maids in Arabia
the impact of maids as carers on children’s social and emotional development

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ABSTRACT
Worldwide, there is concern about the effect of non-parental childcare on children’s development although research has shown that good quality alternative childcare during infancy can have a positive effect on children’s development. This article reports a study of the use of housemaids instead of qualified caregivers in the Arabian Gulf. Using national employment statistics, interviews with maids, parent focus groups and a survey of child development, the study shows the widespread adoption of the use of maids as child carers. This is an inexpensive and easily accessible choice of alternative childcare, recognized as a social norm in the Gulf region. The article examines the characteristics of this form of childcare with case studies that demonstrate its harmful effects on children’s social and emotional development. The study is largely qualitative, adopting a constructivist framework to build a comprehensive representation, and including in-depth analysis of three child cases. The article concludes with recommendations for change and implications for parents and policymakers.

KEYWORDS children’s social and emotional development, maids as carers, non-parent care in the Gulf

introduction
This article examines the extensive delegation of early childcare to domestic workers (maids) in the Arabian Gulf. For some time there has been growing concern amongst professionals about this mode of childcare. Observations by teachers of children in nurseries have suggested that many experience
physical, cognitive, social and emotional developmental difficulties and it has
been thought that such behaviours might be associated with children's
interactions with the maids who were assigned to care for them.

Delegation of childcare duties to domestic workers in the Arabian Gulf is on
the rise, driven by the abundant availability of domestic workers, the lack of
viable alternatives, and the increasing number of mothers taking employment.
The employment of domestic workers began in the late 1970s with the onset
of the oil boom, and parents gradually delegated more and more childcare
duties to their maids. The first generation of children cared for by maids is
now in its mid 20s, and most of the population below this age have spent time
with maids in their home. This has influenced young parents who have come
to regard it as acceptable ‘standard practice’ to let the family maid care for the
children and so the phenomenon is now a well-established social norm.

Where childcare is concerned, those most affected, the children, are voiceless
in the discussion. This study seeks to hear their ‘voices’ through the observation
and analysis of their behaviours made during 12 years of systematically
recorded observations and daily contact with children, parents and maids in
two nursery schools in Kuwait and Dubai.

The study does not detract from the importance of quality non-parental
care which can enhance children's care in ways that are difficult for parents to
provide such as the prepared learning environment, peer interaction and the
scaffolding offered by educated caregivers. This study aimed to educate
parents about practices which could be detrimental to their children by
highlighting their potential dangers, while simultaneously emphasizing the
crucial parent's role, especially in the early years, and the benefits of quality
childcare that works in partnership with the care given by parents.

**key research questions**

The study focused on the social and emotional development of children, these
being seen as crucial to other areas of development. Enhancing parents'
awareness of the potential link between early care and children's social-
emotional development was a focal point of this study.

Four research questions form the basis of the study:

1. How much childcare is delegated to domestic workers in the study region?
2. What are the characteristics of childcare obtainable from domestic workers
   in term of quality, extent and stability?
3. How are the children socially and emotionally affected by their early
   experiences with family maids?
4. What can parents and the society do to mitigate any negative effects?
methods and methodology

survey of families

A survey of families was conducted in order to demonstrate the prevalence of the use of maids as childcarers, regardless of the family's background, social status or income level. The geographical and social boundaries of the study were determined through an analysis of statistics from the governments of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the organizations of the United Nations (Ministry of Planning, Kuwait, 2002; Ministry of Planning, UAE, 2002; United Nations Development Programme, 2002). These provided economic and demographic information, and data on the availability and cost of out-of-home childcare. One hundred families were selected for the survey, based on maximum variation criteria to mirror the population and taking into account demographic, social and economic factors. The representation of each factor within the sample was weighted to achieve non-biased sampling. A structured questionnaire was used to survey the sample for family characteristics and childcare practices.

survey of maids

In order to create a profile of the typical domestic worker available in the region, including her social, educational and emotional background, traits and characteristics, 30 maids were selected at random from families known to have children under five years of age. The maids' employers agreed to conduct a structured interview with their maids; the questions and response categories being determined in advance. The data were further verified and triangulated through visits to two employment agencies, which also provided information about methods of recruiting domestic workers the conditions of employment, and legislation and regulation governing this employment. The aim was to establish the employment and working conditions of maids and their consequent capability of providing suitable care for young children, irrespective of their personal qualities, education and experience.

observational survey of children

Staff of two nurseries in Kuwait and Dubai made detailed daily records of parents' and maids' involvement with the children (a total of 85 children) in the nurseries' daily routines and events over a period of one school term. Parents' viewpoints, motives and rationales were explored using multiple sources: transcripts of regional television programmes and articles published in the local media; anecdotal accounts of informal discussion with parents;
and a focus group interview with six parents, selected because they had experience of employing maids to care for their children.

three case studies

In addition to this broad survey, the cases of three children who demonstrated symptoms that strongly suggested links to their early care were studied. Each case was investigated individually and systematically as a comprehensive unit. This comprised: systematically recorded observations (Bentzen, 1993; Hobart and Frankel, 2000; Montessori Centre International, 2001) over a period of between one to two school terms; interviews with the parents and sometimes the maids; and interviews with the school doctor or child psychologist that diagnosed the case. Each case presented the phenomenon from a different perspective, which enriched the findings through a cross-case analysis that helped ‘build an abstraction across the cases’ (Merriam, 1998: 195).

ethical considerations

Domestic workers’ rights in the Gulf region is a topic that will undoubtedly surface in any interview with a maid, though this is beyond the scope of the study reported here. Access to the maids was also difficult and therefore the housemaids were interviewed indirectly, through their employers, who agreed to carry out the structured interviews.

This method of secondary data collection was chosen so as not to cause harm to the research participants; to acknowledge their rights and freedom of expression; to maintain honesty and integrity of expression and, of course, not to violate the law. Taking into account the local cultural conditions, every possible effort was made to protect the identity of the research participants by using fictional identities.

developmental effects of non-parental child care: views from research

Two concerns underpinned this enquiry into the developmental effects of non-parental childcare. The first concerns the mother–infant relationship: ‘Will this relationship be harmed or diminished in significance as a result of the daily separations that are entailed when a baby is placed in childcare?’ The second focuses directly on the children: ‘Will the young child’s cognitive, language and social-emotional development be compromised as a result of spending time in childcare?’ (Shonkoff et al., 2000: 307). These concerns combine to prompt a third question about the effect of stability of care on social-emotional development.
Quality of care ultimately boils down to the quality of the relationship between the child care provider or teacher and the child. A beautiful space and an elaborate curriculum – like the beautiful home – can be impressive, but without skilled and stable child care providers, they will not promote positive development. (Shonkoff et al., 2000: 314)

In 1986, Belsky prompted concern that extensive non-maternal childcare before the age of one year ‘may be associated with diminished compliance and cooperation with adults, increased aggressiveness, and possibly even greater social maladjustment in the preschool and early school years’ (Belsky, 1986: 1). Belsky later cited several American studies which indicated that children receiving non-maternal child care for 20 hours or more per week during infancy were ‘more likely to have an insecure attachment to their mother than are children who primarily receive maternal care during infancy’ (Belsky, 2001: 849).

The Study of Early Child Care by The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, 1997) identified the following predictors:

Lower quality care predicted:

- less harmonious mother-child relationships;
- a higher probability of insecure mother–child attachment of mothers who are already low in sensitivity to their children;
- more problem behaviours, lower cognitive and language ability and lower school readiness scores.

Higher quantity of care or a history of more hours in childcare was associated with:

- less harmonious mother–child interaction;
- more reported problem behaviours when the children were two years old;
- higher probability of insecure attachment in infants of mothers low in sensitivity. (NICHD, 1997: 16)

A further study suggested that, ‘children's attachment was found to be less secure when children were in early child care for more than 10 hours per week and had mothers who were rated as low in sensitivity’ (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2002: 1053).

A high quality of non-parental care is identified as an essential prerequisite to avoid negative socio-emotional effects. Several studies agreed that children’s development can be stunted when childcare has one or more of the following characteristics:

- a caregiver who is neglectful or harsh;
- caregivers who are unable to provide individualized attention because they are responsible for too many children; and/or
- situations where the children lack adequate stimulation (Doherty, 1996: 51).
findings
alternative care in the Arabian gulf

Analysis of statistical data for this study indicates that some 58 per cent of children under the age of three in the Arabian Gulf are cared for by housemaids for about 30–70 hours per week (see Figure 1). About 30 per cent of children are cared for by their mother or another family member, either exclusively or aided by a domestic worker. The remaining children attend nurseries or child-minder services of varied quality and durations, including child-minder services staffed by domestic workers (Hayes et al., 1990; NICHD, 1997). These figures show the extensive reliance on domestic workers to care for children in the Gulf in comparison to the US and Europe.

This study has found that the amount of time children spend with the family maid by far exceeds the duration recommended by major studies to avoid harm to maternal attachment or increase the probability of problem behaviours: 10 hours per week according to the Study of Early Child Care (NICHD, 1997), and 10–30 hours in the Goteborg Child Care Study (Lamb, 1996), compared with the research findings of 30–70 hours per week. Consequently, many children spend more of their waking hours with the substitute caregiver than they do with their parents. There is concern that this

figure 1 childcare provision in study region (compared with USA)
could result – in extreme cases – in a role reversal, with the maid becoming, willingly or unwillingly, the primary caregiver.

There are clear economic benefits to parents using their maids in childcare. Compared with the cost of a licensed nursery school which averages about US$6 per hour, or that of an unregulated child-minder service at about US$2.5 per hour, with possible hidden extra costs such as transport and food, a maid is a very economical alternative at a cost of less than US$1 per hour, and she also provides many other additional services (cleaning, laundry, cooking and so on). This advantage, plus the fact that the child remains in his/her own home and care is available full time, motivates many parents to opt for this type of childcare. For some, the social status associated with having one's own maid is also a desirable factor.

**the parents, society and the media**

The ready availability of maids, and the ease with which they can be hired and dismissed provides a convenient solution to childcare. Such care is available at all hours, flexible, in one's own home setting and at low cost. However, popular opinion suggests that this convenience might come at some cost to the children.

The present study found that 80 per cent of European expatriate families (in the higher income bracket and with a smaller number of children) hire a full-time domestic helper to do the housework and look after the children when they are at work. Thus, maids are more like baby-sitters rather than trained child carers. Parents' absence from the house can be extensive, with younger children (0–3 years) spending more than 50 hours per week with the maid. Forty per cent of Arab and Asian expatriate families with working mothers hire full- or part-time maids to look after the children and do the housework while the mother is at work. Almost all nationals employ more than one maid and delegate more childcare duties to the maids.

Analysis of interviews with parents, focus groups and parents' anecdotal accounts gathered during this study revealed that the majority of parents are ill at ease with the situation, with almost all parents considering having maids look after their children to be an unavoidable necessity. They justified their practice by personal convenience, economic considerations and the lack of a viable alternative. Parents voiced concern about the effect of maids on children's language development and their possible cultural and religious influences, but despite this, most parents tolerated these effects, considering them to be remediable, and hence – on balance – the benefits outweighing any disadvantages.

Parents' and maids' involvement in school activities was analysed using the daily registers of two nurseries; one in Kuwait and one in Dubai over one school
term (10 weeks). Analysis of these data shows that 100 per cent of national children (35 per cent of the pupil intake in the Dubai nursery and 80 per cent of those in the Kuwait nursery) were brought to school by their maids, while 20 per cent of expatriate children were accompanied by maids. The remaining 80 per cent of expatriate children were brought to school by their parents. School trips and Sports’ Days attendance records showed the same proportions. Maids also asked staff about the child's achievement, would be the one to buy a uniform, or get assurance from the teachers that the child ate well.

A study by the Department of Childhood Centres in Sharjah, UAE, examined the influence of housemaids on children's linguistic and cultural development and warned against the dangerous effects of excessive dependence on foreign housemaids on national families, and in particular on young children. According to Gulf News (2001) the fact that the maids are non-Arabs, mostly Asians, has raised fears about their impact on the national child’s culture and identity as they could transfer their own language and customs to the children. The issue of maids and children has been the subject of increasing attention over the past few years; both as a popular topic for discussion in social gatherings and also of informal discussions with parents. Articles in local magazines, newspapers, web pages and television talk-shows (Kul Al-Usra, 2003; Sayidaty, 2003) all concur that having one's maid look after children is: a) a socially acceptable norm; and b) there are problems associated with this practice. They often associate such problems with the maid's characteristics, her attitude and the quality of care she can provide. Some maids are often very young and perhaps too young to have responsibility for long periods of time for young children. Some are reported to be aggressive or abusive, having little regard to the stability of care. Problems become exacerbated when maids and children do not speak each others' languages. Some maids are mothers themselves, having left their own children in the care of other family members while they come to the Gulf to earn a meagre wage to send home to support their own family.

the maids

Only 8 per cent of the maids interviewed were specifically hired to look after children, the remaining 92 per cent considered that caring for their employer's children was an added household chore. This fact, added to the vagueness of the domestic worker's job description, places childcare duties on a par with cleaning, ironing or dish-washing and is an indicator of the quality of care which might be provided by domestic workers. This attitude does not necessarily satisfy children's physical needs and may well disregard their emotional and psychological needs. Employment of maids can be terminated and replacements found. It is not uncommon to employ a maid on a ‘trial-and-
error’ basis, thus resulting in frequent ‘turn-over’. This affects the stability of care for children and interrupts a healthy pattern of attachment that may form between the child and the maid.

One of the most important findings of the study was the relationship between the nature of the maid’s employment contract and the obtainable quality of care. The contract, whether written or not, construes a master–servant relationship between the employer and the maid that implies an open-ended duty of obedience. This is in contrast to the partnership arrangement called for between parents and teachers for example. In this sense, the maid has to ensure that her assigned duties, childcare included, are carried out exactly as directed and controlled by the employer, without any regard to her own experience or personal feelings, including her attachment to the child, and her know-how as a mother herself.

The findings of this study resonate with many ethnic and feminist studies of migrant domestic workers. Cross-cultural studies (Chang, 2000; Parrenas, 2001) show striking parallels in their lives, working conditions, alienation, and their emotions as mothers, separated from their own children to look after those of their employers. Parrenas calls the maids ‘transnational mothers’ who are ‘unable to provide their children with daily acts of care, and tend to rely on commodities to establish concrete ties of familial dependency’ (2001: 123). Hondageneu-Sotelo’s (2001) study of paid domestic work in Los Angeles advocated the recognition of domestic work as a ‘real job’ and elaborated on the vagueness of the domestic worker’s job description, particularly when it comes to caring for children, and the ‘love triangle’ of mother–child–nanny:

Employers want good, loving care for their children, but they don’t want to lose their children’s affection or feel displaced as parents . . . The Americana tend to become jealous when they see their children running more eagerly to the nanny than to mommy or hear them cooing ‘I’m Concha’s baby.’ (Hondageneu-Sotelo, 2001: 151)

Similarly, Jureidini (2001) discussed the relationship between the employer, (in this case the parent) and the domestic workers or the maid:

Part of the dilemma in domestic work is that neither employer nor employee can assume an arm’s length, rational approach to the contractual relations, for the arena is the ideologically ‘natural’ sphere of the female domain, with all the emotional and cultural baggage which is bound up in it. This results in a highly charged set of dynamics between the maid and her Madame. (Jureidini, 2001: 17)

The three child case-studies carried out as part of the study reported here demonstrate the master–servant aspect of the relationship between the parents and the maid and calls into question any possible advantage that can be obtained from an experienced, caring, even well-educated maid, particularly on children’s social and emotional development. Even when the employer is most caring and considerate, the maid’s desperate need to keep
her job and her constant fear of dismissal leads to the same result of blind obedience.

The study shows that the employment of maids for childcare can lead to exhibition of one or more of the following characteristics:

**lack of authority**

The maid has no authority to set limits on children's behaviour and this directly impacts on the child's social attitude. Children are seen to take advantage of the maid's required obedience and this affects their interpersonal interactions.

**insensitivity to the child’s needs**

Many maids are young girls with little experience of childcare, and the majority of maids are uneducated or poorly educated. Language may be a barrier, as children and maids do not always share a common (even second) language.

**lack of stimulation/freedom to explore**

A maid may not allow the child to explore or be creative because:

- she is afraid he/she will harm him/herself, causing her to be blamed;
- she assumes that the child will make a mess and her priority is to keep the place tidy and clean. Childcare is a secondary duty.
- she is sometimes instructed by the mother to keep the child in his/her cot or pen while she does the housework.
- she does not know how to stimulate the baby.

**the child’s attachment to the maid**

It is normal for children to become attached to the maids, given the long hours spent in their care. This, mainly in the case of young babies, may lead to an apparent role-reversal, where the maid becomes the primary caregiver. The result can be a love triangle of mother–child–maid, with inevitable feelings of jealousy and guilt when the mother sees how close the child is with the maid.

**the maid’s own emotions**

The maid’s own attachment to the child can lead to her becoming overprotective, sometimes even possessive, leading to the risk of more maternal antagonism. In some cases, the maid’s own emotions, or her reaction to the
way she is treated, can make her resent caring for the children. She may become harsh and less responsive.

the children

The study examined three cases where the mal-effects of extensive, unstable or inadequate early care on children's social and emotional development were apparent. Each child-case study involved systematic recorded observations (Bentzen, 1993; Fonagy, 2001; Hobart and Frankel, 2000; Montessori Centre International, 2001) over a period of one to two school terms; interviews with the parents; interviews with the maid where possible, and interviews with the school doctor or child psychologist who diagnosed the child's difficulties and traced its history back to inadequate non-parental early care.

What follows are examples of cases where children's care is inconsistent with their needs. They have been chosen to highlight the difficulties that can arise when children's needs are unmet. It is important to note that some children are able to cope with a range of relationships and attachments of different degrees of insensitivity and intimacy. This study does not focus on identification and treatment of 'damaged' children or on those children who do not experience difficulty in coping with transitional care arrangements. Its purpose is to highlight what can happen in extreme cases where caring 'goes wrong' for children.

child 1

early care history (0–4)

This child has had two working parents and several maids over the past four years – sometimes changing every few months because the parents were endeavouring to get the best through trial and error. The maids were exclusively dedicated to care for the child (feeding, changing, bathing, putting to bed, sleeping in the child's room). The child has had little time with her parents, the family seldom ate together, the maid fed the child by physically putting food into the child's mouth – she had never learned how to feed herself and use cutlery.

outcome (age 4)

Withdrawal and social phobia presenting as:

1. selective mutism 'where the sufferer will speak in familiar settings, but decides not to speak in school or in situations which bring their anxiety to the fore' (Gallagher, 2002: 1);
2. refusing to eat in public;
3. refusing to participate in group activities or to make new friends.

All three behaviours are symptoms of an anxiety disorder reflecting inhibited social actions for fear of embarrassment or concerns that others will judge them negatively.

**interpretation**

The child failed to form an attachment with any caregiver (Ainsworth, 1978). Experience appears to have taught her that a caregiver can disappear without notice (this being persistently confirmed by her mother's frequent absence and the repeated loss of any alternative caregiver). Eventually these experiences combined to form an internal working model (Bowlby, 1986) of attachment relationships, that ‘includes such elements as the child's confidence (or lack of it) that the attachment figure will be available or reliable’ (Bee, 1992: 427). This lack of confidence seems to have fuelled her separation anxiety and culminated in an anxiety disorder leading to what presents as a form of social phobia. Also, ‘important developmental tasks may not be accomplished when the child is preoccupied with feelings of loss' (Levy and Orlans, 1998: 223). Withdrawal is a marked symptom of what Erickson (1993) identified as a malignant tendency resulting from inadequate, inconsistent or harsh care in the first crisis of life, in other words, trust vs mistrust.

The case is a worrying example of the potential mal-effect of a lack of stability and inconsistency of care and caregivers.

**child 2**

**early care history (0–3 years)**

This young boy had two working parents with his mother travelling frequently on business. He is the third child in the family, and has had one dedicated maid since he was born. The maid is strongly attached to the child, (she is a mother herself with children back home and her husband also works within the same household). The maid could be described as ‘overprotective’, always worried that this energetic little boy may harm himself leading to her being blamed, and possibly leading to the loss of her and her husband's jobs. The mother reported that ‘She made sure that cupboards and doors are locked, nothing is left on shelves and tables and would not let the child wander outside the room. She would not allow him to go out of her sight, carrying him all the time. She was afraid he might hurt himself.’ The mother did not allow the maid to use her own language (Urdu) with the child or to speak to him in poor English. As the maid knew no Arabic, the child was not spoken to for long periods in any language and so spoke no language himself.
outcome (age 3)

1. delayed speech (non-biological) and frustration;
2. impulsiveness and aggression;
3. cruelty to animals and other children.

All three are known symptoms of a Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), where children display intense levels of anger, fear, pain and shame. Such children frequently appear disheartened and depressed. ‘Typical social roles developed and maintained include victim (helpless, powerless) and/or victimizer (bully). Blaming others for their own mistakes and problems, and taking little or no responsibility for their actions and choices, further alienates and frustrates others’ (Levy and Orlans, 1998: 100). They reflect inhibited social actions for fear of embarrassment or concern that others will judge them negatively.

interpretation

The child failed to acquire any language, presumably due to lack of verbal interaction with adults. The readily available help from an overly anxious, though well-intending, caregiver, reduced the child's need to speak, because his every need was anticipated and met. Restricting his freedom to explore and the lack of stimulation in his daily life seem to be the main causes of this apparent Reactive Attachment Disorder. In Erickson's second and third stage of early childhood (shame vs doubt – initiative vs guilt) children who learn how to take the initiative, but not how to judge the consequences, or who feel guilty if their actions harm someone, can acquire the maladaptive tendencies of impulsiveness and ruthlessness.

This case is a typical example of how the maid's employment conditions, lack of authority, and vulnerability about losing her job, can lead – due to fear – to poor quality in childcare.

child 3

early care history (0–4)

This child of two working parents was cared for since birth by a part-time maid for about 50 hours per week. The maid's duty was only to see to his physical needs, without getting emotionally involved with him. The father said, 'I will not allow the maid to pick him up, cuddle him or play with him . . . I do not like her to touch my boy or become too close to him, just feed him, change him and put him to bed. He should stay in his cot or, when awake, in his play pen.'
outcome (age 4)

Reactive Attachment Disorder (disinhibited), with the following symptoms:

1. delayed speech;
2. lack of concentration, impulsiveness;
3. disobedience, defiance and aggression (biting);
4. showing affection with strangers but not with parents, and manifesting a superficially charming persona.

interpretation

The boy did not develop a secure primary attachment with his mother or father (Bowlby, 1988) nor was he allowed to develop any attachment with his part-time maid, in spite of the fact that he was left in her care for over 50 hours per week.

This case suggests how the parent's understanding and appreciation (or lack of it) of the importance of the first attachment is a key factor in determining their children's emotional development. This is an example of adults (Darling, 1999; Main and Goldwyn, 1985) minimizing the importance of interpersonal connections for children in favour of achievement. Such adults are often unable or unwilling to address attachment issues, and avoid any potential pain of early rejection by their child and their own need for love and affection through various defensive strategies. This type of adult attachment promotes avoidant attachment in children. 'The shared parent/child attachment strategy is to maintain distance, in order to reduce the likelihood of emotional outbursts that might lead to rejections. The price is a loss of sensitive care for the child when it is needed' (Byng-Hall, 1995: 50).

Despite the psycho-dynamic orientation of the clinicians' interpretations, this case, like the others, serves to indicate the potential of a maid's lack of authority preventing her from becoming a good caregiver.

implications and consequences of the employment of maids in childcare

The three child-cases show the potential effects of maids as carers from different perspectives. A cross-case analysis with an abstraction across the cases (Merriam, 1998) demonstrated the extent of potentially damaging effects on social and emotional development that can arise from using maids for childcare. The following list is not exhaustive, nor conclusive, but is indicative of difficulties that in extreme cases which could arise.
maid’s impact on children’s social and emotional development

i) attachment disorders

Such disorders can result from extensive time spent with the maid. Mainly presenting in mild to severe forms of insecure attachment patterns: anxious-ambivalent, resistant or anxious-avoidant. Reactive attachment disorders have been diagnosed in extreme cases, both inhibited and disinhibited.

ii) separation anxiety and social phobia

This can be the main effect of a frequent change of maids (resulting in instability of care). The child can develop a primary or secondary attachment with the maid only to find that she has gone with no notice and no ‘goodbye’. Children also display such behaviours if they see maids punished in front of them, or when the maid threatens to leave when reprimanded – using the possible withdrawal of her labour as her only defence mechanism.

iii) personality disorders

Such disorders can be a direct result of the lower quality of care that arises from the maid’s lack of authority, insensitivity or unresponsiveness. The results are either maladaptive or malignant tendencies, including: sensory maladjustment; withdrawal; impulsiveness; compulsiveness; increased or lowered feeling of guilt.

iv) social attitude disorders

Socially, children can display reduced ‘interpersonal intelligence’. This can be a typical result of in-home alternative care, especially after the second year of the child’s life, when children need peer interaction to develop their social skills. This young child mimics his/her parent’s attitude towards the maid (s/he is ‘master’/’mistress’, she is ‘servant’) and s/he expects others to be there for her/him and obey her/his orders as s/he issues them, or becomes abusive and aggressive.

implications for parents

Asking parents in the Arabian Gulf not to delegate childcare to their maids without providing them with a viable alternative is futile, especially for children in the first two years of their life where alternatives are practically non-existent. This study suggests that parents can do some things to mitigate the potentially harmful influences of intensive use of maids for childcare on their children socio-emotional development.
understanding the parent’s role

While alternative caregivers change over time and in relation to the child's age and family circumstances, parents should do all they can to remain the consistent, continuing influences in the development and learning of their children. It is important, before any attempt is made to delegate this duty of care to an alternative caregiver, for them to understand and appreciate their own parenting role in their children's development.

From a social emotional standpoint, the attachment relationship that a young child forges with his/her mother or primary caregiver during the first six months of life can form a key foundation stone of personality. This is a secure base from which a child can go out to explore further and the starting point for forming all other relationships.

delegation and continuity of care

It is important to understand the ensuing relationship between the parents and the potential caregiver who, as the name implies, is acting in place of parents (in loco parentis), to promote children's development and learning.

Alternative caregivers should not divest parents of their role as a secure base. In fact, it is from this secure base that parents should introduce the new caregiver to the child (as their partner in caring). Children can form many secondary attachment relationships with their maids, relatives and others, safe in the knowledge that their parents are there when the secondary caregiver is not.

To ensure continuity of care, alternative childcare should be seen by parents as a partnership between them and the potential caregiver, rather than a master/servant relationship. This means that there should be an element of respect rather than an element of control. Partners work together, respecting each other's capabilities and experience, for the realization of their common objective, in this case, the welfare of the child. This is more understandable when parents are dealing with specialized out of home childcare providers and schools, nevertheless, it should equally apply to live-in or part-time maids. Once accepted, this analogy of a partnership will help parents in their selection of an alternative caregiver (finding an acceptable partner), and enables them to set out their expectations, share their concerns and exchange views on the best structure and rules.

dealing with the maids

Once the concepts of the parent's role as a primary caregiver and a secure base, and that of the alternative caregiver as a partner in a continuum of care
are accepted, parents can easily reconsider the way they deal with their maids to retain the benefits, while mitigating or at least minimizing the harmful effects on their children.

**stability of care**

Changes of maid can have a very harmful effect on children. The trial and error process for selecting a maid should be done before the child is born and the child should never be used for testing the maid. The initial criteria for selecting a maid, the way she is treated, her workload, and understanding her own problems, are all factors that influence whether she will be stable and happy at the same time. Care should be exercised when the maid leaves, for whatever reason. A transitional period back to the mother or another caregiver can help to reduce the child’s feelings of separation and loss.

**time in care**

No matter how much time parents are away from home with the child left in the maid’s care, and no matter how tired they are when they come back, parents should allocate sufficient quality time to their children, to counteract the long periods spent with the maid and re-establish their bond with them.

**seeking alternatives for older children**

Quality alternatives are now available for children over two years of age. Nursery schools might be more expensive, but the good ones offer a superior quality of care, with a prepared environment that stimulates learning and socializing.

**implications for policy-makers**

The findings of this study have clearly demonstrated that the employment of maids in childcare, a practice that has become a cultural or a social norm in the Gulf region, is now affecting the social and emotional development of generations of children, future parents, and ultimately the whole society.

In spite of the difficulties in regulating domestic work, there are many areas where policymakers can intervene to improve the situation, both in the corrective and the preventative sense. The following are three examples of government interventions that can be practically implemented:

- improving the quality of in-home care;
- working in partnership with parents;
- providing and promoting viable alternatives.
The future of any society absolutely depends on how well it cares for its children, and no price can be put on such a benefit. However, a benefit analysis carried out in Canada to justify the required public spending on childcare, concluded that ‘For every dollar invested in high quality childcare, there is a two-dollar benefit to children, parents and society’ (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 1998: 5).

references


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