitude there is, data be damned ... The [Blair] Government is showing a sophisticated appreciation of the fact that children at different ages need different things. From the age of two or three, children in nurseries with good-quality education programs can thrive."

Melhuish advised the British Government that unless you compromise on quality, "for the first 18 months to two years of life, the cost of good-quality care is potentially very high and is comparable in cost to paid parental leave for two years". Moreover, if parents are given a real choice: "The Swedish case is very revealing. There was high-quality infant care available to all and heavily subsidised. It was widely used in the '70s and '80s, but in the early '90s parental leave was increased and now there is remarkably little use of child care under 18 months. Parents voted with their feet."

That possibility, to give those "crazy about the kid" the chance to honour and practise that love, while not forever foreclosing the world of opportunity that paid work offers by extended leave programs and the right to part-time work, we are not yet putting our full energies into.

Australia's Arbitration and Industrial Relations Commission has recently recommended just these measures. It is an alternative and humane path through the feminist revolution, which maintains attentiveness to children. It has already shown itself to be practical and workable in other nations.

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This is an edited extract from *Motherhood* by Anne Manne (Allen & Unwin, \$29.95).

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