

Early Childhood Education Does Not Increase Behavior Problems: Evidence from Five Countries

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Executive Summary

Approximately 80% of 3 to 5 years old children in industrialized countries attend early childhood education (ECE) programs.^{1,2} As rates of ECE enrollment have increased during recent decades, concerns regarding potential negative effects on children's wellbeing have also risen.³⁻⁵ In particular, mixed evidence emerged on whether extended time in ECE poses a risk for children's behavioral development.³⁻⁷ Using advanced analytical techniques to assess data from more than 10,000 children across 5 countries (the U.S., Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway), a new study provides rigorous evidence suggesting no causal effect of ECE on children's behaviors. This finding should be reassuring for both families and policy makers as the use of ECE services continues to increase.

Most Young Children Attend ECE Programs in Industrialized Countries

As of 2019, 74% of children from ages 3 to 5 in the U.S. attended formal early childhood education (ECE) programs such as child care centers, pre-k, and preschool programs.¹ ECE attendance is even higher in other industrialized countries (87% on average across OECD countries), with many children starting early education prior to age 3 (50% in the U.S. and 36% across OECD countries).^{1,2} ECE programs are not only an essential support for working parents but also have been shown to promote early development, school readiness, long-term academic outcomes, and later-life success.⁸⁻¹¹ Thus, many states and municipalities in the U.S. and internationally are increasing their investments in ECE programs.^{12,13}

Concerns Regarding ECE Attendance and Child Behavior Problems

Researchers have raised concerns regarding whether ECE may have downsides for children's development by, for example, disrupting child-parent attachment, increasing separation anxiety, or providing models of negative behaviors which other children then emulate.³⁻⁷ There is conflicting evidence from a broad set of research studies, with some evidence suggesting that attending ECE more hours per week is associated with a higher risk for developing

behavior problems among young children^{6,7,14,15} and other research not identifying this pattern.^{16,17} These inconsistent findings raise continued concerns about potential detrimental effects of ECE on some domains of children's development.

Prior research in this area suffers from numerous limitations. One limitation derives from non-experimental research designs that cannot identify causal effects of ECE on children's behaviors.^{9,13} A second limitation is overreliance on data from a handful of studies and samples from the U.S., many of which assessed children in prior generations. As such, results may not be generalizable to the current generation of children or to children in other countries with different ECE norms and policies.^{9,19} To address these limitations, a recent study²⁰ assessed data from seven studies across five countries, using rigorous analyses to test whether more time spent in ECE increases children's behavior problems.

Effects of ECE on Children's Behaviors Across 5 Countries were Rigorously Assessed

This study assessed over 10,000 children, drawing data from seven different studies of young children and their ECE experiences within five different countries: the U.S., Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway (see

Table 1). These studies followed children over two to four time points between the ages of 1.5 and 5 years, with all studies recording the number of hours that children attended ECE per

week and gathering ECE teacher reports of children's aggressiveness including behaviors such as hitting, kicking, bullying, or arguing a lot with other children or adults.

Table 1. Study characteristics

Dataset	EMIGARDE	QLSCD	BIKS	Pre-COOL	BONDS	FLP	NICHD SECCYD
Country	Canada	Canada	Germany	Netherlands	Norway	United States	United States
Number of children	515	2,223	554	~3,000	1,157	1,292	1,364
Child's year of birth	2003 - 2004	1997-1998	2002-2003	2008	2006-2008	2002-2004	1991
Child age at assessment (months)	24, 36, 48	18, 30, 42, 48	43, 69	28, 42	24,36,48	35, 48, 58	24, 36, 54

Note. EMIGARDE=Life experiences and psychosocial development of the child: The role and quality of child care services study; QLSCD=Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development; BIKS-3-10 = Educational Processes, Competence Development and Selection Decisions in Preschool and School Age Children; Pre-COOL = Cohort Research on Educational Careers – young child; BONDS = Behavior Outlook Norwegian Developmental Study; FLP = The Family Life Project; NICHD SECCYD = National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development.

Greater Hours in ECE Does Not Predict Higher Behavioral Problems among Young Children

Rigorous analytic techniques (within person fixed-effects analyses) were used to analyze data from each of the seven samples. These analyses allowed each child to be compared with themselves over time: if a child spends more time in ECE at age 3 than at age 2, one would expect more behavior problems at age 3 than age 2 if there was a direct causal effect. This analytic technique helped to rule out alternative explanations as to why greater hours in ECE may be linked to higher behavior problems, such as genetic or family environment differences.

Results of the study found that the time children spent in ECE did not negatively affect their behavior. Combining results across all samples (using meta-analytic techniques), there was similarly no significant effect of time spent in ECE on children's behaviors. These findings are consistent with previous research using advanced analytical approaches to assesses effects of ECE on children.

Results Support Efforts to Increase Access to ECE

Finding that greater exposure to ECE does not increase children's behavior problems is reassuring for families, early educators, and policy makers. This pattern was replicated across five different countries, ranging from those with still-limited and targeted public funding for ECE and less progressive child and family policy contexts (e.g., the U.S.) to those with near-universal publicly-funded ECE and other progressive policies supporting children and families (e.g., Norway). These reassuring results come within the context of enhanced efforts by municipalities, states, and countries to increase public funding and access to ECE programs.²¹⁻²³ In fact, they are all the more valuable when combined with evidence of the benefits of high quality ECE programs on children's learning and development.²⁴⁻²⁶ Access to ECE programs remains a pressing challenge for many families, particularly low- and moderate-income families within countries such as the U.S. with more limited publicly-funded ECE options, but these positive results can bolster advocacy efforts aimed at enhancing access to ECE.²⁷

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