



cultural influences

FATHER-INFANT RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE AKA

Among the Aka hunters and gatherers of Central Africa, fathers devote more time to infants than in any other known soci-

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ety. Observations reveal that Aka fathers are within arm's reach of their babies more than half the day. They pick up and cuddle their babies at least five times more often than do fathers in other hunting-and-gathering societies in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

This Aka father spends much time in close contact with his baby. In Aka society, husband and wife share many tasks of daily living and have an unusually cooperative and intimate relationship. Infants are generally within arm's reach of their fathers, who devote many hours to caregiving.

Why are Aka fathers so involved with their babies? Research shows that when husband and wife help each other with many tasks, fathers assist more with infant care. The relationship between Aka husband and wife is unusually cooperative and intimate. Throughout the day, they share hunting, food preparation, and social and leisure activities. Babies are brought along on hunts, and mothers find it hard to carry them long distances. This explains, in part, why fathers spend so much time holding their infants. But when the Aka return to the campground, fathers continue to devote many hours to infant caregiving. The more Aka parents are together, the greater the father's interaction with his baby (Hewlett, 1992).



social issues: **Health**

DOES CHILD CARE IN INFANCY THREATEN ATTACHMENT SECURITY AND LATER ADJUSTMENT?

Research suggests that American infants placed in full-time child care before 12 months of age are more likely than home-reared babies to display insecure attachment—especially avoidance—in the Strange Situation (Belsky, 1989, 1992). Does this mean that infants who experience daily separations from their employed parents and early placement in child care are at risk for developmental problems? A close look at the evidence reveals that we should be cautious about coming to this conclusion.

ATTACHMENT QUALITY

In studies reporting a child care-attachment association, the rate of insecurity is somewhat higher among child-care infants than non-child-care infants (36 versus 29 percent), but it nevertheless resembles the overall rate of insecurity reported for children in industrialized countries (Lamb, Sternberg, & Prodromidis, 1992). In fact, most infants of employed mothers are securely attached! Furthermore, not all investigations report a difference in attachment quality between child-care and home-reared infants (NICHD Early Child Care Research

Network, 1997; Roggman et al., 1994).

FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

We have seen that family conditions affect attachment security. Many employed women find the pressures of handling two full-time jobs (work and motherhood) stressful. Some respond less sensitively to their babies because they receive little caregiving assistance from the child's father and are fatigued and harried, thereby risking the infant's security (Stifter, Coulehan, & Fish, 1993). Other employed parents probably value and encourage their infants' independence. Or their babies are unfazed by brief separations in the Strange Situation because they are used to separating from their parents. In these cases, avoidance in the Strange Situation may represent healthy autonomy rather than insecurity (Lamb, 1998).

QUALITY AND EXTENT OF CHILD CARE

Poor-quality child care and many hours in child care may contribute to a higher rate of insecure attachment among infants of employed mothers.

In the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care—the largest longitudinal study to date, including more than 1,300 infants and their mothers—child care alone did not contribute to attachment insecurity. But when babies were exposed to combined home and child-care risk factors—insensitive caregiving at home with insensitive caregiving in child care, long hours in child care, or more than one child-care arrangement—the rate of insecurity increased. Overall, mother-child interaction was more favorable when children attended higher-quality child care and were in child care for fewer hours (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997, 1999).

Furthermore, when the NICHD sample reached 4½ to 5 years of age, children who spent more time in child care were rated by their mothers, caregivers, and kindergarten teachers as showing more behavior problems, especially aggression. Specifically, 17 percent of children who averaged more than 30 hours of child care per week during their first 4 years were seen as more assertive, defiant, and



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This child-care center meets rigorous, professionally established standards of quality. A generous caregiver-child ratio, a limited number of children in each room, an environment with appropriate equipment and toys, and training in child development enable caregivers to respond to infants' and toddlers' needs to be held, comforted, and stimulated.

disobedient, whereas only 6 percent of children in child care for less than 10 hours per week were rated this way. Quality of care slightly reduced the link between child-care hours and aggression but did not eliminate it (NICHD Early Childhood Research Network, 2001). These findings do not necessarily mean that child care causes behavior problems. Children prone to be aggressive may have parents who leave them in child care for long hours.

Overall, findings of the NICHD Study indicate that parenting has a far stronger impact on preschoolers' problem behavior than does either extensive child care (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1998). Indeed, having the opportunity to form a warm bond with a stable professional caregiver seems to be particularly helpful to infants whose

relationship with one or both parents is insecure. When followed into the preschool and early school years, such children show higher self-esteem and socially skilled behavior than their insecurely attached agemates who did not attend child care (Egeland & Hiester, 1995).

CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, research suggests that some infants may be at risk for attachment insecurity due to inadequate child care and the joint pressures of full-time employment and parenthood experienced by their mothers. However, using this as evidence to justify a reduction in infant child-care services is inappropriate. When family incomes are limited or mothers who want to work are forced to stay at home, children's emotional security is not promoted.

Instead, it makes sense to increase the availability of high-quality child care and to educate parents about the vital role of sensitive caregiving in early emotional development. Look at the signs of developmentally appropriate child care for infants and toddlers, listed in Table 10.5 on page 433. For child care to foster attachment security, the professional caregiver's relationship with the baby is vital. When caregiver-child ratios are generous, group sizes are small, environments are stimulating, and caregivers are educated about child development and child rearing, caregivers' interactions are more positive (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996, 2000a). Child care with these characteristics can become part of an ecological system that relieves rather than intensifies parent and child stress, thereby promoting healthy attachment and development.