



## Full Length Article

## Individual differences in effects of child care quality: The role of child affective self-regulation and gender



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## ABSTRACT

The current study investigated whether the relation between child care quality and children's socio-emotional behavior depended on children's affective self-regulation skills and gender. Participants were 545 children ( $M_{age} = 27$  months) from 60 center-based child care centers in the Netherlands. Multi-level analyses showed that children with low affective self-regulation skills or who were male demonstrated less teacher-rated social competence when exposed to relatively low quality child care. In addition, children with low affective self-regulation skills also showed more social competence in the case of relatively high quality child care, suggesting mechanisms of differential susceptibility. No main effects of child care quality or interactions were found for teacher- and parent-rated externalizing behavior. These findings emphasize the importance of considering children's affective self-regulation skills and gender in understanding the effects of child care quality. High quality child care can be a means to strengthen children's social development.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on the effects of early child care quality has indicated that high process quality child care (e.g., child–teacher relationships and interactions) is prospectively related to more social competence and fewer behavior problems in children (Burchinal et al., 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008; NICHD ECCRN, 2006; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001), with effects sometimes even lasting into adolescence (Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, & Vandergrift, 2010). However, several of these studies also found null effects for some of the socio-emotional outcome measures (NICHD ECCRN, 2006; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Vandell et al., 2010), and a recent meta-analytic study by Keys et al. (2013) of four large-scale studies in the U.S. showed that child care and preschool process quality were not reliably associated with children's social skills and problem behaviors one year later. One possible explanation for these mixed findings is that children's individual characteristics might moderate these effects (Crockenberg, 2003; Phillips, Fox, & Gunnar, 2011). The current study addresses this issue by examining whether child affective self-regulation skills and gender moderate the link between child care quality and children's socio-emotional development.

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### 1.1. Child care $\times$ temperament

The past two decades has experienced tremendous growth of the number of empirical studies that focus on the interactions between child temperamental characteristics and environmental influences in relation to children's socio-emotional development (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Most early studies investigated hypotheses derived from a *dual-risk* framework (Sameroff, 1983) in which children with certain temperamental characteristics (e.g., a difficult or reactive temperament) were viewed as more *vulnerable* for adverse environmental influences, compared to children with other temperamental characteristics who were viewed as more resilient. However, evidence has emerged that this multiple risk framework may only be one side of the story. The more recently developed *differential susceptibility hypothesis* proposes that some children are not only more vulnerable for adverse environments, but in general are more *susceptible* to both negative and positive environmental influences compared to their less susceptible counterparts (e.g., Belsky, 1997; Belsky et al., 2007).

Most evidence for either dual-risk or differential susceptibility for children's socio-emotional development comes from studies on parenting by temperament interactions (for reviews, see e.g., Kiff, Lengua, & Zalewski, 2011; Pluess & Belsky, 2010). However, evidence has emerged that effects of early child care experiences might also vary depending on children's temperamental dispositions (e.g., Phillips et al., 2011; Pluess & Belsky, 2010). Temperament is a multi-dimensional construct with somewhat diverging definitions across studies (e.g., Nigg, 2006; Rothbart & Bates, 2006). In the current study, we follow Rothbart and Bates (2006) who define temperament as "constitutionally based individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation, in the domains of affect, activity, and attention". Within this definition, *reactivity* refers to the "responsiveness to change in the external and internal environment", and *self-regulation* to "processes such as effortful control and orienting that modulate reactivity" (Rothbart & Bates, 2006, p. 100). Most child care studies investigating the moderating role of child temperament have focused on child *reactivity*. For structural child care characteristics (e.g., type and amount of care), it is found that infants with a reactive temperament exhibited more externalizing and internalizing problems as toddlers if they attended center-based child care in the first year of life (Beijers, Riksen-Walraven, Putnam, de Jong, & de Weerth, 2013) or spent long hours in center-based child care (Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2005). In addition, attending several parallel child care arrangements was related to more internalizing, but not externalizing behavior problems in toddlers rated as highly reactive as infants (De Schipper, Tavecchio, Van IJzendoorn, & Van Zeijl, 2004). These studies found no or weak effects on child behavior problems for less reactive children. It should be noted, however, that results are not consistent across studies, as child reactive temperament did not moderate the relation between hours in child care or early center-based child care attendance and child socio-emotional adjustment in other studies (e.g., Bates et al., 1994; Pluess & Belsky, 2009, 2010).

Next to structural child care quality characteristics, other studies have found evidence that child reactive temperament moderated child care process quality characteristics. Children with a relatively difficult or reactive temperament as infants or toddlers were less involved in contacts with peers (Almas et al., 2011; Deynoot-Schaub & Riksen-Walraven, 2006; Phillips et al., 2012) and exhibited more behavior problems and less social competence (Pluess & Belsky, 2009), when exposed to low quality child care compared to their more easy or less reactive counterparts. That is, children's reactive or difficult temperament functioned as a vulnerability for low quality child care. However, in two of these studies, reactive children showed fewer behavior problems (Pluess & Belsky, 2009) and were more socially integrated with peers (Phillips et al., 2012) when they were exposed to high quality care, indicating mechanisms of differential susceptibility rather than dual-risk. One study did not find evidence for moderation by child reactive temperament for teacher-rated behavior problems (Phillips et al., 2012). Thus, although evidence is accumulating that child reactive temperament is probably an important moderator of early child care quality, results have not been completely consistent across studies.

#### 1.1.1. Child care $\times$ affective self-regulation

Despite the increasing number of studies exploring child temperament as a moderator of early child care effects, none of these studies has to our knowledge specifically focused on the moderating role of child *self-regulation*. Research on parenting by self-regulation interactions suggests that individual differences in early self-regulation skills are probably an important moderator for socialization influences. Several studies found stronger associations between negative parenting behaviors and child externalizing behaviors for young children rated as low on self-regulation, compared to children rated as average or high on self-regulation (e.g., Morris et al., 2002; Rubin, Burgess, Dwyer, & Hastings, 2003). For positive parenting behaviors, one study showed that less parental positive control was related to more externalizing behavior, but only when toddlers scored low on effortful control (Karreman, van Tuijl, van Aken, & Deković, 2009). The results of these studies were more in line with the dual-risk model, with low levels of self-regulation only operating as a risk factor for more adjustment problems in the case of more negative or less positive parenting behaviors, and not as a susceptibility factor in the case of less negative or more positive parenting behaviors. The current study is designed to extend these results by exploring if, and if so how, child self-regulation moderates the effects of child care quality on child socio-emotional development.

In recent years, the interest in child self-regulation has tremendously increased, as it has been associated with a host of positive child developmental outcomes such as more social competence (Calkins, Gill, Johnson, & Smith, 1999; e.g., Spinrad et al., 2007), fewer behavior problems (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Spinrad et al., 2007; Willoughby, Kupersmidt, Voegler-Lee, & Bryant, 2011), better academic outcomes (Blair & Razza, 2007; Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007), and stronger conscience development (Kochanska & Knaack, 2003). Moreover, one study has shown that positive behavioral effects of early self-regulation persist at age 32 years (Moffitt et al., 2011). However, there is considerable disagreement between researchers on how to define and measure child self-regulation, which has led to a plethora of tasks assumed to measure self-regulatory

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