

Trapped by the dilemma of paid work or motherhood

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Virginia Tapscott makes the excellent point that if parents were more aware of how critical the early years are, their priorities would quickly change (“The Untold Value of Care”, 16-17/7).

Childcare in the first three years is now so normalised and formalised parents of children who remain at home during this time are encouraged to believe their children are missing out on something crucial for their optimum development.

In fact, group care in the first three years is incompatible with normal development, a time of rapid change that brings idiosyncratic erratic behaviours only a mother could love.

Contrary to the line parents are being sold, babies and toddlers from good homes don't need to be surrounded by “educators” and offered nutritionally sound hot lunches. They are better off with a banana sandwich and most days spent with an adult who has a parent-like commitment to them – their mothers, fathers or a grandparent.

Parents and politicians need to understand that childcare in the first three years is solely about the adult's interest, not the child's, and is, in most cases, a second-rate option. The only children in the under-threes who benefit from care are those living in extreme poverty or isolation, or in abusive or dysfunctional families.

The markedly diminished quality of life in group care is easy to confirm by observing how the under-threes never complain about being picked up the way they do when they are left. And note the look of hope in the eyes of toddlers when the door opens and some lucky kid's mother arrives early to collect him.

As we have virtually no other answer to the dilemma of paid work and motherhood, childcare is not going away. Urging governments to spend more and subsidise childcare costs helps adults and the economy but doesn't provide children with what they really need in the early years. It is also financially unfair to families where one parent stays at home.

Rather than brainwashing parents to believe childcare is the norm – even advantageous – parents should be encouraged to think of ways to avoid it, or minimise it as much as possible.

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