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MOTHER-CARE VERSUS INSTITUTIONAL-CARE

"You know, Mrs. Schlafly, it has been scientifically demonstrated that babies do just as well in child-care centers as they do being cared for by their own mothers." Such was the positive assertion of a woman student on a college campus I visited recently.

Regrettably, her foolish belief is not unique. Many young career-headed college women are encouraged to accept that notion by their role-models among the women faculty members who have refused to allow motherhood to interfere with their career advancement.

Until recently, it was never thought to be necessary to prove what most people think is a self-evident truth, namely, that babies need mothers. Now, literature is beginning to surface which proves the proposition that babies need mothers.

Two exhaustive reviews of the literature on early child development have been published in the last couple of years. Both studies conclude that the research in the field of child development proves the importance of caring for children by their mothers (or mother figures) in the home in order to achieve proper child development.

Dr. Selma Fraiberg and Dr. Raymond and Dorothy Moore are all experts in their field. They conclude that the trend toward more and earlier out-of-family care is without any systematic research basis, and that mother-child discontinuity has negative social, emotional, and cognitive effects on children.

Their conclusions are based on the importance to the child's development of bonding (attachments). The Moore study shows that the preponderance of evidence indicates that the key role of a parent throughout the years of childhood is to be a warm, responsible, and consistent person to whom a child can safely become attached.

The study shows that early development and learning are actively dependent on this bonding between parent and child. This attachment also gives stability to the child's uncertain world and enables the child to develop a healthy self-reliance.

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Both Fraiberg and the Moores conclude that the strength and quality of the bonding is determined principally by the amount and kind of care given by the mother (or mother figure). To be successful, any surrogate who tries to assume the role of mother must become very much involved in positive ways with a child on a relatively continuous and consistent basis.

The Moores conclude that "the home appears still to be the best place for acquiring a healthy attachment. At present no substitute is known for the family in this respect. ... Most children cannot tolerate separation from their mothers before the age of five."

Both studies demonstrate that the attachment relationship of child to parent, especially with the mother, is of prime importance in helping the child to build a positive sense of self-worth and to adapt more contructively to the world outside his home. The child who faces life from the security of the traditional family structure will have strong, internal values and his standards will be less vulnerable to peer pressures.

The Moore study concludes that "unnecessary out-of-home or other alternative care may endanger the child socially, emotionally, behaviorally, and even academically." The Moores demonstrate that impressive, research-based data suggest that our society should encourage parenthood for pre-school children rather than try to provide alternatives whose worth cannot be proven.

Such developmental psychology literature is corroborated by the results of other studies by economists. Economists such as John Brittain have shown that parental time devoted to the care of children affects the cognitive development of the child and thus results in increased earnings of the children in later life.

Belton Fleisher used the National Longitudinal Surveys of the Labor Department to construct an index of mother's child-care-time input. He measured the years during which the child was under 15 and the mother worked less than six months of the year. He found that the child's earnings-payoff resulting from each year of the child's formal schooling was positively related to the index of the mother's child-care time before school.

Such studies indicate that the next generation of Americans will pay a heavy price for the current increased labor-force participation of mothers with small children.

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