



# Society for Research in Child Development

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## **PRESS RELEASE**

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## **Lower Caregiver/Child Ratios Translate to Better Care**

The first-ever experimental study of the impact of child-to-caregiver ratios in day care centers found that reducing the ratio from five children for every caregiver to three children for every caregiver significantly improved the quality of the caregiver-child interaction, particularly for infants. The results are published in the July/August issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Researchers from Radboud University Nijmegen in The Netherlands observed 217 caregivers from 64 child care centers that served children from infancy to 4 years. The researchers watched two play episodes between the caregiver and children: one with a group of three children and one with a group of five children, all randomly selected from the caregiver's regular care group.

Caregivers in the smaller groups provided more emotional support and treated the children with more respect. Additionally, the children themselves cooperated better with the caregiver. When the researchers applied their observations only to infants, they found caregivers playing with three infants provided better structure, limits and a higher quality instruction while expressing less irritation and anger towards the babies than those playing with five. Additionally, the infants exhibited higher levels of well-being in the smaller groups.

To see whether the caregivers' behavior during the play episodes was consistent with their behavior in natural situations, the researchers observed the caregivers throughout the rest of the morning and during lunch, confirming that the caregivers' behavior during the experiment reflected their "everyday" behavior towards the children.

"Although the differences in the quality of the caregiver-child interactions for ratios of 3:1 versus 5:1 were relatively small, they may nevertheless be psychologically meaningful," said lead author Elles J. de Schipper, MA., "marking the difference between adequate versus inadequate care for substantial numbers of children."

Currently, professional organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Public Health Association recommend child-caregiver ratios of 3:1 for children from birth to 12 months, 4:1 for children from 13 to 30 months, 5:1 for children from 31 to 35 months, 7:1 for 3-year-olds, and 8:1 for 4-year-olds.

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“Our findings show how critical it is to recognize the importance of child-caregiver ratios in determining the quality of professional child care,” said Ms. de Schipper. However, she warned, “generalizing our findings to other countries, with a different child care quality and context, has to be treated with caution.”

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 4, *Effects of Child-Caregiver Ratio on the Interactions between Caregivers and Children in Child Care Centers: An Experimental Study* by de Schipper EJ, Riksen-Walraven JM, and Geurts SAE (Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.