Daycare study roils in further controversy

by Jessica Garrison
Los Angeles Times
April 25, 2001

A week after a high-profile study cast a negative light on child care, researchers - including the study's lead statistician - are sharply questioning whether their controversial work has been misrepresented.

As publicly reported last week, the study showed that the more time preschoolers spend in childcare, the more likely their teachers were to report behavior problems such as aggression and defiance in kindergarten.

But several academics involved in the study feel that its conclusion was overstated and that other important findings never reached the public. In the aftermath, a rift has been exposed among the research team, and questions from other experts have caused the researchers to do additional analysis before publishing their findings.

"I feel we have been extremely irresponsible, and I'm very sorry the results have been presented in this way," said Margaret Burchinal, the lead statistician on the study funded by National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. "I'm afraid we have scared parents, especially since most parents in this country (have to work)."

Several of those involved in the project accuse Jay Belsky, a professor at the University of London and one of the lead researchers on the study, of downplaying other important information when he presented the findings at a news conference last week. They accuse him of having an anti-child care agenda.

For his part, Belsky charges that his colleagues are "running from this data like a nuclear bomb went off" because they are committed to putting an approving stamp on child care.

"I sometimes feel I'm in the old Soviet Union, where only certain facts are allowed to be facts, and only certain news is allowed to be news," he said. "I've yet to hear a compelling argument that's evenhandedly applied to all our data."

Within academia, the dispute is part of a years-long battle between Belsky and his colleagues over whether child care harms children.

For the public, the high-profile dispute illustrates how difficult it can be to separate ideology from objective findings, particularly on a topic as volatile as child care.

"The bottom line is this isn't a simple story," said Harvard University researcher Kathleen McCartney, one of the investigators on the study.

The findings predictably sent parents into a tizzy, with many working parents worrying about or hotly defending their choices, and stay-at-home moms feeling vindicated.

But several researchers on the team said that if the public had been told other information about the study, the reaction might have been quite different. For example:

• While 17 percent of kindergarteners who had been in child-care showed more assertive and aggressive behaviors, that proportion is the norm for the general population of children and adolescents. (Only 9 percent of children who spent most of their time with their mothers were rated by teachers as showing the more troubling behaviors.)

• Family interactions counted more toward children's future behavior than hours spent in child care.

• In addition, researchers said that the statistics themselves are very modest: Few children exhibited above-average behavior problems, and the problems themselves were not drastic.

Some parents whose children are subjects in the ongoing study have expressed concern and anger over the latest controversy. Investigators are worried it may cause some families to drop out, and might jeopardize their chances of having funding renewed in 2004, said Alison Clarke-Stewart, a researcher at the University of California, Irvine.

The massive research project, widely considered the largest and most authoritative of its kind in the nation, started 10 years ago with investigators going room to room down hospital corridors asking new mothers if they would participate in a study of child development. More than 1,000 of the original subjects in 10 cities are still signed up, and investigators have followed the children ever since.

The investigators visit with their parents, giving them personality tests and check lists to fill out. They spend hours observing classrooms and day care centers, talking with teachers and day-care providers. And then they use complex statistical analysis to figure out what it all means.

Data from the early years of the study - which has cost the federal government $80 million so far - is available to the public, and all the data eventually will be made available.

The most recent findings were presented at a conference last week of the Society for Research and Child Development in Minneapolis. But because the work has not yet been published, it has also not yet been formally critiqued by other experts.

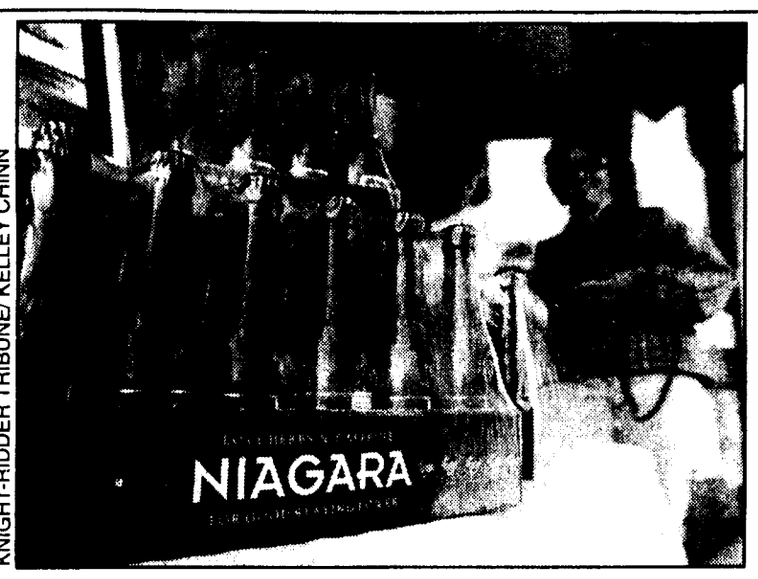
Above all, the researchers said they need to do more analysis because they don't know what the numbers mean.

Some studies by their nature can leave more room for interpretation based on ideology, scientists say. A study recording whether patients died or not has a result that is clearly good or bad. The child care study, by contrast, measured how children were behaving at kindergarten age - a measure whose "goodness" or "badness" may be much less clear.

Such a study " tempts alternative interpretations much more richly," said Daniel Kevles, a scholar of the history of science.

All the researchers said they are committed to continue working with each other in the future. Ultimately, they said, the conflict may benefit the project.

" It is unusual to have a collaboration for 10 years that has included people having these different views," Clarke-Stewart said. " That still means there's room for interpretation here."



KNIGHT-RIDDER TRIBUNE/ KELLEY CHINN

Viagra's distant cousin?

Niagara, an herbal drink from Sweden, claims to increase sexual potency. The FDA warns that the claims may not be true, but adds the drink is probably not harmful either.

White House crafts image of Bush as blunt, honest leader

by Naftali Bendavid
Chicago Tribune
April 24, 2001


KNIGHT-RIDDER TRIBUNE /HARRY HAMBURG

President George W. Bush meets with Prime Minister Rafik Hariri of Lebanon in the Oval Office of the White House Tuesday.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer, describing how President Bush expressed himself during the recent U.S.-China crisis, said, "The president spoke out directly, plainly, forthrightly and wisely."

A few weeks earlier, Fleischer was asked what message Bush was sending with the expulsion of 52 Russian diplomats. Bush was acting "in a realistic and direct way," Fleischer responded. "He's a plain-spoken man."

That picture of Bush as a blunt, honest leader, a straight-shooter whose word can be trusted, is central to the image the White House is trying to craft in the early months of Bush's administration. The notion of Bush as someone who always tells the truth, a theme heavily promoted during the campaign, has become even more important to Bush now that he is in the White House.

One goal is to offset what is thought to be public weariness with the perceived slickness of former President Bill Clinton and with politicians in general. Another goal is to turn a potential Bush weakness--his lack of eloquence and oratorical fluidity--into a virtue.

"If you have George Bush and you want to package him and present him, what are you going to play to?" said Paul Brace, a political scientist at Houston's Rice University. "He is not going to be a great orator. He's just not. You want to keep his comments short. So 'Plain-speaking, honest George' is a good theme."

Jeff Myers, who teaches communications at Bryan College in Dayton, Tenn., said the contrast with Clinton is particularly important.

"Saying that President Bush is a straight-talking man is an easy way of making a distinction between this administration and the previous administration," Myers said. " 'What you see is what you get' is the impression, and that plays well with people, especially after eight years of people not ever being sure what they're getting."

The danger for Bush may be that when he changes positions, as politicians inevitably do, the political consequences could be more serious. Voters accepted when they elected Clinton that he cut corners in some ways, but Bush was elected on a promise to tell it straight.

Bush already has abandoned his campaign pledge to limit carbon dioxide emissions at power plants. Some military leaders have complained that he has backed off a commitment to give them more money. And Bush will almost certainly have to embrace a tax cut of less than $1.6 trillion despite repeated assertions that nothing else will do.

"He has--if not changed positions on issues--has gone from right to left and back to the middle," said Judith Trent, who teaches political communication at the University of Cincinnati. "Maybe that's why it's necessary for them to say he always tells it like it is. That is a persona they are trying to give him. We don't know yet whether it is sticking."

Bush's aides are trying to make sure it does stick. In a recent interview, White House aide Mary Matalin put it this way: "The operative thing here is that he says what he means and means what he says. That defines the administration."

"That's who he is," added Karl Rove, Bush's senior adviser. "I think people just instinctively sense that. Being president is sort of like 'The Emperor's New Clothes' at the end of the day. People see you as you are."

At least in some quarters, the image has taken hold. Questions may persist about Bush's abilities, but that does not detract from, and may even enhance, a feeling among some of the public that Bush is honest.

Jennifer Walters, an administrative assistant in Billings, Mont., said she is not a huge Bush fan. But "I like his persona," she said during a recent presidential visit to Montana. "He's not fake."

Bush himself regularly advertises his own honesty, as in a news conference in March when he was asked about his meetings with foreign leaders.

"I'm a pretty straightforward fellow," Bush said. "I don't mind making my case, and it's important. It's important for world leaders to know exactly where the United States is coming from. ... A friend is somebody who's willing to tell the truth."

Bush also emphasizes this theme when praising others. In Chicago on March 6, Bush paid a high compliment to House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill.

"He's the kind of fellow who when he gives you his word, he means it," Bush said. "Sometimes that doesn't happen all the time in the political process. Sometimes they'll look you in the eye and not mean it. The speaker means it when he tells you something."

For the Bush team, part of the message means demonstrating that Bush honors his campaign promises. As Texas governor, Bush had considerable success outlining a handful of big ideas in his campaign and then pushing them through, and he is trying to do the same thing in the White House.

"Bush is trying to capitalize on perhaps an image problem that Clinton had, which was that he was manipulative," said Brace, who studies presidential images.

"Bush needs to have extraordinary credibility right now, given the close margins in Congress. He needs to speak with authority, and he has to be believed."

Rove, Bush's top political strategist, said such follow-through is crucial. "It's absolutely vital," Rove said. "To do otherwise undermines confidence in the system. These elections have to standfor not just a popularity contest, but people have to have confidence that if they vote for someone based on something they, say that they're actuallycommitted to doing it."

It also sends a politically useful message about Bush. Americans cherish the notion that their presidents are men of truth, from George Washington's "I cannot tell a lie" to "Honest Abe" Lincoln to "Give-'em-hell Harry" Truman.

The less attractive side of this crusade has been aides' willingness to deride Bush's opponents as hypocrites and liars in contrast.

As Bush began his presidential campaign, supporters contrasted his bluntness with Clinton--who claimed that oral sex was not sex and quibbled over the meaning of the word "is."

While Bush might stumble over his words, his backers said, he embodied a simple American decency.

But Bush was not running against Clinton, and his aides soon started attacking other rivals on their integrity.

Shortly after Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., surged in the New Hampshire primary, the Bush campaign accused him of being someone who "says one thing and does another."

Once Bush won the Republican nomination, one of his campaign's principal messages was that his rival, Democratic Vice President Al Gore, was untruthful. The Bush team issued a perpetual stream of press releases headlined, "The Gore Detector: A Regular Report on Al Gore's Adventures With the Truth."

Now Bush is not in a political race, but like all presidents, he is constantly shaping his image with a view to approval ratings and ultimately to re-election. And the image he wants is clear.