

A photograph of a woman with her back to the camera, wearing a purple and white checkered dress, walking through a series of vertical bamboo poles. In the background, a man in a white shirt is visible on a set of stairs. The scene is set outdoors on a grassy area.

Penelope Leach

Culture Today

What We Know and What We Need to Know

Child Care Today

What We Know and What We Need to Know

PENELOPE LEACH

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Child Care Today

ALSO BY PENELOPE LEACH

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Babyhood

Introduction

This book is about child care. In the book and in most of the research it reports, child care means just that: the care of children. It includes what used to be referred to as “day care” but is by no means confined to it. The distinction is important. To many people, perhaps especially North Americans, “day care” refers only to child care provided by people other than parents for children below school age while their mothers are out at work and mainly to care that takes place in group settings such as nurseries or centers. The real world of child care is a lot more diverse and complicated than that. For a start, even when a child is in child care for many hours and her mother, as well as her father, works a fifty-hour week, she will still spend more time with her parents and be far more intensely and lastingly influenced by them than by her other caregivers. Then, for many families child care is not a clear-cut either-or between home or child care setting but a jigsaw puzzle of people and places, family and nonfamily, paid and unpaid, in the child’s home, in someone else’s home, or in a professional setting. To complicate matters further, not all nonmaternal care is nonparental; there are increasing numbers of fathers caring for their children. And not all nonmaternal care is chosen to enable mothers to work or study, either. Some women are based at home and available to their children but want some separate time for their own benefit or for the child’s. Some fathers and mothers want to share children’s care or to have one or the other of them solely responsible for it, and some grandparents want to spend time with children that’s as much sociable as useful. We need to be aware of all that complexity, because if child care research is to inform public or personal policies usefully, it needs to be about identifying ways of caring for children

that fulfill the needs and fit the changed and changing lifestyles of both children and adults.

Child care is a very large and wide-ranging topic, so this book covers a lot of ground and is crammed with facts and figures, not all of which will seem relevant to every reader. American parents thinking about nonparental care for their own child may not care what is provided in Europe or Australia or how researchers judge the quality of a children's center; they may want to start with Chapter 4, read about different types of child care in Chapters 5–12, and then go to Chapters 14–16 on judging and choosing child care, and Chapter 20 for some suggestions on making it work for whole families. However, those same parents, thinking about child care as taxpayers and voters, may welcome the discussion of political and policy issues in Part One, of the research that tells us what we know and what we still need to know about child care in Chapter 13, and of how American child care and its funding compares with that of other countries in Chapters 17–19.

Child care is not only a big topic but also one that is dangerously hot to handle. Tapping into parents' desperate desire to do the best for their children and the hair trigger of their guilt when that is in question, child care stories are widely reported in all the media, whether they are individual scare stories, dry reports from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) in the United Kingdom, sober findings from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network studies in the United States, or accounts of their own experiences from parents who took part in the Families, Children and Child Care (FCCC) study in the United Kingdom. And, judging by TV shows, Web sites, radio phone-ins, and letters to editors, such stories all get a huge response from their audiences. Unfortunately, that wide interest and coverage says more about increasingly intense concern about child care than about widespread or growing understanding of it. There is more written but less understood about child care than about almost any other single topic that is relevant to almost everyone. And the more sensitive the topic becomes, the more difficult it is to present objective facts or measured accounts, to iden-

tify gaps in our knowledge, and to open honest debate, as this book hopes to do.

The topic of child care is becoming more sensitive because, after two generations of startlingly rapid social change and almost a decade into the new millennium, we are still looking at it backward, treating the sole mother care that was typical of white middle-class families for a generation after the Second World War as a gold standard against which to measure (and decry) today's child care and sometimes look askance at today's parents. It is difficult to imagine a less useful mind-set. Rapid social change is the context for many parents' problems and the starting point for this book, but it is neither a diagnosis nor a cure. Understanding more about how things have changed will not, in itself, make it much easier to cope with the way things are. And looking at the differences between today and yesterday, between our children and our childhoods, will neither resolve regrets nor produce solutions. History never runs backward. We don't get a second shot but have to try to figure out how to live with and enjoy what we've got in the time and place that we're in, and perhaps exert some control over where we're going.

Whatever the brief period between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s when sole full-time mother care was the social expectation or aspiration meant to children, it meant isolation and discrimination to many of their mothers and hastened its own ending by helping to power them into the women's movement. Modern sociology recognizes that in each society some women want to give priority to children and home rather than to paid work, but wide acceptance of that particular form of nuclear-family living and gendered division of labor is over. We know that modern economies absolutely require women's work as well as men's, that of parents as well as those without children, yet we are still arguing about whether it is bad for children to have "working mothers." Looking regretfully over our shoulders at a rose-tinted past stops us from making realistic assessments of the present or looking forward to how we could make a better future, and both are urgent. The reality is that nonmaternal child care is a fundamental part of modern societies; until we acknowledge that, we shall not recognize, let alone address, the unpalatable reality that much child care, especially for

children under three, is currently of dismally low quality. We know this; anyone who reads research studies or reports of them from North America, Australia, or the United Kingdom knows it—including millions of anxious parents who would rather not. Less known, though, and far more shameful is that we know how to improve the quality of child care, and we are not doing it.

If we stopped pretending that parents are solely responsible for child care; stopped implying that if nonparental care isn't good, the only alternative open to good parents (mostly mothers) is to care for children themselves full-time, whether or not that is what they want to do, we could stop looking back and use what we know to move forward. Some countries have already moved farther forward than others. Countries need to learn from one another. The United States is unique among Western countries in having no federally mandated paid maternity or parental leave, and its programs to assist poor parents with child care fees are underfunded. In contrast, parental leave in Finland is so generous and well paid that having a parent at home with a baby or toddler is a realistic alternative to child care, which is freely available to all parents who choose it and, like later schooling, financed out of general taxation. Between these extremes, child care in the United Kingdom must still be paid for by the parents who use it, but paid maternity leave can now last nine months for any employed mother, and every three- and four-year-old is entitled to free half-time preschool education. We need answers to positive questions: What are the real issues in combining the human essentials of earning and caregiving? What types of child care are there? What is high-quality child care like—for which children in which families and when? How can it be provided and paid for?

These are some of the questions this book addresses.

A Note About the Author

Penelope Leach was educated at Cambridge University and at the London School of Economics, where she received her Ph.D. in psychology, after which she studied many aspects of child development and child rearing under the auspices of Britain's Medical Research Council. A Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a founding member of the U.K. branch of the World Association for Infant Mental Health, she works on both sides of the Atlantic in various capacities for organizations concerned with prenatal care and birth, family-friendly working practices, day care, and early years education. She recently co-directed a major program of research in the United Kingdom into the effects of various forms and combinations of care on children's development from birth to school age. Penelope Leach has two children and six grandchildren and lives in Lewes, England.

A Note on the Type

This book was set in Janson, a typeface long thought to have been made by the Dutchman Anton Janson, who was a practicing typefounder in Leipzig during the years 1668–1687. However, it has been conclusively demonstrated that these types are actually the work of Nicholas Kis (1650–1702), a Hungarian, who most probably learned his trade from the master Dutch typefounder Dirk Voskens. The type is an excellent example of the influential and sturdy Dutch types that prevailed in England up to the time William Caslon (1692–1766) developed his own incomparable designs from them.

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Contents

Introduction	vii
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Part One: CHILD CARE TODAY

1. The Context for Child Care	3
2. The Issues	20
3. How Much Child Care? What Kinds and Where?	42
4. Parents and Child Care	58

Part Two: TYPES OF CHILD CARE

Introduction: Family Care, the Baseline	81
5. Shared Care by Mothers and Fathers	85
6. Care by Full-Time Mothers	91
7. Fathers as Principal Care Providers	107
8.. Grandparent Care	115
9. Care by Nannies, Au Pairs, and Other In-Home Child Care Providers	125
Introduction: "Formal Care"	135
10. Family Day Care	138
11. Child Care Centers or Nurseries	152
12. Integrated Care and Education: Children's Centers and Extended Schools	170

Part Three: QUALITY OF CARE

Introduction: Quality of Care from Various Viewpoints	187
13. Quality of Care from Research Viewpoints	189
14. Quality of Care from Parents' Viewpoints	201
15. Quality of Care from Children's Viewpoints	213
16. Choosing Child Care	230

Part Four: MOVING ON

Introduction: Is Better Child Care a Priority?	255
17. Politics and Policies, Models and Money	260
18. Families and Child Care	273
19. Some Signposts to the Way Forward for Politicians, Policy Makers, and Professionals	282
20. Some Signposts to the Way Forward for Parents and Children	287
Acknowledgments	299
Notes	301
Index	339

Part One

CHILD CARE TODAY

1. The Context for Child Care

This ought to be the best time to become a parent that there has ever been. The stream of scientific information about fetal, infant, and child development is at an all-time high and still rising. There's more government and media interest in families, parenting, and small-child-related issues than ever before, and parents and stepparents—grandparents, too—are increasingly thoughtful about what and how they are doing.

Not everyone is interested in becoming a parent, of course, but not everyone has to. This millennium-spanning generation of women has an unprecedented amount of control over its childbearing. An active sex life and no children is socially acceptable and physiologically possible in most of the developed world, and many people opt for it. Low fertility (or no male partner) and children is not quite so easy, but assisted conception is now available in most of the Western world (though whether as a right or a big business depends on where you live) and is astonishingly widely used, often by individuals who would not have seen themselves as prospective parents a generation ago, including women past menopause and gay couples.

Throughout the postindustrial world, however, women are having fewer babies than ever before, and while mundanely falling birth rates may do something to slow the overpopulation of the planet, falling birth rates in developed areas mean “aging populations” and, thirty years into the future, a real threat to economies. The 2006 Canadian census shows that the number of people over age sixty-five has gone up by almost 12 percent since 2001, while the number under age fifteen has dropped more than 2 percent in the same period. An aging population, better described as a shortage of young people, not only means that a larger proportion of the population will be retired and dependent on pensions and care arrange-

ments that a smaller proportion of people of working age are going to have to finance; it also means fewer young people acquiring and disseminating the new skills on which employment will increasingly depend. So, in the long term, we need our populations to produce the next generation of workers, and countries that do—such as the United States, which saw a fractional increase from 64 infants per 1,000 women of childbearing age in 1996 to 66.3 in 2004—will be at an enormous advantage if it is maintained. The assumption that countries with very low birth rates can turn to migrants instead ignores the real math. If a country such as Italy continued with its current fertility rate of about 1.3 (instead of the 2.0 that would replace each couple with two offspring) for more than a generation, its labor supply would drop by about 10 million workers. It is inconceivable that Italy, or indeed any nation, could attract such a large number of employable immigrants or absorb them.

It is difficult to see a future shortage of labor as an urgent problem in countries where unemployment rates are high, as they have been, for example, in Germany and Spain. However, it is now generally realized that current unemployment comes about less because there are too many workers than because too few of the available workers have the requisite skills. Indeed, if the birth rate stayed so low that there was a catastrophic shortage of labor in thirty years, there would probably still be a high rate of unemployment among inadequately skilled workers, many of them approaching retirement age, who were no longer employable in the jobs available.

What do birth rates now and labor supplies in the future have to do with child care? The link is women's participation in the labor market. A generation ago, the women who didn't work outside their homes were the ones who had the most children, and that is still the case in some parts of the world. In most countries, though, that sit-

"In Germany the phenomenon of shrinking families has been going on for the past 30 years. This problem doesn't just affect Magdeburg, or Germany, it affects the whole of Western Europe. . . . Having children just doesn't seem to fit with modern lifestyles. . . . Some people have become less tolerant of children. They see them as loud and stressful and a bit of a pain."

Lutz Trumper, mayor of Magdeburg, Germany, 2005