

I'll be here all week - the societal risk of universal daycare

I have been working with small children nearly all of my adult life. As a student I trained to teach school, as an adult I have taught K-12 and still do so, and as a parent I have raised 4 children. I took time away from my paid work, many many years away, to do the unpaid work of raising children.

I want to share some of the insights of these years of not just exposure to both worlds, children at home and children in institutions, but to raise a red flag about some of the dangers. There is no one 'right' way to raise children. I have seen small children in chaotic and violent homes with drug addiction for whom a setting away from the abusive parents would probably be a good thing. I have seen middle class homes where children were given every conceivable toy they wanted and super indulged for most requests, but who were dropped off at daycare daily for 8 hours as young as 3 years old. I have seen kids in grade one so starved for attention they made all instructional hours mayhem if they could, and whose background was a life so far of daycare.

I have read copious amounts of literature about children, about women's rights, and the claimed merits of certain care styles, for women, for children. Over the years I've watched the case being made for daycare, the renaming of it to childcare then to early education. I've read the arguments for how it will socialize kids, give them 'readiness to learn', and how for parents it will enable them to do their paid careers, to 'work', to use their training and skills. I've read about the union backing of daycares, the lobbies for it heavily funded by trade unions with questionable actual knowledge of the workers. And of course I've seen government under pressure to do the right thing for women, perplexed about what that may be, and caving in to the daycare lobby as if that was what all women wanted.

I have seen kids crying following behind a parent as they are dragged to daycare, kids hurried into cars, balking, kids happy to get to the daycare, kids depressed, shy, balking, kids having tantrums they wanted do badly to go home, kids angry at the parent and making some small statement resisting going home.

I've seen women desperate to be home with their children and crying at the paid job because they were there instead, women torn, in distress at not being where their heart was. And I've seen women speaking with relief to be away from their children, women sobbing big public tears of how they desperately need daycare so they can be away from the kids earning. I've seen women using the daycare so they can go to the spa themselves, shop, go the gym, have lunch with friends. I've seen the rich using daycare at low cost in Quebec even though they could afford to pay more and I've seen the very poor forced to use daycare that costs the state more than the salary they earn, situations where the taxpayer loses money and still the law requires it.

I have seen daycare and afterschool locations and kindergarten settings in big rooms and small, ones with large windows and ones with none, ones with concrete playgrounds and ones with outdoor sandy climbing equipment and seen a common thread of what I find very troubling. It is not in the staff, though partly, not in the location though partly, not in the funding, though partly. The problems run even deeper. I have not 'seen it all'. You can never see it all. But I have seen enough. There are insights I want to share about observing kids and human nature for 40 years.

Am I biased? Yes. I am biased in favor of kids. I am appalled at some of what I have seen. And it is not about Big Brother trying to indoctrinate kids into some government policy, everyone chanting little Maoist slogans in toddlerhood or anything. It is not even that organized. The problem I am seeing with mass institutionalization of kids from very young is not a government 'agenda' to corrupt their minds at all. It is a government agenda to try to get women and men all paying taxes, an agenda to treat kids as obstacles and their care as an irritant in the intense focus on paid work, productivity and competition in the marketplace.

People assume a mother who was or is at home is biased, old-fashioned, unliberated. And yet what may be surprising is that the ones at home are nowadays the most revolutionary, daring to buck a system and are the most feminist, daring to enlarge the definition of what 'work' is, what the GDP is, and what the economy really depends on.

Yes I have seen 40 years now of parenting styles but there are common threads and they come from the nature of children and of people in general. Just like babies still have to be washed by hand, there are commonalities that we have been ignoring in our rush to put all kids somewhere else so we can get women earning. I don't make these observations to justify choices I made or to get others to do as I did. What I did was very very labor-intensive and difficult. It was a lifestyle that government penalized very heavily by increasing poverty and significant social stigma. Not everyone is prepared to endure all that and no one should have to. My work of these 40 years has been to make the system fairer, for those who chose what I chose and also for kids in any situation, and for parents. I am looking very hard for the win-win. It is not in universal daycare.

What kids need

A baby needs clean diapers and warm milk, cuddles and love. A daycare can give the clean diapers though not as often changed as one might wish if the adult-baby ratio is high. It can give warm milk but it will not be able to give breastfeeding which pediatric association around the world have found is best for babies to age 1-2 years. It cannot give cuddles as much as one might hope if there are too many babies also wanting to be held. And it cannot give love because you can't legislate love. People who work in daycares tend to be ones who 'love children' though technically that is an odd thing to say anyway since children are so different. The will of the daycare worker is strong to be 'loving' even if they don't technically love each child, but kids know the difference. The most you can hope for of genuine emotion is 'liking'. As a teacher who has taught thousands of children, I can attest that I have loved none of them but I have liked some, I have been professional and polite and kind to all of them and those I had to reprimand I have never really disliked personally. I have done the role of 'teaching' them, whether they liked me or not, to try to keep them on the path of honesty and virtue society endorses.

But kids have a strong sense of when they are loved. They gravitate to the playful, fun, happy person, the cuddler, the person who speaks in genuine language not faked babyish jargon or that faked tone of voice some use when speaking to children. Kids want authenticity, real language and normal speed, and they know when a smile is a real one. Daycares can't offer that since they

are formalized ritual places. Most kids by age 12 ache ache ache to get out of daycare, often kids by age 8 or even 6.

When kids don't feel valued for who they are individually, but are just mass-treated and lock-stepped, they are too young to know it could be different and for a while may seem to go along with it. But in just a few days or weeks their very self-focused minds and bodies will want to do something differently, will have a question or insight that is off the schedule, and they will find their individual needs are an irritant to the system.

Kids need dependability. They just go here, new in town and they want to know what in this area stays the same, what they can absolutely depend on. They dare to bond with an adult and they dare to hope and expect this person will be there for them whenever they cry. When that person is not there, when mom is off at her job, and the new person is someone else they lose a stability. They can adjust if this new person is the one always there but if the new person also changes to a 3rd or 4th over the course of ages 0-6 the child quite quickly learns there is no stability there.

Kids will bond with what is constant. If the constant is this daycare worker, they will treat this person as a mother, and some parents have a real jealousy problem with that. Others think it's good and are happy to have someone else clothe and wash up and do hair of their infant, letting go of the bond that might have been for them. But what daycares then do is to have the child 'graduate' each year to a new caregiver. The adult world might celebrate this as progress but for the young child this is a new loss of stability. The bond they made with the daycare worker was for nothing. They have to start over. Given enough years of this they stop trying and they bond with only what is the same, their peers. This has been dubbed 'peer attachment disorder' by some psychologists and we are seeing it a lot now in the schools. Kids could not care less what adults around them say, and are not even risking trusting adults to stick around. They only try to impress and please their little friends because those are the relationships they can count on. Entertainers often say who they are on stage and tell how long their show is. running at this location. " I'll be here all week" is a statement of a kind of dependability. It 'slike 'If you need me, don't hesitate to call'. It's like the fast food store or the overnight pharmacy or grocery

store, the health clinic or emergency ward that is always there is you need it. But parents have stopped being that to kids. They have said they are not available for 8 hours a day most days and kids can you imagine it, so young, have to cope with this realization. The parents have walked away from their very young.

The kids are not left alone. They are just left without an anchor.

That scenario of impermanence is played out even more when daycare workers are young, untrained, with not much invested in this job and with sights on other careers or personal life eventually. With low wages, cramped working conditions and long hours many daycare workers jump ship as soon as they can so the turnover of employees is very high. The result for kids is even more troubling- the rotation of faces of adults around them is ramped up even faster and there is even less reason to bond with anyone who is taking care of them. We are therefore contorting the mental health of our young. We are pressuring them by default, into feeling alone in the world, using role models of the immature, the blind leading the blind so to speak and we are depriving them of a sense of society being individually nurturing. We took from them the vital role parents historically have always had - the for-sure- presence to the very young.

It is this at the route of many psychological problems, from the ones who withdraw into their shells in sadness, with depression and even autism I would suspect, to those who get angry and become bullies, aggressive, biters, kickers, those with tantrums. How is a child going to express its sense of being pushed to locations it does not want for long hours against its will every day, away from those it loves? It is in the warehousing of little kids that we see the routes of social alienation, the us versus them psychology that can breed criminal behavior, selfishness, gang membership. It is in the feeling of lack of being loved and noticed as individuals that we see the routes of early sexual activity from young teens, of early experimentation with drugs and alcohol from kids who have been over regulated and who want to break free.

Who caused this? We did, when we took from kids their love bond with parents from the very start.

Academically we still see a lot of kids having trouble reading, kids hating math, dropping out of school before they finish grade 12. A lot of kids fall by the wayside and we have many many labels for kids now, not just the growing litany of behavioral labels but also the academic ones. It is a new fad to classify kids and then get extra funding for their care. But what really is a child who has a disorder called 'attention deficit'? In my experience this child is nearly always just one who is very wired, hyperactive, desperate for attention. Do we give this child a stable, calm, one on one environment from the early years or do we mass-treat this child so competing for attention is the name of the game? Lately we have done something even worse, medicating this child just to get them out of our hair. I see that as a really unkind solution, practical maybe for the adult and for other kids nearby but very inappropriate for the needs of the child involved. Yet we have done this when we warehoused kids.

Kids need to feel unique but not like little gods. We have to set boundaries, to socialize them into the laws of the land and have them respect the police and those in authority. Yet we have created with daycare an oddity. Parents knowing they are going to be forced to use daycare, use their time with the kids in very predictable ways, human nature wise. The parent is rushed so many of the interactions are preoccupied ones. The parents both have jobs outside the home so both are on their cellphones and taking business calls and getting their own briefcases and business suits in order some of the time they could be spending with the child. They are obliged to go to evening meetings, committee hearings, out of town conferences and so even the time they could spend with the child is reduced.

So what do they do? They try to make up for it. When they do turn off the cell phone and actually notice the child they exhaust themselves doing so. They then try to become 'super mom' and 'superdad'. They try to buy the child's affections and assuage their guilt when they leave the child so often by purchasing lots of toys and clothes for the child. They enroll the child in lots of classes, pottery, gym, swim, tae kwon do, spinning, anything and everything. This way they can prove to themselves somehow that they are great parents, that even though they are away a lot their kids lacks nothing and is having a superior childhood.

The child then is not just rushed to daycare every morning but is also rushed evenings and weekends all over town to other classes. So what is wrong with that?

On the one hand nothing. The child is learning even more social graces as it were, assuming that just standing near other little kids is so great for development of the personality. And the child is learning to swim, do gymnastics or whatever skill is involved.

But if you understand little kids you will also know that kids have opinions of their own. They may not want to do the dance course or the violin course the parent decided they should. They may want some free time not just structured time. They may actually dislike these lessons which allegedly are to make them happy and the lack of attention the parent pays to the child's own wishes can be quite hard on the child's understanding of a caring world.

What is happening is the desperation of a parent for 'quality' time as if kids can bank up all their affection and questions and bonding needs for scheduled intervals. They can't.

We also see in little kids a desperation for parental affection. Why is it that little kids are going to bed later and later/? Why are they resisting so much going to bed? It is because during this one less scheduled part of the day there is a tiny window where they just might be able to get attention from the parent. The parent does not look at it this way and is tired and wants some free time so the child's cries for a longer bath or another story or a drink of water are irritating but the child wants someone to just 'hang out' with him. The child is needy of the one-on-one lacking all day.

So we have even deprived kids of sleep because we have set up these routines that make them little assembly line workers on an adult work day schedule as young as age 3. We have robotized our culture, nearly from birth. I am appalled at seeing lines of cribs or high chairs or playpens or cots. I am appalled at treatment of kids as cogs in a machine. I am appalled at seeing little kids taken

down a street walking in a long line holding onto a string. Would any adult like to be treated this way? Why would we assume kids like it?

The daycare is not a healthy place medically either. It is fraught with germs, overrun with viruses and bacteria and you just can't avoid that. There are germs on the carpet and in the stuffed animals, on the blinds and doorknobs. There are germs in the saliva of kids as they suck every toy and in their noses when they sneeze, in their mouths when they cough and certainly in their urine when they are toileted and do not wash their hands. These are children. They do not know how to stay clean and the spread every single illness each of them has to everyone else very fast. You can sanitize the room and the next day it will be germ-ridden again. Teaching young children I nearly always get sick. I have had flus, colds, pink eye, and yes even head lice. It is a risk of the trade and daycare employees are often very sick. Do we want this for our kids?

There is the theory someone dreamed up that this exposure to measles, mumps, colds, flus is good for kids and builds up their immunity. But what I have seen is way more troubling. One little child is sick and this sickness spreads through the daycare, and is taken home and spreads to the parents. They lose some paid work time for it or work in a cloud of illness themselves and we actually lose a lot of adult job productivity because of daycares. But more to the point for kids is we have little tiny ears and nasal passages struggling much of the time with germs they would not have to deal with constantly if they were not so mass-warehoused. We therefore have put kids' health at risk by daycares.

Kids have basic needs and then brilliance. You can teach them rote little things like nursery rhymes or to chant the alphabet or the numbers and call that 'early education' but frankly I believe every single child is way way smarter than that and deserves more. But daycares can't give it. The staff does not have the time to attend to the learning style of each child, has no time to even hear the confused little queries of every toddler, has no time to try to understand the hesitant garbled pronunciations of every one year old. So what we lose are 'teachable moments' every single hour of every day at a daycare, for every child. There may be effort to teach kids with reading them a story or letting them play with the sand table, or play house with the plastic dishes but the brilliant mind of the child is being watered down to some low level functioning since the adult in the room cannot spend time at the higher levels.

There is inadequate language stimulation. With lots of kids in the room, the adult can't even hear the comments or questions of everyone and can't answer why birds sing or why roads go both ways or what his mark is on their knee. The employees of daycares often, sadly, do not always even speak fluently the language of the child so their ability to role model speech is limited. This is not a racist comment but one about factual language competence. If we are trying to teach kids to speak, the instructors should be good at the language. And if we are aiming at high level functioning not just basic, the speakers should be able to create rhymes, to do verbal tricks and create puns and know and contort and enjoy language games.

If the child has a troubling thought or question, some misunderstanding about snakes or ghosts or witches or cars and does not get that question answered at 2pm but has a nightmare about it at 2 AM, the person helping him through the nightmare can't hope to understand if don't know what went on at 2PM. With changes of caregivers day and night what we get is a lack of continuity, a lack of making the world seem logical and explainable. Kids with such big gaps in the explanations they hear, even when they do hear them, either withdraw into shells and never try to get answers or they stop even wondering and they just dumb down their inquiry. They focus on silly things like who has whose toy, because those are things the caregiver does listen to. And so we make sacrifices bigtime in the academic training of kids when we put them in daycare.

When parents can't be with their kids there is also an oddity of human nature that makes them contort the discipline process. They don't want to have their time with the child unpleasant to the child or adult so they make it an unreal aura of happiness. They let the kid have his way. They become way more tolerant of misbehavior than they might be if they had to live with this child 24-7 And then they expect the daycare or the school to iron out the problems. And so I am seeing in the kindergartens some very hard to control kids, very prone to misbehavior, spoiled if you will, because their parents have never laid down the law. These parents all through the child's growing up then define themselves as buddies and get angry at teachers and principals if their child gets low marks, or if any misbehavior of the child is reported at school. The child, in their books, can do no wrong and they expect the teachers to also

indulge their offspring. But this stems from not knowing their child well and not having to live with their child.

A parent who is not in a hurry, not rushing out the door to leave the child, will not be afraid to have rules and will know that the child's sadness right now that he can't have chocolates for breakfast will be offset in an hour when they go play at the park. The parent knows that over the course of a day the good times will outweigh the setbacks, that the hairy moments of tantrums if they come will be smoothed out with storytime and cookies in the late afternoon. But we have deprived parents and kids of these relationships developing, of the slow and gradual discovery kids have to make about life. We have thrown them into the cement mixer and told them to survive so of course the kids are angry and of course parents overcompensate.

We have told ourselves that only in a daycare will a child's needs be noticed, that that is where we will catch those who are hearing impaired, visually impaired or needing speech therapy. We are told that 'early intervention' will save children. And yet who are we really trying to promote here?

Parents observe their babies very very closely. They study them with an intensity no one else gives, with an exposure to the child over time no one else has. Nobody knows the child like the parent does, if the parent is with that child for any period of time. So it is usually the parent who notices and worries about speech, vision or hearing problems. It is usually the parents who notice thyroid glands swelling, urination coming too often, medical signals that the casual observer won't see and that the overworked daycare worker certainly is too busy to see. So with daycare we are actually risking kids getting less medical attention not more. We deprive the child of the most likely to notice person and put them with the person least likely to notice.

The rationale that daycare is good for kids is simply wrong. Not mistaken, not an opinion only, but just statistically wrong. It harms them medically, psychologically, socially and academically. It does not do this on purpose. It does this by its nature. It is a place with little real intellectual stimulation, an environment of overcrowding with little language stimulation, great health risk, not enough physical exercise or exposure to nature, overregimentation of the

day schedule, too long a 'work day' to be humane for the young but its biggest flaw is it is not a place where the ones who love the child are in attendance.

We have done great harm to kids by putting them into daycare. Any government move to do more of the same is not good for kids.

conclusion

When you tell your child not to run with scissors, not to charge across a busy street without looking, not to smoke or drink the child will think you are trying to keep them from pleasure. They will resent your intrusion and sure enough you will eventually have a society where adults are permitted to do all those things, and take the risks. But the warning is because there are real dangers. The desire is to protect people from them, to avoid the great suffering that may ensue. I feel that way about daycare.

It is nice to say 'different strokes for different folks' and to just let people choose. And so we must. This is a democracy. But daycare is a very high risk thing to expose kids to for any significant length of time.

Any government policy that prefers funding for daycare over other care arrangements plays favorites with kids and by definition is unfair that way. But the preference for daycare over sitter, nanny, grandparent or parental care is particularly problematic since that is the least good way to tend children. For the reasons above, we must not as a state fund daycare. Fund kids yes, but not daycares.

What kids need is to hear someone who loves them say, and mean it 'I'll be here all week' They need someone on call, always.

What women need is recognition of their work wherever they do it, their paid work away from home, their paid work from home, their unpaid care work at home. Tilting the equation does not liberate women.

Beverley Smith

Canada