

Childcare Scare.(international aspects of childcare)(Brief Article)

by KATHA POLLITT

© COPYRIGHT 2001 The Nation Company L.P.

Depending on who's counting, one in four, five or six American children lives in poverty, the highest rate in the industrialized West. Nearly 11 million have no health insurance. Hundreds of thousands are in foster care. Five hundred thousand are homeless. The infant mortality rate in the inner cities of Washington, New Haven, East St. Louis and Chicago rivals that of Malaysia. There is one thing America has, though, that you won't find in France or Denmark or Sweden or Italy, and that is the persistent conviction that children would be just fine if only their mothers would give up working and stay home.

Consider the media feeding frenzy around the latest research released by the National Institute for Child Health and Development. Just about every paper has given major play to its finding that 17 percent of children who regularly spend thirty hours or more a week in childcare between the ages of three months and four and a half years are aggressive, disobedient and defiant in kindergarten, versus only 6 percent of children who have spent less than ten hours a week in childcare. (Childcare, by the way, is everybody but Mom, including nannies, Dad and Grandma--so forget equal parenting, and forget, too, the nanas and bubbes and aunts and older sisters who have taken care of small children for centuries while mothers toiled in the fields or behind counters or over laundry vats long before "working mothers" existed.) Buried in the coverage is the study's other finding: that high-quality childcare is associated with better cognitive and linguistic skills. Unmentioned is the fact that only a few years ago welfare moms were lambasted as lazy and useless for staying home with their children by some of the same right-wing ideologues now crowing on TV about the NICHD study. The truth is, the daycare debate has always been about college-educated working moms--women with good jobs some think they shouldn't have, and children every quirk of whose development is of interest to the opinion classes.

As it happens, Jay Belsky, who has gotten the lion's share of the press attention and is often cited, incorrectly, as the study's lead or even sole author, has been warning against the dangers of early childcare since 1986, when he claimed it caused babies and toddlers to fail to bond with their mothers. That didn't pan out but Belsky is all over the press now, boasting of his lack of political correctness in bringing people the unpleasant truth. "I won't lie down and play dead," he told the New York Times. Elsewhere, he has recommended not only parental leave but that mothers reconsider full-time work. Sarah Friedman, Kathleen McCartney and other researchers on the study

don't agree at all. "This study was conducted by a team of some thirty researchers," Friedman told me. "His view is not the majority view." And she adds, "the type of analysis does not allow us to infer causality." In other words, childcare may not cause aggression but may be associated with something else that does--family stress, exhausted parents. Says Deborah Vandrell of the University of Wisconsin, "Mothers should stay home? Childcare is bad for kids? The data don't support that." And indeed, the study isn't so dire: Most kids in childcare are fine; the problematic behavior falls within the normal range; moreover, kids kept out of childcare double their rate of aggression when they finally get to school, suggesting that Vandrell may be right when she theorizes that the results mostly reflect the opportunity for aggressive behavior, and that kids would benefit from better conflict-resolution skills. (In an all-caps e-mail to me, Belsky professed himself "appalled" that McCartney put this idea forward on Face the Nation--he claims the study refutes it--and accused his colleagues of focusing on childcare quality rather than quantity because they don't want to be "unpopular.")

It's easy to take potshots at social science, so I'll just note in passing that one of the criteria for "cooperation" is "keeps room neat and clean without being reminded." It does seem like yesterday, though, that Bruno Bettelheim was blaming the group care typical of an Israeli kibbutz for making kids too sociable, too compliant, not ruggedly individualist enough. I know, it sounds crazy now--have you ever met a laid-back Israeli? But then, as Caryl Rivers pointed out on Women's E-News, back in the 1950s stay-at-home moms were blamed for producing a generation of molycoddled wimps unable to stand up to the communists. If middle-class working moms really did trade the briefcase for the stroller, not only would lots of them be poor and frustrated, but within five years we'd be reading about spoiled, feminized sons and angry, condescending daughters already plotting their escape to Lesbian Island.

My French friends find the American debate over childcare utterly mystifying--all French 3-year-olds go to the ecoles maternelles, and many are in creches long before that. In European countries with long-established childcare systems, the American suspicion of daycare does not exist. (Vandrell noted that the European papers haven't even reported the NICHD study.) But then, why would it? European parents have government-paid parental leave and government-funded childcare systems staffed with well-trained and decently paid professionals. In this country, paid leave is a rarity, and daycare is like babysitting: Any warm body will do. Pay is abysmal,

Childcare Scare.(international aspects of childcare)(Brief Article)

training rare, formal standards low. And, of course, the very conservatives who champion the NICHD study oppose every attempt to raise those standards, because that would cost money, encourage "bureaucracy" and go against the know-nothing faux libertarianism that is their political stock in trade.

There's another difference, though: Although everywhere childcare is connected to women's employment, in Europe childcare was developed as something that would be beneficial for children, like nursery school; in this country, it's seen as something for women--women, who if middle-class shouldn't have jobs and if low-income shouldn't have kids. Daycare in America is about feminism. That's why no matter how many studies appear touting the benefits of high-quality childcare, the ones that hit the headlines are always full of gloom.