Zero to Three

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Infants in Day Care: Reflections on Experiences, Expectations and Relationships

by
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Day care, as an important experience for very young children, cannot be separated from our continued attempts to appreciate and understand relationships in general. Day care must be thought about and seen as occurring in a context of other relationships and as containing relationships.

When "relationship" is highlighted and articulated as the true issue for children, parents and caregivers, the understanding of what day care is shifts. It is only when *relationships* are recognized as the major issue that changes in the quality of care can happen that will make the day care of children more appropriate.

Understanding the experience of infants in day care does not, as it sometimes seems to, primarily involve an understanding of issues of separation. In fact, that focus as the major issue of concern may be far more central to the experience of the parent than it is to the experience of the child. There is a separation, of course, both as an event in reality and as a psychological process, but it all happens in a context—to very differently functioning children, with very different relationships with their parents and in very different day care circumstances. In addition, children in general have varying experiences with separation from major parental caregivers in situations other than day care.

We have expectations regarding the tolerances of infants and toddlers for separations, that reflect parental needs and cultural styles. These expectations are not necessarily either natural or unnatural in some absolute sense. They are there. American babies for example, are known to nap alone and even sleep alone all night. Often too, mothers disappear when they lean over to tuck in the bedding and they're out of the line of sight of their infants who then may howl or may not howl. Mothers also go to the bathroom (though

in my experience less frequently alone than they would like) and mothers may even go shopping while someone else cares for their sick child or just because they want to go shopping alone or with a friend and sometimes all day. In this culture—that is the way it is. On the other hand, surely no caveman or cavewoman ever sought a small cave next to theirs in which to place their infant at night. Sleeping with infants is probably evolutionally "natural" or at least has a very long

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history. More of the world does it than does not. It behooves one, then, to think very carefully about where we draw lines on what is clearly a continuum and to pay attention to why we are deciding that X is ok but Y is not.

The real task is to try to understand as much about infants' and toddlers' capacities and needs as we can and then to apply that to our understanding of children's experience and particularly to the individual child's experience, and that includes "day care."

First of all, of course, the phrase "day care" itself subsumes a wide range of caregiving arrangements for children. Licensed center and licensed family day care are in the minority—representing a far lower percentage of out-of-home care than other arrangements.

The real task is to try to understand as much about infants and toddlers as we can, and then to apply our understanding to the individual child's experience, including the experience of "day care."

More frequent arrangements include a neighbor who keeps several children, an unlicensed home where numbers of children are cared for, or a private arrangement with a friend or relative. It is interesting that in many of these latter arrangements concerns about separation and about the evils or virtues of day care barely arise. The same person who might deride center care may cheerfully drop her own child off with her mother each morning or have had three au pairs in her home in 14 months. Clearly, the *fact* of separation is not the issue for this woman; although arrangements which result in her not feeling guilty about her child's care may be her concern. So separation per se is only a part of a far larger and more important issue.

I have seen more than one child left in the care of a grandmother so incapacitated that the care was literally dangerous. I have seen mothers leave their infants with relatives whom they dislike and distrust and by whom they have felt ill-treated both currently and in the past. The virtues of this for the children were certainly limited, though quite real. They were with someone who had an ongoing meaning in their life, who may have conveyed her special investment in some way, and who would continue to be an important figure. Though even here, situations are very complex.

Recently, a young woman was referred to us after calling a Talk Line out of fear that she would injure her 19-month-old child. He was, she said, horribly aggressive and had been totally impossible from birth. In fact, what we learned was that since his birth, Jose had been left all day, 5 days a week with his parental grandmother while his mother worked, and that this grandmother had gone back to Nicaragua three months before. Joe's day care situation had shifted to a neighbor who had 6 children in her sole care and whom the mother herself described as rough and volatile.

It took time for this mother to appreciate the meaning of any of this. It took time to help this mother experience that her son's loss of his grandmother and subsequent inappropriate care arrangement were the major sources of Jose's very difficult behavior. She was able to

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NANCY P. ALEXANDER

remember that he had, in fact, not been "aggressive and impossible from birth." Their difficulty is resolving very nicely in the context of our program's weekly visits and a better day care situation.

In fact, this child had lost not only one major caregiver but had also effectively lost another—his mother. Because of her lack of understanding and her angry response to his expressions of grief, she was not available to him in any familiar reassuring way. His grief and despair burdened and angered her, and she rejected and punished him. When the mother was able to understand her son's experience, the problem for them both began to resolve, even though the loss of his grandmother's care remained a real loss to Jose. Jose is deeply attached to his mother, and with her restoration to him, he is functioning quite well. An appropriate day care experience is also salient to his good functioning. After the loss of his grandmother, his need for a day care environment which could be truly responsive to him was even more vital to his well-being.

Sometimes it may feel to parents that they have somehow abandoned their child when they have left their child in a day care center or professional family day care home, but that they have not abandoned that child when he is left with a grumpy and almost wholly incapacitated great aunt. The assumption that care is all right because of consanguinity is about as sensible as assuming that biological parenthood automatically assures sensitive and thoughtful childrearing. And this is illuminating. In either case the care may or may not be adequate. It may be only that the parent will feel less guilty in one situation. This is certainly not unimportant; guiltlessness will have it own effect on the parent-child relationship. But what assuages the discomfort may be irrational.

What is it, in fact, that might make a parent feel more comfortable? Without a clear awareness of why it might really matter, the parent may feel comfortable in leaving a child when the child has a relationship with someone—a grandmother, a neighbor, or a friend.

There may be an unarticulated recognition of the importance of relationships even though in much of what any parent would read or hear, "separation" is often more discussed as an issue. In fact, in situations where a child is cared for by a neighbor, friend or relative, not only the child but the parent has a relationship with that caregiver. The parent really *knows* who that person is and therefore has some faith, misplaced or not, in the appropriateness of the child's care. The same is often true of care provided in the child's home where the "sitter" becomes known to the parent as the two casually exchange daily information of all kinds.

This continuity for the parent, this reassurance, is often missing, though it need not be, in other kinds

of care. In centers or other non-relational care, caregivers tend to be pressed for time, as is the parent, and sometimes out of discomfort the parent behaves as if there were a sharp division between two worlds and she simply leaves her child with an uneasy faith that he will be all right. She does not think, because it may seem irrelevant in these circumstances, of the "relationship" of her child to the adults or of her own to them; she only hopes that he is safe, fed and won't cry too much. Relationships between people are not necessarily conceptualized as the centrally important factor in day care, and the various continuities which are based on the adult relationship are often insufficiently appreciated.

As Sibylle Escalona assured us, infants can be relied upon to put together the available nutriments from their environments. The infant whose primary substitute caregiver is truly available for a responsive, respectful relationship or the infant who has several primary caregivers over the course of a long day—all of whom are appropriately available, has the opportunity to form some meaningful relationships. We would, of course, wish to limit the number of individuals to whom an infant must relate, and relate is the operant word. We want the experiences of the infant or toddler to be predictable and familiar, and the interaction to have within it those elements which allow the infant to experience her needs as recognized and responded to appropriately.

The infant whose primary caregiver is truly available for a responsive, respectful relationship—or the infant who has several appropriately available primary caregivers over the course of a day—has the opportunity to form some meaningful relationships.

Such responsivity cannot be a consistent feature of a child's experience in a truly satisfying way if one person feeds, another diapers, another rocks and another sings songs. That degree of fragmentation creates relationships which are undoubtedly too shallow and too abbreviated. However, even if several people do all of these different things during certain serial time periods, a child is probably capable of establishing a sense of mutuality and effectiveness, and that is the major crucial and important factor. In these circumstances, infants will establish their own hierarchies of preferences, both between people in a general way and between people in specific ways. They certainly do this in family relationships. In the mood for hi-jinks? That's Uncle Bob's forte. Stomach ache? Mother handles that well. And Daddy is terrific at wandering around pointing at environmental adventures—like wiggly worms, airplanes, and dogs digging up the front lawn; besides, he has that specially silly sound he makes before he snuggles you in the tummy.

We allow and expect these predilections of infants and toddlers in the ordinary course of events, and they do not worry us at all. So too, the primary substitute caregiver will have her strengths, as will the parent. Overall, however, if there are no serious impediments to the parent-child relationship a parent has far more than an edge. There is no question that by and large the parent's investment in the child—his or her claiming of the child—is transmitted in unmistakable ways. No one else is so likely to make the child feel as good about herself, as special, as important or as valued. This unique sense of well-being and self worth guarantees a powerful reciprocal response toward the person who generates that experience. And this person exists in the familiar surround of things and space and people that is where you come from and return to. There has never seemed any reason at all to worry that responsive parents will not matter most to a child.

So what are we worried about when small children are in day care? We think about their moment-to-moment experience. We do not want a child to feel lost or abandoned or to yearn painfully and endlessly for us and be helpless to fix things. This probably means, then, that separation experiences need to be titrated so as to become tolerable. It is not a good idea to be almost always available to a child and then suddenly leave him for 8 hours, 5 days a week, whether at 3 months or at two years. Over time, and in doses, the child must be given the opportunity to establish a relationship with the person with whom he is to be left.

And here we get to the issue of individual differences, as well as previous experiences. Some children find relative strangers quite upsetting, especially when they abruptly assume roles other than that of stranger. As we know, certain children will approach after awhile, and others will take a very long time. Some children can tolerate a quiet, non-intrusive presence whom they are free to engage or not, but they will howl with anguish if someone decides to approach them. But the parameters of the category "stranger" are very different for different children. Such differences are not in any simple way connected to a child's age. Some two-year-olds are as wary as some 9-month-olds. And some 9-month-olds are as sanguine as an experienced, outgoing three-year old. Certain two-year-olds have almost zero tolerance for the absence of their mothers, while certain 9-month-olds adjust very rapidly. These varying tolerances reflect the temperament of the child, the quality of primary relationships, the child's experience with separation and the meaning of separation; even then this is all a complex transactional phenomenon with each of these things affecting the other.

One of the issues around separation is the issue of whether or not infants "remember" their parents—or what they experience in regard to them while separated. We know from Leon Yarrow's very early work that infants recognize a change in caregivers within at least weeks. We also know that infants and toddlers remember their parents when they are separated from them. If a five-month-old can remember and demonstrate to us that she felt negatively or positively about

one of two puppets which she encountered for 10 minutes one week before, then *we* are not likely to be forgotten. We don't need to wrestle with the differences between recognitive and evocative memory. The recognition of a familiar person and ability to call the person to mind in her absence are actually on a continuum; both are dependent on the child's experiencing certain cues associated with the person. In any situation, there will be sufficient internal and external cues to evoke memories of us in our absence. The cuing is subtle but very evocative. It *is* questionable, however, whether and when there is enough organized sense of our constancy and eventual reappearance to reassure and quiet the child's occasional yearning for us. Children may be soothed and comforted by others in their need for us to respond to all kinds of things—hunger, reassurance, play and attention—but will their need just to *see* us be totally assuaged? Probably not. So it matters even more that the care available at the moment does not leave the child feeling abandoned (This is equally true even when a child is old enough to know that we will come at 4 o'clock.)

It's clear that affective memories as well as cognitive memories are encoded. The affective memories are encoded long before language. It is not clear *how,* but the evidence is overwhelming that they are. The internal models of relationships—what they promise and how they work—are gradually organized around specific, discriminated people—mothers and fathers and siblings and aunts and caregivers. Which aspects of these relationship experiences will be triggered by what later encounters is undoubtedly very complex. But we are certainly safest in trying to ensure a basic optimistic core to all of these early relationships where we can do so. Most vital, it seems to me, is that the infant or toddler is cared for in ways that promote his feeling effective, respected and understood much of the time. The sense of having needs met—the sense that relationships hold promise—will hinge not only on parental input into the child's experience of safety and trust; it will develop as well within relationships with others. If this occurs both with parents and with caregivers, then we have far less about which we must be concerned.

Most vital is that the infant or toddler is cared for in ways that promote his feeling effective, respected and understood.

In addition to concerns about the child's experience in the moment, and mastery of separation, many of us have other concerns. What effect will early experiences in day care have on the quality of relationships which the child will be capable of in the future? Will the child have affective, unverbalized memories of abandonment and helplessness, and have poor trust in relationships? Are children monotropic—needing one kind of nurturance involving a single constant caregiver—and will they be damaged if this cannot be totally accommodated? We wonder whether, without this, a child will be capable of deep, abiding relationships characterized by intimacy.

In fact, these long-term issues can best be addressed by understanding and addressing short-term issues. Where care is taken to assure safe, tolerable and rewarding relationship experiences in the present, we are doing the best we can to protect relationships in the future. To be able to assess the effects of day care on a particular child, then, a parent must acknowledge—really know—that she or he is leaving the child with a particular person or set of people; the parent will have to notice what the child's relationship with that caregiver is likely to be. I am sure all of us know how unbearable that is for many parents who have no good choices; if they looked and understood, they would find the reality intolerable.

Parents who have no good child care choices may find it unbearable to look at and understand the reality of their child's relationship with her caregiver.

Perhaps it is now time to ask if we, as a society, indeed wish our children to be capable of deep, abiding intimate relationships. I believe our answer would be a resounding "yes," but we might wonder if intimacy is in fact a valued quality in the majority of personal relationships these days. If intimacy is *not* part of a person's life, does its absence represent "freedom"? Are we as a society experiencing a re-evaluation of human relationships? How do we approach the transmission of cultural values in the midst of massive cultural change? It is difficult to think about, for it, too, is a transactional, almost circular phenomenon. Our habitual linear, unidirectional thinking fails us when we try to decide if our society is *creating* a problem with intimacy and separation or whether individual problems with intimacy and separation are creating a societal tolerance, if not a need, for major cultural shifts.

We can expect that parents who are forced to rely on day care for their infants or whose internal dynamics more comfortably fit with shared care will have led the way, while others strain and possibly break under the demand to place their children in substitute care. We can argue that the demand to place infants in day care will be met increasingly easily by the children of the children whom we are creating, as they will have no difficulty tolerating separation and attenuated intimacy. Or we might argue that with awareness and care we can create children who will balance the demands for separation with sufficiently healthy relationships to adapt without great personal cost both to what society now demands and what it yet still treasures.

We must recognize that in addition to pressures on parents of infants to remain in the work force, there are other cultural demands for mobility, geographical

distance between nuclear and extended family members, and lengthy separations of infants and toddlers from their parents. It may be a three-year separation for little George, between the ages of 2-5; he is with Aunt Franny in Miami because his single mother in San Francisco can cope with her 7-year-old and her baby but not with him. Life for Jimmy consists of four days each week with mother and three with dad, now that he's two; his parents were separated before his birth. There are desperate immigrants who leave children behind for years and then reclaim them. This family of five has moved three times in three years in pursuit of work promotions. Clearly these phenomena are both causes and effects. Some people seem to adapt with apparent ease to experiences which others might feel as alienation from close human ties. I think we must come to grips with the basic questions we are really asking and be hard-headed in our responses.

In a world filled with massive separations and losses, the issue of separation in day care is of minimalist concern. Yet if we can think well about this issue, we may find paths to addressing larger social concerns.

As parents, we can allow our child in day care to miss us, but she should not miss herself.

We could probably all agree that in our society one must be dependent, independent and interdependent to get the best of what may be gotten. We ought not feel that we can simply take or leave particular people, but we must feel that we can function for greater or lesser periods of time both with them and without them—enjoying the reality of all of those states. We can only do this if relationships are inside of us in good and nurturing ways. It is that positive internalization of mutually respectful and contingent relationships that makes flexibility possible. I have written this essay alone, but I could really master doing so because I am alone in the presence of someone. My mother, my father and other important relationships are embedded in my sense of myself in relation to a world of mutually interacting people whom I basically trust and with whom I feel secure.

For infants in day care, their world of mutually interacting people includes their day care providers. These caregivers make their own important contributions to what infants and toddlers come to expect of relationships and how they experience themselves. Only if that care is responsive, understanding, loving and contingent will a child's sense of his central importance, competence, effectiveness, and trust and safety be maintained.

In effect, as parents we can allow our child in day care to miss us, but she should not miss herself. Her sense of herself, and of herself in relation to others should not be damaged. That is the major loss in being separated from a good and adequate parent. Separation itself may be painful in many ways, but it pales in comparison with the child's loss of an effective, competent, well-loved self or a socially competent self who can relate and be related to. There must be relating partners who much of the time respond to a child as he is and in terms of his needs. There must be a sensitive, *caregiving* relationship, not mechanical caretaking.

The child in day care internalizes an important relationship, one that mixes and matches, is concordant with or nonconcordant with relationships with mother, father, siblings, and others. The degree to which these interactions share basic dimensions of respect, responsivity and mutuality is the issue. The 15 minutes shared with Uncle Al cannot compete in the moment, and is a different category of experience from, 8 hours, 5 days a week with Martha, even though Uncle Al may be around for the next 40 years. It is true that Uncle Al will be a part of one's ongoing life, but the Martha or Ann or Bess who cares for an infant or toddler over long periods of time and then disappears will be tucked away inside, shaping the child's expectations and coloring what he imagines relationships can give him and what he can give them. Those expectations should be as hopeful and as promising as we can devise.

In closing, perhaps a quotation from a short story of Tillie Olsen's will convey what the essence is of what I am trying to say about parents, infants, and day care.

"She was a beautiful baby. She blew shining bubbles of sound. She loved motion, loved light, loved color and music and textures. She would lie on the floor in her blue overalls patting the surface so hard in ecstasy her hands and feet would blur. She was a miracle to me, but when she was eight months old I had to leave her daytimes with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all .... Then she was two. Old enough for nursery school they said, and I did not know then what I know now—the fatigue of the long day, and the lacerations of group life in the kinds of nurseries that are only parking places for children."

Tillie Olsen describes what will *not* do. While we must know that not all babies are miracles to their parents, while we must know that no baby is perceived as a miracle all the time by parents, we must also steadfastly insist that each child in day care deserves the highest probability of being perceived as unique, of being appropriately and respectfully interacted with and of having predictable, trusting, mutually determined relationships. By the same token, each parent, and each caregiver, deserves respect, understanding, and support for his or her unique investment in the child. If we can also find ways to help ensure mutually respectful, trusting, and ongoing relationships *between* parents and caregivers then we will have the best kind of shared care for the child.

Day care must not be a "parking place for children" but a viable, rich place for safely learning more about the very complicated but very worthwhile, things in the remarkable world of human relationships.