Overall scientific concepts and goals

Adapting to non-parental care arrangements can be a difficult and stressful time for young children. Within their first months in day care, children’s behaviour is inhibited (Fein, Gariboldi, & Boni, 1993; Feldbaum, Christenson, & O’Neil, 1980; Mc Grew, 1972), their levels of behaviour distress increase (Ahnert et al., 2004; Cryer et al., 2005), and their levels of cortisol (a hormone produced in response to stress) rise (Ahnert et al., 2004). Some case studies have shown that when first entering child care, toddlers show insecurity and withdraw from social interactions (Bailey 2008; Grossmann, 1999; Niedergesäß, 1989). Research on young children’s transition processes suggests that, once young children have spent some time in day care, they seem happier and less distressed, become more sociable and peer oriented, and are increasingly active – both verbally and physically (Feldbaum et al., 1980; Fox & Field, 1989; Mc Grew, 1972, Fein et al., 1993).

While this is a crucial developmental step for young children in child care, it has received little research attention, and there is only restricted research evidence about the factors which facilitate toddlers’ transition from sole maternal to non-maternal day care. In this study, a theoretical framework was developed with a focus on: a) developmental steps young children have to take when settling into day care, and b) indicators of successful transition into childcare. 104 toddlers’ initial reactions to care and their patterns of behaviour change over the first months in care were investigated with the following aims:

- describing toddlers’ experiences of child care entry and their first months in day care;
- describing toddlers’ initial reactions to day care entry, and changes in their behaviour and their physical stress levels over the first months in care
- exploring factors which may contribute to children’s settling in processes: i) the general quality of their care environment, ii) their experiences in one-to-one interactions with their care providers, (iii) parental behaviour before and during leave-taking, and iv) their own physical stress levels
- developing thoughts on how to foster toddlers’ successful transition to day care, particularly in regards to practitioner education and development

Theoretical framework

Day care settings aim to foster children’s learning and development in offering opportunities for young children to interact with peers and sensitive and responsive adults who engage them in developmentally appropriate, stimulating and cognitively facilitating activities. Yet, adapting to non-parental care arrangements can be a difficult and stressful time for young children. In order to take part in stimulating and facilitating interactions and activities in day care, young children first have to overcome initial feelings of insecurity and come to terms with separation from and the absence of their parents. To settle young children into day care, centres have to support children in a way that enables them to

- experience their situation in day care with contentment, satisfaction and pleasure;
• perceive their new environment as interesting and enriching, so that they turn to others (and their activities) and/or resources, and take in/understand given situations (e.g. activities carried out by others; objects and their functions);

• form secure relationships with others in a way that allows them to engage in complementary and reciprocal interactions (Datler, Datler, Hover-Reisner, 2010; Datler, Hover-Reisner, Fürstaller, 2010).

Thus, when adapting to day care, children learn to experience their care environment as a secure and stimulating place, which in turn allows them to engage in exploration and dynamic interactions with others. Importantly, the settling-in process itself can be viewed as educational process, because when settling-into day care, children develop and unfold new capacities in aspects of

• their affect regulation;

• their focused engagement

and exploration of new situations and resources;

• their engagement in

interactions which are characterized by their turn-taking structure and by role reversal.


