

**U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families
Hearings on:
“Pre to Three: Policy Implications of Child Brain Development”
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**Testimony by:
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Note: The following statement has been adapted from both Dr. Fisher's prepared testimony and actual transcript of hearing. Further edits by Dr. Fisher have been included for clarification of points.

I am Dr. Diane Fisher, a practicing clinical psychologist, board member of Mothers At Home, board member and speaker for the Independent Women's Forum, and, most importantly, the mother of two school-aged boys and a two year-old daughter. I am indeed in the trenches of child-rearing, walking the fine line between satisfying my own needs for professional stimulation and my deep conviction that children need a parent at home. Based on my experiences both as a therapist and a parent, I believe it critical to be a primary part of the environment that affects my children.

The “Quality” Illusion

Lately, we've read reports stating that high-quality, non parental daycare is the equivalent of being at home with mom or dad. In reality, how much can “quality” daycare accomplish? I feel sad for the parent who must drag her children into their car seats early each morning, often with a waffle in their hands, still in their blanket sleepers and nighties, off to what often ends up to be a ten-hour day at daycare. Is that parent able to be with her children in that special intimate joyful way children need? Or must she rush from task to task to survive the day? These are parents that deeply love their children! And yet these children miss their parents' perspective on the world: their comments, jokes, the mirror through which they learn who they are, a sense of family identity -- irreplaceable stuff -- neither trivial nor superficial -- but so devalued in our society!

Brain Research

Recent studies of the brain have underscored the critical importance of the emotional and physical environment to infants, and a child's irreplaceable ties to mother. As excited as we are about infant brain development, we must remember that it is the *emotional* development of the infant that forms the foundation upon which all later achievements are based. For the zero-to-three age group, this means that time spent drilling

with flash cards is time wasted. The infant's emotional security, the ability to feel safe and nurtured enough to begin to explore the world, is what's important. For the infant, a mother *is* the environment -- pre-natally and post-natally. As a society, we are uncomfortable accepting this -- but it is a biological fact. An infant is soothed by the mother's smell and voice. The warm mutual cocoon of security between the mother and the child allows and inspires the flowering of everything else in the child's personality. This is not an overstatement. Intellectual skills are more resilient and can be compensated for -- there is more plasticity. Emotional development is very difficult to compensate for later. An infant can recover from a deprived intellectual environment much easier than she can recover from emotional abandonment or neglect. It is critical that we protect the budding parent-child relationship.

When we say "infant stimulation", what are we talking about? Black and white mobiles? Vowel sounds? Specialized physical movements? No, we are basically talking about attachment, or the unscientific word "love." Yet, we worry about what children three and even younger should know and be able to do, and we want programs to measure it all. Experiencing the everyday world on the arm of a loving, responsive parent is all the special stimulation and material that most babies need. The secure attachment of the infant to the mother is the critically important element for the child's *overall* development.

Infant Attachment

Attachment theory says that parents and babies are biologically "hard-wired" to form a close emotional tie. This is not a quick bonding period -- one that fits into today's typical twelve-week maternity leave. Rather, it is a slow, gradual process of many seemingly trivial communication cues and responses that occur over the first year of life. The adult woos the baby and encourages it to interact and explore, primarily by intimately sensing the baby's needs and sensitively containing the child. Most of this is accomplished intuitively by the mother who is motivated by love and enjoyment of her offspring. This attachment is not something for which you can write a check or schedule on a calendar. Experts connect attachment failures with the appearance of addictive behavior, loss of resilience to later trauma, intimacy problems, sexual promiscuity, drug and alcohol abuse, academic problems, depression, and delinquent behavior.

There are some serious misunderstandings about attachment theory. In a recent national research report (Key Findings from a Nationwide Survey among Parents of Zero-to Three-Year-Olds, Zero to Three National Center for Infants, *Toddlers and Families*, April 1997), *more than half* of parents surveyed thought that the *more* caregivers a child is exposed to in the first three years, the better. In reality, "socialization" or resilience to separation is not an appropriate goal for infants. Attachment optimally occurs with a single person who is primarily available to the child. Experts believe it is only *after* this secure relationship is firmly established (roughly in the middle of the first year) that baby is ready for secondary attachment figures. Multiple caregivers, a common phenomena in institutional care, is very destructive to the developmental goals of the first three years of life. It is unfortunate that our society is impatient with slow, subtle infant schedules in this fast, goal-oriented culture.

Parents Are Best

An argument I often hear is: "Parents aren't perfect -- many are angry, depressed, disorganized, or withdrawn with their children." Certainly, parents aren't perfect and do benefit from information about their infant's development. When parents need help, let's educate them to know how to find it and support them in their parental role. Let's not succumb, however, to the elitist idea that we can't trust ordinary parents to

successfully manage the early phases of children's lives, or the idea that they can't nurture the infant as well as, or without the help of, trained child care professionals.

Our culture displays an almost romantic, wishful perspective on parenting. We want to believe in "quality time." We want to believe that no matter how many hours the parent is separated from the child, that the parent will stay just as emotionally engaged with and knowledgeable of her child as the parent who has spent far more hours of the day with her child. However, we are now learning that this is just not true.

April 1997 National Institute of Children's Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study

Despite the "no more worries -- daycare is fine" reports which appeared after the results of the recent NICHD study was released, there was much that wasn't stated or explained in the media. Let's look at what this study said and did *not* say. First of all, most of the relieved headlines focused on the part of the study that showed that children in high-quality daycare had cognitive and language skills better than those in low-quality daycare. In fact, improving the quality of daycare had much less impact than expected on improving the child's emotional and cognitive functioning. More important was the quality of the home environment. What then, will strengthen the home environment?

The data pertaining to emotional attachment was more clear. The findings showed that for *non-risk* families, the *more* hours in daycare, the more the mother-baby relationship appears to be at risk of being adversely affected. Interestingly, it is a two-way street: *both* the child *and* the mother appear to become less engaged and responsive. Specifically, a *mother's* ability to sensitively respond to her child at three years of age was still affected by the amount of separation experienced when the child was *six* months old. Similarly, the more hours spent in substitute care in the infant's first six months, the less positively engaged that *child* was with the mother at three years of age. The detrimental effects of mother-baby separation over time were also *cumulative*: the more total hours of separation, the less the infant was positively engaged with mother at two and three years of age. If we agree that attachment and emotional development are critical for healthy, well-functioning children, then encouraging parents to place their infants and young children in daycare at early ages and for long hours does not appear to be in their children's, and ultimately, society's best interests.

Things Unmeasurable

I have respect for studies that attempt to grapple with the issues of children's growth and their response to different environments. I must comment, however, on what is *not* measured. Science cannot quantify important social qualities such as compassion, courage, character, and moral vision. These traits are inextricably linked with attachment and emotional development. Do we really believe that these and other important values can be reduced to learning objectives and effectively taught in all-day early childhood group settings?

It is hard to see the reality of how children develop into whole human beings. When one sees a young child riding through the supermarket in a grocery cart pushed by a parent, or helping with the laundry, it is easy to think nothing significant is happening. These seemingly ordinary moments can hardly compete with media images of smiling reading circles led by certified teachers and stimulating primary-colored environments filled with the latest sparkling "developmentally-appropriate" toys. It is easy to trivialize, even denigrate, the simple day-to-day mother-child world. Some feminists and child care advocates are uncomfortable even using the word "mother" and prefer the more politically correct "caregiver." They believe focus on "mother" is

oppressive, and that we should ensure that women and men approach their parental roles with absolute equality, or perhaps sameness. Yet children understand gender differences and yearn for connectedness to mothers and fathers, each with their own unique qualities. Children do not cooperate with politically-expedient social agendas.

Policy Implications

Let us take a moment to focus more directly on the recent policy conversation. Despite the fact that the latest research confirms the importance of attachment, we are paradoxically calling for expanded government support of daycare. The new daycare and brain research is being presented in a way that ignores unpopular, factual findings and instead is media-packaged to persuade Americans of the need for higher taxes and new federal programs. When daycare is presented not as an option, but as the model for the future, we have to ask ourselves, why? Perhaps many of us have become discouraged and embittered by the avalanche of statistics on rising youth depression, drug use, violence, children born to single mothers, etc. But we are in danger of prescribing the poison. In response to reports of alienated children, and incompetent or disempowered parents, we are prescribing institutional solutions for *all* families that will result in more familial disconnection, further eroding typical parents' confidence as the most important source of nurturance to their children.

A favorite argument is to say, "sure, more parental time with kids is best, but the days of staying at home are over." In fact, the majority of parents of young children work out arrangements that do not require both of them to work full-time (see Appendix). A recent post-election poll (The Polling Company, for the Independent Women's Forum, November 1996) found that only 15% of parents believe daycare allowing both parents to work full-time was a solution to balancing work and family. Other polls echo these beliefs. To claim that a national system of full-time daycare is the only viable economic reality or the model for family life in the future is just not valid.

One-Size Solution Won't Work

The push for a federally-supported, universally-available system of daycare is the mission of many child advocacy organizations. Those who speak out to "improve and expand" daycare as we currently provide it often state that government support would not affect those who choose not to use it. This is dangerously naive. Those that are free to choose will be "free" at a financial price. Across the economic spectrum, many parents will feel forced to seek employment and take their children elsewhere to be cared for by others. With little societal support or validation for the role of the at-home parent, many parents may succumb to the obvious economic incentive of "free" daycare. If government only extends financial incentives for daycare options, extended school programs, and other parental substitutes, we will be eroding support for the healthy autonomous families and communities that can and do exist.

When this argument about government incentives is raised, daycare advocates retreat to the emotional pull of the worst-case scenario, using the welfare, high-risk, or inner-city impoverished child as a wedge to develop social programs that are then prescribed wholesale for healthy not-at-risk families. Some of the NICHD data show that at-risk children may benefit from some aspects of *high quality* daycare, whereas non-risk families overall showed an opposite effect: the more hours in daycare, the less positively involved was the mother with her infant.

This complexity about the risks and benefits of daycare for young children must not be dismissed or ignored because it is politically uncomfortable. Not all parents need extra help, but there are two groups that do. Most obvious is the grave set of needs of disadvantaged, hopeless children in forsaken schools, with unwilling or incapable parents. This is of grave concern to all of us and demands action in the form of foster-care reform, family resource centers, high quality daycare, home support and community-based parent education. However, we must not assume that parents are any less central to their children in these cases.

A *different* problem is the crisis in middle-class and affluent mainstream families, where child drug and alcohol use, suicide, depression, and moral confusion are also on the rise. Children in these families have potentially capable parents who have become convinced that hands-on parenting is less important than other demands on their time. They often believe that parental functions taken over by professionals, including daycare, is superior and thus a win-win proposition for parents and children alike -- and the more, the better.

The Needs of Children and Their Families

Programs that further take children out of their parents' hands are the *last* thing that families need. Policy and cultural solutions should insure that parent education and early childhood development programs stress and support parental time spent with children. The information we now have underscores the importance of time children spend with parents from infancy *through* the teen years. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 9/10/97) reported that teens want and need more parental time than they are currently receiving. These study results concur with the Carnegie Corporation of New York study of ten- to fourteen-year-olds ("Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century," October 1995) which found that pre-teens were desperately in need of more attention and time with adults. We need to convey this strongly: parents are irreplaceable to children.

It is hard to overstress how vulnerable families are today. A struggling family can be profoundly influenced by another one in which the parents have organized their lives to have one parent at home for most or all of the child's day, or to be home after school. Rather than forward a social-political agenda for expanding the number of children in daycare (and the hours spent there), why not commit ourselves to protecting every parent's opportunity to spend time with her or his children. We can support family leave and workplace reform, substantial tax breaks for children, neighborhood schools, and parent education which recognizes and supports the value of what parents do for their children.

I challenge Congress to choose a better, more humane model for the future. Rather than a grim, subsidized, institutionally-controlled society, let's aspire to make possible a more egalitarian society, accepting and incorporating the unavoidable truth that children need their parents. Our modern ideas about women and men must not preclude the beauty of a mother whose heart is fully open to love and nurture her infant -- a mother who is not hesitant or emotionally distanced because separation is weeks away; a mother unembarrassed to love being a mother; a mother fully supported by her spouse, her family, and her culture.

Appendix

The 1994 Bureau of Census Report "Who's Minding the Kids?" shows that *non-employed* mothers care for 47%, or 9.1 million of all pre-school children. Well *over half*, or 61% of young children are cared for by mothers when parent tag-team arrangements (10%) and mothers with home-based employment/businesses (4%) are added.

The 1996 Current Population Reports, Consumer Income P60-197, published by the Bureau of the Census shows that:

- a quarter of all married couple families have children under age six (24.7% or 6,470,000)
 - Two-thirds (65.7% or 4,252,00) of these children are cared for by a non-employed mother or a mother employed part-time.
 - Over one quarter (27.6% or 1,787,000) are cared for by a non-employed mother.
- In married couple families with children under age 18, the median income for families with husband and wife both employed is \$57, 637 (\$64,026 for two full-time earners). The median income for married couples with a non-employed wife is \$38,835.

1/16/98

Note: Testimony was also provided by: Dr. Benjamin S. Carson, Sr., Director of Pediatric Neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins University Hospital; Dr. Harry Chugani, Director, Positron Emission Tomography Center, Children's Hospital of Michigan, Wayne State University; Dr. Anthony DeCasper, Head, Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Dr. Edward Zigler, Sterling Professor of Psychology and Director of the Bush Center for Child Development and Social Policy, Yale University; and Carlie Sorenson-Dixon, "retired" tax attorney, at-home mother, and co-founder of several mother support organizations. For information about their testimonies, contact: Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families, Chairman Senator Dan Coats, Senate Hart Office Bldg. Room 625, Washington, D.C. 20510. Phone: (202)224-5800.