

Can childcare attendance reduce externalising behaviour in children exposed to adversity?

By Dr. Jessica Edwards



Childcare attendance has been proposed as a public health initiative to help close the developmental gap between children from disadvantaged families and their wealthier peers.^{1,2} Now, Marie-Pier Larose and colleagues have investigated whether childcare attendance might modify the association between exposure to family adversity early in life and later externalising behaviour by buffering cognitive function. To do so, the researchers harnessed data collected by the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children.

“In this study, we specifically examined if children’s cognitive abilities partly explained the association between exposure to adversity and higher levels of externalising behaviours during adolescence”, explains Principal Investigator, Edward Barker. “We chose children’s cognitive abilities as a potential explanatory factor for two main reasons. First, several theoretical models suggest that cognitive deficits, which can be associated with difficulties to express and regulate oneself, might be associated with the expression of higher levels of externalized behaviours. Second, many studies have documented an association between childcare attendance and higher cognitive abilities, particularly among children from socially disadvantaged environments”. With this in mind, the researchers then tested whether childcare attendance may attenuate the deleterious effect of early life adversity on children’s cognition and later behaviour.

Larose *et al.* found that children exposed to adversity in early childhood had lower cognitive abilities in middle childhood, which were then associated with higher levels of externalising behaviour in adolescence. Moreover, childcare attendance was found to buffer this indirect effect. “Although significant social selection processes were taken into account in our paper, this finding highlights the importance of childcare attendance for children exposed to early life adversity”, says lead author, Larose. “But unfortunately, children who might benefit the most from childcare attendance are also the least likely to attend because of social, administrative and financial barriers. To achieve a childcare social equalising effect, stakeholders need to need to implement policies that diminish the influence of these barriers on family’s propensity to attend childcare services”.

This study has highlighted a potential mechanism that could be targeted to prevent externalising behaviour in children exposed to adversity. Future studies that explore additional biological and psychosocial pathways which link adversity to impaired development are now needed and could reveal other complementary intervention targets.

Referring to:

Larose, M-P., Cote, S.M., Ouellet-Morin, I., Maughan, B. & Barker, E.D. (2020), *Promoting better functioning among children exposed to high levels of family adversity: the protective role of childcare attendance.* *J. Child Psychol. Psychiatr.* doi: 10.1111/jcpp.13313.

References:

¹ Berry D. *et al.* (2016), *Household chaos and children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development in early childhood: Does childcare play a buffering role?* *Early Child Res. Q.* 34, 115–127. doi: 10.1016/j.ecresq.2015.09.003.

² Dearing, E. *et al.* (2009), *Does higher quality early child care promote low-income children’s math and reading achievement in middle childhood?* *Child Dev.* 80, 1329–1349. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2009.01336.x.

Glossary:

Externalising behaviours: maladaptive behaviours which are directed externally towards the environment, such as aggressive behaviours and impulsivity.