

Introduction

The building is part stone and part frame. It stands on a quiet corner in a quiet town in New York's Long Island, and were it not for the playground equipment in the yard outside, it would be hard to distinguish it from the one-family residences that are its neighbors. It once served as the home and office of a dentist named Dr. Quint. For the past twenty-five years or so, in rooms where teeth were once drilled and filled and pulled, children from ages 18 months through 5 years now sit at little tables and draw or sit in the laps of their teachers to hear stories of bears and frogs or watch fascinated as butterflies hatch from cocoons.

For twenty-five years at the building and about ten years before that, the Rosa Lee Young Childhood Center has cared for the children of working parents who must leave their children in the trust of others each day while they pursue a livelihood. It is one of the early child care centers that seems to work, a place where parents can leave their children with confidence that they will be looked after and cared for and, yes, loved, for the eight or ten hours a day, five days a week, fifty-two weeks a year that they will be there.

It is a setting that inspires both hope and tragedy at the same time. Hope because within its walls you can see the tremendous potential of what an early child care program can do for children, tragedy because despite the vast need, places like this that provide quality child care for children are all too rare in our country today.

THE CRITICAL NEED FOR QUALITY EARLY CHILD CARE

Anyone who doubts the urgent necessity for high-quality early child care need only look at the profound changes that have taken place in American family life over the past forty years. These changes are reflected in the high rate of divorce and family breakups, and the big increase in families headed by a single parent. But the biggest change in family life has come through the large number of women now in the workforce, prompted by the fact that, in most two-parent families in our country today, at least two wage earners, both mother and father, are essential for the family's livelihood. This is a relatively new phenomenon in America where, until recently, the mother traditionally stayed home and cared for the children, and the father was the breadwinner. In the past, if a woman worked, she did so to enhance the family's income and move it to a

higher standard of living. Today most women, including the mothers of very young children, work because they have to; because their incomes added to that of their husbands are critical in keeping their families afloat.

Just a quick examination of a few figures should make the point all too clear. According to census figures, in 2002, 10.2 million, or 60.8 percent, of all American mothers with children under the age of 6 were in the labor force.¹⁷ The question that then starkly presents itself is: What happens to these young children with no parent at home to care for them? In many cases grandmothers are called upon to take care of the children. Such care might be good or not so good, but today with the need so vast, even this is obviously not a reliable factor.

Which brings us to the real problem we face as a society. We are not the only advanced industrial society with large numbers of mothers in the workforce; some others have a higher percentage of working women than we have. But the United States is one of the few industrial countries with no national system of early child care. And this problem is escalating rapidly. In 1991 the Washington, D.C.-based National Association for the Education of Young Children reported on a national child care survey: "23% of babies younger than 1 year of age (many younger than six months and some as young as five and six weeks), 33% of 1-year-olds, 38% of two-year-olds, and 50% of three-year-olds are cared for outside their homes in regulated and unregulated family child care and in infant/toddler centers."¹⁸ By 1999 the percentages of young children being cared for by those other than a parent had risen to 44 percent for infants under one year, 53 percent of 1-year-olds, 57 percent of 2-year-olds, and 61 percent under the age of 4.¹⁹ The 2002 census reported that 56.8 percent of mothers with children 1 year old or younger, 62.1 percent with 2-year-olds, and 65 percent with children between the ages of 3 and 5 were now in the labor force.²⁰ "Early and extensive enrollment in child care has become the norm in U.S. society," notes *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, the landmark study of early child development in the United States by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine. "Indeed, if children were only sporadically or briefly exposed to child care, it would not be the visible policy issue that it is today."²¹ Or, in absolute numbers, "Of the 21 million children under the age of six in the United States, almost 13 million are spending at least part of their day in child care. For the first time, large numbers of children are being cared for by those with no emotional investment in them."²²

But faced with this compelling national need for early child care, the response on the part of national and state authorities has been incredibly inadequate. Many child care facilities charge tuition fees well out of the range of ordinary working families. One on Long Island, not far from Rosa Lee Young, charges from \$975 to \$1,260 a month, depending on the age of the child.²³ Others exist on an almost hand-to-mouth basis, often scrounging to come up with ideas to raise funds to continue operation. Rosa Lee Young is a private, non-profit school. It receives some money from federal, state, and county governments administered through Nassau County's Department of Health and Human Services (formerly the Department of Social Services). Like many other

facilities of this type, Rosa Lee Young must engage in numerous fundraising activities to cover its operational expenses and to provide scholarships for those who cannot afford the tuition. The scholarships are important in maintaining the institution as one that serves parents from across economic lines.

Another factor that weighs heavily on the profession is staffing. In a field that should insist upon people with the highest educational and professional skills, the pay is shockingly low; in many cases hardly above the poverty line, with people often leaving the profession to seek other jobs where they can make a living. At a national conference in 1996, sponsored by Zero to Three, a professional organization dedicated to the healthy development of infants and toddlers, J. Ronald Lally, EdD, director of the Center for Child and Family Studies in Sausalito, California, highlighted the problem in chilling terms. He flatly declared at that time that only 10 percent of the day care centers in the United States can be considered good and that 40 percent actually did harm to the children. At the same time, another study reported that only 14 percent of child care for all age groups was considered adequate, with the percentage of adequate care even lower for infants and toddlers.²⁴

For years early childhood educators seemed to be talking in the wind. As the number of women in the workforce with young children at home grew, pioneering organizations like Zero to Three and the National Association for the Education of Young Children wrote and campaigned, sponsored professional conferences and workshops, and tirelessly sought to upgrade the profession and focus the attention of the nation on the growing need for quality, affordable early child care. And for years, as the problem of the shortage of such child care facilities multiplied, very few seemed to listen.

Until recently.

In recent years the press has been reporting that more people are beginning to pay attention to the acute need for early child care. An article in *The New York Times* highlighted the problem and the growth of a new “child care industry” in the suburban communities of Long Island, New York, where Rosa Lee Young is. According to the *Times*, a study commissioned in 2004 by the Child Care Councils of Nassau and Suffolk counties, groups that collect data and provide parents with information about child care facilities, found that about 74,000 children on Long Island were cared for out of the home during the day. About 85 percent of them were in day care centers and nursery schools, with the rest cared for in the homes of individual caretakers. Many day care facilities on Long Island, said the study, were booked to capacity and had waiting lists. They generated revenues of \$612 million a year. “With that kind of money on the table,” said the *Times*, “child care is attracting entrepreneurs as well as nurturers, who are carving out market niches and offering a wide variety of services and settings.” Child care centers that have long provided high-quality professional care are understandably worried, not about the competition but about the fact that in the absence of strict national and state standards, the quality of care can suffer.²⁵ The *Times* article also pointed to the concern among child care professionals that the “entrepreneurship” factor is leading many to forsake long-established principles of early child

development in favor of catering to the current popular notion of preparing children for tests, even at the earliest ages.

And, of course, for a problem like this one, which has not been addressed for so long, it is going to take a lot more pressure to bring it up to the priority status it deserves in America today. As recently as October 18, 2007, a piece in *The New York Times* by its op-ed columnist Gail Collins was notable for the fact that very little had changed in the way of national attitudes toward early child care over the past two decades. Criticizing the 2008 presidential contenders competing in the primaries of both political parties for completely ignoring the problem that has become so vital for millions of American families, she declared, "We live in a country where quality child care is *controversial* [italics in original]. . . . Right now, the only parents who routinely get serious child care assistance from the government are extremely poor mothers in welfare-to-work programs. Even for them, the waiting lists tend to be ridiculously long. In many states, once a woman actually gets a job, she loses the day care. Middle-class families get zip, even though a decent private child care program costs \$12,000 a year in some parts of the country." For a single parent with two children in child care, that's larger in some states than the parent's entire median income. "For child care workers," Collins noted, "the average wage is \$8.78 an hour. It's one of the worst-paying career tracks in the country. A preschool teacher with a postgraduate degree and years of experience can make \$30,000 a year." And although certification is needed for many jobs less critical in national importance than this, only twelve states require any training to take care of children, Collins reported.

New York State, to be sure, has certain basic rules for its licensed centers, such as the number of children a center can admit based upon the age of the children, the space available, and the number of staff members. It also stipulates that anyone caring in a home for three or more children not related to the owner must be registered with the state, and anyone with access to the home over 16 years of age must be fingerprinted. The facility must also be certified as safe and sanitary by local officials.

Nevertheless, as people in the field maintain and as we repeatedly illustrate in the pages to follow, although these factors are basic, there is much more to quality child care than this. I have had some of my own troubling encounters with child care centers over the years in which I have observed practices that were harmful, often even abusive, to young children. And that's what makes the story of the Rosa Lee Young Childhood Center, and others like it, so significant. And so inspiring.

In this book we'll examine some of the basic principles of high-quality early child care and how it can be applied in everyday practice in one current child care center. The first chapter discusses the general philosophy and qualities of what makes a good child care center, why Rosa Lee Young seems to be working so well, and how this all begins with the youngest children. In subsequent chapters we dig more deeply into specific aspects of the program at Rosa Lee Young—how it establishes an environment that fosters healthy and creative

relationships among the children and between children and adults; how it uses this creative environment to build communication skills among children and prepare them for school; how it acknowledges and uses the ethnic and cultural diversity of the children in its care to prepare them for participation in a nation and a world that is also diverse; and how it strives to maintain the professional standards of its administration and staff in the face of some of the difficulties we've noted above.

Of course, we never intend to imply throughout this book that Rosa Lee Young is the only high-quality child care center in the nation. We have written about this particular school because it is the one we have become familiar with. But, throughout this great country there are people, dedicated people, who are striving to make a difference in the lives of children. They struggle every day with the same problems Rosa Lee Young has and despite it, they provide children with the early experiences that can make a big difference in their lives. For those who work with children, it is a very exciting and heartwarming story.