

Stand Up For Parental Rights and Responsibilities; Oppose Increased Preschool, Screening, Universal Child Care, and Home Visitations

Summary

In recent years, politicians, government officials, so-called experts in early childhood, corporations, and others have been pushing hard for increased intervention in the lives of families with young children, including increased routine screenings of newborns and young children, increased preschool at younger ages, and now, federal legislation to promote home visitations. Intervention harms children and families and undermines the fundamental rights of parents. As a result of this intervention and economic pressures (including loss of jobs that will support a family), young children are spending less time with their parents and children. People concerned about this trend can act personally and politically. See “What We Can Do” below.

Background

Although the family is the basic unit of all known societies, many current programs and proposals relating to infants and young children undermine the family rather than meeting young children's needs by strengthening it.

Some of the attention being given to children's early development is based on sincere concern for children and recognition of the importance of the first few years of life. However, there are also economic incentives for intervention, especially since this is the age when professionals and institutions are currently least involved with children and therefore have the most to gain in terms of more clients, more jobs, and more prestige. Professions and organizations that benefit from increased intervention include so-called experts in child development, politicians, government officials, teachers, school districts, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, family and juvenile court judges, researchers, corporations, and the pharmaceutical industry.

What about parents who have to work and need better day care and early preschool for their children? Many of them would rather spend more time with their children. They would be much better served by public policies (such as increased tax deductions for dependent children) that support families and meet some of their most immediate need, which is for money.

Current Concern

The trend for professionals to intervene in the lives of young children has come to the point where serious proposals are being made that the government pay social service agencies to profile and target what they consider to be high risk families and send professionals to their homes to check up on them and train them in parenting. A proposal to create federal grants to states for home visitations is part of H. R. 3200, one of the current health care bills before the US Congress.

Problems with This Proposal and Others

- Increases in routine newborn, preschool, mental health, and other screenings harm children and their families. Screenings focus on weaknesses, not strengths. There is controversy about what constitutes normal or age-appropriate behavior. During screenings some children are appropriately wary and refuse to do things they frequently do at home. Many screenings are highly subjective; others are inaccurate. Behaviors children would outgrow naturally are labeled; such labels often become self-fulfilling prophecies, especially if children are given drugs. Parents' and children's confidence is undermined.¹

- It is especially risky to have screenings controlled by professionals who benefit from negative diagnoses through increased salaries, jobs, and prestige, and to allow drug companies to make huge profits from drugs they prescribe. By searching for scientific, black and white, uniform indicators of development that will make it easier to institutionalize children, professionals create problems by denying children the opportunity to grow in their own way, at their own pace. Instead they use the elaborate mental health handbook *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and similar materials to promote their own self-interest at the expense of children and their families.²

- Institutionalizing children in day care and preschool separates them from their parents. It denies them the love, freedom to explore, emotional support, physical contact, security, and nutrition they need to learn and grow well. It increases screening and labeling. It creates long-standing problems of insecurity, hostility, labeling, and drug use. Common sense, experience, and research show that institutions cannot raise children as well as families can. Families are weakened and parents' parenting skills decline when universal child care is instituted.³

- It is inconsistent with democratic principles for the government to set standards for, fund, and oversee programs that train parents in parenting. Consensus is lacking on the best way to parent, different children need different approaches, and all benefit from individualized attention from people who love them.

- Young children, especially boys, often lack the physical, neurological, emotional, and social maturity to benefit from formal academics. Early academics are a waste of time and money and, worse, often do life-long damage to children who are normal but unready and as a result lose confidence and interest in learning, while children who begin academic work at later ages generally do much better. Preschool programs such as Head Start make the biggest difference for children suffering from social ills such as poverty and racism, presumably because they receive better nutrition and other benefits. Academic gains children may make during preschool or even full-day five-year-old kindergarten evaporate by third grade.⁴ Children whose birthdays are shortly before the cut-off date for entering preschool or kindergarten and who therefore are younger than their classmates generally do less well academically and a larger percentage do not attend college.⁵

- The major predictor of a child's academic success is not class size, teacher qualifications, time on task, size of school budget, or features of their school facility. It is the child's family background.⁶

- Making programs such as the proposed home visitations voluntary does not solve these problems. First, administrators of such programs often do not tell parents their participation is voluntary and, in fact, often strongly imply that it is required. (For example, many parents do not realize that preschool screening is not mandatory and that in most states, kindergarten is voluntary.) Second, many programs that begin as voluntary become mandatory. (For example, the Wisconsin Legislature is considering making five-year-old kindergarten mandatory.)

- To be sure, some children have conditions that need to be diagnosed and treated. Those serious enough to benefit from treatment are almost always obvious to parents, relatives, and community members. Routine screenings damage normal children far more often than they benefit a few by uncovering serious hidden problems. Also, there are a very few parents who simply are unfit to raise their children (often as a result of poverty). Social services programs and child abuse laws are already in place to deal with these situations. It makes no sense to undermine the vast majority of families, at great expense to taxpayers, because of a very few families.

What We Can Do

Personal Action

- Live according to our principles and beliefs, which may include spending as much time as possible with our children despite the financial sacrifices required; giving children the opportunity to learn and grow at their own pace instead of sending them to preschool; avoiding newborn, preschool, and other routine screenings unless absolutely necessary; and homeschooling. Our actions have a powerful effect on our own children and family, and our example is important to other families and policy makers.

- Share ideas about the importance of parenting, the rights of parents, and the problems with screening and intervention by "experts." Many parents lack confidence, underestimate their importance to their children, and do not realize that screenings and kindergarten are voluntary.

- Support parents of young children. If we have young children, we can form small groups to share ideas, have fun, and support each other. If we don't, we can help families who do by planning activities, delivering meals, etc.

Political Action

- Contact our federal and state legislators. (Go to <http://www.legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/waml/waml.aspx> or call the Wisconsin Legislative Hotline at 266-9960; toll-free: 1-800-362-9472.)

Tell legislators that we oppose the proposed home visitations in H R 3200 and other government programs that would increase intervention by so-called experts, including increasing screenings; promoting government supported day care and preschool; making kindergarten mandatory; and other programs that undermine families and parents' ability to spend time with their children.

Tell legislators we want legislation that supports families such as increased tax deductions for dependents, other changes in the tax code that would benefit families, and policies that would make it easier for parents to spend more time with their children, thereby reducing the need for day care, preschool, etc.

Footnotes (For complete information, visit the WPA web site at www.homeschooling-wpa.org and click on Issues and Legislation and then Preschool.)

1 WPA, "Children Are Not For Screening," WPA web site, click on Issues and Legislation and then Preschool.

2 Angell, Marcia, "Drug Companies and Doctors," *New York Review of Books*, January 15, 2009.

3 Baker, Michael, et al., "Universal Childcare . . ." NBER Working Paper No. 11832, 2005

4 Cannon, Jill, et al., "Is Full Better Than Half?" RAND Working Paper Series No. WR-266, 2005.

5 Bedard, Kelly, et al., "The Persistence of Early Childhood Maturity," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121(4), February 2006.

6 Hanushek, Eric, "The Economics of Schooling," *Journal of Economic Literature*, Sept, 1986. ❖