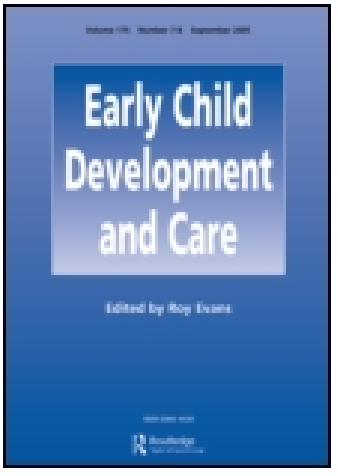

Early Child Development and Care
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gecd20

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Published online: 07 Jul 2006.

To cite this article: Eva L. Essa, Kelley Favre, Geri Thweatt & Sherry Waugh (1999) Continuity of Care for Infants and Toddlers, Early Child Development and Care, 148:1, 11-19, DOI: 10.1080/0300443991480102

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0300443991480102

Early Child Development and Care, 1999, Vol. 148, pp. 11–19
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Continuity of Care for Infants and Toddlers

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(Received 20 September 1998)

Theory and research support the need for continuity of caregiving for infants and toddlers, yet current practice often ignores that need. In many child care centers, children are promoted to a new class when they reach a specific milestone, such as a birthday. In other cases, frequent teacher turnover and parental choice add to very young children's discontinuity of care. At the Child and Family Research Center of the University of Nevada, Reno, infants and toddlers stay with the same teacher for the first 3 years of life. Many benefits are seen from this practice, particularly in the close relationship between children and teachers. Children's attachment to their teachers is evident in the security with which they explore their environment. Another major benefit of this 3-year continuity of children with teachers is the close relationship that develops between the parents and the teachers. Close bonds are forged between the adults who have nurtured and watched their babies develop over a 3 year period into competent preschoolers. In addition, yearly transitions to new classrooms, which better match the children's growing developmental skills, are eased when the entire group of children and adults move together. In some classes, there is a relatively wide range in ages of children, yet this age span has not proven to be a concern; children become very close to and protective of members of their cohort and adapt to the varying developmental abilities of peers. The practice of keeping a group of infants with their primary teacher for a 3 year period is highly recommended by the staff of the Child and Family Research Center for other infant programs because it is developmentally important for very young children.

Key words: Infants, toddlers, care, continuity

With the rise in number of very young children who spend significant time in non-parental care, early childhood professionals have begun a more systematic examination of the needs of infants and toddlers in child care. According to the Bureau of the Census (1995), over 50% of mothers of children under the age of 1 were in the labor force, although a more recent large-scale study (NICHD, 1997) found that 72% of babies receive regular non-parental care during the first year of life. In recent years, more and more attention has been given to the needs of our youngest children of working mothers to measure the impact of child care on their development.

One of the most important needs of infants and toddlers is for regular, predictable caregiving which allows babies to develop a special relationship with a familiar adult (Honig, 1985). Yet so often group child care is structured to ignore that need. Children are classed by age, and when they have reached a particular milestone, they are moved to another group, with a new teacher. Furthermore, infants and toddlers often experience change in child caregiver because teachers leave their jobs or because parents initiate the change. The National Child Care Staffing Study (Whitebook, Howes & Phillips, 1990) found an average 43% turnover rate in child care programs. The NICHD research team (1997), looking at all forms of care including by relatives, determined that by the end of the first year over 36% of infants had experienced at least three different care arrangements. Howes and Hamilton (1993) found that between ages 1 and 4, only 12% of children had experienced only one teacher change, 44% had experienced two changes, and 44% had undergone three to four changes in primary caregiver. Another large-scale analysis of child care centers (McCartney *et al.*, 1997) found that infants had experienced an average of one change, toddlers almost one and a half changes, and preschoolers over two changes during their child care history. Thus, with center policies dictating that children be moved at certain times, teacher turnover, and family decisions to change children's care arrangements, many infants and toddlers experience considerable instability in their earliest care.

Yet such practices do not take into account the developmental needs of babies. Theories of development provide some insight into why this is so. For instance, Erik Erikson (1963) speaks of the importance of the development of a sense of trust during early life; the focus of that trust is a consistent, nurturing caregiver. Margaret Mahler (1968) explains that the child's gradual separation from the caregiver, which takes place during the first 2 years of life, requires the presence of a predictable, stable adult on whose feedback and security the child can count. In addition, according to Ron Lally (1995), infants and toddlers are engaged in the task of forming a preliminary sense of who they are. "Part of what infants and toddlers get from caregivers are perceptions of how people act at various times and in various situations . . . how people act toward them and others . . . and how emotions are expressed. The infant uses these impressions and often incorporates them into the self she becomes" (Lally, 1996, p.59). Taking away a consistent caregiver from a child during the first 2 or 3 years of life compromises the sense of trust, the process of separation, and the formation of a stable identity. For this reason, increasingly more professionals are advocating continuity of care, keeping the same caregiver with infants and toddlers for the first three years of life (Miller, 1995).

Research has also begun to flesh out a picture of why continuity of early care is important. At the simplest level, young children show a preference for a stable caregiver, one with whom they have developed a relationship, over someone who is not always their teacher (Cummings, 1980). But beyond such preference, children's behavior is disturbed when there is a change in their primary caregiver (Howes & Hamilton, 1992a). Toddlers with more changes in child care arrange-

ments were found to be less competent in interactions with peers (Howes & Stewart, 1987). One study assessed the separation stress of infants and toddlers in the process of "graduating" to a new class. They found that children were more fussy and aggressive, slept less during nap and cried more before going to sleep, were more active, and exhibited more problems at home during the move to a new class (Field, Vega-Lahr & Jagadish, 1984).

The impact of unstable caregiving during the first years of life has been documented longitudinally as well. Children who experienced more changes in caregivers presented more behavior problems as preschoolers (McCartney *et al.*, 1997). Howes and Hamilton (1993) found that children whose primary caregiver changed at around age 1 were more aggressive and socially withdrawn and less outgoing at age 4. On the other hand, children who experienced a close, ongoing relationship with their toddler teachers were more socially competent at age 4 (Howes, Matheson & Hamilton, 1994). Even five years later, when these children were 9 years of age, both their friendships and their relationship with their elementary school teacher were best predicted by the relationship they had had with their toddler teacher (Howes, Hamilton & Philipsen, 1998). Howes (1988) also found that as first graders, children who experienced less stable early care had more adjustment problems in elementary school. Furthermore, the most recent National Household Education Survey (Hofferth, Shauman, Henke & West, 1998) concluded that children who had experienced the largest number of multiple care arrangements were most likely to have characteristics associated with school failure.

One reason that teacher stability is so important, in fact the link to the outcomes related to children's experience with stable infant caregivers, is the attachment that babies form with their caregivers. Babies with secure attachment have a base on which to develop a strong sense of self and form later social relationships (Howes, 1989). While infants who have formed a secure attachment to their mothers are more likely to experience a secure attachment to their caregiver (Howes & Hamilton, 1992b), infant caregiver attachment is independent of infant-mother attachment (Goossens & vanIJzendoorn, 1990; Howes, Rodning, Galluzzo & Myers, 1988). In fact, in the case of insecure attachment to the mother but secure attachment to the caregiver, infant child care "can serve as an intervention for children with disturbed mother-child relationships" (Howes *et al.*, 1988, p.414). For child-caregiver attachment to take place, however, the caregiver has to be consistent, stable, and reliable through the child's early years.

Because of the evidence from theory and research, and because common sense also supports the importance of such stability, the Child and Family Research Center at the University of Nevada, Reno structures the experiences of infants and toddlers so that they stay with the same primary caregiver for the first three years. This system reaps many benefits, some clearly similar to those discussed earlier in this paper, others not expected. The following discussion of this program will focus on four broad themes: (1) attachment and trust, (2) teacher-parent relations, (3) transitions, and (4) age-span within groups.

ATTACHMENT AND TRUST

The clearest benefit of the practice of continuity of care for infants and toddlers is to children, in the close relationship they build with their primary caregivers over the 3-year period. Children exhibit an evident level of trust and comfort, which comes from knowing their teachers so well. Teachers, in turn, recognize and understand the cues of the children because they intimately know the children's needs, moods, reactions, and dispositions. The fact is that children and teachers grow together. They have ample time to get to know and understand each other well. As one parent put it, "It is such a comfort for me to know that my child is with someone who knows her so well, knows what she wants, what upsets her, and what she likes. I know she is well cared for and given attention by someone she is very attached to."

Teachers also feel that it saves time in the long-run to be with the same children for a 3-year period. When children are on a 1-year rotation schedule, the teachers and children have to spend a considerable amount of time getting to know each other. Children have to ask themselves each year, "can I trust this stranger?" and teachers have the daunting annual task of learning about a whole new group of children and their families. But when they stay together for 3 years, there is no need to get acquainted because their familiarity simply deepens and becomes more intense. The comfort and continuity of the teacher provides the children with a deep sense of security which goes hand-in-hand with attachment and trust.

In addition, when children feel secure with their teacher, they are more likely to take chances, experimenting in both physical and social realms. One of the major tasks of 1- and 2-year-olds according to Erikson, is the attainment of a sense of autonomy. To work toward such independence, however, children need to have established a firm sense of trust in their caregivers. Toddlers need to feel assured that a trusted adult will be there to provide a safety net for their exploration. When a teacher is familiar to the children because she has been with them since they were infants, they are much more likely to embrace new experiences and expand their learning.

One interesting conclusion about working with children for a 3- rather than a 1-year time-span is that it makes teachers feel more relaxed and able to focus in depth on each child's development. Because the teacher gets to know each child so well, she is very aware of exactly where the child is in various areas of development. When children spend only 1 year with a teacher, the teacher is concerned about "readiness" for the next class, often subconsciously pushing to meet developmental milestones because in the next class the child will be expected to exhibit certain skills. But when the child spends 3 years with the teacher, the adult can say to herself, "this child is not yet ready, but we are working on it." The teacher can watch carefully with the assurance that her nurture and patience will help each child reach the next level of development in her own time when she is ready. The same attitude holds in relation to formal and informal assessment of the children. Teachers are not concerned about whether children pass or fail particular tasks by a deadline; rather, they work toward specific achievements and enjoy the occasion when they are accomplished.

TEACHER-PARENT RELATIONS

Another highly rewarding aspect of 3-year continuity is the close relationship that develops between parents and teachers. As Miller suggests, when parents first place their child in someone else's care, they have to learn "to trust another individual with their cherished baby" (1995, p.75). This trust gradually turns into mutual respect as parents and teachers share in the development and nurture of the baby. Both recognize and acknowledge the importance of this unique, special little human being. Thus, the child's first teacher earns an important place in the life of the family. As one parent recently said, after his son left the infant/toddler teacher he had been with for 3 years, "You will always have a special place in our family." When the child remains with the same teacher for a 3-year period, that trust and mutual respect not only continue but grow.

The special relationship between parents and teachers is facilitated by the need for daily communication between them because they need to share information that is important in the care of a new infant. This daily exchange of information about the baby's routines, accomplishments, reactions, and moods sets the background on which trust is built. Parents learn that they can trust the judgment of the teacher and teachers learn that their observations are valued and relished by parents who leave their children reluctantly in the care of someone else. Over time these daily acts of sharing develop into a deeper bond by the adults who enjoy and share in the care of the child. Later, when parents and teachers engage in more formal parent conferences, the comfort that has built during the multi-year period makes such meetings more meaningful and productive.

Parents at the Child and Family Research Center articulate the benefits they see from this 3-year continuity with great enthusiasm. They recognize the importance of a solid foundation for their little ones, based on a relationship of trust and stability. They come to rely on the insights and knowledge of the teacher that grow out of the teacher's familiarity with the child. As one parent put it, "My daughter is very close to her teachers. Sara always talks about them at home and is very comfortable with them. I know who is going to take care of Sara and that is the best feeling for me. It really lessens my guilt at leaving her when I know she is with adults who care about her and know her so well." Another parent commented on the closeness of the entire group. Her son knows the teachers, his classmates, and his classmates' parents extremely well. The mini-community of the classroom is an important and cherished part of his life.

TRANSITIONS

One of the most difficult times for very young children is during transitions. Infants and toddlers are much more comfortable with what is familiar than with change. Transitions to new experiences have to be carefully thought through, as others who work with infants and toddlers have documented (e.g., Daniels, 1993). When the

staff at the Child and Family Research Center began the 3-year continuity arrangement, they thought that the change to new classrooms would now be effortless, and in many ways such transitions were eased since teachers and children, as a group, moved together to the new environment in the fall. Before the continuity program when, children got not only a new room but also a new teacher, it took the toddlers six to eight weeks to adjust to the change, similar to the research findings of Field and her colleagues (1984). Now, however, children seem to adjust within 2 weeks to the change, a considerably less stressful improvement.

The children who find the room transition most difficult are the 1-year-olds, changing from the relatively low-key infant room to the more stimulating 1-year-olds' class. Teachers carefully plan transitions to allow children to become comfortable enough with their new environment. During the summer before the change, children often make brief visits to the new room; in addition, some of the toys from the new room are brought to the infant room. The toddlers enjoy playing in the new room, with its many new discoveries and interesting toys that are developmentally challenging. But, once the final change is made, the children show signs of missing their old room, which continues to be part of their "comfort zone." On walks down the hall, they get excited when they near the infant room, and stop to look wistfully into it. The teachers continue to search for ways of easing this transition by examining factors in the 1-year-olds' class that might be stressful, such as the larger size of the room, a higher noise level, or the overall more stimulating atmosphere.

Another difficult transition, for teachers and parents as well as for children, is the move out of the relatively relaxed infant/toddler program into the more structured preschool. Teachers find it especially hard to part from the group of children they have nurtured and watched develop over the first 3 years of their lives. The parents also find this transition difficult because of the close relationship most of them have developed with their child's first teacher. Parents recognize how important the children are to their teachers and how important the teachers are in the lives of their children. For the children, the transition to the preschool is made gradually. During the summer before the change, the children move with their toddler teacher to the preschool classroom. In this way, they have 3 months in which to acclimatize to the new environment. Also during the summer, the preschool teacher spends time with this group, especially during lunch and outside when several groups share the outdoor play space. Toward the end of summer, the preschool teacher joins the children in their new classroom so they get to know her better. In addition, visits by children and parents to their former infant teacher, and by that teacher to the preschool classroom, are encouraged. In this way, the strong attachment that was built over the past 3 years continues to be honored and promoted.

AGE-SPAN WITHIN GROUPS

One concern that has been voiced about continuity has to do with the potential age span within a group. In a class of preschoolers, a difference of 8 or 10 months

is often barely noticeable; but with infants and toddlers, such an age difference can indicate a very wide range of abilities and skills. In fact, it has been suggested that "when you enrol new children, try to keep a given caregiver's children as close in age as possible" (Miller, 1995, p.76). This recommendation, however, might be difficult to implement in a small program or in one where there is only one class for infants, one for 1-year-olds, and one for 2-year olds. At the Child and Family Research Center, experience has taught the teachers that the concern about age-span is really a non-issue.

Teachers find that when children are at different stages, the adults can enjoy each accomplishment of each child as it takes place rather than having it diminished by the fact that most or all of the children are learning the same task within a relatively short period of time. This allows children, teachers, and parents to delight fully in each child's unique achievement. This also underscores the importance of individualization of the program for each child. The teachers have also found that for the children, the cohort of familiar peers, with whom they have literally spent most of their lives, is much more important than age differences. This becomes apparent during periods of transition, for instance as the group moves to the preschool class. Children find comfort in each other and become very protective toward members of their group.

One interesting example of a wide age-span within one class occurred a few years ago when two children, who had just turned 1, were enrolled mid-year in the 1-year-olds' class. The other toddlers were all older, some by almost 12 months. The first challenge for the teachers was to help the newcomers establish a sense of trust in their teachers and then to help these children integrate into an already established group. The difference in age-span became particularly apparent when the teachers realized that one of the new children, Todd, was not just one of the youngest in the group but was also developmentally delayed. In a group where everyone soon was quite verbal, Todd was noticeably different. Yet the other children appeared to take this in their stride; they simply learned how to respond to Todd and modified their expectations. As 2-year-old Marissa told a visitor to their class one day, "He doesn't talk. We talk for him." The children were quite adept at reading Todd's non-verbal cues and, when he did begin to talk, they were as delighted as his teachers in his budding accomplishment.

SUMMARY

Infants and toddlers in child care need the stability of consistent adults in their lives. Theory and research support the importance of such continuity and practical experience has shows that it has great benefits. The Child and Family Research Center at the University of Nevada, Reno honors this need of very young children by keeping them with the same caregivers for the first 3 years of life. The benefits of this practice is seen in the close relationship between the children and their teachers. Teachers get to know the children very well during the 3-year period they spend together, and their strategies and responses are based on this in-depth

familiarity. In addition, the relations between teachers and parents are close and enduring. They recognize that for those all-important earliest years, they share in the nurture and care of their very special child. The comfort of well-known teachers helps children deal with transitions, which inevitably occur as they grow older; nonetheless, having the teachers they trust be there to provide support helps ease the stress of transitions and new experiences. In some groups at the Child and Family Research Center, there is a wide age-span, up to 12 months, among the children. Teachers see that as a benefit rather than a problem because they treat each child as an individual rather than seeing children as members of a relatively homogonous group. Based on their very successful experience, staff of the Child and Family Research Center highly recommend that other infant and toddler programs consider making the switch to a continuity arrangement. Children, families, and teachers all benefit when they are able to continue their close bonds for the children's first 3 years.

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