

Quality Counts

No matter where we stand on the issues of women's roles and family values, as a society we have to face this fact: Millions of children in our country are spending the majority of their waking hours in childcare settings. Unfortunately, there is reason to fear that many of these children's needs are not being met.

The research is chilling enough to underscore that concern. According to a groundbreaking study undertaken by the National Institute for Child Health and Development, much care for young children is still inadequate to meet their needs. An appalling number of childcare placements are actually harmful to children.

However, there is some good news in the research as well. Some childcare is amazingly beneficial for children. A growing number of highly professional early childhood educators and childcare providers are making a positive difference for children and families day in and day out in quiet, lovely ways.

When childcare works as it should, it enlarges a child's attachment system. He learns that there are more people who love him besides his family. He builds trust rather than fear for the world outside the confines of his own home.

Children in high quality childcare spend time in meaningful play rather than in front of the television or strapped into a car seat for errands during much of the day. High quality childcare provides appropriate play experiences which will help a child develop in every domain.

High quality childcare includes children from diverse backgrounds in a loving, supportive social setting. Children in such settings gain early experiences of acceptance of the many ways we human beings may be different.

Parents who use high quality childcare discover an ally in their child's caregiver. The partnership they create together supports the child's development and supports both of them in their roles of caring for the child. Caregivers can be like fresh horses to love our kids when we have run out of energy or patience. These teachers not only scaffold children, but they also add to a parent's resources.

The best early childhood professionals in the field have the energy, creativity and skill to provide a nurturing environment for all sorts of children. Their pay is shamefully low for the enormous contribution and potential impact they make on our society, both now and for our future. But they do what they do because they really, really like children and can't imagine not spending their lives with them.

Nothing beats the time parents spend with their children. But when they need to be apart, parents can continue to provide for their children's happiness and wellbeing by seeking out early childhood professionals who are committed to the very same thing.