

Preschools: Child Care Quality*

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1 Introduction

Professor Margaret Owen and myself worked together on a project in 1991 where we tried to understand the joint contributions of family dynamics and child care quality to child development (see Figure 1). There is good evidence that family dynamics—or parent-child interactions—can influence children’s behavior (remember my lectures on antecedents of attachment, and consequences of parenting style?), but there is relatively little evidence about the influence of child care quality on children’s behavior. Further, it would be strengthen any research conclusions if the effect of child care quality could be evaluated while controlling for characteristics of the children’s families. Dr. Owen has collected just these kinds of data as part of The Young Family Project, conducted by the Timberlawn Psychiatric Foundation in Dallas. At that time Dr. Owen was the Director of Developmental Research at the Foundation, but now she is a professor at The University of Texas at Dallas.

We are going to share some of these results with you, as a way to provide some background for this activity. Our presentation of the results will be necessarily brief, but should be sufficient to give you an idea of how these factors are related to one another¹. There will be three parts to our presentation, corresponding to each of the arrows in Figure 1. The first association we will explore is the association between Child Care Quality and Child Behavior. The results, summarized in Figure 2, show that three of the Child Care Quality Variables successfully predicted three of the Child Behavior variables. In particular, children enrolled in preschools where the quality of teacher training was higher, the classroom atmosphere was more positive, and who spent less time in preschool, were more likely to be high in social skill and self-control, and less likely to have negative tone. Thus, in this study at least, quality and extent of child care

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¹If you are interested, Dr. Cross has a copy of the Owens and Cross manuscript which you can borrow

Figure 1: A possible predictive model encompassing the relations among family dynamics, quality of child care, and child behavior.

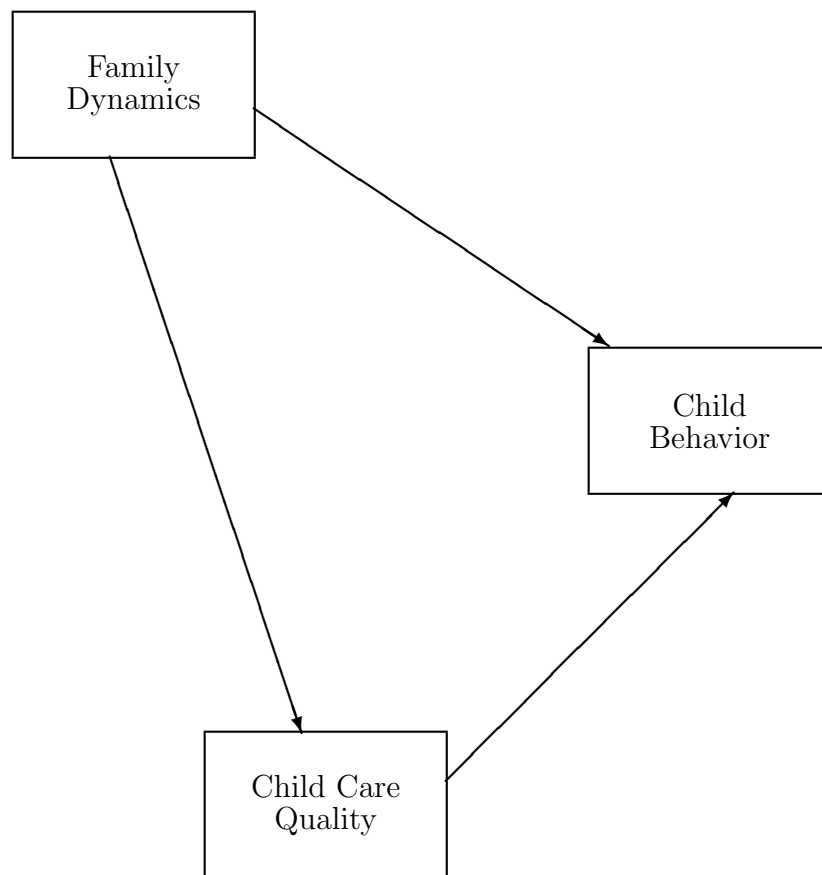
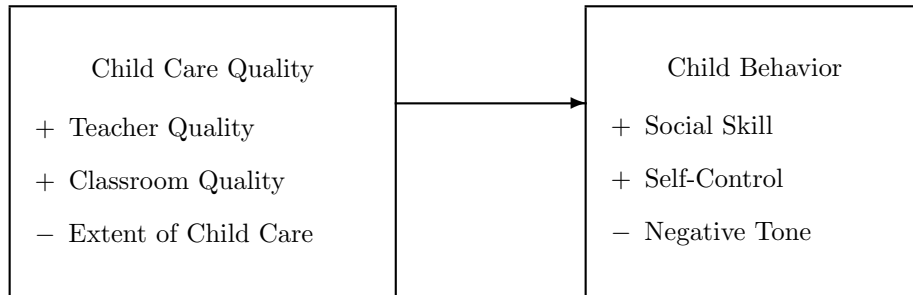


Figure 2: Prediction of Child Behavior variables from Child Care Quality variables.



predicted important aspects of children’s behavior. As an aside, note that the instrument used to assess Child Care Quality in the Owen and Cross study is the same instrument that you will be using in this activity.

The second association that we explore is that between Family Dynamics and Child Care Quality, with data from the mothers and fathers considered separately (see Figure 3. You might be asking yourself at this point, “Why would the quality of parent-child interactions in the home be associated with the quality of child care in the preschool?” After, all variables such as teacher training are not going to be sensitive to family dynamics in the children’s home, are they? Although it is true that there can be no direct effect of family dynamics on child care quality, there still can be association, for at least two reasons. First, parents who interact with their children in certain ways may *choose* preschools with certain characteristics. If there is an association—and in our study we found that there is—this relationship between family dynamics and choice of preschool is most likely the cause. If this is the case, then the question becomes, “What are the factors that lead parents to choose one preschool over another?” The second reason that there could be an association between family dynamics and at least some of the child care quality measures (e.g. classroom quality and teacher quality) is that the children themselves have an effect. Perhaps children who are better behaved have a positive impact on the school, contributing to better classroom environments, and making it more likely that the school can attract and keep good teachers.

The top part of Figure 3 shows the association between Family Dynamics and Child Care Quality using the mother-child interaction data. As can be seen from the chart, mothers whose interactions with their children were more appropriate and sensitive, and characterized by more positive mood and less negative affect on the part of the child, sent their children to preschools that were higher in child care quality as measured by five variables: physical quality, quality of materials, quality of teachers, classroom quality, and teacher training.

As can be seen in the bottom part of Figure 3, exactly the same pattern of association held for the fathers also. Thus it can be seen that in those families where the quality of parent-child interaction is higher, these same families select preschools that are higher in quality on a variety of important dimensions.

Finally, there is the association between Family Dynamics and Child Behaviors, shown in Figure 4. In this case the patterns of association are more complex, because there are two dimensions of association between parent-child interaction and child behaviors. Although there are minor differences between the mothers and fathers predictive associations, the basic pattern is the same (the minor differences are not shown here). Component 1 shows that in those parent-child dyads where there is greater security of infant-parent attachment, the children display greater positive affect, agency, and social skill during their preschool years. (This finding corroborates the empirical data we discussed in class on the consequences of attachment.) Component 2 shows that in those dyads where parent-child interaction is characterized by more positive mood, greater appropriateness and sensitivity on the part of the parent, and less negative affect on the part of the infant, the child demonstrates greater self-control as a preschooler. These results demonstrate once again the important linkage between the quality of parent-child interactions and children's development.

Taken together, the results shown in Figures 1–4 demonstrate that families have a substantial impact on child behavior. Part of this impact is achieved directly through parent-child interactions and parent-child attachment, but part is also achieved through the choices that parents make regarding children's preschools. The quality of the preschool experience itself can impact children's behavior and development directly. It is probably safe to envision preschools as amplifiers of processes already occurring in the home: In those homes where parent-child interactions are of high quality, children are also likely to experience preschools of high quality, which represents an accumulation of positive influences on children's development. Of course, amplification can occur in opposite directions when family interactions and relationships are not of high quality, and poor quality preschools are chosen for children. In these cases, children are doubly at risk.

2 Requirements

2.1 Steps

1. Attend lectures the twelfth week and do the associated readings (see below).
2. Select a partner, and together visit each of the participating preschools. While at the preschool, complete the Child Care Quality Checklist – Preschool.
3. Get together with your partner to compute reliabilities and plan your written report.

Figure 3: Prediction of Child Care Quality from Mother-Child and Father-Child Interactions (Family Dynamics).

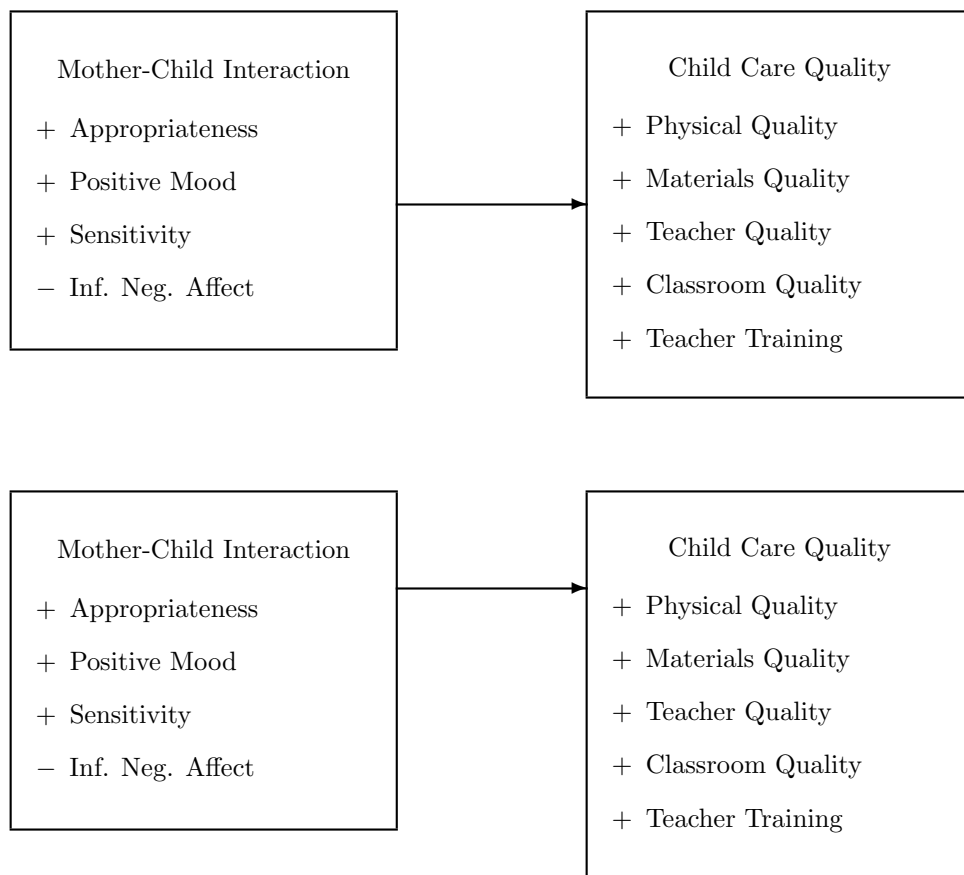
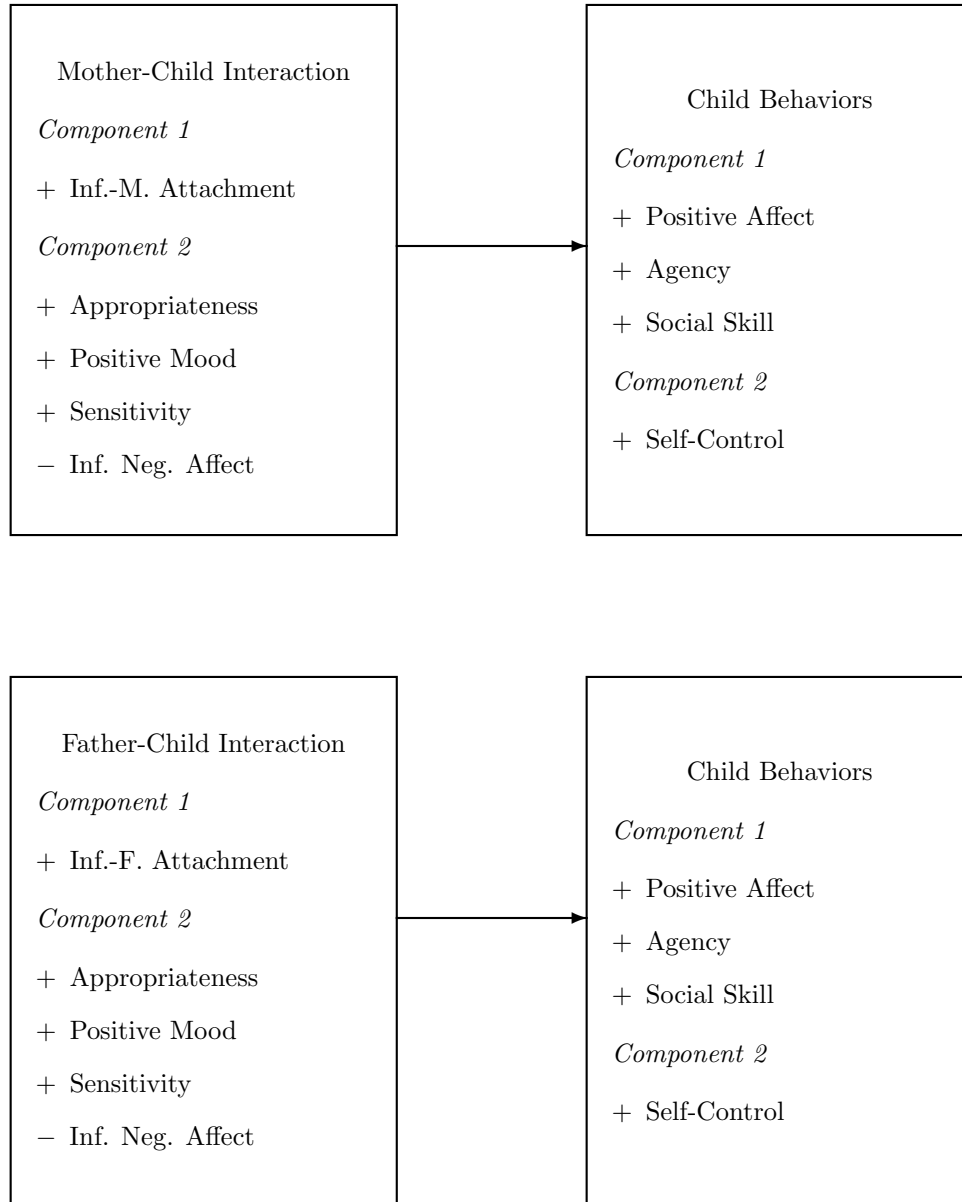


Figure 4: Prediction of Child Behaviors from Mother-Child and Father-Child Interactions (Family Dynamics).



4. Write your report and turn it in by the announced deadline.

2.2 Notes

- Do this activity with a partner.
- A limited number of students will be able to do this activity.
- Arrive at the preschool a few minutes early, so that you find your way around and introduce yourself. Most of your ratings will be based on observation, but a few (e.g., Teacher Training) will require you asking a few questions. Thus, the first thing you should do is interview the school director or whomever is available when you visit.
- Your written report should include (a) your partner's and your scoresheets, (b) computation of reliabilities (see next item), and (c) a *joint* set of answers to the questions (see below).
- You and your partner should compute a reliability (i.e. percent agreement) for each scale. If you evaluate more than one preschool, compute scale reliabilities across preschools.
- Your grade will be based on your completion of the scoring assignment, and the quality of your answers to the questions. Your grade will *not* be based on the level of agreement you and your partner achieve, as reflected in your reliabilities.

2.3 Materials

- Expanded description of individual Child Care Quality Checklist items.
- Child Care Quality Checklist—Preschool (four copies are needed).

2.4 Readings

- Hetherington & Parke, Chapter 7 (especially the section “Multiple Caretakers and Attachment: The Effects of Day Care”).
- Vandell, D. L., Henderson, V. K., & Wilson, K. S. (1988). A longitudinal study of children with day-care experiences of varying quality. *Child Development*, **59**, 1286-1292.

The following two readings are listed for reference purposes, you do *not* have to read them for this activity:

- Clark-Stewart, A., Gruber, C. P., & Fitzgerald, L. M. (1994). *Children at home and in day care*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- The Center for the Future of Children. (Winter, 1995). Long-term outcomes of early childhood programs. *The Future of Children*, **5**(3). [The text of this publication is available on the internet—www.futureofchildren.org]

2.5 Questions

1. What percentage of children in America attend child care prior to attending Kindergarten? What are the different types of child care that are available? What do you know about state and federal regulations dealing with the quality of child care?
2. What is the empirical association between quality of child care and child development? Does quality of child care make any difference? If so, does it affect all aspects of child development equally? Or are some aspects affected more than others?
3. Based on your observations using the Child Care Quality Checklist, how good is the quality of the preschools that you visited. Would you send your child to these preschools? Why or why not? Based on the empirical literature, what is the prognosis for children who attend these preschools?
4. What type of observational method is the Child Care Quality Checklist? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Can you think of any ways to improve it?

3 Description of Child Care Quality Items

3.1 Physical Space

1. *Individual Space* (e.g., locker, drawer, cubicle) for each child to store personal belongings. Personal space should be accessible to the child, easily identified with the child's name, and in good condition.
2. *Storage Space* available for children to return toys and equipment to shelves after use. It should be readily accessible to children and shelves should be low and open to promote independent use by children.
3. *Windows* large and low enough for children to see outside.
4. *Art Work*: A variety of colorful pictures, posters, and mobiles in view. The children's work should be plentiful and displayed at their eye level.
5. *Physical Space*: Indoor and outdoor physical space is plentiful. There are not too many children or too much large equipment for the space. Limited space indoors may be offset by a greater amount of outside usable space, and *vice versa*.
6. *Activity Areas* are defined clearly by spatial arrangement. Space is arranged so that children can work individually, together in small groups, or in a large group. Space is arranged to provide clear pathways for children to move from one area to another and to minimize distractions.
7. *Private Areas* are available for children to have solitude (e.g., book corners, pillows in corners).

8. *Soft Surfaces*: Indoor play area has soft surfaces (e.g., pillows, cushions, rugs, easy chairs, couches).
9. *Outdoor Area* includes a variety of surfaces such as soil, sand, grass, hills, flat sections, and hard areas for wheel toys. It includes shade, open space, digging space, and a variety of equipment.
10. *Sound Absorbing Materials* are used and are effective in minimizing excessive noise.

3.2 Materials, Equipment, and Activities

1. *Range of Activities*: Full range of activities available to both boys and girls (e.g., dress-ups, dolls, cars, trucks, tools).
2. *Choice* of several activities (e.g., story, music, painting, puzzles) much of the time, except during naps, mealtime, lessons.
3. *Materials and Equipment* for quiet play (e.g., books, puzzles) and active play (e.g., riding toys, climbing structures).
4. *Art Supplies*: Some or all of the following materials in evidence: paints, crayons, pencils, paste, clay or dough, sand, water, scissors, paper, buttons, string.
5. *Building or Construction Materials*: Some or all of the following materials in evidence: wood, cardboard, boxes, blocks, building toys.
6. *Books*: Attractive and well-written story and picture books, with many to choose from.
7. *Outdoor Play Materials*: In the outdoor play area two or more of the following: blocks, cartons, or boards for building; sandbox and sandtoys; slides, riding toys, see-saw, balance beam, tires.
8. *Enough Materials and Equipment* so that children do not have to wait more than a few minutes to use them.

3.3 Children

1. *Happy*: Children appear happy (i.e. laughing, joking) around adults.
2. *Busy*: Children are busy and involved (i.e. not wandering aimlessly, just sitting and staring blankly, waiting for a long time).
3. *Sociable*: Children seem to enjoy one another (e.g., help, smile, show approval, cooperate). Little aggression is seen (e.g., fighting, hitting, grabbing toys, pinching, kicking).

3.4 Group Size and Adult-Child Ratios

1. *Group Size:* Children are in relatively small classes or groups: no more than 18 preschoolers would be good, 19–25 would be fair, and more than 25 preschoolers would be poor.
2. *Adult-Child Ratio:* Enough adults to provide individual attention: one adult for every six children is optimal, one adult for every 7-9 children is fair, and one adult for 10 or more children is poor.

3.5 Teachers, Adult Staff, and Care Givers

1. *Balance:* Adults are observed to teach children sometimes but not all the time (teaching may be informal, including explaining, labeling, reading). There is a balance of structure and flexibility, with smooth transitions between activities.
2. *Interaction:* Adults interact frequently with children. They are available and responsive to all children.
3. *Positive:* Adults use positive approaches (modeling, encouragement) to help children behave constructively. Consistent, clear rules are explained to children. They do not use physical punishment or other negative discipline methods that frighten or humiliate children.
4. *Friendly Noise:* The sound of the environment is primarily friendly, positive, and courteous, rather than harsh, stressful, and clamorous. Conversation should be encouraged, but adult voices should not predominate. Enforced quiet is not a good environment.

3.6 Teacher Training and Investment

1. *Teacher Investment:* Adults are interested in child care as a career (i.e. they attend meetings, read books, are part of a daycare support network). They are interested in becoming a better teacher. This is not just a temporary job.
2. *Teacher Training:* Adults have had some specific training in child care and child development (an advanced degree in child development and experience working with children is optimal).

4 Child Care Quality Checklist—Preschool

Physical Space

Individual Space	Poor	Fair	Good
Storage Space	Poor	Fair	Good
Windows	Poor	Fair	Good
Art Work	Poor	Fair	Good
Physical Space	Poor	Fair	Good
Activity Areas	Poor	Fair	Good
Private Areas	Poor	Fair	Good
Soft Surfaces	Poor	Fair	Good
Outdoor Area	Poor	Fair	Good
Sound Absorbing Materials	Poor	Fair	Good

Materials, Equipment, and Activities

Range of Activities	Poor	Fair	Good
Choice of Activities	Poor	Fair	Good
Materials and Equipment	Poor	Fair	Good
Art Supplies	Poor	Fair	Good
Building-Construction Materials	Poor	Fair	Good
Books	Poor	Fair	Good
Outdoor Play Materials	Poor	Fair	Good
Enough Materials-Equipment	Poor	Fair	Good

Children

Happy	Poor	Fair	Good
Busy	Poor	Fair	Good
Sociable	Poor	Fair	Good

Group Size and Adult-Child Ratios

Group Size	Poor	Fair	Good
Adult-Child Ratio	Poor	Fair	Good

Teachers, Adult Staff, and Care Givers

Balance	Poor	Fair	Good
Interaction	Poor	Fair	Good
Positive	Poor	Fair	Good
Friendly Noise	Poor	Fair	Good

Teacher Training and Investment

Teacher Investment	Poor	Fair	Good
Teacher Training	Poor	Fair	Good