

Current Comments®

Child Care: An Investment in the Future. Part 1. An Overview of Corporate Child Care Programs and the Effects of Day Care on Young Children

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On September 8, 1982, the ISI® Caring Center for Children and Parents began operation. The occasion marked the fulfillment of a dream that I shared with ISI employees¹ about four years ago, during the groundbreaking ceremony for our new corporate headquarters.² In fact, it was even earlier, during the initial planning stages for our new building, that I suggested a company-sponsored child care center to Peter K. Aborn, ISI's senior vice president, administration. From this seemingly casual remark, a model child care facility has grown.

Actually, my interest in child care is a reflection of my childhood experience in day nurseries, and my adult experience as a working single parent. During the Great Depression, my mother supported my sister and me by working in factories during the day. Then she would bring home additional "piecework." I remember sitting around the kitchen table at night, pasting rhinestones into the costume jewelry that would later be sold at Woolworth's. For my mother, work was an economic necessity—not a career choice. Fortunately, she was able to work because someone had the wisdom to set up a "day nursery" or child care center.³ As a matter of fact, my sister and I were among the first toddlers admitted to that institution.

As though history were repeating itself, at the age of 22, I found myself alone with an infant son. At the time, I was a junior at Columbia University, supporting myself by driving a cab and

collecting veteran's benefits.⁴ I quickly discovered the disadvantages of being a working single male parent before women's liberation. Although the city operated a number of child care centers, they would not accept children of a single father unless he could prove that every female relative had refused to provide child care. Had I been a single mother, no one would have insisted that my sister or mother care for my son.

For a while, I tried a number of solutions that eventually proved untenable. I learned how cruel strangers could be to boarders—even small children. For a while, I hired a nursemaid and then shared one with another single parent. But eventually I was forced to let my son live with a loving aunt and a resentful uncle. That too proved untenable. By that time I was working in Philadelphia and, thanks to my dear friend Ted Herdegen and his family, I could cope with being a bachelor father. Eventually, I remarried. I relate this experience so you will understand why I have a special appreciation for the working parent.

The ISI Caring Center for Children and Parents is, of course, designed to care for the children of our employees. But it is also there to serve the children of parents who work and live in Philadelphia. Our trained staff currently cares for 60 children aged six weeks to six years who attend the center on a full- or part-time basis. We also provide after-school care for older children. In the near future, I will describe ISI's child

care center in more detail. However, child care has become such an important societal issue that it merits separate treatment. This essay will concentrate on corporate child care programs, and on child care's effects on the development of young children.

The types of care available in the US fall into three broad categories. About half the children of working mothers are cared for by a paid sitter, in either the child's or the sitter's home. Many such sitters operate what are called family day-care homes, looking after their own children in addition to a few neighborhood youngsters. Another third of the children are cared for by relatives, such as older siblings or grandparents, usually at no financial cost to the parent. No one measures the emotional price that may be involved. This type of care most closely resembles the care traditionally provided by extended families. However, the increased mobility of the US labor force means many parents live long distances from relatives and can't rely on this alternative. Finally, about 16 percent of the children attend child care centers, where larger groups of children participate in planned programs directed by a trained staff.⁵ This is the type of care offered by ISI, and upon which this essay will focus.

Day-care centers are generally operated by governments, corporations, hospitals, the military, churches and synagogues, and by commercial ventures involved in only the day-care business.⁶ Several types of organizations that employ a large number of women, most notably the military, hospitals, and textile manufacturers, have been operating child care centers for many years.⁶ However, only about 350 companies in the US presently sponsor some form of support for the children of employees.⁷

About 50, like ISI, operate their own centers, either on-site or in the neighborhood of the company. Tuition in these centers is usually fully or partially

subsidized by the company.⁷ Many firms that do not operate their own centers hire child care professionals to investigate community programs, and refer parents to those appropriate for their children. These companies often reserve space in local programs for children of their staff. In areas where adequate child care is available, some companies pick up the cost of child care arrangements made by parents. Many companies that provide day-care benefits allow flexible schedules which permit parents to arrange work hours around their children's schedules.⁸

Although few companies offer such benefits, child care promises to be one of the most important issues facing employers in the 1980s. Nearly 70 percent of the 104 "Fortune 1300" executives surveyed in a 1980 Harris poll said their companies were likely to provide day care by 1985.⁹ Their reasons are obvious. According to 1980 US Census Bureau statistics, nearly half the women in the US with children under six years old are employed, compared to less than one third only a decade ago.¹⁰ The UK reports similar figures, while in Sweden, two thirds of the mothers with children under three years old work.¹¹ Although many of these women are working for personal fulfillment, the worldwide recession has forced many families to rely on two paychecks. Divorces have increased sevenfold since the turn of the century, and this also forces single parents into the work force.¹¹

In many countries, the government recognizes the widespread need for day care and sponsors centers for the children of working parents. In France, mothers can send infants and toddlers to *crèches*, and three- to six-year-olds to *écoles maternelles*, both of which offer full-day programs. Since 1956, the USSR has made *yasli-sads* available to children six weeks and older. In factories in the People's Republic of China, *aunties* care for small groups of children under three

years old. By 1980, 67 countries—but not the US—also provided cash benefits designed to help parents stay home with young children. Sweden leads in this area, offering paid maternity and paternity leave extending up to nine months.¹²

Unfortunately, the US ranks well below other developed nations in its support for working parents. In the past decade, the US government has failed to enact any legislation to provide comprehensive child care. And many of the day-care programs that had been serving the poor have been eliminated.¹³

Many corporations in the US are filling the child care gap created by government inaction. Quite a few are also reporting tangible benefits from doing so. In a 1979 survey of about 300 organizations sponsoring child care, more than half of the employers polled by the Women's Bureau of the US Department of Labor claimed that providing day care enhanced their ability to recruit employees.⁶ Nearly half also reported lower absenteeism by working parents, and general improvement in employee morale. Slightly more than one third said that employee turnover had declined since the establishment of child care centers.⁶ Tangible benefits of employer-sponsored day care have been reported by Intermedics, Inc. This Texas-based medical technology firm recorded a 23 percent drop in employee turnover and 15,000 fewer work hours lost to absenteeism during its center's first year of operation. PCA International, Inc., a photoprocessing company in North Carolina, claims their center saved about \$50,000 a year in recruitment and turnover costs.¹⁴

For parents, high quality day care in the vicinity of their work place means more time spent with children during the commute to and from work, and during lunch. Mothers with infants can nurse during the day, and all parents benefit from the peace of mind that comes with

knowing their children are in a caring and stimulating environment. Since corporations usually subsidize their day-care centers, employees usually pay lower fees than they would be charged for comparable care elsewhere.⁶

Day-care centers may be good for parents and employers, but are they beneficial for children? For the past two decades, day-care researchers have been trying to answer this question. The level of activity in this field is reflected in a fairly large list of papers citing a cluster of core papers derived from the *Social Sciences Citation Index*[®] (*SSCI*[®]) data base. This cluster, entitled "Day care for young children and infants," was identified by the same technique used for the ISI Search Network data bases.¹⁵ Each of the five core papers in the cluster was cited at least 11 times between 1978 and 1980. Three of those papers explore behavioral differences between children in day-care centers, family day-care homes, and those raised exclusively at home.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ The other two discuss the effects of separating young children from their mothers for long periods of time.^{19,20}

The majority of day-care research currently centers around this separation issue. Since a child's relationship, or attachment, to its mother during the first few years of life is crucial to his or her subsequent development,²¹ researchers want to know whether separation interferes with a child's emotional and intellectual growth. Selma Fraiberg, University of Michigan, is one of several experts who believes that it does. She claims that a child under three years old needs constant attention from a primary caregiver who is "sensitive to his signs and signals, his unique patterns of personality, and his idiosyncrasies."²² (p. 82) Fraiberg asserts that day-care staff members cannot provide this sensitivity. Her position is supported by Burton L. White,²³ Harvard University, and Elizabeth Jones and Elizabeth Prescott,

Pacific Oaks College, Pasadena, California,²⁴ who maintain that in day-care centers, children are rarely assigned to one caregiver who is solely responsible for monitoring their welfare and growth. These researchers agree that enrollment in day-care centers, or nurseries, can be beneficial to children over three years old because of the educational and social opportunities provided. However, they emphasize that children should only attend such centers part-time. Fraiberg reported that after four hours or so, "restlessness, tearfulness, whininess, or lassitude become epidemic in the group of 3- to 6-year-olds."²² (p. 86)

Most of the authors we identified in our search of *SSCI*, however, disagree with Fraiberg, Jones, and White. They conclude that children from stable homes who are placed in centers staffed by trained, caring people are *not* adversely affected by daily separation. Several of the studies used the "strange situation" experiment developed by Mary D.S. Ainsworth and Barbara A. Wittig, Johns Hopkins University, to measure a child's reaction to separation.²⁵ In this experiment, children are placed in an unfamiliar room with a stranger, and their reactions to visits from their mothers are studied. Using this experiment, the majority of authors found that day-care children formed attachments to a larger number of people than did youngsters raised exclusively at home. However, the intensity of the mother-child relationship was not affected.^{20,26}

One of the key questions now being investigated is the optimal age for starting a child in day care. Some researchers recommend child care even before the child reaches six months. Presumably, this is less harmful because separation takes place before the child has completely established its primary attachment to its mother. And presumably, such children don't seem to distinguish care given by their mothers from that

given by other people during the first three months of life. Thus, care can be divided without disturbing the mother-child relationship.²⁷ In supporting this view, J.D. Schiller, a child care consultant, asserts that children placed in child care at an early age haven't had time to develop expectations of their mothers' continuous availability.²⁸ J.F. Saucier and R. Betsalel-Presser, University of Montreal, suggest that while children under six months old may feel loss or abandonment, this can be alleviated through the care of a warm person. Older children may interpret separation as rejection or even punishment, which is more complex and difficult to manage.²⁷ An opposing view, however, is that a child who has time to develop a strong relationship with its mother by receiving care almost exclusively from her is in a better position to develop relationships with other people.²⁸

A third view held by many experts is that the starting age is unimportant, as long as the child is receiving enough attention and warmth from the substitute caregiver. Alison Clarke-Stewart, University of Chicago, takes this view. Although children of all ages may initially find it hard to adapt to separation, she claims the majority adjust in a few weeks or months.¹¹

A number of other issues related to separation are also being investigated by day-care researchers. For example, many are trying to determine whether a child's relationship with its substitute caregiver affects its relationship with its mother. In a review of the day-care literature, Michael Rutter, Institute of Psychiatry, London,²⁹ cites several studies suggesting children form a sort of "intermediate attachment" to caregivers they've known for a fairly long time.^{30,31} However, he points out, this attachment is substantially less than that which the child has with its own mother. Studies at Israeli *kibbutzim*,³² where mothers and trained caregivers share responsibility

for children, and at Soviet *yasli-sads*,³³ where infants are cared for by surrogates from the first month of life, seem to bear this out.

A second question related to the caregiver-child relationship concerns the child's reaction to changing caregivers. In a study of six- and seven-year-old children, Terence W. Moore, University of London, found that children who had changed caregivers two or more times before they were five were more insecure and fearful than children in stable care arrangements.³⁴ In a more recent study, however, R.R. Largman, University of California, Berkeley, found no differences between children who had, and had not, changed caregivers.³⁵ According to several researchers, the negative reactions observed by Moore may have been caused by instabilities in the families of the sample population, rather than from the change in caregivers.^{19,29} Indeed, many child care experts believe family stability can mitigate the negative effects of a moderate amount of caregiver change.

Perhaps the most important question child care researchers and parents are asking is whether children who spend the majority of their day in substitute care differ from their home-reared peers. Most child care experts would answer with a qualified yes. Clarke-Stewart recently compared two- to four-year-old children who attended day-care centers with children of the same age who were raised at home or attended family day care (in another person's home). She found the day-care children to be more mature. They were more at ease with unfamiliar peers and adults, and more outgoing and independent. Other studies have shown that, upon entering school, the day-care children were better adjusted, more persistent, and likely to become leaders.¹¹

On the other hand, day-care children also tended to be more verbally and physically aggressive than home-reared

youngsters. Clarke-Stewart notes that day-care youngsters tend to be "less polite and agreeable, less respectful of others' rights, and less responsive to adult requests."¹¹ (p. 76) Jay Belsky, Pennsylvania State University, and Laurence D. Steinberg, University of California, Irvine, believe this occurs because "the social development of children in day-care programs most often reflects the characteristically stressed American values of aggressiveness, impulsivity, and egocentrism."³⁶ Finally, although children, especially those from lower income families, benefit intellectually from day-care programs, this advantage tends to disappear after the children enter school.¹¹

Although researchers continue to debate the merits of substitute care, certain guidelines for day-care centers are widely accepted. Since children in mixed age-groups tend to be more socially competent, most experts recommend that youngsters within a few years of one another be grouped together. Clarke-Stewart bases this recommendation on studies showing that children in mixed age-groups, especially younger children, "have more frequent and complex interactions with their peers and are more cooperative, persistent, flexible, and knowledgeable in tests of social competence and intelligence."¹¹ (p. 93) Most experts also agree that classes should be kept small and the child-adult ratio low. Clarke-Stewart explains that levels of noise and activity in larger classrooms can be too physically and psychologically demanding for both the teacher and child.¹¹

Even more important than the age mix, according to Clarke-Stewart, is the warmth of the caregiver and his or her involvement with the child. A good caregiver is one who is actively involved in talking, teaching, and playing with the child, but who still permits freedom, initiative, and exploration. The caregiver should guide the child through positive

encouragement and suggestions, rather than demands or punishment. He or she should also be trained in child development or child care, and have five to ten years of experience.¹¹

Most day-care research has, thus far, been done in high quality centers which may not be representative of the type of care most children receive. And the widespread use of day care is a relatively new phenomenon, so the long-term effects on children are still unknown. What is unmistakably evident is the need for more, and better, day-care centers in the US. In a 1977 survey of some 3,000 mothers, only 19 percent who wanted to send their children to day-care centers could find openings.³⁷ This situation will worsen in the next decade, as parents in the US seek care for an anticipated 10.4 million children.³⁸

Kathleen Norris, in her book *Hands Full of Living*, wrote: "We can't give our children the future, strive though we may to make it secure. But we can give them the present."³⁹ Companies that are concerned about the present generation of children, and the welfare and productivity of their working parents, will have to provide quality care for these youngsters. In an upcoming essay, I will explain how ISI is doing so by incorporating the latest research into its day-care program.

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