

THE EMOTIONS OF CAREGIVING

Hector was under the table, holding onto a leg and hollering. His mother was yelling that it was time to go home and was pulling on one of his legs to get him out. I was hovering ineffectually between them. I tried to both reassure the mother and explain to Hector that it was time to go home.

Every day, infant and toddler caregivers can experience the pleasure of soothing a baby, the frustration of two infants crying at once, and sympathy for an overwhelmed parent. Over the course of the day, caregivers manage a variety of pulls on their time, emotion, and energy. The tempo of the day ranges from hectic to peaceful and is always unpredictable.

Thirty years ago, in an infant centre in New York City, I spent each day with 6 two year olds. I discovered how to tune into each child and how to manage the day while minimizing the stress on the children. Each day was different and over time, I developed strategies for handling challenging situations. Some situations were more difficult than others.

Two-year-old Hector enjoyed being at daycare. He happily involved himself in a project when he arrived each day and he stayed involved in one project or another the entire time he was there. One morning, he worked intensely to figure out how to undo the drain to the water table. He succeeded and there was water everywhere. This particular day, he was engrossed with trucks.

His mother was always in motion, a young woman who liked to move fast. She was usually in a hurry to get to the next place and this day she had plans.

I was a young teacher with idealistic notions about the care of children. I tried to keep the atmosphere in the room calm and nurturing. I tried to support the parents. I cared about the children with whom I cuddled, chatted, played, and read to every day. But this day, the environment did not seem peaceful and nurturing.

The feelings and tensions described above are part of the daily life of a caregiver working with children under three in an infant or toddler daycare centre. Being in a caring and responsive relationship with infants and toddlers calls for a variety of skills, a multitude of talents, and can elicit layers of strong emotions. As Benner & Wrubel (1989)

write, “Involvement and caring may lead one to experience loss and pain, but they also make joy and fulfillment possible” (p. 3).

When a baby brightens at the sight of her special person, starts to chortle as that person gets closer, and bursts into a big smile when picked up that person does indeed feel special. The desire to protect and care for infants is not only intellectual, it is also emotional (Bowlby, 1991; Brazelton, 1983). The emotional responses of parents and caregivers to infants are based on their own history of attachment (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985), her own knowledge and understanding of infants, and the meaning she brings to her work.

I cared for Hector, I empathized with his mother, and I managed to help them get out the door. I absorbed the emotional energy of Hector, his mother, and the children in the room. Afterwards, I burst into tears. At times, the emotional tensions of the job were overwhelming.

I was twenty-five when I helped disengage Hector from the table leg. I could not articulate all of the emotional tensions I experienced which ended that day with my tears. Other days in that centre and, later, in other centres, I felt pulled in several directions. There was the question of whom to support: the parent, the child, or one’s self. There were also the issues of how much support each person needed and what the results might be. Endless opportunities existed to learn about relationships and one’s self.

While caregivers struggle to articulate the difficulties of their work and the emotions evoked, a general lack of understanding about the nature of caregiving exists. Over the years, I have heard people dismiss the work as “baby-sitting” or reduce the difficulties of the work to needing “lots of patience”. These comments and attitudes prevent the general public from appreciating the actual complexity of the work. Talking about one’s work in the face of such comments is difficult and daunting. Lally (1995) acknowledges that the real work of caregivers is obscured by the public perception “that anyone can do it” (p. 59). Caregivers may feel isolated by the lack of public comprehension of the real issues that they face.

Feminist scholars and researchers have called attention to the silence that typically surrounds women’s work. Seen as unimportant, there has been little discussion of the complexity and ethics of caregiving.

As caregivers, we make decisions about the care for a baby based on a complex array of factors, including the particular child and his family or situation. Waerness (1996) describes a “rationality of caring” which draws on *both* reason and emotion to explain the practice. Caregivers need to be both conscious *and* feeling. For example, knowing the nutritional needs of an infant is coupled with an emotional responsiveness to feeding and caring for the baby. When caregivers further reflect on how their decisions are influenced by thought and feelings, more substantial descriptions of the intricate and sensitive nature of caring for very young children will emerge.

Within this “rationality of caring”, interdependence is assumed—a value often hidden in our independence-oriented society. Babies, children, and adults alike need a secure base, a base of connectedness and caring, from which to grow and develop. As we grow older we continue to need a sense of emotional connection; it is vital to acknowledge the dependence we have on each other. When we help put on a child’s jacket rather than insist she do it herself, we model helpfulness and we have a moment of closeness with that child.

The skill and thoughtfulness needed to work with very young children and their families is not recognized by the larger society. Articulating the complexity and intensity of caring for infants and toddlers is crucial if the work is to be recognized. As Doherty (2001) notes, the lack of recognition of the skills required for caring and the high level of responsibility associated with providing childcare contributes to poor morale among caregivers (p. 23). In our society, money is often equated with the value we place on a job, but the real issue is the need for acknowledgement of the valuable contribution that caregivers make in our society and the skills that are necessary to do so.

In the last couple of years, I have asked infant and toddler caregivers to share their experiences and how they have come to interpret these experiences. All would agree with Pence and Benner (2000) that “there are no simple answers” (p. 152) in this practice of caring for babies. Caregivers frequently discussed learning to negotiate and make decisions to fit particular relationships or situations. And they talked about using their skills: their ability to use empathy, reflection, and experience to create balance in many relationships. One caregiver said, “You want to provide the best care that you can in the

best time. So you are always thinking about the other ways you could have done it that would have been better”. It is never easy to meet all the competing needs of children, parents, and caregivers.

Caregiving work may seem to be invisible and unrecognized, but each of the caregivers I spoke with felt their involvement to be important and fulfilling. I believe it is through their reflection, thoughtfulness, and attentiveness to their emotional connections to very young children that these caregivers have come to the beliefs and values that sustain good practice. They believe, as Mary Catherine Bateson (2000), an anthropologist interested in children, says:

Human infants survive only if they receive loving care. The memory of that care remains as a basis for the ability to give and receive care. (p. 187)

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