

# Beware the two legged stool

## the systematic marginalisation of parents as educators

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In days gone by when all stools were crafted with wood, they either had four legs or three. Three is the minimum number of legs for a wooden stool to be functional. The young genius Buckminster Fuller discovered, during a model making exercise while still in kindergarten, that three is also the most stable number for engineering construction. During his illustrious career he went on to invent the geodesic dome, and you might have a derivative climbing frame at your centre.

The most stable “construction” when looking at early childhood education is also based on the number three: there are the parents (including extended families), their children, and the childcare service the parents choose which fits their family requirements. Looked at in this way, one might argue that the parents are the “primary leg of the stool” for without them there wouldn’t be children. I would suggest that at the policy making level, the structural level, the level of power dynamics and at the every-day practical level, parents are neither seen nor treated as a pivotal part of this triad, this three-way partnership.

### **Early childhood centres, including Kindergartens**

Although parents might feature in a centre’s policy, their presence is for the most part token. In too many centres parent involvement amounts to a greeting while dropping their child off, a farewell when picking the child up, and entries in the child’s portfolio. Of course there are exceptions and these are found within centres where the staff there make a unilateral decision, based on their own beliefs around ethical partnership, to invite parents into a more meaningful partnership. Notice the power dynamics though: the parents are the ones being invited, not the ones initiating the partnership. Still, parents who attend centres like this are almost always grateful that they are considered in the equation.

### **Playcentre, an educational exception**

The Playcentre service is one exception, it is set up structurally as a parent cooperative. The governance and management is the province of the parents. It is parents who decide how their centre will be organised because it is their centre. The Playcentre organisation understood from its inception that education was pivotal for “all three legs of the stool” and has, for more than sixty years, provided and sourced education for themselves, the parent-teachers:

- for the benefit of their children: the curriculum includes child development, child-chosen play as the vehicle with which to meet curriculum requirements, the setting up of the environment so as to meet children’s developmental needs...
- for the smooth functioning of the centre: the many business, administrative, technical skills required for “owning”, managing and running a successful early childhood education cooperative...
- for their own benefit: all of the above, plus professional development in personal growth, communication skills, emergent leadership training...

It is the parents who provide the programme of education both for themselves and for their children. Small wonder that many of the elders in the NZ early childhood family are graduates from this grassroots organisation. But Playcentre, set up in a different era, is facing some major challenges as society changes.

### **The times they are a-changing**

The economic climate and employment patterns are changing with more and more parents moving into full time work earlier after the birth of their children. To accommodate the infants and children of these parents, an industry in childcare has grown, and grown so rapidly that the demand is currently ahead of supply for centres. There is a shortage of teachers nationwide and as fast as one intake of trainee teachers graduates, new centres come on stream. The teacher shortage has sparked a very public debate about whether or not those who care for young children need to have a degree. Surely, they say, all the child requires is someone who is loving and kind. How, they wonder, will knowing about Lev Vygotsky or Jean Piaget benefit an infant in any way? And they have a point. Understandably, those who have worked so hard to have educational opportunities available to the teachers in early childhood centres are defensive, they are defending their achieving educational opportunities for early childhood workers - and they have a point.

## How far is too far?

When early childhood teachers claim that children deserve to have trained teachers who would argue? When they argue that to educate small children you benefit from being trained, most would agree with that position. But when the early childhood sector claims that you cannot educate young children without being trained they are taking the point too far. In taking that intransigent stand they unwittingly chisel away at the “parent leg” of the stool. Such a stand undermines the role of parenting, yet again. Parents are not trained in the development of their children, and with few exceptions, they have little or no access to an education equivalent to the one early childhood teachers have won through their lobbying, and for which the parents are paying with their taxes. If the parents were *extremely* lucky, they may have been selected for the Parents As First Teachers (PAFT) programme, the only national state funded parent education programme. It consists of 36 hours spread over three years, one hour a month. A meagre 36 hours. Yet even that makes the most difference for families lucky enough to ‘draw the long straw’.

## Remuneration and valuing

Our society remunerates employment in ratio to the way those with the power to make decisions about remuneration see value in the employment. It is not incidental that care of the youngest citizens and care of the oldest citizens are among the least valued occupations in our society and until recently have been among the lowest paid occupations, erroneously considered unskilled labour. The early childhood sector is succeeding in changing that. With their strategic lobbying for educational qualifications and for pay parity with teachers from other services they are lifting the way society sees them as a whole. Is there room, with their hard-won gains, to extend generosity of spirit and factor parents in as a partner, a partner who is not undermined (albeit unintentionally) by early childhood industry dialogue, professional press releases, and by conference papers?

## Parents need a leg to stand on

By nature of the life cycle, most people become parents when they have student loans, are resuming study, have mortgages, are learning to parent, to advance in their careers, to referee junior soccer and generally just hold their heads above water. They don't have access to a parents' union to lobby on their behalf, or even to a community parent advocate such as the visiting Plunket nurse and Public Health nurse as in days gone by. In my thirty eight years involved with parenting education I have neither met nor heard of a parent who didn't want the best for their child. Even parents who end up doing serious harm to their children did not start out wanting that; they did not have sufficient skills to handle themselves (and their children) differently. Likewise I have not met an early childhood teacher who did not want the best for the children. Wanting the best and delivering the best are not the same thing. Dr Emmi Pikler recognised this when she said “I have no doubt you love and care for the baby, we'll show you how.” Both parents and teachers need skills to deliver the best, and this is what effective early childhood education offers. Having managed to achieve a high level of education availability, early childhood teachers are now way out in front in the “three legged race.”

## But wait. Who will advocate for the children?

Not too far down the track I believe we, as a nation, might regret how quickly we have adapted to institutional day care for infants and toddlers. Steve Biddulph in his book “Raising Babies” presents a dismal picture of the long term effects of stress on the developing child, as do the Brainwave Trust and Sue Gerhard among others. Currently the Ministry of Education is licencing for numbers which ensure there cannot be other than stress with so many infants in one room. I wouldn't like to think that a marriage of convenience drives the licencing of these “baby barns” - profit on the part of centre owners, and extreme thrift on the part of the Ministry - but it is hard to imagine what else it could be. The question remains, who will lobby for the children? Who will push to see the regulations and conditions work *for the children*? It is irrelevant to stressed children whether their caregivers earned an A plus in their developmental theory essay. What they need are teachers who intuitively, or have been trained to, set up a safe stress free environment and practice in such a way that infants' and toddlers' stress levels do not go sky high, so that cortisol levels in the their systems do not rise to the point of damaging. That comes first. ‘Learning 101’ will have informed trained teachers and Ministry advisors that **no one** learns when they are stressed\*, and stressed under-threes have their whole learning future compromised when cortisol levels rise to levels that shut down growth, openness to relationship and for repair functions in the body. If policy makers continue making policy that works against children's best interests, will trained teachers lobby for changes to those policies, will they stand strong for the children and refuse to implement damaging policies?

\*The brain does require the state of excitement *eustress* (positive stress) for learning, but beyond that level, the brain attends to survival.

### **We can win the three legged race**

And the parents? If we in early childhood cannot include parents in meaningful educational opportunities (the PAFT allotment of an hour a month couldn't be hard to beat, or at least match), we could at least stop chipping away at parents' standing. When parents tell me they feel guilty not enrolling their little ones into childcare, I look perplexed and ask why would they feel guilty? It turns out, they have absorbed the rhetoric and believe that teachers know about all children, while they are untrained and know nothing. This is no way build the strong community we all long for. In Hauraki, CAPS Hauraki has been offering Baby'space Parent-Infant classes to our community since 2005, an hour and a half a week over eight weeks with four booster classes to follow up. The results are stunning, and we are talking about a mere 18 hours now. Parents are not thick, and given an ideal learning forum they gently absorb this respectful way of being (which is inspired by the work of Dr Emmi Pikler), they relate to their children in ways that are so respectful that the child cannot feel other than safe and loved. And **the child** must **feel** safe and loved or the partnership is simply a mental construct in the parents' heads. It is not a relational energy at all, it is not the **physical reality** the unfolding-child requires to map in their world successfully. These same parents end up making their own groups when the Parent-Infant classes are over because, as one parent put it, "You cannot take your babies to other groups, the children are all feral and their parents so unaware". It seems eighteen hours can make that much difference. The equivalent of three days of learning can seed a whole new way of relating, one that cements the partnership with the parent, and at the same time, wires the child for successful future relationships.

### **I have a dream**

My dream goes something like this: early childhood centres or organisations that *really* want the best for their children, parents and themselves will find a way to offer Parent-Infant classes to parents while they are on the waiting list. If these classes were done well, the parents would stay on the waiting list. They would delay the starting time for their children to go into home-based care or centre care, because they would real-ise (make real) the value of the relationship. There would be the added benefit that when and if the child *did* enter the kind of care the parents chose, the parents and the teachers would be on the same page, implementing the same respectful approach. Early childhood teachers have worked very hard for educational opportunities to support them in doing a better job of supporting young children. We who have gained so much; can we find a way to support parents in the most important role they will ever undertake - educating their child to be a happy, intelligent being who can make harmonious relationships and friendships.

### **And the bottom line?**

I would like to see just a tiny dollop of taxpayers' money, which is given to vote education, siphoned off for parents. It wouldn't need to be great if you can do family-sized miracles with just eighteen hours of opportunity. That's value for money. The tiniest amount spent offering parents the support they need to do the job they want to do so well reaps the most... well, 'profit', since we are fixated on money. The benefit to the child, the parents, the community, and to our society is actually priceless.



### ***Parent-Infant Classes***

*The parent (on the left) watches her child climbing on the stairs - the equivalent of you standing on the dressing table for height. The woman on the right is one of two Baby'space facilitators in the room, and she is supporting the parent to observe, and to trust her daughter's capabilities.*

Pennie Brownlee