

Dr. Elaine Heffner: Questions about child care ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Observing a pre-school group of 2-year-olds, I saw a wonderful example of separation contagion. This refers to a group with one or two children who are having a particularly hard time separating from parent or care-giver. The crying and upset that ensues sets off a similar response in the other children until almost the entire group is coming apart.

The reason the upset behavior is catching is that many of the children are on the cusp of managing their own separation. Their own feelings about this are close enough to the surface to be triggered by the upset of others. Even when other children don't break down in tears one can see their anxiety aroused by the behavior of the upset child.

The mother of a 2-year-old told me of her own anxiety about enrolling her child in daycare after she had been previously cared for by a nanny. This raised the question of the merits or liabilities of group care vs. individual care for young children -- a question of great concern in the years since increasing numbers of mothers of young children have entered the workplace.

This mother expressed her own misgivings despite the fact that her daughter seems to be doing well. The mom is surprised at how well the child seems to be able to accept the routines and the role of the teacher, although she worries that it is a long day for her and is amazed that the child can manage as well as she does.

The fact that certain things are hard for a child doesn't mean they are bad for them. A child's protests may sound worry alarms for a parent but it is not the protests that are of concern but rather the way they are understood and responded to. In the group referred to, the teachers were able to offer support and comfort to individual children including retrieving the parent of the most upset child.

It is only in recent years that children have been placed in groups from such young ages. A sign in the doorway of a neighborhood building advertised "Pre-school Prep." The idea seems to be that children have to be prepared to attend pre-school, once considered preparation for grade school. This is in keeping with the fact that once children are in groups, expectations begin to change for their behavior along with an earlier introduction of academics.

Yet children's development has not changed, and if more children are to be cared for in groups, such groups must address their developmental needs. A large part of our societal resistance to dealing with the problem is the cherished belief that there is no solution that will or can duplicate the family life that existed in an older division of labor. But as in dealing with all the many societal changes that have taken place in modern times, we need to be creative in finding solutions that do not rest on the sacrifice of any one of the parties in basic human relationships.

Children need not only physical care but the attention of caring, interested adults who don't necessarily have to be their parents. The cultural investment in one-to-one care, typically currently provided by those with the financial means, is not a solution for present day realities. Whether we call it early childhood education or day care, clearly we need to think in terms of some form of group care for children.

Achieving the desired quality of such care will take a major financial commitment which will require overcoming entrenched resistance to government support.

-reprinted from Olney Daily Mail

Region: United States ^[3]

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