

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Child care becomes an election issue

One of the less publicized, but critical issues in the 1988 U.S. presidential election is the crisis provoked by the growing dependency of families on group child care.

The issue is coming to the forefront because of the devastating effects, both psychological and physiological, that group child care is proving to have on millions of infants in the United States.

Experts in child behavior note that with the number of children in formal group-care centers skyrocketing from 141,000 in 1960 to 2.1 million in 1986, it is only recently that the impact of this trend is beginning to hit home.

According to an article by Karl Zinmeister of the American Enterprise Institute in the Sept. 25 *Washington Post*, "A growing and worrisome body of evidence suggests that when infants and toddlers go into full-time day care, long-term emotional, intellectual, and cultural damage can result."

"For one thing," he wrote, "a number of different investigators have found that when babies less than one year old are placed in day care, many of them—perhaps as many as half—develop weak and insecure bonds with their parents, bonds that are thought to be crucial to healthy later development."

He cited a Chicago study of 110 children of affluent, intact families which showed that in cases where children were subjected to hired care at eight months or earlier, they turned out "to have significantly less secure relationships with their mothers," and "many infants interpret repeated daily separations from their working moth-

ers as rejection, which they cope with by withdrawing."

He noted that "other follow-up studies of children as old as 10 have shown that those with a record of early non-parental care tend to exhibit more serious aggression, less cooperation, less patience, more misbehavior, and a pattern of social conflict or withdrawal."

A study of 5- to 8-year-olds who spent part of their first years at a highly regarded day care center at the University of North Carolina found them "more likely to push, kick, threaten, swear, and argue than children who were not in day care or who started later." Research on middle-class third graders in the Dallas area found that children were "more uncooperative, less popular, and had lower grades, poorer study skills, and less self-esteem than their counterparts who were cared for exclusively or predominantly by a parent."

In addition, the American Medical Association and the Centers for Disease Control have warned that, since a baby's immune system is not well developed until the third month, and not fully effective until about age two, the group setting of child care centers can be "dangerous sources of infections."

Dukakis wants mandatory group care

In the context of these alarming trends, Democratic presidential candidate Mike Dukakis has endorsed a package of legislation known as the "Act for Better Childcare" (ABC) that would spend \$13 billion in the first four years on child care, dictating that such programs would be available only to parents willing to send their children to government-supervised group-based day care programs.

As government-regulated centers, under this Dukakis plan, the type of values espoused by such centers would be circumscribed by court decisions already won by the infamous American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to exclude any religious content, or, for that matter, any teaching opposed to abortion and premarital sex.

According to Jo Ann Gasper, former deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, writing in the summer 1988 edition of *Human Life Review*, "The ACLU has already argued that being opposed to abortion and encouraging children to abstain from premarital sexual relations is 'promotion of religion,' " and that Judge Charles R. Richey of the U.S. District of Columbia Court agreed with the ACLU in an April 15, 1987 decision, *Kendrick v. Bowen*.

Dukakis's card-carrying membership in the ACLU was brought out during his first debate with Vice President George Bush last month.

On the other side, Bush has proposed a "Children's Tax Credit," which would allow a family to receive a tax write-off for child care expenses, without dictating whether a parent stays at home with the child, provides a sitter in the home, help from a relative, or uses a group center.

However, Bush's program does not address the fact that the so-called "Reagan economic miracle" of the last eight years has driven down real incomes, forcing both parents of a family to work in more and more cases.

Zinmeister noted that after World War II, "middle class families with children were largely exempt from taxation." He noted that "if the current federal dependent exemption were adjusted to retain its 1948 value, each child would now bring his parents well over \$6,000 in tax benefits. Present law allows only \$1,900."