

Caring About Quality by Gillian Doherty, Ph. D.

Introduction

A child care experience is considered to be high quality when it protects children's health and safety, promotes their well-being and development, and supports their families in their child-rearing role. This article focuses on three issues related to the provision of high quality child care:

- Why the quality of child care matters to us all.
- The vital role of the caregiver in providing quality child care.
- The supports and conditions that enable caregivers to provide quality experiences for children.

Quality does matter

Regular participation in child care, often starting in infancy and continuing to age ten or older, is now the norm in Canada. In 1999, 61% of women with at least one child under age three were engaged in the paid workforce (Statistics Canada, 2000). In spite of the availability of one year of parental leave, 52% of employed women return to work within six months of giving birth, and within a year 86% have returned (Statistics Canada, 1999). By the time their youngest child is age six, 71% of all mothers have paid jobs (National Council of Welfare, 1999). Most women who are engaged in paid employment (68%) work full-time (Statistics Canada, 2000). When mother is engaged in paid work someone else has to look after her child. Other women require child care to enable them to engage in academic up-grading or job skill training.

According to the federal government, "A child entering child care at six months of age would receive 10,125 hours of care by age five." In contrast, "A child receives a total of 13,680 hours of class time in grades 1 through 12" (Human Resources Development Canada,

Thus the child would spend almost as much time in child care prior to school entry as he or she would spend in classroom activities in elementary and secondary school combined. Many school-age children also spend substantial periods of time in child care before and/or after school.

What happens in the child care setting is vitally important for several reasons.

- First, all children have an inherent right to environments and experiences that protect their well-being and support their development.
- Second, a large body of research documents that children's early experiences build the scaffold upon which later development depends. These early experiences are crucial for the health, well-being, competence and coping ability of the individual throughout life (Doherty, 1997; McCain and Mustard, 1999);
- Third, there is growing recognition that a stable, prosperous society with funds for social and other programs is dependent upon a competitive workforce that maintains economic growth (Doherty, 1997; Keating, 1999). This type of workforce requires people who are good problem-solvers and have good social, literacy and numeracy skills — skills that have their initial development in the early years but continue to develop throughout childhood.
- Fourth, child care is an essential support

1994, p. 9).

for families. However, the extent to which it reduces stress and assists parents to cope with their family responsibilities is linked to the extent to which parents feel secure that their child's health, safety and developmental needs are being met.

The vital role of the caregiver

People commonly talk about 'caring' for children as if protecting their health and safety is all that is required. However, children's optimal development also depends upon the provision of 'educational' experiences starting in early infancy, for example, being talked with, read to, and given opportunities to explore the environment. As a result, the provision of quality child care requires the provider to pay attention both to protecting children's health and safety and to providing an environment and experiences that promote physical, emotional, spiritual, social, language and intellectual development.

In order to protect children's health and safety, the caregiver must practice good hygiene and encourage children to do so, ensure that the physical plant, toys and equipment are in good repair, provide nutritious food, and protect children from emotional abuse and threats to their self-esteem. Supporting development requires providing interesting, challenging experiences and opportunities that will expand the child's capabilities without being too stressful because they are too far beyond the child's current level of development.

Both protecting health and safety and providing 'educational' experiences occur within the context of the daily interactions between caregiver and child and among the children. It is these interactions, not the toys and equipment, that make up the substance of the child's experience. Much of the infant's and toddler's contact with the social and inanimate environment relies on the caregiver's physical

Supporting caregivers

Caregivers work within a context that includes the child care centre or family child care agency, their colleagues, the community, and the province or territory. This context is an important determinant of the extent to which caregivers receive the supports required to provide high quality child care.

The two most basic supports are a safe physical space and sufficient funds for the provision of nutritious food. A third crucial support is a limit on the number of children for whom the caregiver is responsible. Researchers have consistently found that caregivers are more sensitive and supportive in their interactions with children and more likely to provide activities that promote children's development when they are responsible for a reasonable number of children (Doherty, 1999). This is not surprising. A caregiver responsible for too many children given their age, is under considerable stress and can do little more than attend to the children's physical needs and safety.

Access to affordable training is a fourth vital support. Providing quality child care is a skilled occupation that requires specific knowledge and skills (Canadian Child Care Federation, 2000). At least initially, the caregiver cannot know a child as well as the parents do and must rely on her/his knowledge of child development to be able to set realistic expectations and provide activities that are appropriate for the child's level of development. The ability to interpret and address the interactions and dynamics in a group of

and/or emotional assistance. For preschoolers, it is the adult who provides or fails to provide the sense of security necessary for the child to engage in the exploration and risk-taking essential for learning. Older children rely on the caregiver to assist them to develop important peer social skills such as negotiation with others. Providing appropriate levels of adult support and guidance requires the caregiver to be alert to children's needs and to their attempts at communication and to respond promptly in a sensitive fashion.

unrelated children is also necessary. Other crucial caregiver supports include:

- support from colleagues;
- support from centre supervisors or family child care licensing officials;
- a work environment that addresses the needs of the adults in it; and
- a remuneration level that is sufficient to live on and also conveys the message that the work being done is valued (Doherty et al., 2000, Goelman et al., 2000).

The range of required supports clearly indicates that the provision of high quality child care requires a number of players in addition to the individual caregiver. *Governments* can set the stage by regulations requiring appropriate caregiver-to-child ratios and caregiver training, by ensuring the availability and affordability of training, and by providing funds for operating costs and adequate caregiver remuneration levels (see Doherty et al., 2000 and Goelman et al., 2000 for specific recommendations). *Licensing officials* have an important role as sources of information. *Centre directors* establish the 'workplace climate' and influence the extent to which colleagues support each other and the centre addresses the needs of its staff.

Public health units, municipal programs, children's mental health services, and elementary schools are potential sources of advice, in-service training, and access to library and recreational facilities.

Gillian Doherty, Ph.D. is an author, researcher, policy analyst, and professor. She will be the Keynote Speaker at the Caring Connection Conference and Trade Show, January 26, 2002.

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(902) 423-8199

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