

Nurturing children: Why “early learning” doesn’t help

Children should start attending school later, not earlier, Canadian development psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld reveals. “Early learning” programs for young children have no benefits for kids, he adds. So why are governments running down the opposite track?

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“I want to make sure that my son learns how to get along with others,” one parent will say. Another will add, “My daughter is shy. I want her to be with other children, to help her come out of her shell.” A third might enthusiastically report that her child loves all her friends at daycare: “She can’t wait to go and spend time with them!”

These are just some of the things parents say when it comes to the benefits they see in the social settings that pre-schools, daycares and all-day kindergarten provide. Parents are rightly concerned about whether their children get along well with others.

However, is it true that early interaction with peers improves socialization for young children? Canadian developmental psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld says this is not the case, particularly in sending young children into “social” environments before they are ready. [1]

Defining socialization

The word socialization can mean different things to different people.

With regards to small children, Dr. Neufeld clarifies one thing that socialization is not: **“Probably the greatest myth that has evolved is this idea that socializing with one’s equals leads to socialization.”**

Developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner also clarifies what socialization is not: “It should be clear that being socialized is not necessarily the same as being civilized. Nazi youth were also products of a socialization process.” [2]

Socialization in childrearing means rendering children fit for society so that children can grow and mature into becoming contributing adults, who can respectfully interact with others in community, be it at work or home, with colleagues, family and friends.

Successful socialization is of particular interest where reports of bullying hit the media with some regularity. [3]

For Dr. Neufeld and his colleagues at The Neufeld Institute, socialization is more complex than simply being able to get along well with peers. [4] Socialization involves being able to get along with others while at the same time being true to oneself.

Getting there from here

Dr. Neufeld describes a teacher who is unable to express her views for fear of causing conflict. Picture a staff meeting, where this teacher chooses to stay silent rather than disagree. This may create the appearance that she is “really nice,” and able to get along well with others—something she may well tell her students to do as well. The reality is she may be unable to hold on to her own identity in face of conflict.

Constantly agreeing and being nice may, in fact, be immaturity in disguise. “You have to be separate enough so you can be with your equals without losing your distinctiveness,” says Dr. Neufeld.

He adds that someone who always “gets along” may not be able to handle diplomacy without a loss of integrity. If this form of mature self-expression can be hard for adults, how much more difficult is it for children?

“Premature socialization,” says Dr. Neufeld, “was always considered by developmentalists to be the greatest sin in raising children ...[w]hen you put children together prematurely before they can hold on to themselves, then they become like [the others] and it crushes the individuality rather than hones it.” [5]

A is for “attachment”

One of the issues with large numbers of little people in group care settings is the issue of peer orientation. This means having small children attach to their peers, rather than to adults.

The concept of attachment, developed primarily by psychologist John Bowlby, denotes the instinct that causes



adults to care for children and children to receive that care. Successful early attachment is necessary for adult emotional development. In Bowlby’s words, attachment is the tendency “of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others.” [6]

As humans, we are highly sociable creatures. But we identify some relationships as being higher priority, and are very particular about who takes that position. [7] It is through these connections that we develop a sense of self. [8]

And importantly, our high priority attachment figures (aka the people we see the most of and really love) are intended to be enduring. **These are not people who should disappear from our lives, neither are strong attachments something small children should “grow out of.”** [9]

This is one reason why daycare employees can never imitate the potent power of the parent: A job is a job, and employees change cities or jobs with some regularity.

Helen Ward is the president of a non-partisan, grassroots group called Kids First Parents Association. She highlights how attachment and socialization work together. “In order for children to grow up into the mature adults we desire them to be, they have to spend time with adults they are attached to, not their own likewise immature peers.” She goes on: “This means that if we take the attachment figure away—through death, illness, distractions, daycare, or any disruption in attachment relationships—and replace it with peer attachment - puff - the kid will be a 'lord of the flies' type because the seemingly 'socialized' behaviour is simply copying, it is not 'inside' yet. It is developing, but can just as well ‘undevelop.’” [10]

If parents aren’t aware of this, they may interpret negative developments as positive. The three-year-old who

can't wait to be with his friends in daycare may in fact be on his way to becoming peer rather than parent attached, because being attached makes us want to be with those we are attached to.

The problem is that the more children are peer attached, the less attached they are to adults—and this can result in children becoming very hostile to being parented or taught.

Cultural flatlining

When small children spend too much time with their peers, they will imitate the features of those they see around them. Dr. Neufeld speaks of a “flatlining” of culture as a result. “We have a children’s culture of today. In Europe, there is a crisis, which is that youth are not integrating into mainstream society and people believe it is happening in North America as well.”



The question might also be whether they are integrating into a newly mainstream culture that is not altogether mature. “Children have become fit for a society that does not reproduce itself and does not contribute to the larger society as a whole,” says Dr. Neufeld. [11]

Supporting diversity

Diversity—creating it, respecting it and allowing it to flourish—is one of today’s most popular buzzwords, something to which we pay lip service. However, the early placement of children with as-of-yet undeveloped personalities in group daycare for long hours, when they aren’t able to “hold on to” their own special, unique personalities creates sameness, not individuality.

This is, in many instances, one of the reasons parents might choose to delay entry to school. In fact, for much of Canada’s history, children did not attend so-called “early learning programs;” school started at age six.

Ironically, some who advocate for homeschooling do so in order for proper socialization to occur. In *Home Schooling and the Question of Socialization*, author Richard G. Medlin highlights how healthy socialization does happen for homeschoolers, writing “home-schooled children are taking part in the daily routines of their communities. They are certainly not isolated; in fact, they associate with—and feel close to—all sorts of people.” [12]

Another researcher, Larry Edward Shyers, compared homeschooled children with those in traditional schooling for his PhD thesis at University of Florida. He found that with regards to self-esteem, there was no difference. [13]

The problem with children socializing at school, Ward says, is that children can be fickle in their friendships.

“Kid’s ‘friends’ are not really ‘friends’ in any meaningful sense of the word. They are not mature people who can handle another’s pain or difference of opinion. Peers want you to be the same as them,” says Ward.

The result is less individual expression and less personal growth, she concludes.

Crushing the spirit of childhood

Back in 1988, child psychologist David Elkind wrote *The Hurried Child*, saying, “**we are going through one of those periods in history, such as the early decades of the Industrial Revolution, when children are the unwilling victims of societal upheaval and change....Today’s child has become the unwilling, unintended victim of overwhelming stress.**” [14]

Elkind worried that children are increasingly being treated like mini adults. In childhood as a replica of adulthood, daycares and pre-schools put children under academic pressure. Child sports teams have pro uniforms and poor pee-wee players are sidelined. Children’s clothes have an adult look about them. If this was Elkind’s problem some twenty years ago, the situation today is not much changed.

More evidence that the smallest of children are being subjected to adult standards is the Early Development Instrument (EDI). [15] Under the auspices of improving child outcomes, the EDI asks teachers to answer a host of entirely subjective questions about a child’s proficiency physically, academically and emotionally and then chronicles how and where children are “behind.”

Activists use this flawed research to lobby for more early learning programs for younger ages. In Ontario, for example, a special advisor to Premier McGuinty desires to create schools as hubs, where children can be dropped off all day, possibly all year, to attain greater “school readiness.” [16]

When Francois Legault, of the Coalition for Quebec’s Future recently proposed that secondary school should follow work schedules, running from 9 am to 5 pm, some found it provocative. [17] The reality is that many grade schoolers in before and after-school care already experience adult working days, and the same could be said of a toddler in daycare. Children’s lives are scheduled down to a T, with little free time to just be kids.

Why the anti-child direction?

The reasons for this are varied. However, a big one is the current trend in public policy which creates pressure for all parents to have full time jobs. As a result, labour force attachment trumps parent-child attachment. Canada’s below-replacement birthrate means we are constantly searching for more employees. Having both parents work full-time is entirely reliant on putting their children in some form of standardized care, hence the reation of subsidized daycares. [18]

This has little to do with child development. The problem is that once centre-based care is preferentially funded and the cost heavily tax-subsidized, it creates an incentive for parents to use it. At that point, parents no longer truly have a real choice. They can’t assess the unique needs of their own children because their lives have been set up around two parents at full time jobs.

When asked what are the gains from early learning for small children, Dr. Neufeld simply replies: “**I don’t think there is anything to be gained except parental emancipation. And certainly not parental fulfillment. That’s a totally different issue.**” [19]

What to do?

Dr. Neufeld emphasizes that *who* parents are to their children matters more than what they do. [20]

This research is not intended to panic parents whose young children are in all-day care. However, it is wise to understand *why* your children are there. Some parents put their children in care for the express purpose of socializing them; this is not a researched reason to do so.

For parents whose children must be in care, it would be wise to **confirm that the “early learning” is limited exclusively to playing in an environment of adult attachment.** [21] Sometimes it is parents themselves who put pressure on teachers to provide “educational content” to younger and younger ages. When the “report cards” come back and show poor grades, this creates further anxiety in parents who now believe their children are behind.

Parents should eschew the creation of any kind of one-size-fits-all system. This is the sort of system that governments try to create—to “help” each and every family. By definition, these environments are less personal and more distant from parents. Even the local primary school may not, in fact, be the closest thing to the home environment for small children, if for example, a neighbour next door wants to take in additional children on top of her own, and that neighbour is known to the parents and the child.

For far too long, this form of high quality care for kids has been labelled “unregulated,” by those who strive to create school-based daycares with unionized employees. Facing a lack of criticism in the press, “unregulated” has come to be known as “dangerous.” But Helen Ward points out that all parents are “unregulated,” and this alone is not cause for concern. Parents need to inspect all care from top to bottom—whether government-regulated or not.

There are some elements of public policy being discussed that would help undo the damage of current trends. **Family income splitting allows parents to share their income and pay a lower tax burden. More money in parents’ pockets always means more choices.** While the federal Conservatives made this a policy plank in the last election, they watered it down by saying they’d only institute family taxation when the books were balanced, possibly in 2015. Ending the preferential treatment of non-parental care by funding families themselves would make a dramatic difference.

For Dr. Neufeld, the capacity for healthy relationships is meant to unfold in the first six years of life. “It’s a very basic agenda,” he says. “By the fifth year of life if everything is continuous and safe then emotional intimacy begins. A child gives his heart to whomever he is attached to and that is an incredibly important part... **The first issue is always to establish strong, deep emotional connections with those who are raising you. And that should be our emphasis in society. If we did this, we would send our children to school late, not early.**” [22]

1. This article is based on an interview with Dr. Gordon Neufeld on May 18, 2012. Dr. Neufeld is a developmental psychologist and the co-author of the 2004 national bestseller *Hold on to your kids: Why parents need to matter more than peers*.
2. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1970). *Two worlds of childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, p. 2.
3. For greater understanding of how to stem the bullying tide, see Simon, L. (2012, July 18). Empathy: An antidote to bullying. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/issues/empathy-antidote-bullying>
4. The Neufeld Institute can be found online here <http://www.gordonneufeld.com/>
5. Personal communication with Dr. Gordon Neufeld, May 18, 2012.
6. Green, M. and Scholes, M. (eds.) (2004). Attachment and human survival. London: Karnac, p. 7.
7. *Ibid*, p. 8.
8. *Ibid*, p. 37.
9. *Ibid*, p. 8.
10. Personal communication with Helen Ward, August 21, 2012.
11. Personal communication with Dr. Gordon Neufeld, May 18, 2012.
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14. Elkind, D. (1988). *The Hurried Child*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc, pp. xiv, 3.
15. The EDI questionnaire can be viewed online at http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/media/uploads/publications/edi_bc-yukon_2012.pdf

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19. Personal communication with Dr. Gordon Neufeld, May 18, 2012.
20. Denis Friske, D. (2012, January 16). Moments of connection with our children. The Neufeld Institute blog. Retrieved from <http://www.neufeldinstitute.com/blog/2012/01/moments-of-connection-with-our-children/>
21. Laucius, J. (2012, February 4). All work and no play is not good for the developing brain, says psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld. *Ottawa Citizen*, p. J3. (Helen Ward also points out that “child led” or “free play” can in fact mean even less interaction for children with adults, as staff will simply provide toys and ensure that no child is physically hurt.)
22. Personal communication with Dr. Gordon Neufeld, May 18, 2012.

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