

## Child Care – A Work of Love by Carla Anglehart

"Work is love made visible" - the wise words of Kahlil Gibran. Now I'm not sure when that notion came to Gibran, but my guess would be that he was standing in a room filled with color, artwork, toys and games, with a warm place for naps and a clean place for snacks – where the joy and wonder of children filled the room – where perhaps he observed a caregiver bending down with open arms to soothe a tearful toddler – while another led a group of children in song . . . . And Gibran saw the love as every detail of the day unfolded. Yes, I'm sure that's it. He was standing in a child care setting and he saw that work was love made visible.

In her book , *Simple Abundance*, Sarah Ban Breathnach said, "You spend so much of your time (a finite resource) working, the work you choose deserves profound contemplation." She quotes Studs Terkel as saying, "daily meaning is as important as daily bread".

For many of you who have chosen the field of child care, your work represents a "calling" – where the focus is not merely earning a living, (which is a valid choice for some), but a calling where large financial rewards and status are exchanged for passion and meaning.

Hmmm, exchange large financial rewards and status for passion and meaning. . . let's talk about those things. First, the financial piece - There's no question that the important work you do as early childhood educators, caregivers and administrators is not reflected in the remuneration you receive. In fact, it seems evident to me that our societal values are terribly askew when the annual income of one professional athlete is greater than the combined annual salaries of all of the staff and administration of one child care centre. And the work you do is so critical and has such a lasting effect.

Next, the status issue: As a group you face the challenge of gaining recognition as a profession. Part of that may stem from the fact that much of the work you do – is the work that has for generations been done by women (mothers in their own homes) , and their work has been done gratis and largely unsung. Your campaign for professional recognition is not unlike the challenge nurses, teachers and social workers faced in the not-so-distant past. They too were women dominated professions in the business of caring for and supporting others' growth.

Recognition is a wonderful thing. Sadly, I know that you (child care providers) do not receive the recognition you deserve. Not often enough do you hear the words that say "you're important", "you're significant", or

"you play an important role and make significant contributions to society". And that's tragic – because you are significant and important – individually and collectively.

When I picked up my son a while back – fresh from my research, and my heightened awareness that caregivers are sorely "under-recognized", I said to his child care provider, "Thank you – I am not worthy – your eminence!!"

And though I may sound flippant – I am dead serious. I am in awe of the work you do. I could no sooner care for six toddlers at one time than fly a hang glider to the moon. I've looked at the work you do:

Before the children walk in the door, you have carefully thought out and planned a day full of activities – delicately striking a balance between structured and free time; making sure to select or create activities that are age appropriate, adaptable to your setting and resources and the special needs of the group; working toward development in social, emotional, mental and physical realms (and even that is broken down into gross and fine motor skills).

When they arrive, you greet each child warmly and treat them like the important, unique individuals they are. You model communication skills and manners – creating a safe environment for them to learn and grow. You teach them right from left and right from wrong. You make learning FUN. You ensure effective timing for nutritional food breaks and much needed rest periods or quiet time. You encourage creativity and work on enhancing their self-esteem – the key and foundation to each person's future success.

Oh, and I mustn't forget a key part of your day: Dealing with Mom and Dad!! I'm sure it's one of your primary sources of joy! Now, I'm going to be gentle here because I am one of those parents! I know I would never arrive without the proper outdoor wear on a winters day – especially after you reminded me twice and put it in a friendly written reminder! And I would simply never forget to send the bathing suits, skates or other items required for the special outing. I wouldn't even mention it or fuss if my child came home with play dough or paint on her clothes after I forgot to send the smock you recommended. And I would simply never put up roadblocks to prevent my child from participating in activities geared to learning, development and pleasure. And you just know I would never be late with my fees!! Like many others, I am a perfect parent.

Seriously, we are an odd lot – parents. We want the best possible care for our children and we don't – all at the same time! You see, if I am unfortunate enough to find poor child care, (thankfully I've never been there), then I am riddled with guilt for putting my children through that. It reinforces the doubt/fears I had before returning to work; and validates some peoples belief that children should only be in the care of their mother or father. On the other hand, if I find fabulous child care, (which I have) and observe my children flourishing, I may feel I am easily replaced. I'm expendable. So, ... I look for holes – vigilantly watch for signs of weakness.

Recently Ellen Galinsky wrote a book entitled "*Ask the Children!*". In it she does a report card on the impact of working parents on their children. Many benefits were evident: enhanced opportunities for social, intellectual and emotional development and growth, - not to mention that fulfilled parents (those who really enjoyed their work outside of the home) were happier and that happiness was carried over into their parenting.

Galinsky asked the parents their read on the situation – was it negatively impacting the children that both parents were working outside the home? – and how were paid child care providers measuring up?

I told you some parents look for holes – and feel guilty. They were tough markers. They gave passing grades but weren't heavy into giving accolades.

Then Galinsky asked the children – those directly affected by the parents working outside the home. Not surprisingly perhaps, the children were more generous! They saw all kinds of benefits – and liked the situation – many preferring it to traditional arrangements.

But you know, those results wouldn't be so positive if the child care providers weren't doing such an awesome job. To some, at a glance, your work might seem straight forward. They may not realize the knowledge and skills required to effectively complete the requirements of this demanding profession. Let's look at your knowledge base – you need a well-developed understanding of child-development principles, learning theory, cultural issues, inclusive care for special needs children. You need a huge number of transferable skills - practical skills and strategies: you need communication skills, organizational skills, planning and decision-making abilities. You need supervisory skills, and the ability to create, innovate, design and implement. You need flexibility, change resilience, team work skills and conflict resolution abilities. Personal skills include: integrity, caring, compassion, understanding, a sense of humour. You are a skilled group of professionals.

And the research shows that the more skilled the caregivers, the better quality the care. Stands to reason. Research also shows you're a well -educated lot! Many centre-based care givers have more educational credentials than required – often at levels above the average levels in the general labour force.

And you know what else is amazing about you folks? Armed with all those very marketable skills you go to work each day, and throw yourselves into your work even though the large financial rewards and the recognition are lacking.

Why? I asked some of you. I heard a lot of meaning and passion. Here's what you said.

"Joy – to see the look on the children's faces when they achieve something – and to know that you helped them get to that point."

"Pleasure – being important to the children – having them come to you. Watching them smile when you're silly – watching them learn and grow. Knowing you're making a difference."

"I love these children. I watch them grow – I help them grow."

"The first five years of life are so important and shape our future. We have precious few days to help wonderful new people get their start."

"It's a blessing for me to work in the children's centre. It's the most natural thing I know. Smiles and laughter from the babies and my colleagues bring me joy – I feel at home doing what I do". I only wish others could gain an appreciation for what we do."

Next, I went to the parents – and asked them what they thought about the work you do:

"I rave and brag about the centre my children are in all the time. The workers are so caring. I have complete trust in the women working there".

"We're the parents of a child with some special needs. The staff is wonderful – they made special arrangements for him and he's doing so well there. They're so great with him."

"I think it's an extremely hard and demanding job they do. They provide the children an education that prepares them well for school – and that is a bonus for society. The children grow intellectually and learn social skills in the larger groups that they wouldn't learn at home. Within 3 months I saw an improvement in my

sons language skills."

"My children's caregivers are like a Godsend. It makes me feel wonderful when my children hug me goodbye and run off to play. I know they're happy there and they are getting the best care."

"When I moved to NS a few years back I was 6 months into a high risk pregnancy and on bed rest. My sister made the child care arrangements for my 4 year old before I arrived. So the day I sent my daughter off to day care with her Aunt, she was headed to a new place with new people that we had never met. I'm not sure who was more afraid, my little angel or me. Well, she arrived home that evening with a smile on her face and stories to tell. We're going swimming tomorrow and to the library on Friday, Mom! In her bag was a lovely message from the staff telling me about her day and upcoming events. When, sometime later I finally met the staff at the end of the notes – I felt like I was part of their big family. They have never been less than wonderful. I am so grateful. They are precious people."

Do you know the ripple effect of what you do? More than 65% of Canadian women with young children work outside of the home. And 55% of them utilize paid childcare while they pursue their careers or tend to the reality of supporting/affording what's most important – their children. So that means about 1.4 million children are accessing paid childcare services.

So, think of the ripple effect. The work that you do is essential. Your work – your calling- enables parents to pursue their work – their calling. And then they can make their contribution to society.

Consider this:

Yesterday Mrs. X dropped her toddler off at a child care facility and her daughter at the before and after school program. She kissed them good-bye, confident that they were in good hands. Then her focus turned to work. In the course of the day she counseled two clients individually, helping one prepare a resume so he can obtain work to support his family following his lay off. In the afternoon she delivered a training session, helping workers understand more about themselves and each other and how to effectively communicate with one another. So, Mrs. X was able to directly affect 32 people in a positive way because she had good, reliable childcare. And directly, well, it's hard to measure.

But that's just Mrs. X.. What about the Information

The teacher who made a difference to a teen – said the right words – and convinced him or her not to drop out of school? The early childhood educator who taught a group of children the value of honesty and the meaning of love.

Our greatest work is sharing our personal gifts and strengths with the world. My friends, the work you do – your work of love - is a gift. A gift that enables others to share their gifts and strengths with the world. Never underestimate the value of what you do. A wise friend of mine recently said "we have an infinite capacity to love". Keep on loving those children. Love is the most powerful positive emotion in existence - and it will come back to you.

I keep a poster on my wall by Ralph Waldo Emerson – "To laugh often and much, to earn the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children, to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure betrayal of false friends, to appreciate beauty, to find the best in others, to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded."

You are a success. And I thank you – on behalf of the parents and the children whose lives you make better through your work of love.

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## Internet Resources:

Centre for the Child Care work Force [www.ccw.org](http://www.ccw.org)

Child and Family Canada [www.cfc-efc.ca](http://www.cfc-efc.ca)

Human Resources Round Table on Child Care. *Our Child Care Work Force*, [www.cfc-efc.ca/docs/00001269.htm](http://www.cfc-efc.ca/docs/00001269.htm)

## Connections Resource Library:

Ayles, T. (1995) "The Work of Caring." *Interaction* 9(3): 23. CCCNS No. F-100-Ayl/Int.

Beach, J., Bertrand, J. & Cleveland, G. (1998) *Our Child Care Workforce: From Recognition to Remuneration*. Ottawa: Child Care Sector Study Steering Committee. CCCNS No. L-010-Bea.

Technology Specialist who developed a new program to increase efficiency and reduce workload for the overburdened staff? Some of the staff actually got home on time last night. Or the lawyer who made a case and had the child abuser locked up? The nurse in ER who saved a life.

**Doherty, Lero, Goelman, LaGrange & Tougas** (2000) *You Bet I Care! A Canada-Wide Study on: Working Conditions, and Practices in Child Care Centres*. Guelph: Centre for Families, Work and Well Being. CCCNS No. L-010-Doh.

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**Jaruszewicz, C.** (1999) *"Strengthening Your Professional Commitment: Questions Both Directors & Teachers Need to Address."* Child Care Information Exchange 127: 68. CCCNS No. F-100-Jar/CCIE.

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**Bloom, P.J.** (1997) *"Navigating the Rapids: Directors Reflect on Their Careers and Professional Development."* Young Children 52(7): 32-38. CCCNS No. F-100-Blo/YC.

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**Cartwright, S.** (1998) *"Caregivers of Quality: Essential Attributes for Teachers of Young Children."* Child Care Information Exchange 120: 18-20. CCCNS No. F-100-Car/CCIE.

**Farynowski, L.** (1998) *"I Really Like What I Do."* Interaction 12(3): 16-17. CCCNS No. F-010-Far/Int.

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*More Than the Sum of Its Tasks.*" Young Children 49(1): 40-42. CCCNS No. F-010-Man/YC.

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**Morris, S.** (1989) *"Recognition for a Job Well Done: Increasing Respect for Teachers."* Child Care Information Exchange 69: 15-17. CCCNS No. F-110-Mbr/CCIE.

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