

We All Sing in Perfect Disharmony

by Roger Neugebauer

What's wrong with this picture?

Child care makes a difference for children!

Mounting research evidence underscores the value of quality child care in supporting children and families:

- In reviewing 36 studies of early childhood programs, W. Steven Barnett concludes that high quality programs "can produce large short-term benefits for children in intelligence quotient (IQ) and sizable long-term effects on school achievement, grade retention, and social adjustment." (Behrman)
- In a review of four major longitudinal evaluations, Hirokazu Yoshikawa concludes that "as one element in a comprehensive plan to address poverty and other environmental causes of crime, programs combining family support with

early childhood education show promise in lessening the current devastating impact of delinquency on America's children and families." (Behrman)

- A study by the GAO reports that child care is the most important factor in getting low-income mothers off welfare and into the workforce. Raising child care subsidies, concludes the report, could significantly increase the number of poor mothers who work. (Seitel)

Child care makes a difference for employers!

Growing numbers of employers are reporting that providing child care assistance for employees makes good business sense:

- Researchers at the University of Michigan found a direct, positive relationship between attitudes,

recruitment, and retention among those employees who used their employer's child care center. Performance was indirectly affected by creating a climate that alleviated problems and allowed employees to focus on their jobs. (Seitel)

- According to the National Association of Hospital Affiliated Child Care Programs (now Child Care in Health Care), 86% of hospital-supported centers have been able to demonstrate concrete success in improving recruitment and retention. (*Child Care Information Exchange*, July 1991)

- Arnold Hiatt, CEO of StrideRite Corporation in Boston, says his company's two child care centers probably save \$22,000 per employee by helping them retain high-caliber people and avoid having to train replacements. (Seitel)

Child care is valued!

Countless commissions and panels have called for public and private support for child care:

- A report by the National Conference of State Legislatures asserted, "The good news is that there now exists a significant research foundation to inform state policy development. Today, lawmakers know with great confidence not just that quality programs work, but also what makes them work." (Smith)
- A committee of business leaders convened by the Committee for Economic Development determined, "The nation needs a comprehensive human-investment strategy for child development and education that

Where Directors Stand

Center directors who participate in the Exchange Panel of 200 were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements about major advocacy issues. To the left of each statement is recorded the percentage of directors who agreed with it.

- 99% To improve quality of care, licensing requirements in states with the weakest requirements should at least be brought up to the median of requirements in all other states.
- 99% Public subsidies should be restricted to licensed or registered child care providers.
- 96% Child care programs operated by public schools should meet requirements at least as stringent as state licensing requirements.
- 94% Funding for early childhood services from state and local public school systems should be accessible to all public and private providers.
- 85% Federal child care funding should include set-asides for school age care.
- 77% Federal child care funding should include set-asides for child care R&R.
- 69% Federal and state child care funds should be distributed to qualified parents in the form of vouchers they can use to purchase child care from a provider of their choice.
- 64% The federal minimum wage should be boosted to \$5.15 an hour.
- 38% Federal Head Start funds should be rolled into a child care block grant which is turned over to the states.
- 4% Centers operated by churches should be exempt from licensing.

helps all children become productive citizens and self-sustaining adults." (*The Unfinished Agenda*)

- In a call for public and private support of early childhood services, the Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children concluded, "All Americans must work together, in their homes, workplaces, and communities, to ensure that children under the age of three — our most vulnerable citizens — are given the care and protection they need and deserve. Nothing less than the well-being of our society and its vital institutions is at stake." (*Starting Points*)

- The National Commission on Children, appointed by President George Bush and chaired by West Virginia Senator John D. Rockefeller,

IV, recommended that "government at all levels, communities, and employers continue to improve the availability and affordability and quality of child care services for all children and families that need them." (*Beyond Rhetoric*)

Child care is in demand!

At the moment, the need for, use of, and support for child care centers is at an all time high:

- From 1975 to 1995, the number of children under six with mothers in the workforce more than doubled. (*State of America's Children*)

- From 1970 to 1989, the number of children enrolled in child care centers more than tripled. (*Child Care Information Exchange*, January 1994)

- In a 1992 survey of college students, 89% of the women surveyed saw marriage and children in their future before age 35. Of these women, 97% planned to resume work after giving birth, and 88% of the men assumed the women would. (*American Demographics*, November 1992)

- A survey by the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans of its 1,865 member organizations revealed that over half expect to be providing on-site child care or child care subsidies by the year 2000. (*Child Care Information Exchange*, July 1991)

The current supply of child care is inadequate!

Despite all the evidence on the value of child care, despite the rising calls for public support for child care, and despite the rising popularity of child care, the delivery system for child care in the United States is still inadequate:

- The recently completed *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers* study concluded that "only one in seven centers provide a level of child care quality that promotes healthy development and learning." (Helburn)

- Despite strong agreement that quality of care is dependent upon caregiver training, approximately four-fifths of child care teaching staff do not have a college degree, and almost one-third of teachers and over half of assistant teachers have only three years or less of child care experience. (Whitebook)

- In 1988, the average hourly wage for child care providers was \$5.35, which results in an annual income below the threshold for poverty for a family of three (Whitebook). The *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes*

study reported that, in 1994, the average hourly wage for all teachers and assistant teachers averaged \$6.89 — representing an annual increase of less than 5%. (Helburn)

- Subsidies for the working poor are inadequate to meet the need. In 1994, 36 states reported waiting lists for child care assistance, with eight states having more than 10,000 children waiting for assistance. (*State of America's Children*)

What *is* wrong with this picture?

We know how to operate high quality centers. We know that high quality centers are beneficial to children, families, employers, and society. And Americans have repeatedly pronounced their support for child care. With all these pieces in place, why don't we have the best child care money can buy?

In surveying center directors and advocates for this article, a number of explanations were offered for the inadequate support child care receives in the United States:

- "Our population is rapidly aging so that the concerns of voters are shifting from education and children to health and the elderly."
- "The charitable, caring spirit of America is withering away, replaced by growing conservatism and self-centeredness."
- "Our advocacy efforts are too gloomy — we're always harping about how bad child care is. This paints a negative picture of the profession — not an image that is likely to generate support."
- "While our society purports to value children, Americans have always invested much more on vehicles, clothing, jewelry, beauty

aids, and electronics than on children's education and development."

These are all plausible arguments and indeed may explain, in part, the difficulty of building support. However, the following explanation may carry the most weight:

- "We are our own worst enemy. The inability of all players in the early childhood profession to develop and push a unified agenda has undermined our efforts."

Today there exists a wide range of professional associations which serve specific segments of the early childhood market. This is a healthy development in the sense that child care professionals can find support among peers who share the same challenges. On the other hand, with so many segments of the diverse child care world focusing strictly on their specific interests, their combined advocacy voices tend to be discordant.

Can unity be achieved?

Imagine if all early childhood stakeholders united behind a consistent position. Imagine what could be accomplished if the 120,000 early childhood centers and the 1.5 million early childhood professionals working in these centers and the 9 million families who rely on these centers spoke with one voice.

Is this an achievable vision, or are the issues that divide us so complex they cannot be bridged? To see what is possible, we asked center directors who are members of the *Exchange Panel of 200* their views on the prospects for harmony. Here is a sampling of their views:

- **David Braughton**, Creativity in Child Care, Clearwater, Florida: *Agreement is possible if the approach stays on increasing funding. Many of*

the issues around which we disagree (such as ratios and staff qualifications) have funding at their core.

- **Mary Ann Anthony**, Westerly, Rhode Island: *All segments — private, public schools, head start, church-run, family day care — must agree on minimal health and safety standards, such as lead paint, square footage indoors and out, and playground fencing — not just to "level the playing field" in terms of the cost of doing business, but to protect our children! This is a state licensing issue that could benefit from national attention — perhaps a national licensing conference.*

- **Buffy Owens**, Sunrise Preschools, Scottsdale, Arizona: *I'm not sure harmony is what we are after. I think it is through discord and conflict that a lot of new ideas have grown. There is room for many different views in our industry because our parents come from all walks of life and have different needs and aspirations for their children. Perhaps the undermining comes from a lack of maturity from within our industry. We need to learn from each other in a professional way. We need to appreciate why people have opinions different from our own and learn how to better deliver our service from them.*

- **Beatriz Leyva-Cutler**, Bay Area Hispano Institute for Advancement, Berkeley, California: *Exchange has said it many times — harmony in an organization is only temporary and not necessarily a sign of health. We should not strive for the harmony and peace of mutual agreement but for the basic rights of children and families. How we each choose to service the community is defined by the needs of the community. As soon as advocates represent the broad diversity of families, perhaps there can be voice and representation.*

- **Claudia Doran**, Capitol Child Care, St. Paul, Minnesota: *It seems that in Minnesota this past session we*

we're hit hard by conflicts. It is clear that we all will tend to protect our vested interests as it may affect our livelihoods, but with clearer communication that is open and accepting of give and take, we must be prepared to make our compromises before we begin to "lobby." We made no progress last session and have started in earnest to open discussions **now**. We are making some positive strides.

• **Joan Dunn-Antonsen**, Nike Child Care, Beaverton, Oregon: *The only non-controversial approach I can imagine is to expand the child care tax credit and include mechanisms for parents to benefit from this monthly — not just at tax time. This is especially important for low-wage families. The need is to get more money into the system.*

• **Jon Jacka**, Bright Start Children's Centers, St. Paul, Minnesota: *This is still a sore point with me after a quarter of a century in the field. Recent events have deepened my belief that our industry can never reach agreement on any goals or issues, much less achieve harmony. Turf protection and unenlightened self-interest still rule the day.*

• **Diane Smith**, YMCA Child Development Center, Burr Ridge, Illinois: *I think that if we all were held to the same standards, whether we were private, funded, church-based, public school-based, etc., there would be some sense of unity as we all strive for better places for children.*

• **Holly Seplocha**, Kings Daughters Day School, Plainfield, New Jersey: *Harmony will be difficult to achieve, but I think wages and licensing requirements could be areas we could all agree on. Our best bet might be to have our leaders come together in a coordinated think tank/retreat.*

• **Patricia Sheppard**, Educational Environments, Eugene, Oregon: *We need to narrow the issues and work on one or two, such as training for child*

care teachers and improving wages and benefits. Always keep it simple so the message can be understood.

• **Lynn Downs**, The Good Samaritan Hospital Child Care Center, San Jose, California: *It goes without saying that the overall goal of all segments of the child care community is to improve the lives of children. This disharmony comes from several sources, but may chiefly be attributed to the fact that resources are so limited that each group may need to compete aggressively for a piece of the pie. Maybe very carefully selected and strong leaders could meet on a regular basis to reinforce the need to work cooperatively for the best use of our resources.*

Next Steps

Having studied the views on advocacy expressed by our Panel of 200 members as well as by the advocates who supplied information for the following Child Advocacy Directory, a few points of agreement stand out:

• While there is near universal frustration with our ability to work together effectively, there is strong sentiment that complete harmony is not only unachievable but also undesirable. The clash of ideas in a respectful environment can lead to fresh insights and healthy self-examination. In addition, the simultaneous exploration of varied approaches to delivering early childhood services is good for parents and the profession.

• The most effective way to begin coming together is to focus initially on a few key issues where agreement is least difficult. With the growing recognition by researchers (see Helburn) and practitioners (see "Where Directors Stand" on page 20) that licensing standards need to be addressed, this may be a useful starting point. In the past,

licensing issues have sparked bitter debates, and even today it is unrealistic to assume that all players will ever agree on all licensing issues. Nevertheless, there does appear to be a groundswell of support for taking action. At the very least, as many of those surveyed recommended, the time is right for representatives of the various sectors to meet and see if a plan of action can be negotiated.

• Another point of agreement is that the main problem is lack of funds flowing into the child care system. The obvious weak links in the delivery system — the problems of affordability, low wages, and limited staff training — are funding problems.

Our current funding mechanisms — parent fees, employer contributions, and a patchwork of public subsidies — are ineffective because:

- 1) They do not, in total, contribute enough resources to deliver a consistently good service.
- 2) Funds are distributed in such an unproductive non-system that the few dollars being invested are not always making a difference.

• What is needed in the long run is for the immense creativity of the millions of child care professionals and advocates to concoct a simple system for infusing public and private investment into the child care system based solely on the needs of parents and the quality of the providers. We are eager to publish your creative solutions.

Resources

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