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What daycare can never do

Why moving toward more and more daycare at younger and younger ages is a wrongheaded direction for child development

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It is often said that education is the cornerstone of a civilized society. The foundation for learning begins long before formal schooling starts. But two questions arise: What do we mean by education and how should it be delivered?

Certainly, no one argues that education begins at birth. The first tools children need to learn evolve within the family, our first school. The basis of that education lies in developing trust, love and empathy, which unfolds in our first relationships, not in academic skills.

The best foundation for learning the three "Rs" (Reading, Writing and 'Rithmetic) are what could be called the three "Ss" – Safety, Security and Stability. These are the underlying substructures of education. When these three basics are provided, many emotional, behavioural and academic concerns fall by the wayside, as well as the costs associated with them. For this reason, early learning programs, today moving toward younger ages outside the home, will always fall short in providing a solid basis for lifelong learning.

The knowledge that education begins at birth with families in the home is reinforced by academics. According to Daniel Goleman, a renowned psychologist, children learn fundamental lessons in the family unit that last for a lifetime. [1]

John Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst, and the father of attachment theory, emphasized the significance of our first bond with the mother (or substitute) in an historic study in Attachment and Loss.[2] Attachment is essential in developing trust and empathy and is the root for establishing meaningful relationships with others. It is a necessary prerequisite to a successful learner and is learned within a safe, secure and stable home with a consistent caregiver.

The recent explosion in neuroscience research can now show that these developmental changes are neurologically and biologically based. For example, The Canadian Institute of Child Health in Ottawa reports that the brain at birth is highly underdeveloped. While billions of cells are built into the physical structure, the "wiring" between them will be laid out by environmental stimulation. This triggers a cascade of biochemicals that affects everything from emotions to movement to memory and learning. Simple interactions like a mother's touch triggers the neurons to grow and connect into complex systems, and with repetition, become well defined. This wiring will become the foundation for functioning as it shapes the neural architecture that will be indelibly coded for life. [3]

These findings are extremely significant, not only in developing healthy children prepared to learn in school, but in preventing the growing social problems in children and youth. For example, a trend in the violent crime rate among young people in Canada shows an increase of 12% in 10 years, and 30% since 1991, with homicides in 2006 reaching their highest point since data was first collected in 1961. [4]

And the widespread use of medications for Attention Deficit Disorders (with or without hyperactivity) continues to put pressure on parents and schools as it affects learning and behaviour. Statistics Canada indicates a classroom will have one to three children with this disorder, with boys being diagnosed three times more than girls. [5] Similar trends are shown in mental health disorders and bullying. [6]

This increase in social problems among the young also coincides with an eight-year profile, which shows that the proportion of children in daycare has also increased. In 2002-2003, for example, 54% of children aged six months to five years were in some form of child care, up from 42% in 1994-1995. [7] This correlation may not necessarily be causal but Bowlby cautioned us decades ago that "when the care of children is neglected they become a source of social infection as real and serious as are the carriers of diphtheria and typhoid." [8]

In spite of these developments, there is a growing movement across Canada towards establishing "early learning centres." Ontario and British Columbia, for example, have already implemented programs for full-day learning for 4- and 5-years-olds with plans for a gradual expansion of early childhood education services from the prenatal period to age twelve. [9]

If, as Bowlby states "...attachment is a biological necessity...and a key to survival," [10] how do we reconcile extending non-maternal and institutionalized care in the formative years with attachment theory? The best funded, best constructed daycare, even dressed up as early childhood education, cannot fulfill the child's biological need for parental attachment. Consistency and stability cannot be ensured even in the best of daycares. Sufficient ratios of adults to children will always be a struggle to maintain. Staff will change as their personal lives dictate. This is a job, after all, and emotional investment is not the primary bond.

The underdeveloped child cannot adapt to the variety of individual personalities, both adults and children, nor be separated from home and parents for long periods of time, often in changing environments. A study by the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (USA) found that "...the more time children spend in any of a variety of non maternal care in the first 4.5 years of life...predicts problem behaviour...assertiveness, disobedience and aggression... ." [11]

As a School Social Worker for twenty years with the Child Guidance Clinic in Winnipeg, I have been witness to these problems beginning at the kindergarten level. For example, one highly verbal youngster in full-day kindergarten who presented with just such symptoms, cried that, although he told his mother how he felt about being away from her for so long, she didn't care. Why? "Because," he said with helpless resignation, "nothing changes." What a profound statement from a 5-year-old! As it happened, his mother, who had continued to work at his father's insistence, was laid off. Happily for both, the child changed to half-day kindergarten allowing for more time at home with his mother. Within three months, the symptoms subsided. No medication, no professional intervention.

Learning the three Rs will be child's play to those fortunate children who have been provided the three "Ss" – Safety, Security and Stability. Due to the realities of child care as a job, even the best daycare centre cannot provide that. This is why moving toward more and more daycare at younger and younger ages is a wrongheaded direction for child development.

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Endnotes

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