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REFEMINIZATION OF CHILD CARE: CAUSATION, COSTS AND CURES

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Recent media attention to sexual abuse in various child care settings appears to have created an exodus of males. Refeminization has the potential to support sex roles stereotypes and to result in loss to all concerned. Strategies for combatting this phenomenon and its effects are proposed.

In a recent article in a popular magazine titled "Day Care: Men Need Not Apply," the author decries the recent exodus of men from the field of child care. He observes that "even the most fundamental day-to-day relationships between parent, child and teacher are tainted with mistrust, and the specter looms larger over men" (Richardson 1985, 60). A former mayor who was accused and subsequently vindicated of charges of sexual abuse expresses a similar sentiment. His comment in response to a reporter: "there are a tremendous number of men now involved (in schools and day-care centers), and my advice to them is to get out and get out in a hurry" (Paschal 1986, C1).

The climate of suspicion that currently confronts males working in child care facilities did not evolve without a basis in reality. The problem of sexual abuse perpetrated by caregivers is *real*. "Increasingly, we hear reports of sexual abuse of very young children occurring in daycare centers and nursery schools" (Borkin and Frank 1986, 76). "Parents, teachers and law-enforcement officials all across the country are waking up to what experts describe as an epidemic of reported sex-abuse

cases" (Beck and Namuth 1984, 44). It was reported that "during 1984 approximately 30 day-care employees nationwide were charged with the sexual abuse of preschool children" (Lindner 1985, 271). The widely-publicized case of the Virginia McMartin preschool in California is by no means an isolated event. Accusations of sexual abuse have been lodged against child care facilities across the country, e.g., South Carolina, New Hampshire and Texas.

The pattern of abuse in child care seems to parallel that observed elsewhere (James, Womack and Strauss 1978). Men are more likely to engage in child sexual abuse; when they do, the victim is most likely to be female.

The public policy response is aimed primarily at males who are viewed as the most likely potential perpetrators. The strategies, when implemented, can be perceived by men as harassment. The combination of suspicion and perceived harassment may be resulting in an environment in which many male caregivers are saying "it just isn't worth it." The tenuous foothold of men in child care services appears to be in danger.

THE HISTORICAL PLACE OF MEN IN CHILD CARE

In 1974, government sources reported that only 4% of all child care workers were men (*U. S. News and World Report* 1974, 69-70). By 1979, an increase in the percentage of males was described (Robinson 1979, 474). The increase apparently continued until the mid 1980's.

Traditionally, our society has taken sex-role stereotypes regarding the interaction of men with children in the home and extended them into the work setting. Child care has been viewed as "women's work" in either environment. Activities of child care and "mothering" have often been linked. While a decline in the segregation index was observed between 1960 and 1970 "as men moved into traditionally female professions and women entered typically male sales and clerical jobs" (Blau and Hendricks 1979, 209), the societal pressures for men to avoid extensive interaction with children continued. A recent article reported that "our current social milieu continues to encourage females, and to discourage males, to expect to have significant interaction with children" (Ebina 1984, 809).

For those males who may have wished to disregard society's sex role stereotypes to enter the field of child care, tangible rewards have been few. Child care has always been low in status and pay. "Tuition costs typically are kept low by paying staff a minimum or less than minimum wage, with few if any job benefits" (Lindner). Whether the rewards were low because of sexist attitudes toward a female-dominated area of work or whether the work itself was deemed of little importance (because it could be performed by women?!) is not the issue here. For whatever reason, perhaps a vicious circle, men entering child care have had to be strongly motivated by factors other than tangible rewards. Those who sought child care jobs seeking financial gain, tended not to stay very long (Robinson 1979, 474).

Poor remuneration of child care work may explain in part the staffing problems encountered in child care agencies. When staff can be found, their motivation may be suspect. It has been suggested in a popular magazine that "the low salaries. . . are bringing unqualified, and perhaps even dangerous people into the field" (Rowan and Mazie 1985, 105). While the relationship between rewards and problems of sexual abuse may not be one of direct cause and effect, staffing difficulties may at least contribute to dangerous conditions. "The problem of limited professional rewards for child care workers is a situation that constantly courts disaster, sometimes making the need to secure adequate staff outweigh due caution in hiring" (Lindner). The reward structure in child care services may have discouraged both male and female potential employees, appropriately motivated to work with children, who might have made important contributions to the field. It may also have allowed other persons who possessed dubious qualifications and questionable motivation to gain employment.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

If an uproar over problems of sexual abuse has helped to identify child abusers and resulted in safeguards to protect children from them, this can only be viewed as a positive step. If only perpetrators of sex abuse were to be harassed and, in some cases, driven out of child care work, we could only ap-

plaud. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Guilty and innocent have both suffered. Why?

Sensationalistic accounts of sexual abuse investigations have unfortunately furthered . . . public mistrust. For those unfamiliar with high quality programs for young children, the repeated juxtaposition of child care and sexual abuse give the inaccurate impression that these two entities are necessarily linked (Mazur and Pekor 1985, 10).

The resultant suspicion has been generalized to all facilities. For obvious reason, men have been most suspect. They have begun to leave. There is evidence that the percentage of men in daycare is declining noticeably (Gardner 1986, 29). A director of a daycare center recently reported to the author that she has tried for six months to hire a male employee to replace one who recently left. No applicant has gone beyond an initial inquiry into the nature of the work. Another administrator is not actively seeking males because she was reportedly told that malpractice insurance rates would be higher if men were employed. A refeminization of the field appears imminent.

COSTS OF REFEMINIZATION

The exodus of a subgroup of care providers that has always represented only a relatively small minority of persons would seem, on the surface, to be of little import to the child care field. Our attitude might be that if they prefer to leave because of their dislike of policies or rules designed to protect children, let them go. Who needs them?! They will likely be replaced by others who find such controls less oppressive. Their replacements are likely to be women who, statistically, are less likely to be child abusers anyway. Their leaving may even open up higher level positions to women who have traditionally been denied access to them. Why is this bad? Except on a short term basis, the specter of refeminization of child care services is potentially costly to *all* parties involved.

1. *Men*: Men who feel compelled to leave child care because of society's stereotypes are denied work that is especially meaningful for them. Research has indicated that they are

among the most altruistic of employees (Robinson and Canada 1977, 113). They may also be those males who are the most comfortable with themselves, less likely to have been socialized into activities of sex role stereotyping than other men. Their recognition of the gratification that they receive in their work with children may identify them as among the least sexist of males. If they no longer find employment in child care tolerable, they will need to seek employment in other areas less likely to provide the gratification that child care services can offer. Healthy, productive interaction with children in other than a parenting role may be denied to them.

2. *Children*: The absence of men will have a cost for children. Even if the frustrated response of men currently employed is ultimately considered to be little more than of a temporary nature and if some re-enter the field later, the likelihood of today's male children being influenced by their temporary absence is still great.

There was a time when it was believed that the presence of males in child care settings provided a needed male identity figure, particularly for boys who might lack the presence of a father in the home. However, research studies have demonstrated that men in child care differed little from women in their behaviors (Etaugh and Hughes 1975, 394). In fact, as one author points out, "men in child care must be nurturant, sensitive and yielding" (Robinson 1979, 475). Their primary contribution to children may be as androgynous role models for all children who need to see men who do *not* conform to masculine macho stereotypes.

The disappearance of significant reduction in the number of men in child care is likely to result in a serious problem of continued sex role stereotyping. This society can ill-afford another generation of males (and sometimes females!) who routinely type work as male or female. Yet, the absence of males in child care could contribute to this result.

Authors propose that "an occupational position which is perceived as being exclusively comprised of or performed by women becomes 'typed' as being a proper role for women and an inappropriate role for men" (Shepelak, Ogden and Tobin-

Bennett 1984, 995). Children come to believe at an early age that some jobs and activities are associated with one or the other gender. Occupational segregation is believed to be a major contributor to the dichotomous labeling of children that perceives certain occupations as being "for women" or "for men." A dual result may be young male adults who dare not enter a field where they have much to offer for fear of social stigma and who also guard from women their own domain of what society views as male-appropriate occupations. In short, perpetuation of sexist behaviors can result.

The absence of sufficient males also can create a related problem for both boys and girls in child care. Historically, young children have encountered few males as elementary school teachers. Their experiences with adult males often have been limited to interaction with parents or a few significant others. Men working in child care have offered a unique form of interaction for young children that is informal and that involves a male who is neither a parent or other authority figure. This affords an opportunity for preparation for later inevitable relationships, an opportunity that can be lost if the male exodus continues.

3. *Women:* Women will also pay the costs of refeminization. A Nineteenth Century committee in search of a school superintendent recorded its opinion about who might be appropriate to fill it. They stated, "as there is neither honor nor profit connected with this position, we see no reason why it should not be filled by a woman" (Stock 1978, 188). The prevalence of this attitude to the present day has resulted in a concentration of women in a relatively small number of professions which "just happen" to be poorly paid. "Sex-stereotyped female occupations. . . . are notoriously low in pay and prestige" (Vogel 1985, 16). The specter of a vicious circle emerges. The low pay and status of child care has attracted few men. Some of them undoubtedly entered the field for the wrong reasons. Media attention to their behavior has resulted in safeguards that may be driving others away, reversing the minor gains in de-feminization that were made. Will the increased predominance of women result in more status and better pay to attract better

people? Not likely. The continued prevalence of sexist attitudes in our society may further devalue child care services. This will result in fewer rewards for those dedicated persons who remain, most of whom will be women. Attracting good co-workers of either sex will become increasingly harder, making their jobs even more difficult.

RESPONSES: SAFEGUARDS OR HARASSMENT?

Of course, incidents of sexual abuse in child care must not be allowed to reoccur. Abuse currently undetected must be stopped. But how? To date, the outraged reaction of public officials, law enforcement and administrators has been one of frustration followed by action. In some cases, the responses have been a "package" of safeguards that may translate into harassment from the perception of male employees. It has been suggested that "the pendulum . . . has swung too far . . . to a presumption today that men who show an interest in children are potential abusers" (Paschal 1986, C1).

Public policy has reflected one type of response. *Time* magazine recently reported on demands for the state to monitor day-care and youth programs to "comb the the pedophiles drawn to such employment" (Leo 1984, 73). *Newsweek* noted that recently Mayor Koch of New York City announced that the city would begin regular on-site inspections of day care centers and that a model code for screening day-care workers was being drafted by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (Beck and Namuth).

Reported local (agency) responses have included policies forbidding male employees to talk with a child in private behind closed doors, to accompany them to the bathroom or to change a child's diapers. Others include blood testing all workers for venereal disease, finger printing of workers and precise guidelines for physical contact with children (Lindner, 270-272) (the latter was requested by workers for their own protection against false accusation).

Other safeguards undoubtedly now exist within informal but equally restrictive guidelines relating to staff contact with children, the need for presence of female staff when certain

activities are performed, etc. Any one of these and other new measures to safeguard children may not be oppressive in themselves. One would be hard pressed to oppose them, as they seem to represent a small constraint on staff freedom given the potential danger to children. Viewed *in toto*, however, they can start to look like harassment, especially to men who are most subject to suspicion anyway. These measures may well reduce incidences of child abuse, but at what costs to children and others? This question must be addressed by the responsible practitioner.

FIGHTING REFEMINIZATION

If we can accept the assumption that refeminization of child care is an imminent danger and that, in the long run, it would be costly for child care workers and the children they serve, what can be done? A start can be made if we acknowledge that even judicious and well intended protection measures *can* sometimes be excessive.

Much of the impetus for safeguards comes from concerned parents. Social workers can perform a valuable educational function and prevent excessive measures if they will help to provide parents with a realistic perspective on the risks inherent in child care. Certainly, parents need to know what they can and should expect from child care workers and what should not be tolerated. But they also need to know that most responsible agencies are adequately concerned about their children's safety. There is no reason why the employees of the many good child care facilities that exist should have to work under the watchful eye of the suspicious consumer who assumes that abuse is an imminent danger. Parents especially need to know that there is nothing inherently "strange" about men who choose to work with children, and that their presence is an advantage in the socialization of their children. Assurances of this and efforts to correct misconceptions that currently exist would be appropriate responses by the social worker. Parents should also be encouraged to avoid supporting a common belief among children (Seifert 1973, 168) that men who work in child care are somehow "odd."

Social workers (including, but not limited to those who work in child care) need to critically examine rules, policies and procedures that can be viewed as harassment, especially those seemingly directed at male employees. Certain questions should be asked. Are they within the area of what is reasonable, given what we know of child sexual abuse and of the dynamics that surround it? If so, combined with other safeguards, do they begin to constitute "overkill"? Are there other ways of accomplishing the same objectives without humiliating or casting aspersions on employees?

When safeguards are identified that appear excessive, social workers should oppose them. After all, if they represent unjustified harassment to any worker, male or female, all will ultimately lose.

Recent media attention to sexual abuse has brought about a perfectly logical response that, nevertheless, threatens the place of men in child care work. While some short-term re-feminization of the field may be inevitable, long-term effects can be minimized if social workers acknowledge the danger and act.

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