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CHILD-CARE - AN EXPEDIENCY OR A HUMAN RIGHT? Contributed by Ruth Crowe

Historically the provision of child-care has been justified as a means of solving pressing social and economic problems of particular groups (of particular families or particular needs of industry). For example, to rescue children from squalor; to provide a workforce in wartime; to enable welfare or low income families to be self-supporting; to retain special skills in the workforce(e.g. nurses, teachers, university staff). Thus child-care has been provided in a piecemeal way as an expediency.

Pressure for child-care as an expediency will continue to dominate until such time as there is a generally accepted vision of children's centres that are based on the community.

But, by the words "based on the community" it is not enough to see parents or children or the community as they are now. What is required is a fusion of the deepest personal needs of all groups of people with the broader social ideals.

Indeed, this process around child-care can play a most important role in creating community where none now exists, or where only a poor pale partial substitute for community exists.

In other words, what we should be thinking about when we talk about community-based child-care is how to fuse personal need and social aspiration in such a style that the process creates conditions for community involvement which overcomes our alienation from each other by providing the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging.

So long as the provision of child-care is motivated by parochial or sectional interests the facilities that are available will tend to paternalistically separate out and segregate children from the community and intensify the stratification of the population into groups according to income, occupation, age, ethnicity and so on. At the same time such facilities intensify the isolation and segregation of those adults who are directly caring for the children (the majority of such 'caring' people are women under today's conditions).

What can be done to counter the inevitable trend towards creating services for children over which those who are the main consumers have such little control?

THE VISION OF CCC.

To illustrate the development towards a human rights approach, it is timely to recall one of the first statements by Community Child Care (in the preface of the 1972 handbook).

"Child-care facilities must not be developed as 'dumping depots' or fortresses for forgotten children. We already have quite enough institutions separating the age, sex and socio-economic groups off from one another.

To avoid institutionalization and the authoritarian attitudes that go with this, we believe that it is essential that child-care facilities develop as small co-operatively run neighbourhood groups firmly rooted in their communities. They can be places which provide full day care for working mums, occasional care, emergency care for families in crisis, special services for the disadvantaged or handicapped child, and afterschool and holiday care for school aged children.

As well they can offer companionship and a sense of usefulness to those who need to be needed and have something to give (e.g. the old and lonely)."

Thus, the significance of COMMUNITY-BASED CHILD-CARE was the touchstone for CCC from its inception.

WORKPLACE CENTRES

It is from within this context that moves for child-minding at work places can be seen as developments towards provision of child-care as an expediency.

Neighbourhood or community-based centres mean that:
. children have an opportunity to grow up with other families of the neighbourhood and develop community links,
. the child does not have to change centres as mother changes jobs,
. the child does not have to travel long distances to the centre,
. there is little likelihood of the provision of care being a controlling factor over the lives of the parents,
, there is opportunity for comprehensive facilities to be provided (family day care, before and after school activities);
. the parents will feel free to participate in the running of the centre.

Child-care based on the workforce contributes to;
. providing female labour at the least possible cost
. forcing the child to become a commuter and traveling long distances;
. making women more vulnerable and socially dependent on the workplace;
. reducing the opportunity of changing jobs
. making it more difficult to struggle for better working conditions;
. making it more difficult to participate in improving conditions of the centre.

In most cases the service can be term. nated whenever the sponsoring industry so desires (i.e. when women are no longer needed in the workforce).

Child-care services which are based on piecemeal planning to meet an expediency can be closed without much protest when the providers of the service think that the facilities are no longer justified. The following warning from America should be heeded:

"Child-care centres during the Depression and World War II were established to meet the needs of the government and not the needs of children, parents, teachers whose lives were affected by them. When the government no longer needed to provide jobs' for teachers on relief work, or to employ women in defence work, it closed down the centres. Although many women struggled to keep the centres open, their movement was not organized or powerful enough to change government policy." (from an article entitled 'Public Child Care, Our Hidden History' by Judy Kleinberg published in The Day Care Book, 1974.)

Those who were involved with war time child care in Australia could make a similiar statement. During the early 1940's a number of all day care centres were financed by the Federal Department of Labour and National Service. The story of their establishment and demise fit exactly the U.S. statement.

The object of CCC is 'community-based child-care'. The significance of the word 'based' is demonstrated by the following examples of how child-care can be provided through co-operation and effort that bridges the gap between the work place and the community.

In the school vacation during 1974 and again in 1975, school age children of workers at the I.C.I. Zipper Factory in Ascot Vale

were cared for by a programme provided by women who were given leave from the factory bench to care for the children. The majority of those participating in the programme were migrant families. The factory canteen was the main assembly area for the activities and the children went from the factory to play days organised in the neighbourhood and thus cemented relationships with the community of the district in which the families lived and the parents worked. This is a shining example of how a group of employees can plan to solve their own problems.

The gains from such co-operative efforts are afr greater than the mere provision of adequate minding of children while mothers work. The mothers gained in human dignity through solving their own problems and finding such ready acceptance from a wide circle of people within and without the workplace, Australian born and migrant, professional recreation leaders and volunteers, workmates and neighbours.

Nevertheless, such efforts have an in-built contradiction in that they are built on the assumption that there is equality between employees and employers, that class conflict can be abolished through co-operative effort. This is contrary to reality. Thus these efforts may be only short lived and sporadic.

There are those who argue for child-care for particular categories of employees because they deplore the loss of professional skills from the work-force.

This was succinctly stated in an article in the 'Australian' some years ago during the debate on Gorton's Child-Care Bill: "On purely economic grounds there is probably a case for the provision of creches going to women who are highly paid and thus contribute most to the economy, and depending on which way Mr. Gorton's vague policy pronouncements is given this is exactly what could happen".

The expediency of providing work-place based child-care could strengthen this elitist selectivity. Large organisations with professionally trained staff such as universities, hospitals and schools are at present considering how to meet the child-care needs of their workforce. For example, the price of enrolling a child at the Melbourne University Family Club is $150 per month, which is somewhat out of the reach of most students.

So long as these deliberations are confined to those whose immediate concern is the smooth running of the institutions: i.e. managers, personnel officers, boards of directors, then there will be a natural trend towards seeking centres that provide care for the most highly trained, specialised staff (those with degrees are most likely to be given precedence over domestics).

A welcome new development is the possibility of one of the large metropolitan hospitals co-operating with local resident groups to establish a community based service within which some places would be reserved for child=care for staff that is specifically in short supply at the hospital.

Similarly, the move for children's centres at schools are resulting in centres where there is a wide social mix of families. For example, at Brunswick Girls High the centre is used by children from the district as well as by children of those who work at the school. A school is much more than

3. a workplace and, in fact, can become

the hub of a neighbourhood. (see article in Sept.-Oct. Newsletter).

The three teachers organisations, the Victorian Teacher's Union, the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association and the Technical Teacher's Association of Victoria have joined together in recent conferences at which child-care has been the main topic.

The only way to prevent children's services from opening and closing in response to the needs of government and industry is for these centres to be firmly based on the involvement of the people who use them.

It is axiomatic that the only way for such community control to be achieved is by more and more people having a vision of how human relationships can flourish when there are such centres of social acitvity on a neighbourhood basis.

Thus the provision of child-care is not primarily for patching up some immediate pressing problems of particular groups of people, nor providing a workforce to overcome temporary undersupply of labour, (although solutions to these problems may incidently be found by the provision of adequate facilities); but to enable a fuller social life to be made available to all members of the family and the community.

STUDY ON THE CHILD-CARE NEEDS OF MIGRANT FAMILIES

A study is currently being heavily financed by International Women's Year for an investigation of child-care needs of migrants in the inner suburbs.

There is some cause for alarm about this survey as every question in the main questionaire assumes that the most appropriate and necessary location of the child-care centre is at the workplace.

A number of factors could combine to contribute to make the results of the survey dramatically show that migrant families want child-care located at the factories.

These factors include:
a) the high proportion of young migrant women in the work force.
b) the migrant's lack of knowledge of children's services that are available.
c) the poor provision of children's services in areas where there is a high proportion of migrants in the population
d) the inadequate recognition of the special needs of migrants in the existing child-care services.
e) some of the migrants come from countries where the only child-care services are located at the workplace and thus regard this as being the traditional way such facilities are provided.

The questionaire in the study only offered women the choice of a yes/no response and in no way tested the assuption of those conducting the study that the facilities should be at the workplace.

Despite the good intentions behind this study, it is an example of a piecemeal, patching up approach to human problems. Child-care at work places would tend to confine migrant women to an option of choosing a 'service' that would generally mean another controllin factor on their lives. Such a choice robs migrant women of having any perspective of how neighbourhood centres could be places for their families where they could have a sense of belonging to the community in which they are bringing up their children.