Daycare: Is an Opportunity Being Missed?

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ABSTRACT: Changes in the role of women and the composition of family units are transforming societal views regarding child rearing. Despite the interest shown by the private sector and more recently corporate employers, there remains a shortfall in daycare provision and a question over its present quality. This paper ponders insights into the phenomenon as viewed by senior recreation and park administrators in the public sector. The authors suggest that the case for recreation and park agency involvement in daycare is two fold; community responsibility for children outside of the home and, leisure literacy. Several options for service delivery are offered.

KEY WORDS: Daycare, women, family, children

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Women are exploring and acting upon a variety of options which are different from the traditional family role. They are joining the labor force, going back to college, entering professional schools and working in blue-collar jobs in record numbers (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1980). Women made up 43 percent of the U.S. labor force in 1980 compared to 29 percent in 1950, and 52 percent of all women aged sixteen and over were working or looking for work compared to 34 percent in 1950 (Waite, 1981).

This increased emphasis on a career has contributed to delayed marriage and child bearing. Many women now work for perhaps a decade before deciding to have a child for the first time at age thirty, thirty-five, or even forty (Daniels and Weingarten, 1982). After bearing a child, many desire to continue working rather than to become homemakers. Indeed, the most rapid increases in women’s employment have occurred among married mothers and especially mothers of preschool children. These groups were among those least likely to work in the past. Married mothers of children under 18 are
now more likely to hold a job outside the home (54 percent) than to be full-
time housewives (Waite, 1981).

At the same time, the divorce rate is increasing and over 40 percent of
the people marrying today are likely to divorce (Masmick and Bane, 1980). A
primary result of the accelerating divorce rate is that nearly 20 percent of
families are now headed by one parent. This is the fastest growing household
type (Masmick and Bane, 1980).

Such dramatic changes have contributed to the emergence of more diverse
family types. Naisbett (1982: 234) has forecasted that by the year 1990:

Husband and wife households with only one working spouse will account for only 14
percent of all households, as compared with 43 percent in 1960.

Wives will contribute about 40 percent of family income, compared to about 25 percent
now.

At least thirteen separate types of household will emerge, eclipsing the concept of the
conventional family. They will include such categories as "female head, widowed, with
children", and "male head, previously married, with children".

More than one-third of the couples first married in the 1970s will have divorced, and more
than one third of the children born in the 1970s will have spent part of their childhood
living with a single parent.

Changes in the role of women and the compilation of family units have
transformed familial and societal views regarding approaches to child-rearing. Thus far it appears that many sections of the community, including park and
recreation agencies, have been slow to react.

There are almost seventeen million working mothers with children under
eighteen (Blum, 1983). In 1980, there were 1.6 million licensed daycare
spaces available in the private nonprofit, commercial and public sectors, while
7 million preschool aged children had working mothers. Furthermore, some
of the available spaces were taken by children of non-working mothers. At
the same time, flexible work schedules which might allow working parents
to pool with others and share the responsibilities of child care were available
to only 6 percent of full-time workers (Newsweek, 1980).

Although there is a substantial shortfall in the supply of daycare services,
their rate of growth has been rapid. In Texas, for example, verified and
registered daycare places have increased 74 percent from 251,223 in 1977 to
436,072 in 1981 (Texas Department of Human Resources 1981). The majority
of those places are provided in what might be termed institutions, with daycare
in homes representing only 14 percent of the 1981 total. Although this rate
of growth is impressive, lack of daycare facilities is still a primary issue
confronting communities in Texas. A study of human service needs in Ar-
lington, Texas, concluded:

the primary causes of concern can be identified as transportation, family/marital problems,
youth related problems and child care. (United Way of Metropolitan Tarrant County, 1980).
Such was the concern in Arlington that a further study was commissioned which focused directly upon child care and youth issues in Arlington (United Way of Metropolitan Tarrant County, 1981).

The case for daycare rests not only on the need to provide custodial care for the children of working parents, but also upon the opportunity it provides for furthering leisure literacy. What future generations do with their leisure time will largely depend on what skills they learn and experiences they enjoy in their youth (Cheek and Burch, 1976).

Whilst some employers are making efforts to alleviate daycare problems and the private sector is responding with both corporate chains and volunteer initiatives, there is still a substantial shortfall in provision. Recent calls for an extended school day are offered in part as an alternative strategy for latch key children. Kelly (1974), has pointed out that many children are initiated into leisure activities more often by their parents and their friends than through the schools. In the absence of parental contact should the schools be vested with the responsibility for leisure literacy or are recreation and park agencies better qualified? Godbey (1981: 216-219) makes a convincing argument that recreation and park agencies are better equipped to undertake this task. Daycare offers an opportunity for recreation and park agencies to substantially contribute to the leisure education of young people. As one of those interviewed in this study said:

"Leisure education in my community is practically zilch. Increasingly it is the province of poor quality daycare programs followed by TV and more TV."

Objectives and Methods

The intent of this study was to investigate how a selected sample of recreation and park practitioners and agencies in Texas are responding to the daycare issue. Unstructured telephone interviews were undertaken with senior managers in ten Texas community recreation and park departments. A set of questions, based upon a thorough literature search, were prepared to provide a general focus for the open-ended conversations. The interviews were tape recorded, subsequently transcribed, and analyzed. Responses to a particular line of questioning were grouped together to facilitate analysis of the diversity of responses to the same question.

It is important to note that the study reported here was essentially qualitative. Its objectives were limited to identifying, and obtaining insights into agency and practitioner responses to the daycare issue. Because of the research design, data collection technique, and the limited sample size, this study was not concerned with the distribution of these responses in a population. The results of these interviews are not intended to "represent" the conceivable range of views among practitioners concerning daycare. Rather, the aim was to acquire some expressive data for thinking about the problem, to stimulate ideas and further study of daycare.

The study had three specific objectives. They were (1) to identify recreation and park practitioners' perceptions of their agencies' roles in relation
to daycare; (2) to discover the extent of recreation and park departments' involvement in daycare, including both their direct provision of facilities or programs and their links with other daycare suppliers in the community (i.e., private sector, non-profit, and other public agencies); (3) to delineate the potential opportunities and problems for increased involvement by recreation and park agencies in offering daycare services.

Results

There was diversity of views as to what constituted daycare. To some it implied looking after pre-school age children for long time periods (e.g. 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.) and catering to their needs by providing food, shelter, rest, and custodial care. Others envisaged much less comprehensive programs for shorter time periods. Some respondents defined daycare only in terms of very young children, although there was little agreement on the age range, while others included older "latch-key" children. (The phrase latch-key child was coined in the nineteenth century to describe children who were left at home by working parents. These children wore their keys around their necks. Today the term refers to children of single parents or of two-income parents who are the first to return home at the end of each day.) Some related daycare exclusively to working women, while others viewed it more broadly.

Recreation and park practitioners exhibited very different perspectives of their agencies' roles in relation to daycare. Half of the ten respondents perceived their agency not to be involved in daycare. The remaining five respondents indicated that their agency was partially involved for short time periods. These differing perceptions of level of involvement in daycare were used as a basis for dividing respondents into two groups, those who perceived their agencies to be involved in daycare and those who did not.

Respondents Who Perceived Their Agencies to be Involved in Daycare

Typically, perception of the involvement of these agencies was limited to their offering programs after school, on weekends, and during school vacations. Although the primary intent was not to provide daycare, it was acknowledged that this was the de facto result. As one respondent commented, "Elementary school age after-school programs provided at recreation centers do provide a kind of daycare because there is probably no-one at home." Programs for pre-school age children at recreation centers were also, somewhat reluctantly, perceived as daycare: "Parents could take advantage of this program to achieve daycare. However, it is not a current objective of the department to provide daycare." Because daycare was not the primary goal of these programs, they were offered for short time periods and were not geared to serve the needs of working parents.

Respondents did not perceive their agencies to be in competition with other daycare suppliers:
"I don't see myself in competition because they do not have structured programs."

"I don't consider we are competing. We are trying to fill needs, I don't see daycare as the monopoly of one or more provider. We are not really into daycare because we do not provide meals and transport. However, there is the need to provide activity classes and learning through play."

Only one example of a purposefully planned daycare program was reported and this was offered during the school vacation. It consisted of a downtown day camp program which was deliberately designed to enable parents working downtown to drop off their children on the way to work and to pick them up on the way home.

An additional example was given demonstrating collaboration between a recreation and park department and a school district, where the department provided after-school recreation programs at school locations.

One respondent pointed to an increase in demand for programs in which children and adults could participate at the same time. However, in general such coordination appeared to be left to serendipity: "If adults bring children to recreation centers and the programs coincide, then we look after the children."

There was a consensus among respondents that there had been an increase in the number of voluntary groups, commercial organizations, churches or individuals supplying daycare in their communities. All respondents reported that these private sector operators used facilities managed by their recreation and park agencies. They generally welcomed this use and took advantage of it to jointly program with all providers of daycare regardless of the sector particularly at swimming pools, in recreation center activity classes, and for special events. The only problems emerging from private daycare suppliers using public facilities appear to be the "surprise impact" which a sizeable group suddenly appearing has on the existing users, and the abdication of supervisory responsibility for the children to the recreation center staff.

Although prices were charged for most agency programs used by the private daycare suppliers, they were commonly subsidized by up to 50 percent. No agency was identified which adopted a separate price for private daycare suppliers who used public facilities. The prevailing attitude was expressed in the following terms:

"We don't care where the kids come from. If they come with Mom and Dad or with Kindercare we treat them the same. We just hope they get something out of the experience, that is what is important."

Respondents were conscious of the opportunities available for their agencies to become more actively involved in daycare. They pointed to the suitability of neighborhood recreation centers as daycare facilities and the importance of leisure literacy, as important positive ingredients.

One respondent reported that his agency had been approached by the Human Services Department in the city to set up a downtown daycare center. The approach was rejected on the grounds that the recreation and park agency
was "not geared up to do it." However, in most cases the potential opportunities for increased involvement were constrained by two concerns: (1) "It would have to be financially self-sufficient," and (2) "If we went into daycare, the private sector would react unfavorably to our low charges."

Respondents Who Did Not Perceive Their Agencies to be Involved in Daycare.

This group of respondents also noted the use of their public facilities by private daycare groups. They shared a concern over "surprise impact",

"We do not like them to use our free play sessions in recreation centers. They have been 'dropped on us' so to speak, and are really an increasing problem."

"We have to be careful not to allow them to monopolize."

Some of these agencies engaged in cooperative programming, but respondents suggested that it was with reservation:

"In deference to our regular users we would not take time from the public programs just to make money from the daycare operators."

"We feel they are a business coming to take advantage of our facilities."

In common with the first group, these agencies operated pre-school, after-school, and vacation programs. However, they did not perceive these programs to represent an involvement in daycare:

We do some sort of daycare, although I would not want to call it daycare, our summer programs begin at 8:00 and run through 5:00. Conceivably parents could drop off their children and pick them up after work.

"We do operate a pre-school program. . . . but it is not something that working parents can take advantage of."

"After school and summer recreation programs may be considered daycare, but I consider them programming. . . . we provide activities therefore we are not daycare."

These respondents were not enthusiastic toward their agencies expanding their role in daycare. One respondent indicated that as long as the commercial sector operated and the United Way offered to subsidize daycare programs, there was no need for recreation and park agencies to be involved. Leisure literacy was recognized as important, but this group of respondents did not believe it should be related to the issue of daycare,

"We are geared to provide recreational experiences not to the needs of working mothers."

Others used financial arguments to support a reluctance to get involved in daycare. One respondent raised the issue of equity,

"I would be real hesitant to get into a situation where we subsidized daycare in one suburb and across town we charged private sector rates."
could use existing neighborhood recreation centers as daycare facilities, with minor physical adaptations to meet state licensing requirements. This could be achieved at minimal expense. In this study respondents recognized the potential of using centers for this purpose. In some communities, recreation centers are underutilized in the day time, and daycare offers a clientele which could take advantage of this slack time.

If agencies are not able to offer daycare services in their own facilities, then outreach efforts may offer an alternative. This may take the form of contracting with others to take advantage of recreation and park departments’ programming expertise. This would enable daycare programs to be offered in cooperation with the operators of shopping malls, high tech industry, factories with a female work force, office developments, real estate developments, hospitals, and other vocational enterprises.

Having identified potential daycare locations within the community, the developers or managers would have to be approached by recreation and park staff with an attractive argument for daycare, which could be regarded either as an auxiliary service offered by the enterprise as part of its operations, or as a separate service operating independently of the parent enterprise. A system of incentive contracts for leaders could easily be adopted. The type of program could be tailored to the needs of each client and the client’s child population. The service could take the form of a casual “drop in” for 30 minutes or provide care for a complete 8 hour work week shift.

Finally, private daycare suppliers may welcome co-operative programming as a means of expanding the scope of their daycare operations. It is unlikely that the personnel, equipment and facility resources available to a city recreation and park agency could be accumulated by a private sector daycare operator. Making those facilities accessible to children already in daycare, would work to the benefit of the recreation and park agency, the private supplier, and the child.

Non-profit and commercial providers of daycare services looking for ways to enrich their programs, offer a potential source of new revenue. The concept of contracting out the programming expertise of recreation and park agencies to other daycare suppliers, is an exciting delivery option analogous to contracting out this expertise to corporations (Crompton and Younger, 1983).

References


Discussion

The responses clearly indicated that there is a semantics problem. Daycare, child care, child development, adolescent boredom, and latch key children, are all terms being applied to a very important issue. The term “daycare” appears to infer custodial care of very young children, rather than an educational opportunity for all young people, which causes some recreation and park professionals not to react positively toward it. To resolve the semantic difficulties, it may be useful to define daycare as concern for the welfare of children outside the home environment. The key question is “should recreation and park agencies be involved in responding to this situation?” Half of the respondents did not perceive their agencies to have any role in daycare. However, it became clear as the interviews progressed that their agencies already were involved in some form.

In most cases, respondents identified a growing number of private daycare centers in their communities, but they were unable to accept that this trend should impact their own service delivery efforts. While some respondents were ready to adapt and change to meet this new community need, others were reluctant to change from their traditional recreational role. This was exemplified by a lack of concern for coordinating child and parent programming which is an important factor in the ability of single parent families to participate.

In order to be relevant, recreation and park agencies must recognize the new diversity of client groups, and be creatively responsive to their needs. Daycare incorporates a variety of target markets—pre-school, elementary, junior high, and high school children. Daycare services may be needed at work, in shopping malls, in apartment complexes, in schools, and on vacation. Single parent families and families with two working parents, are likely to respond to recreational opportunities for their children while they are working, and recreation programs that encourage participation of the adult and child at the same time.

The costs of society failing to respond with adequate daycare services include:

- a loss of potential industrial development through labour inflexibility and short supply,
- a loss in the economic multiplier effects of second income generation
- the negative costs of social disorder and counter culture behavior typified by adolescent vandalism, drug abuse and alcoholism.

Daycare has emerged as a community problem. Recreation and park agencies are part of the network of community services and as such have a role to play in resolving the problem. Indeed, it should be viewed by such agencies as a new opportunity. At the minimum, recreation and park agencies are obligated to cooperate with other community service agencies and agree upon a course of action which addresses the problem.

Recreation and park agencies could serve either as direct providers or as facilitators in the delivery of daycare services. As direct providers, agencies