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Attending a childcare center in France (*crèche*): a positive effect on early language development, particularly for disadvantaged children

In France today nearly one in five children under three attends a childcare center or *crèche*, according to the country's National Observatory of Early Childhood. Using data from the ELFE study (French Longitudinal Study from Birth), INED researchers Lidia Panico and Anne Solaz, together with Professor Lawrence Berger of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, have conducted the first French study on the impact of this type of childcare on language development, motor skills, and behavior. Their main finding is that with other variables controlled for, attending a *crèche* positively affects language acquisition, while having little effect on motor skill development or behavior. The positive impact on language skills is particularly strong among disadvantaged children.

Early childhood is a crucial stage in the development of the brain and the formation of structures and mechanisms that determine a person's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional wellbeing throughout their life. Moreover, high-quality care in early childhood can affect child development both directly and indirectly. The ELFE study (French Longitudinal Study from Birth) is the first comprehensive scientific study to follow 18,000 children from birth to adulthood. The ELFE cohort is improving our understanding of how a child's environment, family circle, living conditions, and type of childcare can influence their development, health, and socialization.

Families in France greatly appreciate *crèche* care for the high qualifications of the personnel, the excellent reception conditions, and the idea that this type of childcare will help children transition toward nursery school. Though most parents would prefer to put their child in a *crèche*, this type of formal childcare is only the second-most in France, behind small group care in a licensed provider's home. In fact, there are not enough slots in *crèches* to meet parental demand.

A positive effect on language acquisition, especially for disadvantaged children

To assess language, the researchers used the *MacArthur-Bates Inventory*, which measures the size and variety of acquired vocabulary by counting the number of words, from a pre-established list of 100, that a child utters spontaneously. The researchers also took into account the fact that children in *crèches* have particular characteristics. With those characteristics controlled for, language use of children attending a *crèche* is better, on average, than that of children in other types of childcare. Next come children in the care of a private nanny and those in groups of three or less with a licensed childcare provider. The lowest level of language acquisition is found for children cared for directly by their parents. *Crèche* children can use an average of 80 words—6 more than the overall average and 12 more than children who stay at home with their parents. Children's contact

with professional childminders in *crèches* who offer them educational activities adapted to their age, and their contact with other children, can work to enrich their vocabulary.

Children from disadvantaged families—especially children mothers who have little education, immigrant mothers, or children from low-income households—seem to benefit most from attending a *crèche*, namely when it comes to language development (*Figure 1*).

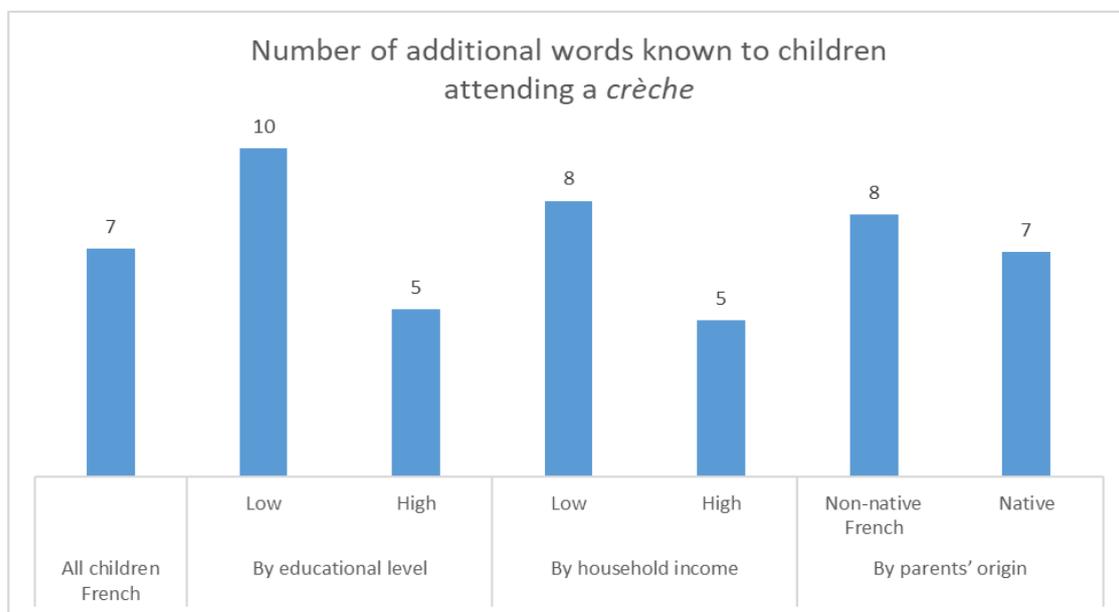
Less impact on motor skills and behavior

The motor skills of *crèche* children are slightly better than those of children in other types of childcare. The differences are once again greater for children from disadvantaged households, though differences by type of childcare in this area are not as marked as for language. Motor development was assessed using indicators that measure both gross and fine motor skills. Fine skills are associated with better later performance in writing, reading, and math and can therefore be important in children’s preparation for school. Gross skills are checked to detect delayed development and are associated with physical wellbeing and later behavioral and socio-emotional skills.

Regarding behavior, attending a *crèche* seems on average to have a slightly more negative impact compared to different types of childcare. However, this effect is not found for children from disadvantaged families. Behavior was assessed in the study in terms of child’s acceptance of care, whether or not they talk back when reprimanded, and general degree of aggressiveness.

Overall, the findings suggest that attending a *crèche* is more beneficial for children from disadvantaged families than children from better-off ones. This means that facilitating *crèche* access for disadvantaged families could reduce early socio-economic disparities in development, particularly in the area of language. Given the importance of very early cognitive, social, and emotional development for outcomes in later life, this could also have an impact on long-term socioeconomic inequalities—a key implication given the fact that fewer disadvantaged children attend *crèches* than children from more privileged families.

Figure 1 — The language acquisition benefit of attending a crèche



Source: ELFE study

Reading: Children attending a *crèche* whose parents have little education acquired twice as many additional words than children of highly educated parents.

Control variables: sex, order of birth, low weight, multiple birth, younger sibling, age, mother’s educational level and marital status, whether of migrant origin, working, desired pregnancy, preferred childcare type, recent house move, and local context variables.

Database: ELFE Survey - *Étude Longitudinale Française depuis l'Enfance* [French Longitudinal Study from Birth]

ELFE is the first nationwide French longitudinal study to track children. Multiple aspects of their lives are investigated from social science, health, and environmental perspectives. For the first time, researchers from a wide range of disciplines are following the histories of children from birth to adulthood. Over 18,000 children born in metropolitan France in 2011 were included in the study. For the study presented here, a nationally representative sample of 12,000 ELFE cohort families provided the data on children's language, motor skills, and behavior.

For more information: <https://www.elfe-france.fr/>

For more information, see :

Lawrence M. Berger, Lidia Panico et Anne Solaz, 2021, "[The Impact of Center-Based Childcare Attendance on Early Child Development: Evidence From the French Elfe Cohort](#)", Demography.

Published in a scientific journal referenced by French national evaluation authorities.

About INED:

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