

"We can no longer afford to neglect early childhood education"



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High-quality child care is crucial for a well-functioning society and economy. Every family is entitled to child care services, according to Martin Hafen of Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts.

What do you think is best for children?

Martin Hafen: There is solid empirical evidence showing that parents want the best for their children. Parents care about their children's well-being, and that's certainly true in socially disadvantaged families. Those families often do an incredible job with very limited resources, relative to the resources of wealthier families.

But the real question is this: What do children *need*? Researchers from a wide variety of fields – neurobiology, epigenetics, psychology, developmental psychology and stress research – agree that freedom from chronic stress is most important. I'm not talking about the occasional stresses that every child experiences; these stresses help develop resilience. Chronic stress is different – and in the first few years of life, it is usually caused by violence or a lack of emotional support.

Chronic stress has serious consequences for a person's health and social behavior. Longitudinal studies have shown that massive stress in early childhood has a devastating effect on health and psychosocial development. Large numbers of children in refugee camps are affected by stress, and this is why they need appropriate psychological services.

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during the early years of their lives.

We know that at the epigenetic level, a secure bond activates an anti-stress gene that makes us better equipped to handle stress later in life. Without such a bond, stress will have a number of negative consequences.

take place in public spaces. They also show that between the ages of two and five, children engage in physical activity more often if they have opportunities to play outside, on their own – in a residential area, for example. This leads to more social contacts and helps them become more independent.

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Don't let government come between dads and kids

by Jack O'Sullivan / November 10, 2017

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time outdoors than in the past. In indoor spaces, the lighting and the lack of opportunities to look into the distance lead to the deformation of the eyeball, and thus to myopia.

SK: *This is a relatively new problem. What can be done about it?*

in 2010 by launching a complete overhaul of its approach to school instruction, which now takes place primarily outdoors. Students are no longer glued to their books or iPads, but have opportunities to gaze into the distance on a regular basis. Taiwanese schools have also abolished homework, because it is usually done indoors. Instead, children are encouraged to go outside and play.

SK: *Let's talk about Switzerland – where you live and conduct your research. People in Switzerland have a diverse range of opinions about early childhood education. The concepts and programs that are in place in Switzerland are equally diverse. What should a high-quality early childhood education program be able to accomplish?*

MH: We need to distinguish between two areas. The first is family and economic policy. Over the past 50 years we have seen a dramatic change in family structure. A very large share of women in Switzerland work part time, and only a small percentage work full time.

Approximately 50,000 female academics are not employed in their chosen profession. No doubt some of these women are staying home with their children because they want to, and that's certainly a legitimate choice. But I'm sure there is an equally large group of women who are unable to pursue their careers because of a lack of child care options.

High-quality child care is crucial if we are to bring more women into the labor

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affordable, high-quality non-family child care. If we look at other countries, it's obvious that this discussion is no longer timely. We clearly have too few child care programs, especially in rural areas, and the ones that exist are much too expensive. The average Swiss parent pays a higher percentage of the cost of non-family child care than the average parent in other countries.

The second area to consider is social and health policy. Some families are unable to provide the kind of environment their children need for healthy development - an environment that is stimulating and free of stress, and that fosters secure emotional bonds. These families are doubly disadvantaged, since in many cases they also have difficulty gaining access to existing programs.

They require additional support that is tailored to their needs - for example through the schritt:weise program, which includes home visits, or the ZEPPELIN program, which is designed to promote mother-child bonding in socially disadvantaged families.

SK: *Returning to the topic of family and economic policy: What effect does spending every day in non-family child care have on children between the ages of one and three? Is it very stressful for such young children?*

MH: Any kind of change can be stressful, and that applies to children as well as adults. Children are accustomed to being with their mothers and fathers, and in some cases siblings as well. Perhaps a grandmother is also part of

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Therefore crucial."

And that brings us to the question of quality. In non-family child care, a child's stress level is closely related to the ratio of children to adults - whether enough teachers are there to meet the children's needs - and to the training the teachers have received. Child development is a highly complex topic. In early childhood, external influences have a more profound effect than at any other time in a person's life. High quality is therefore crucial.

It is clear that Switzerland has room for improvement in this area. So in addition to high costs and a lack of child care options, inadequate staffing is another reason why so many women are unable to pursue a career. Parents may be reluctant to send their children to a center that is staffed by a large number of trainees, but too few well-trained early childhood educators.

One example: A [2016 member survey](#) conducted by *kibesuisse*, the Swiss Childcare Association, revealed that 55 percent of daycare center personnel have not completed an adequate level of education.

"It is certainly not helpful that many policymakers still believe that

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MH: Switzerland's child care centers fail to hire enough staff; burnout rates are high; teachers are required to work under noisy and other challenging conditions. Low wages are yet another issue. The result is that in the canton of Zurich, [for example](#), half of all daycare centers have unacceptably high absence and turnover rates, which makes it very difficult for teachers and children to form stable bonds.

We're not talking about certifying grandparents as caregivers for their grandchildren! But in professional settings, appropriate training is essential for high quality.

SK: *What is your vision for the future?*

MH: Ideally, the government would ensure an adequate supply of non-family child care. I'm certainly not suggesting that enrollment in daycare centers should be mandatory. But I am suggesting that every family should be able to decide freely whether the mother - or father - will stay home with a child, or whether the mother wants to pursue a career and send her child to a daycare center where she can be confident that the child will be well cared for.

"We need to defend the rights of women, fathers and families to choose what is best for them."

As it is now, women who stay home are disparaged for not working, while employed women are accused of being bad mothers. What I would like to see is just the opposite - we need to defend the rights of women, fathers and families to choose what is best for them, and we need to provide the child

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and Arts. His doctoral dissertation proposed a theory of prevention based on sociology's systems theory. For several years his research has concentrated on early childhood, which he has identified as the most important period for prevention. Martin Hafen is an ambassador of the initiative [READY!](#)

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