

Debating Early Child Care

The Relationship between
Developmental Science and the Media

Robert Crosnoe and Tama Leventhal



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Throughout distressing cultural battles and disputes over child care, each side claims to have the best interests of children at heart. While developmental scientists have concrete evidence for this debate, their message is often lost or muddled by the media. To demonstrate why this problem matters, this book examines the extensive media coverage of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development – a long-running government-funded study that provides the most comprehensive look at the effects of early child care on American children. Analyses of newspaper articles and interviews with scientists and journalists reveal what happens to science in the public sphere and how children’s issues can be used to question parents’ choices. By shining light on these issues, the authors bring clarity to the enduring child care wars while providing recommendations for how scientists and the media can talk to – rather than past – each other.

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Both Crosnoe and Leventhal joined the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network when the SECCYD children entered high school, and they helped to organize data collection as the sample moved from adolescence to young adulthood.

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107093294

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First published 2016

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-09329-4 Hardback

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This book is dedicated to all of the investigators on the NICHD Study of Early Child Care Network, including and especially the Phase IV investigators who had such influence on us: Jay, Cathryn, Bob B., Celia, Peg, Sue C., Beth, Martha, Sarah, Jim, Bonnie H-F, Bill, Kathy, Dan, Bonnie K., Kathleen, Vonnie, Fred, Phil, Marion, Margaret, Ross, Bob P., Kim, Vijaya, Glenn, Sue S., Larry, Liz, Deborah, and Marsha. And, in this group, we want to make special note of Alison, whom we all miss a great deal.

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Acknowledgments

The William T. Grant Foundation has proven to be one of the greatest resources in support of developmental research, and it has been something like a home base for both of us for most of our professional careers, first through the Faculty Scholars Program, which shaped us as researchers, and then through a grant that helped us launch the young adult wave of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. That project led to this book, and so the Foundation gets much of the credit for our work here. In particular, we want to thank Bob Granger and Ed Seidman for always encouraging us to go our own way, especially if doing so meant charting new territory.

For many years beginning in 2004, we were part of the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, and the funding that we received from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (under the management of Sarah Friedman and then Jim Griffith) was instrumental in our careers. Without that experience, we would never have written this book, of course, but we would also not have achieved many other things. Our dedication of the book to the members of the NICHD Network, so many of whom helped us with this project and in innumerable other ways (you know who you are), speaks for itself.

More recently, the Council on Contemporary Families has helped us to be more thoughtful about our role as public scholars. That organization, which is dedicated to using science to inform the media, has taught us many lessons and has been an invaluable source of support. We are especially grateful to Stephanie Coontz for her guidance.

For help with the newspaper sampling and coding, we need to thank a wonderful group of students at the University of Texas at

Austin and Tufts University: Natalie Raff, Emily Morton, Danielle Cross, Sooyeon Byun, and Natalya Zaika.

As we have written in both the introductory and concluding chapters of this book, this project was as much about our lives as parents as it was about our work as developmental scientists, and so it seems only fitting that we pay special thanks – above all others – to our own families. Shannon, Joseph, and Caroline, Matt, Naomi, and Nina. In the end, nothing else matters.

I The child care wars

RYAN: A major study Wendt commissioned of 1,364 children showed a clear link between parents' dumping their kids in day care and an increase in hyperactivity, lack of discipline, and violent behavior.

WILL: Can I see that?

JOSH: You're saying Jeffrey Dahmer's only problem was day care?

RYAN: We're always harping about the root causes of crime and violence.

JOSH: I work for the federal government. I've never heard of Wendt's so-called "major federal study."

WILL: Maybe that's because all TV news programs are produced by mothers who dump their kids in day care.

From "An Khe," the 102nd episode of the West Wing (originally aired February, 2004)

This exchange among the advisors of a fictional Democratic president in an episode of the Emmy-winning television show was referring to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD), a birth cohort study of 1,364 US children that began in 1991 and officially ran until 2008. Like many developmental scientists, we knew exactly what the NICHD SECCYD – one of the most famous studies in the field – had found about the effects of early child care on children's development. Moreover, we were particularly attuned to the study at the time because we had just joined the team of investigators (the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network) that ran it. Needless to say, we were nonplussed by the conclusions that these characters were drawing about the study. In reality, the findings from careful analyses of the NICHD SECCYD consistently revealed,

among other things, small but significant associations between the quantity of time that children spend in nonparental care and their engagement in aggressive behavior, but, rest assured, these statistical patterns do *not* rise to the level of violent behavior or, worse, Dahmer-like cannibalism (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network [ECCRN], 2005a).

This scene in the *West Wing* was clearly written and played for comic effect. We understand that. Still, we could not help but ruminate on it, as, to us, it offered a vivid illustration of the sometimes bumpy process by which scientific research moves into the domain of public discussion. In short, this episode plays into some of the worst fears that scientists have about what happens when they send their research out into the real world. They like to think of research as producing “facts,” but the truth is that the findings of even rigorous empirical studies are usually open to multiple lines of interpretation. When moving from the lab to the television (or the newspaper, blog, magazine, website, etc.), those lines of interpretation can morph into different “messages” that are difficult for scientists to control. As a result, the media sometimes get research dead wrong. Other times, the media do not get research wrong, but do convey it in ways that might not be to the researchers’ liking – playing up or down something that does not warrant it, simplifying something complex, or making too much out of something simple. Still other times, the media get it exactly right but perhaps not the way that the researcher, who has her or his own perspective, wants it. The perils of this translation between research and the media are particularly acute when the stakes are high because the topic is of great importance, highly contested, or controversial in some way (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Semetko & Valkenberg, 2000).

This translational tension is by no means confined to developmental science – the primarily psychological but inherently interdisciplinary study of how humans, especially children, grow, mature, and adapt to their environments (Cairns, Elder, & Costello, 1996; Lerner, 2015). Still, developmental science has all of the ingredients for a high

degree of tension. It covers a subject – what is healthy, safe, and good for children – about which many people have general lay knowledge (all of them having once been children and many of them now parents) and about which they care very deeply. Developmental science also increasingly seeks to inform federal, state, and local policies and programs relevant to this subject. Perhaps because people care so much, developmental science often generates or is co-opted into fierce debates about controversial topics concerning children and their parents (Dunifon & Wetherington, 2012). Consider, for example, long-standing media-fueled controversies about spanking (is it abuse or effective discipline?), latch-key children (is it neglect or building independence?), and breastfeeding (do the health advantages of breast milk outweigh the convenience of formula?). Continuing this tradition, more recent media-fueled controversies have centered on helicopter parenting (parents should be involved in their children’s lives, but are some *too* involved?), “tiger moms” (are US parents too soft, coddling, and lax?), and, once again, breastfeeding (does the length of time that a woman breastfeeds indicate how good a mother she is?).

Early child care and more specifically the NICHD SECCYD are a ground zero for this potential drama surrounding developmental science. The former has been a core topic of developmental science for many years, and the latter was strongly influenced by developmental science perspectives and run by developmental scientists since its inception. People have strong (and divergent) attitudes about early child care and how it might affect children in the short and long term, making the extensive government intervention into the early child care market and the billions of dollars spent on it hotly contested (Scarr, 1998). As a credible barometer for what those early child care effects on children are and, therefore, how policy should intervene in the child care market, the NICHD SECCYD was sure to be polarizing. (“This study was bound to generate intense emotions,” remarked to us one journalist who covered the study for years, echoing the sentiments of many journalists, not to mention the scientists who ran the study.) For two decades, that polarization has played out in,

and has been fueled by, the media. No doubt, a major contributor was the fact that the developmental scientists involved in the study, who themselves were often at odds, had no training in working with the media despite support from their federal funders and professional organizations and had to figure it out as they went along.

Consequently, we argue that discussing the long-standing media coverage of early child care research in general and the NICHD SECCYD in particular can shed valuable light on the translation of science into public use, providing a useful service to developmental scientists *and* the media along the way. In this spirit, we drew on theoretical concepts about framing effects from political science to organize a content analysis of US media coverage of the NICHD SECCYD and then supplemented this content analysis with interviews with many “stakeholders” in this particular research–media exchange – the study scientists, representatives of NICHD (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the federal agency that funded the NICHD SECCYD), and journalists who directly covered the study or write about family and early child care issues more generally. To provide some context for this discussion of early child care, we compared what we found with the results of parallel analyses of media coverage of the NICHD SECCYD in developed English-speaking countries outside the US and then with the results of similar analyses of the media coverage of another controversial subject of development science – corporal punishment, or spanking – in the US. Doing so revealed the ways in which the specific case of early child care generalized (or not) across national lines and to other developmental topics.

Specifically, political scientists often discuss framing effects, which is not something that developmental scientists typically think about, especially in relation to their research. The discussion of framing effects in political science is organized by framing theory, which contends that the ways in which communication is framed can alter the effects of information on public opinion. When evidence relevant to an emotionally charged debate is ambiguous or nuanced,

a variety of messages can be created and disseminated to sway opinion one way or the other (Borah, 2011; Chong & Druckman, 2007). Our content coding of articles about the main NICHD SECCYD study reports in dozens of US newspapers during selected windows from 1996 through 2010 and the analyses of more qualitative data associated with this media coverage revealed a fairly clear case of framing on both sides of the translational process. The mixture of positive and negative findings from the NICHD SECCYD and the honest disagreements among its scientists about these findings occasionally allowed multiple “takeaways” to arise from the Network, which, in turn, enabled journalists with different orientations toward early child care (and, more broadly, toward mothers using early child care) to choose which message to pass on to the public. As one of the original investigators on the Network quipped to us, “It was kind of like a projective test – positive and negative interpretations of the same results from the same press release.”

Thankfully, this framing phenomenon never got to the level of linking early child care to serial killing, à la the *West Wing*, but exploring what happened reveals how things can go a bit awry when researchers and journalists start talking to each other. More than a cautionary tale, however, we think that this phenomenon is an object lesson for learning how developmental scientists and their partners in the media can do better in the future.

A DEEPER DIVE INTO EARLY CHILD CARE

Although we are especially invested in the issue of early child care and personally connected to the NICHD SECCYD, we view this book as being far more generalizable than this particular issue and study. We are using them as a specific crucible to engage in what we hope is a larger discussion of the role of developmental science in the public sphere during a time in which the value of all social and behavioral sciences is increasingly judged by how effectively it informs the public good, especially in terms of policy and practice. Media are one vehicle through which this translation of scientific research into public use