

## **What does research tell us about services for under-threes?**

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Stand first

*Much less research exists on the impact of early childhood education and care services on under threes than older pre-school children. Ole Henrik Hansen examines some of the recent Nordic research which shows that high quality services for under threes can contribute to social and intellectual development for all children.*

Pull quotes

- 1. High quality services were characterised by having higher educated staff able to provide emotional attachment and stability*
- 2. ...with a pedagogical approach that encourages bonding and empathy between the child and the pedagogue, the child will develop earlier and richer language, and may obtain better social competences that exceed the competences of the child that have not been in day care.*
- 3. ..the child will become a more self confident individual, and enriched by this process*

We know less about the impact of daycare services on children under, than those over, the age of three years. This gap has begun to be remedied in the Nordic countries. Over the last decade there have been a number of Nordic research studies on under-threes. And the research is showing very clearly that services for this age group can be beneficial - if they are of a sufficient quality. High quality services can be linked to higher levels of self-esteem, curiosity and motivation to learn and in this way can have a positive impact on young children's social and intellectual development.

My own research on daycare for children under three, undertaken in nine Danish centres, revealed very significant gaps in quality in otherwise similar institutions. Indicators of quality included :

- a leadership offering critique and vision,
  - a visible pedagogical structure underpinning the daily activities
  - children divided into small groups related to functional ability,
  - the adults seated on the floor, close to the children, and able to take the child's perspective
- (Hansen, 2010a, 2010b).

We found that in high quality services children interacted with an adult for 21 minutes per hour, and there were multiple shifts in their dialogue, whilst in services of lower quality the children only interacted with an adult for three minutes per hour, and there were on average only three shifts in the dialogue. This can mean that disadvantaged children and children with special needs or from homes with low rates of adult attention, might be left with an inadequate rate of interaction, which might influence linguistic and concentration skills.

High quality services were also characterised by having higher educated staff able to provide emotional attachment and stability. Over 50% of staff working with the youngest children in Danish services are fully-qualified pedagogues, educated to a degree level. In the higher quality services, the pedagogues reflect critically upon their pedagogical practice. They provide not only a caring environment, but also educational activities (Hansen, 2010a; 2010b). Their three and a half years of initial education provides pedagogues with a sound understanding of their role in developing the whole person: mind, body, emotion, creativity and social identity and they cover the disciplines relevant for this.

In services for under threes each pedagogue has responsibility for no more than three children under the age of two or four children aged two to three. (Broström, Heering, & Nielsen, 2010). My own study shows that smaller groups of children at the same functional level, can provide higher rates of interaction, and higher rates of dialogue, and foundation for role-play and friendships. In Norway, Greve (2009) has observed that children in high quality services develop friendships

that are significant in helping to develop social and intellectual skills, by improving emotional child-child relations and child agency.

### *The child's perspective*

Nordic as well as Anglophone research shows the importance of staff in services being able to take the child's perspective and place the child at the centre - not as an object, but as a subject; staff should have a listening role, being involved and responsible, authoritative adults who are observant of how the child expresses herself. Their role is to offer the child support in becoming confident individuals and participating citizens who are prepared for future challenges. (Hansen, 2010a; Lindahl & Pramling Samuelsson, 2002; Sommer, Samuelson, & Hundeide, 2010).

### *Multi- disciplinary research*

Recent multi-disciplinary research shows that young children's development and learning abilities are the result of a complex mix of biology, and social and cultural influences (Hansen, 2010b), a process that requires closeness, empathy and imitative awareness from the pedagogues. In this way, socio-cultural dispositions interact with skills and motivation gained together, and contributes to the child's development (Dahlberg & Moss, 2010; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007). In daycare services, the socio-culturally determined awareness begins as a growing subset of the biologically determined cognitive reach. Then, two things happen: the child's cognitive reach extends beyond the biological boundaries and a new component of cognitive reach is created like an expanding ring around the biologically determined component. This new component shares some features with each of the other components (Hansen, 2010b). Studies in daycare centres indicate that with a pedagogical approach that encourages bonding and empathy between the child and the

pedagogue, the child will develop earlier and richer language and may obtain better social competences that exceed the competences of the child that have not been in day care. These results underline the importance of reflected interaction between children and the pedagogues (Hansen, 2010b; Nielsen & Christoffersen, 2009).

Low quality daycare can be caused by few or no educated pedagogues, low budget centres or severe social problems among the children and the parents. Daycare centres that are unable to facilitate adequate and challenging pedagogical measures will not support developmental processes of the child at the same level as the high quality centres although both Anglophone and Nordic studies indicate that for disadvantaged children even low quality daycare will still be beneficial (Ellneby, 2000; Sylva, et al., 2004, Hansen, 2010b). (Broström, et al., 2010).

### *In conclusion*

Research shows that the quality of day care centres can make a difference to the development of a young child. Daycare appears to improve both a child's social and cognitive performance. The current findings reveal that the correlation between early childhood education and care and subsequent developmental achievements and behavior persists throughout childhood. Both children from stimulating homes as well as those from less supportive homes benefit from high quality day-care, although children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit the most from high quality services.

Good services can use the social connectedness between children and between the children and the pedagogues to develop the child's potential and exceed the child's language, its cognitive reach and its social competences. The child will become a more self confident individual, and enriched by this process.

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