

Findings



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America's Child Care Crisis

Early Child Care Advocacy vs. Mother-care

By Alysse M. ElHage

The issue of child care has been called one of America's most urgent national crises. Single moms working to pay the bills and raise their children by themselves face it every day, as do two-career families who are trying to balance the needs of their children with the demands of their jobs. With nearly 59 percent of women with infants under the age of one in the workforce, there is little doubt that child care is an issue of national importance.¹ Single mothers (divorced, separated, widowed or never married) make up a large portion of working women with infants.² But married women with young children are returning to the labor force in record numbers as well. In 1998, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, two-parent working families with children became the majority (51 percent) of all married-couple families.³

The number of children under five who spend time in non-parental care has risen significantly in recent years. The latest U.S. Census Bureau statistics report that 49 percent of children under age five were in child care arrangements outside the home in 1995, with 30 percent in some type of organized care, such as a day care center.⁴ Nearly one in four had no formal child care arrangement and were cared for full-time by a parent.⁵ Nationally, preschoolers with working parents spend an average of 35 hours per week in some form of child care.⁶ In North Carolina, there are 164,972 children age 5 and under in some form of child care outside the child's home.⁷

Who is going to take care of the children while both parents are at work is a question more parents face every day. Most working moms will tell you that it is not an easy decision to drop their young child off at a day care center every morning. But for

some parents, especially single moms, there is often no other option. Child day care is a necessity for some working parents who cannot afford for mom to stay at home with the kids.

The question to consider in this debate is where the real crisis lies. Early child care advocates argue that the problem is a need for more affordable, high quality child care for working parents. Others point to the fact that children are entering day care at younger and younger ages as more parents

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are unable to afford staying at home. The central issue in this debate is not whether child day care is sometimes necessary; rather, it is whether child care that takes place outside the home should be pushed on society as better than or even equal to mother-care. Should public policy be focused on making it easier for parents to leave their children with other people, or on making it easier for parents to care for their children themselves?

Early Child Care Advocacy

Forty years ago, the suggestion that other forms of child care are just as good as mother-care would not have been given much credence. Today, at least among the academic and political elite, it is a much different story when it comes to the issue of child care.

Parents today face a great deal of societal pressure to place children, at

younger and younger ages, in child care arrangements outside the home. This pressure is felt most by mothers who are often encouraged by the philosophy of feminism to return to work as soon as possible after the birth of a baby. Parents are told by members of the media and political pundits that well-educated and highly trained child care professionals—many of whom are certified by the government—can do just as good a job of raising children as they can.

In addition to this, early child care advocates are heavily promoting early learning programs. Early learning education focuses on very young children, from infancy to kindergarten. Recently, scientific studies which report that the first three years of a child's life are the most critical in the brain's development have been the focus of national attention.⁸ Other recent studies claim that child day care is not harmful but beneficial to child development and may even be a future crime deterrent for at-risk children.⁹ Together, these types of studies are being used by early child care advocates to encourage more parents to place their children in early learning programs and to encourage more government involvement.

Add to this the economic pressures faced by families which make it necessary or desirable for both parents to work in order to earn a living. Tax laws continue to penalize married couples, and many families pay 40 to 50 percent of their income to the government in various taxes.¹⁰ All of these things add to the pressures on parents to place their young children in care outside the home.

Why Mother-Care Is Still Best

With all the talk about early child care, it is important to take a close look at the benefits of mother-care. It is interesting to note that most Americans still believe that mothers are best qualified for the job of

child care. According to a recent survey by Public Agenda of parents with young children, 81 percent believe that children age five and under have a better chance of receiving the care they need from a parent who stays at home than from a well-trained child care worker; and 66 percent strongly agree that if a family can afford it, it is best for one parent to stay at home full-time with young children.¹¹

When non-parental child care becomes necessary, center-based care is still the last choice of many parents. The Public Agenda survey found that nearly half of parents with young children rated quality day care centers as their “least preferred” form of child care.¹² Most parents prefer care by other relatives, nannies or even home-based centers to the standard day care center.¹³ In fact, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 50 percent of preschoolers were cared for by a relative in 1995.¹⁴

From the moment a new life begins to develop inside her womb, mother and child form a deep bond that grows even stronger after the child is born. This mother-child bonding that begins in the womb is critical to a child’s healthy development and needs to be cultivated as the child grows.¹⁵

Early day care has been shown to adversely impact this important relationship between mothers and their children. One of the ways it can is by reducing a baby’s chances of being breast-fed. Breast-feeding is one of the best ways to provide babies with a “head start.” Breast-fed babies develop better physically, mentally and emotionally, and most pediatricians recommend that mothers breast-feed infants for at least the first six months.¹⁶ Breast milk contains essential nutrients that babies need, and the physical act of breast-feeding has been linked to healthy brain development.¹⁷ In spite of this, only 50 percent of infants are breast-fed today, and fewer than 20 percent up until six months.¹⁸ This decrease in breast-feeding has been related to so many mothers returning to work earlier.¹⁹

The importance of mother-child attachment is critical to healthy child development, especially during the early years. Too much day care too soon has been found to impact this attachment. According to two longitudinal studies (studies that take place over specific lengths of time) published in 1988, infants in intact working or middle-class families who were placed in non-maternal care for more than 20 hours a week had more insecure relationships with their mothers.²⁰ One of the findings of a more recent on-going child care study by the National Institute of Child Health and

Human Development found that “children were less positively engaged with their mothers when they spent more hours in child care.”²¹

The Child Day Care Experience

Perhaps the most persuasive argument for the benefits of mother-care comes from the day care experience itself. It is important to consider what child day care is not, as well as some of the harmful effects of too much center-based care during the early years of a child’s life.

Even early child care advocates and the medical community agree that daily, one-on-one interaction with a primary caregiver is essential for the healthy development of young children, especially infants. “Every baby needs a warm, intimate relationship with a primary caregiver over a period of years, not months or weeks....Infants, toddlers and preschoolers need these nurturing interactions most of their waking hours,” write Drs. T. Berry Brazelton and Stanly Greenspan, a well-known pediatrician and child psychiatrist, in a recent issue of *Newsweek*.²²

Most people who have visited day care centers—even high quality centers that focus on education—realize that very little one-on-one interaction occurs. Center-based child care is simply not made for these kinds of relationships. According to the 1995 National Household Education Survey, the child-to-staff ratio in most day care centers is almost seven to one (6.5 children for every one teacher).²³ For licensed day care centers in North Carolina, the teacher-to-child ratio in a classroom of infants one and under is 1:5; for two-year-olds it is 1:10; and for three-year-olds it is 1:15.²⁴ Even in the most highly regulated child day care setting, one-on-one interaction between caretakers and children is nearly impossible.

Not only do children need constant interaction—they also need consistency. As the word “primary” implies, babies need one central person with whom they can form strong attachments—who knows them and can understand their unique personalities and needs. Brazelton and Greenspan write that a long-term relationship between a baby and a caregiver who really knows her “is responsible for a surprisingly large number of vital mental capacities.”²⁵

The problem with center-based care is that children are cared for by several different people throughout the day and week.²⁶ Multiple child care arrangements (such as center-based care part of the week, and care by a baby-sitter the other part) are common for children who spend time in

non-parental care. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 44 percent of children under age five spend time in more than one child care arrangement per week.²⁷ Studies have shown that having multiple child care arrangements can be harmful to children’s mental and social development and can also inhibit their attachment to one caregiver.²⁸

There is also a high turnover rate among child care workers, which makes it even more difficult for children to develop a strong bond with caregivers. In 1998, for example, the turnover rate averaged 31 percent.²⁹ Strangers who pass in and out of a young child’s life, as many child care workers do, can never truly understand a child’s unique individuality the way a parent can.

Early child care advocates often argue that children develop better social skills in group settings.³⁰ Day care children in general are supposed to be more confident and friendly than children in other types of care. But there is a big difference between the preschool experience a few days a week beginning around the age of three and the 10-hour-a-day, five-day-a-week experience of average day care children. Some research studies have found that children raised in group care arrangements are actually less compliant and more aggressive, peer-oriented and disinclined to seek help from adults than home-reared children.³¹ The more time children spend in group care arrangements, like day care, the more likely they are to develop behavioral problems in the early school years.³²

The issue of child day care also brings with it the very real concern of infectious disease. Young children are constantly putting things into their mouths, whether it be a toy, their own fingers or another baby’s bottle. Studies have found that children in day care centers have a two to three times higher risk of infection than other children.³³ Incidences of diarrhea, colds and inner-ear infections are common.³⁴

The purpose of pointing out the negative attributes of center-based care is not to portray all child day care as harmful. There are certainly many fine child care centers, including church-run and home-based programs, that provide high quality care for children. But when it comes to raising young children, center-based care should be the exception, not the rule.

More Good Than Harm?

Early child care advocates are often pointing out the benefits of center-based care for children, claiming that children who spend time in high quality day care programs do better in school and even later in

life. One of the most-often cited studies is the High/Scope Perry Pre-School Study Project, the study of an early education program for low-income, at-risk black children in Michigan. Researchers tracked two control groups for the study—those who had participated in the Perry Pre-School program as young children and those who had not—until they reached age 27.³⁵ The results showed that children who had gone through the program did significantly better educationally, financially and socially throughout their lives.³⁶ Early child care advocates continue to use this study as proof that center-based care is beneficial.³⁷

But a close look at the Perry Pre-School program reveals some problems with this claim. The 58 program participants were at-risk children, many from welfare families and households headed by single mothers, with IQs less than 85.³⁸ In addition, these were not infants or even toddlers—children entered the program at either age three or four.³⁹ Even more importantly, the Perry Pre-School program was not day care. It consisted of 2.5 hours of intensive classroom teaching a day combined with weekly, 90-minute home visits to each mother and child.⁴⁰ This was a highly-intensive, education program for preschool aged children that worked with parents. To equate its success with all center-based care or even early education programs is misleading.⁴¹

It also important to point out that a 1998 RAND study of early education and intervention programs, including Head Start, found limited cognitive, behavioral and educational effects, with most of the gains in IQ disappearing within a few years of the programs' end.⁴² In spite of this, early child care advocates continue to use these programs, along with the brain research, to push for more early childhood education programs and for more government involvement in child care. What the day care experience, brain research and even the Perry Preschool study reveal is that for healthy development young children need more than just someone to change their diapers, wipe their noses and make sure they are fed. The question is: who is better qualified to provide young children with the care and educational stimulation they need during the early, formative years—parents or the child care industry? More importantly, when alternative child care is necessary, should the government dictate how that care is provided?

Government Involvement

What is the role of government in this issue? According to early child care

advocates, the government should be more involved by investing money into the child care industry, as well as extending its control over the industry itself.

Subsidizing child care has long been a goal of early child care advocates, who view the high costs of quality day care programs as part of the current child care crisis. Subsidized child care is the use of state and federal funds to help families (based on income) pay for child care. Government subsidies for working parents may help lower the cost of child care, but they represent a larger issue—more power in the hands of the federal government and less power in the hands of parents. As the government continues to pour more money into child care, it has more control over how that care is provided.

Early child care advocates are behind efforts for more government regulations and national standards for day care centers. North Carolina's own Smart Start is an example of a state-controlled child care initiative that promotes more government regulation of the child care industry.⁴³ The state's new "voluntary" star rating system for day care centers is another.⁴⁴ While these regulations claim to be about protecting children from harm and making sure every child starts school ready to learn, there is a deeper issue to consider. As the government steps up regulations and imposes national standards, it also removes child care even further from the private sector where it belongs. The government, not parents, ends up defining what quality child care means.

Under these conditions, certain child care centers which meet a specific set of government standards receive accreditation and state and federal funding, while others do not. This impedes competition but also extends the government's control.

One of the major ways government subsidized and regulated child care poses a threat is through the standards of accreditation. The standards are imposed by groups like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the nation's leading child care advocacy group. Community colleges cooperate with the NAEYC in the development of Child Development Associate (CDA) degrees. Federal programs like Head Start actually pay for their teachers to complete this accreditation process—80 percent of CDA certified teachers are in Head Start.⁴⁵

The problem is the agenda that groups like the NAEYC are pushing through these accreditation programs. For example, the NAEYC's *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children* features

instruction for teachers on "constructing nonsexist gender identity" in two-year-olds, which includes the following activities:

- showing toddlers books that feature anatomically correct pictures of the human body;
- making copies of an outline of a body drawn by a preschooler and asking toddlers to fill in all body parts to show if the picture is a boy or a girl;
- using anatomically correct dolls in play areas.⁴⁶

Teachers are also told to discuss children's genitals during diaper changes in order to point out the differences between boys and girls.⁴⁷ The anti-bias curriculum for two-year-olds also includes reading books about boys and girls that "contradict gender stereotypes," as well as books that feature families with two daddies or two mommies (gay and lesbian parents).⁴⁸

What is most frightening about the NAEYC is that it is the accrediting agency for the federal government's child care programs.⁴⁹ More government regulations and standards in child care will lead to the national use of curricula like those endorsed by the NAEYC.

A uniform system of child care regulated by the government greatly limits choices in the marketplace. It encroaches upon the ability of many privately-run child care facilities (home-based and church child care centers) to provide alternative quality programs that many working parents desire for their children.

How Government Can Help

Contrary to what early child care advocates claim, the answer to the problem of child care is not more government involvement. Government should not be in the business of child care, nor should it be encouraging parents to place young children in care outside the home. Instead, it should be looking for ways to enable more families to care for their own children during those critical, early formative years. Parents are the best caregivers children can ever have, and public policy should be crafted to help families care for their own children. Government can do this in several ways.

Families who choose stay-at-home care for their children should be included in any child care tax exemption plan. Currently, the federal government offers tax credits for working parents who pay others to care for their children. The qualifying factor in receiving the Child Care and Dependent Tax Credit is that parents must use the child care to enable them to work or look for work.⁵⁰ The problem with this is that families who chose mother-care do not

qualify for the tax credit. The absence of tax credits for stay-at-home moms discriminates against parents who take a cut in pay so that one parent can remain at home to care for their own children. These families should not have to pay for the child care of other people's children, which is exactly what happens when others receive a tax credit and they do not. By refusing them a tax cut, the government is essentially pressuring more stay-at-home moms to enter the workforce. If a tax credit is granted to stay-at-home mothers, the government would truly be strengthening families by enabling more parents to care for their own children.

*Double or triple the \$500 per-child tax credit for families with preschool aged children.*⁵¹ The heavy tax burden on families only adds to the pressures parents feel to place their children in child care outside the home so they can both work. By enabling families with preschool aged children to set aside more money, government can help more families have the option of stay-at-home care for their young children.

Enact policies, such as tax incentives, to encourage employers to provide more opportunities for parents to spend time with their children. If mothers have to work, they should be able to work part-time and not be penalized for doing so. Opportunities should also be made for more mothers to work from home. In this age of computer technology, there is no reason why more companies cannot invest in moms who want and need to work but prefer to do it from home. When mothers have to work, the government can help with child care by enacting legislation that helps make part-time work or work from home more possible. This can be achieved through tax incentives for businesses who offer flexible working hours and benefits to part-time workers.⁵²

Conclusion

Although child care outside the home is necessary for some parents, especially single mothers, it should not be promoted as the answer to the child care crisis, nor as a reason for more government involvement. If the government has any responsibility in this issue, it is to help more parents be able to care for their children at home. By lowering the tax burden on families and

forcing fewer parents into the workplace by overtaxation, child care will remain in the capable hands of parents where it belongs.

Alysse M. ElHage is Director of Communications for the North Carolina Family Policy Council.

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