



Living in non-parental care moderates effects of prekindergarten experiences on externalizing behavior problems in school



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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the effects of prekindergarten quality and quantity on externalizing behavior problems for children living in non-parental care, compared to other children from socioeconomically at-risk backgrounds. Data were obtained from the Head Start Impact Study. Non-parental care was defined as a primary caregiver other than a biological, adoptive, or step-parent. The sample included 3029 children who attended center-based prekindergarten. Teacher–child conflict and more hours of prekindergarten predicted increased externalizing behavior problems for the full sample. Teacher–child closeness and overall process quality were only associated with externalizing behavior for children in non-parental care. Findings are discussed within a goodness-of-fit perspective in which the vulnerabilities of children in non-parental care explain how they respond to their prekindergarten experiences.

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1. Introduction

Externalizing behavior problems, including hyperactivity, inattention, and aggressive or oppositional behaviors, impede children's abilities to succeed in school (e.g., Keith & Roisman, 2010; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999). Children with early externalizing behaviors tend to show less motivation, persistence, and positive attitudes toward learning in preschool, which are in turn linked with lower achievement in elementary school (e.g., McWayne & Cheung, 2009). A national survey of kindergarten teachers revealed that more children face problems managing their behavior (e.g., following directions) than grasping early academics (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). A particularly vulnerable group of children at-risk for behavioral problems during the transition to school are those living in non-parental care (e.g., formal foster care, kinship care) due to concerns such as abuse, neglect, domestic violence, illness, substance abuse, or legal problems (Billing, Ehrle, & Kortenkamp, 2002; Pears, Kim, & Fisher, 2008).

The federal government recently established memorandums between Child Welfare and the offices of both Head Start and Child Care to increase access to quality early care and education programs (ECE) for children involved in the Child Welfare System, including those living

in non-parental care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011a,b). In order for ECE programs to be successful at improving school readiness outcomes for children from high-risk backgrounds, such as those living in non-parental care, they must meet children's specific and diverse needs. Children who have had early adverse experiences (e.g., maltreatment) may respond to ECE programs differently than others. Yet very little is known about how children's risk factors play a role in the effects of ECE experiences on school readiness outcomes. The current study takes an important step in this line of work by examining the role of ECE quality and quantity during the prekindergarten year for children living in non-parental care compared to other children from socioeconomically at-risk backgrounds. We focus on externalizing behavior problems as an index of school readiness because children living in non-parental care are particularly vulnerable in this domain (e.g., Billing et al., 2002; Stahmer et al., 2005).

2. Children living in non-parental care

In the current study, *non-parental care* is defined as a primary caregiver who self-identifies as someone other than a biological, adoptive, or step-parent. Almost 80% of children in the United States who are not living with a parent live with other relatives (often called kinship care), and most of these children are not in a formal foster care arrangement (Denby, 2011). Children living in non-parental care face risks that may compromise their development in nearly every domain, making it

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difficult for them to enter kindergarten ready to succeed. Children in non-parental care often experience prenatal exposure to alcohol (Astley, Stachowaik, Clarren, & Clausen, 2002), poverty (Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Sousa & Sorensen, 2006), caregiver mental health problems (Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Minkler, Fuller-Thomson, Miller, & Driver, 2000), maltreatment (Chernoff, Combs-Orme, Risley-Curtiss, & Heisler, 1994; Pears et al., 2008), and instability of home environments (Rubin, O'Reilly, Hafner, Luan, & Localio, 2007). Consequently, children living in non-parental care often face developmental challenges; they particularly struggle with behavioral and mental health (Billing et al., 2002; Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Rubin et al., 2007; Stahmer et al., 2005), as well as academic achievement and school engagement (Billing et al., 2002; Pears, Heywood, Kim, & Fisher, 2011; Scherr, 2007).

Impaired self-regulation may be at the root of many of these negative outcomes. Stressful experiences early in life can disrupt the development of neurobiological systems that are important to self-regulation and related behavioral outcomes (e.g., Bruce, Gunnar, Pears, & Fisher, 2013; Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007; Twardosz & Lutzker, 2010). Children living in non-parental care show heightened vulnerabilities in self-regulation (Lewis, Dozier, Ackerman, & Sepulveda-Kozakowski, 2007; Pears, Bruce, Fisher, & Kim, 2010) and may therefore need additional external regulation (through supportive relationships and structure from adults) in order to avoid externalizing behavior problems. Research on parenting practices of substitute parental figures for children who have experienced maltreatment suggests that structured yet responsive and warm adult-child interactions help children who have poor self-regulation learn to manage their behavior more appropriately (Kim-Spoon, Haskett, Longo, & Nice, 2012). Unfortunately, many non-parental families utilize negative or harsh, rather than supportive, parenting (e.g., Ehrle, Geen, & Clark, 2001; Orme & Buehler, 2001). In sum, children living in non-parental care often experience adversity that threatens self-regulation and heightens the need for supportive relationships with adult caregivers.

High quality ECE programs may provide an avenue for helping young children living in non-parental care learn skills for managing their behavior in group settings, and increase their chances for success in school. Over 50% of 3–5 year old children living in out-of-home child welfare placements attend center-based ECE programs (Ward et al., 2009). However, given the specific vulnerabilities and needs of children living in non-parental care, ECE experiences may affect these children's development differently than that of children in the general population.

3. Early care and education (ECE)

Evidence from studies of children who live with their parents consistently shows that ECE experiences play a significant role in development across a wide variety of areas relevant to school readiness, including behavior and early academics (Belsky, Burchinal, et al., 2007; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network [NICHD ECCRN], 2005). Although the size of these ECE effects on development tends to be modest, some studies indicate that ECE effects may be greater for children from at-risk families (e.g., Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). This line of work, however, has been limited by a nearly exclusive focus on socioeconomic risks. A few recent studies have found that factors associated with children's underlying neurobiology, also moderate effects of ECE on social and behavioral indicators of school readiness (Belsky & Pluess, 2013; Lipscomb et al., 2014; Phillips, Fox, & Gunnar, 2011; Pluess & Belsky, 2009). Given that vulnerabilities associated with non-parental care (e.g., prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol, and maltreatment) affect children's neurobiology (e.g., Bruce et al., 2013) they may also affect the way children respond to ECE experiences.

An emerging line of research is beginning to document the role of ECE experiences in the development of children living in non-parental

care. For example, Dinehart, Manfra, Katz, and Hartman (2012) have shown that attending accredited child care (a marker for high quality), compared to non-accredited child care, is associated with better developmental and early academic outcomes for preschool-aged children receiving Child Protective Services (CPS). Similarly, higher quality ECE has been linked to better scores on developmental assessments for infants and toddlers receiving CPS (Kaiser, Katz, Ullery, & Dinehart, 2011). Additionally, analysis of data from the national Head Start Impact Study, a randomized control trial, found that Head Start has a positive impact on school readiness for children living in non-parental care, including early academic skills, behavior, and relationships with teachers (Lipscomb Pratt, Schmitt, Pears, & Kim, 2013). Collectively these findings suggest that quality ECE experiences can have a meaningful role in the development of children involved in child welfare. The current study extends this work by examining how specific features of ECE quality and quantity relate to behavioral outcomes for children living in a range of types of non-parental care, and by comparing these ECE effects to those for other children from socioeconomically disadvantaged households.

Little is known about how different groups of children respond to various ECE experiences. Prior work has focused on whether children from specific subgroups (e.g., low-income, difficult temperament) evince a greater magnitude of the same types of associations between ECE and child outcomes as children from the general population. For example, differential susceptibility, a model in which factors such as temperament or genetics enhance children's sensitivity to both positive and negative environmental inputs (e.g., Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van Ijzendoorn, 2007), is receiving increasing empirical attention in the field of ECE (e.g., Belsky & Pluess, 2012, 2013; Phillips et al., 2012; Pluess & Belsky, 2009). In contrast, the current study takes a goodness-of-fit perspective, in which the degree of congruence or "fit" between individuals and their environmental contexts impacts how experiences contribute to outcomes (e.g., Lerner, 1983; Thomas & Chess, 1977). Although the goodness of fit perspective has primarily been discussed in relation to parenting, it also has relevance for the ECE context (Vitiello, Moas, Henderson, Greenfield, & Munis, 2012). In this study we consider how specific features of ECE might provide a "match" or "mismatch" for the needs and vulnerabilities of children who live in non-parental care. This study focuses on ECE quality and quantity during the prekindergarten year. By examining only center-based prekindergarten programs this study holds type of care constant.

3.1. Quality of ECE

The current study examines two key components of the quality of children's ECE experiences: classroom process quality and teacher-child relationships. Both have been identified as important predictors of school readiness outcomes for the general population of young children as well as for those living in poverty (e.g., Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Yet they have rarely been studied simultaneously, and their importance for children living in non-parental care has not yet been investigated.

3.1.1. Classroom process quality

Classroom process quality is defined as the quality of instruction and the nature of teacher-child interactions (Cassidy, Hestenes, Hansen, et al., 2005; La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). Prior research consistently links process quality with social, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes in preschool and beyond (Burchinal et al., 2008; La Paro et al., 2004; Mashburn et al., 2008; Vandell, 2004). For example, in a study of 240 publicly funded prekindergarten programs, responsive and stimulating teacher interactions predicted greater social competence and fewer behavior problems when children transitioned into kindergarten the following year (Burchinal et al., 2008). Although no prior evidence of the effect of classroom process quality on behavior problems for children living in non-parental care is available to guide the current study, evidence suggests that children at risk for school problems (due in part to externalizing problems) benefit more from high classroom

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