

The Scope and Need for Early Childhood Education

By Eva L. Essa from Introduction to Early Childhood Education,
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Although the importance and value of education in the early years of life have been acknowledged for more than 2,000 years (Carter, 1987), relatively recent factors brought early childhood education to the forefront of public awareness. Fundamental changes in the economy, family life, public awareness and public support have had a profound effect on early childhood education. You have undoubtedly seen the recent newspaper headlines and national magazine covers that have directed a spotlight on child care. Much of their focus has been on changes in family life that have brought about the need for child care outside of the home. These changes include many complex factors such as a rising cost of living, an increased number of dual-income families, an increase in single-parent families, and increased number of teenage parents, greater mobility as families move more readily to different parts of the country, and a decrease in the impact of the extended family.

The needs of working families are not the only reason early childhood has been in the public focus. Over the past several decades, the success of publicly funded programs such as Head Start has shown us that high-quality early educational intervention can combat poverty and dysfunction. There has also been increased attention to the needs of special populations of young children and how to bring them into the mainstream of society, for instance, children who are disabled, abused, or culturally different. In addition, recent research on the amazingly complex and rapid development of very young children's brains has given us much greater insight into the importance of the early years.

Finally, many professionals are outspoken and eloquent advocates for the rights of children.

Changes in Family Life

"Typical" family life has changed considerably since the end of World War II. Demographic information indicates that increasing numbers of women are entering the work force. No longer do most mothers stay at home to rear their young children. Economic necessity forces many families to rely on two paychecks because one simple does not provide for all of their financial needs. In other families, both parents work because of the desire for personal and professional development rather than from economic need.

Whereas in 1950 only 12 percent of the mothers of children under six worked, that number has risen to about two-thirds of these mothers (Children's Defense Fund, 2000). This growth in the number of families in which both parents work has dramatically increased the need for child care.

Another family change that has affected the demand for child care is the increase in the number of single parents. The majority of single-parent families are created through divorce. The divorce rate has been steadily increasing. At the beginning of the millennium, 56 percent of the adult population was married and living with a spouse (Bureau of the Census, 2000). The increase in divorce has been steadily rising, and is almost 15 percent higher now than it was 30 years ago. The divorced single parent who has custody of the children is probably the mother..., although an increasing number of fathers now gain custody or joint custody of their children. Not only will she experience a significant decrease in income and standard of living, but she will also, most likely have to work (or work longer hours) to support the family. Of course, to work outside the home, the single parent needs to find appropriate child care. In addition to the increased number of families headed by a divorced, single parent is a growing number of never-married parents, some still finishing their high school

education. Today, far more teenage mothers opt to keep their babies than in past years. They also need child care while they are at school or work.

A third change in family life is the increasing mobility of many of today's families. Work demands cause some families to move away from relatives who might otherwise provide support. Family mobility, involving only the small **nuclear family**, has contributed to the declining influence of the **extended family**, that network of relatives such as grandparents, uncles and aunts, or adult brothers and sisters beyond the immediate family.

Until relatively recently, the most prevalent form of child care was provided by a relative. Parental and relative care, combined, continue to be most widely used for infants and toddlers, although center care for this age group has been increasing and is now the norm for almost half of all pre-schoolers (Capizzano, Adams, & Sonnestein, 2000). In the mid-1970's, less than 10 percent of infants and toddlers and 20 percent of preschoolers were in center care. Two decades later, that number jumped to 24 percent of children under three and 45 percent of preschoolers (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This change in family support is another reason for the increased demand for outside child care.

Changes such as increasing numbers of dual-income families and single-parent families, and a decline in the impact of the extended family, have dramatically raised the demand for child care and brought early childhood education to the forefront of public attention. "Child care is now as essential to family life as the automobile or the refrigerator...[The] majority of families, including those with infants, require child care to support parental employment" (Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1990, p. 26).