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The Importance of Mothercare

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"KINDLY REMEMBER —
THIS IS OUR QUALITY TIME"

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Before western technology was advanced enough to develop relatively safe artificial formulae for infants, the separation of an infant from its mother was virtually a death sentence for the baby, particularly if a "wet nurse" was not available. The fact that infants can now survive and even thrive on artificial milks has apparently misled governments, social engineers and even some families into imagining that infants and young children can thrive despite long periods of separation from their mothers.

Research indicates otherwise. Artificial milk formulae are not a perfect substitute for breastfeeding, and even well beyond the breastfeeding age, young children have a great emotional and psychological need for their mothers' personal care and presence. According to British psychiatrist John Bowlby, well-known for his theory of attachment, "the attachment relationship that a young child forges with his mother forms the foundation stone of personality." Bowlby writes in his book *Attachment and Loss* that "the young child's hunger for his mother's presence is as great as his hunger for food", and that "her absence inevitably generates a powerful sense of loss and anger."¹

Infancy & lactation

The advantages of breastfeeding can be quite simply stated: breastmilk is the perfect "miracle" food for babies, individually tailored to a baby's requirements. Its composition changes not only from week to week as the baby grows, but varies in content depending on the time of day. Breastmilk helps protect babies from a range of diseases, as well as having a role in the prevention of early obesity and allergies. Breastfeeding also has beneficial effects on jaw development and speech patterns.^{2,3}

For successful lactation to be established, it is essential that babies are not separated from their mothers. As it is not only World Health Organisation policy but also the policy of the Australian Health Department that "breastfeeding is the preferred method of nutrition", one wonders why Australian government policy is biased against those mothers who wish to care fulltime for their infants, and why substantial financial incentives are available to those who leave their babies in creches. Government child care subsidies appear aimed at separating mothers from their infants, in clear contradiction to government health policy. Both Liberal and Labor governments in Australia have spent millions of taxpayers' money - and plan to spend millions more

- in paying for and subsidising child care centres while actively discriminating in the taxation system against the single-income family where the mother stays home to care for her children.

It is significant that in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe since *glasnost* and *perestroika*, women are protesting about having to leave their infants to go to work. They say, "the goal should be to create an economy where women do not have to work."⁴ The USSR, finally admitting statistics on rising infant mortality and falling female life expectancy over the past several decades in the Soviet Union, has now begun paying allowances to mothers who stay home with their babies. Australian governments appear to have learned nothing from the Soviet experience - Australian taxpayers are compelled to subsidise strangers to look after babies in creches, but low-income mothers receive no subsidy enabling them to care for their own.

Attachment

In the USA where the child care industry is more "advanced" than in Australia, experts are beginning to have serious reservations about the effects of daycare on children. *Who Will Rock The Cradle* is the edited transcript of two important Conferences on Child Care held in Washington DC in 1988 and 1989.⁵ Contributors include paediatricians, psychiatrists, psychologists, politicians, managers of daycare centres, and well known writers such as Midge Decter, George Gilder, Harold Voth, and the editor of the book, Phyllis Schlafly, who is President of Eagle Forum, USA, and a Member of the Commission on the Bicentennial of the US Constitution.

Among the researchers cited is psychologist Jay Belsky, who in the seventies thought that day care did not adversely affect child development. Belsky has now changed his mind and points out two worrisome trends: infants in day care are more likely to develop insecure attachments to their parents, and several fol-

low-up studies of children with a record of early non-parental care show more serious aggression, less co-operation, less tolerance of frustration, more misbehaviour, and at times social withdrawal.⁶

In the February issue of *Child Development*, Belsky and Michael J. Rovine report on the evidence from two longitudinal studies of daycare children. Infants placed in daycare twenty hours a week or more were more likely to be classified as insecurely attached to their mothers than those who spent less time there. Research involving middle-class children in Dallas found that those who spent extensive time in daycare were more uncooperative, less popular and had poorer grades and study skills, and less self-esteem by third

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grade. (A research study published by Australian National University, Canberra, 1989, of 31 high schools in seven countries, showed that a loving home was the key to good marks at school).⁷

Other research cited in *Who will Rock the Cradle* is by psychiatrist Peter Barglow and colleagues at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago, who examined 110 one-year-olds from affluent families. Half were cared for full time by a parent, half had stable hired caretakers. The substitute care infants turned out to have significantly less-secure relationships with their mothers.⁸ The researchers concluded that many infants interpret daily separations from their working mothers as rejection, which they cope with by withdrawing from her. This finding corroborated another study of middle-class children in Michigan. It found that one-year-olds in fulltime daycare displayed greater avoidance of their mothers than did parent-reared infants. Another study of five to eight-year-olds who had spent most of their first years at a highly regarded daycare centre at the University of North Carolina, discovered they were more likely to hit, kick, threaten and argue than those not in daycare or who had started later.⁹

Penelope Leach, British psychologist and author of the child-raising handbook, *Baby and Child*, is another leading opponent of the trend towards mothers having to go to work and leave their small children. Leach insists that babies need individual care for at least two years.

Deborah Fallows, author of *A Mother's Work* went to hundreds of daycare centres and saw what hundred of social scientists refused to see: the pain, loneliness, confusion and boredom of many toddlers in group daycare. Her book gives wrenching descriptions of children enduring tedium, much bewilderment and unconsolated tears.¹⁰

Another Schlafly source is Dr Burton White, former director of the Harvard Pre-School project and author of *A Parent's Guide to the First Three Years*. White maintains: "After more than 30 years of research on how children develop, I would not think of putting any infant or toddler of my own into any substitute-care program full time, especially a centre-based program. Unless you have a very good reason, I urge you not to delegate the primary child-rearing task to anyone else during your child's first three years. Babies form their first human attachment only once."

Child psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg says that regular absences by the mother can be damaging for children under three. Only from ages three to six can most children profit from a half-day in high-quality group care. But even then "there is consensus among preschool educators that the benefits of a good preschool program diminish or are even cancelled when the school day is prolonged to six hours or beyond."¹¹

Research by Mary Ainsworth at the University of Virginia, Mary Main at the University of California and Alan Sroufe at the University of Minnesota, has consistently shown that the pattern of attachment developed in infancy and early childhood is profoundly influenced by the mother's ready availability, her sensitivity to her child's signals, and her responsiveness to his need for comfort and protection.

When a child is confident that his mother is available, responsive and helpful, he develops a pattern of secure attachment. Extensive research shows how patterns of attachment that have been developed by 12 months of age are not only highly indicative of how the child will act in kindergarten, but how he will act as an adolescent, as a young adult and as a parent.^{12,13,14}

While the scientific and medical evidence shows the impor-

tance of a mother's consistent and ready availability, it does not show the need for a perfect mother. Paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who was as influential in England as Dr Benjamin Spock in America, showed that the conditions for secure attachment are fulfilled with what he called "good-enough mothering" and "holding" the child. Winnicott said that adequate "holding of a baby is indispensable to emotional development and essential for developing the child's capacity for empathy. The child should experience his mother as a "good and happy" person, and should also know that his mother sees her infant as a "good and happy" person. Later the child internalises and draws on these images

to comfort himself when the mother is not present. These same images are a reservoir from which the child can draw as he comforts others in his adult life."¹⁵

Disease risk in child care centres

The American Medical Association has warned that daycare centres, where drooling, napping, toy-sucking infants put their fingers in their mouths an average of every three minutes, were becoming dangerous sources of infections. According to the US Centre for Disease Control and other authorities, daycare centres are responsible for rising levels of diarrhoea, dysentery, giardiasis, epidemic jaundice, hepatitis A, ear and cytomegalovirus (CMV) infections. The *Paediatric Infectious Diseases Journal* in 1988 reported that "the data are now convincing that half of children younger than age 3 who are cared for in group daycare with more than 50 children are likely to acquire CMV." CMV is not only a hazard for babies but even more to their mothers if they are pregnant. CMV is known to invade the womb very easily and can cause deformities in the unborn baby during the first half of pregnancy.¹⁶

Dr Reed Bell, a Pensacola paediatrician, says that "children in daycare, especially infants and toddlers, are at increased risk for acquiring and spreading infectious diseases, compared to children not in daycare. They have more respiratory, gastrointestinal, skin and epidemic childhood infections, and are at a higher risk for serious secondary infections such as meningitis, than are children in home care. Children in daycare have infectious diseases more often, they are more severe, and they have more complications, than children in home care." The official recommendation of the American Academy of Paediatrics is that children under two should be cared for only with their own brothers and sisters.¹⁷

In Australia, on-going research at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, (to be published during 1991) indicates that the incidence of influenza B (which occasionally develops into meningitis) is far higher among children who attend child care centres than in children cared for at home.¹⁸

Babies need individual care

Phyllis Schlafly has fought strenuously against the Dodd-Kildee ABC Bill for child care, a piece of legislation introduced into the US Congress in 1988. This Bill, if passed, would provide government funding for government-licensed child care centres, but nothing for parents who care for their own children or who use private child care services by relatives, church-based centres or other options.

In *"Who will Rock the Cradle"* Mrs Schlafly, herself a mother of six, says, "With respect to children under two years of age, the evidence of researchers is unanimous - being separated from

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parents, and especially mothers, for an extended period of time on a regular basis seriously weakens the child's attachment to his mother, and this weakened attachment results in damage to a child's emotional and intellectual development. Children deprived of parental care in early childhood are likely to be withdrawn, disruptive, insecure or even intellectually stunted. New research from the Cleveland Clinic even suggests that the depression resulting from separation anxiety in early childhood can cause a permanent impairment of the immune system, making these children prone to physical illnesses throughout their lives."¹⁹

Enormous cost

At present all of the aggressive efforts of the increasingly powerful child care lobby head in the wrong direction. These activists insist that helping mothers stay at home when their children are very young is absurd since "working" mothers are a "reality." Feminists vehemently oppose any policies which would encourage or even financially enable mothers to have a choice about being fulltime homemakers. They also oppose the idea of a homemaker's allowance, income-sharing between spouses or the payment of child care subsidies direct to mothers rather than to centres.

In Australia it costs \$186 per child per week in a government child care centre. Of this amount, parents pay weekly fees of \$15, the rest of the cost for many families is covered by federal, state or local government subsidies, which are available not only to low income parents but also to those on incomes as high as \$68,000 per year. A fraction of this subsidy, paid direct to mothers, would give many of them the choice of staying out of the paid workforce while their children are young.

In Victoria (and no doubt the situation is similar in other states), among the *Women's Budget*,

1990-91 initiatives, Mrs. Kirner announced that 1195 child care places had been created at a cost of \$6 million to the Victorian Government and \$8 million from the Federal Government, a total of \$14 million in all, i.e. a cost of \$11,715 per child per year.²⁰ (This cost is higher than the fees at the most expensive independent schools). At the same time, the full-time mother who stays out of the workforce to care for her own children received nothing. This injustice must cease.

Another example is from local government. The Municipality of Brighton, Victoria, in its \$5 million loan program, plans to borrow \$375,000 to build a child care centre adjacent to municipal parklands. The cost will largely be borne by ratepayers, many of them single income families who have made the sacrifice of foregoing a second income so that the mother can be home while the children are young.²¹

There is also an identifiable push by federal and state Labor governments, unions and feminist groups to pressure employers and companies into providing work-based child care, by offering tax deductibility for expenses incurred. The ultimate costs will of course be passed on to consumers and taxpayers.

Another objectionable policy is federal and state Labor governments' aim to eliminate grants for those programs used by full-time homemakers, e.g. playgroups and kindergartens, while increasing the number of full daycare places.²² In December 1990, the Federal Government announced it had increased child care places by 400. This is a further major discrimination against mothers who care for their own children.

Liberal policy at the last federal election was to continue with existing Labor funding of child care places, but also to give tax deductibility for private child care to the second earner in the family. Neither Labor nor Liberal give any subsidy or tax deductibility to the mother who cares for her own children. Mrs.

Jan Wade, Shadow Minister for Women in the Victorian Parliament states: "The Coalition is at present developing a tax policy which involves a restructuring of tax resources. The benefits to families will certainly be less discriminatory than they are at present under the Hawke/Kirner Governments, and be more equitable and fair to families with dependent children."²³

It is up to pro-family voters and organisations to ensure that Coalition policy is genuinely equitable in regard to mothers who choose to care for their own children. Point out to your federal and state politicians the injustice in government funding of child care, and the discrimination against mothers who stay home.

Options for mothers

Rather than further subsidising substitute parenting with its many risks, we ought to endeavour to create options for the large number of mothers who would like to care for their own children when they are very young. There is much we can do in this area from providing substantial tax deductions for parents raising preschoolers, encouraging more home-based work and changing social attitudes about the contribution of stay-at-home mothers.

Geoffrey Lehmann, a partner in Price Waterhouse, in an opinion piece in *Australian Business* magazine, 17/10/90, wrote: Our current tax and social security system destabilises family life. Among primates, monogamy is usually the outcome of a stable food supply and the absence of predators. Taxation policies that discriminate against traditional families may be seen as a form of predation...

"As of June 30, 1989, it is estimated that there are 1,239,468 children in Australia aged 0-4 years. The government's doubling of child care expenditure over the next few years is designed to establish another 50,000 non-profit child care places and an additional 28,000 commercial sector places by 1996-96.

"It is apparent that very large

numbers of children and their parents will never benefit from these government outlays. It is also unlikely that these hundreds of thousands of children outside the subsidised child care system all come from wealthy families... Solutions must be adopted which recognise the structural changes which have occurred in our society. The clock simply cannot be turned back. Subsidised child care services are a stop-gap which takes power away from parents and gives it to bureaucrats.

"The only clean solution is to give a child care tax deduction to all parents with children below pre-school age. This should recognise that in a pluralist society different parents want different things. Some mothers want to go out to work, others to look after young children at home. Parents who pay a third party to care for the child should obtain a child care deduction. Also, if one parent stays at home to care for the child, the working parent should obtain a deduction for notional child care payments to the other parent...

"The argument of the social welfare lobbyists who want money for their own programs is that a child care tax deduction is regressive... that parents with a high marginal tax rate, for example 47 per cent, get more benefit than a parent on a lower income that is taxed at 38 per cent. The solution is to give the deduction by way of a tax rebate... It would be possible to set a rebate at 38 per cent so that for every dollar spent on child care, the parent would be entitled to a tax rebate of 38 cents from his or her tax, irrespective of the parent's personal tax rate."²⁴

The child's viewpoint

In the last decade our knowledge of infant development has undergone a scientific revolution in which some basic assumptions have been overturned. One is the idea that babies are merely passive consumers of experience, that they absorb - but

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do not seek out - the sights and sounds of the world around them. It is now clear that scientists previously underestimated infants' capacity for active participation. Researchers have now found for instance that an infant will increase its rate of sucking on a dummy in response to a recording of its mother's voice, but not after hearing a strange woman saying exactly the same words. The baby is showing a clear preference for its mother. Babies do not want *any* mother - they want their own mothers. An infant who maintains close, affectionate contact with its mother has a higher chance of healthy survival, and circumstances that disrupt the bond can have a profound effect on later psychological health.

Recently, *TIME* magazine had a special issue on "Women: the road ahead" analysing the effects of the feminist movement and its future. Most poignant quote was from Sheri Davis, 21, a senior at the University of Southern California: "I'm not willing to have children and put them in daycare. I've babysat for years and taken kids to daycare centres. They just hang on my legs and cry. I can't do that."²⁵

Although this paper is about mothercare, it is not intended to minimise the role of fathers. Research shows that fathers relate to, care for and play with their children in ways different from mother - and children need both kinds of relationships. To be able to be a "good and happy mother", a woman needs a husband who will care for and support her. West Australian author Alan Topper in *The Family in the Welfare State* emphasises that the government must stop discriminating against two-parent families and subsidising family breakdown. Government policy should be directed towards helping families stay together: "Sole parent families tend to give children less support, and they are

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commonly formed by a separation and divorce process which children usually find emotionally traumatic, sometimes with severe and lasting after effects."²⁶

A favourite tenet of the feminist movement holds that babies and young children don't need a mother's full-time care, that it is the "quality of time" a parent spends on a child that counts, not the quantity. "Quality time" rationale runs like an incantation through feminist literature for career women. This assumes that mothers and fathers are never too tired at the end of a working day to give a child "quality time", even while they are cooking dinner, doing dishes and laundry, and hoping to get the children to bed early so they can relax themselves. The absurdity of "quality time" is obvious by the fact that it is not used in the office - feminists don't say to their bosses or co-workers: "I'm too busy to spend more than an hour on this job, but it will be high quality time."

The biggest problem with substitute care is that there will never be enough people willing to take care of other people's children. Even those who are willing, are being asked to do for money what very few of us are able to do for any reason other than love. A child care worker is doing a job - if she is kind and reliable, that is all you can expect. Only the baby's mother and father can give the baby a sense of permanent love, the feeling that it is the most wonderful baby in the world. Our federal and state governments should make it possible for all babies to feel securely loved.

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