



A Manner of Speaking

The gate clicked behind us and we were drawn into a maelstrom of intense emotions and expectations, a world where adults and children come together to share who they are. It was the Ark's fourth birthday party, and Roger and I attended as board members, former and present. We were not parents, or children, or staff; so in large part our impressions were those of strangers, drawn into a situation where our impressions were fresh. Although we visit many child care programs, we seldom arrive during peak parent participation hours and we rarely have such an intimate opportunity to view what child care programs really mean for families. You already know everything I am going to say about programs such as your own, but if you hear it in a different voice, you might feel the applause.

Annika ran to the play yard gate as her father, flowers for teacher in hand, approached. One father carried his dessert for the potluck in one arm and scooped up his squealing child in the other. How important these moments are for parents and children. How significant is this place. Child care centers are places where parents and children bolster each other with sendoffs of support and encouragement for the day ahead. They are places where parents and children at day's end run joyfully into each others' arms. Good and bad days begin and end here.

Excitement filled the air as parents, grandparents, staff, board members, volunteers, and friends assembled to celebrate these children. Groups of parents gathered to meet and greet, some obviously longtime friends, others meeting parents of their children's friends for the first time. There was such a sense of community. What a perfect environment for meeting your support group. Parents coming together, daily meeting and greeting other people with lives similar to their own. Busy, hassled people find here a place to relax, to rejoice in being parents. Child care programs provide incredible support to parents and parenting.

Taylor was throwing a fit. This was his place, these were his parents, but the scene was different and he had had enough. His mother's offered choices for his behavior just didn't cut it. As his fit continued, his mother was terribly embarrassed. "You must be wondering what kind of parents we are!" To her husband, loudly, she challenged: "Are you sure you want another child?" It was easy to identify parents of older children, parents of more than one child — they were the veterans, so much more comfortable with parenting on parade. Child care centers are places where parents improve their skills. They learn through teacher modeling and parent education programs; they also learn from observing each other. Child care programs strengthen parents. Good programs are a resource for building stronger families.

Children tugged adult sleeves as they tried to pull their significant adults together. Family pictures were taken of child, parent, and teacher groups. Clusters of parents and children formed around teachers. This was an evening of celebrating the importance of this human link to a significant part of their child's life, and parents delighted in meeting spouses, children, and friends of their teacher. Children reveled in this extended period of attention from beloved adults.

When a day hits and you feel that what you are doing isn't really working, go out the door of your center, take a deep breath, and walk in through the gate at 5:30 PM. Try to experience your center as a stranger might, someone who isn't diverted by words and conversations, but who is attuned to the emotion of all that is taking place. Let yourself be absolutely overwhelmed by how important your program is in the lives of families. Rejoice in your own significance. Call it a reality check. 🧩

June 1997