

How Universal Child Care Affects Boys vs. Girls

A case study from Quebec reveals surprising differences in how children—and their parents—respond to subsidized care.



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Among its many milestones, the 2016 U.S. presidential race marked the **first time** both the Democratic and Republican nominees released their **child-care and paid-leave plans** prior to the election. While campaigning, Donald Trump proposed a dependent-care savings account and a small earned-income tax credit for middle-class families. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, called for direct government

investment in early childhood education—including universal pre-k for 4-year-olds—and tax relief for working families' child care.

Both child-care plans were conservative by international standards. When it comes to early childhood education and care, countries like Denmark, Iceland, Luxembourg, Norway, and Sweden **spend more than** \$9,000 per child under the age of 6 each year.

But there's reason to believe that this kind of spending doesn't always pay off. In 2015, a National Bureau of Economic Research **working study** studied Quebec's universal day-care program and discovered significant negative behavioral and emotional effects among young children who received care. The program, known as the Quebec Family Policy, was created in 1997 with the aim of providing child care for just \$5 a day to all children under the age of 4 (this became \$7 a day in 2004). Although it presented **some significant upsides**—namely, allowing more mothers with young children to participate in the labor force—the quality of care was noticeably lacking. Young children enrolled in the program often became more anxious or aggressive, and teenagers who were previously enrolled reported declines in health and overall life satisfaction.

This created a predicament: Policies that favored working mothers seemed to be placing their children at a disadvantage. In fact, it's the same argument President Nixon cited in 1971 when **he vetoed** the Comprehensive Child Development Act, which almost granted universal child care in the United States. Nixon described the bill as “a long leap into the dark,” fearing that “it would commit the vast moral authority of the national government ... against the family-centered approach.”

Ivanka Trump had nearly the opposite to say on the campaign trail in 2016. “As a society, we need to create policies that champion all parents, enabling the American family to thrive,” Trump **said to a crowd** in Aston, Pennsylvania. For all its complications, child care is often surrounded by two modes of thought: On the one hand, policy-makers argue that families do best when the parents are successful, supporting the case for more readily available child care. On the other

hand, they argue it's the child's well-being that matters the most, and children benefit from increased parent attention. Are the two beliefs mutually exclusive?

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The authors of another [NBER working paper](#), released Monday, revisited Quebec's child-care policy to determine whether any additional effects are at play. What they found was striking: Not all children with access to universal care exhibited similar responses. After studying children under the age of 5 from two-parent families, the researchers found a distinctly gendered difference in the way children were shaped by universal care. Only boys, for instance, saw a significant decline in motor social development, as well as increased hyperactivity and inattention. By contrast, only girls saw significant increases in emotional and separation anxiety. (Formal tests did not reveal significant gender differences on average.)

Perhaps the most interesting finding was that parents raised their children differently depending on their access to subsidized care. "The introduction of universal child care led to substantial changes in the manner in which parents invested in sons and daughters," the researcher wrote. To start, boys were more likely to be placed in center-based care, while girls were more likely to be placed in home-based care. Girls with access to universal child care also experienced fewer positive interactions with their own parents. Notably, the parents of girls were two times less likely to spend time reading to, laughing with, or doing special activities like going to the library with their child.

As is often the case, future research is needed to determine whether these gendered differences have lasting effects as children become adults. It's also important to point out that the poor quality of Quebec's day-care program likely has something to do with its negative effects.

At the very least, the new study reveals the dialogue surrounding universal child care is more complicated than policy-makers may have originally thought. In

reality, child-care programs aren't just a matter of making lives better for parents or children. While a child's gender may affect how they respond to a program, many behavioral issues could be the result of what happens at home. It remains critical that parents play an **active and positive role** in their child's life, regardless of whether they have access to universal care—or whether they have a son or a daughter.

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