Available, Accessible, High Quality Child Care in Australia: Why we haven't moved very far.

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In a recent article in *Children Australia* (16:2, 1991) Moore points out how our system of social services and community work reinforces traditional concepts of family (especially mother) responsibility for the care of children with disabilities. This same attitude reflects a fundamental ambivalence in our society towards the provision of state assisted child care. Like care for the disabled, out-of-home care for young children is assumed to rest within the private sphere, so that state assistance in any form becomes gratefully accepted as a generous gift.

Child care in Australia moved into the political realm with the enactment of the Child Care Act in 1972. This legislation described the conditions under which the Commonwealth Government would distribute funds for capital expenses, and provide some wage supplements to non-profit groups delivering child care services in formal centre settings. Since that time, promises of increased Commonwealth funding to meet increasing demand have become more and more ambitious - 20,000 spaces were promised in 1984; 30,000 in 1988; and by 1990, the promise had expanded to 78,000 new child care spaces to be funded by the Labor Party. As it turned out, many of the 78,000 spaces promised during the 1990 election campaign were not 'new' at all, but represented already existing private spaces, now made eligible for funding by a change in policy. The bulk of the spaces meanwhile were targeted for after-school care (much less expensive to fund), when research clearly indicated the dearth of spaces and critical need for infant care (very expensive to fund).

The most surprising aspect of the level of child care intervention by the

Commonwealth government is that it has been hailed as progressive. The token granting of some spaces under particular circumstances, and the promised increases in spaces which hardly make a dent upon the projected need, nor target the most needy groups are, in fact, offering a band aid approach to a condition requiring major surgery. The acceptance (even gratitude) of those 'assisted' by this government approach allows politicians and others to deflect attention from the real issue - that governments have not committed themselves to play a significant role, either in support to, or provision of the care of pre-school aged children in Australia. Even more astounding is the fact that, from their activities (or lack thereof), it appears that neither parents (users of child care) nor the professionals (providers and advocates for child care) have applied pressure to governments to make this commitment. In this way lobby efforts have served to re-inforce existing structures, rather than to provide a blueprint for effective change.

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This article argues that both those who desperately need options for child care and those who advocate most vociferously for them, have unwittingly contributed to the restricted model by which these demands are met. Limited expectations for state responsibility can only result in limited support. As long as child care is viewed as a residual program, targeting certain 'priority' needs: immigrants over indigenous families; full-time working parents over parents who

are studying or seeking employment; four year olds over three year olds - services will continue to be unsatisfactory, uncoordinated and precarious.

The solution to child care problems does not rest in how many dollars governments vote in for children's services. The real issue in government supported child care is whether we as a society are ready to embrace the institutionalisation of child care - whether we can firstly visualise, and secondly, actualise alternatives to mother care as the only 'correct', natural mode of child rearing.

Motherhood and Child Care

The major barrier to a vision of child care as a state responsibility has been the traditional belief in the sanctity and reverence of 'motherhood'. The ideology of motherhood reflects the collective perception of women, and of their role in society.

> Ideology refers to a systematic body of concepts which constitute a particular vision of society and which contributes to our beliefs and dreams of what is true, desirable, and possible... (it is) a relatively formal and articulate system of meanings and values that legitimate and justify culture as it is.
>
> (Berlak and Berlak, 1983, p.271)

The notion of state intervention in child care is in direct conflict with an entrenched vision in which mother-care forms the basis of family and social functioning. This unquestioned form of interaction between women and children is prevalent throughout Western nations (O'Connor, 1990), despite the fact that there is little empirical support for it. An exploration of the motherhood ethic reveals that the exclusive care of children by their mother is neither a universal concept nor a natural arrangement, but a recent phenomenon which Margaret Mead has noted is 'only possible under highly artificial, urban conditions'

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(Mead, 1966:248). Indeed, in many cultures motherhood does not represent the dominant pattern of child care. Of one hundred and eighty-six cultures studied by Weisnor and Gallimore (1977), mothers were identified as the principal caretakers of young children in only twenty percent of the societies. In a comparative study of six societies, Minturn and Lambert (1964) reported that child care responsibilities fall most often on older siblings and extended family members, and Werner (1988) concludes that 'World wide the exclusive care of infants by their mothers is an exception rather than a rule' (Werner, 1988:105). Whiting and Whiting (1975), following up the Minturn and Lambert study, noted that the lack of the role specialisation for mothers was correlated with a 'healthier development pattern in children', and a number of recent research findings demonstrates that children develop better when their mothers work (Hoffman, 1979; Gottfried and Gottfried, 1988) and that mothers who are in the workforce are more physically healthy and less prone to depression (Harris and Brown, 1975). These studies, however, have not appeared to alter deeply embedded beliefs.

THIS IS A MOTHERHOOD STATEMENT ABOUT THE ISSUE OF CHILDCARE.

Mother responsibility for child care is related to the relatively recent notion of childhood as a prolonged stage of dependence, separation, protection and delayed responsibility for children (Aires, 1962). This concept of the dependence and concomitant need for

'care' of children became entrenched during the era of industrialisation. Children in agrarian societies were viewed as productive units, contributing to the family economy. With the separation of work from home during the industrial era, children eventually lost their value as workers, and became instead dependants - begging the question of where the responsibility for these dependant agents lay. Historians commonly associate this era with the emergence of the ideology which described family, and especially mother, responsibility and autonomy for child rearing (Edgar and Ochiltree, 1983).

Thus the concept of mother care/ responsibility for children in Western cultures is associated with the move from an agricultural to industrial society, the concomitant geographical separation of work from home, increased affluence allowing for the emergence of a specialised non-wage role for women, and the segregation and lengthy period of dependency of children. These social changes culminated in a division of spheres of influence: women and children in the home; men in the world of commerce, industry and production (Kessler-Harris, 1982).

The concept that the state might have a role in providing child care was never entertained until a critical labour shortage during the Second World War spurned some creative programs. For a few years the Commonwealth government in Australia, through the Department of Labour and National Service, made special grants for the expansion of services to various Kindergarten Union and Day Nursery Associations. After the war, however, the grants were arbitrarily withdrawn despite the ongoing need and demand for the services (see Brennan and O'Donnell, 1986:20).

The post war version of the role of women and of the 'sacredness' of motherhood, in order to counter the liberating war-time policies, became increasingly constricting. The discovery of psychoanalyses and of cognitive psychology provided empirical support for a reinforcement of the importance of the motherhood role during early childhood. Mother in the

1950s was seen to be crucially responsible for the healthy development of children, and especially for meeting their newly discovered infantile psycho-sexual needs. Research findings claimed that a child deprived of mothering care was most unlikely to 'remain normal'; that effects were lifelong; and that damage from early maternal deprivation was irreversible (Spitz, 1945; Bowlby, 1951). The following statement from British psychologist and psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott, summarises the ethos of the times:

What is much needed at the present time is to give moral support to the ordinary good mother, educated or uneducated, clever or limited, rich or poor and to protect her from everyone and everything that gets between her baby and herself.

(Winnicott, 1957:144)

Despite the powerful propaganda promoting a particular image of family, and the role of the wife/mother within it, the war-time promotion of women in the workforce, and the (albeit, brief) period of state provision of child care, did sow the seeds of later developments, and inaugurated a modified perspective on the position of women in modern society.

Gender Equality and Child Care Policy

Most significantly, female workforce participation during the World Wars gave birth to a change in attitudes, primarily those of child care consumers - women who were unwilling to give up their new found independence - and to the emergence of numerous other stakeholders with divergent reasons for demanding state intervention in child care provision.

Providers came to reflect the growing professionalism in the field of child care. This newly formed body of experts, prompted by their discovery of positive outcomes for children in care and/or by employment prospects, became a powerful advocacy group for public child care provision. Similarly, some employers were reluctant to give up a now trained and experienced female workforce, and many families may have discovered the benefits of two incomes (the need for which was promoted through the advance of

television with its consumer orientation). The proliferation and marketing of labour saving devices for homemakers, medical advances prolonging life, and the availability of contraception (which prevented and/or delayed birth) resulted in the tasks of homemaking and child rearing demanding a much smaller percentage of a woman's life (Simons and Vella, 1984; Midgley and Hughes, 1983). These factors combined with the emergence of articulate spokespeople such as Germaine Greer (1970), Kate Millet (1971), and Betty Friedan (1971) created a climate in which mother-care could be questioned, and prompted the onset of the Women's Liberation Movement.

Meanwhile, the research findings of the 1950s suggesting long term negative effects on children separated from mothers, were replaced by a second generation of studies emphasising the positive outcomes of out-of-home care (see Belsky and Steinberg, 1978). At the same time, popular ideas about child care stressed the adaptability of the babies, and the suggestion that the mother's rights could, to some extent, supersede those of the child. The best selling *Baby and Child Care* by Dr. Benjamin Spock, counselled parents to follow their instincts: 'Trust yourself...what you feel like doing for your baby is probably best' (Spock, 1953 3-4).

The reduction of state supported child care services after the Second World War created a reactive lobby from both providers and users of the care whose satisfactory arrangements were suddenly withdrawn. The introduction of labour saving household devices, the recognition that work need not be differentiated by gender, increased rates of divorce and of single parenthood, demands for increased income, and feminist rhetoric, culminated in increased demands for state support for child care. The demands were couched within a doctrine of gender equality.

Growing out of the women's liberation movement, spurred by influence of behaviourism, and strengthened by equal rights legislation for minority groups, this new ideology espoused the idea that the social differences between men and women are environ-

mentally caused – and that these differences can be eliminated by redefining roles and breaking down stereotypes. Proponents of this belief system call for state action to counteract discrimination by legislating equal rights and privileges to women, including access to opportunities for training and workforce participation. In response to these demands, and reflecting world wide trends in this direction, legislation was passed in Australia which addressed the elimination of work related discrimination against women, focussing primarily on job related and maternity benefits.

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The Australian Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act of 1984 made unlawful acts of discrimination on the grounds of sex, marital status or pregnancy in employment and other areas. It gave effect to some provisions of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, ratified by Australia in July, 1983, and it promoted recognition and acceptance within the community of the principle of equality between men and women. Australian States have also enacted legislation. In New South Wales for example, the 1980 amendment to the Anti-Discrimination Act of 1976 requires certain employing authorities to develop equal employment opportunity management plans and to adopt affirmative action programs.

Child care, because it frees women to participate in the wage economy, is a critical aspect of equal employment policies. The new legislation, however, and the growing demand for child care because of spiralling female workforce participation rates, did not result in substantial gains in the availability of child care. Scarcity, in

fact, has overridden all other concerns in out-of-home child care in the 1980s internationally (Belsky, 1988), and remains a critical issue in Australia (Jones, 1986). A review of the child care developments in Australia post-1972, reveals that despite a plethora of rhetoric, manifold promises, and countless studies, the scope of state intervention in child care has been limited, restricted and/or unstable.

Australian Child Care Policy Developments

Between 1972, when the first (and only) piece of child care legislation was passed, and 1982 when the Labor government solidified its political hold, the child care policy field was racked with reversals, infighting and stifled promises. Prior to the reign of the Labor party, these changes and reversals might be attributed to party politics, however party ideology cannot account for the swings or the lack of progress which has coloured the area since 1982.

In that year Prime Minister Hawke announced that child care is the 'right of every child'. Income levels of eligibility for subsidy were raised; subsidies to commercial centres were terminated; and the expansion of services was cited as the major focus of the child care program, under a new proactive government planning scheme (replacing the reactive submission model of funding). In 1984 the government announced its goal to develop twenty thousand (20,000) child care spaces and the Office of Child Development moved from the Department of Social Services to the Department of Community Services. In 1985 the mini-budget slashed the promised child care funding by 63 million dollars. More cuts took place in 1987. The expansion of spaces slowed although the stated target number continued to increase. In 1988 an Interdepartmental Committee (IDC) on child care debated the concept of vouchers for low income parents to purchase child care from any number of organisations, once again promoting subsidy for commercial centres.[1] These proposals were not implemented. Further IDC debates ensued concerning the target of child care policies. The

intra-parliamentary conflicts over child care policies became vehement. A number of Ministers were opposed to any provision of child care for woman who were not working (that is, they wanted no Commonwealth intervention for pre-school, educationally - oriented care); and to any provision for the supplemental care of school-aged children. Thus within the ruling party itself there was both ardent opposition to, and articulated support for, a host of variant child care policies (Sydney Morning Herald, July 16, 1988: *Labor split on creche proposal*). Meanwhile, community advocacy and numerous published reports targeted a critical need for more day care, especially infant spaces. Then, suddenly, in July, 1988 Cabinet announced a program to fund 26,000 additional child care spaces. The majority of the spaces were designated for school-aged children whose need, while important, was never considered primary by any lobby group. The reason given for the surprising focus on after-school places was that:

...(out of school places) are cheaper than full day care centre spaces...an after school space cost the government $6.90 per week, a day care space up to $50.00 per week.

(Sydney Morning Herald, July 20, 1988: *Why pre-school gets top marks*).

Bickering within the Labor party continued after the announcement when the Departments of Treasury and Finance pointed out that 'this policy did not clarify what is proposed under the proposal', and that the 129 million dollar price tag 'does not rectify current targeted deficiencies' (leaked discussion papers cited in *The Australian*, July 23, 1988:32).

Meanwhile, a new inquiry by the Centre for Economic Policy reported that the financial benefits of work related child care in Australia could outweigh the costs by 106 million dollars (Sydney Morning Herald, May 31, 1988: *Child care aid pays off, says Blewett*), and the government announced its intention to share child care responsibility with employers. The plan involved tax deductions to industry for capital child care expenditures, resource staff to assist in development, and user fee subsidies. The previously heralded notion of

community based day care was now noted by policy makers to be 'constraining to those most in need' (Sydney Morning Herald, August 24, 1988: *PM to seek business help for child care*). The business community however stated that they were 'unlikely to feel a commitment to provide this service' (The Age, August 25, 1988)[2], and on closer analysis the incentives were shown to be minimal especially in comparison to American employer incentives for child care provisions (see Burad, 1984).

The majority of the rhetoric, the continuous administrative reorganisation, the internal squabbles, and the endless policy debates revolved around the prioritisation of the educational (preschool services), the social welfare (family support services, services for the disabled), and the employment related (day care, family day homes, out-of-school and vacation care programs) aspects of children's services. This contrived need to designate which of these areas would take priority in terms of Federal intervention exacerbated conflicts amongst the different child care stakeholders, deflected grievances away from critical issues and, in the end, resulted in minimal movement towards increased, consistent and/or committed Commonwealth support for child care, despite its high profile promises.

...our policy has had a creche landing!!

Do we really want a changed system of child care?

A fundamental consideration in the move towards increased state responsibility in child care is motivation, or the extent to which society is able to overcome its love affair with the traditional concept of 'motherhood'. This includes the need for women to relinquish the veneration and control which they derive from their motherhood status. Do we really want a model of child care in which the government or its agents (such as funded community groups) provide universal access to a multitude of child care options, while flexible work practises open up unlimited potential for alternate lifestyles for both men and women? Evidence indicates we may not.

The threat of a perceived impending social change often results in resistance (or fear) which serves to strengthen traditional beliefs (Toffler, 1980). The onset of systemic gender equality which jeopardises our familiar motherhood ideology could well be influencing the mobilisation of a conservative element. These 'traditionalists' cling to a vision of the ideal family within a mythical 'correct' society; so that institutionalised child care represents the antithesis of how society is supposed to function. Thus changes such as increased rates of divorce and of working mothers with infants become symbols of a declining morality and give birth to counter reactions. Traditionalists seem to find vehement spokespeople whose campaigns against change often assume a missionary ardour. (Reverend Fred Nile is one such spokesperson who zealously calls for a return to a traditional, 'moral' lifestyle).

The resistance to an alternative to motherhood however, is also reflected in less conspicuous ways. Empirical findings have become available to support a renewed emphasis on the importance of mothercare, reiterating older research studies which pointed to the deleterious effects of out-of-home care (see, for instance, Belsky, 1988). The role of the media in influencing prevailing attitudes is significant as well (Connell, 1977). In the 1980s, images of traditional motherhood roles outweighed new female

images on television and in films and magazines (Stewart, 1984). Meanwhile research findings which indicate that centre–reared infants exhibit poor attachment to mothers have been reported in the popular press without the concomitant reservations regarding methodology and other factors which temper these conclusions (Ochiltree, 1989). The ensuing collective vision associates the provision and use of institutionalised child care with in–humane, destructive practises at worse, or with individual selfishness at best. Within this context women come to question their motives, and child care advocates, on the defensive, come to frame their demands in concrete, often quality–oriented rhetoric so as to counter any appearance of avariciousness. As Moore points out:

> Piecemeal changes may help women on an individual basis and for a short time, but do not result in any lasting changes. (Meanwhile) women's accounts show how (they are) grateful for even the smallest changes or rewards.
>
> (Moore,1991:6).

The same is true of professionals. A lack of vision of (or commitment to) the structural reforms which need to be addressed in order to make child care an acceptable aspect of state functioning, leads to the demands for a new social order taking the form of incremental proposals for increased state intervention in specific aspects of child care delivery – more regulations, increased funding, changed training requirements, and other programme details. These changes can be generously addressed by politicians because they do not substantially alter the child care status quo, they often win votes prior to elections, and they are easily minimised by implementation procedures.

Moving beyond the motherhood ethic could make life more uncomfortable for men who would no longer be able to take for granted their lack of child care responsibilities and/or their 'natural' right to career and control paths which are superordinate to those of their wives and other women. But the relinquishing of the glory of motherhood will be painful and frightening for women as well. They will no longer be able to justify complacency, nor will they have an excuse to abdicate from the often

exhausting business of self determination and self reliance.

The limitations of our current child care policies reflects our ambivalence about what we really believe, and really desire. In the 1990s, only a small minority of children under twelve years of age will be cared for full time by their mothers. Despite this fact, surveys have shown that the belief in motherhood as the sacred, natural, and best role for women, and in mother care as the best child rearing technique, permeates all levels of society and socio–economic groupings (Wearing, 1984), and the devolution of child care responsibility to non–maternal agents and institutions has been minimal.

The success of child care policy developments can be measured by the extent to which we have contested and altered our entrenched vision of the role that women play in society. Men, women, and professionals must look long and hard at what they really want and, if ready to confront a new society, they must stop being appeased with token and incremental concessions which keep child care programs residual. If ready, we must battle for a new vision of state responsibility which allows myriad forms of child care to be accepted as natural – and be willing to perform the painful, but freeing reconstruction of motherhood. ◆

Notes

1. The Interdepartmental Committee had representatives from the Department of Community and Health, Employment, Education and Training, Social Security, the Office of the Prime Minister, Department of Finance, and Treasury. The Committee soon became embroiled by debates on the social focus of the child care program vs the need for economic efficiency. Child care as a women's issue was raised when a leaked document demonstrated conflicts between female and male committee participants over the retention of the dependent spouse rebate (apparently favoured by male members). (*Australian,* July 20, 1987: 'Child care places; *Australian,* July 23, 1987: 'The great baby brawl')

2. Both the Confederation of Australian Industry (CAI) and the Business Council of Australia (BCA) responded cooly to the program as reflected in their statements to the media:

> Child care is rated fairly low as a priority... It is not necessarily the answer to workers being happy at the end of the day. (Clive Speed, Assistant Director BCA, cited in *The Age,* August 25, 1988).
>
> Employers do not see themselves in the business of child care. (D. Nolan, Director CAI, cited in *The Age,* August 25, 1988).

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Minuchin, Salvador
Families and family therapy
London: Tavistock Publications 1977
Keywords: family therapy; case studies.

Wearing, Betsy
The ideology of motherhood: a study of Sydney suburban mothers
Sydney: George Unwin, 1984
Keywords: single mothers; working mothers; employment; attitudes; mother child relationships.

Ingersoll, Sandra L. and Patton, Susan O.
Treating perpetrators of sexual abuse
Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1990
Keywords: sex offenders; treatment; child sexual abuse; incest; recidivism; crisis intervention; families; programs; models; group therapy; research

Jones, David (ed.) et al
Understanding child abuse
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982
Keywords: child abuse; child neglect; parenting.

Finkelhor, David
Sexually victimised children
New York: The Free Press, 1979
Keywords: child sexual abuse; incest; victims; theory; sex offenders; family environment; trauma.
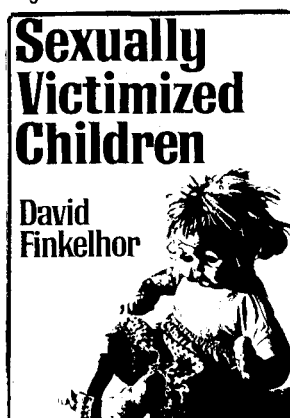
Goldstein, Joseph; Freud, Anna; Solnit, Albert J.
Beyond the best interests of the child
New York: The Free Press, 1973
Keywords: adoption; substitute care; foster care; law; legal issues.

Moss, Peter and Melhuish, Edward
Current issues in day care for young children : reseach and policy implications : papers from a conference at London University, February 26-28 1990
London: HMSO, 1991
Keywords: child day care; research; policy; comparative studies; forecasting; work based child care; preschool education; child development; children's rights; parents rights; child care workers; child behaviour; curriculum; environment; conferences

Howe, Renate and Swain, Shurlee
All God's children: a centenary history of the Methodist homes for children and the Orana Peace Memorial Homes
Canberra: Acorn Press, 1989
Keywords: children in care; residential care; children's services; family counselling; finance; foster care; foster parents

Festinger, Trudy
No one ever asked us...: a postscript to foster care
New York: Columbia University Press, 1983
Keywords: children in care; foster care; longitudinal studies; adolescence

Maas, Henry S. (ed.)
Five fields of social service ; reviews of research
New York: Columbia University Press, 1983
Keywords: children in care; foster care; longitudinal studies; adolescence