

Child Care in México

Written by Clotilde Juárez Hernández, Ph.D., Universidad Pedagógica Nacional

Within the context of the World Forum on Early Care and Education that will take place May 13-16 in Acapulco, México, it would be interesting for you to know a little bit about child care in this Latin American country. Economical, social, and cultural factors such as the industrialization and modernization of the country, the NAFTA and globalization of the world market paradoxically have impacted the structure and functioning of the majority of the nuclear and extended Mexican families. These changes have resulted in widespread economic needs and societal disadvantages. Even more, the increasing need and motivation of more women to enroll in schools and join the work force means more mothers work full time out of the home.



Ideologically and pragmatically, those factors have also significantly influenced the conceptions of the child as a human being, subject of rights, infant development, early infant stimulation and education, as well as child rearing and child care practices. Therefore, this article will address the following current issues: what about history, how prevalent child care is in México, to what extent child care is used for working families, why families in México use child care, what agencies provide child care services, the licensing/accreditation and quality standards for services, and the big challenges facing the early childhood community in México.

What about history?

Historically, our ancient cultures considered children very important within the family. However, the Hispanic concord culturally impacted childrearing values and beliefs with the orphans of war. Nevertheless, it wasn't until the 19th century that in México child care was established to support working mothers within a market setting.

Throughout the 20th century dramatic changes have occurred in regard to child care conceptions and practices. Since the '20s, the first formal child care facilities were originally called *Guarderías infantiles* where infants 0 to 6 years old had custodial care during several hours a day while mothers were at work.

In the '60s, the 134th Constitutional Article stated that *child care* was a labor right for working mothers within the government; services were improved, including nutrition and instrumental care to young infants.

It wasn't until the '70s that the Mexican Education Ministry (Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP) became legally responsible for coordinating and forming the structure and functioning of the child care facilities which were conceived as educational settings like nursery schools, administered within the context of the *initial education*, equivalent to early childhood education. Consequently, their name changed to "Infant Development Centers." The staff were trained to provide children with educational stimulation in order to foster their growth and development.

In the '80s, there was an overwhelming nationwide child care demand of services that SEP had to cover. Due to the high economic costs, an innovative modality was created — a non schooling alternative option for early childhood education. Minimally educated youngsters from local rural, marginal, and indigenous communities were trained as community instructors to work directly with parents. Their tasks were to inform parents on infants' growth and development, and to orient parents on how to stimulate their children's development at home. Their work was supported by pedagogical manuals and guidelines with specific objectives and a wide variety of activities to stimulate infants of distinct developmental ages: infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Although in México elementary and secondary education have been compulsory, in the '90s, as a result of a new trend to foster equal rights for all children in our country — from the urban, marginal, rural, and indigenous areas, from 'normal' and disabled populations, from poor and middle class communities — there was a new orientation in the public education system called the Educational Modernization of basic education (preschool, elementary, and secondary schools).

Such reorientation also impacted the early childhood formal (and informal) education for children 0 to 4 years old by creating adequate educational content and meaningful learning experiences related to the local social context. Educators were considered to be educational agents in the children's balanced and harmonic developmental and educational processes. The major aims from the programs were to respect and to foster the children's spontaneous exploration, discovery, and creativity; to rescue moral values and traditions; as well as to rescue and preserve the ecology. By the mid '90s, Early Childhood and Preschool Education programs were joined to work together within SEP.

The most revolutionary and unexpected Mexican educational reform took place at the end of 2001, when legislation stated that preschool education also was compulsory. This action has several political, legal, and educational implications which touched early childhood education: preschoolers are now considered to be children ages 3 to 6, not 4 to 6 as earlier. Educators are required to professionalize their work by studying a four year baccalaureate educational university program on Preschool and Elementary Education. There is a grace period of six years to attain such an ambitious goal nationwide. It is expected that those teachers will be also licensed to work in the early childhood educational level.

After this brief historical overview about the evolution in early childhood education, it will be easier to comprehend the following child care issues.

How prevalent is child care in México?

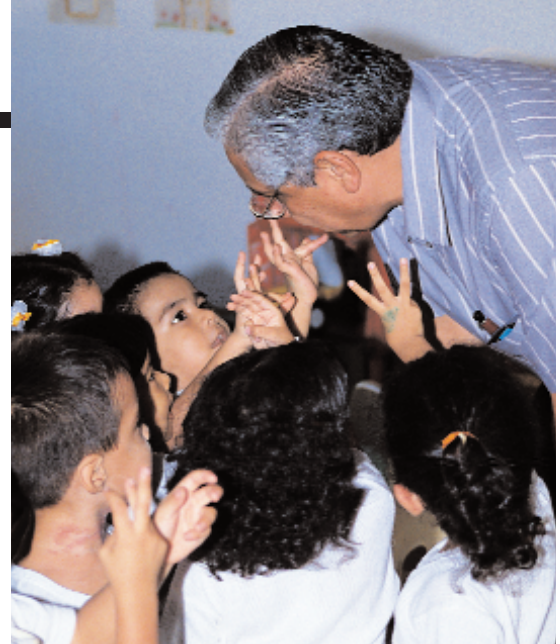
The National Educational System (SEP) conceives of Early Childhood Education as an educational process that takes place within the Infant Development Center (IDC), the prototypical education setting or school that provides child care as assis-

tance and education to small children (45 days to 5.11 years of age) of working mothers; and that supports working mothers during their labor journey in order to enhance quantitatively and qualitatively their productivity. Physical, affective, social, and cognitive children's development is fostered by trained educators through a variety of activities. IDCs are also equipped to provide children with medical, psychological, social work, pedagogical, and nutritional services. Parents are also oriented in child care practices, development, and early stimulation.

The number of IDCs has recently increased in the big cities due to even more participation of women in diverse productive and social activities. In the school year 2001-2002, the SEP reported a total of 2,848 IDCs, 53% of the totals are to public nursery schools (33% federal, 20% state) and 47% are private. These figures do not consider other institutions.

What agencies provide child care services and what is the nature of their services?

Within the national educational system, SEP is the major provider of Early Childhood Education and Care services in urban populations through two types of educational settings: Infant Development Centers (IDC) that serve children of different ages: infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, and preschool settings exclusively for preschoolers. Both have trained and licensed early childhood teachers. There is the national and Federal District DIF (Integral Family Development), an institution that serves not only urban, but also marginal and vulnerable populations. Since approximately 20 years ago, as a result of a social movement, there is an important growing number of NGOs such as popular community autonomous child care centers assisted by non-professional mothers who have been authorized to formally work as educators either in nursery schools or at home.



ISSSTE (Institute of Security and Social Services for Governmental Employees) and IMSS (Mexican Institute of Social Security) are two national health institutions that have their own IDCs that not only provide child care services to their own employees, but also cover specific populations: ISSSTE focuses its child care services to the federal government employees and IMSS to support low income working mothers from the private productive sector with direct or subrogated child care services.

CONAFE (National Council of Educational Foment), as it was indicated earlier, predominantly serves rural and indigenous communities in a non-schooling modality, focusing in parental training. It administers small centers where parents are informed and oriented in regard to their infant's development, child rearing practices, nutrition, health, early developmental stimulation. Actually, parents are trained to become competent parents.

It is important to mention that in February 2003 it was announced that a political alliance between the Presidential Government and SNTE (National Syndicate of Teachers — the largest in Latin America) would elaborate, publish, and distribute three volumes by age: 1) 0-5, 2) 6-12, and 3) 13-15 years of *Parents' Guide to Educate their Children*. The implicit



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

Why do families in México use child care?

According to the 2000 national population census data (INEGI, 2002), approxi-

educational model "Better parents, better children" is intended to impact Mexican children and adolescences' specific abilities, behaviors, attitudes, and values.

To what extent is child care used for working families?

Child care services are mostly requested by urban and marginal working mothers. A pregnant working mother has the right of a remunerated maternity leave for three months to give birth and care for her newborn. After that time, although she may have child care facilities at work, she may prefer to leave her infant for several months with a relative (predominantly maternal or paternal grandmothers) or a domestic employee at home before the baby actually is enrolled in an IDC.

SEP registered in 2000-2001 school year 3,423,608 preschool children: 90% served in public schools and 10% in private. From those 3% went to IDCs-SEP, 1% to DIF, and .30% to CONAFE. By the 2001-2002 school year, SEP reported a significant increased number of children served in public (Federal and State) and private IDCs: there was a total of 271,960 children (51% boys and 49% girls; 18% babies, 48% toddlers, and 34% preschoolers). Current figures for this year: IMSS provides Early Child Care Services nationwide to a total of 142,540 children; ISSSTE serves in its Nursery Schools for Early Wellbeing and Development 20,425 children.

mately 37% of women are part of the total labor force, most of them are working mothers with one, two, or even three small children. It is inferred, then, that the major reason why families in this country use child care services is because in a nuclear family both parents work or in a single parent household, the mother is employed outside of home. When both parents work, but extended family is available, it is more likely that relatives care for young infants in their homes. The private child care centers or a domestic worker are options that middle class families can afford. In poor families without a social supportive network, some working mothers may either bring their young children to work or leave them alone at home under an older sibling's care.

Despite SEP implementation since the early '90s of the educational integration project of disabled children into the regular classroom, working-class mothers with disabled children still have to stop working and leave their employment and its corresponding income to devote their time and energy for caring for their children (Juárez-Hernández, 2002).

What are the licensing and accreditation, and quality standards for services?

In México, there are two main types of public or private institutions to professionalize early childhood educators: the traditional 'Normal' Schools and the

most recently created (in the '80s) Pedagogical Universities. The highest degree of education for an educator is a four year baccalaureate program for teachers. Other lower levels of education are much more related to specific training such as child care of small infants.

Some quality standards for public as well as private IDCs are sanitary and safe buildings, interdisciplinary and trained staff, low children ratio (5 per teacher), teachers supported by one or two assistants, educational programs, developmental stimulation, and sensitive care.

What are the big challenges facing the early childhood community in México?

The major challenges are sufficient public budget to support early childhood education for low income full time working families, creation of more IDCs, community support to enhance the quality of their own IDCs, a massive professionalization of early childhood education programs in order to provide sensitive and comprehensive early child care and education services to all children, and parental information and involvement in their children's education.

References

Juárez-Hernández, C. (2002). "The structure, dynamics, and stress management of families with blind infants," paper presented in the XXVII International Congress of Applied Psychology, Singapore, July 7-12, 2002.

Servantes, J., Olmos, J. G., & Martha-Elba, E. (February 9, 2003). *Objetivo: El Adoctrinamiento*. *Proceso*, No. 1371. (Weekly Mexican magazine of information and analysis).

Internet references:
www.inegi.gob.mx
www.sep.gob.mx