

A Reprint From

# policy REVIEW

## BRAVE NEW WORLD

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How Day-Care Harms Children

KARL ZINSMEISTER



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Published quarterly by The Heritage Foundation, *Policy Review* is a forum for conservative debate on the major political issues of our time. The views in *Policy Review* are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial board or of The Heritage Foundation.

Correspondence should be sent to *Policy Review*, 214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002. Telephone: (202) 546-4400. Requests to reprint more than short quotations should be addressed to the Managing Editor. Send address changes to *Policy Review*, Subscription Manager. Subscription rates are \$18 for one year, \$34 for two years, \$48 for three years. Add \$8 a year for foreign air-speeded delivery.

*Policy Review* is indexed by The Public Affairs Information Services and The Social Sciences Index. *Policy Review* has been copyrighted in 1988 by The Heritage Foundation. ISSN 0146-5945. National distributor for newsstands and bookstores: B. DeBoer, 113 E. Centre Street—Rear, Nutley, New Jersey 07110, (201) 667-9300.

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# BRAVE NEW WORLD

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## How Day-Care Harms Children

KARL ZINSMEISTER

A rapidly growing share of America's children are being raised by hired workers, by substitute parents. Although most families still make arrangements so that either the mother or the father can stay home with very young children, every year more and more youngsters are handed over to caretakers, at a younger age, and for longer hours. While no one has any idea what the ultimate outcome of this giant experiment in proxy child-rearing will be, there is growing evidence that the long-term emotional, intellectual, and cultural effects will be unhappy.

The prospect of a "professionalization" of parenting has long disturbed some observers. One of the earliest cries of caution can be found in George Orwell's *1984*—which describes a future in which the state takes over the child-rearing functions of the family, with a resulting disappearance of close and intimate human bonds. Only among the ragged, sentimental, tradition-bound "proles" are children still raised by their parents. This primitive social practice makes proles hopelessly uncompetitive with the professional class that has come to rule the earth. It is also only among the proles that inefficient human traits such as loyalty, altruism, humor, and love continue to thrive.

Not everyone worries that public child-care will be harmful to society, however. In her pioneering book *A Lesser Life*, feminist Sylvia Ann Hewlett lodges a fierce protest against "the misguided notion that governments cannot and should not help provide a substitute for mother love and mother care," which she considers one of the last great barriers to economic and social advancement by American women.

Yale psychologist Edward Zigler has called for turning the public schools into full-service institutions that would relieve the family of many of its traditional obligations. In the future, he urges, public schools should take over care of all children three and older, and play "a large role" in looking after infants as well. School buildings should open earlier and close much later, including on all vacations, so that parents who work could leave any child, from newborn on up, at the local school all day.

At present, day-care takes many forms, ranging from a live-in nanny to a large center located near a major highway exit. Nearly half of all mothers of preschool children are employed. As of the latest Census Bureau survey in the

winter of 1984, their children were cared for as follows: 40 percent were tended by a relative, including the father; another 8 percent were taken care of by the mother while she worked, either at home or elsewhere; the rest were looked after by outsiders, with equal numbers in homes and in day-care centers.

The arrangement growing fastest is institutional care. Just from 1982 to 1984 the fraction of preschoolers in day-care centers went up 56 percent. By now, probably a third or more of all young children of working mothers are in centers, and the total is rising fast. Both advocates and opponents view group care in large, state-licensed and -regulated centers as the wave of the future.

This mass surrender of child-rearing responsibilities to nonrelatives—particularly to the state or other institutions—marks a profound change in human history. It represents the final victory of the industrial revolution: the industrialization of the family. From a purely economic point of view, having talented individuals leave the labor force for considerable blocks of time to rear their offspring is wasteful. The ultimate application of the principle of division of labor demands that the "job" of humanizing, acculturating, and morally educating our progeny be assigned to paid workers. If the results of industrialized child-rearing occasionally resemble Henry Ford's original assembly line, it should not be entirely unexpected.

### Frighteningly Empty

In her book *A Mother's Work*, Deborah Fallows presents an unusual journalistic account of typical days in a wide variety of day-care centers. For more than a year and a half, she spent hundreds of hours in dozens of centers in Massachusetts, Texas, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. While Fallows discovered no abuse, little dirt, and adequate physical conditions in most centers, she nonetheless found the average child's experience to be frighteningly empty. This was a fairly typical visit:

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Walt Disney Productions

Not as supercalifragilistic as originally thought.

I settled into an inconspicuous corner of the room and began to watch the children. . . . Often, one child would attach himself to me—maybe going off for a few minutes but always coming back to say a few words . . . point to a shoe that needed tying . . . or show me his tummy.

The teacher watching the children tried her hardest, ad-libbing her way from one activity to the next. She put on a record and started to dance. One little blond boy started dancing along with her. A few others joined the group. Five or six gathered by some swinging cabinet doors that formed the partition between the play area and the rest of the room. One little girl sat by herself, crying softly in the corner. The rest wandered around. . . .

She gave up records then and tried reading a story. The same few eager dancers moved right in to listen, while the rest kept on swinging on the cabinet doors or aimlessly wandering. The little girl was still crying in her corner. After a short story, the teacher opened the large cabinet and pulled out some puppets. This immediately attracted the largest crowd of the morning. All but a few rushed right over to watch the show. But the brilliance of the idea dimmed after several moments. As her impromptu story line weakened, the toddlers drifted back to their swinging doors and wandering, shuffling their feet, chasing back and forth. . . .

Here as at other centers I visited, you could almost feel the morning driving itself toward the grand finale—lunch.

In a day-care setting there is much rigidity and few surprises—standardization is the key to efficiency. There is

even a uniform emotional environment, with scant room for individual expression; Fallows describes it as a constant “on” atmosphere, where charged hubbub leaves little time for children to muse, and where the pressure of numbers pushes even gentle and reserved children to react constantly.

Grace saying, coat donning, one-at-a-time hand washing—these become exhausting trials in depersonalization. Fallows gives wrenching descriptions of children referred to as “hey little girl,” of activities that cater to the group average but leave the quiet children behind. She describes desperate notes sent in with youngsters by their parents pleading for extra attention and special comfort. There is much tedium, much bewilderment, many unconsolated tears, tired teachers doing what they can to get by, a lack of individualization in the best cases, no one really caring in the worst.

### Wandering Aimlessly

While day-care provided in homes tends to be less impersonal than the center-based variety, it also has many problems. For one, there will never be enough individuals willing to take children into their homes, or to go to other people’s houses, to accommodate the demand. It is most often the elderly, young girls, and illegal immigrants who are willing to accept such a role today. And, although home-based care has the potential to be the healthiest kind for children, it is also where the most dangerous abuses occur. Conditions are extremely uneven and often difficult to assess.

Writer and mother Linda Burton encountered some of

these problems when she began searching for home-based day-care:

In one instance, I found the “absolutely marvelous” family day-care provider, recommended by trusted friends, sleeping on her sofa while eleven children (she had informed me that she only cared for five children) wandered aimlessly around in front of the blaring TV. Another time, on an unannounced visit, I found that the “highly recommended” licensed day-care provider confined seven preschoolers to her tiny dining room. I found them huddled together, leaning over a barricade to watch a TV program showing in the adjacent room.

These are not unusual experiences. One hears similar tales constantly when talking with parents today. Advocates say that quality-of-care problems could be eliminated

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**The researchers concluded that many infants interpret repeated daily separations from their working mother as rejection, which they cope with by “avoidance.”**

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just by requiring more licensing of day-care providers. The problem is, there are already lots of fully regulated—and fully disappointing—homes and centers out there.

Even the gold standard of day-care—a nanny-type arrangement in the child’s own home—has serious problems. The most common is frequent turnover among caregivers, which can cause emotional disruptions for the child.

More fundamentally, it appears that whether the day-care takes place in a center, a private house, or at home, the risks to the child’s intellectual and emotional development are not terribly different. The latest research confirms that serious problems can arise anytime one substitutes a paid relationship for the natural parent-child bond.

### **The Evidence Against**

Research on substitute parenting’s effects on children is notoriously thin. The pioneering work was done by the English psychologist John Bowlby after World War II. He found that war orphans raised in institutions with good physical conditions but relatively little love or personal attention were badly stunted by the experience. These findings startled authorities, but based as they were on complete rather than partial parental deprivation, they were not applied directly to day-care.

When, in the mid-1960s, demand for day-care began to rise, a quick flurry of studies suggested that nonparental care did children no harm and might actually be good for children in deprived environments. But, as the field began to mature and a younger generation of more agnostic in-

vestigators took over from the true believing pioneers, revisionist schools began to spring up.

Today, there are still relatively few good long-term studies, and research remains biased toward the best centers. As one professor puts it, “the lousy centers won’t let a researcher near the place.” And like so much social science investigation, there is always the risk of confusing the quantifiable with the significant. Much of what we need to know in this area is very hard to measure. But we are beginning to get some more sophisticated research. And it is no longer clear that day-care is good, or even neutral in its effects. Quite the contrary.

### **Belsky’s About-Face**

Child psychologist Jay Belsky of Pennsylvania State University, coauthor of the definitive review of the 1970s research, was viewed as one of the nation’s leading defenders of full-time day-care for most of the last decade. Then in September, 1986, he published a landmark article in the bulletin of the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs that expressed serious concern over a “slow, steady trickle” of accumulating evidence that contradicted the view that day-care did not affect child development. The more recent studies, Belsky pointed out, looked more closely at such factors as age, gender, and amount of time spent separated from parents, and focused more on typical care-givers than earlier studies had. And they showed, Belsky said, two worrisome trends.

First, when babies less than one year old are placed in day-care, many of them develop weak and insecure bonds with their parents, bonds that are crucial to intellectual and emotional development. Weak parental bonds were found in poor children and upper-middle-class children in day-care, in children who attended good centers and bad centers, and in children who had high quality nanny-type care in their own home. “Whether it’s a day-care center or a baby-sitter doesn’t seem to matter,” Belsky reports. Second, several different follow-up studies of children up to 10 years old show that among those with a record of early nonparental care there is more serious aggression—kicking, fighting—less cooperation, less tolerance of frustration, more misbehavior, and a pattern of social withdrawal.

Given his high profile, sterling credentials, and history of day-care advocacy, Belsky’s review touched off a massive controversy, with rebuttals from some academics and heated attacks from feminists and day-care partisans. Belsky followed it up with a new study of his own, which found that nearly half of the children who started 20 hours a week or more of substitute care before they were one year old developed noticeably insecure attachments to their mothers, as measured by a standard scored psychological test. Belsky now urges that, if at all possible, a parent stay home with children less than two years old, and calls for government help to make that easier.

Even children in extremely expensive in-home care are at risk. A study by psychiatrist Peter Barglow of Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago and colleagues examined 110 children of affluent intact families. Half were cared for full-time by a parent, half had stable, high quality in-home caretakers because both parents worked. The hired care

began at eight months or earlier. Half of the substitute care infants developed only weak attachments to their mothers. The researchers concluded that many infants interpret repeated daily separations from their working mother as rejection, which they cope with by "avoidance," or turning off what has become painful. "Is the mother by far the best caretaker for the child in the first year?" asks Barglow. "We think probably yes."

Another study of five to six year olds who had spent part of their first years at the University of North Carolina's highly regarded day-care center found them more likely to hit, push, kick, threaten, swear, and argue than their parent-raised counterparts. UNC psychologist Ron Haskins described the 1985 findings as "a caution light."

The argument is hardly closed. Some long-time defenders such as Jerome Kagan continue to claim that day-care's effects on children are neutral. But clearly the findings of the last few years give reason to hesitate in our headlong plunge toward child-raising by hire.

### Warnings from the Experts

The recent research casting doubt on day-care is consistent with the views of pediatricians, child psychologists, and educational theorists. Among such child specialists, there has long been broad sentiment that any significant amount of nonparental care for very young children is unhealthy and to be avoided where possible. According to psychologist Claire Etaugh (a day-care advocate), of the 20 most influential child-care books published in the 1970s, only seven approve even grudgingly of both parents working while they have young children.

Penelope Leach, the British psychologist and author of perhaps the most influential child-raising handbook in America at the moment, *Your Baby and Child*, is a leading opponent of the trans-Atlantic trend toward mothers leaving their small children to go off to jobs. She speaks out regularly against group care for the very young, insisting that babies need the concentrated attention of their parents for at least two years. Someone caring for a child out of love will do a better job than someone doing it for pay, she argues, and social arrangements should aim to make full-time parenting easier.

Dr. Benjamin Spock has for years opposed infant day-care. Despite a good deal of backtracking in successive editions of *Baby and Child Care* in response to criticism from feminists, he still points out that "even at six months babies will become seriously depressed, losing their smile, their appetite, their interest in things and people, if the parent who has cared for them disappears. . . . Small children . . . may lose some of their capacity to love or trust deeply, as if it's too painful to be disappointed again and again." He adds, "It is stressful to children to have to cope with groups, with strangers, with people outside the family. That has emotional effects, and, if the deprivation of security is at all marked, it will have intellectual effects, too." Until a child is three, Spock now argues, he needs individualized care from the same person. Only in certain cases where the day-care fits that description fully can it substitute "pretty well" for parental care.

Burton White, the renowned educational psychologist and director of the Harvard Preschool Project, has also



"I would not think of putting a child of my own into any substitute care program on a full-time basis, especially a center-based program."

—Burton White

written explicitly on the subject of nonparental care. "After more than 20 years of research on how children develop well," he says, "I would not think of putting a child of my own into any substitute care program on a full-time basis, especially a center-based program." He suggests that parents not use substitute care at all except for occasional baby-sitting during the first six months of a child's life. From six months to three years of age, White says, the parent can use some part-time child-care, but the child should spend most of his waking time with a parent or grandparent. He concludes, "Unless you have a very good reason, I urge you not to delegate the primary child-rearing task to anyone else during your child's first three years of life. . . . Babies form their first human attachment only once. Babies begin to learn language only once. . . . The outcomes of these processes play a major role in shaping the future of each new child."

Child psychologist Lee Salk argues that "no one can replace the mother if she must work." Educational theorist Selma Fraiberg says that regular absences by the mother are damaging for children under three. Only from ages three to six, she states, can most children profit from a half day in high-quality group care. But even then, she writes, "There is a consensus among preschool educators that the benefits of a good preschool program diminish or are even cancelled when the school day is prolonged to six hours or beyond."

The medical establishment, too, has voiced reservations about day-care. The American Medical Association warned in 1983 that day-care centers—where drooling, diapered, toy-sucking infants put their fingers in their mouths an average of every three minutes—were becoming dangerous sources of infections and disease. According to the Centers for Disease Control and other authorities day-care centers are responsible for rising levels of diar-

rhea, dysentery, giardiasis, epidemic jaundice, hepatitis A, infectious diseases of the inner ear, and cytomegalovirus (CMV) infection.

Many of the germs thus met would eventually have entered the child's system anyway at a later age. But given that a baby's immune system is not well developed until the third month, and not fully effective until about age two, early exposure can be risky. (And if CMV is brought home to a pregnant mother it can be very dangerous.) The standing recommendation of the American Academy of

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**Even the gold standard of day-care—a nanny-type arrangement in the child's own home—has serious problems. The most common is frequent turnover among caregivers, which can cause emotional disruptions for the child.**

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Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control is that all children under two should be cared for only with their siblings. When that is impossible, they recommend that no more than six children, from no more than three families, be grouped together.

### **The Magic Bullet**

At some point in the 1960s or '70s, American parents were promised a magic bullet that would make day-care workable. "Quality time," it was called. It didn't matter how much time you spent with your child, the argument went, so long as what time you did spend was "quality."

In their recently published book *Quality Parenting*, Linda Albert and Michael Popkin assure parents that they can "transform ordinary moments into encounters that, like a healthy diet high in natural foods and vitamins, sustain kids throughout the day when you have to be busy elsewhere."

This runs against all credibility. Anyone who denies that time, physical presence, and intensive one-on-one nurture are important to children denies every truism of human development research.

It is particularly ironic today, when parents are otherwise so receptive to the idea that small attentions early in life can make a large difference. The emphasis on starting out right leads many couples to insist on natural childbirth. Nearly every modern parent considers it essential to hold their baby in the first minutes after birth, lest he "bond" to an incubator instead of a human. Some maintain that the first day, or first six weeks, or first four months (depending on your guru) are an absolutely critical period for establishing parent-child ties. Yet some of these same parents then hand their still-pink infant for most of his waking hours to

someone they're paying \$5 an hour.

Some of us have been convinced that it is not necessary to actually talk to, hold, cuddle, teach, and comfort our babies ourselves. We parents will just pick out the activities and the setting, the clothes, toys, schedule, and diet. We will set the *tone* for the child's life, while leaving most of the actual rearing to our sitters and housekeepers.

### **New Skills for Old Love**

Though experts tell us there is no substitute for parental time and attention, conscientious day-care providers do try to compensate. Most caretakers insist they're "not just baby-sitting," but providing valuable training. In impressive clinical language, directors describe their attention to "gross and fine motor skills," to "good self-concept," and "enhanced creativity."

Day-care children, to be sure, often start out ahead of their home-raised peers in things like knowing the alphabet when they begin kindergarten. But does this amount to anything? Kids under age four, experts tell us, are not capable of much "achievement." In fact, formal education in those years can actually do harm, particularly if it is demanding or competitive. Many authorities now say that until a youngster is about five, little more than creative play ought to be solicited from him.

When children are young, it is important that their environment comply to their needs, rather than the reverse. Fraiberg points out in *The Magic Years* that "it is only in the minds of adults that childhood is a paradise, a time of innocence and serene joy." In truth, she says, the early years are often full of fearful puzzles. What the young want, urgently need, is not education, but the affection and unhurried attention of their parents.

Of course, love is not easily bought. Institutions can't hope to offer it. Only in a few rare instances can extraordinary individuals offer a child in day-care this love and personal attention he craves. A majority of caretakers are conscientious, and try to substitute for the missing parents, but fail anyway, for any number of reasons. One problem is sheer numbers—a single caretaker typically looks after from four to 15 children, depending on their age and the setting.

Another is continuity. Child developmentalists tell us that rapid shuffling of guardians is extremely traumatizing to a small child. (That is, until they learn not to get attached to any care-giver.) If a child is unable to develop secure adult attachments in the first three or four years, he can grow up simply not caring for anyone's approval and lacking any sense of accountability. Yet it is not uncommon for parents to change child-care providers two or three times a year (bad experience, sickness, child gets too old for that group, etc.).

Even if the parents and child stay put, the provider may move out from underneath them. The average child-care program in New York state has a 40 percent annual turnover rate among its teachers. Many parents have found an acceptable care provider after a long search only to lose her. Left for a new job. Got married. Deported by the immigration service. Au pair goes home.

But the deepest problem with paid child-rearing is that someone is being asked to do for money what very few of



us are able to do for any reason other than love. Competent and safe baby-sitting, that is not so hard to hire. What will always be difficult is finding people who feel such affinity with the child that they will go out of their way to do the tiny precious things that make children thrive—giving a reason why rather than just saying no, rewarding a small triumph with a joyful expression, risking a tantrum to correct a small habit that could be overlooked but would be better resolved, showering unqualified devotion.

Ultimately, a child and a paid caretaker don't really share very much. Their relationship is commercial, temporary, practical. As one woman, a professional social worker who tended a friend's child in her home along with her own daughter, admitted to *Parenting* magazine, "I cuddle and kiss and hug this child, but the feeling is just not there." The experience of taking care of another woman's baby has convinced her that "nobody is going to provide my child with as much love as I can." The truth is, it is unfair to dutiful day-care providers to hold them to parental standards of child-rearing. A child and a parent are bound eternally, by blood and destiny. A day-care worker is doing a job. If he or she manages simply to be a kind friend to the youngster and a reliable guardian of his safety, that is all anyone ought to expect. Giving the child the rest of what he needs—a self-image, a moral standard, life ambitions, and a sense of permanent love—is too much to ask of anyone other than the parents.

### Mothers Emulating Fathers

For years, one of the most cogent criticisms of American sex roles and economic arrangements has been the argument that many fathers get so wrapped up in earning and doing at the workplace that they become dehumanized, losing interest in the intimate joys of family life and failing to participate fairly in domestic responsibilities. Now it appears that workaholicism and family dereliction have become equal opportunity diseases, striking mothers as much as fathers. At a recent conference on children, day-care campaigner Sylvia Hewlett told an anecdote about her efforts to convince the national accounting firm Arthur Andersen to institute a day-care policy because 40 percent of Andersen's professionals are women. Nearly all of these women, Hewlett pointed out, work "60 hours a week." It is essential, she argued, that programs be put into place so that after delivering their babies these hardworking employees can keep on in their jobs just as before. Apparently, Arthur Andersen's executives saw the business value in the plan and accepted her proposal. But what kind of human society are we becoming when we encourage new parents to hold "60-hour-a-week" jobs?

One of the giant obstacles to good day-care ever being more than a happy exception is that while all parents *want* good quality child-care, far fewer are willing to provide it. Linda Burton describes the moment she recognized the root of the dilemma:

While I—and most of my friends—were saying our minds were "too good" to stay at home and raise our children, none of us ever asked the question, "Then what sorts of minds *should* be raising our children—minds that were *not* very good?"



"Even at six months babies will become seriously depressed, losing their smile, their appetite, their interest in things and people if the parent who has cared for them disappears."

—Benjamin Spock

My carefully worded advertisements for child-care literally came back to haunt me. . . . I wanted someone who would encourage my children's creativity, take them on interesting outings, answer all their little questions, and rock them to sleep. I wanted someone who would be a "part of the family."

Slowly, painfully, after really thinking about what I wanted for my children and rewriting advertisement after advertisement, I came to the stunning realization that the person I was looking for was right under my nose. I had been desperately trying to hire me.

The quest for a humane child-rearing system is more than an engineering problem. It is a values problem. So long as we continue to debase parenting, only the debased will be willing to take it on. So long as people perversely want what they are not willing themselves to give, there can be no solution. The only way out of the natural shortage of good child-care is for every parent to devote more of his own time to his children, instead of hunting frantically, and quixotically, for more and better hired care.

### Backdoor Networks

There is presently a broad consensus that women as much as men thrive when they are able to take a wide, active role in the world. Increased female education and employment are, on the whole, powerful and positive developments in American life.

But whatever expansive new roles women have taken on in the last three or four decades, they are emphatically *not* interested in relinquishing the old ones. Women still want husbands and they still want to be mothers. They are taking on heavy added responsibilities without rejecting



**Penelope Leach wants allowances from the state for parents who stay at home to raise their small children.**

their traditional imperatives. Unfortunately, the experiment in forging new roles for women has taken place (not coincidentally) in one of the most self-interested eras in American history (the “me decades”). Rising egoism is compounded by a simultaneous collapse of traditional systems of parental burden sharing. Often inadvertently, we have kicked out a lot of the social supports that used to undergird child-raising in this country—decent public schools in the cities, strong “backdoor” networks among parents, extended families and relatives nearby to help out, a safe public environment that allowed children to play outdoors without supervision. While the rise of substitute parenting on a mass scale in some ways signals a socialization or public takeover of the structure of parenting, on a deeper level the last decades have seen a sharp and unhealthy privatization of child-rearing responsibilities. We have to a large extent washed our hands of the idea of children as a common treasure.

Surveys show a tremendous decline since the 1950s in the social prestige accorded to parents. Most parents still find the personal satisfactions tangible, immediate, even overwhelming. But with collective approval and cultural rewards evaporating, rearing a child is on one level much less satisfying than it once was, for women in particular. Today, women are more likely to be admired and appreciated for launching a catchy new ad campaign for toothpaste than they are for nurturing and shaping an original personality.

The past three decades have also brought widespread abandonment of children by their fathers—an era of high illegitimacy and extensive no-fault divorce. Many mothers at some point face economic demands with no spouse present. As a result, some are understandably reluctant to endanger their job market value by partly or temporarily withdrawing from the labor force. Meanwhile, most fathers remain unwilling to stay home with their young children, and few absent fathers pay adequate child support.

## How to Stay at Home

We know that children benefit greatly—intellectually and emotionally—from parental attention. There is no “sound barrier,” no moment when children suddenly stop needing their mothers and fathers. But at a minimum, experts counsel, we ought to aim for a situation where one or the other parent is devoting most of his time to the child until he is about three years old.

That could mean parents working at staggered intervals and alternating at child-care. More likely, it will lead to one parent working full-time and one working irregularly or not at all until the child enters part-time nursery school or kindergarten. (Which there is no reason to discourage. It appears that once they are about three, most children can benefit from the socialization of a few hours of nursery school two or three times a week.) The practice that many American parents already follow—incrementally increasing their participation in the paid labor force as the youngest child begins attending some school—seems to be sound. Parents and children both can benefit from an increase in family income. If parents find work stimulating, their satisfaction and confidence will overflow into the family. But these benefits disappear if work begins to cut into the child’s time at home.

It will not be particularly easy for all families to work out, but to the extent we can assist, educate, enjoin, accommodate, and inform, we ought to work toward a policy of maximal parental care in the preschool years. In fact, that is what we still have in a majority of families. Figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that today 55 percent of all mothers with children under three are *not* working. And of those who do work, one-third work only part-time. Moreover, some of the full-timers work only seasonally or part of the year. The bottom line: despite sharp increases in female labor force participation, three out of four mothers with young children still either do not work at all or work only part-time or seasonally. Despite the pressures, most Americans still think it is important to arrange their lives so that they can be with their children when they are very young.

## Second-Choice Solutions

For reasons most parents already sense, paid day-care ought to be a distinct second choice, and group day-care in institutions a last alternative. For some children, day-care seems satisfactory. But few youngsters thrive in it, and some very large fraction—quite possibly most—are stunted in some way if they are forced to spend more than a few hours a day in their early years in nonparental care. Where full-time day-care can’t be eliminated, we at least ought to shorten its duration (for instance by working shorter hours, using caretakers close to home or job site, or having parents stagger their times of employment so that one can drop off the child late and the other pick him up early). And the longer nonparental care can be delayed, the less likely it is to do harm.

Having a child cared for in the home of a friend or neighbor is usually preferable to a center, because the setting is more familial and the care is usually more personal and less rigidly structured. Having a relative come into your own home is even better. The setting is familiar

to the child, and a grandparent or aunt or cousin, while not a parent, is at least a familiar, permanent presence in the child's life, strongly tied to the parents, and someone from whom a warmer than normal level of concern can be expected. No doubt, hired day-care will always exist as a necessary evil used by some hopefully small number of parents. But owing to its inherent and intractable disadvantages, public policies ought to avoid as a matter of principle any endorsement or subsidization of full-time nonparental care for infants and toddlers.

### Public Policy Changes

We instead ought to offer substantial new assistance to those—particularly single mothers and low-income married couples—who feel they have little alternative to placing their children in group care. Single parents are the group with the meagerest financial condition, the least choice in the structuring of their home arrangements. Yet 64 percent of divorced, widowed, separated, and unmarried mothers stay at home with their children while they are under three. (Another 9 percent work only part-time.) Many scrape along living with relatives, collecting child support, drawing on Social Security and AFDC, and consuming savings until the child is old enough for the mother to work.

We ought to change the laws and habits that prevent

many parents who would like to from working at home. Writer Nancy Pearcey points out that, once, "the home was the center of society, both socially and economically. A woman could raise a family and still take part in other interesting activities . . . because they took place in or near the home." After industrialization, however, the home was reduced to a passive adjunct. Woman's role was reduced, while man's role was enhanced by the development of the money economy.

Thanks to new technology and services, the rebirth and refinement of domestic industry is both possible and desirable. Whether in business for oneself, doing piece work on contract, or connected to an office by computer modem, there is much productive, interesting, and well-paying work that can now be done easily at home. We ought to stop sacrificing the needs of parents and children to the special interests of trade unions (who oppose home work) and some employers, and repeal the antiquated provisions that inhibit further decentralization of the workplace.

We also ought to relieve the tax burden on parents who opt to stay home with their children. Larger exemptions for young children and for caretaking expenses should be considered. And the bias that forbids nonworkers from making as big a tax-free contribution to their IRA as workers are allowed should be rectified.

We should encourage employers to institute more flex-



The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe by Jessie Wilcox Smith

time, good part-time employment, job sharing, and "take out" work, so that parents who work can arrange their schedules to spend more time with their children. Part-time working parents make excellent, responsible employees, and, entering an era of critical labor shortages, it is in the interest of companies as well as workers to bring these

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**Today, women are more likely to be admired and appreciated for launching a catchy new ad campaign for toothpaste than they are for nurturing and shaping an original personality.**

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talented individuals into the labor force on their terms. A more fluid, less rigid job market, which has been evolving in this country for years anyway, will improve both efficiency and worker satisfaction.

We ought to support other forms of family care for children, for instance by grandparents. Perhaps tax credits could be allowed for parents who want to house a grandparent or other relative who would care for the child. Perhaps most important, fathers as much as mothers ought to feel responsible for daily supervision and guidance of their children, as they are slowly beginning to.

#### **More Ambitious Proposals**

Some call for more ambitious programs that would establish a system of comprehensive support for all parents. Penelope Leach argues that the early years of child-care should be treated as a distinct phase of life, as education and retirement are treated, and that a parent who stays at home to raise a young child should receive an allowance from the state. She has called for a program that would allow one parent to stay home full-time through the child's first two years, then provide retraining to assist a gradual return to work if desired.

Allan Carlson of the Rockford Institute proposes that we improve our economic treatment of parents. He calls for four alterations of tax and social policy: doubling the tax exemption for children only, providing a \$600 annual tax credit for each child, as well as an extra \$600 allowance in the year of a child's birth, and converting the current child-care credit into a universal \$500 credit available to all parents, whether they pay for care or provide it themselves. For a married couple, for example, with three small children and an income of \$25,000, this plan would allow them to retain up to \$4,300 more of their earned income.

This program shifts the tax burden away from families with young children and toward individuals without child-

raising responsibilities, returning us to the conditions of the post-World War II era, when families were largely exempt from taxation. Its revenue costs could be manipulated within a broad range, for instance by altering the age at which children no longer qualify.

#### **Damage by Day-Care Lobby**


Today, all of the aggressive efforts of the increasingly powerful day-care lobby head in the wrong direction. Day-care activists insist that encouraging new parents to stay at home is "absurd." Working parents are "a reality." Stay-at-home parents are "dinosaurs."

The advocates implicitly discourage the form of day-care that is least likely to be harmful—informal care in a neighbor's or friend's home—on the grounds that it is not standardized and regulated, not professional enough. The fundamental push of day-care advocacy today is away from the personal, the small, and the impromptu and toward the big, regulated, fluorescent-lit "young age homes" run by professional baby-sitters. This is the only way to make universal social parenting possible, and it is the strategy that currently has the political momentum.

Of course, these centers, while varying widely from worst to better, are the places least likely to give children what they need. Common sense and empirical research both bear that out. But all existing bonuses, options, and subsidies push in their direction. For instance, our current child-care tax credit (line 40 on form 1040) costs about \$3 billion annually. But it can be claimed only by people who pay others to provide the care. It cannot be claimed by parental care-givers. In addition to being blatantly discriminatory and regressive (it is a transfer from stay-at-home parents, who have lower average income, to working parents, who are richer), it is very bad policy for children.

Rather than further subsidizing substitute parenting, with its many risks, we ought to endeavor to open new options for the large number of Americans who would like to raise their own children. Put the help, and encouragement, and dollars on the side of children and parents, not institutions and bureaucrats.

Certainly, raising children produces its share of frustrations and fatigue. It is a demanding task. And without extra doses of time alone, conversation, and adult stimulation, stay-at-home parents can come to feel isolated. But raising children is also one of life's most varied and humane undertakings. It forces us to face our own mortality, the implications of our ethics, our own deepest hopes.

Yes, there will be difficulties. But there are compensations: more secure children, happier parents, a healthier society. The requisite changes are well within our capabilities; all we need is to be convinced they are worthwhile. They demand some hard but necessary choices that go to the very core of what it means to be a parent, and a citizen: deciding that we are not going to live only for ourselves, for our short-run prosperity and material advancement. That we can, and yes, want to, participate spiritually in the future of our culture. That raising a child by our own code and ethics is both a worthy goal and a profoundly rewarding undertaking. 

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Savimbi's strategy, as he outlines in POLICY REVIEW, is "...to raise the costs of the foreign occupation of Angola until the Cubans and the Soviets can no longer bear the burden." *Norman Podhoretz, Washington Post*

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Israel gains "convert" in Christian rightist—Helms. Jesse's alternative, spelled out in POLICY REVIEW, was for the United States to "face up to the fact that aid to Israel is essentially a defense cost." *Wolf Blitzer, New York Jewish Week*

## On Our Judeo-Christian Heritage:

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