

Shopping for Child Care and Early Education

by Alan M. Weber

This article will make no distinctions between the criteria for evaluating good child care ("day care") and early childhood education ("preschool") because there are really no distinctions to be made. Despite the very different traditions and reputations of the two, the quality and identity of each come down almost solely to its caregivers/educators. Day care does not have to be purely custodial. There are certainly those that provide fine and appropriate education, perhaps even in numbers comparable to nursery schools, Head Start programs, public prekindergartens, etc., who have traditionally been considered "educational," but whose care giving may leave much to be desired and whose "education" may lack appropriateness. So the criteria are much the same for both: qualities such as caring, responsibility, professionalism, knowledgeable and validity. But study after study has shown that the overwhelming majority of American programs for young children, whatever type, are unacceptably lacking in such quantifiable areas as safety, health, quality and appropriateness. And yet most of the parents using such programs are found to be satisfied with them. So one of the major problems is that parents often look at, or are led to look at, the wrong things, and therein lies the purpose of this article. Hopefully, it will serve as a useful aid as you search for a program that meets your needs (cost, hours, etc. and, more importantly, your child(ren)'s needs.

In shopping for child care and early education, the first consideration must be the attitudes and behaviors of the care givers/teachers (and adults working with children have to be both). If the program falls the least bit short in this area, there is no need to go on to criterion two. Watching the adults with the children, you must be convinced that, very simply, they love their job, and the children, and all of them. They must show themselves to be emotionally healthy, genuine, open, patient and obsessively attentive to the children, to the point of neglecting you in favor of needed supervision or attention. They should respect the children as people, with feelings, needs and rights, individuality, family and culture, You should be able to see serious planning, clear knowledge and utmost professionalism. Now if all of this seems

like simple common sense, that is the problem. In their effort to rush young children so as to fit them into their often inflexible and inappropriate mold, our educational establishment has incited Parents to distrust their instincts and common sense. So, parents end up accepting not only the pressuring, the conformation, the labeling and the miseducating of their children, but their own manipulation and disempowerment as well. They become advocates for the wrong kinds of curriculum, discipline and expectations, and a vicious cycle is created, wherein teachers try to please and impress parents, parents try to please and impress teachers, and the children get lost.

In an environment that is built around and builds love, self-esteem, self-motivation, stress-reduction, individualization and pro-social values, children will emerge and thrive. As the influential psychologist Abraham Maslow pointed out in his "hierarchy of needs," the basic needs of physical well-being, safety, security, self-esteem and respect must be established before the higher needs of intellect and culture have a foundation. So, if the program you are considering seems to have an atmosphere of coldness, unhappiness, silence, power, tension, pressure, competitiveness, judgementalism, disrespect, irresponsibility, boredom, irrelevance, phoniness, antisociability or non-individuality, run the other way.

After you are satisfied with the human dynamics, it is time to consider matters of certification. You must find out if the program is licensed, if the facilities have been approved, if there is a supervising and inspecting body, if the teachers are credentialed, if health and safety codes are complied with, etc. While it is true that an official document guarantees nothing and indicates little, their avoidance can speak volumes. And you certainly want things like recourse, checks and balances and objective standards. The program should be in accord with established guidelines for teacher to child ratios and class size as per age group, classroom square footage per child, infectious disease control procedures and other issues of health and safety, proper nutrition, appropriate curriculum and methods per age group, and inclusion of children with special needs, among others. If the program appears to have, for money sake, hired the youngest, least qualified "teachers," overcrowded classes, been stingy with facilities and equipment, skimmed on menus, or, otherwise, taken unnecessary (given, their funding source and fundraising efforts) or unacceptable shortcuts that would put them out of compliance with professional standards, again, run the other way.

Next comes the issue of educational methodology. A "Methodology" is a philosophy (a set of beliefs, values, principles, priorities and goals) combined with a system for realizing them. The program should know what it stands for, and be able to articulate and, where necessary, defend it convincingly. It should have written material on its philosophy and method. There are a number of early childhood educational methodologies, among which are Traditional/Teacher-Centered Education, the Montessori Method, the Free School perspective, the Bank Street Approach, the High/Scope Curriculum, the Reggio Emilia approach and DISTAR. Traditional/Teacher-Centered Education is the formal, grade school-style education most of us are familiar with from our own experience, pushed down into the preschool level. It takes the form of early academics, lessons, dittos, homework and tests, sitting, paying attention and being quiet. It is referred to as "the pushed-down curriculum" because it was never intended nor has it been validated for young children, who, contrarily, learn actively, concretely and through play. Learning must be "developmentally appropriate," meaning that the materials, activities, concepts, skills, styles and expectations fit not just the general chronological age of the children, but each individual child's real developmental stage, physically, intellectually, socially, emotionally and linguistically as well.

The cardinal principle of our field is, "Play is a child's work." Play is the most appropriate and most beneficial mode of learning for young children. Many well intentioned parents and educators believe that early academics and work will give their children a "head start," but the truth of the matter is that a number of studies, such as one conducted by the District of Columbia Public Schools, first published in 1990, show clearly that early academics not only distracts from the critical social and emotional development that young children need, not only perverts young children's emerging learning styles and attitudes, not only leads to the relatively new and terribly unfortunate psychological phenomenon nicknamed "second grade burn-out," but actually provides even a weaker academic foundation than does self-initiated and interactive exploration (i.e., play). If the program is not built around constructive and facilitated play, if it is not marked by concreteness of concepts and materials, if it is characterized by long periods of sitting, listening, repeating and performing, you have yet another reason to run.

Each of the other methodologies was developed intentionally as early childhood specific and essentially as an alternative to the Traditional/Teacher-Centered model. If you are looking for a program which emphasizes socialization, imagination, play and childhood, then, generally speaking, albeit there are different interpretations, Montessori is probably not for you. It is recommended that you seek out a program that is consistent with the principles of what is called "Open" or "Progressive" education, developed by great American educators of this century like John Dewey, Patty Smith Hill and Lucy Sprague Mitchell, along with the innovators of the nursery school and infant school movements in England, the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy and the often unsung and earlier contributions arising from African, Indian and Judaic traditions. These are programs whose priorities are socialization and thinking skills, values such as individuality, diversity, freedom and responsibility, and a curriculum relevant to the needs, interests and experiences of the children. One such methodology, the Bank Street Approach, the background of this author, is oriented toward early childhood social studies, in the form of themes relating to self, feelings, social skills, social values, family, community and people, their common bonds and diversities. Another, High/Scope, is more oriented toward early childhood math and science, focusing, as a priority, on the development of thinking skills. One that is gaining increasing appreciation is the Reggio Emilia "project method," one which is centered more on art and is based on an emergent curriculum derived from children's creative expression through negotiation and cooperative learning between teacher and children and amongst the children. You want to find an approach which has significant freedom, balanced by social responsibility, both in keeping with the capabilities of young children. It is recommended that programs with a behaviorist bent, such as DISTAR, wherein children are conditioned using repetition and positive and negative reinforcement, not unlike the dogs and rats that served as the, shall we say, guinea pigs on which behaviorist ideas were built, should be avoided, especially when recent studies have concluded that children from DISTAR programs are twice as likely to turn later to adolescent juvenile delinquency. This should be contrasted to numerous studies which have shown that good preschool programs, ones which emphasize decision making, values, self-motivation, self-esteem, socialization and play, significantly reduce later crime and violence, drug abuse, welfare dependency and dysfunction. So it is very important to find out what the program you are considering believes

and practices, through written materials, interviews and observation. Many programs will not know about these methodologies, where they stand or why they do what they do. Lace up your running shoes.

We come, fourth, to the matter of the facilities. The program should have a sufficiently sizable indoor and outdoor space. Classrooms should be divided into interest areas, including art, manipulatives, science, library, dramatic play ("housekeeping," "doll corner," "kitchen," etc.), blocks and music. These areas should be adequately stocked with inviting, well organized and well maintained materials. Only things that the children can take freely at appropriate times should be accessible on the shelves; teachers' items should be stored high or away. There should be space to move comfortably but not so much open space as to be an invitation to run or roughhouse, room for the group to meet for short circle times, places for privacy and personal belongings, and a general feeling of coziness, stimulation, aesthetics, imagination, purposefulness and organization. Safety should be vigilantly assured, with sharp, hot or poisonous objects also stored high or away, electrical outlets guarded and attention paid to things that could potentially fail, break or trip a child. The facilities, in short, do not have to be new, expensive or exotic; there is, in fact, much to say for simplicity and non-materialism. But they should encourage children to feel proud, interested and secure, to be able to manage and maintain their environment. If not, take your mark....

Next is a cluster of considerations having to do with the way children, collectively and individually, are perceived and treated. The effects of inappropriate discipline, unfair labeling and lack of individualization are devastating, whether your child is directly victimized by them or simply learning their negative messages secondhand. Discipline is to be immediately distinguished from punishment. Punishment is the infliction of pain, physical or emotional, for immediate gratification of the adult, whereas discipline is the process of teaching, for the long term benefit of the child in moving him/her gradually toward self-discipline. This does not imply permissiveness, but, rather, the recognition that young children are still in an early stage of learning about things like appropriate behaviors, feelings, self-control, empathy, delayed gratification, sharing, communication, problem solving, rules and consequences. Such learnings should be at the heart of the curriculum, rather than being seen as peripheral to or a distraction from it, and programs should take responsibility for their teaching. When programs

respond to mistakes and testings in harsh, impatient and authoritarian ways,, when they instill fear, powerlessness and mindless obedience, when they use mechanical, punitive and "quick fix" techniques, little learning is taking place,

For example, "Time Out," if used at all, should be used correctly: a brief, unpainful, individualized opportunity, where necessary and constructive, to communicate, reflect and regain control. There should be no formal "time out chair," no arm dragging, no required tears or apologies, and no mechanical applications or pseudo-scientific formulas for time sentencing per age. Star charts and stickers and other forms of bribery should generally be avoided altogether, as they do not teach the reasons for positive behavior nor encourage internal regulation, but, rather, can lead to materialism, manipulateness, sneakiness, competition and dependence. Such practices, called "behavior modification," were initially and best intended for children who need the external motivation because their behavioral disabilities, such as autism or so-called "hyperactivity," make it too difficult for them to rely solely on internal motivation to "behave," or even to understand appropriate behavior, despite the desperate desire to do so. But teachers, appreciating the opportunity for generalized and arbitrary overcontrol of all students, started to proliferate amateur behavior modification, aimed at children who could learn and practice positive behavior for the right reasons.

Certainly corporal punishment should be the first "disciplinary" practice to be rejected, as counterproductive, unethical and, fortunately, at least in New York State and twenty two others at last count, illegal. Hitting children obviously does not teach them not to hit, nor, again, the reasons for positive behavior. Moreover, studies now clearly demonstrate that children who were spanked with regularity in childhood show in later life significantly higher rates of violence and other anti-social activity, There is much to be said about this important subject of discipline, about the need for a balance between firmness and gentleness, about focusing on the positive, about the importance of "the three c's," communication, clarity and consistency. Question the program about their philosophy and practice regarding discipline, and, again, observe them in action.

Just as we drew a distinction between punishment and discipline, we must also draw one between labeling and diagnosing. Proper, professional early diagnosis of special needs such as learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder and speech impairments is critically

important for the ultimate success of children with these challenges. But all too often, children are, rather, unprofessionally labeled, out of ignorance, convenience or bias. It is hard for parents to have to accept that their child may have a special, challenge or disability, but it is tragic when it is untrue and, yet, becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy, There is a great deal of deviation and individuality in child development. Assuming the use of the very best instrument to measure a given child's development, intellectually, physically, linguistically or socially, there is as much as a two year window, plus or minus, within which the child's development can be considered "normal." Yet commonly the educational system denies children this window and, instead, throws labels at them if they do not meet precise targets that exist for their own convenience. Too often young children who cannot conform to inappropriate expectations that they sit still for long periods of time are labeled "hyperactive." Too often children of kindergarten or even prekindergarten age who are simply not ready or yet interested in reading, or who quite normally reverse letters, are labeled "learning disabled." Too often young children who, also quite normally, lisp or stutter or have trouble with blends or other difficult sounds are labeled "speech impaired." Too often, young children who do not conform or even healthily rebel against unreasonable expectations or limitations or even abuses are labeled as having a "behavior disorder." Too often, differences in culture, gender, age, ability, style and experience are not understood, leading to the biased application of labels. As a result, these children are, from then on, pressured and demoralized and often isolated. Again, it is unquestionably important for professionals who know what they are doing to catch early warning signs, and they do clearly exist to the trained eye. But be very careful of any seemingly snap, questionable or biased judgement placed on your child, or of an environment that appears to label, judge, blame, misunderstand, compare or separate children.

Lastly, in this context, we come to the issue of individualization. This is one of profound importance. Children are a composite of unique inheritances, temperaments, personalities, experiences, interests, strengths, needs and learning styles. Programs that talk or teach to the group, or group children by judgmental and defining standards, do great injustice and harm. There is no practical or ethical short-cut to individualizing curriculum, expectations, relationships, methods and styles. From a practical standpoint, children must

be allowed to function and learn in the way they are most familiar, comfortable and capable. From an ethical one, as an anonymous educator once said, the art of teaching is helping each child find what is unique and special about him/herself. No child can be allowed to slip through the cracks, be made into someone who they are not or be put at a disadvantage because of who they are. Look closely at the acknowledgment and treatment of individuals -- at the respect, understanding, flexibility and effort shown. With unfortunately growing class sizes, it has become the impossible possibility to uphold a truly individualized program, since there is no acceptable short-cut, it is how close the program tries to come that should be the standard. If the program appears to be trying to make children into a faceless crowd, interchangeable cogs, carbon copies of the teachers or by-products of the laziest kind of whole group or ability group teaching, or fails in any of the above areas, well, you know what to do.

Diversity is a much debated and often misunderstood idea these days, and it stands as our next to last criterion. Young children must learn to appreciate the fact that we as people are all different and yet all the same. They must be taught that no color or gender, appearance or background, cultural expression or family composition, is any more beautiful, more good, more acceptable or more central than any other. This can be done in many ways, but the most concrete and compelling is first hand interaction with children and teachers who are different. Schools must take responsibility for an affirmative effort to provide a diversity of potential friends and role models, in relation to race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic class and disability. Additionally, dolls, posters, books, music and food must be inclusive and non-stereotyping, holidays must be ethnically and religiously balanced and true, and teachers must examine themselves for the virtually unavoidable prejudices which, if unchecked, lead to maltreatment, limitation and the passing down of prejudice to the next generation. Look for a classroom of inclusiveness, equality, harmony, knowledge, anti-bias, balance and responsibility in this regard.

Last but not least, we must touch on an issue which is surely of interest to you, that of parent involvement. Now, education is not democracy. The professionals who practice it are, or at least should be, seriously trained in its science as well as its art. Early education, or any education, should not have to yield to whim, fad, pressure, politics, subjectivity or marketability. Educators must be leaders. But there should be consequential involvement by

parents in all appropriate and possible matters, most especially choices and strategies involving their own children. There are also decisions regarding expenditures, trips, meetings and celebrations that are shared ones. Parents should be informed and consulted regarding ways of addressing such matters as sexuality, religion and cultural expression and death, and books or curricula designed to address such scourges as child abuse, drug abuse and even homophobia. There should be a body of parent representatives and liaisons, with well defined powers and limits. Head Start programs, for example, have a Policy Committee which is involved in budgeting, hiring and policy making. Public day care programs also often have a parent policy board of sorts. Parent Cooperative programs are those wherein parents actually serve as the Board of Directors, as well as, most often working in the classroom in lieu of assistant teachers on a scheduled rotating basis. In the public school system, there is, of course, the P.T.A., but seldom does it have a real voice unless made to have one by its leaders. And in Public special education, there is a C.P.S.E. (Committee on Preschool Special Education) or C.S.E. (Committee on Special Education) which includes parent representatives, and is meant to guarantee that parents of children being considered for special education do have a voice (although once in the system that voice tends to dissipate somewhat). But regardless of the degree of parent involvement, there must be an open door policy whereby parents may observe, visit and have access to their children at any time. Find out the program's position on parent involvement, and consider whether it matches your desires, availability and personality. Also consider whether there is a sense of open and non-manipulative communication, wherein individual parents are kept informed, talked to professionally, called with good news as well as bad, and treated, themselves, with respect, understanding, inclusion and non-judgmentalism.

There are, of course, numerous other factors to be considered, but we have probably covered the essentials. As you shop for child care and/or early education, you have to do your homework (better you than your young child), by reading, networking or consulting your local college's early education department. But as important as the technicalities are, your job begins and ends with instinct and sensitivity. Forget the propaganda, and go back to your own childhood; would you have wanted to be a part of this program? Consult with your child; what do his/her words and behaviors tell you about a child's perspective, especially when that child is the one who will win or lose? John Dewey once said that a classroom should be "a microcosm

of society;" is this mini-society one wherein the values, behaviors, relationships and potentials that you want for your child are seemingly being developed? This is not an easy job you are undertaking. The most popular programs are often the worst ones. They may mesmerize with computer and foreign language curricula, or they may promise advanced academic achievement or obedience training, or they may smile and hold out their hand and then neglect or mistreat your child once you are on your way. Ignore the peripherals and look to the heart of the program. When all else disappears, what you really want for your child is what you give: love.

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