Infant Transitions: Home to Center-Based Child Care

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ABSTRACT: An array of factors are examined which may encourage or impede the infant's transition from home to center-based care. Specifically explored are the structural climate of the child care center and the inter-related needs of the infant, parent(s), staff, and administrative leadership. Utilizing the conceptual frameworks of Maier (1991) and Greenspan and Porges (1984), guidelines are offered which facilitate the infant's transition to center-based care in a manner that takes into account the infant's relational development and enhances attachment quality.

Survey data from June 1992 indicate that 54% of the mothers of infants under a year old are in the United States work force (Casper, Hawkins, & O'Connell, 1994, p. 6). As such, these parents must make child care arrangements. For a significant number of them, the traditional child care center is a desired option. Parents seeking child care assistance are increasingly sophisticated in terms of basing their center choices on factors such as cost, location, staff qualifications, and center accreditation. In addition, parents assess the warmth of the potential caregiver and the probable physical comfort of the child. However, parents as well as center-based caregivers sometimes fail to address adequately the dynamic of the infant transitional process from the home to the center.

The public service nature of child care and the predominance of interpersonal interactions make the infant home-to-center transition complex. Effective transitions from one caregiving setting to another, in this instance from home to child care center, require adult interventions that are influenced by an understanding of general develop-
mental issues as well as by the specific needs of the child involved in the given transition (Daniel, 1993; 1995).

Moreover, it is important that the center be organized in its policies, procedures, and facilities in ways that support the development and maintenance of attachment relationships among infants, parents, and their caregiving partners as represented by center staff. A responsive center-based staff is critical to the comfort and security experienced by both the parent(s) and infants in building an appropriate network of attachments, which is intrinsic to high quality care. The conceptual frameworks of Maier (1991) and Greenspan and Porges (1984), as reviewed in this paper, are applied to this issue in order to identify specific structural characteristics of the center-based environment, as well as specific provider and parental behaviors that facilitate developmentally adequate transitions from home to center-based care, for infants entering the center from birth through nine months and beyond.

Infants are particularly vulnerable during the transition from home to center because they are in the process of building important attachments to caregivers (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). The kind of care that infants receive determines individual differences in attachment quality (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Research shows that the quality of these attachments is predictive of future relational, coping, and problem solving skills (Waters, Matas, & Sroufe, 1975). Thus, when infants make the transition from home-based to center-based care, they are confronted with a complex task. Just as the infant is establishing attachments to primary caretakers within the structural parameters of the home, the transition to center-based care demands the formation of new attachments to additional caregivers in the vastly different structural environment of center-based care.

This paper will examine a variety of factors that may either encourage or inhibit the formation of relationships that support the infant’s gradual transition into center-based care. The transition or acclimatization process takes place over a period of time defined by the interactions of the participants in the particular center setting. We will consider the structural climate of the center and the inter-related needs of the infant, parents, caregiving staff, and administrative leadership in order to construct guidelines for facilitating this transition in a manner that fosters attachment quality and developmental competence.

The Center Relational Climate and the Transition to Care

Maier (1991) maintained that one way of fostering attachment in child and youth work is through the use of “contextual practice ef-