

# NATIONAL POST

## Experts are no substitute for parents

**Kate Tennier, National Post**

Published: Wednesday, April 04, 2007

On the same day last week that the American National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) issued its latest study on the long-term effects of early childcare, a Canadian report surfaced suggesting Canadian parents weren't up to the job of raising their kids.

According to the Canadian report *Early Years Study 2: Putting Science into Action*, by Fraser Mustard, Norrie McCain and Stuart Shanker, poor parenting skills in Canada leave children open to no end of social ills such as juvenile delinquency, illiteracy and substance abuse. The solution? To bring in government-licensed "experts."

This push to professional parenting parallels calls by childcare experts for a universal daycare program, with the argument that daycare can make up for a supposed lack of parenting skills by injecting some expertise into the lives of these youngsters. But before setting off to implement the recommendations of this latest Mustard study, we would do well to consider the findings reported in the NICHD report.

This instalment of the NICHD report, the only peer-reviewed longitudinal study of its kind in the world, found that the more time children spent in daycare centres, the more likely they were to exhibit behaviour problems, some lasting up to the level of Grade 6. While the authors point out that these problems by no means reached pathological levels, they strongly suggest that this phenomenon be more carefully investigated for the sake of public policy development.

Another even more illuminating conclusion found in the NICHD study is that the effects of all outside early learning and care, good, bad or otherwise, consistently pale in comparison to the impact that parenting has on a child.

To those of us who believe an apple is an apple, this comes as no surprise. Every sensible parent, teacher or policy maker in the land would agree that short of removing children from the home (a policy nonstarter) the influence of outside experts can never be greater than the impact a parent has on their child.

This phenomenon was first noted in 1966 by James Coleman of the University of Chicago in his iconic, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. Coleman laid bare the myth that school expenditure and outside professional input were more critical to student success than the home life of the child.

While Coleman's finding that parents are the strongest influence on children seems on the surface to bolster the *Early Years Study 2*, and thus appears to support the recommendations of Mustard and his co-authors, there is a crucial difference between Coleman's findings and the *Early Years* report.

Implicit in Coleman's study is the notion that we must work with parents to improve their natural abilities and interest in bettering the lives of their own children, whereas the Mustard report has a punitive, shaming tone in which the suggested ineptitude of parents provides background colour for their arguments calling for more expert input into the lives of families.

That unhelpful tone came through in an interview Mustard gave about his new report. Commenting on parenting in Canada, he declared: "Only about one-third of the population are actually highly competent parents, the rest are OK, but about 17 per cent are godawful," said Mustard. "You do have to improve parenting -- parents have a huge impact on brain development."

Parents should not deceive themselves into thinking they would be immune to the policies envisioned by Mustard and his coauthors. They declare that problem kids are found in all levels of society. No one is spared from their policing eye.

How will you know you are not a good parent? There is an answer to that as well according to this report. Mustard's study promotes screening children using something called an "Early Development Instrument." This "instrument" will peg your child's energy levels, social competence, ability to follow routines and emotional maturity, letting you know exactly where your child fits in or doesn't. It's all Orwellian in its implications.

What is presented in Mustard and his co-authors' most recent study is little more than a slap in the face to Canadian parents. It represents harmful demands that we defer to experts who claim to know what is best for our children. We would be wise to re-examine Coleman's 1966 study along with the NICHD's most recent report so that the power of parents can be leveraged to put the educational centre of gravity back into the home.

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