Other people's children: the day care experience in America

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Very few recent proposals in social policy have received such enthusiastic and unqualified endorsement as the idea of day care centers. The chorus of approvals broadcast these past five years has gone almost unanswered. To a startlingly wide variety of proponents, the establishment of centers for the care of pre-school children seems like a good idea whose time has come. Such a reform, they contend, will beneficently reorder the existing relationships between sexes, generations, and social classes. Important support for the movement comes from women liberationists, who insist that day care will eliminate the most crucial barrier—that is, the day-to-day responsibility for children—which confronts women who try to enter the labor force and to pursue careers. Indeed, women liberationists argue that day care centers have actually fulfilled this function in the past. World War II is their paradigm case: As soon as the federal government built day care centers, women entered the factories in unprecedented numbers. It follows that as soon as the government recommits itself to this program, women will again enjoy full opportunities for work.

But the argument for day care centers goes much further than this. According to many proponents, day care centers will do far more than simply allow women to join the labor force. They will
once and for all resolve the conflict between the child's welfare and the mother's welfare—for the centers will offer advantages that neither the nuclear middle-class family nor the economically deprived lower-class family can match. According to day care proponents, especially the social psychologists among them, the day care centers will free the suburban child from the intense and overbearing pressures of the nuclear family, and therefore fit him better for an adult life in the outside society. For the lower-class child, the centers will offer exemplary medical and dental care, the chance to use the latest educational play equipment, and the skilled guidance of experts who will help the youngster cope with the deficiencies of his own family life.

Some day care advocates do concede that in an earlier era such child care institutions were frequently disappointing places. But the historical record does not give them pause. As Indiana Congressman John Brademas explained: "Traditionally it was easy to conceive of a child care program. The crèche and the orphanage are typical of what we used to expect: food, a roof over the head, and a minimum of adult supervision." But now, he insists, we know better: "In recent years psychologists have come to learn more about how children grow. As a result we have gained a deeper understanding of what intelligence, accomplishment, and development are." These ingredients will make the internal organization of our day care centers markedly superior to that of their predecessors.

Still another proclaimed purpose of day care centers is to bring a new cohesion to the social fabric, binding the social classes to each other. The center populations are to be mixed, so that lower-class and middle-class children, blacks and whites and chicanos, and their parents will all come into regular contact with each other. "Think for a moment what this would mean," Congresswoman Bella Abzug recently declared. "It would let local groups of parents and women set up child care centers for children from all socio-economic backgrounds. It would let community groups create the models for that universal kind of child care we are all talking about—a child care system that would accommodate rich and poor alike, that would let our kids grow up with a chance to know each other and to learn that they can bridge that racial and economic gap that divides their parents."

It is small wonder, given this definition of potentialities, that day care supporters called the centers the "right of every pre-school child in America." How can one deprive the child, the parents, and the society of such advantages?
Still, before investing large sums of money in day care centers, we had better know what it is we are building. There is, alas, considerable evidence which indicates that this is a reform movement that will soon need reforming. In our long overdue effort to insu re equal rights and opportunities for women, we may be establishing institutions that within a generation we will be doing our best to dismantle. It is not clear that day care centers historically have been an essential mechanism for getting women into the work force, or that they will become so. Nor is it true that enlightened change is the theme of day care developments, or that these institutions will bridge the gap between social classes. Rather, the history of day care in this country, from its origins in the 1850's through the events of World War II, is filled with cautionary tales that scarcely legitimate the kind of inflated rhetoric that we are now hearing.

The beginnings of day care in America

The first American day care center—or day nursery, as it was then called—opened in New York in 1854, the work of a group of the city's wealthy ladies. They were going to do good; specifically, they were going to assist impoverished and unfortunate women through the trauma of giving birth—and simultaneously satisfy a pressing need of their own, to obtain wet nurses for their infants. The plan was ingenious: It called for a combination foundling home, lying-in center, day care center, and employment bureau. The poor or deserted or unwed mother came to the center in the last months of her confinement. She had her baby there, and then, as recompense for the charity she received, she nursed not only her own infant but one other one as well—either a foundling or the infant of an employed wet nurse. After three months, if her milk was adequate and her behavior proper, she faced a choice of accepting a position as wet nurse or taking her infant and leaving the center. If she chose to be a wet nurse, she left her own infant in the day care center (to be fed by another three-month resident), and went to work in the homes of “the better sort.” Everybody's needs, it would seem, were satisfied. The poor had a place to have their babies, and a ready means of employment. The wealthy had wet nurses, the gratifications of benevolence, and the chance to teach the downtrodden the right rules for living.

The essential characteristics of this first day care center reappeared time and again in later and more extensive programs. Throughout the 19th century, and well into the 20th, it was the
elites that organized and administered the centers. It was their definition of proper behavior that went into the rules and set the tone for the enterprise. Moral uplift was endemic to the venture; the ultimate purpose of the centers was not merely to allow poor women to earn income but to bring them and their families under the “right influences.” The centers tried to encourage female employment in the “socially desirable” occupations—that is, in domestic and not factory work. There were other day care models that Americans might have emulated. In France, for example, beginning in 1846, a series of crèches were constructed right next to the factories. Their chief aim was to allow the laboring mother to take brief work breaks in which to nurse her child. While not designed to “liberate” lower-class women, the French system did in fact operate in accord with their economic needs, rather than in accord with the moral needs of those who established and operated the American centers.

In the closing decades of the 19th century, as foreign-born immigrants crowded into America’s urban slums, the day care movement spread in an ad hoc way from one city to another. In Boston, New York, and Chicago the benevolent-minded established centers. With the zeal and confidence of missionaries to the natives, they leased the bottom floors of brownstones in the midst of ghettos and eagerly, if haphazardly, set to work.

Their biggest prize, of course, was the child. They had him in their control at least during the daylight hours, and they were not going to waste the opportunity. As one day care organization explained with all due sympathy and condescension: “His mother must bring him in clean in the first place and her primitive methods are supplemented by the skilled service of competent nurses. . . . He is regularly fed, and his weak puny body soon shows the result in greater strength and better brain power. . . . He is taught good manners and pleasant ways.” In short, he was to be transformed into a strong, intelligent, respectable child who would become a law-abiding and hard-working American citizen.

This child was also to serve as guide and teacher to his own family. “Nursery training,” as one center official put it, “brings good not only to the child but to his home.” Under the tender attention of the day care center workers, for example, he was to learn affection. When he returned home at night, he was then sure to show his parents love, and they in turn would reciprocate. So, too, his cleanliness and good manners were to inspire them to emulation.

Moreover, the day nurseries of this period devoted considerable energy directly to the uplift of the mother. They made efforts to
find her domestic work, certain that the moral refinements of a proper household—with the example of how to wash, sew, clean, and cook constantly before her—would do much more for a girl's welfare than the factory. Some day care centers organized night classes for women to learn to do laundry and housework, in order to make them even better mothers and more marketable domestics. There were classes, too, for cooking and sewing, designed to improve both the children's meals and the family income. Some day care centers also included school-age children in their programs. The nursery took care of the youngest, the kindergarten of the next oldest, and afternoon clubs and playground groups of the oldest. After all, the lessons that the toddlers learned were just as relevant to their older siblings. So from 6:30 in the morning, when breakfast was served, till 9:00 at night, when the last mother departed, the day care centers tried with energy and good will to pass on their special brand of values and skills.

The settlement houses

It was reformers in the Progressive period who first attempted to "professionalize" day care, to make the centers' programs an integral part of a broad social welfare policy. From storefronts and church basements and vacant rooms in boarding houses, the centers moved into many of the new settlement houses. Young and dedicated college women now supervised the children, replacing the well-to-do matrons who had given of their Thursday afternoons. The settlement workers designed a systematic program of education, medical care, and mental hygiene to bring coherence to what had been an odd assortment of programs.

The Progressives' agenda for the centers was impressive. They were to be not merely custodial places where mothers could drop off their children on the way to domestic work, but innovative nursery schools. Children from three to six years old were to learn under the Montessori method; the centers at the same time would train kindergarten teachers in the newest pedagogical techniques. Moreover, day care would provide access to medical facilities. Children would receive regular physical and dental checkups, and in cases where emotional disturbances appeared, mental health advice too. A social worker was to investigate each day care applicant, obliged not only to inform the parent of the various facilities available but to administer social case work assistance where necessary. The settlement house also tried to integrate older children into its
program through drill clubs, reading clubs, and discussion clubs, and to service mothers through instruction in English, crafts, and homemaking. "Last year," one day care center in the Progressive period boasted, "we received 1800 children. We gave many of them more abundant food and much better care than their poor homes could afford." Under the promise of this program, centers grew very popular. Two hundred six licensed day care centers operated in 1905, 500 in 1912, and 695 in 1916, the high point for the movement in the pre-World War II era.

For a brief time, some of the well-run settlement houses actually seemed to come close to realizing their ambitions. Hull House in Chicago and the University Settlement in New York for a few years did provide a wide range of services to the children of hard-working immigrants. But in pretty short order, probably by the outbreak of World War I, and certainly by 1925, conditions in the day care centers deteriorated. Inadequate personnel and custodial care, along with a rapid turnover in staff and clientele, characterized their operations; concomitantly, they grew less popular, the number of licensed centers declining from 695 in 1916 to 600 in 1925. Like so many other social welfare institutions, they enjoyed a brief spurt of seeming excellence and then suffered a prolonged lapse into mediocrity, or worse.

**From second choice to last resort**

One cause for this rapid decline was the competition that came from another Progressive reform, the widow-pension movement. Social workers and settlement house leaders vigorously insisted that morally deserving widows or mothers with physically disabled husbands should receive adequate relief at home, and not be forced to leave their children in order to eke out a living in factories or sweatshops. In fact, most reform energy went into the framing and eventual passage of such pension legislation. The Progressives' priority was to keep the good mother at home with her children, not to supervise the children in centers while the women worked. In other words, day care had a quality of second choice about it from the start. Progressives defined the program, for all its potential benefits, as less desirable than proper family care at home.

As a result of this judgment, and of the passage of liberal legislation, the day care clientele quickly became stigmatized, in their own eyes and in the eyes of center administrators. They were the unworthy poor—the mothers of illegitimate children, especially;
otherwise they would be at home with their children, living on a pension which was now available. The decision to take on factory work had a dubious quality about it, and by obvious extension so did the decision to place one’s child in a day care center. Not surprisingly under these circumstances, the centers soon had more vacancies than children. Within a decade, they moved from second choice to place of last resort.

An unbreakable chain of events spiralled the centers downward. As the quality of the care declined, more vacancies were created; as more vacancies occurred, funding became more restricted; as funding declined, the quality of administration fell and the stigma associated with day care centers increased. Then the level of care dropped further, more vacancies occurred, and the cycle began over again.

Thus, within a decade the day care center operations bore little resemblance to the plans of their founders. The clientele was no longer composed of the children of hard-working immigrant mothers who, following the reformers’ advice, did domestic work during the day and attended sewing classes at night. Instead, illegitimate children, along with those whose mothers had no choice but to work in factories, now made up the bulk of the centers’ children. These types had not been welcomed in the first Progressive day care centers—but by the 1920’s the centers were glad to have anybody to service.

Also, rapid turnover of both children and staff now became typical. Pennsylvania charity officials estimated in 1923 that 6,000 to 10,000 children passed through its 61 day care centers in that year. Under these conditions, there was little left of a coherent program. Evening classes ended; Montessori techniques in schools disappeared. The centers became places to care for the children of the most unfortunate or incorrigible of the poor.

Investigations of day care conditions revealed all too clearly the woeful effects of these changes. In New York, the Public Health Committee of the New York Academy of Medicine examined the 112 licensed centers of New York City. Their findings: Less than half provided the most elementary kind of sanitation or safety; 14 per cent were totally unfit for use. In Pennsylvania, Helen Tyson, a social worker and prominent state charity administrator, examined the 61 licensed day care centers. Her findings: The centers were “a catchall in cases of desertion, non-support, unemployment, sickness, etc.” The matrons in the centers knew almost nothing about the children—after all, as one worker told her, “the children changed
so fast that she could not keep a daily roll book.” Over half the centers did not meet basic standards of cleanliness. In most centers the children’s play was undirected, the equipment was poor, education was totally absent, and general supervision was inadequate.

The new social workers

Yet despite all these disappointments, the idea of the day care center as a viable and important means for social improvement did not die out. Between 1925 and 1930, the newly professionalized social workers took hold of it, eager to turn the centers into places that would bring case work techniques to bear on the “pathologies” of the poor. Miss Tyson herself was more impressed with the promise of case work than with the dismal reality she uncovered. After recounting her findings, she concluded her report by insisting that new social work techniques, together with better licensing procedures and more demanding standards, would transform the centers. “The best nursery,” she insisted, “is superior to the home.” Or put another way: Highly trained social workers could now do a far better job at raising the children of the poor than the poor themselves could do.

The new model for the day care centers was the child guidance clinic. Hence, far from being reluctant to admit the children of the “unworthy poor,” as their Progressive predecessors had been, the social workers of the 1920’s focused precisely on the product of the “unstable home.” From their perspective, personal as well as social problems had their origins in psychological maladjustment—if only the poor could be cured of their emotional disturbances, then they and the system would benefit. At the heart of this effort was to be the day care center; in it children and parents together would be taught the right rules for living.

The social workers were to be the central figures in the day care operation. They would administer elaborate admissions procedures to reduce the number of clients, and would intensify the relationship between the families and the nursery. The social workers would hold numerous interviews with the parents, and then channel information between the nursery teacher and the family. The teacher would learn all the important features in the child’s background—how he had been raised, his family’s psychological difficulties, etc.; and in turn the family would learn more about the child—his strengths and weaknesses, and how to help him overcome his troubles. The interviews would also give the social workers the
chance to do case work therapy with the family and to use their new skills to improve "adjustment" and "functioning." In essence, the center social worker would promote family and community stability, bringing a new order to the lives of the poor.

For all the novelty of the language and terminology, this program was little more than an updated restatement of the most traditional viewpoint on the poor and on day care. The founders of the earliest centers had also vowed to inculcate the proper habits in lower-class parents and children, and so had the Progressives. To be sure, the nature of the clientele in the 1920's had changed; social workers were now eager to work with the "hard core," previously thought to be incorrigible. But their approach and their goals remained the same. United Charities, an organization devoted to the very traditional ideal of bringing efficiency to almsgiving, was attracted to the social work ideal and made day care an essential item on its list of causes worthy of support. So, by the close of the 1920's, centers were once again beginning to grow in number and in reformist appeal.

Before social workers could capture the movement, however, the Great Depression intervened. The first years following the Crash bankrupted most private charities, making it impossible for organizations like the United Charities to support existing centers, let alone expand them. Moreover, by 1933 the bulk of professional social workers had been pressed into government service to staff the relief and works agencies. Finally, the labor market for women almost completely disappeared. In WPA projects and in private industry preference went to men, on the assumption that they had to support families. A nation suffering so keenly from unemployment did not want to employ wives or single women. So with clients, supporters, and staff occupied elsewhere, day care centers limped through the 1930's.

The one exception to this general condition during the Depression was the founding, under the auspices of the WPA, of some day nurseries. These places were to provide unemployed teachers—particularly the women driven out of the private labor force—with a chance to work, and to give children some free food. As with most WPA projects, the nurseries were a temporary expedient, a stopgap measure until teachers could return to the school system. The children who attended came from families on direct relief or on WPA rolls; the mothers were almost always at home themselves, but the family's resources were not above subsistence. The function of the WPA nurseries, then, was not to educate the child, or to free the
woman for work, or to bring social case work to the families, but simply to provide jobs to teachers and hot meals to poor children. As one would expect, turnover in both clients and staff was very high, facilities were inadequate (the basements of schools or public buildings), and the entire effort was really a minor venture in relief giving.

The War and its aftermath

The next great national emergency, World War II, had a very different effect on the number of day care centers, but not on their mode of operation. With men serving on the war front, and production a critical goal, the country had little choice but to press women—married, single, or widowed—into service on the home front. Occupations which had been traditionally closed to women suddenly were opened and women in unprecedented numbers filled the labor force.

Within a year of Pearl Harbor, these circumstances forced the federal government to enter the field of child care. The government wanted to maximize the number of women who could work, and hence it made good sense to provide facilities where mothers could leave their children during factory hours. It was also important to avoid demoralizing scandals. During the first year of the War, it was not uncommon to find children locked in parked cars near a factory—surely some arrangements could be made to avoid that kind of “care.” Finally, the government wanted to allay widespread fears that the influx of so many mothers into the work force was to the detriment of their children.

Accordingly, in 1942 (under the Lanham Act) the federal government appropriated funds for the care of pre-school children. On a fifty-fifty basis, it matched state funds for organizing or expanding day care facilities. The growth of centers that followed this act was incredible; practically every community heavily involved in defense work ran one. Under the press of this emergency effort, as might be expected, the centers themselves were of makeshift quality. They had only to be better than a locked car, and by that criterion they did succeed. Set up wherever a few rooms could be had, they fed the children, kept them from harm, and allowed their mothers to work.

But these were temporary efforts—indeed, influential organizations worked to insure that this was so. A 1942 day care conference organized by the Children’s Bureau quickly decided that the centers
should not be constructed right next to the defense plants. For then they might be too convenient—the centers might outlive the emergency and encourage women to stay in factory work after peace had come. Hence, to no one’s surprise, as soon as the War was over, the federal government stopped funding the centers; and with the exception of California and New York, so did the states. To most observers this meant that stable and middle-class mothers could get back to doing what they should be doing—raising their own children.

In the decade and a half that followed World War II, a new group of women, ignoring traditional injunctions, began to enter the labor force. To an unprecedented degree, not only the very poor but also lower-middle-class and middle-class women began to work; and they held clerical and sales positions, not only factory jobs. At the same time, the number of working mothers increased. In 1948, only 20 per cent of the women in the labor force had children under 18; by 1958, the number swelled to 30 per cent. Yet these two changes had little or no effect on the day care movement. Of the 5.1 million children under 12 whose mothers worked full time, only two per cent received group care; for those children under six years of age, the figure was a mere four per cent. What day care centers there were, were grossly underused; they operated at most at two-thirds capacity.

In other words, the first major influx of women into white-collar jobs took place without the assistance of day care centers—and without any public demand for such assistance. In fact, the service agencies and the public at large continued to define day care centers as appropriate only for “problem” children, those from “marginal” homes, in a psychological or economic sense. Well into the 1960’s, hardly any observers valued group care over the home. Rather, they defined the centers as appropriate only in those cases where the mother might otherwise abandon or give up the child. Day care was a last ditch effort to keep the mother with her child.

The day care revival

And so the matter rested until the late 1960’s, when a curious combination of forces gave day care a totally unexpected and unprecedented stimulus. The first groups to revive the day care idea, albeit from a different perspective, were composed mainly of educated women from the middle and upper classes. They perceived day care as a very useful method for facilitating the advancement
of their own careers without sacrificing their children's welfare. But however worthy their ambitions, one must treat their solutions with a great deal of caution and skepticism. There are many sound reasons for questioning the psychological and educational theories with which these women have rationalized their advocacy and use of day care centers. But in a fundamental sense, the long and intense debates over the virtues of "insular" nuclear families as opposed to group care, over the wisdom of early as against later schooling, are not of primary significance to public policy makers. For the decision of a middle-class or upper-class mother to send or not to send her child to a day care center is ultimately a voluntary one. Among the well-to-do, those women persuaded of the one argument will use the centers; should they grow disappointed with a particular institution they can remove their child, place him in another, or hire a baby sitter. They have discretion and power; they act as free agents, choosing their side and taking the consequences.

But the rhetoric of these day care center advocates has much more serious repercussions for a very different clientele—the poor, particularly the welfare mother. Perhaps the rise in relief cases over the past decade would, in and of itself, have prompted a revival of interest in the day care solution. What is incontrovertible, however, is that the women's liberation rhetoric justifying day care has coincided with municipal and state pressures to curtail the numbers of mothers on relief, to get the "shirkers" off the rolls, to restrict Aid to Dependent Children, to make welfare mothers enter the job market rather than remain at home with their children. For those persuaded of the propriety of these measures, the legitimation of the day care idea could not have come at a better time. Here is a socially acceptable mechanism for getting welfare recipients back to work, and at the same time for transferring the care of their children to "better" hands. There is no group that reads women's liberation literature on day care with greater pleasure than relief administrators. The results of this coincidence do concern public policy—for here, to an unprecedented degree, we enter the area of compulsion and manipulation. Until now day care centers, for all their inadequacies, were typically part of a voluntary and private charity effort; the poor did not have to use them. Today, however, we are entering a new stage, wherein the government, under the threat of withholding relief, can compel the poor to put their children in the centers.

The project that most unequivocally demonstrates the coercive
potential in linking day care with welfare is the federally sponsored Work Incentive Program (WIN). Established in 1967 by Congressional legislation, WIN was ostensibly designed to provide welfare recipients with the training and skills necessary to get them jobs in the open market. First priorities in the WIN program went to men, since Congress insisted that they were to be the first helped in getting jobs—or, put another way, the first removed from the welfare lists. After two years of operation, however, WIN had little to show for itself. The men on welfare, it turned out, were usually unable to work because of physical and mental disabilities; WIN then turned to women—that is, to mothers receiving ADC. Here they hedged their bets in an eminently predictable way. Recognizing that the likelihood of putting many welfare mothers to work was low, they took refuge in a much more ambiguous and hard-to-measure promise of educating and improving their children. “The WIN program,” announced officials, “will be judged not only by the extent to which it enables mothers to obtain employment, but also by its performance as a program serving the welfare of children.”

The structure that was basic to this effort was the day care center. Because of the new-found legitimacy of group care, legislators in state after state could, for the first time, compel needy mothers with children under six to enter the job market via the WIN program. Their rationale, of course, rested on the superiority of the new day care centers; once there was no need to be worried about the child’s welfare, there was every reason to insist that the mother earn her keep. Thus the original purpose of ADC, to keep the family together, could be contravened.

The tangible results of this effort, as might be expected, have been disastrous. WIN has proven to be a very costly program, unable to get ADC mothers into the job market, and unable to provide first-rate child care. But WIN has probably succeeded to some degree in its more fundamental purpose—to frighten potential welfare recipients from applying for relief.

A recent evaluation of WIN, commissioned by the program itself, points to its key failures. For one, despite state laws that welfare mothers could be made to enroll in WIN only where “adequate” child care facilities were available, the great majority of WIN mothers were left completely to their own devices in obtaining child care. For another, the costs of providing “adequate” centers turned out to be very high. “It costs more,” the evaluation noted, “to provide quality day care to children than most states are willing to pay mothers [under ADC] to take care of their own children.” In effect,
then, the WIN program “may result more in a transference of funds from the mothers to child care vendors with little reduction of actual costs.” In other words, the welfare mother must get off ADC to earn money to help pay the salaries of middle-class teachers, social workers, and psychologists. They get perhaps $8-10 an hour for taking care of the children; she got perhaps $1-2 an hour on welfare for doing the same thing.

The WIN evaluation also highlighted another major flaw in the program. The welfare mother who did in fact gain skills and entered the job market could leave her child in WIN day care centers for only three to six months. After that, she was on her own, compelled to pay all the costs of child care. But the working mothers would probably not earn enough to cover day care costs, or even after-school or summer programs for older children. These circumstances left little incentive, indeed little opportunity, for the mother to leave welfare for employment.

Promise and reality

The WIN experience is all too typical of day care center ventures: They do not fulfill their promises. In January 1972, New York State initiated a day care center program based on the federally-approved sliding scale of payments; the scale was to enable all classes to take advantage of day care facilities, paying according to their needs, and at the same time to keep the cost of the program short of the astronomical. In effect, however, what it did was to subsidize center care for the poor and place public facilities beyond the means of almost everyone else. Those families earning under $4,320 per year received free day care center care. But a family of four earning $8,500 had to pay the full share, that is, $2,700 per year per child. For that price, a family could send its child to the most expensive New York private school, and still have money left over to pay the costs of a bus and some baby sitting too! More to the point, no family making that salary could afford those payments. Thus, the effects of the New York program are twofold. All but the very poor are priced out of public day care. And for the very poor, as one angry mother put it: “Rockefeller has made day care centers into concentration camps for the poorest black and Puerto Rican families.”

The New York experience is not at all unusual. A study of 500 centers in all regions reported that fully 75 per cent of them are essentially segregated, serving either whites or blacks exclusively. This is a far
cry from the day care center as "the meeting ground" of rich and poor, black and white!

The persistent failure of licensed centers to achieve or maintain adequate standards of care is even more disheartening. In fact, the reality of public day care as it now operates is dreadful, and there is no prospect that conditions will improve substantially in the future. Practically every systematic investigation of day care operations reports the same dismal findings. A 1972 study by the National Council of Jewish Women of 500 centers, selected at random from all parts of the country, concluded that the level of care was far lower than what parents had the right to expect. Of public, non-profit day care centers, 62 per cent provided nothing better than custodial care; of proprietary, privately-run centers, 85 per cent were just custodial. Only 10 per cent of public centers and one per cent of the proprietary centers gave "superior" care—that is, the kind of care the rhetoric of the centers has promised. So too, a recent survey in New York City of its 240 licensed centers found 52 "inadequate," in that they did not meet minimum standards of health, sanitation, and safety.

Part of the failure of centers to offer good care reflects the inability of municipal or state governments to devise mechanisms for enforcing standards. To date, officials have relied exclusively on licensing, a woefully inadequate procedure in this instance. As the National League of Women Voters of Minnesota discovered when investigating failures in their state, both the decision to grant and the decision to revoke a license rarely take into account the actual operating faults of the centers. Substandard facilities are approved, on the basis of promises and hopes that conditions will be corrected and improved. All too often, however, improvement is not forthcoming. But then, "once a center is in operation with parents and children relying upon it, there is a great reluctance to revoke a license without alternative facilities available in which to place the children." In Minnesota, the League found, the state had no other power save licensing with which to enforce standards. And yet never once had it actually revoked one: This might have led to a "confrontation" with those operating and using them. Inevitably, then, as officials rush to use the centers as alternatives to welfare, they will grow even more lax about standards. A probationary license will become permanent, and then no one will want to put the center out of business. If the expansion of the day care center movement continues unabated, we will witness a further deterioration of these institutions from a point that is already far too low.
Nor have the centers solved the problems of staffing. The issue is not primarily one of adequate funding, for the rapid turnover in staff that now plagues the centers, and the absence of any credentials among its personnel, reflect more than just a low salary scale. They also point to weaknesses in the founders' conceptions as to who would be running the institutions. Proponents insist that early childhood education experts will perform the task. It is the cognitive psychologist who is the contemporary counterpart of yesterday's "well-trained" social worker. Ostensibly skilled in teaching children to learn, he is to design the center's routine, and then train a group of workers to administer it. But in fact, there are few early childhood education experts around. Worse, there is no evidence that they actually do have the "answers" to early education. This is not a well-established field, with incontrovertible and tested principles that only need to be systematically learned and applied. Rather, the field is still too uncharted to serve as the basis of a day care system.

So the reality of staffing in centers today is, typically, that a group of women, without special training or even talent or aptitude, staff the centers, usually on a part-time basis. For many of them, it is a temporary commitment. At best, they run a genial custodial operation. At worst, they inflict the kinds of cruelties that amateurs in charge of such institutions are prone to commit.

Giving the poor a choice

There is a long and disheartening tradition in this country of reform rhetoric legitimating new institutions which, in the course of one generation, decline into custodial places, or worse. Some 150 years ago it was the almshouse that was going to bring habits of discipline and thrift to the poor, and thereby remove them from the poor-relief rolls; a later generation invested in clinics where social case work would teach the poor to "adjust" to their circumstances. In each instance, benevolence flowed from the top down, from experts in moral uplift or psychology or pedagogy to the poor and their children.

The day care center movement belongs to this tradition. As always, proponents are not at a loss for persuasive arguments. Isn't it good to get poor children out of rat-infested tenements for eight hours a day? What could be wrong with giving the mothers marketable skills? How can one object to intensive childhood education or hot meals and free medical check-ups? Are not all problems of power solved if the poor have a say in the administration
of the day care centers? But as always, these considerations avoid the fundamental issues, which are economic and political. If we are going to spend 20 billion dollars for day care centers—the estimated cost of the Ribicoff proposal—and if most of this money goes to middle-class professionals, is that really the best way of helping poor families? And do we want to give government the right to coerce mothers into placing their children in day care centers so they can go to work?

Given the potentiality for abuse—indeed the already clear signs of it—in day care centers, it would seem the better part of wisdom to trust the poor rather than to trust the administrators or those who claim to speak for the poor. Why not allow the welfare mother to choose among alternatives? Rather than encourage the federal government to make appropriations directly or exclusively to day care centers, it would be more equitable and less risky to use the funds to establish a generous family assistance program. In this way, parents could exercise their own discretion. They could select this day care center or that one, or none at all. They could decide to leave their children under the supervision of someone else, or to forego job training in order to take care of them themselves. Critics are acutely sensitive to the dangers of abuse here—for the mother to remain idle or to spend her money foolishly. But they pass ever so lightly over the dangers of alternatives, such as founding institutions for child care that lack adequate supervision and personnel.

It remains all too true that getting federal money allotted to the poor is no easy matter. And many day care supporters, like Shirley Chisholm, urge the funding of centers not for their own sake but as a strategy for loosening purse strings in Washington on behalf of the poor. They believe that given the hyperbolic rhetoric surrounding day care, legislators might support the institutions handsomely, whereas they would not assist the needy directly. But the battle for appropriations is better fought directly. The prospect of coercion in a day care program more than outweighs its advantages as a fund-raising ploy.

In the end, the autonomy of decision making must be an essential part of any child care arrangement. First, because it is right and just that Americans control their own lives. Second, because it is the most important guarantor of success—only a voluntary commitment to job training or day care will allow it to succeed. If autonomy is not respected, we are sure in 10 years to be advocating, not day care as the right of every American child, but the organization of a Committee for the Rights of Children in Day Care Centers.