Helping Parents Work and Raise Children

by Elizabeth M. Goetz, Ann P. Turnbull, and Marion O'Brien

Working parents and day care are here to stay. By 1990, the United States will have an estimated 24.3 million children under six years of age, a 36% increase from 1979. At least 10.5 million of these children will be members of two wage-earner or single working-parent families, a 63% increase since 1979 (Edelman, 1981). Furthermore, by the year 2000 the typical family will have two wage earners (Menninger, 1981).

Concomitant work and family responsibilities often pose a dilemma for working parents. They need to work for financial survival and/or self-realization, and yet, at the same time, desire to play the predominant role in raising their own children. Many times, guilty feelings prevail that the day care necessary for their children may be detrimental to their normal growth and development. Moreover, for many parents, managing their time to both work and raise children seems difficult, if not impossible.

Child care workers can help parents resolve this dilemma in several ways. First, they can inform parents of the effects of day care on children's emotional, cognitive, and social growth, as documented by research, and thus dispel the myth of a negative outcome. Second, they can establish close, trusting relationships with parents and assist them in rearing their children. Third, they can suggest home time management techniques that allow for family living as well as household chores and responsibilities. Here are some suggestions for assisting parents in each of these ways. Through the provision of such assistance, caregivers can supplement, rather than supplant, the parents' crucial role in raising their own children.

In Support of Day Care

In spite of the ever-increasing participation of mothers in the work force, our society's ideal for the rearing of young children still envisions Mom at home, children playing happily at her feet, as she puts the apple pie in the oven. This idealized picture, though never representative of most American families, nonetheless affects today's parents' images of themselves and others' reactions to their activities. As a result, many working couples, especially mothers, feel guilty about leaving their children with substitute caregivers and find it hard to handle criticism from others, particularly grandparents.

The myth of mother-child-at-home care as the "best" way of raising children is so widespread that it may even affect some day care workers. However, if caregivers are to be able to offer working parents the support they need to overcome the influences of an outdated social picture, they must take a more objective view of day care; one based on fact, not fiction.

The research concerning the potential effects of out-of-home care on young children strongly suggests that the guilt young working mothers feel is entirely unwarranted. A sizeable body of research, much of it attempting to prove detrimental effects, has shown no widespread negative impact of day care. In fact, there is some evidence that the reverse may be true—that day care, if of reasonably high quality, may actually enhance, rather than interfere with a child's development of social, intellectual, and motor skills.

Caregivers who are familiar with such findings can do a great service to parents by discussing with them, informally, how day care might be contribut-

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ing to their child's growth. Such conversations can bolster parents' confidence in themselves, increase their pride in their child's independent accomplishments, and also strengthen the parent-caregiver relationship by making it clear that the caregiver believes in and supports the parents' approach to child rearing.

Parent-Child Relationships

Many professionals and some parents have been concerned that early extensive exposure to care by someone other than the mother could lead to a disruption of attachment bonds between mother and child. Despite extensive efforts to show such an effect, however, no objective evidence exists that attachment bonds are weakened in day-care children, even when out-of-home care begins in infancy (Farran and Ramey, 1977; Ragozin, 1980). Many mothers feel, quite to the contrary, that having time to pursue their own interests makes them less resentful of a young child's many demands and thus increases their positive feelings toward their child. Furthermore, children who attend day care have the opportunity to form comfortable relations with adults other than their parents. Such familiarity with a number of predictable adults may actually help the child learn a sense of trust in other people.

Intellectual Development

Investigators who have measured the cognitive development and/or IQ of children in day care compared to home-reared children have uniformly found no negative effects of day care, even when the care situation was not particularly education-oriented (Doyle, 1975; Cochran, 1977). Children attending programs that attempt to implement an educational curriculum of some sort are commonly found to show gains in cognitive development compared to children who are cared for at home (Ramey and Mills, 1977; Robinson and Robinson, 1971). This is particularly true for children from high-risk homes, where poverty or lack of parental education is predicted to create a less than optimal environment for young children.

Of course, day care situations differ as much as homes do—some contain people who are responsive to children's needs and some do not; some are well equipped with safe, interesting play and learning materials and some are not. Even so, good day care has not been shown to be a less effective child rearing environment than a good home. In fact, because children in day care tend to be more actively involved in play, as opposed to watching others or "passing time", than are children at home (Rubenstein and Howes, 1979), they actually have a greater opportunity to learn by doing, and this may enhance their intellectual and motor development.

Social Development

One obvious difference between day care and home care is the constant presence in day care of other children. Depending on one's orientation, this may be perceived as a positive factor, in that day care children may learn social skills more readily than a largely isolated child, or as a negative factor, in that young children surrounded by peers may be less receptive to adult direction.

Surprisingly little research has been done to describe the impact of extensive peer contact on young children. Indications are, however, that children tend to play more creatively with peers than when playing alone or with an adult (Cohen and Tomlinson-Keasey, 1980), and that interaction with peers in day care is frequent and largely positive, even in infancy (Finkelstein, Dent, Gallacher, and Ramey, 1978). These findings strongly suggest that peer play, when carefully supervised by adults, may be an important source of learning for children in day care.

Most parents are curious to know who their children's school friends are and how their children are getting along with others. Caregivers who pay attention to individual children's relationships with each other will be in a good position to describe specific instances of positive social play. A caregiver who notices that a particular child is somewhat isolated because of shyness or lack of social skills might suggest that parents occasionally invite one of the child's classmates to their home. On home turf, even "shy" children tend to be more social and play more assertively with another child (Jeffers and Lore, 1979).

The opposite problem, the child who is overly aggressive with peers, is usually only too evident to caregivers. Although disruptive or aggressive behavior should not be hidden from parents, neither should they be made to feel responsible for causing or solving the child's problem behavior. Instead, caregivers who discuss with parents how they are working with the child can at the same time point the benefits