

by Jim Greenman

Places for Childhoods: How Institutional Are YOU?

The notion that we are institutionalizing children in child care is not one that we like to hear. After all, we child care professionals are the good guys. We love children, childhood, primary colors, and cookies. And yet, there is not another appropriate term for what we are doing. A child care center or home is an institution — a formal, established organization. It is the connotation we find hard to take: *institutionalize* conjures up, well, institutions, particularly those that sociologists call *total institutions* (asylums, hospitals, prisons, some schools) — places where uniformity, order, and rules are the primary values.

Sociologist Erving Goffman studied institutions and noted that while every institution captures something of the time, space, and interests of its members, some are far more encompassing or total than others as to their control and impact on the lives of their members. In total institutions:

All aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same authority (eating, sleep, play, work, social life, etc.). Second, each phase of the member's daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together. Third, all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above. . . . Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims to the next. (Goffman, 1961, p. 6)

In total institutions there are inherent tendencies that work in concert to dehumanize all the members, including staff. Child care centers have many of the defining characteristics of total institutions. That isn't bad, it's just the nature of the beast. But total institutions can be bad, very bad, and those inherent tenden-

cies are present in child care. To avoid becoming the sort of institution that we find far removed from a good place for a childhood, it is helpful to consider some of the typical characteristics of total institutions:

Room

Total institutions rarely allow much space per individual, justified by cost. Large group life is thus predominant, and comes to be considered acceptable. In child care, 35 square feet per child (25 in some states) and limited outdoor space has become standard, without many objections.

Time

Institutions always control time and parcel it out in time blocks based on institutional needs, creating an institutional rhythm that renders the rhythm of the individual or the task irrelevant. There is hospital time — change the sheets at 6:00 AM — school time marked by bells and buzzers, lunch at 11:00, recess at 2:00 before a departure at 3:00, and child care time — diapering at 9:30, outdoor play from 11:00 to 11:30, nap from 1:00 to 3:00 (“I don't want to tell you again, back on your cot!”).

Privacy

Institutions allow little privacy, justified by the lack of space and the need for order and security to protect the members from themselves and each other. There is a very small personal zone, the area surrounding an individual that the individual can claim (“get outta my

*Living
in the
Real
World*

Of Square Pegs and Round Holes

Kyle was the epicenter of chaos. His enthusiasms worked on him like tectonic plates, grinding and shifting until the air around him was vibrating in a state of anticipation. He could no more portion out his interests and passions into 19 and 42 minute time slots than use his four year old body to drive a truck. He could, however, be a truck, a dog, an airplane, or his piece de resistance — a dinosaur.

And when he was taken over by his dinosauritis, he didn't want to put down the dinosaurs and read about them at story time like the teacher suggested, he wanted to continue his play because at that moment he WAS a dinosaur, he needed to sound like one, move like one, eat like one. Watching him try to sit with the group and involve himself in the teacher's words that hazily floated toward him and focus on the small two-dimensional images of dinosaurs on the pages between the heads of the other children, you could see the very thin veneer of civilization slipping away from his four year old body as he began reverting to the dinosaur he truly was only minutes ago. And, of course, his devolution carried Julian and Katie along with him. "TIME OUT, KYLE!" again.

The pressure to shape up and fly right was not occasional, but continual, and often led to frustration. The tragedy was that it was Kyle's wonderful qualities that brought down the institutional wrath. His enthusiasms, his charisma, his attention span, and his devotion to HIS task created problems, whether the task was dinosaurology or being engrossed in a book or building a fort. In the institutional context, it was hard for the staff not to see Kyle as a disruptive troublemaker, which he was, but only because of the context he had no control over. Trouble was not *badness* but enthusiasm. Staff rarely saw the person in Kyle, the person who is present now and will emerge in various incarnations as the nine year old, the teenager, the adult. Looking at Kyle that way, one sees an inquisitive person with a huge appetite for experience and an ability to focus on the experience. His ability to apportion his appetite to the child care context at four years old is unfortunate for the staff, but hardly a signal of future sociopathic behavior.

face"). There is often no way to own time or space, except perhaps during punishment. The child care equivalent: limited, secluded, or cozy areas. There is in many areas a growing unfortunate simplistic tendency to confuse supervision with surveillance; the children must be under the observation of adults every second — thus large open spaces and no seclusion. This replaces the more sophisticated concept that supervision also includes a safe, planned "yes" environment, shared expectations, socialized children, and adults who are aware about what is happening without needing to become omniscient wardens.

Personal Property

Institutions limit personal property, for the protection of the property and maintenance of order. In a child care context, this means little security for the child's art or treasures and restrictions: "Park your blankie at the door, buster."

Meaning and Responsibility

In institutions there is little activity that has much meaning outside the institution. There is a tendency to

be insulated from the outside world. Occupants have little responsibility for anything meaningful, including meeting their own needs for care. You are usually dependent on others for meeting basic needs, either for permission, or timing, or access. Child care equivalent: No independent bathroom access, portioned out food, sleep and wake up when told, and no responsibilities for the tasks of daily life.

Exuberance and Spontaneity

Institutions rarely tolerate exuberance or spontaneity. These qualities are usually viewed as impulsive or immature. They disrupt routines and raise the terrifying specter of chaos. Institutions do not suffer gladly life-enhancing individuals; those characters whose "joie de vivre" leads to exuberance and spontaneity.

These troublemakers make magic and stir things up. We may love them in literature and film — McMurphy in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," Robin Williams's characters in "Good Morning Vietnam" and "The Dead Poet's Society," Pippi Longstocking, Mary Poppins, Peter Pan — but supervising them or working with them is another story.

Security, Safety, and Order

Institutions are preoccupied with safety, security, and order, usually justified for the good of the inmates. If in doubt, restrict. If the overall effect is a contained, lifeless atmosphere, c'est la vie (or le mort).

My Baby

Caitlin came with a raft of accessories every day: a photograph, a cookie, a necklace, and a stuffed animal. It was a struggle to enforce the policy of discouraging toys from home. Her first day back from vacation she appeared with a new baby doll. Despite gently being told she already had her authorized "lovey" at the center, she demanded admittance for her new baby "Ashley." "Babies do not belong at home alone," she sniffed. "MY BABY will not be home alone," she bellowed with her maternal instinct aflame. Quick witted, the teacher (to the dismay of some of the staff) admitted Ashley and began a baby doll day care. There was never a more ferociously protective group of mothers than those four year olds looking out for the interests of their babies.

Significant Others in the Outside World

Institutions take pains to limit the power and influence of others, specifically family, e.g. parents. There is rarely an accommodation to the context of others to allow them to participate or have influence on the institution. In schools and some child care, closed classroom doors, professional assertions of expertise and jargon, and PTAs channel parents away from raising questions and influencing their children's experience.

Staff

Institutions are hard on the staff, who often feel the only power they have is ruling over the inhabitants. Low salaries, limited autonomy, virtual confinement within the institution during work, and lack of professional respect place them only a notch above their charges.

Individuality

Individuality is a casualty of all the other dimensions. The reality is that the important defining characteristics

Actuarially Correct

There is a school of thought that argues we should teach children the right way to go down the slide — erect, with hand on railing, body poised for a safe landing — and a right way to swing — erect again, the chain fully grasped on each side, eyes straight ahead. There are also licensing requirements in some states that require children to have shoes on at all times, in spite of the well established primal need of a toddler to have one shoe on and one lost. No one is in favor of playground injuries or harm to feet or foot-borne disease, but a world of erect, shod children is hardly the stuff of childhood dreams.

are not individual but relative to the group and context. The whole person within is rarely considered. For child care and schools, it is age. The more age-graded the situation, and the more parents are kept at an arm's length, the less the individual child is recognized.

Dignity and Respect

Institutions rarely leave much room (literally) for dignity and respect. Simple kindness is not enough to overcome the loss of individuality, privacy, and responsibility. Total institutions are not places where life is to be lived in all of its joy and drama. Joy and drama are too unwieldy. It is easier to turn day-to-day life into mostly pageant — ritual doings and observations. Drama has fire, the hint of chaos, sensuality, and intense moments of concentration and the intricate mini plays of social life. It is engagement with life. Thomas Merton commented once that civilization was heading toward lives of low definition with little to decide, an apt description of institutional living.

Total institutions arise not because of evil or ignorance, but out of legitimate concerns for order, smooth standard operations, and the well being of the inhabitants as a group. They become mindless as they lose sight of the individual and the real goals, the end goals, as they concentrate on the means. Order takes precedence over mental health in asylums, education in schools, rehabilitation in prisons, and childhood in those child care centers that fit the description.

Childhood depends on some precious formula of freedom and mess. Until institutionalized through child

care, children in the most structures homes could usually break through the concrete web of good intentions and find the cracks, alive with possibilities for movement, exploration, and discovery—in the room, under the bed, in the back yard, on the stoop, alone or with friends. These were times when adult sanctions were weakened, allowing exploration of forbidden words with delicious hard consonant syllables and intriguing substances. These were times when space opened up rather than contained; and jumps, shouts, and giggles pierced the air. More centers can have the same feel by being alert to the dehumanizing tendencies that are ever-present.

Reference

Goffman, Erving. **ASYLUMS: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates.** New York: Anchor Books, 1961.

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