

Values And Beliefs In Caring For Babies And Toddlers

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Is looking after babies straightforward or is it complex? Can anyone with a modicum of maternal feeling do it or does it require skill and training? Is looking after someone else's baby outside the home different from looking after your own baby at home?

These questions are considered in a new analytical review from the Childcare Resource and Research Unit's *How should we care for babies and toddlers? An analysis of practice in out-of-home care for children under three* (1999). It takes a broad perspective, and includes some of the historical, psychological and cultural evidence about research in early childhood. Looked at in this light, some of the conventional North American guidelines and rating scales about how to look after babies and toddlers have serious limitations.

Publicly funded services for children under three have been well established for many years in a number of European countries, and there is an accumulation of experience and expertise which is useful to draw upon. The report focuses on some of the official and semi-official documents and guidelines on practice in childcare produced in different European countries for service providers, and explores their assumptions.

The Limitations of Child Development as a Discipline for Understanding Infancy

Studies of infancy are big business in psychological research. There have been important attempts to translate the plethora of research findings on babies and toddlers into guidance for daily practice in caring for babies. But research is a far from neutral process, and inevitably reflects dominant political and moral ideologies. Historical evidence shows clearly how theories of infant behaviour and the guidance manuals derived from them reflect the time and place where they originated. Cultural considerations shape beliefs about what young children need and what they can do. Patterns of immigration and migration across continents (and across centuries) have led - and continue to lead - to new and often contradictory perceptions and understandings about childhood. These diverse and multiple perspectives are infused by relationships of power and subordination between established groups and incomers. Many, if not most, of the world's children grow up living their lives with *an increasing awareness of contradictory values, expectations and practices, lives lived in overlapping and unequal communities and cultures.*

Anglo-American research in child development, although very dominant, is also increasingly being criticized as failing to represent the diversities of children's experiences. Empirical research methodologies in child development may produce impeccable data, but they do not guarantee that the questions being asked in the first place are value free. Since most research on infant childcare has been carried out in North American settings, the particular and limited context of those settings should be taken into account.

Widely used American guides and scales such as *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programmes Serving Children Birth Through Eight*, and the *Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale* have been developed in the context of a market economy approach to childcare and reflect anxieties about low standards, and notions of consumer choice in such a market setting. The aim is to *avoid the worst care*. Early intervention programmes reflect the difficulties of targeting and compensating for disadvantage or disability in highly unequal societies, where access to good services cannot be taken for granted. This context of inequality, (and in American setting, considerable violence and very high incarceration rates) is not a universal one. Many countries are more egalitarian and have widespread, universally accessible, public health, education and childcare services and less social disorder.

A European Approach

In most European countries, the market system is of minor importance in comparison with the state sector in providing services for children over three, although of more relevance to children under three. Where conditions of entitlement apply, and comprehensive state funded systems exist, the issue of choice does not really arise. Most parents, even wealthy parents, would both expect and want to use local state-funded childcare provision, since good basic standards in staffing, space, ratios, etc., are automatically guaranteed, and costs for all parents are heavily subsidized, and services can experiment and develop. State funding does not necessarily imply state provision, and systems have shown a considerable degree of flexibility and decentralization in Western Europe. In Eastern Europe (and in Asian countries with a history of communism such as China) where there are also high levels of state funding, services have been comprehensive and near-universal in urban areas, but have tended to be highly prescriptive.

Caring for Babies - The Nature of Relationships Between Adults and Children

In Anglo-American context, attachment theory has been important in shaping provision for young children. This posits that a warm continuous relationship with a mother or mother figure in infancy is essential to mental health. This theory still implicitly or explicitly informs practice in an Anglo-American countries, but it has been much less important in determining practice in European countries. Alternative theories place less emphasis on mothering or substitute mothering, and more emphasis on developing relationships between children themselves. As the Family Aid Commission in Sweden (1982) has stated:

“Today so much attention is out on the value of good relationships between children and grown ups that we sometimes forget the importance of children’s relationships with each other for their development...the work in the day nurseries must concentrate on developing the capacity for group fellowship among the children; a group in which they can be of support and joy for each other and where they are brought up to show solidarity and co-operation”.

Many strategies for developing solidarity and fellow feeling have been developed in nurseries. The Loczy method, developed in Hungary, and referred to in a number of official documents in other European countries, stresses the importance of maintaining children’s autonomy by minimizing adult interference, and mediating as little as possible in baby and toddler activities. *The infant is not born inferior to adults; and infancy is not a waiting room; it is a stage of life with experiences as diverse as those experienced by adults...it is important to acknowledge the present, to understand as a whole, not to splinter or fragment what the child experiences, to allow the child to construct and deal with the experiences she comes across.* (Cocever, 1990:11) The Loczy method views adults as too keen to intervene in children’s play and direct it; other children, as well as adults, are mediators of children’s experiences.

In Italy, in the famous Reggio Emilia nurseries, collective feeling amongst adults as well as amongst children is emphasized, and adult-child relationships are not viewed in isolation; a child-friendly, child-aware environment means that looking after babies and toddlers is not merely an individual but a co-operative task to be undertaken with others. In Denmark, the strategy for developing relationships is through age integrated centres, incorporating out of school care, where older children, especially brothers and sisters, are encouraged to nurture younger ones. Ideas about how children relate to others, and what constitutes best practice in looking after them, varies considerably between countries - they all recognize the emotional vulnerability of young children, but they view the roles of adults and other children differently.

Health, Safety and Physical Well-Being

Medical models of childcare have tended to stress hygiene and the avoidance of disease and illness, particularly for infants. French and Belgian crèches have traditionally been medically orientated. Welfare based models, especially those targeted on disadvantaged children, are alert to the importance of physical abuse and physical danger, and have avoidance of risk of abuse as a priority. In these contexts, showing physical affection to children can be problematic. Some systems however go beyond these immediate preventative concerns, and positively promote the concept of *well-being*. Well-being includes food and nutrition, for instance, celebratory attitudes towards food, as in the preparation and serving of regional dishes in some Italian and Spanish infant nurseries, or a commitment to an ethnically diverse diet, and more recently to organic foods and the avoidance of genetically modified foods, as in some UK nurseries. Well-being also involves a concept of physical fitness, for example regular and demanding outdoor and indoor exercise as in Norwegian nurseries, where a child by the age of five might be expected to be a competent skier. Finally, well-being implies a sense of rhythm and pace to a child's day and regular rest, as well as relaxation techniques such as massage or the use of soothing music - baby massage is a familiar technique in parts of India for example, and has been imported into some European nurseries.

Education Content and Styles of Instruction

What role should adults play in very young children's learning, especially language learning? How should daily life be organized to enhance learning, and what sort of materials, toys and equipment should be used? Answers to these questions depends in turn on the views about the role of adults as mediators in very young children's lives, on perceptions of the group as a learning environment and on the extent young children are trusted with the freedom to explore out of the range of adult gaze.

Language acquisition is a central issue for very young children, and linguistic contexts vary considerably. A variety of strategies have been pursued in different countries to address the needs of children whose mother tongue is a low status language and not mainstream. These include assimilatory approaches, bilingual language support, and the use of regional or local languages or dialects for all children, not just those who have an indigenous background.

Some countries, most notably Spain, where the 1990 Education Act specifies two cycles of infant education, 0-3, and 3-6, have a broad curriculum or have tried to set very broad learning goals for infants. Many ex-communist countries, building on their interpretations of psychologists such as Vygotsky and Luria, also had infant curricula, more didactic than the Spanish model, where certain words and ideas were taught, especially music and poetry recitations.

There are various views about the extent to which babies and toddlers learn from being in ordinary environments and handling the everyday objects around them, (what is called *heuristic play*, exploring the textures, tastes, smells, sounds and sights of ordinary articles such as a lemon, tin lids, leather purses, etc.) or whether they benefit more from a specially constructed nursery environment which relies on specially manufactured toys and equipment. There is a view that manufactured toys are aggressively marketed to parents and their excessive use and display requires children to become consumers by requiring them to continually exercise choice amongst an array of artificial materials.

For example one English textbook maintains that:

Children are not interested in puzzles or putting pegs in their proper holes and would usually rather throw them on the floor.....Their level of competence cannot be satisfied by play material where there is a right answer determined by adults. Children feel a great urge to explore (the natural world) and discover for

themselves the way objects behave in space as they manipulate them. They need a wide variety of objects...which certainly cannot be bought from a toy catalogue. (Goldschmied & Jackson, 1996:120).

Some children find learning difficult because of a physical or mental disability. Attitudes to disability also vary considerably. In some systems it is argued that early diagnosis of disability is very important and specialized and separate remedial attention be given as soon as possible, whereas others argue that any labeling is premature and integrated settings potentially offer greater learning support.

Training to Work with Young Children

Who should care for and teach very young children? What conditions of work and remuneration should be offered to them? In Europe three models of training can be distinguished: the social pedagogue who is trained for four years post 18 to work with children 0-18 in a variety of care settings (a model most highly developed in Denmark); the infant teacher who is trained as a teacher specializing in 0-5 age groups (a model most highly developed in Spain); and a puéricultrice or health worker, who has vocational nursing training specializing in infant care (a model most highly developed in France and Belgium). These models are all institutionally based. More recently, in the UK a competency based model has been developed, whereby workers are assessed on their competency in the workforce as measured by national accreditation schemes. Accreditation schemes rely on fixed criteria and assumes that learning is sequential, cumulative and directly measurable, whereas both the pedagogue and the teacher model assume that training is about challenging preconceptions and beliefs, and that learning comes from reflections on the problematic content of knowledge, and knowledge skills and attitudes are to a certain extent open-ended and cannot always be precisely defined.

Some countries, most notably Italy, stress the importance of continuous, as well as initial training. The emphasis on life-long learning in many fields arises out of the need to continually adapt and update skills in response to new knowledge and a volatile labour market. Workers benefit from some kind of collective representation, whether from professional associations or from unions, and where they have such representation their working conditions tend to be better.

The more professionalized the worker, the more problematic it is to be untrained - whether as a worker such as a family day carer or as a parent. Some countries have state funded projects where parents and other carers are encouraged (and paid) to work alongside professionals, either in various co-operative schemes, or as family day carers, for example in France, Portugal and Germany. Other schemes offer parents education, assuming they need extra help in looking after their young children and can also benefit from some kind of training in childcare and child development.

It is frequently assumed that women, preferably motherly women, are the best people to look after young children. But a number of countries have policies and strategies to encourage men to work with young children, on the grounds that a variety of role models is important.

Not all systems of childcare are leadership and management orientated. In some countries there are more collective styles of working, where hierarchy is minimized, and all decision making is as collective as possible in order to provide egalitarian role models for children. Many state nurseries in Italy, Spain and Denmark do not have managers or leaders, but operate on a collective basis with elected administrators serving for a limited period.

Ecology and the Environment

In some countries, ecological and environmental questions are seen as important, and there is concern for childcare as an aesthetic environment. For example in Finland, *special attention is given to the need for daycare that implants in the child a sense of social responsibility, understanding the need for peace and concern for the environment* (Central Union for Child Welfare in Finland). Daily life for babies and toddlers includes respect for plants and animals, growing and cultivation of foods, and frequent trips to natural environments, such as woods and forests.

In Germany, there is a powerful green movement, and most new buildings, of any kind, have to conform to ecological criteria. The Frankfurt kindergarten programme in Germany provides for recycled water, solar heating and reusable materials, and where possible, living roofs of turf or some other growing material. In a number of countries, state nurseries are routinely architect designed to maximize the use of space, light and texture and to ensure adequate ventilation. Even where converted buildings are used, environmental restraint and elegance is regarded as important in shaping children's aesthetic perceptions. According to *People Under Three* (1996):

Many rooms (in nurseries) have furniture which is not the right shape, cushions and curtains of colours and textures which do not add up to any harmonious scheme and which most of us would not tolerate in our own homes...we are often content for children to spend their most formative years surrounded by ugliness and clutter.

As well as curricular and design issues concerning the environment, there is a concern in a number of countries to see the environment as an intergenerational issue. One disposable nappy takes 500 years to decompose and nappies now present serious problems for waste disposal. These and other issues about the environment which directly concern young children - encouraging off-road cycling and avoiding car and other noxious fumes; clean food such as unsprayed fruit or food which is not genetically modified; recycling, etc. are being actively addressed within some childcare systems.

Where Next?

The report suggests that how we look after babies and toddlers is open to many interpretations, and the very diversity of existing practices suggest that it is important not to be dogmatic. We need reflective and well-informed practitioners, who do not assume there is one best practice which suits us all, but who are able to recognize, explore and discuss *the arc of human possibilities*.

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