

“Was brauchen Kleinstkinder?”

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Hello, I'm Steve Biddulph. It's great to have this chance to speak to you. I'm very sorry that I couldn't travel to be in Germany for this conference.

Uhm, I'm speaking from my home in Tasmania which is down here in Australia.

Also, I'm sorry that I don't speak very good German, so I'm very grateful to the translator for interpreting my words to you, I hope you'll be patient with them.

You have probably been listening all day – from looking at the programme - to many of the researchers and very solemn scientific background to our concerns of our children using day care, and so I thought I would try and give an overview of the future and also some stories and of my - ways of looking on this and what we're be able to do about this growing problem.

Many of us who started working with children back in Sixties and Seventies were really interested in making sure that children got early learning experiences, and we were keen to foster the growth of kindergartens and pre-schools.

We saw that three and four year olds needed to have time with other children, especially if they were living at home with a mum in a house of their own, mum and dad, and needed to mix with other children and get some learning experiences and enriched playing experiences, so we were very supportive of the idea of kindergartens and pre-schools.

However over the last 20 or 30 years the (rising?) of children has really changed and the idea of day care centres and the use of them by parents has increased, younger and younger. So today it's not uncommon to see children as young as 3 or 6 months spending the whole of the day 5 days a week in a group care situation. I was speaking this to people in Sydney a couple of years ago, they told me about a 3 day old baby who had been admitted to a day care centre, her mother was a law student who wanted to continue her studies, so this tiny baby was coming to a day care centre for about 50 hours a week. This would be illegal in Germany but in most of the world people would see no reason why not to do this.

And those of us working in the area observing and visiting many day care centres became very concerned at the different qualities of childhood that you would receive being cared for in a group setting like this with dozens of other children and people caring for you who were strangers and not part of your family. As I said, the use of day care for very small children has increased by about 4-fold in the last 20 years. And for a long time we didn't know the picture of what exactly was going on with that, we knew the total numbers but not what made up the picture ..let me just draw for you the picture that we'd seen ... children in early care. If you take the percentage of children aged from naught to four, around 3 months a certain number of people begin to give the babies into care, and around by the age of 2 that increases considerably, so that is just general pattern, if that were a hundred percent .. there is still a fair

proportion who never go to child care. When these figures were broken down it was discovered that in fact there were two completely different patterns of child care usage. To begin with, there was a group that started soon and continued right through, basically these children grew up completely in child care. And there was a second group started some time a little after two and into the of age three to pre-school they began to give their children a few more hours a few more time ... and there was a third group of course who never used group care at all for their children, they stayed home or with their grandparents or they were in some kind of 1:1 care.

It's interesting to notice the difference, it is very different from country to country , so for instance – uhm - in the UK the children who received no group care ever in their lives ...they move on to kindergartens when they're ready, would be around 60% of all children, in Sweden that's 50% , in the US which as a very different kind of culture with a very high proportion of mothers working or needing to work (or fathers needing to work) the figure is only 35 %. In Italy the figure is 90% of children never go into group care. And you may all be familiar with the German situation, which I understand is something that is changing quite a lot at the moment.

But the main things to realise is that there are two absolutely different styles of parenting: In English we call this group "slammers", that is the name that researchers come to tell them, which slam their children straight into care, soon as they are able, full time, they would spend 12.000 hours in child care before they begin school.

"Sliders" are people who use group-care gradually increasing as they feel their child is more ready to go to it. And this group fortunately ... we see as we continue to talk about the possible risks of this kind of thing is very small.

Slammers in my country here and I suspect it's the same in most European countries are around about, only around about 5% of parents. And interestingly, the interesting thing about them is that they are not people generally who are forced by economic circumstances to do that. Poorer groups of people, immigrant groups, are very very reluctant to use child care unless it's absolutely forced on them.

Slammers are by and large people who are very affluent, who basically see their priorities as being career, income. And children are important but not as important as career, although they may of course not put it that way themselves.

So the question you have to have been asked is: OK is this a worry? why worry about this? And - for about 30 years there's been discussion, a controversy, probably one of the most intense controversies about any social issue in our current lives, our social lives. And fierce arguments from both points of view. And - research earlier on was very contradictory, was poorly designed and didn't give a clear picture.

And so, during the 1990ies both certainly in the US and in the UK and also in some studies in Germany, Norway, Sweden, a number of other places, very large scale studies were carried out, the most world famous study was the NICHD, a US study, which was (set by the?) National Institute for Child Health and Development, this was carried out over about a 14 years period, still going on, it involved thousands of children in very many locations and it involved most of the leading researchers in the United States in the developmental field, brought together as a large research team. It included people who supported child care very strongly as well as those who had

concerns about that. And the UK study was called the EPE or early pre-school and primary education study, and again involved thousands of children and covered about 5 year period. Both of these studies released their outcomes in about the last 4 or 5 years, and progressively as the data was gathered, and in both cases, along with other studies in many parts of the world, what they found was that there were serious risks, to children who had too much child care for too long a period starting too young. That was the 3 risk factors: *too much, too soon, too long*.

What they found were that these children had basically personality differences. When they began to go to primary school they showed an increase in misbehaviour, particularly aggression and disobedience, non-compliance with adults and teachers, and so for instance the NICHD-study found that children receiving very little child care had around about 6% behaviour problems, children who had 30 hours or more had gone up to 17%, and so if you are in a class room teaching in primary school, and 17% of all your children have behaviour problems, it's a serious concern. And one of the things that was earlier on considered, perhaps the main focus of the discussion, was the quality of care. If the care was good enough: well trained staff, good facilities, good ratios (staff to children), that this would prevent these problems. And - while quality was varying on these factors, the most striking thing about the studies was that it could not eliminate these risk factors. When you controlled for quality you still had damage happening to childrens' personality development, character development.

The second area of concerning findings was that children who had spend too long in day care from to young an age had weakened connections with their care giver, mother or father at home, and so they had suffered some damage to the closeness between a parent and baby. So these two are the factors that come out consistently of studies in many different countries. Its not a huge absolute change, its a risk factor. This thing is a risk factor. And - probably what's happening is that all children are harmed to a small degree, but this is concerning because it involves changes to millions of children.

It's important to use your common sense when listening to research and to think yourself: why would this be so? and does this fit my experience of the way that children develop and grow? And - one of the most striking things, I think, is the different quality of experience: if your'e a child in a group care setting , if you're a visitor in a day care centre, a child care centre, what you'll notice is, that the - uhm - it's noisy – uhm - there's a continuous movement of the children, and carers have to share their care between many different children .

When studies are done between the interactions between the mothers with a child its found that hundreds of times a day the child initiates a kind of visual seeking behaviour, when they look to their mum, see if she's paying attention, and she looks back and makes a sound, there is a continuous dance, a very beautiful dance, between a loving parent and their own child.

When this is studied on video tape in child care centres the carers even in the very best care miss 2/3 at least of these cues from the children, and so the children make the seeking action that is not picked up and not responded to. There isn't anything like the intensity or the fineness of interaction.

The other thing about being in a group setting for these children who are still far too young to be interacting in group play is that it looks to be very stressful. Now - there was a breakthrough in the study of infant and in fact human stress in the mid nineteen-nineties, discovery of a substance called cortisol. And cortisol is a by-product of adrenaline, and by great good fortune it can be tested by taking a little bit of saliva on a little cotton wool bud from the child's mouth and will give you an instant reading of the stress levels in their blood stream. This meant, we could study "stress" in a much more non-invasive and continuous way. It was immediately applied in my work, it was applied to studying war veterans', soldiers' and emergency workers' levels of stress, and – but in children in creches and day-care centres, some big studies were taken, one of those was here in Australia, which found that children - in - put into day-care, this was toddlers put into day-care - will have double the cortisol levels in the early weeks of being put in there, those levels would diminish over time but even studied 5 or 6 months later, after they had been put in child-care centre, they were still elevated stress levels.

Another finding which was also of considerable concern was that - in a child at home cortisol levels are highest in the morning and so they start of, I can say they sort of wake up with the ... sun ... and as the day goes on they taper away. Whereas in a child-care centre the level of stress shown in a child's blood stream as measured by the cortisol sample – uhm – increases the longer the day goes on.

So these children are getting basically more stress. Now – is this a worry? Well, it turns out that stress levels make changes in the body that are very significant. It's as if the body says: ok, I'm in an emergency here, I need to move my resources for that. And so what happens is: it shifts resources from growth. As Cortisol levels go up – growth hormone goes down. And the part of the child that's growing most prolificly at this time of course is the brain growth. And so what we find is that children that are under stress are not developing the neurological connections that they should be growing as quickly. They don't learn as much. Also their stress levels are also effecting their immune response, and so they are more likely to suffer from infections and illnesses.

We are particularly concerned because in a child who is being cuddled and being talked to and laughed to, who actually registers the exact smell of their carer, and even responds – we can measure the response to the pupils dilating in their mother or fathers eyes or their grandmother (whoever is caring for them) if they are really really involved with their child. As that child does that, cortisol levels fall, the child becomes happy and relaxed, and growth hormones come up and the part of the brain that is growing at that time is called the prefrontal cortex (it's in here), it's the part of the brain which handles social interaction, and so the ability to be empathic, to care about someone else's feelings. The feelings being learnt, especially in the first 12 months of life, is how to be loving and sensitive. The child is reading its mother's emotions, the mother is responding to the child in a highly refined way. Unless the mother is severely depressed or drug-addicted, she will do that far far better than any other carer will do, especially when the care is being shared around a large number of children.

Sometimes it's good to just draw along personal experiences to get a snapshot of what this is like. I was visiting a large German child care centre, I was invited there in about 2001, when I was struggling to do an election tour in Germany – uhm – on of

the child-care centres of that region was concerned what I was writing in my books and said: come and visit us, we are the best child-care centre for this region and we think you need to see what we're doing. And so I went there and had a wonderful look at the – uhm – beautiful toys and the beautiful windows and the gardens and the – uhm – clean facilities and and everything beautiful, but there weren't any children there and I said after a while: I don't mind seeing some children, and they said: oh they're – it's 4 o'clock in the afternoon – they're down in the outdoor area playing, and so I said: could we visit them and spend some time there, so we did that, and the children were lovely, and they were very keen to get some attention they ran up and we talked to them and – uhm – while we were doing that I was travelling with - I had a young German pediatrician, a young woman doctor, a childrens' doctor, who was my translator, and as I was talking to some little kiddies I noticed that a child, a little child, a little girl, who looked kind of sad, walked up to my friend, and my friend had sort of looked down on her and noticing she looked a bit sad had got down on her knees and the child put its arms right around her and held on to her very tightly and – uhm – my colleague stood there and held the child back again, and I think they were holding for a long time, 30 seconds, a minute, a long time for a hug, and then my attention was taken away, one of the children I was talking to had sand thrown in her face by another child, a bit of disturbance, and so when we were travelling back from that visit I noticed my interpreter looking angry and I said: what's the matter? And she said: Well, she'd been - when she finished hugging that little girl, the little girl talked to her and said, I got this brace I'm supposed to wear on my wrist (it's a kind of strengthening (?) brace) and it hurts my hand, and the young woman had said: let me rub your hand, let me just rub it to make it feel better, and one of the carers had come up and said: what are you doing? - And - this girl has to go now, she's supposed to have that brace on her wrist and my friend said: oh, I was just rubbing it and the carer said some words I've never forgotten, she said: "We don't have time for that kind of thing here".

And I think that is so indicative of the way it is when in a group care situation: *We don't have time for that kind of thing here*, we don't have time for special treatment, we don't have time for making anyone especially loved or especially singled out. And the sad thing about that is, that is exactly what children need to feel. They need to feel, at the age of 1 or 2, that they are the very centre of their parents world, that the world loves them because their parents love them. And that's simply not available.

Now, there's been a great deal of discussion about 'quality of care', how to improve quality, and I would certainly support that, I think we'll always need to have child care, and we will always try and make it the best we can, but do you realise that is incredibly expensive? – uhm – in the UK for example which has – uhm – variable standards of child care, they spend 0.2% of the - 0.3%, of the gross domestic product (?) on providing for early childhood education. Sweden by comparison spends 2%..., a huge proportion, on their national income they spent on early childhood education. And something very interesting about that, which is: one thing: you have to spend seven times as much as the UK does, but another thing is that Sweden is probably in most peoples' minds the country that pioneers early childhood education, it has the best quality child care in the world, and has all sorts of facilities.

And – but in the 1990ies the Swedish government responded to concerns and pressure from parents, that an increasing number of parents including parents who had grown up in themselves attending Swedish day care centres as children, that

they would like the choice in the matter, that they would like there to be adequate parental leave, so that if someone chose to stay off work for a couple of years while they had a new baby, that could be allowed for, and that they would have the guarantee to return to work, and that they would have parental financial support. So Sweden brought in 'paid parental leave' in the first two years.

As a result of that Swedish parents almost universally stopped sending very young children to day care. Today in Sweden there are less (drawing, flip chart) – there are less than 300 babies in child care centres in the whole of Sweden. By comparison in the UK there are 30.000 babies in child care. In the United States 60% of all babies are in child care by the age of 6 months.

So there are huge differences in inequality and the provision of the different countries, and I see Germany being at a kind of a cross-roads: there's a very strong tradition in Germany of caring-involved parenthood and in providing good support for parents, so that families can survive on one income. I think this is now at a cross-roads and at risk in a way for heading in the American direction which, I think, is a very poor outcome for children.

The dilemma for parents, I think, it's a combination of elements here (refers to flip chart sketch). I think that as individuals we have to take responsibility for ourselves. But there's continuously, in a modern world, a choice that we are handed or presented with: on the one hand there is the choice of the world's message – puts up continuously – which is: to earn and spend, that's the major pre-occupation of the corporatized world, the media advertising, the people spend their time doing. Earning and spending are seen as some kind of ... god that society worships. That's in a tension, every parent is in a tension between that, and - what they want to do with their children which is caring and communicating (uses flip chart) and how we can allocate our time so that we can provide enough caring in our own families. I think every parent today is kind of stretched out on that cross trying to decide (flip-chart) which way that they're going to go. And – is your life entered around money or is it entered around parent love.

And as a society we have to encourage the things that we think will produce a happier future. There are 3 areas that each impact: one is 'individual choice', the other is 'government policy', the other is the 'work place culture'. And if the work place culture encourages family-friendly practices there is an extended maternity leave, plenty of re-education and there's many good corporations in the world that are doing easing parents back into the work force after 2 or 3 years providing catch up seminars, guaranteeing continuity, they find that they get many benefits in staff loyalty, especially from younger couples who hold these values now.

And – governments have to legislate so that there's adequate income support – uhm – Prof. Melish (Schreibweise?), the UK expert on this whole area, has pointed out that, yes, you can provide high quality child care for the children, you can provide high ratios of staff, and high levels of training of staff, all the staff are university-educated in early childhood. By the time you do that it is so expensive that it is actually cheaper to pay a salary to the parents to stay home. And - it's the better investment and better guarantee of quality to provide paid leave for young mothers and young fathers who choose in their families to be the one who provides that loving care, 1:1, in the early – uh - years of their child.

I am very honored to have been able to speak at this conference, I hope that that pictures has made sense and – uhm – hasn't repeated too much familiar, and I look forward to hearing from you or speaking to you again at some time. Thank you.