

# Helping Parents Make Healthy Educational Choices for Their Children

Educators can guide parents toward developmental programs and away from educational hothouses if they are sensitive to the pressures that make parents anxious about their children's early schooling.

We are currently embarked on a social experiment of enormous significance. Never before in our history have more than half of our children below the age of six been cared for outside of the home on a regular basis for extended periods of time.

During the critical early childhood years, young children form lifelong attitudes toward themselves and others as well as toward their capacity for initiative and learning. If we bungle this experiment we may emotionally and educationally disable a significant proportion of future generations. How can we, as professional educators, help parents make informed choices regarding the care and education of their young children?

## The Demise of the "Traditional" Family

Family life has changed dramatically in the last quarter century. In the early 1960s some 60 percent of American families could be described as traditional—two parents, one at home, two or at most three children. Yet today, only about 7 percent of our families are "traditional." The prevalence of two-career couples, single parents, and so-called "blended" families has introduced economic, emotional, and interpersonal dynamics into parents' decisions about what is best for their young children.

The prevalence of new technologies and the transformation from an industrial to a service-based society makes these choices even more difficult. The

rate and extent of social change call traditional values—not only with regard to women, sex, and divorce, but



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also about children—into question. The Freudian-inspired concept of the "sensual" child, which dominated our thinking from the 1930s through the '50s, has been replaced by the concept of the "competent" child of the 1960s, '70s, and particularly the '80s.

### Disagreement Among Experts

Those who should be in a position to advise parents about what is best for young children do not themselves agree. Some writers, such as Burton White<sup>1</sup> and the Moores<sup>2</sup>, argue that out-of-home care is detrimental to the child's growth and development. White claims that children need to be kept at home at least for the first three years of life, while the Moores would like children to be reared at home at least until the age of eight. On the other hand, writers such as Schweinhart and Weikart<sup>3</sup> and Clarke-Stewart<sup>4</sup> argue that quality early childhood programs can be beneficial for young children.

The disagreement does not stop there. Writers who agree that children should be kept at home during the early years are nonetheless at loggerheads when it comes to the kinds of at-home programs they recommend. White, for example, advocates enriching informal interactions between parent and child during the early years. Glenn Doman,<sup>5</sup> in contrast, suggests that parents introduce formal instruction during the first year, including presenting children with flashcards depicting animals, the presidents, and famous composers.

Even writers who regard out-of-home care as not necessarily harmful to young children disagree considerably. Some writers and administrators, like New York State Commissioner of Education Gordon Ambach,<sup>6</sup> believe that early childhood programs should be a downward extension of formal education. In New York City, beginning in the fall of 1986, four-year-old children will enter kindergarten. Other writers like Edward Zigler<sup>7</sup> and I<sup>8</sup> advocate informal educational programs for young children that are adapted to their unique learning styles and limitations.

### Choosing Reliable Research

Given this professional Tower of Babel, how are we to help parents choose intelligently the best out-of-home program for their children?

First, we need to make our own way through this jungle of educational theory and opinion if we hope to guide parents. We do this best, it seems to me, if we follow the path opened by substantial research and experience rather than that suggested by unsubstantiated theory and opinion. There is considerable evidence from longitudinal follow-ups of Head Start children, for example, that out-of-home programs for young children need not be harmful and can be beneficial.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, there is no evidence that early formal instruction, such as that advocated by Doman, the Englemanns,<sup>10</sup> and others for children in the early years of life and by Ambach at age four, has any lasting value. Indeed, all of the evidence is against such formal instruction in the early years.

The cross-cultural data are a case in point. Denmark is essentially a middle-class country without our nation's extremes of poverty and wealth. Illiteracy is almost unknown in Denmark, and a strong national policy and sentiment support a literate populace. Yet Denmark's approach to reading instruction is developmentally oriented:

It is a general rule that no formal training whatsoever in the three *Rs* is given in the kindergarten class. Before children can learn to read, it is considered that they must have acquired a range of skills within the primary spoken language. Such skills are thought to be best developed through total real life experiences in a social context and related to natural language, not by the artificially segmented training provided by formal pencil and paper tasks. The reading would serve no purpose for the child and hence he might learn, albeit by accident, that "reading" is non-functional.<sup>11</sup>

Another sort of evidence for the ineffectiveness of early formal instruction comes from two recent studies of gifted and talented individuals.<sup>12,13</sup> These studies are instructive because the aim of many early instruction programs is purportedly to "raise your child's IQ" or to "have a brighter child." The investigators in one of the studies looked at 120 men and women who had attained eminence before the age of 40. In the other, the investigators queried more than 100 individuals who had been awarded the coveted McArthur Fellowships, given to individuals of exceptional talent.

In both studies the investigators asked questions about the role of parents in the achievements of their off-

spring. Their results were quite comparable. In the first study, of those who had attained eminence before the age of 40, both the children and the parents emphasized the importance of their culturally rich and intellectually stimulating home environment and the parents' role in providing support and encouragement. In the second study, involving about 50 of the MacArthur Fellows, the respondents again stressed the importance of the home environment and support—rather than pressure—they felt from their parents. The parents of these gifted and talented young people did not attempt to teach them math or reading at an early age, but rather created an environment that stimulated their child's interest and curiosity.

Substantial evidence supports the conclusion that introducing children to formal instruction in the three *Rs* (involving pencil-and-paper tasks) after the age of five is more beneficial than doing so earlier. Children who enter kindergarten before the age of five are more likely to develop learning problems and to drop out of school than are children who enter kindergarten after the age of five.<sup>14</sup> I am speaking now, of course, about mass education. We should not put any roadblocks in the way of children who seem to pick up reading, writing, or arithmetic on their own and should encourage and support their interest. But for most children, earlier formal instruction in the three *Rs* is not better.

### Education for Responsible Parenting

As professional educators, then, I think we can responsibly advise parents that out-of-home care need not be harmful to their young children, but that a high-pressure academic program for young children might have long-lasting negative effects.

Many parents, to be sure, will not be swayed by the evidence. Some of these parents may be victims of social influence: the children of their friends may be in high-pressure programs, and they may feel that their friends' children will have a "leg up" on their own. As one mother said, "If I don't put her in this program all of her friends will be reading and she won't be."

We can give permission to parents who are victims of social pressure to

do what they feel is right for their child, even when it seems to fly in the face of social practice. I often tell parents that it is all right to say *no*. Their children do not have to attend a high-pressure school or take ballet lessons just because their peers are doing so. Such parents need support in exercising their parental authority in a loving and caring way.

Other parents are simply overwhelmed by their work and responsibilities. One mother asked me how to teach her six-year-old son more healthy stress-relief mechanisms. When I asked her to explain, she said that she was a working single parent who had to leave her son with a babysitter before and after school. In addition, to give her son what she felt other parents were giving their children, she enrolled him in cub scouts, music lessons, and karate. When I suggested that she could cut down on some of the activities, she said that it was impossible. But she went on to ask if I could teach her son not to bite his nails and to do deep breathing or relaxation exercises.

We can sympathize with such parents and acknowledge their frustration that they have no options. Although they are talking about their children's stress, they are also talking about their own. Such parents feel reassured and supported if we acknowledge, honestly, the efforts they are making on behalf of their children. We need to tell them that their efforts are admirable and that in the long run, if not immediately, the child will appreciate them. But we also have to tell them that if they do too much at too great a cost to themselves, it may backfire. Children need their parents more than they need lessons and activities. Cutting down on some activities may not be an act of selfishness but a gift of parental time and involvement.

Still other parents overburden their children out of their own guilt. Although it has become socially acceptable for middle-class parents to put their young children in out-of-home care, even the most liberated parents may question this practice. Such parents are easy prey for the "earlier is better" rationalization that argues that out-of-home academic training is essential for later academic success. Such parents often enroll their chil-

dren in high-pressure, academically oriented preschool programs, believing that they are acting in the children's best interests.

With such parents it helps to acknowledge their apprehension about out-of-home care and to tell them that it can be stressful for young children to be separated from parents on a regular basis. We need to emphasize, however, that the stress of separation is lessened by a solid early childhood program geared to the child's developmental level. On the other hand, when the stress of separation from parents is compounded by the stress of a high-pressure academic program, the child risks adverse reactions.

### Strategies for Social Transition

Although some parents are more vulnerable than others to making the wrong decisions on behalf of their children, all parents have needs that require sensitive interpretation and response. A few moments of conversation with parents will usually give an educator enough information to make a "differential diagnosis." Parents who are victims of social pressure will often say something like, "But if I don't enroll my daughter in soccer at 6, she won't be able to make the team at 14." Often the theme of social acceptance dominates discussions with such parents.

In contrast, parents who are overwhelmed with their responsibilities and financial burdens will talk about all the things that they and their children have to do. The tension and speed of their speech conveys their sense of being trapped without options.

Finally, parents who are overburdening their young children out of guilt usually will express ambivalence toward the time and energy they have diverted from family life to pursue a career. "I really want to spend more time with Jennifer, but we are in midst of a major ad campaign and it is impossible. Besides, she loves that school and is already reading those little books."

The social dynamics of contemporary life are pushing many parents with the best intentions into making the wrong educational decisions for their children. Some parents respond to social pressure, others feel the bur-

den of financial obligations, others struggle with the guilt they feel in having to choose between career and family. Many other parents, of course, deal with some combination of all three pressure points in their lives. As educational professionals, our task is to identify the parents who need our help and to give them the information, support, and permission they need to make healthy educational choices for their children. □

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