

JUDY DUNN

A double act

How do women cope with the multiplicity of roles they have to play when they are working, bringing up young children and running a home—and how are the children affected?

Anyone caring to look beyond the homes of the affluent will see that the social and economic changes in Britain have dramatically affected family life. Consider three well-documented examples and their significance for mothers and young children.

First, single parents are greatly increasing in number and are very likely to be under economic and emotional stress. Their children's welfare is threatened.

Second, the number of mothers of young children who work is steadily increasing. The increase is not only among those with school-aged children; it has occurred among women with children of all ages, including the very young. In one recent national survey, as many as 47.5 per cent of all the mothers with children under five had been regularly employed outside the home for at least some of the time.

These are the figures for all families. The proportion of single, divorced, widowed and separated mothers who work is higher, and so is the proportion of them who work full-time. The number who have to work is likely to rise, not fall. Yet the amount of day-care provision has decreased. The proportion of pre-school children cared for in day nurseries has declined from 17 per cent in 1948 to 3 per cent in 1984.

The third example concerns the mental health of women at home with young children. A substantial proportion of mothers with several young children suffer from depressive illnesses, which spells trouble for children. Those who have some employment outside the home are less likely to suffer from depression.

These are features of family life in Britain that are well documented and accepted as true. They are not new problems, but they are growing in scale, and each affects children's lives. The provision of good child care outside the family would help all of these problems, yet it is decreasing, despite the recommendation of a succession of bodies advising on policy over the last 20 years that increased provision and a coordinated policy of child care is what is needed.

Faced with this lack of provision, mothers frequently have to settle for unsatisfactory care, or have to work unsocial hours. A recent national survey found that 77 per cent of women on evening shift work had small children. So did 69 per cent of part-time night-workers. In families in which the children are looked after by their fathers (13 per cent in the OPEC survey) this is not primarily because their fathers are unemployed, or on shift work. Rather, it happens because the mothers in these families are particularly likely to be working unsocial hours.

Why does the provision of child care get so little support? In part, it is because of a concern that it is damaging for young children to be away from their mothers. Critics fear that the greater availability of child care will encourage mothers to work.

But is a child's future really threatened by periods away from his or her mother? What are the consequences of care away from the mother for a child's well-being and their development? If a mother has a choice, should she or shouldn't she work? If she has to work, how can she best meet her children's needs?

Guilt and anxiety haunt every mother who faces these questions. And the advice they are given—the messages they receive from tv, magazines, doctors, relatives—does little to allay these anxieties.

Research on the consequences of different kinds of care for children has shed some light, however. In a recent book, Sandra Scarr and I set out the main findings and issues, discussing the practical choices for parents and the questions that face policy makers.

Our research brought out one fact clearly. Whether children have a good or bad childhood depends on how satisfied the mother is with her life, not on whether she works or not. The children of satisfied working mothers do very well, as do those of satisfied mothers who are at home. The children of mothers who are unhappy or frustrated, whether at home or at work, are more likely to have problems.

But unease about the welfare of young children whose mothers work remains, for many people, and concern is greatest for the very youngest. We know that babies thrive on loving, stimulating care from familiar people who treat them as individuals. Can these needs possibly be met by individuals other than mothers, or in group care?

Two nightmare pictures haunt the imagination. One is of day nurseries as grim institutions, in which the babies get no individual care or loving attention. The other is of childminding, in which depressed and neglected children are kept in crowded conditions.

But these images are distorted. The quality of child care varies dramatically within each category—whether day nursery, childminding, or playgroup. While it can indeed be as bleak as the grim images suggest, it need not be, and we have learnt much about what makes good child care.

First, let us consider the findings on group care, about which there is particular concern. In other countries, communal care of children is not regarded as a recipe for disaster. Careful studies of, for instance, Kibbutzim children in Israel, and of Swedish children in day care, have shown the children to be as attached to their mothers as those not in group care; they have no more problems.

Most of the large-scale studies of children put in group care while their mothers work have been conducted in the US. They show great variations in quality of care, which are correlated with differences in children's well-being and developmental progress. They may depend on particular features of the nursery or group: for instance, the size of the group

This article by Professor Judy Dunn from the College of Human Development at Pennsylvania State University, is the first of a major NEW SOCIETY series on the modern family. The series will include pieces on the Asian and Afro-Caribbean family, on the problems of parents whose children are ready to leave home, and on AIDS and the family. The next piece will appear on 4 March.

J. Brunre, *Under Five in Britain* (Grant McIntyre; 1980)

J.W. Doublas and J.M. Blomfield, *Maternity in Great Britain* (Oxford University Press; 1948)

H. Joshi, *Women's Participation in Paid Work: further analysis of the women and employment survey*. (Department of Employment Research paper No. 45; 1984)

H. Joshi (1985). "Gender inequality in the labour market and the domestic division of labour." Paper for the Cambridge Journal of Economics Conference, *Towards New Foundations for Socialist Britain*. Cambridge, June, 1985

J. Martin and C. Roberts, *Women and Employment: a lifetime perspective* (HMSO, London; 1984)

S. Scarr and J. Dunn, *Mother Care/Other Care* (Penguin; 1987)

“Whether children have a good or a bad childhood depends on how satisfied the mother is with her life, not on whether she works or not.”



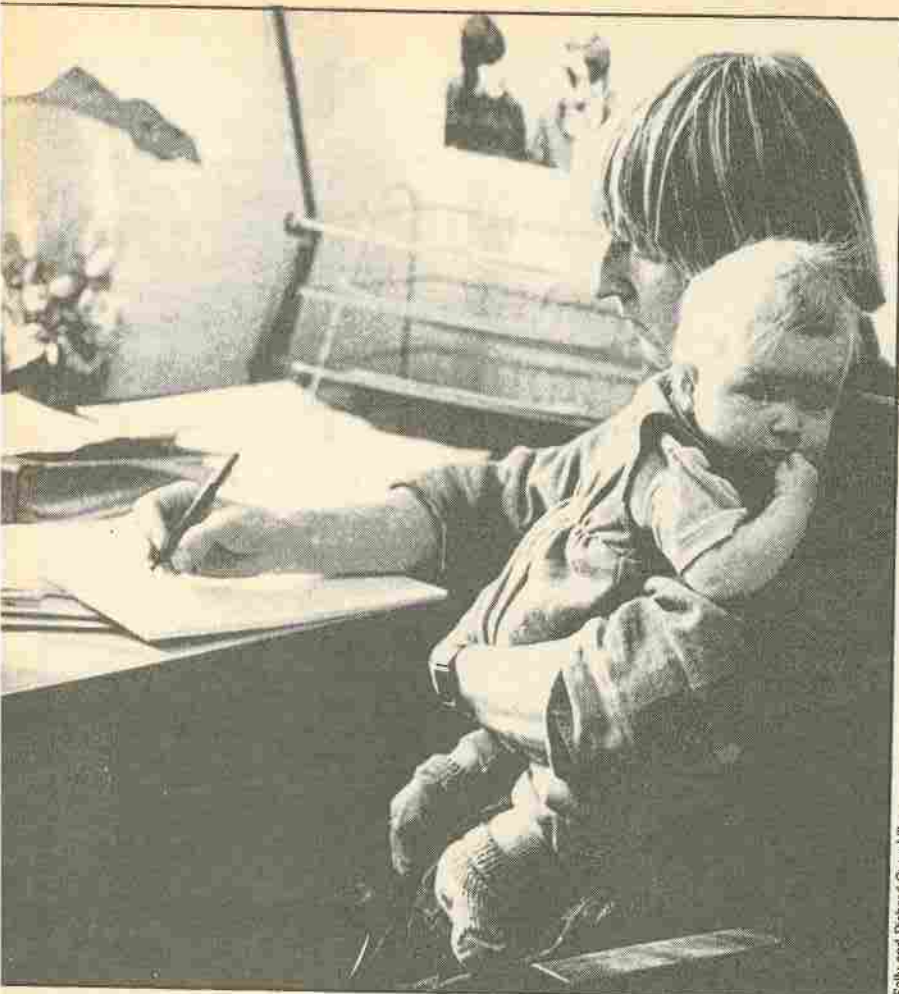
(smaller is better), the extent of collaboration and rapport between parents and those doing the caring, and the training, attitudes and experience of those carers.

British day nurseries are organised and funded in many different ways. The research does not yet allow us to judge very precisely what these differences may mean for the children who go to them. But, most striking—and probably most important from the children's point of view—is the variation between nurseries in the kinds of relationships that the adults have with the children. These differences may be linked both to the outcome for the children

and decisions about the organisation of the nursery, and to the philosophy and attitude of the staff working there.

Most children cared for away from home in Britain are at childminders. At a common-sense level, the advantages of childminding appear to be that the child will have a close relationship with one adult, a “family-like” atmosphere in a real home. They will also enjoy the company of a few familiar children.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, childminding got a very bad press. It was believed that there were hundreds of thousands of children kept in the care of unregistered childminders in appalling conditions. Now, in



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contrast, childminding is often recommended as the solution for working mothers. Has the picture changed? Or is it popular just because it is cheap for the government? There has been much activity in the last few years by local authorities to support childminders. An energetic organisation, the National Childminders Association, has grown up to campaign for better conditions. From this organisation a minder can get information, support and advice. Children and mothers clearly benefit.

So is the life of a child at the minder's quite different from the bleak picture suggested by the research for the 1970s? We have the beginnings of some answers, although there is still a great deal that we do not know about the consequences of childminding for different children.

It seems that the relationship is not usually that of a substitute mother and her child; it is more detached than that, although the studies suggest that most childminders are affectionate and concerned for their charges. A number of "minded" children appear withdrawn, quiet or sad, but we do not yet know whether this is a *consequence* of being minded; the children who seem depressed are most often those who have suffered problems at home. Outside the inner cities, children are not usually in overcrowded or inadequate situations. The research gives valuable pointers for parents about how to assess particular childminding situations for their own child.

We know little, however, about the care by relatives on which most working mothers depend, beyond the fact that it makes it very difficult for husbands and wives to have a family life together. Research is under way, but there is as yet little documentaton of how economic and social stresses

are influencing, for example, the availability of "grandmother" care. It seems likely that the same conditions that are forcing single mothers to go to work are forcing more and more "young" grandmothers to stay employed and thus not free to look after grandchildren.

So there are still many unanswered questions about the consequences of different kinds of care. But we can be sure of two central points:

- The *need* for child care is urgent and will not go away. The result of the "policy" to do nothing about increasing provision is not that mothers stay at home. It is that they have to arrange whatever provision they can manage—which is frequently far from satisfactory. The most pressing question is how the best care can be made available—care that is sensitive to the special and differing needs of babies, of toddlers and of the three and four year olds. Practical answers have been outlined by the National Childcare Campaign. The records of other European countries, and their policies on parental leave, benefits and provision compare favourably with those of Britain, and show what can be done.

- We know care away from the mother *need not* be damaging. The prejudice against mothers' employment is misplaced. It is also important—although rare for committees to do so—separately to disentangle and consider the effects of poor quality care, of having a mother who works, and the consequences of difficult family circumstances on children. The research on mothers' employment shows that children's welfare need not be jeopardised by their mothers working. It is not the experience of having a mother who works that threatens children's well being and happiness; it is the experience of growing up in stressful, discordant and unhappy homes, or in poor child-care environments.

The case for child care should not, moreover, be made solely on the grounds of the social needs of the most vulnerable. Those needs highlight the urgency of the case, but it is a case that should be made on two other separate grounds. The first concerns the hugely differential effect of parenthood on women and on men, in economic and employment terms with women still losing out.

The second concerns the possible benefits to our children. As Jerome Bruner, one of our most distinguished developmental psychologists, said: "It can now be taken as certain that an opportunity to be away from home in a pre-school helps the child develop socially, intellectually and emotionally" (Bruner, 1980). The case for pre-school provision then rests not just on the demonstration that it need not be a disadvantage for children to be away from their mothers, but also on the positive benefits and undoubted pleasures that good child care outside the family can give.

We think of child care as a private family concern, a matter for mothers and fathers, not for government pronouncements. Yet what happens to young children is already profoundly affected by policies, or the lack of them; by decisions on health and social services, taxation and rates strategies, employment prospects for women and the degree to which employers provide facilities and conditions for mothers and children and so on.

To underline the communal responsibility for child care is not to diminish the responsibility or choice that parents should have. Rather, it is to advocate an increase in choice in *real terms*. To recognise that public responsibility becomes all the more urgent when we admit what the quality of life is like for so many mothers and children in Britain today.

The series was conceived and commissioned by Jacqueline Bourgoyne, Reader in Sociology at Sheffield Polytechnic, who died of cancer last month. Jacqui was a vibrant personality and a writer who was both committed and practical. She was a good friend to **New Society** and we dedicate this series to her memory.