

Early Childhood Education

**TWENTY YEARS
IN REVIEW**

A Look At

1971-1990

James L. Hymes, Jr.



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To the reader: Addresses for many organizations and institutions are given in the text. During the twenty-year span in which this book was developed, some addresses may have changed. They are printed as part of a historical context and are not necessarily accurate.

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TWENTY YEARS IN REVIEW

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TWENTY YEARS IN REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Once again, as I have every year since 1971, I invite you to look back with me on the key events affecting young children in the United States. This invitation is special, however. *A Look at 1990* is the 20th report in this series. Twenty is an impressive number so I invite you to look not only at the events of one year, but at the whole twenty-year span, 1971 to 1991.

So many facts, so many figures, so many names, and programs and trends fill up early childhood's past twenty years. Selecting highlights has to be a personal matter. I welcome the chance to be the first to pick out the most significant developments. But the record of each year is available on the pages that follow. As you read you will decide for yourself what you think is most important.

Trends and stand-outs

One powerful trend strikes me as predominant: the flooding of women into the labor market. In 1976 Eli Ginsberg, chair of the National Commission on Manpower Policy, called this "the single most outstanding phenomenon of our century" — a very sweeping statement and one with which I agree.

This "stunning" development — many experts used that adjective — touched young children at every turn. It impacted on life at home: the size of families, the composition of families, the income of families, the hours of family living. It had repercussions directly within the field of early childhood education: the rapid growth of private for-profit child care centers, either independently owned, or branch centers, or franchised groups; the extensive involvement of churches in day care; the slow but steady awakening of public schools to the need for child care; the imperative need for school-age child care; the very slow increase in industry-sponsored

centers; the mushrooming of family day care, an area so hard to supervise, yet one where most of the children are; the continuously growing need for the day care of infants and toddlers, an age where the evidence on optimum conditions and hazards is not yet all in.

A second stand-out in the 20-year span captures my attention: the breath-taking rise in enrollments in early childhood groups. *The New York Times* summed up the story in a 1986 headline: "Early Schooling is All the Rage." All groups for young children boomed, but the galloping growth of public kindergartens was outstanding. After barely holding their own for many long years, free schooling for fives suddenly, within this time span, became available in every one of the 50 states (although not yet reaching every five-year-old within every state).

The number of states that mandated communities to provide kindergartens increased. A movement toward compulsory kindergarten attendance gained strength. The number of full-day rather than part-day kindergartens grew. Kindergartens for "at-risk" four-year-olds became more and more common. *And* free public kindergartens for *all* fours became available in a few cities and states, a very dramatic development.

A third big stand: The almost unanimous support for the *idea* of early education from the widest variety of foundations, influential public organizations, and educational associations. In particular, I am pleased to realize that all the "mainline" big-name education groups have supported the concept of early schooling: NEA, AFT, ASCD, NAESP, AASA, National Association of State Boards of Education, Council of Chief State School Officers. . . . In these twenty years the field of early childhood moved from the fringes of the education "establishment" to center stage.

Survivors

Educational efforts that hung in through the whole time span stand out as I look at the span. Most prominently, of course, is *Head Start*, which marked its 25th birthday in 1990. Seldom has any program received such lavish praise (although the bank notes were far behind the love notes). President Carter called Head Start "one of the beautiful things about the United States"; President Reagan said, "Thanks to your hard work, America is turning out winners"; President Bush described the program as "a national treasure." Glowing words indeed!

Television — that “school” that reaches more young children than any other — had its survivors. Most noteworthy: “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood,” begun in 1969, the longest running (and best) children’s series on public television. Another very durable teacher, “Sesame Street,” 22 years old in 1990, reaching out to millions of children in tens of countries the world over. “Romper Room,” begun in 1953, also hung in there.

Benjamin Spock’s *Pocketbook of Infant and Child Care*, (four revisions and more than 30 million copies sold!), and *Infant Care and Your Child from One to Six*, the government’s best-sellers throughout the two decades, win prizes from me for their staying power and high quality.

Poverty’s stronghold continues

Another survivor, a very different kind, this one *miseducative*, also stands out: stubborn, resistant, intransigent *and* exceedingly hurtful *poverty*. In twenty years we have made no progress whatsoever in reducing the percentage of young children in its grip. Obviously we have waged the war on poverty ineffectively and given up the fight too soon.

Remarkable happenings

Certain specific achievements catch my eye as I look back over the 20 years:

. . . the **eradication of small pox** worldwide in 1979, the official end of one dread disease;

. . . the speed with which other states followed Tennessee’s 1978 lead **requiring seat belts for children under age four**, laws that saved many young lives;

. . . the parade of states started in 1980 by the **Kansas Children’s Trust Fund**, many of them using monies from marriage licenses and birth certificates to help cope with child abuse;

. . . the birth in 1978 of Baby Louise, the first so-called “**test tube baby**,” followed through the years by many other successful similar births — a boon to that group in whom we all have a great stake: parents who really want children;

... the U.S. Supreme Court's sensitive 1973 **Roe v. Wade** right-to-abortion decision which, along with other virtues, prevented many unwanted children from being born into the world with countless strikes against them;

... the 1982 establishment of the **House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families**, source of excellent reports and a clear voice in Congress on behalf of youngsters;

... the growth of **services for preschool handicapped children**, a great gain in the 20-year span thanks to P.L. 94-142 and P.L. 99-457.

I have puzzled about whether to include in a list of achievements the steady but so-slow improvement in our infant mortality rates. My conclusion: *No*. The rate has gone down but overall we rank 18th in the world, and the ranking of mortality of Black infants is 33rd, just ahead of Hungary and Chile. There can be no prizes for any of that! *The New York Times* in an August 1990 editorial said it well: "Born in the U.S.A. — It should be a matter of pride. But for many children being born here constitutes bad luck."

Reports of significance for young children

Report after report about young children filled the bookshelves from 1971 to 1991. Almost surely each reader will have favorites. I pick out four that markedly jogged my thinking (although their impact on the country's actions was not always so sharp):

- *Windows on Day Care*, the startling 1972 survey by the National Council of Jewish Women, revealing the sorry state of private-for-profit centers ("Only 1% really good . . . half poor and some heart-breakingly poor.").
- *The Report of the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior*, also 1972, spotlighting the causal link between TV violence and subsequent aggressive child behavior. The warning by Alberta Siegel, a member of the committee, holds true even 18 years later: "Our society is paying a high price for TV's "free" entertainment, vulgar and tawdry, with its unrelenting themes of murder and mayhem."

- In 1984, *Changed Lives: The Effects of the Perry Preschool Programs on Youths Through Age 19*, the High/Scope Report with facts and figures and — a distinctive contribution — identifying dollar-values for the benefits of *high quality* preschool education, an approach which has impressed legislatures and boards of education the country over.

- NAEYC's *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, a 1987 report concretely showing the continuity of development and desirable practices over the whole early childhood span and, as a by-product, giving us an easily memorable acronym: **DAP**.

Worth repeating . . .

Certain quotes still tickle me as I look back over the 20 years. Among them:

Art Buchwald's most unusual suggestion in 1977 for dealing with the pressures on young children in school: "Send 5- and 6-year-olds to college first. Their minds and bodies are too fragile to take on the tasks their teachers now assign to them (in kindergartens and first grades), while college is the perfect place for them to have their first taste of school. Give them a chance to join fraternities and sororities, go to football games and frolic."

Ellen Goodman's clever words in 1977 lamenting the lack of school-age child care: "Our schools continue to operate just as if there were mothers at home. School hours are like the old banking hours. Kids can be deposited and withdrawn only at the convenience of the institution. Never mind the customer."

David Weikart's 1978 conclusion from an early report on his Perry Preschool Research: "What's good for children appears also to be of benefit to taxpayers."

T. Berry Brazelton's low-keyed observation in 1983 about the push for hard-core teaching of young children: "Everyone wants to raise the smartest kid in America."

Edward Zigler's 1988 case for public support of child care: "Why do we pay school taxes? Why do we educate children? Because we don't want stupid people. And for the same reason we should be willing to pay taxes for quality day care."

Celebrations

These jibes are gentle reminders that the 20-year span had many rough spots. The trouble areas are the more depressing when one counts up the number of unusual celebrations during the two decades that could have given children's causes a boost.

1973 was the 100th birthday of public kindergartens in the U.S.

1975 was designated by the United Nations as "International Women's Year."

1976 was our country's bicentennial. The widely publicized slogan at the time was "Birthdays Are for Kids" but children were not the center of attention at the party.

1976 was also an important birthday year for NAEYC, its 50th anniversary.

1979 was officially named "The Year of the Child" by the U.N.

1990 was the year for the U.N. World Summit for Children.

Six "power years" in the 1971 to 1991 span! One wishes more good for children had come from them.

Finding funding — and answers — still difficult

Our lack of progress in getting good child care is the greatest letdown of the two decades. The federal government has given little help. From Nixon's veto in 1971 through the Ford veto in 1975, to the stalemate between President Bush and Congress in 1988 and 1989: nothing happened. No increase in aid. No federal standards. In 1990, the last year of the 20-year span, a child care bill was passed. Some called it "landmark legislation." Some said, "Child care takes a tiny step." All agreed: It was a miracle that any money for child care was found in the empty federal coffers. Perhaps one simply must have patience. After all, one hundred years after the first public kindergarten was born in the U.S., five of our forty-eight states still gave no aid at all to fives! But it is hard to have patience when the need for good child care is so obvious and the solution so well-known.