

Britain's Penelope Leach argues that parents need to be loving and at the ready 24 hours a day...

In an era looking for reassurance that two-career households are not harmful to children, who would have expected her to become one of the world's popular experts on bringing up baby?

TIME, MAY 9, 1994

# EMPATHIC PARENTING

Journal of the Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

Volume 17

Issue 3  
(Recession Format)

Summer 1994



*Motherhood or Career*

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Minutes of Proceedings of the Standing Committee on Justice and the Solicitor General ...  
Relating to Crime Prevention. Tuesday, December 8th, 1992

The Chairman (Bob Horner):

We're very pleased to have with us this morning Dr. Elliott Barker from the Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Dr. Barker:

...The gist of what I have to say about crime prevention is that as a nation we need to have a focus on crime prevention that is really the opposite; that is, we need to focus on building a nation of citizens who can live co-operatively and affectionately with one another.

I think that's an achievable goal if we set ourselves to do it. I think other approaches to crime prevention simply will not work because they do not deal with the fundamental problems.

**We should set ourselves in a concerted way to effect two changes: first, to see that each new child that's born has its emotional needs met (so that it will develop the capacity for trusting and affectionate relationships), and secondly, that Canadian society deliberately aims at rewarding and enhancing affectionate behaviour amongst its citizens.**

As an approach to crime prevention, that probably sounds like the visionary dream of an idealist. I think it's more visionary and idealistic to believe that crime prevention is possible without achieving these two objectives.

I believe that the present measures to control crime are going to be more and more necessary during the next fifteen years, though even more obviously inadequate -- unless we immediately and vigorously begin to put in place programs that are aimed at the two objectives of which I have spoken: **To nurture all new children adequately (at least during their first three years), and to shift our entire culture to one which aims at enhancing the affection amongst us...**

## WHAT IS EMPATHIC PARENTING?

**Being willing and able to** put yourself in your child's shoes in order to correctly identify his/her feelings, and

**Being willing and able to** behave toward your child in ways which take those feelings into account.

**Empathic Parenting** takes an enormous amount of time and energy and fully involves both parents in a co-operative, sharing way.

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## In This Issue...

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**Penelope Leach**, author of *Your Baby & Child*, *Your Growing Child*, *Babyhood*, *The First Six Months* and, most recently *Children First*, was educated at Cambridge University and the London School of Economics, where she received her Ph.D. in psychology and lectured on psychology and child development. In 1960 she held a research post at the Home Office Research Unit where her focus of interest was juvenile crime. She worked for the Medical Research Council Developmental Research Unit from 1964 to 1970, and the International Centre for Child Studies from 1980 to 1990.

Ten years of academic research into many aspects of child development, followed by the births of her own children, made her conscious of the gulf between professionals and parents, theory and practice, adults and children, even men and women. Much of her work has been devoted to trying to bridge those gulfs from both sides, using every possible medium of communication. Accordingly Penelope is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society, a Vice President of the Health Visitors' Association, President of the Child Development Society in the UK, sits on the professional board of the Institute for Child, Adolescent and Family Studies in the U.S.A. and on the Advisory board of the child abuse prevention program of Kidspace in the United States.



The title (Motherhood or Career) offends me because it assumes a complete separation between male and female parenthood and therefore a simple set of choices facing women alone.

# *Motherhood or Career*

*by Penelope Leach*

Penelope Leach's new book **CHILDREN FIRST** *What our society must do -- and is not doing -- for our children today*, was published in March 1994. Many people have asked why Penelope, who has spent many years researching child development and advising parents, is now focusing on society as a whole and addressing policy-makers, opinion-makers and bureaucrats.

The paper reprinted here, first written in 1989, is the bridge between the two bodies of work and was the starting point for four years research. If you want to see how her thinking, and some of the social trends touched on here developed during those years, **CHILDREN FIRST** is published by Random House of Canada and will be available as a Vintage paperback in January 1995.

When policy-makers asked me for a statement concerning the parenting dilemmas of the late eighties I was delighted. An awareness of problems must be a step towards seeking solutions to them. Faced with their stark title, "Motherhood or Career", however, my delight has sobered. Those three words suggest so little understanding of current situations and aspirations that I wonder whether awareness has even been conceived.

The title offends me because it assumes a complete separation between male and female parenthood and therefore a simple set of choices facing women alone. It also offends me because, highly privileged myself, I nevertheless regard questions about careers as less socially relevant than questions about paid work.

The word 'career' carries with it several connotations which are vital in this debate:

1. That it is a job, or series of jobs, with a coherent and building structure such that staying with it brings increasing rewards not only in money but in reputation.
2. That the value of the person pursuing the career-structure actually increases with age and experience.
3. That the overall structure of the career carries with it present or future job satisfaction and self-esteem.

It is sometimes argued that choices

which jeopardize such a desirable kind of job are even more agonizing than choices jeopardizing routine production-line work or service-industry slavery. But this is spoiled media nonsense. Surely no responsible person can seriously argue that losing a promotion or an ego-building professional opportunity is equivalent to losing out on a wage-package that is needed to meet a mortgage, or to missing the one job opportunity which might have got a single mother off public support and out of her isolation before depression drained her of all initiative? We must surely assume that all working women stand to lose at least the same when their family responsibilities conflict with their roles in the world outside home, because their jobs will be of equivalent importance to each of them, however the jobs may be viewed by society. Only individuals can sort out the differences -- if any -- between wanting to work and needing to work.

However the equation between want and need is worked out by the individual, women with careers are still infinitely better off than most women.

1. Career jobs pay enough money (including tax benefits and other perks) to give women financial options which are closed to others. Of course different careers are differently paid. Of course I support teachers and nurses in their struggle for higher salaries. Of course I do not believe they are rich. But a teacher earning 8,000 Pounds a year is still very differently placed from the woman earning 3,000 Pounds a year in a shop. If the teacher is not rich, the shop assistant is poor. The extra money brings extra choices: the choice of paying for child-care, for example, and the choice of paying for the services which may make a

double life tolerable for all concerned.

2. Because people with careers become more valuable as they get older, careerwomen have the option of delaying their families until their incomes, and their value to their employers, have peaked. Once an employer really regrets losing an employee, her chances of returning to work once she and her child are ready for some separation, of getting part-time work if that is what she prefers, or of working from home if that is what suits her, all dramatically increase. Putting off a family will not help the shop-assistant. The longer she leaves it the more difficult she will find it to get back to work -- ever. There are younger women coming along behind her and the really young ones can be paid even less than she.

Clearly, then, the real issue is not 'Motherhood or career' but something closer to 'Parenthood and paid work: the dilemma'.

When any group turns its attention to the problems of combining paid work with caring for children, discussion instantly focuses on questions concerning daycare for children too young to go to school. Usually the problem is posed in terms of too few nurseries and the solutions proposed are various combinations and permutations of alternative or additional forms of care outside the home.

Let me say right now, that I believe that daycare for preschool children begs most of the important questions and that to propose solutions to work/child problems in those terms is to perpetuate a con.

It begs important questions by entering the debate at a point where individual children and their individual parents, linked into their unique families, already exist. At that point it is already

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too late to consider many of women's most crucial choices. What is the use of asking a woman whether she is sure she should have had a baby when she already has him? What is the purpose of querying the timing of the birth or the father's real wish for a family, after the event? That woman is facing a real situation in which her choices are sharply limited by the existence, the rights if you like, of that baby. Given the situation she is in she may indeed desperately need more daycare facilities. But to suggest that such facilities are any kind of answer to the problems her situation reflects is like suggesting that more and better foster-parents are the answer to child-abuse and battering.

It is a con because the whole debate about preschool daycare suggests that once children reach school age the problems go away. They do not go away. Arranging satisfactory care for the five-year old of working parents can actually be more difficult than arranging it for a three-year old. Children are not cared for in school in such a way that parents (both or either) are free to pursue jobs or careers on an equal basis with the childless. Most children are in school for about 7 hours in 24 (leaving 17 hours without school care) for 5 days in every 7 and for 36 weeks in each 52.

Older children do not need the intensity of care required by toddlers and more of them can be satisfactorily cared for together, but the school-child's care can still be more difficult to arrange because it is so irregular. The toddler needs daycare five days a week from, say, 8 -

5, except on public holidays and over three vacation weeks a year. Your school-child needs it from, say, 8 - 9 a.m. including the trip to school (except when Daddy can take her in the car) and 4 - 6 p.m. (except when she goes to tea with a friend) five days a week except at half term, and in the holidays, and when the school is closed for use as a polling station (when she needs it all day) and except for when she is ill. And illness cannot even be planned ahead.

For me, the real issues start much further back and they do not just involve parents, children and employers. They involve all of us in all our diverse roles. They involve us as people.

I put it to you that the roots of the problem are in post-industrial capitalism; in the nature of 'work' itself; in our expectations of work and the dominance of its theme in all our lives. We do not work to live, we live to work. We do not work for money to exchange for any combination of necessities and luxuries. We do not even work in order to be recompensed in money for using our skills and training for society via an employer. We work for status, for identity, for a recognition which is both public and private. And while all that may seem more obviously true for career-people than for anybody else, research carried out during these years of rising unemployment has made it clear that it is true for almost everybody. There are people who will not take any job that gives them less disposable income than they can get from social security payments. But they are very few. The tragedy of unemployment



But if it is bad for women and children to follow their men's work, can you imagine what would (will) happen if men **and** women were truly trying -- and expecting -- to do so equally in the equal furtherance of equally salient careers? When one partner's job demanded that he stay and the other's demanded that she up-stakes, what would they do? Toss a coin? Agree to split up? I do not know the answer because, so far, I have only talked to couples who have faced this dilemma conventionally; the woman doing however reluctantly what was appropriate to her partner's career, irrespective of what it did to her own. Compromises are multiplying, though, with pied-à-terres housing one partner's work-life while the home houses the other and with weekend commuting replacing daily journeys. And who knows how many conflicts of this kind lie behind the divorce statistics? Sexual infidelity is seldom regarded as a sufficient reason for divorce but infidelity to equal career opportunities may often be part of the total picture of 'incompatibility'.

Leaving children completely out of the picture for the moment, is it in fact possible, within this dominating work-ethic, for two people both to pursue careers equally and to the full while functioning as a mutually responsive and supportive duo?



is that people are not just broke, they are bored. They are not just at home all day, they are at home where nobody expects them to be; where they are not welcome; where they upset the scheme of things. They are not just without a work title, they are without a self image they can accept. The studies I have seen have not produced one single family where the unemployed partner/father's presence at home was welcomed, even by his nearest and dearest, let alone by himself. One twenty year-old girl, married just six months when her husband lost his job, said: "Well yes, of course I love him. Of course wanting to be together was part of what we got married for. But I married a plumber and now what have I got? A nobody." Even in families where there are children, and work more easily available for women than for men, what is still seen as "role-reversal" is rare. One father said: "I used to wish I could have more time at home with the kids. Truly I did. But I can't just stay home with them now. I can't just give up and accept that this is for good: that I'll never be me again..."

For young people who have never had a job and see little prospect of getting one, life is lived in a limbo between adolescence and adulthood. Such a youngster has never acquired her adult social identity; never been handed her passport into adult society.

If we live to work and there is work available then the job must come first and you must go where it is. Consider commuting. People travel, every week-day of their working lives, over distances and in discomforts which they would tolerate for no other purpose -- even for the daily visiting of a sick child in hospital. By doing so they add to the working week hours which effectively increase it

faster than mechanization and social legislation cuts it back. Many working people in Western societies are in working mode for longer hours than are common in preindustrialized societies where labour is still controlled by the sun.

The effects of this mad masochism are not confined to the throngs of travellers either. In many British and American suburbs, the houses and apartments which we call 'homes' and the network of streets which should constitute their 'communities', are almost empty by 8 a.m. and stay that way until 7 p.m. For the single person or childless couple, home becomes a cipher; a rest-station and storage place. For couples with children -- and even more markedly for parents rearing children on their own -- home becomes a place whose distance (in space and time) from work becomes life's critical factor. The further you must travel and the more kinds of transport you must use, the greater the chance that fog or snow, a strike or a breakdown, will make you late in collecting your child from the caregiver. And the longer it will take you to get back to your child's school, the greater your terror of the call that asks you to come immediately because he is hurt or ill.

Going where the job is does not only mean commuting, though. It also means getting into a car or an aeroplane and following opportunity in what is euphemistically called 'job mobility'. Women and children have long been expected to follow men around the country or the world as employers or advancement dictate. It is from studies of those families -- diplomats, military people, engineers that we know how damaging frequent moves can be, disrupting, sometimes even destroying, whole family groups. Mental illness, depression, suicide and educational

failure are all significantly higher in these groups than in more geographically stable families. Even in the United States, where the average family moves at least every three years, moves across State boundaries or further are now being shown to place enormous strain on families even when work-advancement is the motive for the move and better housing is one of its rewards. We are not only family but territorial and tribal animals. We need roots and if our nuclear families are to work they need to be the nucleus of something.

But if it is bad for women and children to follow their men's work, can you imagine what would (will) happen if men **and** women were truly trying -- and expecting -- to do so equally in the equal furtherance of equally salient careers? When one partner's job demanded that he stay and the other's demanded that she up-stakes, what would they do? Toss a coin? Agree to split up? I do not know the answer because, so far, I have only talked to couples who have faced this dilemma conventionally; the woman doing however reluctantly what was appropriate to her partner's career, irrespective of what it did to her own. Compromises are multiplying, though, with pied-à-terres housing one partner's work-life while the home houses the other and with weekend commuting replacing daily journeys. And who knows how many conflicts of this kind lie behind the divorce statistics? Sexual infidelity is seldom regarded as a sufficient reason for divorce but infidelity to equal career opportunities may often be part of the total picture of 'incompatibility'.

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reers equally and to the full while functioning as a mutually responsive and supportive duo? There is already some evidence that it is not. The British Psychological Society has recently reported on current studies of the major cause of lost work-time and therefore revenue to companies: work-stress.

The sharpest rise in stress-related absenteeism is amongst male employees and the principal reason for it is that female partners are out at work. It would be nice to think that the kind of stress which is keeping all those men at home in Nebraska and Minnesota is the kind engendered by a feminist with a frying pan posed over the head. The truth is less amusing. The stress those thousands of men are staggering under is engendered by their difficulties in pursuing their careers wholeheartedly without the back-up services traditionally supplied by women at home. It is easy to mock at helpless men who cannot keep up with their career-demands if nobody takes their suits to the dry-cleaner, gets the car serviced or copes with the serviceman. It is equally easy to mock with a little more sophistication. Can they not cope if they have to be 'latchkey people' or if the wives who are waiting for them want to talk their own office politics instead of listening to theirs? But mockery should be resisted because these are real people facing real problems and the fact that we do not think they should be problems does not remove them from people's lives. It seems that even without children and without major geographical career-moves, it is already taking two people -- or perhaps one and a half people -- to service a single career, and that a lot of the basic, practical problems are related to geographical -- and therefore time -- separations between working and living.

We have created, or we have allowed to evolve, a society in which that most basic and essential human function, procreation, has no easy, obvious or accepted place. This is not a women's problem but a people's problem.

I would argue, then, that sexual partners **cannot** have equal opportunities and rewards in the workplace, and more especially in career-jobs, unless they are prepared to subject the partnership to the whims of management or are both prepared to lower their aspirations and risk missed opportunities for the sake of the partnership. Even without children we are bedevilled by the separation between work and home; between being workers and being people.

Having children is a function of people not of workers. Bringing them up falls (ironically enough) into the home-leisure side of the equation, not into the work side. We have created, or we have allowed to evolve, a society in which that most basic and essential human function, procreation, has no easy, obvious or accepted place. This is not a women's problem but a people's problem.

If you are a woman who happens to be somebody's mother it is hard to believe that it is not your sole problem because society conspires to make it feel that way. But step behind your own immediate experience and needs and you can see that it has to be wider than that. It is not just that parenting should be something shared between a man and a woman but that society as a whole could not survive if there were no children and cannot do better than survive if children are not well done by. Somehow, then, society has to make it possible for at least

some people to combine parenthood with full membership of itself. There are some hard facts -- and I mean facts rather than opinions -- which the current debate, focusing on the rights and problems of mothers in relation to jobs and careers, tends to ignore. Having a child radically alters the lives of its parents ... forever. It may also alter the lives of the many other people whose roles and interrelationships are changed by the birth: the parents who are suddenly grandparents, the sisters and their children who are suddenly aunts and cousins.

The expectation that life can go on more or less as before once a baby has been born is universally contradicted by experience. No matter how many Mary Poppins-type nannies, happy caring nurseries and after-hours school schemes one postulates, parents cannot live as they lived when they were childless. Practically speaking they will, at the very least, have to make and pay for those arrangements and anyone who is currently involved in fixing carpools and play-dates and coming to terms with life with or without a resident or daily care-giver, will know just how much time and energy that takes. Emotionally, those parents will find that they care and that is often the biggest and the least expected change of all. Arrange for the baby to be blissfully bathed by someone else and you will still resent missing his bathtime. Assure his care while you go to the dinner or the



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Babies and young children take time and effort from someone. Constant care for three years. They are not toys to be put away when work begins nor hobbies, like boats, which can be dry-docked when winter comes or the workload is heavy. Once a baby emerges to share the air with the rest of us, somebody has to be on call to care for him or her every minute of every twenty-four hours for at least the next three years. Why three? Because that is the minimum age at which any studied culture reckons that any child can be trusted to care for itself without the instant availability of an older person, night or day.

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Why bother to make such an obvious point? Surely everybody knows that babies need constant care? They may know it but they talk and behave as if they did not. People talk of "alternative childcare arrangements" (meaning any arrangement other than full-time care from the mother or adoptive-mother herself), as if they did not realize that none of those diverse arrangements means anything other than passing on the care of that child from one person to another. My point, then, is that society's commitment to full-time care is absolute; there is no point in debating it. That is the basic fact that must be kept at the forefront of any debate about ways and means of combining childcare with other work.

Western societies pay lip-service to the full-time commitment of motherhood with a variety of arrangements for maternity leave. If Sweden has the best record in this respect, the United States probably has the worst, with career-women being accorded the fewest rights and dar-

ing to take the fewest liberties. For many American women it is normal to return to full-time work six weeks after a birth. American daycare provisions being what they are -- or what they are not -- many mothers employ a caregiver in their own homes. She does not give the care, as a matter of fact, she sells it.

Leaving aside the horror of these arrangements from the point of view of the woman who has just given birth, and the implications of separation for her infant, what about that 'caregiver'? If the career woman has the right to live her life the way she wants to, including pursuing her job immediately if she wishes for the sake of money, prestige and later advancement, does the woman whom she employs to replace her not have equal rights? Passing the daily responsibility for childcare down the socioeconomic line often smacks of the kind of colonialism under which my husband was reared by Singhalese women to whom his parents would not, under any other circumstances, have related.

Of course not all relationships with in-home caregivers are like this. In Britain many registered childminders have motives, other than their ludicrously low pay, for taking care of other women's children. Many have young children of their own and want to be at home with them or want a way of life which enables them to be at home when their somewhat older children are not in school. It may, and often does, work out well for all concerned. But it is not a policy-solution. People use childminders because they can make more money from their outside jobs than they need pay for childcare; because they can thus avoid damaging career breaks or changes in life-style and/or because they prefer a way of life which has outside paid work in it. What about

the childminder's money? What about her career or job prospects in the future?

I am not commenting here on the quality of care babies received from minders because I am sure it is as variable as the quality of care babies receive when their mothers care for them full-time and alone. Perhaps it is often rather better because minders are not expected to do twenty-four hour shifts, seven days a week as some mothers are. But the expectation that a minder, who is by definition not your peer, can bring your baby up as well, in your terms, as you could yourself, is a curious one.

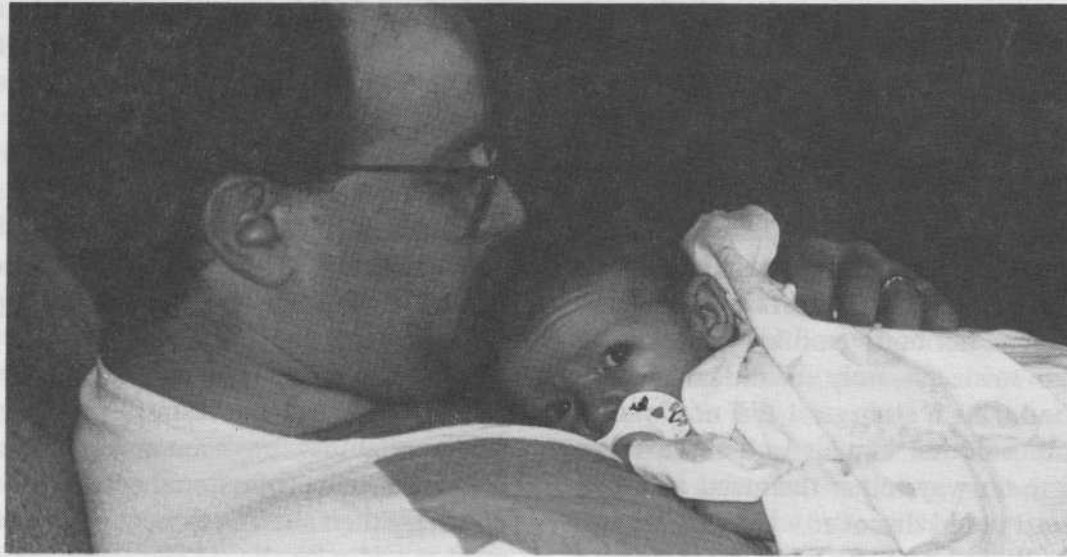
Well-to-do women with the luxury of choices will go to extraordinary lengths to try and ensure that their babies do not suffer from being cared for by somebody else. But the efforts they make often seem to miss the central point of caring: the relationship between adult and baby. Western parents magazines are full of articles about something called "quality time": ways of spending the hour or two between the adult working day and the baby's bedtime which are supposed to concentrate the essence of "good parenting" and thus ensure that nothing is lost through ten hours apart. An American book called "Breastfeeding and Work" is full of advice about how to find private corners of the workplace for expressing breastmilk; how to keep it cold until it can be frozen at home and how to breastfeed ad lib all night in order to ensure that breasts, unsucked all day, still maintain their supply. Breastmilk is certainly the best food for babies, but breastfeeding is not simply the provision of that milk in a bottle.

Many people believe that more equitable and less socially divisive answers to the working mother's dilemma can be found by professionalizing the whole busi-

ness of childcare; gathering babies and preschool children into groups so that the carers can have proper work (even career) status, money and union protection. It sounds all right. It sounds like free choice for all the women concerned, but it brings us up against yet another harsh fact about human babies. Caregivers must be the same people all the time.

Babies do not only need constant care, they also need consistent care. Consistent care does not necessarily, or even optimally, mean from one single person all the time. Only in Western industrialized societies is a baby ever assumed to be the responsibility of his mother alone; everywhere else he gets primary care from his mother and subsidiary care from a whole range of other people including older siblings, grandparents and neighbours. But however many people care for a baby, they do need to be the same people all the time.

Babies learn to be people by using adult people as mirrors and models. If a baby has a lot of different caretakers whom he does not know and who do not know him, he becomes as confused as we should be if the mirrors in our daily lives failed to reflect consistent images. And if a baby and his caretakers constantly have to get to know one another, the relationships which enable him to fulfill his potential for being a loving human being cannot advance. Professional skill and experience can be very valuable in infant care; they may speed up the rate and increase the sensitivity with which a carer can come to terms with a new baby. But they cannot replace ongoing knowledge of that baby; of what he is like and what he likes; of where he is coming from and where he is going. I sometimes get left with other people's babies on the grounds that, "You know about babies so



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Babies do not only need constant care, they also need consistent care. Consistent care does not necessarily, or even optimally, mean from one single person all the time. Only in Western industrialized societies is a baby ever assumed to be the responsibility of his mother alone; everywhere else he gets primary care from his mother and subsidiary care from a whole range of other people including older siblings, grandparents and neighbours. But however many people care for a baby, they do need to be **the same people all the time.**

Babies learn to be people by using adult people as mirrors and models. If a baby has a lot of different caretakers whom he does not know and who do not know him, he becomes as confused as we should be if the mirrors in our daily lives failed to reflect consistent images. And if a baby and his caretakers constantly have to get to know one another, the relationships which enable him to fulfill his potential for being a loving human being cannot advance.

I know she'll be all right with you." I think and hope that any baby will be as all right with me as she can be with any stranger, but stranger I still am. The one I cared for last week while her mother attended a distant funeral was three months old. We had a good morning together. She is a sociable baby and not yet mature enough to know that she does not know me, so we were fine. Eventually she had her bottle and I settled her in her pram to sleep — only she did not sleep, she cried. As a stranger I did not know her habits or her signals and there was therefore no way, other than trial and error, that I could discover what the crying meant. Was she a baby who always cried a little when she was tired; needed to cry in order to get from tired wakefulness over the hump into sleep? If that was the case then the right thing to do was to leave her for a couple of minutes. But was she not that kind of baby at all but simply one who was not tired and did not want to be left to sleep? If so, the right thing to do was to get her up again. For that one day it did not matter because her unhappiness was easily dealt with by picking her up and cuddling her and, had she really needed to sleep, she could have dropped off on my shoulder. But how would she have coped if she had been cared for by several people, each as much a stranger as I, on each of several successive days?

Some child-care centres try very hard to provide consistent care for the babies in their charge within family-type groupings. The idea is that if you provide a group of infants with three or four caretakers, there can always be someone on duty who knows them all well. Within a normal work-situation it does not happen like that. People (unlike mothers) work shifts if a long day must be covered. They

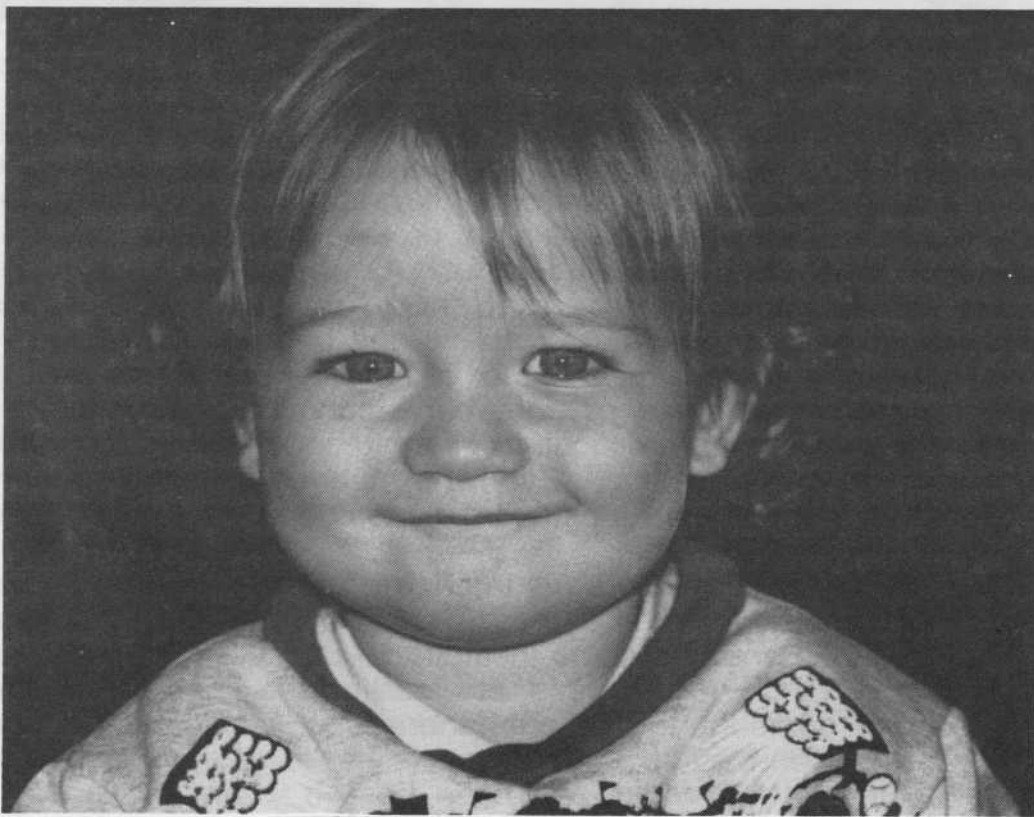
get ill and have their teeth attended to. They have holiday entitlements and, like everybody else, their careers demand that they go on courses and accept appointment rotations and promotions. A U.K. study showed that the average number of new caretakers introduced to six months babies over a three month period was fifteen. Staff turnover in most American daycare centres is 40% per annum.

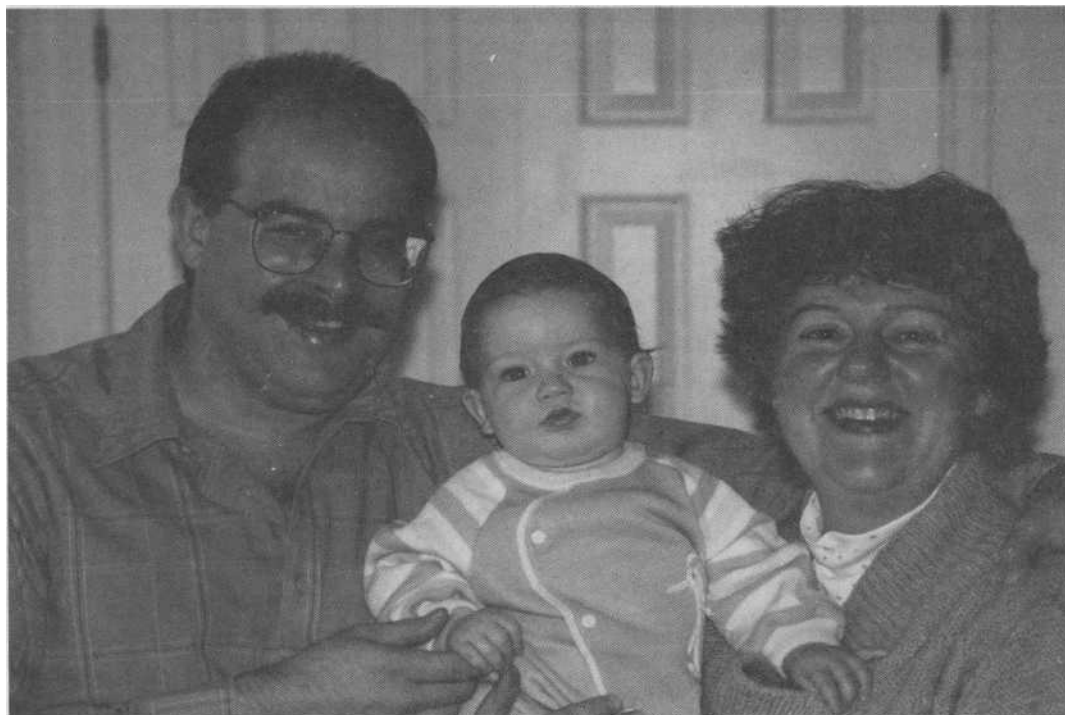
There is another difficulty with professionalizing childcare. It depends for its viability on economies of scale because if one professional cares for only one baby then she is a direct swap for the mother and why should she merit professional status, pay and protection when that mother does not? But babies need a whole caretaker all to themselves. That should not really surprise us because women are equipped to have one baby at a time rather than a litter and to care for each for at least a year before having another. Mothers of twins, or more, can seldom carry them to term and find it infinitely more difficult to give high quality care to two or three than to one at a time. Even the meanest Health Authority accepts that the mother of triplets, let alone quadruplets, must have a helper almost all the time.

If a trained Nursery Nurse is in charge of three or four babies in a group care situation, she is somewhat better off than that lone mother because she has some institutional backup. She may not have to cook lunch, for example, or clean up the floors. And she can count on someone to help out if there is an accident or sudden illness. But even backup will not enable her to give good care to those babies. What would we have her do when one baby is sleepily sucking a bottle on her lap and another wakes, ask-



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The daycare debate tends to skip over these particular dilemmas. Media campaigns for more places are usually backed by charming films of two to four-year olds playing together. They are in age-appropriate groups, assuming that the hours are not too long, and there should certainly be more places. But what about the younger children, the babies about whom I have listed some facts of life? Would more daycare places really be good for them?

A large American study, published in the mid-eighties, purported to have established that good quality group daycare did babies no discernible harm when compared with full-time care at home. This was what people wanted to hear and this is what many of them have chosen to hear and remember. But that University-based research study set up its own childcare facility with many thousands of dollars behind it and the status to attract staff of the highest possible calibre. Far from there being any need to prove economies of scale, the study babies took more time, from more highly qualified people, than any home-reared baby would ever be offered. And because the time-scale of the study was limited and staff contracted for its duration, the usual problems of providing consistency of care did not arise. Nor was the daycare experience itself one of the kind of separation from parents which most babies experience. The parents were University people, the University was interested in the study. Many of the parents were in and out of the centre throughout their working day and all were expected to attend daily conferences and hand-over sessions on their babies behalf.

Far from being surprised that objective tests showed no developmental delays in the daycare group, I am surprised that none showed any acceleration compared with the home-reared babies for whom no such special facilities were provided.

Despite a massive body of research, it is still not possible to prove that professionalized group daycare is bad for babies or good for them. I do not think such generalized "proofs" will ever be forthcoming because the true answer will always be "it depends". Excellent quality care is, by definition, excellent and poor quality care is poor, wherever it is received and whoever it is given by. A baby can be sensitively, responsively and consistently cared for in a centre just as she may fail to receive that kind of care in her own home. As long as individual parents know that kind of care is a necessity, they can consider different ways of making it available, here and now, to their individual baby. But policy-makers, with money to invest (and save) must look at the balance of probabilities and costs for all babies. To maximize the chances of all babies -- including those from poor families -- receiving excellent care in professional groups, they would have to spend vast sums of money on recruiting, training and keeping large numbers of workers; probably far more money than it would take to provide adequate support for one-on-one care.

If neither individual substitute-care nor professionalized group care provide policy solutions to the working-parent's dilemma, what are the answers? For individual families, existing in the here and now, the answers will probably continue to be as various, as complicated and as arguably satisfactory as families themselves. Any solution that works for any family is good, of course, so role-swap-

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ping between partners, flex-time, job-sharing and all the informal versions of these which are keeping families going are to be encouraged. I am not discussing them in detail because I do not see any of them as solutions for the future; solutions which should be a matter of policy rather than the lucky-chance juxtaposition of individual personalities and circumstances.

If we want real solutions we must try to solve the real problem which is not “how can this woman pursue her chosen working life and rear her chosen family?” but “How can the vital people-function of parenthood be re-integrated into our society of workers?”

I do not have answers but I do see some areas for debate and action.

1. Today's children need to be brought up to regard having children of their own as a genuine choice of the maximum importance. At the moment it is still generally taken for granted that every married or stable couple will eventually want children. In many parts of the Western world the “right to children” is assumed to extend to individuals.

All such assumptions and statements of rights must be questioned, backed as they are by arguments which have no bearing whatsoever on a valuation of children as individuals -- such as people's “right to grandchildren” -- and by scare campaigns of the “you'll be sorry later” kind as women reach their thirties. In-

involved as I am in Britain's Voluntary Licensing Authority for In Vitro Fertilization, I know at first hand the agony of people, men as well as women, who face infertility and I do not overestimate the possibilities of educating people into thinking rationally about whether they want children or not. But I do believe that we have to try.

**2. Today's children must be helped to understand, to see, that the choice to have a child limits their other adult choices. The belief that there is a right to children and a right to live exactly as before is responsible for much misery and disillusionment in young parents. It is also responsible for a feeling, reflected in the childcare debate, that somehow society ought to make it possible for them by relieving them of the daily caring that gets in their way.**

3. Today's children must see what life with babies and young children is really like. Perhaps one of the greatest changes in this area in the past fifty years has been in young adults' knowledge and experience of family life. In small, scattered families, many newly-marrieds have never seen a baby at the breast; cannot remember their own parents in a parenting role; have never met a small child's needs as older sibling or cousin and have never moved in the mixed age-

group circles which ensure acquaintance with a variety of phases in adult life. If people are to understand that the right to have children (which I would passionately defend) is like all other rights in that it carries responsibilities, they must know, in advance, what those responsibilities are. How else can there be informed decision-making?

4. If people are only to have babies after due thought for the consequences, and if, having done so, they are to accept their responsibility to rear those children as well as they possibly can, it is society's responsibility to recognize the rearing of those children as an important and honourable activity. That is a great deal easier to prescribe than to implement but I suggest that implementation would be a great deal easier if we faced the enormous social upheaval which any such recognition would have to entail. Two diametrically opposed approaches may illustrate the point: We could accept the present fact that status and therefore self-respect are largely measured in money, and demonstrate a new valuation for parenthood by paying parents. A recent European Council workshop has calculated that having children usually costs a woman half her lifetime's earnings. Nobody has yet assessed what it may cost a man in terms of missed opportunities, refusal to move with the job or just not being available to drink with the boss after work.

We pay people for almost everything else they do that we consider important, so why should people who choose to have children and choose to care for them

themselves rather than competing for scarce and unsatisfactory alternatives not be paid also?

A lot of people find the idea of paid parenthood distasteful and certainly it could have serious problems of the "he who pays the piper calls the tune" variety. National parenting is a horrific idea but would paid parents be paid however they choose to parent? And if not, who would decide when they should be dismissed from the role?

But the only alternative way of raising the status and social acceptability of parenting involves radical attitude changes of the type with which I began. Children are part of home-life not of paid work. As such they are currently of secondary importance. If they are not to be brought into the paid work arena then those priorities will have to shift so that living and working come to be seen as at least equally important; the activities of people as important as the activities of workers.

There are longstanding models for this in the small but important groups of people who manage to operate not only as if their parenting and their working were equally important but with those functions, along with every other aspect of their lives, fully integrated. Most of them work at home. A few of them parent at work. Whichever they do, they tend to end up with a life-package in which they can feel like whole people, pursuing a variety of functions and activities which all roll up together to make a whole. Who are they and what can we learn from them? They are mostly people who live on the job, farmers, market-gardeners, for-

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esters, animal breeders, people whose living comes off the land and whose supervision is constantly required. But there are city models, too. Small shopkeepers who live over the store; small businesses which operate from private addresses; single-handed medical practices and a burgeoning number of freelance enterprises.

The gains can be immense. Flexibility of working hours is an important advantage for parents who, however hard they work, can abandon the job for the child in crisis. There is a vast saving in travel time and costs and a great security, both for parent and child, in maintaining geographical closeness even when attention is elsewhere. There is a saving of stress in that nobody has to "change hats" in order to make the switch from one role to another and there is a gain to children in seeing both parents sharing work as well as parenting and play; in experiencing them as whole, occupied people, always available but not always concentrating on them.

Such models have increasing relevance to modern life because versions of them are increasingly advantageous to businesses. As modern communications technology becomes cheaper, down-town office buildings become more expensive. There is a huge upsurge in "telecommuting" and much more to come. A "full working week" for its whole workforce is difficult for a firm to maintain while flexibly tailoring its production to fluctuating demand. The flex-time and part-time working that often suits parents can be cheaper, even with full benefits pro-rata, than laying people off when demand drops and then recruiting and training a different population when it picks up again.

There are other likely future trends

which should affect our current thinking too. Adult life is long and getting longer. In future that long working life in an era of technological change will probably demand job-changes and career-shifts for everyone. The pattern of emerging from school or college onto the bottom rung of a ladder and then climbing as fast and as high as you can before retirement knocks you off is already out-dated. Most of us will have to train and re-train several times and that will mean that an adult working life divides into chunks. One of these chunks could be parenthood. A stage of life when you and society -- accepted that your priority was your family and that for this time your career or your job took second place.

During those few years two partners could certainly have one and a half careers between them while rearing children through their most crucially dependent years. Only our society's refusal to **credit** those years as creative, responsible and worthwhile, would then prevent people from gradually re-expanding their working lives to take up the slack produced by children's increasing independence and involvement with people outside the immediate family.

In Sweden this principle is embodied in law and, to some extent it is actually happening. America, Canada and Britain have no social precedent for children encroaching on male careers, but that does not mean that the idea is inconceivable. Why, for example, should we not consider Western attitudes to higher education, and seek a possible model in our acceptance of university students?

In most Western societies undergraduate and postgraduate students are more or less supported by society. Their economic status is low -- often extremely low -- but their social status is sufficiently

The most radical social change such a scheme would require is the change that would take us from the belief that children are the business of women-who-are mothers to the realization that children are the business of us all, and specifically of all people-who-choose-to-be-parents. As long as the work/parent dilemma is seen as a women's problem solutions will continue to be sought, or scratched together, in a women's world, leaving the world of men, still the real world of work, untouched. However honestly men seek solutions **for women**, a division between the sexes will prevent a true recognition of parenting as an issue for all people.

I believe that there are many men who genuinely accept the concept of equal responsibility for children and who would welcome the opportunity to act on it. Most of them are foiled by the work-ethic; by the pressures on them to perform as wage-earners and career-people and, sometimes, by feminism itself. Until recently children's needs have not formed a substantial part of the feminist platform; women have fought males at their traditional games but have scarcely sought to involve them in traditional female games. There is a growing recognition of the dangers of sexism both ways round and this is a trend which must certainly be encouraged. In the meantime, women, still principally responsible for young children, can do much to prepare for a different, a gentler and a more child orientated society. Today's boy-babies are tomorrow's men. Their education is critical to a future in which all human beings are people first and workers afterwards; a future in which new people take priority over any other product.



high to make the role feel desirable and it is marked by a variety of special dispensations and "student rates" which are as important as marks of social acceptance as of financial aid. It is accepted that for three, four or five years these young adults contribute little to the capitalist world because an investment is being made in their future contribution. Why could the same approach not be brought to child rearing? The answer, of course, is that while we may believe in people's right to have children, just as strongly as we believe in their rights to all the education from which they are capable of benefiting, we do not believe that emotionally stable, independent children are as good an investment as graduates. We should believe it. No "soft" humanitarian arguments are needed to prove the importance to society of adequately socialized children. A simple cost-benefit analysis, feeding in the costs of emotional disturbance in terms of inability to profit from education; the costs of family disruption in terms of alternative childcare; the costs of inadequate socialization in terms of drug-dependency and all forms of delinquency and the costs of daycare provision for parents who would prefer, if things were different, to do their own parenting, makes the point.

If society believed that young children were important, believed that parents were almost always the best people to care for them in their first years and believed that doing that caring made parents into people with more to contribute later on, a chunk of adult life which was to be devoted to launching a young family could become as acceptable as a chunk devoted to university study and be financed in similar ways. But radical changes in social attitudes would be essential. Today's university students do not regret the work opportunities they lose at nineteen or twenty: they know that better opportunities will be offered them after graduation. Parents would have to be

equally confident that career-opportunities turned down during the years of child-priority would be repeated or bettered thereafter, because they would be recognized as more mature people with more to contribute, because of their parenting.

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# CHILDREN FIRST

by Penelope Leach

Establishing a moral priority for children's known needs, and the political will to meet them as a right, is the difficult part of what needs to be done for children.

The failure of Western societies to do their best for children has only become apparent as cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary research knowledge of childhood has accumulated. That process has been so gradual and specialized that it is still difficult to see the forest of societal disaster for its separate trees. Millions of adults are troubled about individual children, groups of children and particular aspects of childhood: parents struggling to bring up their own; health professionals and educators whose job descriptions emphasize the positive enhancement of children's development but whose working weeks are dominated by attempts to compensate them for earlier disadvantage; child protection agencies reeling under revelations of institutionalized child abuse; economists and policy-makers watching more and more programs, public money and philanthropy draining through social problems like water through a beach on a falling tide. But most individuals, professions and institutions look no further than their own backyard. We all prefer a rosy glow of wishful thinking to clear vision, and surely *overall* things are not so bad for children? Surely they have

better lives here than there and now than then? Of course, it is more comfortable to believe that things are getting better, that "we," whoever we may be, are making some kind of "progress," however that may be defined. I wish I could believe it, but I cannot.

In the first two parts of this book I have argued that the development of post-industrial societies has been inimical to the nurturance of children and that we have all allowed it to be so. We have the knowledge and the resources to facilitate child health, growth and happiness, but while millions of individuals strive to do that on a personal or professional level, society as a whole chooses to ignore the necessity or deny the feasibility of doing so on a public level. To me, this willful refusal to do what we could, and therefore should, do for our most vulnerable and dependent citizens counterbalances the achievement of the individual freedoms that we prize so highly and makes a mockery of Western claims to the world's moral high ground.

Children are the largest minority group in society and the minority that is most subject to discrimination and least recognized as being so. There is no

Excerpted from **CHILDREN FIRST** *What our society must do -- and is not doing -- for our children today.* Copyright © 1994 Penelope Leach. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994. ISBN 0-679-42133-5

equivalent to equal-opportunity legislation for children. No demands are made on their behalf for political correctness; even those who decry ageism seldom include children, certainly not preadolescents. Somehow we have allowed children to be unthinkingly excluded from otherwise universal human rights, and that means that the special needs that go with being very young are not met as a right but at the whim of adults. It is the nature of childhood to be dependent on adults for present survival, health and happiness, for opportunities that foster future development and for the eventual achievement of competent adult independence. From their first toothless and transforming smiles, children have effective ways of evoking the necessary goodwill from parents or their substitutes. But however solidly those relationships are founded, they alone cannot ensure that children's needs are met because even the most loving and privileged of parents can only do what society arranges, allows and supports.

Post-industrial countries certainly could afford practical measures that would revolutionize all children's lives. In fact, they could easily afford them for every child in the world, not just for their own. What would it cost each year to control major childhood diseases, halve child malnutrition, bring sanitation and safe water to every community, provide basic education for all children and make family planning and maternity services universally available-worldwide? Twenty-five billion dollars. Less than Americans spend each year on beer. Half of the money spent on cigarettes in Europe. If we could do all that for all the children in the world out of beer and cigarette money, we could also do anything we wanted for children in our communities. Some of the

most expensive measures would require shifts in our immediate spending priorities, but the costs of most needed policies would be balanced by such massive long-term savings that the net expense would range from nonexistent to negligible.

Establishing a moral priority for children's known needs, and the political will to meet them as a right, is the difficult part of what needs to be done for children. *Actually meeting* those needs, day by day and year by year, is comparatively easy, because the people who have to do it are their parents or parent figures, and almost all of them want to. There are many different ways in which parenting could be facilitated and parents supported and helped -- all parents, those who are currently coping, those who are floundering and those who have fallen down. I sketch some simple suggestions in the final chapters. If those, or similar ideas, were actually implemented, every issue raised in this book could be addressed. And they could be implemented. The final irony is that similar ideas *have* been instituted, somewhere, sometime, for a few people, *and they worked...*

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# CHILDREN FIRST

WHAT OUR SOCIETY MUST DO—  
AND IS NOT DOING—  
FOR OUR CHILDREN TODAY

**PENELOPE LEACH**

AUTHOR OF YOUR BABY & CHILD

*Jacket photography by Harvey Wang. Jacket design by Carol Devine and Archie Ferguson*



Recognizing that the capacity to give and receive trust, affection and empathy is fundamental to being human.

Knowing that all of us suffer the consequences when children are raised in a way that makes them affectionless and violent, and;

Realizing that for the first time in History we have definite knowledge that these qualities are determined by the way a child is cared for in the very early years.

# CREDO



## WE BELIEVE THAT:

- The necessity that every new human being develop the capacity for trust, affection and empathy dictates that potential parents re-order their priorities with this in mind.
- Most parents are willing and able to provide their children with the necessary loving empathic care, given support from others, appropriate understanding of the task and the conviction of its absolute importance.
- It is unutterably cruel to permanently maim a human being by failing to provide this quality of care during the first three years of life.

## THERE IS AN URGENCY THEREFORE TO:

- Re-evaluate all our institutions, traditions and beliefs from this perspective.
- Oppose and weaken all forces which undermine the desire or ability of parents to successfully carry out a task which ultimately affects us all.
- Support and strengthen all aspects of family and community life which assist parents to meet their obligation to each new member of the human race.