

Men's (and Women's) Role in ECE

Perspectives from our shared past

by Dorothy W. Hewes

Although fathering has become recognized as a vital element in the lives of young children, few men work in preschool classrooms. If we consider that "ECE" now stands for Early Care and Education, this historical perspective provides some clues about why we still have a sex role division between the *care* of young children and their *education*. In 1620, Pilgrims we honor at Thanksgiving settled in New England so that they could practice their own religion. Their Geneva Bible became a determining factor in our male/female relationships. In Genesis, God told Eve that Adam should rule over her. This meant that the colonial father was a surrogate for God, manager of the household's financial affairs and dominant over all those living within it.

When colonial ministers established the basis of today's educational system, they incorporated the teachings of Martin Luther. After breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church in the mid-1500s, Luther had advanced the radical idea of public schools for both boys and girls. He also started translations of the Latin Bible into other languages so that everyone could gain salvation. In 1642, the Massachusetts

Bay Colony passed a law requiring families to teach their children to read. They had to be literate when enrolling in the first public schools that opened five years later. Fathers were given major responsibility for teaching them, with lessons usually starting by age three.

The Bible also said that to spare the rod would spoil the child. Discipline was of critical importance. Whippings were both a reinforcer of education and an indication of loving concern. If a boy got a whipping at school, his father might give him another when he got home. Although discipline was strict, evidence of paternal caring can be found in journals and letters. Cotton Mather, a colonial minister, wrote in his diary that "When the Children at any time come my way, it is my custome to lett fall some Sentence or other that may be monitory and profitable to them." However, corporal punishment was the dominant method of parenting. John Witherspoon's 1802 "Letters on Education" were typical, emphasizing absolute authority over children. "Since the rod is the evidence of love, what is said of our Father in heaven, 'Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, he scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.'" It was

not until 1892 that Kate Douglas Wiggin predicted, "It seems likely that the rod of reason will replace the rod of birch."

Parental roles and teaching methods began to be modified after educational leaders visited Pestalozzi's Swiss boarding school between 1805 and 1825. They observed male teachers conducting a program that alternated lessons and games, with children encouraged to explore the natural world and to discover things for themselves. (Our preschool "science tables" date to this period.) Curiosity was encouraged and there was no corporal punishment. Importation of his system opened the doors for women teachers when some of America's first normal schools were opened by Pestalozzi's advocates.

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The label of “Farms to Factories” has been applied to the period beginning around 1830. During the previous two centuries, most families shared agricultural duties or lived in small towns. As the middle-class developed, fathers became preoccupied with making money and establishing businesses. Mothers began exerting more power inside and outside their homes. Relaxed religious views and improved literacy for girls, together with cheaper printed materials, brought about a “cult of true womanhood” through magazines and guidebooks. Mothers could take time for outside activities without losing their virtues of “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.” However, another class of Americans had developed as the population grew through immigration and reproduction. There were now pockets of extreme poverty in the expanding cities, with entire families working in the textile mills and other industries.

It was into this altered environment that the kindergarten was introduced to America in the 1860s. After observing Pestalozzi’s methods, Friedrich Froebel had opened a boarding school for boys and girls in 1816. His 1826 book, translated as *Education of Man* (although he had used a German term that included both sexes), described a method of learning through self-activity. After he became concerned because children entering his boarding schools were lacking in preparation, he developed the kindergarten in which children aged three to seven learned through play. It introduced such elements as blocks, circle time, and sand tables — the basis for our early childhood education of today. That first “institution for the training of little children” opened at Blankenberg, in what was then eastern Germany, in 1837. His partners were his wife, his brother, and former soldiers who had become his friends in the war against Napoleon. Observers wrote that they were all much loved by the young

students. One indication is Froebel’s coat, in the museum located in his boyhood home, with its “Captain Kangaroo” type pockets that were repeatedly pulled loose by children hanging upon them and then stitched back with threads that don’t match.

In our consideration of sex roles, however, a critical point came early in Froebel’s plans. He respected women’s abilities, perhaps because his minister father had enrolled him in a girls’ elementary school instead of the one for boys. When Froebel could not interest fathers to support his plan, he turned to mothers and other women. At the formal opening of the first kindergarten, in 1840, he appealed to “German Wives and Maidens” to establish an institution for the training of governesses and teachers. From that point onward, Mothers Clubs and kindergartens with training classes began their spread across Europe. Disaster struck in 1851 when a government decree closed the Prussian kindergartens on the pretense that Froebel was an atheist and a socialist. It is generally agreed, however, that the main concern was his preparation of women teachers. Even with the overwhelming support of Germany’s major

“A young child ought not to suspect it is possible for his parents to think differently concerning to what relates to his education . . . If your marriage has been an unfortunate one — if the influence of a father may not be trusted — or if he delights in thwarting your well meant endeavors — I know not what to say . . . If such be your unhappy lot, pray to God and he will give you light to make the path of duty clear. He alone can help you.”

Lydia M. Child, (1831),
The Mother’s Book. Boston

educational officials and organizations, the ban continued until 1860. Froebel died “of a broken heart” in 1852, but his widow and others continued his work.

Elizabeth Peabody, the eccentric Bostonian who opened the first English-speaking kindergarten in 1860, carried out her “crusade” for the next 20 years. Her version of the system, taught by women, was carried out through dictated and structured lessons. She warned that salaries were so low that kindergarten teachers must be “above mere pecuniary motive” as they worked with God on the paradisaical ground of childhood. Christian service meant that women became volunteers in kindergartens and men contributed financially to their projects. By 1880, many of the 400 kindergartens in the United States were their “caring” programs in poverty areas, often in settlement houses.

Although Peabody’s dedication was important, a more authentic kindergarten methodology became known in America primarily through German immigrants who had fled the country after an aborted revolution of the 1840s. Some demonstrated his egalitarian sex roles. For example, John Kraus had been a friend of Froebel and Maria Boelté had studied with his widow. They met after coming to the United States and married in 1873. A major contribution was their co-authored *Kindergarten Guide*, published in 1877. Together, they operated a New York Seminary that graduated 1,200 kindergarten teachers before closing in 1913. In a letter published in Peabody’s *Kindergarten Messenger*, in a presentation to the National Education Association and at other times, Kraus emphasized that both men and women should teach young children. In kindergarten classrooms across America, however, women teachers survived on meager wages or were volunteers because breadwinner husbands approved.

The feminist campaign to get voting and other rights to women had little effect upon paternal responsibilities and maternal submission. A parallel movement, the development of domestic science in the 1890s, was designed to dignify homemaking. It evolved into college home economics departments, where most preparation for ECE teaching still takes place and students are almost always female. The late 1890s and early 1900s also saw the emergence of several professions related to families and young children, including child psychology. As Hulbert has pointed out in *Raising America*, male experts of the 20th century became purveyors of enlightened parenthood. They developed the skills of mothers but reduced fathers to amateur status. For example, the four million copies of the U.S. Children's Bureau bulletins distributed between 1914 and 1925 were for "the average mother" but didn't mention fathers at all. Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care* became a best selling guide for mothers after its first edition in 1946, but it was not until 30 years later that he began to include fathers as parents.

Patty Smith Hill, a classroom teacher who had been part of the "Progressive Kindergarten" movement since the 1890s, was invited to give a series of lectures at Teachers College, Columbia University, in 1905. She became a permanent member of the faculty and her ability to relate to male colleagues helped her rise to full professor by 1922. When public schools began to enroll most of the nation's four and five year olds, she recognized the needs of younger children. Her 1926 "Committee on Nursery Schools" included both men and women. They organized the National Association for Nursery Education (NANE), with George Stoddard its first elected president in 1931-33. Its Executive Committee consisted of 21 members, with four of them male university professors. One was Arnold Gesell, who is credited with coining the

terms "child development" and "preschool child" at about this time. Topics of discussion at their 1931 conference included whether the nursery school "took her job away" from the mother and how "the father as well as the mother is losing out in modern civilization." Stoddard later wrote about his "sense of being in a real educational movement that had men's liberation as an important factor" during this period.

NANE, which became the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in 1964, influenced standards and teacher training for the federally funded WPA nursery schools of the 1930s, the WWII Lanham Act child care centers of the early 1940s, and Head Start programs established in 1965. However, even though James Hymes and other male members of the association administered these programs, classrooms were almost entirely staffed by women. NAEYC now actively (but with little success) supports male teachers through its policies and its Men in Education Network.

One positive development began in 1945, when most federal subsidies stopped at the conclusion of World War II. As men were discharged from military service and women who had held paid employment returned to motherhood by producing the Baby Boom generation, many were relocating far from their original homes and family members. A new need was fulfilled by parent cooperative nursery schools, morning play groups organized by middle-class mothers and supportive fathers. There had been a few before the 1930s depression, but the first spurt of interest came in the 1950s. There were about a thousand by 1960, sited in parks, churches, or their own buildings. Mothers usually participated one morning per week as an assistant to the teachers. Fathers were involved with maintenance or services related to their professional occupations, but efforts

were made to increase their classroom participation. By 1968, co-op advocate Katharine Whiteside Taylor wrote in *Parents and Children Learn Together* about the importance of exposing children to "satisfying experiments with a male personality." She noted that, "Often the men have felt unimportant and sort of like side wheels. Unfortunately, many times this has been true. But it is hoped that more and more groups will see the wisdom of working for a balance of the sexes." Beginning in the 1970s, more fathers began volunteering in the classrooms. Manuals originally referring to mothers now use "parents" or similar sex-neutral terms and governing boards include men on an equal basis with women. Despite increased employment of mothers, co-ops have continued and it is now estimated that there are about 5,000 in the United States. They demonstrate how well men can fit into both "care" and "education" for young children — but we cannot ignore the fact that only the supervising teachers are getting paid for their work.

We also cannot ignore other factors related to father involvement. For example, his role in childbirth had consisted of taking the mother to the hospital when labor pains began and then waiting until he could look through a window at their new son or daughter. By the 1960s, groups of prospective parents were taking courses in preparation for the great day and fathers could assist in the delivery room. Another change is suggested by the Men in Education Network bumper sticker: *Men who change diapers change the world*. Could it be that disposable diapers invented in 1961 might be viewed as masculine "technical equipment" while cloth squares with safety pins are part of women's laundry work? There are obviously multiple reasons for men confidently assuming tasks that were traditionally done by women. An estimated 20 percent of children below the age of five are cared for by their fathers full or part time.

"It is one of the peculiar characteristics of women that they are able to attend to so many things at one time. Their lives are so usually encumbered with detail that they have acquired the faculty of passing rapidly from one subject to another, added to which their sympathies and their perceptive powers are quicker than those of men, so that they are both stirred to action and able to grasp their objects more readily."

Georgiana Hill, (1986),
Women in English Life.
London: Richard Bentley, p. 233

This should improve the image of males in child care classrooms. Despite low pay and low prestige, those who are already working with young children are experiencing the intangible rewards that women have enjoyed since the days of the Froebelian kindergartens.

This historical perspective cannot delve into current efforts to increase the numbers of men working in classrooms for young children. What the final paragraphs can do, however, is to refer back to the first one. In many ways, we seem not to have changed much. Current legislative efforts and some prominent experts maintain attitudes similar to those of past eras. An emphasis upon early reading has been maintained, despite research about "multiple intelligences" and developmental diversity. The web site of Mothersandmore.org reflects the 1800s "true womanhood" pride with its mission statement that "All the work that mothers do — paid or unpaid — has social and economic value." Syndicated advice columnist John Rosamond still recommends spanking and isolation for children who do not conform to parental authority. The Distar methodology closely resembles the structured discussions in Elizabeth Peabody's kindergarten of the mid-1800s. There are countless more parallels between contemporary beliefs and those of the founding fathers (and mothers).

One landmark of recent decades was President Nixon's veto of the 1971 Mondale Act, which would have established national guidelines and federally supported child care on a sliding scale fee basis. It had passed the House and Senate with comfortable margins, but a tremendous last-minute protest was coordinated by some religious groups. Nixon's reasoning? He said it would "tear babies from their mother's breast" and would be against the sacred family-centered approach to child rearing. We remain the only major nation in the world without a federal system of early care and education. We might note that fewer than one fourth of the CEOs listed in the January/February 2004 *Exchange* article about the 40 largest "For Profit Child Care Organizations" had feminine names. The two men who were interviewed had come from business enterprises, reflecting the colonial expectation that men will be financial managers while women care for children. If there were more men in the classrooms, would ECE be given more respect and more financial support? If ECE gave them more respect and financial support, would there be more men in classrooms? What will our history tell us in another hundred years?

Suggestions for further reading

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Online resources

MenTech (formerly Men in Child Care and Elementary Education Project):
www.menteach.org

Mothers & More: www.Mothersandmore.org

Parent Cooperative Preschools International:
www.cooperative.org

"By the nineteenth century, many women were no longer willing to support the old fictions of male guardianship of the female, which included the concept of women's intellectual, social, and legal minority. They had knowledge and skills often unavailable to men, talents that were crucial to the task of making urban society workable. Activists began to insist on partnership roles with men and a social, economics, and legal status commensurate with the functions they were performing. The doctrine of 'included interest' was exploded forever."

Elise Boulding, (1976).
The Underside of History — A View of Women through Time.
Boulder, Co: Westview Press, p. 690