

The baby and the bathwater [CA-QC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Every parent in Quebec knows Jean-François Chicoine. His regular media appearances have made him the best-known pediatrician in the province. Le bon Dr. Chicoine, as they call him, is the baby doctor people trust.

But now, the personable young pediatrician has unleashed a bombshell — a 520-page indictment of social practices that he believes are harmful to our kids. His most explosive charge: Too many parents parachute their kids into daycare at far too young an age.

His book, co-authored by well-known journalist Nathalie Collard, is called *Le bébé et l'eau du bain* (The Baby and the Bathwater). "In Quebec," he writes, "children are kept in daycare 52 weeks a year, about 60 hours a week. Children learn to say the word 'mommy' without being cuddled by their mother, and nobody seems bothered by that."

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Dr. Chicoine insists he's not political. He has only one agenda: kids. And he ardently believes that the best place to be for most kids under 2 is with their parents. "At this time of life, it is very important for the baby to get a lot of affection and form a sense of security," he told me. "That is the basis for intelligence, future behaviour and a lot of other things."

His conclusions are based on a large body of recent research about attachment theory, as well as 20 years of personal observation. "Between birth and eight months, the child will attach to the world, and the mother or father will attach to their baby," he says. Those eight months are just as crucial for the parent as for the baby. Forget maternal instinct. Parents need time, he says, to "fall in love."

Between eight and 15 months, the baby will gradually be able to trust people other than the primary caregiver — but no more than five at the most. Now look at daycare. "In daycare, a baby will encounter an average of 17 different caregivers between those ages," says Dr. Chicoine. "During the summer, it's five or six a day." For a child so young, having to deal with so many strangers is an unsettling, even terrifying, experience.

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Interestingly, Dr. Chicoine believes that the families who rely on daycare the most are in fact the ones who are at greatest risk. These are the blue-collar families who work long hours and struggle to get by on two meagre incomes. The mother has no choice but to go back to work quickly — usually to a menial job she doesn't like. The child spends long hours in care that is often "mediocre, even pathetic" — and both mom and baby are constantly stressed out.

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In case you think Dr. Chicoine hates daycare, he doesn't. In fact, he thinks we need to invest in it more, and especially in improving the quality of daycare workers. He believes that infant daycare — very high-quality infant daycare, unlike the quality on offer today — can be of real benefit to children from seriously deprived backgrounds and other high-needs kids. He also thinks daycare (in moderation) is fine for kids over 2 or 2½, who are old enough to benefit from the socialization it offers.

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So how does he respond to the guilty mom (or dad) who reads his book, and can't figure out how she (or he) can possibly stay home for two whole years of baby's life?

"If she asks the question, then we've succeeded," he says. "I want her to think. It's her right to think. I don't think it's a matter of fear or guilt. It's the beginning of responsibility."

He believes it's our responsibility, too. "We need a lot of intense public debate, because we have some important choices to make."

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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