

POLICY BRIEF (ISSUE 6)

Non-Parental Care in the First 18 Months and Its Implications for Child Development in Singapore

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Background

Children are increasingly being placed in non-parental care starting from their first year of life. This raises important questions about the implications of early non-parental care for child development.

Singapore provides a unique context for this investigation. Work hours here are among the longest globally,¹ and young children tend to spend long hours in non-parental care (averaging 41 hours per week for three- to six-year-olds).²

Recent developments in infant care provision highlight the timeliness of this research. National plans include the addition of 6,000 new infant care places between 2025 and 2029,³ alongside the expansion of a government-funded childminding scheme that provides home-based care for infants aged two to 18 months.⁴ As policies expand access and diversify infant care options, local evidence is needed to understand how early care arrangements affect children's development.

A recent study by Lee and Yeung, published in *Child Development*, draws on two waves of data from the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG-LEADS) to address three questions:

- Whether non-parental care in the first 18 months is associated with children's academic and behavioral outcomes during the preschool years;
- Whether parenting stress and disciplinary practices explain the associations between early non-parental care and children's outcomes;
- Whether age of entry and hours in care are related to developmental outcomes.

Data and Methods

Our sample included 2,580 children aged 3–6 at Wave 1 (2018–2019) and 5–8 at Wave 2 (2022). At Wave 1, parents (96% mothers) retrospectively reported their children’s non-parental care history from birth to kindergarten. They also reported levels of parenting stress (e.g., “Taking care of my children is much more work than pleasure”) and the frequency of punitive discipline (e.g., spanking) in the past month. At both waves, children’s math and reading achievement were assessed, and parents rated their children’s externalizing (e.g., “cheats or tells lies”) and internalizing behavior (e.g., “too fearful or anxious”).

Key Findings

1. Prevalence, age of entry, and hours in non-parental infant care

Fig. 1.

About 1 in 8 children received regular **non-parental care** in the first 18 months of life



Center-based care was the most common, followed by home-based care by relatives and non-relatives

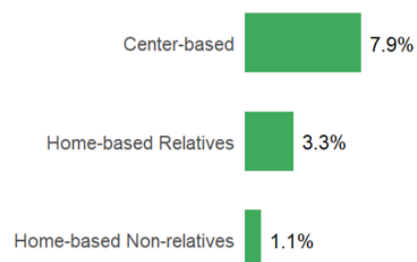


Fig. 2.
Weekly hours in care differ by care type

Center-based care is mostly full-time (41–60 hours), while home-based care is more varied

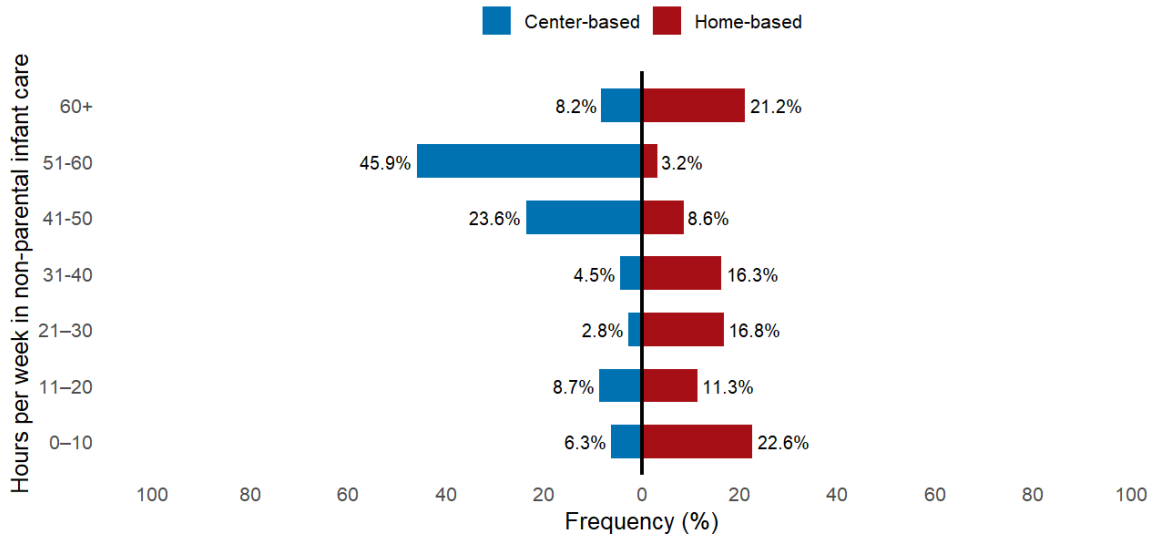
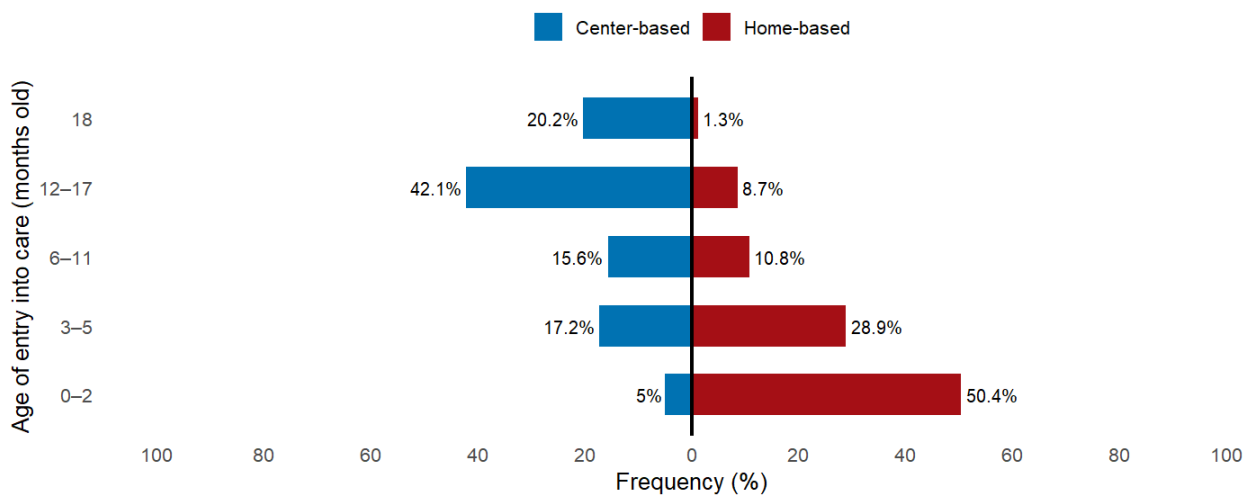


Fig. 3.
Age of entry differs by care type

Home-based care tends to start earlier than center-based care



- 2. Non-parental infant care was associated with higher academic achievement in early childhood.**
 - Children who received center-based or home-based non-parental care in the first 18 months showed higher math and reading achievement during the preschool years (ages 3–6) than children who were exclusively cared for by their parents.
 - They also made greater gains in achievement during the transition to kindergarten (ages 5–6) and primary school (ages 7–8).

- 3. Center-based infant care was linked to more behavioral problems in early childhood.**
 - Children who received center-based care in the first 18 months showed higher levels of externalizing and internalizing problems during the preschool years (ages 3–6).

- 4. Non-parental infant care was associated with more behavioral problems through increased parenting stress.**
 - Parents whose children received any form of non-parental care in the first 18 months reported greater parenting stress and more frequent use of punitive discipline during the preschool years (ages 3–5).
 - These negative parenting experiences were, in turn, associated with children's higher levels of externalizing and internalizing problems.

- 5. Later entry into non-parental infant care and longer hours in care were risk factors for developing behavioral problems.**

Fig. 4a.
Entering care later in infancy was linked to more internalizing problems during the preschool years (ages 3–5)

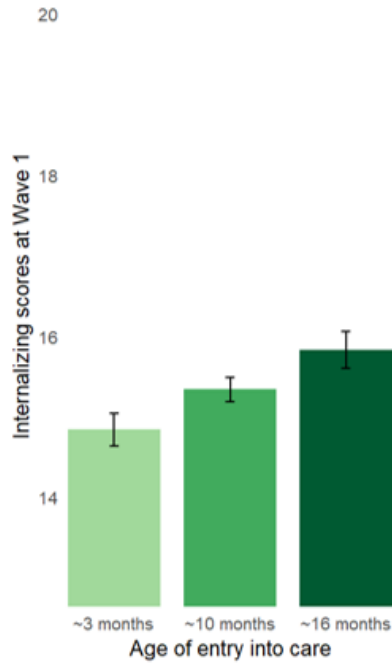


Fig. 4b.
Entering care later in infancy was linked to greater increases in internalizing problems during the transition to kindergarten (ages 5–6) and primary school (ages 7–8)

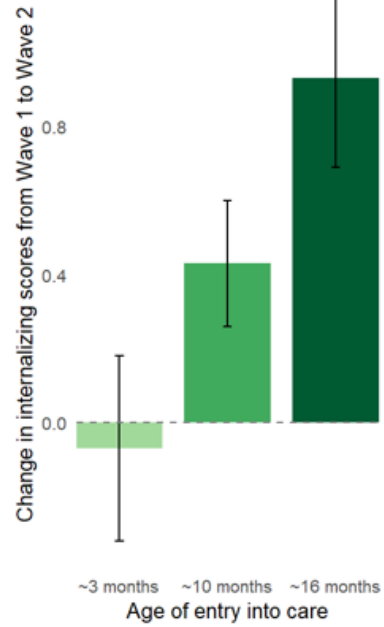
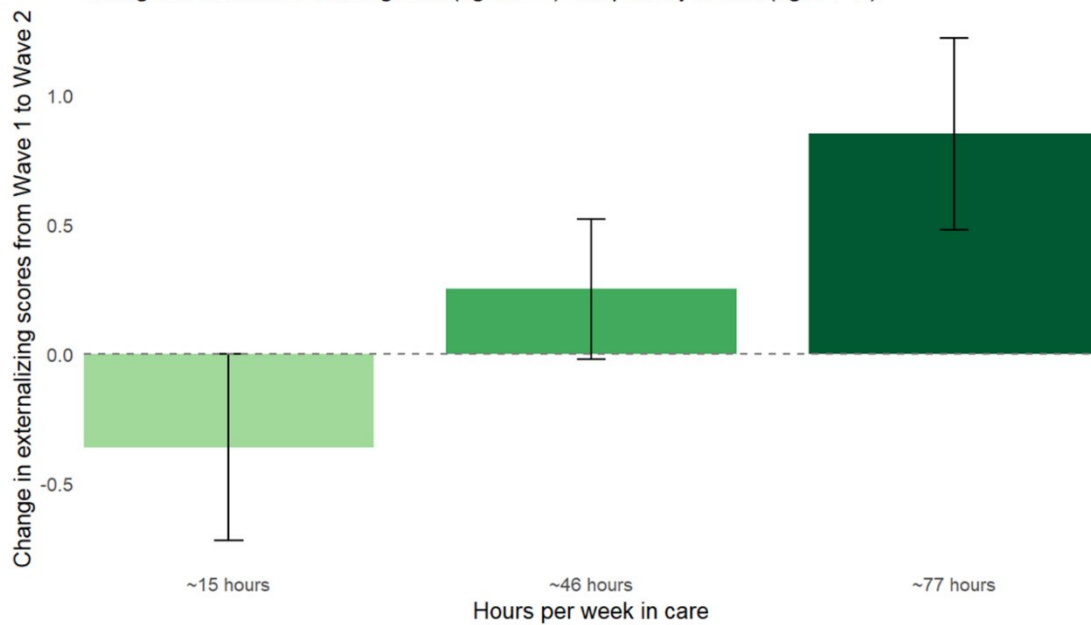


Fig. 5.
Longer hours in non-parental care was associated with larger increases in externalizing problems during the transition to kindergarten (ages 5–6) and primary school (ages 7–8)



Policy Recommendations

- 1. Strengthen support for working parents during a child's first 18 months.** Expand parental leave, offer flexible work arrangements, and provide childcare services at or near the workplace.
- 2. Build a family-friendly work culture.**
Supportive and progressive human resource practices help ensure that parents can take time off to care for their infants without stigma, guilt, or career penalties.
- 3. Promote sensitive and responsive parenting.**
Increase access to evidence-informed workshops and parenting programs to help parents understand and respond to children's socioemotional needs, manage challenging behavior, and cope with parenting stress.
- 4. Enhance training for infant care providers.**
Infant care providers, particularly in center-based settings, should receive training to support children's socioemotional development.
- 5. Improve the working conditions of childcare providers.**
Infant care teachers and domestic workers should be fairly compensated and provided with supportive work environments. This can reduce caregiver burnout, improve care quality, and lower the risk of stress spillover to children.
- 6. Provide guidance for easing infants' transition into non-parental care.**
This may include strategies for managing separation anxiety and transition activities to help infants adjust to new caregivers and environments.

Find out more in this paper:

Lee, J. J. K., & Yeung, W.-J. J. (accepted, May 2026). Non-parental care in the first 18 months in Singapore and its implications for child development. *Child Development aacag105*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/chidev/aacag105>

Learn more about SG-LEADS here: <https://sg-leads.org/>

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References

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- ² Bi, Y., Ding, X. P., & Yeung, W.-J. J. (2024). The link between hours of center-based childcare and child development in 3- to 6-year-olds: Evidence from Singapore. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 68, 76–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2024.04.004>
- ³ The Straits Times. (2024, November 2). 40,000 new infant and childcare places to open up in Singapore in the next 5 years. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/40000-new-infant-and-childcare-places-to-open-up-in-singapore-in-the-next-5-years>
- ⁴ The Straits Times. (2024, March 6). New childminding scheme for babies to be launched in second half of 2024, among efforts to support families. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/new-childminding-scheme-for-babies-to-be-launched-in-second-half-of-2024-among-efforts-to-support-families>