

Sisterhood and Sentimentality — America's Earliest Preschool Centers

by Dorothy W. Hewes, Ph.D.

America's *oldest child care centers* were started during a period of economic growth and intellectual turbulence. Although there were a few wealthy families during the 18th century, someone described the nation as having "pyramids of money in a desert of want." By the mid-1800s, however, professional and business men began to prosper. As the morally superior gentler sex, middle-class wives improved their minds and discharged obligations to the unfortunates of society through church, club, and literary groups. There was no unifying sense of sisterhood, no mutual faith or endeavor.

When the German kindergarten of Friedrich Froebel became known to English-speaking Americans during the 1870s, women became energized by his idea that within each child lies the potential for self-realization and self-learning, a potential developed not through stern discipline but by "learning by doing" in a joyous play school. Parents abandoned old beliefs in children's innate depravity to promote development of their innate goodness through the kindergarten system. Three to six year olds could learn morality and citizenship while they enjoyed educational games and songs or busied themselves with bead stringing,

block building, paper folding, and the construction of "forms of beauty" with wooden slats or parquetry blocks. Mothers could extend their domestic role by assisting the teachers in the classroom, learning new methods to apply at home.

There were less than a dozen kindergartens in 1870, all dependent upon parent fees. Ten years later, when there were about 400 in 30 states, most of them had some form of outside financial support. Early sponsors included the New England Women's Club, Sorosis, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union (with its motto of "Prevention, Not Reform — the Kindergarten Not the Prison is True Philanthropy").

Women of all social classes, religious denominations, and political orientations banded together to promote both charity and fee-paid kindergartens. Affluent matrons gave generously to the cause. Jane Stanford contributed \$30,000 to San Francisco's Golden Gate Kindergarten Association by 1887, and her later endowment of \$100,000 helps explain its position on our current list (page xx). Pauline Agassiz Shaw, who used some of the profits from her husband's copper mining interests to

underwrite 31 Boston kindergartens by 1882, objected to the term "charity" because it was demeaning to the recipients. Names like Armour, Vanderbilt, and Hearst are also on the donor lists, but some kindergarten association members pledged 50¢ a month, saved penny by penny.

Whatever their financial status, these women shared more than a faith in Froebel's system; they shared inferior status in a society that was controlled by men. Even in the National Education Association, the Kindergarten Department represented a chasm between genders that was greater than any distinctions based upon professional training.

The expansion of charity kindergartens, many of them in churches, supplemented or replaced some of the custodial day nurseries for poor working mothers. In her history of kindergartens, Nina Vandewalker wrote that "the new institution became recognized as the most valuable of child-saving agencies, with mission kindergarten work so valuable among wealthy young women as to be almost a fad." Although about half of the country's 4,000 kindergartens were philanthropic when the 1893 depression began, mere numbers cannot cap-

ture the evangelical fervor contained in letters and publications of the period; Ross aptly called it "The Kindergarten Crusade."

Kindergarten advocates were often considered to be "sentimental," but this term can mean the use of sensitivity and emotions rather than logical processes. It was a feminine strategy that made a strong impact during an era when people were concerned with the moral, social, and political aspects of good citizenship; a clearly rational approach would never have gained momentum. However, extravagant claims were often made — as when Mary Mann wrote that entire neighborhoods were transformed if "little minds" were "fertilized" by the kindergarten. "Fathers found entertainment in the children's singing to keep them home from the grog shop" and the beer money went into a savings fund.

American enthusiasts also added their own interpretations to the original German writings. For example, Froebel devised the "Snail Game" as a transition from active outdoor play to indoor activities. Children were to join hands with the teacher, who slowly turned so that the line formed a spiral and then uncoiled to become a circle. The American translation ended with the mystical interpretation that this symbolized the wholeness of humanity but missed its practical intention.

Critics could easily point to writings like these to condemn the whole system — and to provide a basis for their own *advanced* ideas. But to children in the urban missions, on the Indian reservations, at places like the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company where there were 27 home languages, or in countless parlors where mothers presided over a cluster of young neighbors,

the hours in kindergarten were filled with delightful activities.

Our list of oldest child care organizations includes a substantial number that originated in settlement houses that were established as multipurpose service centers in urban poverty areas. One of the first was in Detroit, opening in 1881; but the best known was Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago. Its kindergarten, opened in 1889 as a model of beauty and convenience, had competent staff assisted by students from Alice Putnam's training classes. Many others were equally excellent, but some were so horrible that the first child care licensing laws were developed as an attempt to control the worst of them.

In the early kindergartens, teachers conducted a morning class for about 15 children and made social calls on families during the afternoon. The children were taught to address the teachers as "Auntie" to emphasize her sisterly relationship with their mothers.

By the late 1890s, men with advanced degrees in the "new sciences" like psychology and sociology began to propound a logical and unsentimental approach to education and the problems of poverty. Organizations like the National Conference of Charities and Corrections professionalized and systematized philanthropy, thus creating paid administrative positions and promoting "Friendly Visitors" to make certain that their funds were well spent. The resulting philanthropic kindergartens often had larger classes and a more structured program than the more informal groups of the early years. In the public school kindergartens, also efficiently administered, teachers not only had large classes but were expected to teach double sessions.

Our Heritage from the Past Century

Much of today's equipment and methodology has been an outgrowth of those early kindergartens. We may schedule *circle time* with finger plays and action games just as Froebel did in 1837. We have plastics and play dough instead of wood and natural clay, but we still believe that "what a child imitates, he begins to understand." This didn't just happen. After kindergartens became public school classes for five year olds, Progressive Froebelians maintained the philosophy of learning through play by developing nursery schools for the younger children and by organizing the Committee on Nursery Schools, now the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), in the 1920s.

Our heritage goes beyond methods and materials. The United States has always had some sort of other-than-mother care, as Geraldine Youcha and other writers have pointed out; but the first public concern about standards and salaries began in the kindergarten era. By 1908, when there were about 400 settlement house and mission kindergartens, Vandewalker reflected popular opinion when she criticized those "whose purpose is served if the children are kept clean, happy, and off the streets. . . . The large number of children enrolled, the economy exercised in the use of material, the low salaries paid, these and other conditions that too frequently prevail in philanthropic work have done much to obscure the real educational value of the kindergarten. . . . The teacher often undertook her work as a labor of love and asked for no remuneration. If salaries were paid, they were wholly out of proportion to the services rendered (p. 126)."

The negative inheritance from those early kindergarten enthusiasts persists in the expectation that psychic rewards are adequate compensation, that work with young children and their parents is so fulfilling that any mention of higher salaries or public funding somehow defiles its sentimental sanctity. As we prepare to enter the 21st century, it is time to move beyond charity, sentimentality, and sisterhood with evidence that child care is a worthwhile public investment.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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The Oldest Child Care Centers in the United States and Canada

Organization	Location	CEO	Founded
Graham-Windham	New York, NY	Joyce Lapenn	1835
St. Vincent Home	Philadelphia, PA	Sister Dorothy Arthur	1854
Rochester Children's Nursery	Rochester, NY	Michelle Prince	1857
Leake and Watts Services Inc.	Yonkers, NY	James Campbell	1860
Toledo Day Nursery	Toledo, OH	Jean Kwait	1871
Leila Day Nursery	New Haven, CT	Judy Hanf	1878
Golden Gate Kindergarten Association	San Francisco, CA	Beth Coffman	1879
Virginia Day Nursery	New York, NY	Cordelia McNish	1879
Center for Families and Children	Cleveland, OH	Sondra Jones	1882
Edward Street Day Care Center	Worcester, MA	Doryl Rourke	1883
Springfield Day Nursery	Springfield, MA	James Bell	1883
Lowell Day Nursery Association	Lowell, MA	Jo-Ann Spence	1885
Fruit and Flower Day Nursery	Portland, OR	Roberta Recken	1885
Cheerful Home Daycare Association	Quincy, IL	John Roope	1886
South Side Day Nursery	St. Louis, MO	Marlene Levine	1886
Associated Day Care Services	Boston, MA	Douglas Baird	1886
Creche Child Care Center	Omaha, NE	Liz Kearney	1887
Montreal Day Nursery	Montreal, Quebec	Joan Alexander	1887
West Side-East Side Child Care Centers	Columbus, OH	Kathy Tartal	1887
Memorial Day Nursery	Patterson, NJ	Georgette Hauser	1887
Sheltering Arms Child Development	Atlanta, GA	Elaine Draeger	1888
Lincoln Day Nursery	Philadelphia, PA	Marcellina Keith	1889
St. Michael's Day Nursery Inc.	Wilmington, DE	Helen Riley	1890
YWCA Children's Center	Richmond, VA	Darren Phelps	1890
Camden Day Nursery	Camden, NJ	Cheryl Williams	1890
Victoria Day Care Services	Toronto, Ontario	Sara McColl	1890
Brooklyn Kindergarten Society	Brooklyn, NY	Gloria Lanza-Bajo	1891
Terre Haute Day Nursery	Terre Haute, IN	Marlene Mayfield	1892
Pawtucket Day Nursery	Pawtucket, RI	Barbara Cavallaro	1892
Salvation Army Day Care Center	Philadelphia, PA	Julia Brooks	1892
Children's Day Nursery	Passaic, NJ	Maureen Peterson	1893
Winifred-Wheeler Nursery School	Bronx, NY	John Sanchez	1893
The Lenox Hill Neighborhood House	New York, NY	Nancy Wackstein	1894
Brockton Day Nursery Inc.	Brockton, MA	Donna Hruniak	1894
Community Day Nursery	East Orange, NJ	Suzanne Zimmer	1894
Hudson Guild	New York, NY	Janice McGuire	1895
The Waterbury Day Nursery Association	Waterbury, CT	Richard Pelletier	1895
KCAA Pre-Schools of Hawaii	Honolulu, HI	Jimmy McCoy	1895
Ossining Children's Center	Ossining, NY	Howard Milbert	1895
New Rochelle Day Nursery & Kindergarten	New Rochelle, NY	Susan Kuper	1895
Colorado Springs Child Nursery Centers	Colorado Springs, CO	Diane Price	1897
Sayre Child Center	Bethlehem, PA	Kathleen Moan	1899
The Child Care Group	Dallas, TX	Madeline Mandell	1901
Day Nursery Association of Indianapolis	Indianapolis, IN	Barbara Batchelor	1901
St. Peter's Home	Manchester, NH	Sister Florence Therrien	1902
Mile High Child Care	Denver, CO	Anna Jo Haynes	1902
Stamford Child Care Center	Stamford, CT	Jane Norgren	1902
Jenkintown Day Nursery	Jenkintown, PA	Jan Nicholas	1903
Colony-South Brooklyn Houses	Brooklyn, NY	Balaguru Cacarla	1904
Louise Child Care	Pittsburgh, PA	Mark Stephen Bibro	1904
Gate City Day Nursery Association	Atlanta, GA	Pennye Hicks	1905
Christopher House	Chicago, IL	Joseph Corrado	1906

Federation Day Care Services	Philadelphia, PA	Norman Finkel	1906
New London Day Nursery	New London, CT	Thomas Gullota	1906
Kings Daughters Day School	Plainfield, NJ	Holly Seplocha	1906
Neighborhood Centers Inc.	Bellaire, TX	Angela Blanchard	1907
Queens Daughters Day Care Center	Yonkers, NY	Barbara Berrios	1907
Poughkeepsie Day Nursery Association	Poughkeepsie, NY	Jeanne Wagner	1907
St. Elizabeth's Day Home	San Jose, CA	Sister Mary Leonard Donavon	1907
North Avenue Day Nursery	Chicago, IL	Thomas Layman	1908
Evangelia Settlement	Waco, TX	Jenny Reese	1908
Day Care Center of McLean County	Bloomington, IL	Leigh Egger	1908
Childhaven	Seattle, WA	Patrick Gogerty	1909
Day Nursery Association of Scranton	Scranton, PA	Robert Frein	1909
Pasadena Day Nursery	Pasadena, CA	Jacqueline Schafer	1910
Andrew Fleck Child Care Services	Vanier, Ontario	Elsie Chan	1911
Catholic Charities of Buffalo	Buffalo, NY	Sister M. Gracille	1911
Early Works Inc.	Portsmouth, VA	Martha Williams	1911
Saint Vincent's Day Home	Oakland, CA	Sister Corinne Marie Mohrmann	1911
Holy Family Day Home	San Francisco, CA	Sister Ann Murphy	1911
Long Beach Day Nursery	Long Beach, CA	Mary Soth	1912
Middletown Day Nursery Association	Middletown, NY	Tekki Reszenski	1912
North Side Child and Family Development Center	Columbus, OH	Toni Burkholder	1913
Marillac House	Chicago, IL	Sister Yvonne Thranow	1914
Christ Child Day Nursery	Cincinnati, OH	Peggy Brown	1915
Phoenix Day . . . a child development center	Phoenix, AZ	Elaine Okayama	1915
St. Vincent De Paul Center	Chicago, IL	Sister Catherine Mary Norris	1915
Bay Ridge Day Nursery	Brooklyn, NY	Joyce Cossett	1917
Eastside Neighborhood Services	Minneapolis, MN	William Laden	1917
Jamaica Day Nursery	Jamaica, NY	Juanita Johnson	1918
St. Vincent's Day Care Center	Evansville, IN	Sister Patricia Dunne	1918
Boulder Day Nursery Association	Boulder, CO	Andrea Fishman	1918
Richmond Day Nursery Association	Richmond, IN	Dorothy Atkinson	1919
Memorial Community Center Day Care	Cincinnati, OH	Rose Marie Weishaupt	1919
Encompass Child Care	Green Bay, WI	Rose Dobkoski	1919
Christina Kent Day Nursery	Albuquerque, NM	Carole Cabiedes/Julie Herzog	1919
Volunteers of America Child Care Centers	Sioux Falls, SD	Denny Barnett	1920
Lesley Ellis School	Arlington, MA	Rachel Orefice	1920
Grace Day Home Child Care Center	Sacramento, CA	Nancy De Armond	1920

Notes: Organizations listed have provided non-residential child care services from the “founded” date in at least one of their centers. Information provided by organizations listed. In many cases, the oldest centers were merged into newer child care organizations or have had their names changed.