

## **Academic Blood Sport: Behind the Polemics over Child Care**

In my first twenty years of motherhood, I tried every trick in the book. Nine weeks after my first was born, I returned to working sixty hours a week as an assistant professor of English. After my second pregnancy resulted in twins, I was home full time for several years. Thereafter I worked freelance, mostly from home, anywhere from ten to sixty hours a week--except when the ordinary crises of family life demanded a temporary return to full-time mothering. Like other "at-home mothers," then, I worried that my choices were taking an unnecessary toll on my career. Was I an oppressed wimp? A failure as a professional? But like other "working mothers," I also worried that I was short-changing my children in ways I would come intensely to regret. This was a decades-long neurotic trap, one that I know I share with the vast majority of other mothers regardless of their "employment status." I was just a Mom, attacked in the Mommy Wars from one side or another no matter how I lived, secretly wishing I were an omnipotent goddess. It was hard.

When the kids headed off to college, I found myself with both the time and the courage required to set this long uncertainty to rest at last. In some far corner of the university library, I was sure, there lurked clear, reliable answers to the doubts that had plagued me for so long.

But I was wrong. Even the most significant findings I could find struck me as fairly equivocal. Some studies do raise important questions about the impact of early child care on interpersonal development, but even the strongest critics of early child care repeatedly insist that the influence of child care is dwarfed by the impact of parents. For a stable, sane, essentially middle class couple, the small but real risks of childcare should be no more than one consideration in an extraordinarily complex decision. I'm much more impressed, for instance, by the fact that a year of full-time child care costs quite a bit more than the average cost of college tuition at a major state university--and this at a time in life when parents are probably still paying off their own education loans.

What stunned me as I did this research was discovering that appropriate scholarly and public discussion of childcare research is distorted by hostile disputes between competing schools of developmental psychologists, backed up by equally vitriolic controversy between molecular biologists and cell biologists. So I set out to track down the cultural origins of this insane polemic. That led me to write a book, recently published as *Selling Ourselves Short: Why We Struggle To Earn a Living and Have a Life*, in which the debate over child care covers two meaty chapters, fourteen pages of footnotes, and two appendices. Here I'd like very briefly to summarize what I learned about how this crucially important set of academic disputes distorts discussions of child care and sustains the Mommy Wars.

### **Disputes Among Psychologists**

The academic discipline of developmental psychology is bordered on one side by biology and on the other by the philosophy of consciousness. On the biological side one finds the behaviorists, intellectual heirs of Ivan Pavlov and B. F. Skinner. Research into early childhood from a behaviorist perspective has traditionally involved the quantitative analysis of observable behaviors. At what age does a child roll over? How many words does he know by age two? In

short, does this child have a brain that develops normally? Given the kinds of observations that behaviorists make, they confidently--and reasonably--conclude that infants in ordinary child care do not grow up abnormal in some manner akin to the abnormality of baby song birds who grow up without hearing other birds sing. Child care has no discernable impact upon the set of behaviors that behaviorists study.

On the philosophical side of psychology, so to speak, one finds researchers who trace their intellectual ancestry one way or another back to psychodynamic theories whose contemporary history begins with Sigmund Freud. Developmental psychologists in this tradition ask all the questions about consciousness and about the origins and development of the self that the behaviorists regard as unscientific or unanswerable in any sufficiently rigorous ways. As the behaviorists ask the question "biologically normal or biologically abnormal?" these interpersonal or psychodynamic researchers ask the some version of the question "secure and confident or not?"

According to developmental psychologists in this camp, the key to normal emotional and social development during childhood is a stable, secure, trusting relationship between an infant and a primary caregiver during the infant's first two or three years. This initial psychological development, called "attachment," depends upon the sensitivity and skill of the primary caregiver's attunement to the child. Secure attachment is not simply a function of the quantity of time the adult and the child spend together: the foundational research, performed by Mary Ainsworth in Uganda and again in Baltimore, focused exclusively upon mothers who were at home with their babies full-time. So did Daniel Stern, whose pioneering work on mother-child interactions among children less than a year old made ingenious use of video cameras and other electronic widgey. (By far the best of his books is *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, [Basic Books, 1985].)

Both Stern and Ainsworth observed, as anyone might, that mothers' interactions with their babies reflect the whole ordinary diversity of skill, sensitivity, perceptiveness, consistency, and so forth. What mattered for child well-being was not how much a mother cuddled or smiled and cooed at her baby, but whether or how astutely she recognized and responded to the baby's cues and its particular quirks. I enjoyed the ingenuity with which these scholars painstakingly documented such common sense, but I think it is common sense nonetheless. As some babies are easy but others are fussy and inscrutable, some mothers are domineering or indifferent while others are remarkably perceptive and caring. This is the inescapable variety of the human character. Over time, such differences in parental skill shape the child's learned behaviors and attitudes in powerful ways, as any older parent or experienced teacher will attest--or any therapist, for that matter.

In her long and painstaking work in different cultures, Ainsworth demonstrated that a child's capacity for age-appropriate autonomy in the second year varied in relationship to the sensitivity with which the mother had recognized and responded to its needs early on. The way to have secure and independent children, she argued, was to provide such sensitive and generous attention to infants and toddlers. In this she differed from the famous--or infamous--behaviorist John Watson, who argued that parents should never cuddle children at all, and especially not when the child was upset. From a strict behaviorist perspective, doing so only rewards, and thus

encourages, the child's dependency. Even B. F. Skinner argued that the young child's apparent affection for parents was based upon the parents' providing food, nothing more--hence the comment one still hears regarding a baby's cooing at its mother, "he's just in love with his lunch."

Later, Ainsworth and her colleagues developed and validated a brief lab test, called the Strange Situation, whereby they could challenge a child's security and closely observe the consequences. Like a single blood pressure reading or cholesterol profile, this is only a test. It's not an infallible tool providing absolutely reliable insight into a given child, because there are no such infallible tools. Most of modern epidemiology nonetheless depends upon such tests, which have proven their value over time in assessing the health of populations and directing health-care policy--which is what's at stake in subsidizing and regulating child care.

The Strange Situation test has been further validated by studies of abused children, including children rescued from those terrible Romanian orphanages. These further validations demonstrate a very convincing "dose-related response": the worse the abuse or the longer the children lingered in such orphanages, the higher the percentage of children testing as "insecurely attached"--as having failed to bond with an adult who is sufficiently nurturant to foster their own psychological development toward age-appropriate trust, autonomy, and capacity for healthy relationships.

An array of long-term studies from attachment researchers such as Jay Belsky have shown that 40 percent of children in child care more than twenty hours a week beginning in the first year rank as insecurely or poorly "attached" to their primary caregiver--up from 30 percent in the home-care sample. That's a 33 percent increase in what is known to be a marker for increased risk of significant developmental psychosocial problems such as inappropriate aggression. That's hardly surprising, given that there is excellent evidence that most child care, especially for infants, fails to meet minimal standards of quality. I think this is may be a problem we can solve, *but only if we can admit that it exists.*

And that is remarkably difficult because of fundamental polemics within the academic discipline of developmental psychology. Subtle, wholistic assessments like the Strange Situation are inevitably open to attack by those who want to move psychology closer to the model of "real" or "hard" sciences such as molecular biology. Jerome Kagan, an eminent behavioral psychologist and early development specialist, insists that attachment researchers are simply not "scientific"--as he defines that term. He dismisses them contemptuously as naive sentimentalists, closet religionists, and intellectual cowards for continuing to insist that early parenting matters for long-term outcomes. Kagan contends--and in this he is widely quoted--that early childhood experience has absolutely no permanent consequences at all unless the features of that environment prove permanent (for instance, continuing to live among people who speak the same language). He accuses the attachment researchers of "infant determinism," by which he means believing that early experience is absolutely and entirely defines the trajectory of a the child's psychological and personal development. But that's not remotely what the attachment researchers are saying.

Needless to say, Kagan's position provides ample fuel for those who see rampant sexism behind any criticism of infant childcare. Bias against women runs deep, and deeply disguised, throughout Western culture, but that doesn't mean that infant child care in this country is perfectly adequate, or that early childhood doesn't matter in the long run. Dismissing the influence of early childhood seems to me too closely akin to familiar dismissals of anything characteristically or traditionally managed by women. Arguing that parenting matters deeply during these early years need not mean that women should be excluded from leadership, authority, and professional status. But as the chairman of psychology at Harvard has remarked, disputes among psychologists have become a "blood sport"--a blood sport that contributes massively to dangerous stalemate among policy makers and to unnecessary polemic against women in the popular press both on the left and on the right.

### **Disputes Among Biologists**

Behind this debate between competing schools of developmental psychology is another, equally angry dispute between competing schools of biologists: the cell biologists, who study organisms, and the molecular biologists, who study chemical reactions such as those involving or directed by DNA. The physical sciences, such as chemistry, can predict outcomes as accurately as they do because they can study the major causal effect of a few, single, extraordinarily powerful factors such as gravity. A living organism, by comparison, exists within a complicated network of very many factors, each of which considered alone has a comparatively a weak causal effect.

Genetic inheritance certainly does explain why tulips are tulips and not tomatoes, or how alley cats differ both from alligators and from mountain lions. If that's the question, genes certainly do assert a powerful causal effect: even the tiny genetic differences between children and chimpanzees have major consequences. But if we want to know "how will my infant who is in child care fifty hours a week be different *as a result of that experience* from what he or she would be otherwise?" then we are shifting the question in major ways.

Specifically, we are very dramatically changing the scale whereby differences are measured. The scale that works for displaying an answer to the question "How is my cat different from my dog?" will be far too crude to display an answer to a question that is spectacularly more delicate and subtle: What--if any--are the long-term consequences for a given individual of this or that set of early experiences?

The problem here is this: Cell biologists will contend that the only possible answers to that question will be very delicately delineated relative probabilities, which is what the attachment theorists offer. But relative probabilities are not the ironclad predictions for which young parents naively yearn--a yearning that the popular press is all too willing, all too falsely, to provide. Geneticists, on the other hand, because they work at a different scale and with major causal effects, are apt to dismiss the question as scientifically meaningless, which is what the behaviorists do. Geneticists like Richard Dawkins claim that the genes "create us, body and mind" but cell biologists like Richard Lewontin retort that such a claim is "the hyperbolic excess of a vulgar understanding" (*The New York Review of Books*, 4.7.94). Parents' questions and

children's needs are quickly lost in the fog of rhetorical warfare both in the media and in the scholarly press alike.

### **Compassion and Parenthood**

As I suppose every experienced parent knows full well and first hand, some parents are passionately and intelligently committed to their children's well-being. Other parents are clueless, careless, self-absorbed, and distant--except when they are crossed, at which point they become hostile and rigidly authoritarian. In both groups there are households where both parents work full time, and in both groups there are households where one parent or both parents significantly recalculated the number of hours devoted to their careers. Like any observant parent, I have seen firsthand that the negligent will neglect their children in order to golf just as easily as they will to earn money; the engaged will be engaged despite the psychological and economic cost of nonconformity to a self-centered and consumerist culture.

Engagement, not employment, is the crucial issue. How much employment--or golf--is consistent with how much engagement? There is no calculus that can tell us, no theorist who can relieve us of moral responsibility to live our own lives in good conscience, making the most careful decisions possible based upon the full array of information to which only we ourselves have full access.

And so, all my research came down to this: The certitude fueling the Mommy Wars is entirely misplaced. That's not the answer I expected to find, but I think it's good news for every one of us. Parenthood is inescapably an ad-lib routine, an ad-hoc juggling from one week to the next. All we can do is the best we can do within the variables presented by our own quirky circumstances. If I had to do it all over again, I'd do it all over again--this time without second-guessing myself and my own intuitive assessments.

Furthermore, the last child has only one year left in college. We have survived! The kids are delightful--not an axe-murderer or a psychotic in the bunch. And although I'm not an English professor these days, I recognized years ago that I left academia in 1982 because I needed out no less than they needed me. Life is like that. Life is good--not easy, mind you, but good--and it should be trusted.

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