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It is the season again for working parents to brace themselves and shudder as the latest study on child care lands in the headlines to stoke their quiet fears. But not just theirs. Last week’s survey, funded by the National Institutes of Health and the largest ever on the subject, had something awful for just about everyone.

The more hours children spend away from their mothers, researchers concluded, the more likely they are to be defiant, aggressive and disobedient by the time they get to kindergarten. Kids who are in child care more than 30 hours a week “scored higher on items like ‘gets in lots of fights,’ ‘cruelty,’ ‘explosive behavior,’ as well as ‘talking too much,’ ‘argues a lot’ and ‘demands a lot of attention,’” said principal researcher Jay Belsky. It didn’t matter if the children were black or white, rich or poor, male or female, and—most confounding—whether the care was provided by a traditional child-care center, a nanny, a grandmother, even Dad. Only Mom will do.

But just in case those stay-at-home moms found comfort in the choices and sacrifices they have made, the study also suggests that kids in strong child-care programs tend to develop better language and memory skills, are in certain respects better prepared for school. Would you take that trade, Mom and Dad?

The news refueled some ancient rivalries, revived the most basic questions about what price our children pay for the hours we work and the choices we make. Parents peered into the data looking for themselves, but clear distinctions were hard to find. So far, the unpublished study has offered us only two kinds of children: those raised at home by their mothers (about 1 in 4 children) and everyone else. Which begs the question that the researchers didn’t even pretend to answer: Why would kids who are cared for by anyone other than Mom develop disruptive behaviors, and what should we do about it?

For that matter, should we even be worried at all? The researchers noted that almost all the “aggressive” toddlers were well within the range of normal behavior for four-year-olds. And what about that adjective, anyway? Is a vice not sometimes a form of virtue? Cruelty never is, but arguing back? Is that being defiant—or spunky and independent? “Demanding attention” could be a natural and healthy skill to develop if you are in a room with 16 other kids.

Some experts in the field argue that the problem is not child care but bad child care. Across the nation there is a numbing range in child-care quality, rules and regulations. Some states allow only six babies in one room, others allow 20. States require all different kinds of licensing and accreditation. Child-care workers get paid about $7 an hour on average, roughly the same as parking-lot attendants; no wonder good care is hard to find. “There is a crisis in this country,” says Mary Kakareka, a child-care consultant in Rockville, Md. “Middle-class families pay a lot to get into bad centers—and then down the line, pay again to get their kids in special programs to help solve the problems.”
But what constitutes good care, whether in the home or outside it? What is the healthiest way for children to spend their time, especially in the years before school soaks up most of the day? Many anxious parents, wanting the best for their children and willing to pay for it, fill their kids’ days with oboe lessons and karate classes, their rooms with phonics tapes and smart toys. And yet if you ask the experts to name the most precious thing you can provide your child, they often cite things you cannot buy: time and attention, the appreciation that play is children’s work. Maybe, as the study results suggest, mothers have a special gift for giving that kind of gentle company. But it’s hard to believe they are the only ones who can, as anyone with a great baby sitter, grandmother, husband or day-care provider can tell you.

This is the challenge to busy parents, working long hours, strung out at home. What would it take to create an easy, quiet space where you can just hang out with your kids, read a story or make one up, build a fort, make something goopy together? If in the process your children grow secure in the knowledge that you will forgive them for whatever they break or spill or forget, if they learn to share because you are sharing, if they don’t have to fight for your attention, those skills may serve them better in the adventure that is kindergarten than being able to distinguish the octagon from the hexagon or fuchsia from lilac. The best news about raising a super child is that the secret to doing it is not to try too hard.

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