

Parenting by Proxy – To What Purpose? At what cost?

The tiny tot emerges from his new school, beaming in his school uniform, satchel on his back... The two-and-a-half year old is enrolled in Perth's St Hilda's School new junior kindy. The school is the latest in a string of private schools across the country bent on increasing school enrolments by attracting pupils very, very young.

It's proving very popular with busy affluent parents keen on the idea of putting their infants and toddlers into "enriching learning environments".

The Methodist Ladies College in Melbourne has no trouble filling its "outstanding early learning program" for boys and girls aged six weeks and over.

The Cathedral School in Townsville boasts it offers babies a stimulating environment for promoting fine and gross motor skills, as well as sensory development.

There's plenty of time for all this stimulation and enrichment – most of these schools are willing to take these youngsters from 7.30 am to 6.00 pm, with a solid five hours of "schooling" in the middle.

St Hilda's proudly promotes its daily program: collage making, story reading, art, number and letter rhymes, music, yoga, soccer – but no mention of the compulsory nap. Perhaps they decided down-time was unlikely to impress the high-achieving parents lining up to get their toddlers on the fast track.

What a cynical exercise. Shame on these schools for conning parents into believing that children of that age benefit from this crazy hot-housing.

If these programs are indeed put together by trained early education teachers, they should know better. Basic knowledge of early childhood development shows infants and toddlers are unlikely to thrive when they are separated from their primary carers for such long hours. And surely they learned something about the slower pace of tiny children, who need time to explore their world.

Walk down the street with a two year old and watch as the child stops to pick up a leaf, or dawdle along looking over a shoulder to examine his shadow or decides to sit down and look at her feet. Time is slow, the world is fascinating.

So what are parents doing cramming these little children into uniforms at day-break, rushing them into cars and dumping them at so-called "schools"? The educational hook provides a convenient excuse to allow parents to justify their choice of minimalist parenting.

For five years I lived in New York, where minimalist parenting was an art form. There was a child-care centre opposite the apartment where I lived and I'd watch sleepy

toddlers dropped off well before sunrise and picked up long after dark, often not even by their parents, but night-shift nannies.

Sports clubs were available to take older children off your hands, not only every afternoon, but all weekend, until late Sunday evening. That would never happen in family friendly Australia – or so I thought.

Last year Queensland newspapers reported that child care services in seaside resorts were under pressure to open on Christmas day – sometimes to help parents forced to work, but often because parents wanted to have a good time without the children. So let's not kid ourselves that parents are putting babies or toddlers into this dubious new school care because they have no choice.

The high fees demand high earners – often affluent, two-income professionals who don't want children putting a brake on their high-flying careers. The real choice we should question is why they have children if neither parent is willing or able to cut back for a few years to provide some slack in the system.

The hot-housing may well misfire. We now know that spending long hours in even the most stimulating group care does not set children up for a brilliant school career.

Solid international research from both Britain and the US shows these children are at risk of developing problem behaviours – aggression, disobedience, conflicted relations with teachers, poorer work habits and social skills – which make for a very bumpy life in school.

So here are children who start off with one of life's great bonuses – educated, successful parents.

How sad that they miss out because they hardly ever get to see them.

© Bettina Arndt February 2007. Bettina Arndt is a Sydney based writer who over many years has explored a wide range of social issues.