



## Toddlers' transition to out-of-home day care: Settling into a new care environment

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates toddlers' initial reaction to day care entry and their behaviour change over the first few months in care. One hundred and four toddlers (10–33 months of age) in Viennese childcare centres participated in the study. One-hour video observations were carried out at 3 time points during the first 4 months in the setting and coded into a total of 36 5-min observation segments. Multilevel models (observation segments nested within children) with an autoregressive error structure fitted data well. Two weeks after entry into care, toddlers' levels of affect and interaction were low. Overall, changes in all areas of observed behaviour were less than expected. There were considerable individual differences in change over time, mostly unrelated to child characteristics. Significant associations between children's positive affect, their dynamic interactions and their explorative and investigative interest were found.

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## 1. Introduction

When children first enter out-of-home care, they are confronted by separation from their parents, being in a new setting, unfamiliar routines and people, and generally fewer resources for one-to-one interactions with adults. Adapting to non-parental care arrangements can be a difficult and stressful time for children (Ahnert, Gunnar, Lamb, & Barthel, 2004; Griebel & Niesel, 2009). This is particularly true for infants and toddlers whose emotion regulation largely depends on the availability and closeness of their primary caregivers (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002; Robertson & Robertson, 1989; Schore, 2001; Siegel, 2001; Stern, 1985).

Very young children associate separation from their primary caregivers and being with unknown people in unknown environments with feelings of insecurity, loss and even threat. If they have secure relationships with their primary caregivers they tend to cry and cling onto the leaving parent; when the parent returns they spontaneously search for proximity and contact (Ainsworth, 1969, 1973; Ainsworth, Bleher, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969). In the presence of both primary and substitute caregiver, children prefer interacting with their mothers (Farran & Ramey, 1977; Kagan, Kearsley, & Zelazo, 1978). Young children do not seek separation from their parents in new environments (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975) and at first the parents' absence is associated with distress. In order to take part in stimulating and facilitating interactions and activities in day care, young children first have to overcome initial feelings of insecurity and come to terms with separation from and the absence of their parents (Datler, Datler, & Hover-Reisner, 2010; Roux, 2004). Entering a new care arrangement can be unsettling for children, even if it is not the first time they are confronted with separation from and the absence

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of their parents. Particularly in children at a young age, less stability in care arrangements, changing the primary teacher, or attending multiple care arrangements have been found to be related to less compliant behaviour and lower levels of competent play with peers and resources (Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Howes & Stewart, 1987; Morrissey, 2009; NICHD Early Childcare Research Network, 1998).

### 1.1. Reactions to day care entry

Not many studies have explored young children's first reactions to day care entry and their transition processes during early day care. Yet, some case studies have shown that when first entering day care, toddlers show insecurity and withdraw from social interactions (Bailey, 2008; Datler, Datler, & Funder, 2010; Datler, Erekly, & Strobel, 2001; Datler, Fürstaller, Erekly-Stevens, 2011; Grossmann, 1999; Niedergesäß, 1989). Mothers and teachers describe the first few weeks of childcare as highly stressful for infants and toddlers (Ainslie & Anderson, 1984). Recent studies have explored associations between childcare experience and children's cortisol levels – a hormone produced in response to stress (Vermeer & Van IJzendoorn, 2006). In the first 2 weeks in care without their mothers' presence, children's cortisol levels have been observed to be 75–100% higher than at home (Ahnert et al., 2004). Throughout the day in childcare (but not at home) children's cortisol levels rise; such increases have been observed particularly in toddlers (Watamura, Donzella, Alwin, & Gunnar, 2003). Some studies have shown that when first entering new care arrangements, children's levels of behavioural distress increase (Ahnert et al., 2004; Cryer et al., 2005) and their behaviour is inhibited (Fein, Gariboldi, & Boni, 1993; Feldbaum, Christenson, & O'Neal, 1980; McGrew, 1972).

Thus, entry to day care can leave young children in distress and can inhibit their participation in interactions with peers and caregivers, as well as their exploration of their environment. Yet, one of the most consistent and positive findings in the childcare literature is that when quality of care is high and when infants and toddlers have good relationships with their care providers, day care experience can promote learning and development and help children to make advances in their social-emotional maturity (Belsky et al., 2007; Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2002; Campbell, Lamb, & Hwang, 2000; Dornes, 2006, chap. 7; Howes, Smith, & Galinsky, 1995; Laewen, 1992; NICHD Early Childcare Research Network, 2000, 2003, 2005; NICHD Early Childcare Research Network & Duncan 2003; Sylva et al., 2011). It is a common assumption that good-quality non-parental care settings foster children's learning and development because they offer opportunities to interact with peers and sensitive and responsive adults who engage children in developmentally appropriate, stimulating and cognitively facilitating activities.

So far, little is known about factors that promote young children's involvement with caregivers, peers and resources in day care, especially when they first enter out-of-home care.

### 1.2. Transition to out-of-home care

Overall it appears that, compared with peers with less day care experience, children who have been in day care for longer are happier in their non-parental care environment (Field, Masi, Goldstein, & Perry, 1988); they show less onlooker or unoccupied behaviour (Schindler, Moely, & Frank, 1987), are more peer oriented and sociable and less difficult with peers (Field et al., 1988; Galluzzo, Matheson, Moore, & Howes, 1988; Howes, 1988; NICHD Early Childcare Research Network, 1998, 2001), engage in more constructive, complimentary and reciprocal play (Howes, 1988; Schindler et al., 1987), and spend less time involved with caregivers (Deynoot-Schaub & Riksen-Walraven, 2006).

Research on young children's transition processes suggests that with increased time in care provisions, children become more engaged. Six weeks after entry, preschoolers have been observed to be more sociable and peer oriented and increasingly active – both verbally and physically (Feldbaum et al., 1980; Fox & Field, 1989; McGrew, 1972). This is also true for younger children; with increased time in day care, toddlers also show more positive and less negative affect, more activity and interest, and more peer contact, even though they have less contact and comforting from adults than they did upon entry into childcare (Fein et al., 1993). Compared with age-matched toddlers at home, those who have been in day care for 4 months have been found to show less crying, more smiling, more object contact, and more positive social interaction (Rubenstein & Howes, 1979).

Settling into childcare seems to take younger children more time than preschoolers: changes in toddlers' behaviour have been observed to be only modest after 3 months in care, but substantial after 6 months in care (Fein et al., 1993). Even after 5 months in care, infants' cortisol levels are higher in childcare than at home (Ahnert et al., 2004). How children react to childcare entry, how they settle in and how childcare affects their development might not depend only on children's ages (Vermeer & Van IJzendoorn, 2006) but on many other factors, including other child characteristics. For example, it has been suggested that boys and those children who are emotionally more negative or temperamentally more fearful, and those with lower self-regulation will be more affected by childcare experiences (Crockenberg, 2003).

It has been suggested that settling into a new day care arrangements is facilitated by children's growing familiarity with their caregivers and peers (Fein et al., 1993). Young children form warm relationships with stable and interactive teachers (Anderson, Nagle, Roberts, & Smith, 1981; Howes & Hamilton, 1992; Rubenstein & Howes, 1979) and their relationships with caregivers become more secure over time (Ahnert, Pinguart, & Lamb, 2006; Howes & Hamilton, 1992; Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994). Some studies have found that more securely attached children and those who experience more positive, prolonged and intense interactions with their caregivers are more explorative and show more cognitive activity in day care

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