

Child Care and Early Education: No “Just” About It

by Jim Greenman

*“We are not **just day care**,” sniffed the director to the prospective parent. “Can you not see by our sign that we are **a child development program, a preschool?**”*

*“We are, of course, **not child care**,” huffed the Head Start administrator. “We have a higher calling. We are Head Start. We **teach the children.**”*

*“We are an all day Montessori program, **not child care**,” firmly explained the Montessori teacher.*

In the February 1989 issue of *Child Care Information Exchange*, I wrote a column on the unfortunate distinction between child care and early education (“Is Everybody Singing Our Song? Child Care and Early Education”). It was written in those heady days when early education and child care was finally on the national agenda and there was talk of actually increasing funding.

Times are different now, and the competition is likely to be for shrinking funds. But the message on the ill used distinction between child care and early education is still appropriate.

The “just day care” label is still alive as an epithet to be applied to other programs. The two important studies that brought into the open the poor quality of many existing child

care centers and homes is already fueling the increased use of “child care” as a negative label (see “Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers: Key Findings and Recommendations (*Young Children*, May 1995) and “The Study of Family Child Care and Relative Care — Key Findings and Policy Recommendations” (*Young Children*, November 1994).

All Child Care is Education

Is there such a thing as “*just day care*” or “*just child care*”? Perhaps in result, but rarely in design — what center, home, or preschool (or elementary school) sets out to be purely custodial care? Isn’t a better term for “just day care” or “custodial care” simply “lousy education”? All child care is educational; children learn something in every

setting whether we acknowledge it or not, learning that has implications for future learning. Is it all good education? No, some is actually quite awful.

Child care settings are early education settings often *not adequately funded* to provide quality education — or care. One can look at the marginal quality of much of current child care and make a distinction between child care and *more* educational programs, but that doesn’t alter the fundamentally educational nature of child care. Poor underfunded learning environments provide poor educational preparation and, most often, poor care as well.

The program name or sponsor is no sure indicator of educational value. Good and bad care and education take place in “child development centers,” “day care homes,” “academies,” “Head Start,” “nursery schools,” “learning centers,” and “Montessori programs.” (NAEYC accreditation has considerable value as a national standard because it makes no distinction between child care programs and “educational” programs. It is in the interest of all child care providers to support the concept and work towards accreditation.)

Mama Love

Cornelia Anne Washington Breedlove was known by all as Mama Love. Her husband, Marcus Aurelius Breedlove, was also known throughout the neighborhood as Mr. Mama Love. They took care of kids. They assumed that they were just day care — actually even worse, *baby-sitting*.

“I just loved those children,” she said, “and tried to raise them right.” Walk into her home and the children would be sorting clothes by item, color, and size; or making bread or muffins; or helping with the “little ones,” all the time chatting with her about family and life — “telling my stories or listening to theirs,” she said.

Children might be out in the garden with Mr. Mama Love, planting tulips, carefully arranged by time of budding, color, and height; or in his garage “helping” him fix the car by handing him tools. When I tried to help and hand Mr. Mama Love a wrench, five year old Darius couldn’t contain his condescending smirk while letting me know I was reaching for the wrong wrench — he needed a metric wrench.

If this was *just day care*, I would have loved it for my kid. Yes, as the study makes sadly evident, there is a lot of miserable family child care. But when it is good, it can reach heights of individualized care and education many centers cannot reach.

Educational Quality Depends on Funding and Training

What is the difference between a quality early education setting and a mediocre one? Not the length of the day, the sponsor, or the name. Most often, it is the funding.

Quality education and care is not likely with the deadly combination of \$6 an hour teachers, high turnover, minimum staff-child ratios, minimum space and equipment, and minimum training of staff. This is true whether under the auspices of a school system, a corporation, a social service agency, or a private provider — non profit or for profit. Provide the funding for trained and committed professionals, support staff and services, and decent equipment, materials,

and facilities and quality early education can and does happen in a range of settings.

Child care providers are essentially asked to build the moral equivalent of shanty towns. Visit the thrown together housing by the desperately poor on the outskirts of many third world cities (and in some US cities) and you’re struck by the wonderful ingenuity and sheer effort that is possible when men or women strive to meet basic needs. You are left with great admiration for the builders. They have created a place to live. But not a very good place. Shanties, after all, leak or blow away, and their inhabitants alternately broil and freeze.

And that is what we often are asked to do in child care, construct shanties — out of the inexpensive staff we can find and keep, the

found and low cost purchased spaces and materials that we can afford, and all the energy, love, and commitment we can muster. Even the better programs with newer facades, with private or public support, and glossy brochures are never far from the minimums.

It isn’t all funding, however. What is quite astounding is not the number of poor quality programs but that there are so many that are not mediocre. It is a tribute to how terrifically resourceful and committed child care providers are in crafting programs.

Child Care and Society

There are three vehicles for early education and child care in this society:

- children cared for in their own homes through parents and home-based programs;
- part day programs such as Head Start, nursery schools, and early childhood programs in the schools and other agencies; and
- full and extended day programs serving parents who are working or in training.

Advocacy efforts and any public or private support for early education should begin with a commitment to acknowledging the fundamental educational nature of child care programs. As a basic premise, children should receive early education through the vehicle appropriate for their families.

The Price of Division

The artificial devaluation of child care hurts children and families — both because it keeps child care down and because it results in a fractious “system.” Millions of at

risk children attend all day child care. Attempting to serve them through separate early intervention programs or preschool education programs outside of child care has two consequences.

One is that the thousands of children in child care because of parent need simply will not have real opportunities to take advantage of the intervention programs.

The other alternative is that children attend two early childhood programs: one for a few hours a day, well funded and equipped, called “early intervention” or “preschool education,” the other struggling with all the minimums and called “child care.” (“Wrap around care” is a term already in use to describe

“Day Care”

I think it’s somewhat unfortunate that the term *day care* has become politically incorrect (“I don’t take care of days,” the advocate huffed.) In designing programs and viewing the child’s experience, the most significant distinction is between all day and part day care. While it is, of course, a challenge to provide good early childhood education, it has always seemed to me that the great challenge is to provide good *care* over a long day to a child in a group setting — care that is actually personal, individual, and responsive, in a setting that feels like a good place to be a kid. Day care was a useful shorthand for “all day care” and good day care, inherently to be good, had to include good early childhood education.

programs that wrap around Head Start, nursery school, or kindergarten.) The programs funded for “early intervention” or “early education” are inevitably better staffed; they pay better salaries than child care programs, thus drawing talented staff from child care.

The result of an artificial two track — child care over here, education over there — system is the needless child and family stress of complex schedules, transitions, and transportation; ultimately, the child will spend the bulk of the day in a child care environment barely able to recruit any staff at all. What kind of a day will a young child have — filled with transitions and busing and many different adults from two programs, one of which has high turnover? What kind of parent involvement and parent empowerment takes place if two programs ask for their trust and precious time?

Marissa is a beautiful, shy, three year old with slight physical and language delays. She attends a good child care program and is eligible for two intervention programs — a Head Start type intervention preschool in the morning and a program for children with special needs in the afternoon. Her mother gets Marissa up at 5:30 AM and uses public transportation to get her to the child care center.

Marissa arrives at the center at 7:00 and gets on a van to the educational program at 9:00. Greeted at the preschool by two ex-child care teachers now making \$2 an hour more and working with a 1:7 staff child ratio, Marissa spends the morning in developmentally appropriate play, precisely what she would be doing in her child care center with less trained staff making \$2 an hour less.

She arrives back at the center, presumably enriched, demonstrably exhausted.

After staff help her gulp down food with no time for self-help or conversation, Marissa is bussed to a developmental activity program for some one to one with a special education teacher working on motor skills in self-help care and language.

Arriving back at the center, half asleep and disoriented for the rest of the day, she is for the most part allowed to finish the day at her own pace, unlike the more inflexible schedule at her previous child care center. Her mother arrives at 5:00 PM, after ten and a half hours of work and public transportation, to hear about the parent/child program activity night at the center, which begins at 7:00. The teachers really hope she can make it. (“She needs it,” one told me).

Marissa relates to seven different adults a day as teachers or therapists. Her harassed low income mother has trouble finding the time to talk to the staff at the child care program without missing busses, let alone to staff at the other programs who she hardly knows. Some staff at all three programs see her failure to seek them out or come to conferences as a lack of motivation, which contributes to Marissa’s problems.

The very sparse and erratic communication between the three programs is not perceived to be a problem of professional motivation or a contributing factor to Marissa’s problems. They do not see that when Marissa’s mom chooses to go home and give Marissa dinner, put her to bed, and not return to the parent meeting, it is a rational conscientious parental choice.

Each program does its piece of Marissa’s life relatively well, confident of helping Marissa. The state is proud of its comprehensive services. No one is responsible for asking whether Marissa is having a good day if all the pieces are put

together, nor, in fact, is it clear that Marissa's development is helped or hindered by the abundance.

There are many Marissas, not all are low income or with special needs. Some ride in nice cars and shuttle between enrichment programs instead of remedial programs.

A Final Note

Every time early child care educators or advocates play the "just child care" card to promote their own territory, they do harm and diminish the possibility for improving children's lives. Funding and support for early education, intervention, or enrichment for young children should build on the existing network of programs — helping programs to afford trained and talented staff, improve their ratios, and upgrade their facilities.

*Jim Greenman is vice president of Resources for Child Care Management and author of **Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments That Work** (Exchange Press).*