

The incompatibility of childcare for the under-threes

Childcare outside the family in the early years is now so entrenched, normalised and formalised that parents of children who remain at home during this time are encouraged to believe that their children are missing out on something crucial for their development.

It seems to have escaped everyone's attention that until relatively recently, the majority of under-threes were cared for by their mothers, or occasionally by fathers or grandmothers, at home.

Not so long ago, formal learning, teacher interviews and reports was left until school age.

In the normal course of events, staying at home in the early years was, and still is, a great way for children to receive love and affection, excellent learning and socialisation suited to their age and development from their parents, extended families and wider social groups.

How have we come to this?

Childcare outside the home for the under-threes gained momentum as more and more women wanted and/or needed to go back to paid-work/careers during the first three years of their children's lives.

The main reasons for this are a combination of the following:

- Real financial need due to relationship problems, single parenthood, poverty.
- Work arrangements and obligations tied in with relatively short paid maternity leave (three to six months). Women, often unaware the first time round of the emotional wrench of leaving babies and toddlers in the care of others, are usually left with no choice when their maternity leave ends.
- Perceived financial need related to social and economic pressure caused by the steady rise in the general standard of living (private schools, several bathrooms, home extensions, mandatory holidays, eating out and so on) over the last fifty years, which people now view as the norm.
- The rising cost of housing in capital cities. Many couples take out loans on the assumption both will be contributing to the mortgage.
- Paid work brings self-fulfilment and career opportunities. It is inequitable that men have always had unquestioned access to career and family while women have always had to choose. The rise of feminism last century emphasised and raised women's awareness of this (mine included).
- Many professions are structured so a woman's advancement takes a plunge if she has time out to have babies and then spends two or three years at home with them. It is then difficult to play catch-up.
- It is hard for women (or men) to have to depend on another person's income. Even in a perfect relationship, there is an imbalance of power when one person earns money and the other doesn't. It may only show up in tiny ways – 'well, I work all day, I shouldn't have to cook, clean or change nappies' –

but it has the potential to hang around like a sticky mist getting gluggier and gluggier.

At worst, it completely disempowers the non-earning partner, usually the woman, who has no way of escape.

- Life at home caring for babies and toddlers can be lonely, frustrating and boring. It can also be depressing because care of young children at home by mothers has historically been over-idealised and under-valued.

These are all fair points but, apart from financial hardship where bringing in money is crucial in order to pay the rent and put food on the table, or in extreme environments where domestic violence is an issue, they are all about adult interests and the babies and toddlers just have to suck it up.

Or putting it another way:

The only children in the under-three group who actually benefit from childcare (as opposed to children cared for at home) are those in abusive or dysfunctional families. In these situations, childcare is used to keep the family unit together and to give the baby or toddler crucial social and educational opportunities not available in the home, or to protect them.

The useful idea that childcare is not solely about the adult interest but has advantages for the under-threes, evolved during the eighties and nineties, a time when many cars sported bumper stickers proclaiming, *'childcare good for parents and babies too.'*

Not only was it viewed as 'good' but, taking the theme further, it was proclaimed that as it gave the under-threes social, developmental and educational advantages, it was better than being at home (claims still being made).

Such claims offer reassurance and rationalisation for mothers for whom the idea of leaving their babies and toddlers is painful.

Ergo, childcare is just as good – even better - than being at home, so don't feel guilty, don't worry.

But, of course, mothers, driven by that illogical, biological, emotional connecting bond called mother-love, do feel guilty and do worry. Fathers, despite 'stepping up' in ways their fathers didn't, still seem to largely escape this personal trauma about leaving their babies and toddlers in childcare.

Childcare outside the family in the early years is now so entrenched and normalised that even women who stay at home during these years are encouraged to believe that their children are missing out on something important.

Childcare for the under-threes, however, is at odds with the normal development of this age group.

The first three years is a time of rapid development that brings many idiosyncratic erratic behaviours. Toddlers don't respond well to being rushed to meet adult timetables. They need time to adjust to the pattern of their days. Their inner world is chaotic, so their outer world needs to be predictable and certain. This means they rely on the person they are firmly attached to, usually their mothers, to be there to help them.

They are not good at socialising in the way adults think of socialising. They simply don't have the skills to be jolly in a noisy group of other toddlers for extended hours where there are no avenues for escape. Under these circumstances, resorting to biting, thumping and grabbing is normal behaviour.

Bouts of illness are inescapable in this age group as they build up their immunity. Night-waking is common as is being up before dawn's early crack, none of which is an easy fit with two parents in paid employment.

The best that can be said about childcare is that it's unlikely to be harmful for most under-threes. Children are resilient, they adjust to childcare and many, as they get closer to their third birthdays, eventually grow to like it.

But, as educators and parents are aware, the under-threes never complain about being picked at the end of the day the way they do when they are left. Note the look of hope in the eyes of toddlers when the door opens and some lucky kid's mother arrives early to pick him up.

If the home is stable and secure there is unlikely to be long-term problems solely arising out of childcare in the early years..

It is not my aim to scare the wits out of good parents who have no choice about group care in the first three years. I seriously doubt childcare is damaging for children in stable, loving homes. For me, the issue is about their quality of life at that time of their lives. Parents of normally developing babies and toddlers don't need reports, boxes ticked, failures spelled out.

Babies and toddlers from good homes don't need to be surrounded by educators and presented with nutritionally-sound hot lunches. They are better off with a banana sandwich and most days spent with an adult who has a parent-like commitment to them - that is their mothers or if that is not possible, their fathers or a grandparent.

As we have virtually no other answer to the continuing dilemma of paid work and motherhood, childcare is not going away. Urging governments to spend more and subsidise more childcare costs helps adults but still doesn't provide what children need in those early years. It is also financially unfair to families where one parent stays at home.

The reluctance to consider the actual developmental needs of the under-threes as opposed to how we can reinvent those needs (by re-badging them as 'educational') so they slot nicely into the convenience of childcare, is not doing parents any

favours. Nor is pushing childcare as essential and educationally advantageous to normally developing babies and toddlers from loving homes.

It needs to be clearly understood that childcare is all about the adult interest, not the child's and is, in most cases, a second-rate option. Rather than trying to convince them that childcare for the under-threes is the norm, prospective parents should be encouraged to think of ways to avoid it, or at least minimise it as much as possible.

Concerns about childcare in the first three years are not new:

Erica Komisar, Being There: Why Prioritizing Motherhood in the First Three Years Matters, (J.P. Tarcher, U.S./Perigee Bks., U.S. 2017)

Steve Biddulph, Raising Babies (Harper Collins, 2010)

Anne Manne, Motherhood (Allen&Unwin, 2005)

Children First, Penelope Leach (Vintage, 2011).

Robin Barker 2023

I am opposed to the normalisation of placing babies and toddlers up to age three in group care. The attached file gives my reasons for this.

In view of the fact that taxpayer subsidised group care remains virtually the only option available for most parents and that group care is given funding priority and widespread approval my main points are the following:

*Unless babies and toddlers are living in extreme poverty or isolation or in abusive or dysfunctional families, group care in the first three years is solely about the adult interest - the economy, self-fulfillment and career opportunities, escape from 'domestic drudgery', perceived financial need (as opposed to actual financial need).

*The promotion of group care in the first three years as being 'normal' even 'advantageous' is dishonest.

*Group care in the first three years is incompatible with normal development of this age group.

*While it is difficult to prove long-term ill effects from group care - I happen to believe that in an otherwise normal home environment this is unlikely - it is easy to observe that group care for the under-threes provides a markedly diminished quality of life to that of being at home with a parent. Contrary to what is being put to parents, there is no evidence to suggest that children in this age group are advantaged in any way by being in group care unless they are living in extreme poverty/isolation, abusive families or have a disability which requires specialised care outside the home to optimise their development.

*Finally, I draw attention to the following past practices which now horrify us but which were seen as 'normal', even advantageous to the children concerned, at the time:

1. Corporal punishment in the home and in schools ('a good beating never did me any harm etc'). It is now illegal to administer corporal punishment in schools.

2. Children as young as seven being sent to boarding school. This, of course, still occurs but there was a time when this was promoted as being 'advantageous'. There are many books written explaining how this practice has caused deep-rooted psychological and emotional problems continuing throughout adult life.

3. The removal of babies born to 'unmarried' mothers. This was often forced but even when women attempted to keep their babies they were placed in impossible situations to support themselves and their babies. Note that when the single parent benefit arrived in the 1970s, the adoption rate virtually ground to a halt despite the common belief that the removal of the babies was best practice for both mother and baby.

4. Child migration, mostly from the UK, up until the 1980s when it was believed that disadvantaged children would benefit from being separated from their parents and handed over to orphanages. Many children were lied to - for their own benefit - about their parental status. See, Orphans of the Empire, Alan Gill, Penguin Books.

5. Childbirth: Up until the 1980s many women gave birth alone attended to by hospital staff. Fathers and loved ones were not allowed into the delivery suite, nor were fathers able to hold their babies until the mother and baby were discharged.

6. Up until the 1980s, visiting hours in children's hospitals were minimal and generally strictly adhered to. Once babies, toddlers and older children were admitted their parents had to depart and were only allowed one hour a day, two at weekends. This was viewed as being 'in the best interests of the baby, toddler, child.'

7. The forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, often done with the best of intentions, remains a running sore in the history of Australia and other countries.

I understand that comparing contemporary arrangements for non-parental care of children in the first three years with any of the above can be viewed as unhelpful exaggeration, however, the underlying concept remains the same. History shows that we humans are very good at dissembling - pretending that certain practices that are advantageous to our adult selves are of benefit - even of 'great' benefit - for our children.

Robin Barker



