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Support for parents and families: A  
retrospective look at family life articles in  
Broome County Living magazine 1986 – 1988

Local and Regional Projects

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### Bringing up super baby

V. Sue Atkinson

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# Living



●  
Helping  
Laotian  
Families

●  
How Safe  
Is Your  
Water?

●  
'Super Baby'  
Syndrome

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## Information Center Tip

It is the time of year when we start thinking about preparing our homes for winter. In our Information Center, we have fact sheets and bulletins to help make the job easier. Some of the topics covered are:

"Burning Wood," "Weatherstripping," and "Making an Insulated Roman Shade."

For a complete listing of fact sheets, call and request our newly revised Home Economics catalog of publications.

**Cover: Edna Bodnar, center, and Dorothy House, in white jacket, help Laotian native Somnuk Misaithol and her family learn about American foods.**

## Bringing Up Super Baby

V. Sue Atkinson  
Home Economics  
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"Childhood has its own way of seeing, thinking, and feeling, and nothing is more foolish than to try to substitute ours for theirs." (Rousseau, Emile)

In today's mail I received a flyer informing me that for a mere \$29.95 I could purchase a kit enabling me to teach my child to read, thus insuring her future success in school as well as saving her from her certain fate as a bored, playpenned infant or TV-addicted preschooler.

Last week as I perused the child care section of a local bookstore I found that not only could I learn How To Teach Your Baby to Read, but now I can also Teach Your Baby Math. Other titles that caught my eye were How to Raise a Brighter Child and Give Your Child a Superior Mind.

Sometimes I'm glad that my daughter is three years old and, according to some of these programs, already over the hill. It may be too late, but at least I don't have to make any decisions about what to do.

Next I stopped at a toy store to look for a baby gift. Along with the cute rattles and other toys I found that I could buy a kit consisting of educational toys, exercise equipment (including infant-sized barbells) and a tape to guide parents in carrying out the "program."

On to a department store where the children's bedding looked like a beginning reading



text complete with letters, numbers, and clocks, presumably so children don't waste valuable learning time at night!

When I got home, I read a Parents magazine column on three and four-year-olds that dealt with preparing children to take nursery school entrance exams which would allow children to be admitted to the "right" preschool program, leading to attendance at the right school and the best college. While I had heard of such things, I assumed that the phenomena was limited to a few elite programs in major urban

areas. After reading the column, I got the feeling that this was the shape of things to come.

We all want the best for our kids, and we're willing to invest time, effort, and what money we can afford to help them develop as happily and successfully as possible. But what's going on?

### INTERESTING CHANGES

Over the past decades, research on infants has revealed that babies are more capable, more responsive, see better,

hear better, and interact earlier than previously believed. This knowledge has changed the way we think about and treat infants. Attention is given to the bonding process between newborn babies and mothers. Mothers are no longer told that their babies' early smiles are "just gas." And parents are told that the little games we've always played with our babies such as peek-a-boo, patty-cake, and "So Big!" not only entertain our children, but teach them as well.

But along with a new appreciation of the importance of what goes on between parents and babies has come a push to use our new knowledge of infant development to accelerate that development rather than simply to appreciate and enrich it. Techniques to accelerate development have been successfully and appropriately used to assist handicapped or developmentally delayed children to reach their maximum potential. But recently we have seen more attempts to use these techniques with normally developing children to "speed up" their development and give them a competitive edge.

### SKILLS AT WHAT COST?

The fact is that there are a number of skills that young children can be taught. That some children read at age two or three is not a new phenomena. The question seems to be whether we should make a deliberate attempt to teach this or other skills, and at what cost.

There is no evidence that children who read early are better readers later in elementary school than children who learn to read at six or seven. Research also suggests

that while early readers are bright children, most children with high IQs are not able to read when they enter kindergarten. David Elkind, child development scholar and author of The Hurried Child, believes that pushing children into early academic achievement and apply elementary school teaching techniques to preschoolers results not only in stress for those children, but the possibility of "elementary school burnout" later on as children are turned off to learning by the time they start school.

Why are we doing it? Why are we playing classical music to our unborn children, flashing word cards at three-month-olds, and coaching our toddlers prior to their nursery school "interviews?" Dave Barry in Babies and Other Hazards of Sex, offers this tongue-in-cheek interpretation: "When our son was about 18 months old, my wife, who had purchased every baby-improvement book ever published, got one called How to Teach Your Baby to Read. The chapter headings started out with "Can Babies Learn to Read?" and worked up to "Babies Can Definitely Learn to Read" and finally got around to "If You Don't Teach Your Baby to Read Right Now, You Are Vermin."

### "MAGIC" PROGRAMS?

We've come to believe that programs of various sorts hold some sort of magic that we as parents don't possess. My cousin reports to me that in their suburban New York school district children must have two years of nursery school or they won't be reading for kindergarten. A parent of a child entering a Binghamton nursery school explains that her

daughter is "behind" because they lived for a while in an area where she couldn't watch Sesame Street. My friend from New York City calls to be reassured that she isn't a terrible mother because she hasn't yet enrolled her two-year-old in nursery school. And it seems that nearly all the admirers of my daughter's tumbling ability inevitably inquire as to whether she attends gymnastics class. We seem to have forgotten that children can learn a great deal on their own, from us, and from the many everyday experiences we provide and that programs simply extend and supplement those experiences.

There's also the feeling that everyone else is doing it and we don't want our kids to get behind or miss out. Inevitably, we compare our children to others. We may be perfectly comfortable allowing our children to scribble and develop drawing skills at their own pace until we see their friend's drawing of clearly identifiable people, houses, and trees. We approach toilet training casually until we notice that the neighbor's child of the same age is out of diapers. Comparing is not a bad thing. It provides us with information on development and gives us new ideas and new perspectives on our children. But when comparing turns into competing it may cause us to act in ways that are not in our children's best interest.

Another reason for the "superbaby" trend may be that families have fewer children and may have more invested emotionally (and financially) in each child. Mothers who do not work outside the home may feel some pressure to do great things with their children to justify their decision to stay

home with them. Mothers who do work outside the home may find appeal in programs that not only care for a child but provide something extra that a parent cannot. And society as a whole seems more accepting and admiring of exceptional achievement than a generation ago when top students were described as "eggheads" and assumed to be lacking in athletic and perhaps social skills. Then most parents seemed to want their kids to be like everybody else and child prodigies were thought to grow up to become neurotic adults. David Elkind uses the phrase "early ripe, early rot" to describe this way of thinking.

Today, so much of what we do with children is justified in terms of the future. College prepares them for a good job, high school prepares them to be admitted to a good college. Elementary school prepares children for high school. Nursery school helps prepare young children for kindergarten, and now we are to prepare toddlers to enter the "right" preschool program in order to get on the right track in the first place. Somewhere along the way, we seem to have forgotten that each year (each month, each day) of a child's life has meaning and purpose in itself, as well as being a foundation for the year to come.

### OTHER ABILITIES OVERLOOKED

We also miss much when we think only of children's academic or athletic skills. The ability to get along with others, motivation, self-discipline, creativity, a sense of humor, flexibility, ability to resist peer pressure, enthusiasm about learning - these abilities are not as readily observable or

measurable as academic or athletic ability, but will serve children well. We can teach toddlers to read, but will that help them later on to evaluate the difference between the United States Constitution and Mein Kampf?

Does this mean that all programs for infants and young children are bad? Certainly not. But how can we tell if a program is right for a child?



David Elkind offers these ideas: "Parents can know whether their child is being taught inappropriately by answering a few simple questions. When your four-year-old goes to school, does she bring home dittoed worksheets? Her own artwork? Is she being taught lessons? Or is she engaged in learning through projects such as making soup or building a puppet theater? Is her learning limited to memorizing the alphabet and reciting the numbers? Is her thinking challenged by being read stories, taking field trips, or planting a garden? Does she come home quiet and withdrawn? Or is she joyful and talking a mile-a-minute about her school? If you answer 'yes' to the first half of each of these questions, your

child is probably being taught inappropriately." (Elkind, "Superbaby Syndrome Can Lead to Elementary School Burnout," Young Children, March 1987.)

Another clue to a program's appropriateness is the claims made by the program. A friend once enrolled her toddler in a program called "Motor Learning" which turned out to be free play in a gym - a perfectly good experience for a toddler, but the name of the program certainly created expectations that weren't met. Programs for infants and toddlers should provide opportunities for parents to meet and talk, and for babies to watch each other and begin to interact. They should also provide materials and activities that are safe and age-appropriate. Programs making claims beyond socialization and exposure to activities should be viewed with suspicion. There is no evidence that any program for normally developing infants results in long-term gains in skills.

Methods of instruction should be unpressured. Children (and parents) should not be forced to participate or required to do or shamed into doing something they fear. Some infant swimming programs have come under attack on this point. Currently, most programs follow YMCA guidelines (also recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics) which rule out "forced submersion" and require children under age five to wear personal flotation devices during lessons.

Programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers should extend and enrich what we do with children at home, rather than extend to an earlier age what children do in school.

Local programs for infants include swimming, "gym"

programs for toddlers, exercise classes for mother and baby, and "Infant Learning Through Play" that includes instruction in infant massage, information about development, appropriate play, and how to motivate babies to grow and develop.

All children have their own unique abilities and interests that make them special. Babies, unschooled as they are, are delightful creatures as they reach out to explore their world, each approaching it in a different way. As we observe their wonder and delight in learning about everything around them and struggling to master new skills, we can see that they're all "superbabies!"

For more information on infant and child development, request from our Information Center:  
"Infants and Parents," 30 cents  
"The Phenomena of Early Development," free  
"Ideas to Help Your Baby Learn," free  
"Terrific and Terrible Two-Year-Olds," 30 cents  
"Three and Four-Year-Olds," 30 cents  
"Child Development in the Preschool Years," free

For information on programs serving young children in Broome County, ask for the Child Care Services Directory, 50 cents.

#### RESOURCES:

Barry, Dave, Babies and Other Hazards of Sex, Rodale Press, 1984.

Elkind, David, "Superbaby Syndrome Can Lead to Elementary School Burnout," Young Children, March 1987.

Elkind, David, The Hurried Child, Addison-Wesley, 1981.

Friedman, Nancy, "Water Babies," Parenting, April 1987.

## Group Family Day Care is New Option

Polly Spedding  
Cornell University

Parents in New York State now have another child care option.

Group family day care has joined family day care and day care centers as regulated forms of day care in the state.

Group family day care and regular family day care both take place in the home of the day care provider; the major difference between the two forms of care is the number of adults and children involved. New York State law stipulates that in a regular family day care home one adult caregiver can provide care for not more than six preschool children (fewer if any are infants or toddlers), and two additional school-age children.

In contrast, the legislation that authorized group family day care allows two adult caregivers to provide care for seven to 12 preschoolers (no

more than 10 if any are under the age of two), and two additional school-age children. Both group family day care and regular family day care must meet licensing regulations of the New York State Department of Social Services.

Day care centers, which are located in non-residential settings and staffed to provide care for larger groups of children, also must be licensed by the State Department of Social Services.

Family day care has long been a popular form of child care, especially for infants and toddlers, although the use of day care centers has increased significantly in recent years. The new group family day care option is viewed by many child care specialists as a middle ground - retaining the homelike setting of family day care, but with a medium-size group of

children and two adults. The adults are responsible for making sure that they provide all the important things that make up any good child care program, regardless of its size or location.

Whatever the setting, high-quality child care programs provide knowledgeable, loving caregivers; a safe, friendly environment; and a variety of activities appropriate to each child's age and developmental level.

For more information about day care in your community, contact your local child care council. For information about day care licensing, contact the New York State Department of Social Services licensing office in your region or call the toll-free State DSS information number: 1-800-342-3715.