

# CHILD-PARENT ATTACHMENT NOT AFFECTED BY CHILD CARE

by Eve Krakow

**Parents can relax: in most cases, sending their children into child care at an early age will not affect the attachment relationship between mother and child.**

This was the main finding of a study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), Early Child Care Research Network, in which researchers looked at whether placing children in the care of someone other than their mothers during the early years had an effect on the attachment relationship when children reached three years of age. This study included 1,364 families from a wide range of socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds.

Researchers found that neither the number of hours in care, the quality of care, nor the type of care predicted in and of themselves attachment security at 36 months. The one exception was children whose interactions with their mothers were already compromised. *"If the child had a mother who was low in sensitivity, and the child was in more hours of care, the probability of being classified as securely attached was lower,"* says Sarah Friedman, one of the participating investigators.

Overall, says Friedman, this offers a reassuring message to parents. *"There was a worry before the study was conducted that children who were in child care, especially for many hours, might be less securely attached to their mother,"* she explains, noting that attachment security is important because it can affect a child's social, emotional and cognitive development. *"Our findings show that in general, this worry is not well-founded."*

Virginia O'Connell, Director of Nova Scotia's Early Childhood Development Services, says the study emphasizes the primary role of the parent in a child's development,



and therefore confirms the importance of parent education. *"Sometimes parents don't understand that their behaviour, role modelling and coping skills are all very much a part of their child's development."*

She says the study also indicates that early childhood educators working in child care facilities should be on the lookout for behaviours indicating insecure attachment and less sensitive parenting. If, for example, a child who has shown positive behaviours during the day suddenly becomes avoidant and controlling at pick-up time, the educator may want to gently approach the parent to offer support.

While O'Connell agrees that most children do well in child care, she cautions that the quality of child care — generally measured by the staff's level of training — is still very important. *"If you take a case where the quality of the program is very low or the staff*

*are poorly trained, and mix it with a child and a parent in need, I would be concerned,"* she says, noting that the study does state its limitations in that teen mothers and facilities of lower-quality care were less likely to have participated. Friedman says that other analyses from the same study confirm the link between child care quality and the quality of mother-child interaction, peer relations, other aspects of social development, cognitive development and achievement.

Friedman adds that because every child is different, ultimately, decisions should be based on the individual child. *"Parents need to know that in general, the effects of child care are small, and the effects of families are greater. But each parent needs to look at his or her own child. If they feel their child is not adjusting well, they should talk to their child care provider."* ❧

Ref: NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. Child-care and family predictors of preschool attachment and stability from infancy. *Developmental Psychology* 2001;37(6):847-862.