



by Karen Stephens

Child Care: Kids' Experiences Count Most

Last summer my husband and I visited a lovely public garden — beautiful and relaxing. I couldn't wipe a smile off my face. Around 11:00 a.m. three child care vans pulled up. A great field trip for kids! Children eagerly tumbled out and then dispersed under trees. The vans were spic and span. Perfect paint job. They looked safe and well-maintained. Bright lettering carried an upbeat, child-loving message. It saluted childhood as the extra special experience it should be. The vans carried school-agers on summer vacation. The child care's vital statistics were prominently displayed. The mobile message said they offered kids adventures galore. My smile spread. The kids were having a great experience. Or so it seemed.

A child care worker revealed more to the story. She split the garden's serenity with a shrewish bark: "Hey, you! Get over here or you're not going to Great America tomorrow!" That was all she yelled. I was shocked by her gruffness, by the contempt it conveyed. My stomach tightened; she'd even scared me — an adult bystander! Kids were still getting off the van as she bellowed her threat. She growled in everyone's direction. I don't know whom she was referring to; the children didn't seem to, either. They played on, zoned out. They obviously had learned to ignore this adult. Self-defense, kid-style.

I was disgusted and angry; then dismayed for captive kids. If the teacher was that upset at trip's beginning, what would she be like at the end? If she treated kids like that in public, what happens behind closed classroom doors? Were the youngest kids frightened into quiet desperation? Were the older ones building a protective shell that future adults would butt up against time and time again?

There must have been three drivers, one per van, but I only saw one other caregiver who mingled with kids, trying to give directions. But when one adult is trying to organize three vans of kids, she's swimming upstream without a paddle. Instead of helping out, the grouchy worker gave her undivided attention to eating a sandwich. I'm sure the kids would be fed later, but right then, she was hungry, she couldn't wait, she ate first — in front of the kids. Adding insult to injury, no one was going anywhere until she finished. Gorgeous gardens begged to be explored, but kids waited. I waited, too. And I watched — for about 10 minutes; not long, but long enough.

As she ate, the kids did what kids do when they're aimless, antsy, and bored; they found something to do. Their choice wasn't constructive. Releasing pent-up energy, they leaped and grabbed tree branches. They held on. As tennis shoes gave way to gravity, hands slid down branches, stripping leaves on the descent. Other undirected kids trampled flowers planted around the base of a tree and the small creatures that called the habitat home. No adult attempted to explain garden etiquette, much less proper guest behavior. No one mentioned respect for gardeners' work, or for other living things. Kids floundered without a guiding light.

My husband read my mind: "We'll drive over to get their license plate number." As we left for the interstate, he gave my knee a pat and tried to cheer me, "Remember, not long ago you couldn't wipe a smile off your face." It had caved to furrowed brows. Once home, I called the program's director. I said I knew she must have

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some good workers, but there was at least one weak link. One negative staffer warped and undermined another caregiver's efforts. She assured me she wasn't representative of her staff. I had no choice but to believe her.

And perhaps the child care was an overall good program. We've all experienced public schools that are basically good, regardless of one bad-apple teacher. But I observed an employee who should be counseled out of the child care field, perhaps into computer work where a lousy attitude slams into a monitor, and not into kids' formative years. That sounds harsh, I know. But an employee can be educated on curriculum and child guidance skills. It's tough to teach basic respect for kids. Whatever the reasons (and they might include a harsh childhood of her own) that gruff child care worker didn't consider kids precious, much less enjoyable. There's no way her resentment and disdain were lost on her young charges. Why let her tarnish more impressionable, innocent lives?

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All professions have some quacks, but it's disheartening when I encounter them in my own. I get livid. You see, unlike adults who can walk away, kids can't. And parents who pay for child care aren't at the site much, usually only at drop off and pick up time. That's the nature of child care; the service exists for parents who can't be with their children. If the child care is good, it can be heaven-sent. If it's lousy, or even merely mediocre, kids are in jeopardy — body, mind, and spirit.

If parents don't spend time in their child care, including unannounced drop-in visits, a bad program can pull the wool over trusting eyes. Fancy buildings, high-tech equipment, and slick advertising can mask children's true experiences. A director trained to sell a program can use popular jargon that sounds good to parents, but, in fact, is misleading — all to save the bottom line by bringing in and keeping clients.

Sometimes directors don't even have to talk a good game. I've known parents to ignore bad child care. When quality care is in short-supply, denial is easier than facing the time-consuming (and often demoralizing) job of finding better care. And employers are none too pleased when parents request flexible hours for comparison shopping! The fact is, there's just not enough affordable, high quality child care to go around.

Common sense and research tells us child care quality is revealed in staff and child interactions. I don't care how elaborate a facility is, how affordable its rates, how convenient its hours, or how designer-cute classrooms are, if staff treat children disrespectfully, a child is not experiencing good child care. I don't care if a child care is sponsored by a university, a church, a reputable non-profit group, or a well-known charity, if kids live ten long hours, five days a week in a chaotic atmosphere with ill-tempered adults, it's bad child care.

The outrageous shame of it is, kids suffer when parents and communities tolerate substandard child care. Kids' happiness, developmental potential, and their fleeting, sacred time of childhood, is the price they pay for our neglect and apathy. It's our responsibility and obligation to be vigilant about kids' well being in any setting, whether it is home, child care, or school. After all, childhood is a once in a lifetime experience.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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