

DELINQUENT TODDLERS; A GROWING CONCERN
The number of young kids expelled from preschools is increasing

As unbelievable as it may seem, more and more toddlers are being "kicked out" of school before they've graduated from pull ups. An increasing number of day care and preschool centers in our community are having to ask more and more families of very young children to remove their child from enrollment because of anti-social behavior so serious that it has been threat to the safety of other children, and a serious disturbance to the learning environment of all. As a counselor, I find this national trend increasing in our own community at an alarming rate; without exception early childhood educators with whom I have contact have expressed concern.

Unfortunately, it is common for children who are expelled from one day care or preschool to go on to be expelled from others before parents finally begin to look for help. I personally know of circumstances in which parents have had their young children "kicked out" of at least two day care centers, with the record being five centers by age five. The tragedy in such cases is that with multiple expulsions, the child's already-damaged self concept is further distorted; he comes to believe his significance lies in being the 'best bad kid' around - and if no one intervenes, he behaves in line with that perception of himself in kindergarten, grade school, and beyond. When faced with this challenge, center owners and directors are concerned for the emotional state of the child in question - but they are also concerned for the welfare of other children in their care.

By the time a child's behavior has reached this point, it requires a team effort on the part of parents, teachers, and a mental health professional to turn it around. It involves establishing a predictable environment which meets the child's normal needs for contact, acceptance, belonging and encouragement while at the same time establishing clear limits coupled with predictable consequences - not punishment. But because all of the above is expensive in terms of time, available energy and money - most of the time it doesn't happen and the child is passed on to another center only to become an outcast once again. The saddest part of working with such cases is knowing how easily the problems could have been prevented, that the child in question is behaving exactly as his environment has programmed him to behave, and if nothing changes he will behave in the same manner when he's 50 pounds heavier.

Increasingly serious crimes committed by younger and younger children are a symptom of what's happening in our society; but the source of the problem lies in what's happening in the lives of our toddlers. We focus drug and gang prevention programs on teen and preteen populations, but by then - whatever we do it's often too little and mostly too late.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

Serious behavior problems are showing up with children from all economic levels at younger and younger ages - not because kids have changed - but because the environment in which we all live has changed, presenting conditions that often promote social and behavior problems if we are not alert to ways to counteract them. Some of those include:

- O Normal developmental processes are thwarted - Today, approximately 85% of our infants and young children are cared for outside the home, in settings in which frequent change of care givers is common. Between birth and age three, the inconsistent care commonly resulting from rotation of providers - interrupts or prevents the normal patterns of bonding and attachment so necessary for healthy social and emotional development. (Research has shown that children in child care three or fewer days per week are less vulnerable - because of the daily consistency of the relationship with the parent.)
- O Conditions under which we parent are changing - Society is becoming increasingly mobile, parents do not have the support of an extended family in child rearing matters - and more and

more parents are parenting alone. Whether single or married, when adults assume the job of parent - all are inexperienced and untrained, and most lack consistent available back up in the form of extended family, who have an emotional bond with the child and investment in his development. Many toddlers spend more waking hours with care providers than parents, and in many cases providers may have more influence on personality development than parents.

- O Family life is changing - New patterns of family living are emerging, many of which interfere with developing positive family relationships and positive attitudes and behaviors. Most such changes are the result of a shift in adult priorities related to time - at the expense of family dialog and communication, an emotionally secure environment in which children sense being valued and loved; and a predictable environment in which children are trained to develop self-control and responsible behavior through freedom within clear and consistent limits. For many families, fast food restaurants have replaced the family dinner table and the sense of family that surrounded it; for other families - meals may be eaten in front of the T.V. - in isolated shifts - with no communication between members. In society's search for expediency, the sense of family - the home 'gang'- has all but been extinguished in many settings, leaving children to search for a sense of belonging through a gang outside the home. That's frightening.
- O Many parents have unrealistic expectations of care providers - Never having been a parent before, some parents believe a provider or teacher can provide all the parenting, individual attention, socialization, and training (discipline) their child will need - relieving them of the responsibility. Being what they are, ratios of children to providers and teachers severely limits the time available for each child individually - and difficult children place even greater demands on time. The result may be that nobody takes the time to parent the child.
- O Children are often viewed as liabilities - Unlike previous generations when children were needed to contribute to the family welfare, many are now treated as non-contributing liabilities. Our style of life has changed from one in which children gained skills and a sense of belonging through working along side parents as they made a contribution to family welfare, to one in which parents do for and to, rather than with simply because it's expedient.

A general lack of information regarding the significance of the emotional and social foundation laid during the early formative years leads adults to overlook the importance of early training (discipline) on the development of life-long patterns needed for living, playing, and working in our society.

Parents and providers may nurture naturally, but be completely unaware of the necessity (or methods) for balancing nurturing with training for competency, self control and responsible behavior. Because all are important to the emotional and social survival of the child, he is short changed by well-meaning adults.

- O The second generation wave is rolling in - Because the present societal changes began a generation ago, we're now experiencing the results. Some parents lack a sense of responsibility themselves as a result of growing up with parents who had no idea how to train for a sense of responsibility, self-discipline or self-control. While some parents must leave their child in the care of others while they work to support their family, others do so to avoid the work and responsibility that goes along with parenting young children.

What is happening with adults is affecting children: a growing number of single parents face the time-intensive responsibility of child-rearing alone. The last statistics I read indicated nearly 40% of the children born in Idaho are born to single mothers and increasing numbers of local center owners express concern for children whose parents are involved in drug use or alcohol abuse - which renders them ineffective in dealing with life in general, and children in particular.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- O First, find your May issue of Boise Family Magazine and re-read Shirley King's article entitled: *Kids Without a Conscience*; and Judy Grigg Hansen's article entitled: *Gang Prevention* in which she quotes Roger Quintana, Crime Prevention Specialist for Boise Public Schools. Both articles are packed with important information and suggestions.
- O Then, note for yourself that if your child care or preschool has talked with you regarding concerns about your child's behavior - that was your wake up call, don't wait until s/he's 'kicked' out. Make an appointment with a counselor and/or parent educator who can help you with approaches to correct the problem NOW, and share those approaches with your child's school.
- O Then, note for yourself that if your child care or preschool has talked with you regarding concerns Locate and enroll in a class designed to train parents and teachers in ways to instill self esteem, self control, responsibility and positive values - and to discipline through application of logical consequences as opposed to punishment. Referral resources can be your child's care giver, friends, BFM calendar page, or your closest elementary school. Remember, a positive parenting approach - applied early - is the best, most effective, easiest, and least costly way to gang and drug proof your child.
- O Then, note for yourself that if your child care or preschool has talked with you regarding concerns. If you've been expecting your child care provider to fill all your child's needs for nurturing, training, and discipline - STOP! Those processes can be furthered by providers during the day, but ultimately they are your responsibility as parent. Best results happen when parents and providers work as partners with a unified approach, often attending the same classes related to child behavior.
- O Take a minute to consider aspects of family life in your own home and what they mean to your children. If there are ways you can increase communication by arranging more together time, then do it. Evaluate whether or not your home is one in which children feel loved and valued vs. just being told they are. If it isn't, then plan how you can change that, and do it. Finally, honestly assess whether home life involves activities that pull members together as a cohesive unit, with a sense of family identity. If not, then figure out what you could do to make that happen, and then do it. Building a 'gang' to belong to at home is important; these years with your child are not a dress rehearsal.
- .O If we don't equip ourselves with the knowledge necessary to train our four year olds, God help us when they're 14.

By Vivian Brault, M.A., Counselor

Complimentary Copy from Directions – 208/376-4249
Visit our Website at: www.parentingpath.com