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Daycare May Lessen Aggression in Children of Low-Education Mothers

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MONTREAL, Nov. 5 -- Daycare or other nonmaternal proxies may soothe the physically aggressive potential of a child whose mother never made it through high school, found researchers here.

Action Points

- If patients ask, explain that daycare or care by other adults may help prevent aggressive behavior among children of low-education mothers, particularly if these services start before the child is nine months old.
- Explain that levels of daycare vary and that children of mothers who graduated from high school were less likely to develop physical aggression problems, while daycare offered no additional protection.

Children of mothers with low education levels were 80% less likely to display aggressive behavior if they were entrusted to daycare, or other types of nonmaternal care, before they were nine months old, Sylvana M. Côté, Ph.D., of the University of Montreal, and colleagues, reported in the November issue of the *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

The origins of physical aggression can be traced back to early childhood, beginning with hitting, kicking, and biting, and other forms of physical aggression, Dr. Côté and colleagues said. Studies have shown that maternal characteristics, especially low levels of education, are among the best predictors of high physical aggression from early childhood to adolescence.

The study was designed to test whether various types of nonmaternal care, including family arrangements, center-based care, or other nonmaternal arrangements could prevent development of childhood physical aggression and whether the age at which such care started could have an effect.

From a population sample of 1,759 children representative of all children born in the province of Quebec from 1997 through 1998, the researchers followed 1,691 children, assessing physical aggression levels at 17, 30, 42, 54, and 60 months.

In addition to yearly home interviews, mothers were asked to rate their child on a scale including hitting, biting, kicking, fighting, and bullying others.

Of these children, 111 (6.6%) received no nonmaternal care before preschool, 234 (13.8%) received some type of nonmaternal care before age nine months, and 1,346 (79.6%) started nonmaternal care after nine months.

Children of mothers with low education levels (no high school diploma) were less likely to receive nonmaternal care, possibly because these mothers were not working, the investigators said.

However, children who received such nonmaternal care had significantly lower levels of physical aggression, and the results were statistically significant if daycare started before nine months of age.

Using logistic regression analysis, the researchers found that children of mothers with low education levels who received non-maternal care before nine months had lower levels of physical aggression (OR: 0.20, 95% CI: 0.05 to 0.90) compared with children cared for solely by their mothers.

Children of mothers with low education levels given daycare at or after nine months were also less likely to exhibit high levels of physical aggression compared with those who never received nonmaternal care (OR: 0.36, 95% CI: 0.13 to 1.04), but the effect was only marginally significant ($P=0.06$), the researchers reported.

Children of mothers who graduated from high school were at a lower risk of developing physical aggression problems, and nonmaternal care offered no additional protection even if started before age nine months, the researchers reported.

Despite the strengths of this large study, limitations included the observation that caution be used in generalizing these findings to populations in which frequency of use of nonmaternal care differs substantially and where the quality of these services may be lower.

Although confounding factors were carefully controlled, causal inferences could not be made, they said. Most important, they said, because virtually all the mothers who used daycare services before the child was nine months old were also working, it was not possible to disentangle the benefits associated with maternal work and maternal competence.

This study replicated previous findings showing that family characteristics are generally stronger determinants in physical aggression problems than participation in daycare.

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Côté S, et al "[The Role of Maternal Education and Nonmaternal Care Services in the Prevention of Children's Physical Aggression Problems](#)" *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 2007; 64: 1305-1312.



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