

CHILD CARE — A CONSUMER SERVICE INDUSTRY?

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Quite frankly, I had never thought of this situation as a consumer problem, until it was thrust upon me as such.

In our medium-size town we have, as many cities do, an open-mike radio show which happens to air conveniently at lunch hour. One day the guests on the show had been involved in a state-wide survey relevant to a program under the Economic Opportunity Act. The survey was of the number and kinds of day care centers for pre-school children, available to working mothers, and others.

The M. C. repeatedly referred to the fact that in addition to the negative effect on the child of a poor nursery school or day care center, a whole segment of the public was not getting what it thought it was paying for. The first phone call that came in was from an irate citizen who asserted that "the consumer is better protected by laws regarding the bottling of his beer than the care of his children." And this complaint—"The consumer isn't getting——" was repeated over and over.

Now, one cannot make an elephant a camel just by calling it a camel, as Sen. Cotton of New Hampshire pointed out in support of putting the Truth-in-Packaging Bill into Commerce Committee. However, I do believe that if enough consumers call something a consumer problem then it becomes, and is, a consumer problem, regardless of whether we have ever so considered it before.

A RELUCTANCE TO DO ANYTHING

In general, pre-school children may be cared for in one of three types of facilities—1) by the day, or part of the day in the home of persons outside their own family, 2) in day care centers of a custodial type, most frequently operated on a profit-making basis, 3) in groups which imply primarily educational experiences, calling themselves "nursery schools", "play schools", "pre-schools", and kindergartens. These are generally privately run, for profit.

Some states have excellent, well-administered laws, regulating and setting standards for such facilities, among

them the state of California. In others there has been a mysterious reluctance to do anything which might be construed as interference with private enterprise. In one state, for example, only philanthropic centers must be certified; for those operated privately, for profit, no licensing is required.

My own state of Vermont is one of a handful of states in which there is no family day care in homes. According to a national survey conducted by the Children's Bureau, 33 states have statutory responsibility for licensing both day care centers and family day care homes, six states have mandatory licensing for group centers only, three states have permissive responsibility for licensing both centers and homes. (1)

State Departments of Public Welfare are the most common agencies designated to administer these licensing programs, although in some states this function falls to Health, Education, or some other department. In some states fire and safety, health and sanitation inspections are made routinely, in some states such inspections are made only when requested, in some states they are never made at all.

There are those who see in the licensing of child care centers, or homes, or pre-schools, an encouragement to mothers of young children to cast aside maternal responsibilities, and turn child care over to strangers while the mothers work or play, for their own enjoyment, outside the home.

The fallacy in this objection is that we are considering, not a situation which would be created by the encouragement of better child care facilities, but a situation that already exists. Some 30 percent of the mothers of young children are already in the labor market.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2) estimates that half the women in the adult population below age 55 will be in the labor force by 1970—making the problem of caring for children of working mothers of even greater concern than it is today. Nine million children under age 12 presently have mothers who work outside the home. (3)

MOTHERS WORK FOR ECONOMIC REASONS

A current survey substantiates the hypothesis that mothers work pretty much because of economic necessity. They are divorced, separated, or deserted; they have unemployed, sick, or handicapped husbands; their husbands are unskilled and simply cannot earn enough to take care of a family when only one adult in the family works.

The survey also shows that, by a vast majority, the preference of working mothers would be for children to be taken care of in their own homes. But in few cases is this possible, either because it is financially unfeasible, or because suitable help is just not available. The alternative is care in someone else's home, or in daycare, play school, or nursery school groups.

Mothers in low income groups find it hard to pay the cost of commercial care, yet almost 70 percent of day care is furnished by commercial operators. Many mothers must resort to second-best arrangements in homes or centers which fail dismally to meet even the most minimum standards.

Women work for reasons other than the presence or absence of good child care facilities. The care the child receives generally affects not his mother's need to work, but the developmental experiences of the child himself.

Over one-fourth of all children with working mothers who live in two-parent homes have families who earn less than \$2,000 per year, and almost one-half of the children of working mothers in 1-parent homes have mothers who earn less than this amount. (4)

Here, as in so many other areas, the poor do truly pay more—and receive less.

A requirement that application for license be made, and that inspection and other proof of eligibility be given activates in each individual his own feelings toward authority; degrees of personal security and comfortableness with authority are reflected in the willingness with which proprietors of day care facilities meet this requirement. Thus, the poorest center is likely to be least comfortable with authority, least willing to be investigated and licensed.

Moreover, the client group that uses the second-rate facilities may be least likely to demand higher standards; because of low pay, inflexible working hours, and other conditions, they are least able to develop alternative arrangements, and most likely to be completely unaware of the protections which can result from licensing.

STATE MUST ASSURE SUITABLE CARE

It is for these reasons that the state, under the principle of *parens patriae*—must act to see that suitable care is available to children who may otherwise fall between the cracks in the social structure.

It is true, as opponents of licensing claim, that if minimums in a low income area are so high that facilities must close, then mothers may have to withdraw their children and leave them unattended while they work, scarcely a desirable alternative. The answer must be that requirements can be realistic, but that the very establishment of requirements will help to create in the consumer-parent an awareness of buying a service, and an awareness of levels of quality in the service they buy.

Open hearings on the development of standards have been generally satisfactory in those states which require licensing. Standards relate to such items as the ratio of adults to children, the education, morals, and health of persons who care for children, physical facilities, fire, health, and sanitary inspections, physical health of the children themselves, and so on.

To be effective, concern for development and implementation of laws and regulations must be shared by legislators and citizens alike. Your state may very well have, already, laws requiring licensing of day care centers — yet, for two major reasons none of us is exempt, as citizens or as consumer-educators, from undertaking a *current* review of existing laws and practices.

First, society's view of what constitutes good care changes as social and economic conditions change, and as a community's understanding of children's needs advances. Thus, standards in states where they exist have continuously risen. An important part of any licensing statute should be provision for development and periodic revision of standards. Standards are never static, but reflect the generally rising level of public expectation of better care for children. The question of how often standards should be revised may be answered thus: when practice has moved beyond the minimums it is time for revision.

Second, a review of the laws and regulations of the various states already requiring licensing shows an important loophole: certain kinds of facilities are commonly exempted by law or by administrative ruling from compliance with the licensing requirement. Most commonly excepted are: groups of fewer than 4 or 5 children, (with no maximum number set), those with any religious or fraternal affiliation, those operated by public agencies such as city or county, or those with an educational implication.

FEW EXCEPTIONS ARE DEFENSIBLE

Few, if any of these exceptions are defensible in terms of the needs of the individual child. A child can suffer neglect, injury, illness, and emotional trauma even though he is being cared for in a group of only 4—too few to bring the home under licensing regulation. Conversely, extra-large groups tend to promote "custodial

care," without regard for emotional or developmental needs of young children.

Affiliation with fraternal, religious, or public agencies may or may not be sufficient to guarantee minimum standards. Compliance with licensing regulations should impose no hardship on such groups.

But perhaps the greatest loophole is in the matter of nomenclature.

The name attached to a group is not necessarily a sure guide to its true nature: in too many states a facility may be excluded from licensing regulation merely by calling itself a "kindergarten" or "nursery school", thereby making of itself, by fiat, an educational institution. It would be far more realistic to require such facilities to meet standards set up by Departments of Education; those which fail to pass the standards for a truly educational facility should have to revert to licensing as day care centers.

Too many daily papers carry classified ads reading, "Wanted—children to care for in my home"—with only a phone number to call. I will spare you the horror stories. They exist—in every form imaginable. Some of the personality damage will be recognized only as the child reaches adolescence or adulthood: its source may never be identified. The occasional dramatic situation is seen in isolation, rather than as a symptom of a social need. (5)

OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS INDIVIDUALS

What, then, is our responsibility as individuals with a major concern for the consumer?

1. A survey of the licensing requirements and regulations within our individual states, with a realistic evaluation of these standards in terms of contemporary needs, and with a sharp eye to loopholes that exist.

2. Better communication and mutual support among state and national agencies having these concerns, for it is scarcely credible that children in different parts of the country really have such differing needs as might be inferred from the variety of laws that now exist. (6)

3. On rare occasions, employers have been known to oppose licensing of any day care services because they mistakenly see this as a hazard to obtaining a supply of labor. In some places, education of employer groups is needed. (6)

4. A concerted effort to inform the consumer family. Parents often use facilities which are outrageously poor because they have no backdrop against which to measure value, and therefore cannot make valid judgments on what they use.

I quote from a fact sheet prepared by members of a subcommittee on the Governor's Committee on Children and Youth of the State of Vermont in support of legislation in this area.

"There are no laws at the present time for protecting children and their families from risks when they are cared for outside their homes. There is ample legislation to protect the consumer in the areas of hairdressing, medicine, architecture, plumbing, and the canning of produce, but none for the care of children. At the present time anyone, in any kind of a situation, with any kind of education or lack of it, can set up a nursery school, kindergarten, play school, and day care center."

We may well pause to consider how we may look in the pages of a book on cultural anthropology a thousand years hence.

"The United States in the mid-twentieth century was a nation with great respect for the dead. Those caring for them had strict educational requirements and their establishments had to be licensed. The ceremonies surrounding the burial of the dead were often elaborate and expensive. It was not unusual for a so-called poor family to pay as much as a thousand dollars for the services involved.

"At the same time, these people did not consider the care of young children important. Anyone was thought capable of this work. Many believed educational requirements to be absurd. The idea of spending a thousand dollars for the care of a little child was felt to be preposterous." (7)

Is this how we wish our consumer choices to appear on the pages of history?

FOOTNOTES

- (1) "Licensed Day Care Facilities for Children," U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare (Children's Bureau) 1962.
- (2) Report to National Conference on Day Care, Committee on Labor Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1960.
- (3) "New Directions in Day Care," Katherine Oettinger, Chief, Children's Bureau, 1964.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) "Part-time Care; the Day Care Problem," by Eleanor Hosley, *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, Sept., 1964.
- (6) "Goals, Problems, and Progress in Child Welfare," Child Welfare Report No. 13, 1962.
- (7) Hosley, "Part Time Care; the Day Care Problem."