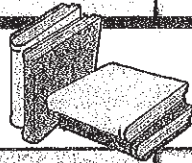


READING



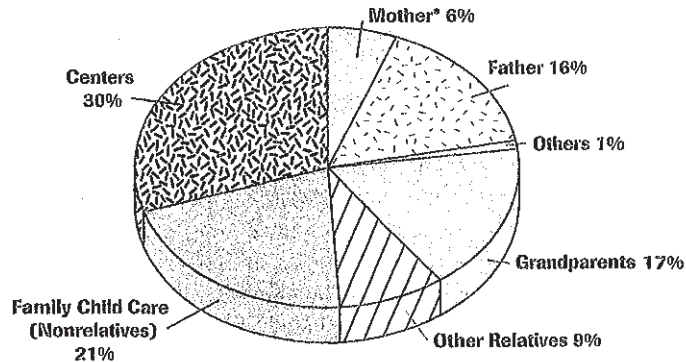
3

American Child Care Today

Directions: Read the following selection, then answer the questions that follow.

Debate rages about how children are raised in modern American society. All parties in this debate claim to be concerned with the quality of child development that results from the various alternatives. What is the historic view of caring for children? Is child development affected by care in child-care centers?

Primary Child-Care Arrangements for Preschoolers of Families with Employed Mothers in 1993



*Includes mothers working at home or away from home.

Source: Casper, L.M. (1996). *Who's Minding Our Preschoolers?* U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, 70.

Exclusive maternal care of infants and young children is a cultural myth of an idealized 1950s, not a reality anywhere in the world either now or in earlier times. Child care has always been shared, usually among female relatives. Until recently, most American children of working parents were cared for by other female relatives, but high rates of female employment have reduced that source of babysitters. What has changed over time and varies cross-nationally is the degree to which child care is bought in the marketplace rather than shared among female relatives.

Today, more American children are cared for by paid providers than by relatives. Relatives have, presumably, some emotional commitment to the health and safety of relatives' offspring, therefore, quality of care was seldom raised as an issue of concern. The predominance of non-relative care in the last decade has alerted consumers, governments, and the research community to the possibly damaging effect of poor quality care on children's development; . . .

In agricultural societies, infants are typically left in the care of siblings, grandmothers, or female neighbors, who are also caring for their own children. In industrialized societies, mothers' employment outside the home has necessitated nonmaternal care of vari-

ous types. . . Tracing historical changes in maternal employment provides a guide to the demand for and use of nonmaternal child care.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, and in nonindustrial parts of the world today, women are both economically productive workers and primary child caregivers. When employment moved outside the home and into the factory and office, men followed work into new settings, and women generally remained at home, without a direct economic role.

In a correlated development, mothers' roles as knowledgeable caregivers began to be stressed. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, child rearing was no longer a natural species response but a role that required extensive education and knowledge. Children began to have tender psyches that required maternal attention to develop well. Mothers were given an important emotional role in the home that complemented the fathers' economic productivity (Kagan, 1980; Scarr, 1984).

Prior to World War II, few women remained in the workforce after childbearing. The need for industrial workers during the war brought many mothers into factories and offices to replace men away at war. Mothers' employment was culturally sanctioned and

supported by the government provision of child-care centers attached to war factories. Mothers, as Rosie the Riveter, took on the many paid work roles that had previously been denied them.

After the war, government and cultural supports for mothers' employment were withdrawn, child-care centers were closed, and mothers were told to go home to make way in the workplace for returning veterans. The birthrate soared and new suburbs were built as federally sponsored highway programs fueled a boom in housing outside of cities. All of this was a direct result of government policy that held as ideal a two-parent family with a working father and a non-working mother, ensconced in single-family dwelling.

Erroneous predictions about an economic recession after the war, which became instead an economic boom fueled by unfulfilled consumer demand for cars, refrigerators, and housing, left many jobs open to women. Many mothers did not follow official advice to go home, and female employment has grown steadily since. Goods and services that used to be homemade (e.g., clothing, canned goods, and cleaning) came to be increasingly purchased, requiring additional family income. As the divorce rate and single motherhood soared, more mothers needed jobs to support their families. Today most mothers are employed.

In 1995, 62% of mothers with children under six years were employed. This rate was up more than 2% from 1994 and nearly 5% from 1993. Among mothers with children under two years, 58% were working in March 1995, up 4% from 1993 (1996 Green Book, as cited in Hofferth, 1996). The ideal of a nonemployed mother remained strong, however. One legacy for working mothers of the baby-boom generation and beyond is guilt about their employment. . . .

In surveys by *Working Mother* magazine in 1995 and 1996, readers expressed strong preferences for center-based care over home care, whether by relatives or not. Child safety and parental control over the arrangements were prominent reasons for the preference. Home care is unsupervised and usually unlicensed. Television exposés of abuse and neglect in day-care homes have appeared regularly over the last decade. Relatives do not always abide by parents' child-rearing preferences, such as toilet-training techniques and feeding routines. Paid help is more dependable and controllable. Child-care centers are open even if one caregiver is ill or on vacation (Mason & Kuhlthau, as cited in Mason & Duberstein, 1992).

There is an extraordinary international consensus among child-care researchers and practitioners about what quality child care is: It is warm, supportive inter-

actions with adults in a safe, healthy, and stimulating environment, where early education and trusting relationships combine to support individual children's physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development (Bredenkamp, 1989). . . .

Researchers have explored the possible long-term effects of day-care experiences in different qualities of care for children from different kinds of backgrounds. Children from low-income families are definitely benefited by quality child care, which has been used as an intervention strategy (Field, 1991; Ramey et al., 1985, Ramey & Ramey, 1992). Poor children who experience high-quality infant and preschool care show better school achievement and socialized behaviors in later years than similar children without child-care experience or with experience in lower quality care. For poor children, quality child care offers learning opportunities and social and emotional supports that many would not experience at home.

For children from middle- and upper-income families, the long-term picture is far less clear. With a few exceptions that can be explained by the confounding of family with child-care characteristics in the United States, research results show that the impact on development from poorer versus better care within a broad range of safe environments is small and temporary. Given the learning opportunities and social and emotional supports that their homes generally offer, child care is not a unique or lasting experience for these children.

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Source: Scarr, S. (1998). American child care today. *American Psychologist*, 53, 95-106.