The Class of ’98: An Inside Story about Child Care

Early Childhood Transformed

In many ways Nicholas Morris’s and Ilana Goldstein’s early childhoods in the 1990s were remarkably similar to those of their parents in the 1960s. Many of the objects and routines of daily life, hopes and aspirations for children, and core cultural values about early childhood were the same. Like each of their parents, Nicholas and Ilana had an array of toys that included books, balls, and blocks. As newborns, they were held and coddled and generally showered with a great deal of adult attention. They attended religious services on most weekends (Nicholas at church and Ilana at synagogue). Like their parents, Nicholas and Ilana were raised in homes that valued family, community, and education.

Naturally, there were also differences between Nicholas’s and Ilana’s and their parents’ first five years of life, differences largely due to the technological changes of the last three decades. For example, when Nicholas and Ilana watched television it was usually a video, not the Ed Sullivan Show. Their toys were more often plastic than wood, and occasionally had a computer chip embedded in them. Computers themselves were not distant and mysterious machines, but household appliances that the two children operated with surprising proficiency.

Yet in a far more fundamental way, how Nicholas and Ilana were raised was very different from their parents. Unlike any of their parents, whose first prolonged experience away from their mothers and with a group of children did not come until kindergarten (and then for only three hours a day), Nicholas
Nicholas’s and Ilana’s families are far from unique in experiencing this generational shift in childrearing practices. Beginning in the 1970s, social, economic, and demographic forces came together to place more and more mothers of young children in the work force.¹ The result was an explosion in the use of child care in the United States. Twelve million children under six, more than half of this age group, are now enrolled in some form of out-of-home care.²

In child care, these children are members of relatively large and stable peer groups. In high-quality centers, they are under the guidance of educated, experienced early childhood teachers. Over the course of a year, they spend thousands of hours away from their families.³ In a deep and important way, child care has transformed early childhood and family life in America.
The Great Child Care Debate

During the 1970s, the increased use of child care precipitated a heated debate. Social conservatives railed against the use of child care, labeling it the warehousing of children. They maintained that child care was harmful to children’s physical and emotional health, destructive of family, and a threat to the general social fabric of society.4 Liberals dismissed concerns about children’s welfare by making a case based on a growing body of social scientific data. Child care was championed as a critical support for working families, and as a liberating institution that allowed women to pursue motherhood and a career.5 The debate was entwined in the more general cultural war over the place of woman in society and the definition of family.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the debate continued. The atmosphere was charged by sensational reports of abuse at a number of centers (e.g., Manhattan Beach; Fells Acres). Although the validity of these reports were ultimately questioned, at the time they contributed to the generally negative attitudes about child care held by most Americans.

Yet on the ground, social realities transcended concerns. Families turned to centers because they provided solutions to their child care needs. Business leaders and politicians, whose natural inclinations might have led them to anti–child care positions, supported centers because they increased employee productivity and helped women off welfare rolls. Economics trumped ideology, and the relative proportion and absolute number of children in child care continued to grow.6

Changing Attitudes

More recently, American’s feelings about child care have turned a corner. Attitudes have caught up with reality, with a growing acceptance of the now prevailing mode of childrearing. Emblematic of this change were the reactions to newspaper headlines in the spring of 2001 reporting on a study commissioned by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. In an attempt to assess the impact of child care, the study compared 1300 home- and center-reared children from early childhood into their school years. The researchers found that the children who attended child care performed better on measures of cognitive and language development. The center-reared children were also rated as more aggressive by their kindergarten teachers. This negative finding was featured in the headlines that read, “Day Care Linked to Aggression.”7
In the past, such headlines have unleashed a wave of child care bashing. In the spring of 2001, however, there was a noticeable silence from quarters that have previously seized upon such conclusions as evidence of the dangers of child care. Of particular significance was the lack of comment by the conservative Bush White House. Instead, the headlines were followed by a wave of editorials arguing for a more nuanced reading of the study. Rather than arguing that the system should be scrapped, these editorials often concluded with statements about the need to improve America’s child care system.

What accounts for this growing acceptance of child care? Likely, part of the change in attitude is the result of research findings filtering into the general body politic. Since the 1970s, scores of investigators have probed the impact of child care on children’s social, emotional, and intellectual development. While results vary, a general consensus has emerged in the research community that child care per se does not harm children.

Time is also a likely contributor to the shift in attitudes. A significant number of center-reared children have now reached maturity. The vast majority of these adults appear unscathed by their child care experiences. Rather than damaged goods, the alumni of child care are generally productive workers, engaged citizens, and caring parents. The sky has not fallen. Fears about child care destroying the social fabric of America have not been realized.

If it were possible to characterize a national attitude about child care, it would be that Americans now accept child care as a fact of life, but are not especially keen on this new reality; that child care is seen as a necessary evil. This necessary evil reasoning goes as follows: Of course, it would be best for young children to be at home. Of course, it would be best for young children to be cared for by their mothers. But parents need to work, and children need to be taken care of. Given these circumstances, child care seems a reasonable alternative.

An Unacceptable Reality

Amidst this growing acceptance of child care is an unacceptable reality: Most centers in the United States provide less than good care. Because of a chronic lack of resources, the physical plants of many centers are sterile and even dangerous. Low wages (the average salary of child care teachers is just marginally above the poverty line) result in an astronomical teacher turnover rate of 40% per year. Child–teacher relationships are interrupted with alarming frequency, staff members are often poorly trained, and the stability required to build quality programs is often unattainable. The result is only one in six centers in the country is of high quality.

The state of American child care stands in stark contrast to most other industrialized nations. In France, for example, child care is heavily subsidized,
teachers must undergo two years of training before starting their positions, and centers are visited by physicians to ensure that they are safe, healthy environments for children. Throughout Europe, there is a much larger societal commitment to the upbringing of the youngest citizens, and consequently, much better child care.

The *necessary evil* perception of child care dooms the American child care system to general mediocrity, relegating millions of children to inferior care. The irony is that Americans care a great deal about children; witness the strong and bipartisan support for programs like Head Start and the strong commitment to educational reform. Yet when it comes to child care, it has been incredibly difficult to marshal the political will to increase funding to adequate levels. It is nearly impossible to rally support, even for something that is clearly essential, once it has been characterized as *evil*.

Untold Stories

With so much hinging on perceptions of child care, it is important to ask is the depiction of child care as a necessary evil accurate? My contention is that for children raised in high-quality centers, such a characterization is misguided and unfair. In fact, high-quality child care centers significantly assist in raising caring, creative, and contributing members of society. The aim of this book is to help debunk the necessary evil myth and make clear the value of providing high-quality child care to all children. My contention about the value of high-quality care is based on the stories of children who have attended, and are currently attending, these centers.

Take as an example the child care story of Caitlin Roberts. Caitlin was two when she was enrolled at the Oxford Street Daycare Cooperative. A member of the Class of 1977, Caitlin spent three years at the center. After graduating from Oxford Street she attended a well-regarded suburban school system, and then matriculated at Barnard College in New York City, majoring in Art History and fulfilling her premedical requirements. Despite this excellent post-preschool education, her mother Ann considers Oxford Street Caitlin’s “best educational experience.”

Ann’s reasoning on the subject is clear. For Caitlin, Oxford Street was “a wonderland of friends and exciting experiences.” At the center she enjoyed a “profound engagement with important aspects of the world,” ranging from classical music to friendship. This engagement nurtured Caitlin’s curiosity and “instilled an incredible sense of wonder about the world.”

Caitlin’s story resonates with what I have observed at Oxford Street and other high-quality centers. For the past eighteen years I have worked in early childhood education, mostly as a child care teacher. During this time I have
taught several hundred infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. I have seen first hand that, when it is of high quality, child care is much more than a necessary evil. Indeed, my observations have convinced me that for Caitlin, Nicholas, Ilana, and many others, child care has numerous social, emotional, and intellectual benefits.

My conclusion, like Ann Roberts’s, differs radically from the necessary evil depiction of child care. It is important to understand why. First, our point of departure is high-quality centers. We are not speaking about American child care as most experience it, but unfortunately, only about what occurs for a select number of children. Second, our conclusions are grounded in our immersion in the everyday experience of children who attend these centers. While such an immersion is not the only useful perspective, it is a perspective that provides unique data and insights into the nature and meaning (and possibilities) of child care. William Blake wrote that science and art must be grounded in “the minute particulars,” the small events of which life is made up. I concur. A deep understanding of child care is to be found in the examination of its minute particulars.

Yet the particulars of child care are generally invisible, the stories of children’s lives at centers largely untold. Child care is still an unfamiliar experience to most American adults. The specifics of what goes on in centers are unknown to all but a small group of people who spend their work lives in these settings. Even parents, who are at centers twice a day to drop off and pick up their children, may only have a surface knowledge of the goings on of child care.

Yet even if one were to spend a significant amount of time at a center, the meaning of events would not always be obvious. Like any complex phenomenon, making sense of child care requires an experienced eye. A complete and nuanced understanding of child care requires both encounters with children’s experiences at centers and a guide to help make sense of these encounters. Opportunities for such understandings are provided by the inside stories of children in child care.

Getting an Inside Story

In September 1994, I began working as the afternoon Baby Room teacher at the Oxford Street Daycare Cooperative. Nicholas Morris and Ilana Goldstein were two of the six children I cared for. At the end of the year, when my charges moved to the Toddler Room, I became the afternoon Preschool Room teacher. Two years later I was reunited with Nicholas, Ilana, and the rest of the cohort I taught in the Baby Room when they became preschoolers.

I began pursuing the question of what it meant for these children to attend child care when I was their Baby Room teacher. To this end I documented
the children’s (and their families’) experiences at the center through daily observational notes, video recordings, and photography. I continued this documentation in the Preschool Room, adding a collection of the children’s work (drawings, paintings, sketches of block structures, recordings of narratives, and so on) to my corpus of data.

In addition, I was a parent of a child in this group. Being able to observe my son’s participation in this group, and talk to him about his experiences, provided another source of information on what child care meant to these children. While not having the objectivity of an outsider, I did have access to a great deal of information about this group of children.

All this took place at the Oxford Street Daycare Cooperative in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a private, nonprofit center that serves fifty children from four months to five years of age. These fifty children are divided by age into four classrooms: Baby Room, Toddler Room, Stomper Room, and Preschool Room. The children move through the center as a group, changing rooms each September. Each room has a morning and afternoon teacher, who is assisted by a parent on a rotating basis. Thus, each room is always staffed with two adults, with the teacher–child ratio expanding as children get older (from 2:6 in the Baby Room to 2:12 in the Preschool Room). To accommodate the varying needs of families, children can attend the center full time (8:15 to 5:30), morning only (8:15 to 1:00), or afternoons only (12:30 to 5:30). (For more information on the organizational structure of the center, see Appendix A).

Because of its urban location and proximity to several universities, families come to Oxford Street from around the world. For example, the thirty-four parents of the children in the Class of ’98 were born in ten different countries. A sliding fee scale and state tuition subsidies add economic diversity into the mix.

Typical of many child care facilities in the United States, Oxford Street is housed in a space not originally intended for children (in this case a former ROTC training center). Child-sized furniture, a vast assortment of toys, and curtains with flower and dinosaur motifs help make the space inviting for children. More unusual, because of above average salaries and a humane work environment, Oxford Street has been able to retain teachers for many years. As a result, Oxford Street is among the one in six American centers that provides high-quality care.

Two Stories About the Class of ’98

Early childhood in the United States has been transformed by the increased use of child care. This book is a meditation on this transformation, its nature, what it means, and the possibilities it presents us. In the pages that follow I tell
of Nicholas, Ilana, and their classmates’ experiences together in child care. I use their experiences as the basis for rethinking what growing up in child care does, can, and should involve.

This book’s major offerings are two stories about the Oxford Street Class of 1998. The first story, “The Guitar Concerts: Making Beautiful Music in the Baby Room,” revolves around the children’s growing fascination with music, musical instruments, and in particular, with guitars. The chapter describes a series of “guitar concerts” that took place during the Baby Room year, providing a sense of how these very young children came to communicate and learn from and with each other. The excitement and joy of this learning together permeates the story.

The second story, “The Wild Cat Drawing: Conducting Joint Research in the Preschool Room,” focuses on the children’s interest in drawing wild cats (lions, tigers, cheetahs, and so on). The chapter describes how these four and five year olds became passionate about drawing together, and how their work took on the feel of a collective research project. The story makes visible the
profound learning, as well as the wonder, that being part of such an exploration inspires.

Between the two stories is a brief “Intermezzo” that provides a glimpse at the Class of '98's intervening two years in the Toddler and Stomper Rooms. The stories are followed by excerpts of interviews with members of the Oxford Street Class of '87, providing a sense of the meaning child care has over the long run.

Both stories are told with photographs as well as words. The photographs are included because they convey invaluable information, in particular about the emotional quality of the children's interactions and relationships. Together with the written word, the images provide what I hope are rich encounters with the minute particulars of the children’s daily lives together at Oxford Street.

In selecting these two stories, I have chosen to focus on the two years when I worked directly with these children. Rather than attempting to be encyclopedic, a few examples are used as windows into the children’s experiences at the center. During their years together these children had an untold number of interactions, with some importance and meaning to some or all of them. Despite my capturing only a small percentage of these events, my file cabinets are filled with a staggering amount of data. The decision to tell just two stories comes from a conviction that going deeply into an event can offer great insights into a phenomenon.

Interspersed in the two stories, and appearing in greater detail in the concluding chapter, are my interpretations about the nature, meaning, and implications of the children’s child care experiences. Given my role as commentator and storyteller/guide, I should introduce myself. I began working in child care soon after graduating from college. I thought my stay would be temporary, a holding pattern until I figured out what to do with a degree in economics. Instead, I fell in love with the children I was working with, and became passionate about having a role in raising the next generation. To gain a better understanding of childhood, development, teaching, and learning, I obtained a masters degree from Wheelock College in Early Childhood Education and a doctorate from Tufts University in Child Development. While completing my dissertation I began teaching in the Baby Room.

I offer no pretense that what follows is an objective evaluation of children. I confess at the onset that I have a pro–child care bias; I believe that good child care is good for children. This bias does not lead me to the conclusion that all children should attend child care, or blind me to the fact that bad child care is bad for children. Nor does my bias blind me to the fact that there are moments, even in good centers, when it can be hard for children to be in a group and hard for them to be away from their families.
There are other aspects of child care, however, more important aspects, that are not widely known or discussed. It is equally true that being part of a group can truly enrich children’s intellectual, social, and emotional lives, and that having a close relationship with a teacher can be a wonderful experience for children and their families. Making visible the value of these two aspects of child care, membership in a group and having a teacher, is the goal of this book. It is because of these two aspects of child care that I have concluded that, at its best, growing up in child care is far more than a necessary evil; growing up in child care can be a gift.
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