

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Developmental Group Care of Children: Concepts and Practice*

By Henry W. Maier. New York: The Haworth Press, 1987.  
Pp. xv + 233.

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Until recent years, the child care field has been closely associated with a *deficit model* of service delivery, which tends to take the view that most people are self-sufficient and those requiring help or services are deficient in some respect. Services provided under this model pay close attention to what an individual is not doing or cannot do, and have as their goal the reduction or elimination of that deficit. Although many child care workers have felt vaguely uneasy with such a conceptualization, most group care services have traditionally been organized under the assumptions of this model. Thus, services were child-focused, oriented towards remediation and usually delivered in formal therapy sessions.

Although the deficit model remains influential, during the last fifteen years a *developmental model* of service delivery has increasingly guided the conceptualization and organization of human services, including child care. This model is based on the belief that people can grow to their potential and learn to live effectively, given the right kinds of experiences and supports. In this model, treatment is viewed not as a formal remedial event but, rather, as any process whereby an individual's growth and development are enhanced. This framework is undoubtedly more compatible with the beliefs of child care workers who, for more than two decades, have pointed out the importance of the group care milieu as a forum where the events and interactions of daily life are transformed into growth-promoting experiences.

The most important proponent of the developmental model in child care has been Henry Maier, whose thoughtful writings have made important contributions to the child care literature for over 25 years. A former line worker and supervisor, Maier recently retired after a lengthy and distinguished career at the University of Washington but has continued his scholarly activities as Professor Emeritus at the same university. During his years in academia he has remained actively involved in the child care field, one of very few senior academics of his

involved in the child care field, one of very few senior academics of his reputation and importance to have done so. The present volume is a collection of twelve of his essays, most of which were written and published during the last decade.

As the title suggests, this book is mainly concerned with describing the major developmental needs of children and youth and examining how these can be met in nonfamilial group living. In the introduction, Maier starts with the premise that young people in group care “remain youngsters with developmental requirements the same as those of their contemporaries who are in the care of their own families” (p. 2). The goal for all children is to develop increasing mastery and competence in order to successfully negotiate the challenges of daily living. Although all children are viewed as having the same fundamental needs, one of the things that distinguishes children in group care is that many of them have not had the opportunities to acquire the level of competence that is possessed by their peers living in the community. The challenge for child care workers, as well as for anyone who would help children in group care, is to build the relationships and create the environmental circumstances that can facilitate developmental progress.

Most of the following chapters elaborate on how child care workers can ensure that group life provides ample developmental opportunities for children. Chapters 1 and 2, which are in many ways the heart of this book, show how developmental theory can help workers understand young people’s behaviors, and also suggest interventions that can aid developmental progress. These chapters merit very close reading because many important issues are covered and numerous practical, concrete ideas are provided, both on the intervention and on the program levels.

In particular, these chapters (as well as Chapters 5 and 6) highlight the importance of care giving, an aspect of the child care worker role that is often undervalued and regarded as a necessary nuisance, to be dispensed with as expediently as possible in order to get to the “real” work of child and youth care. Using developmental theory, Maier shows us how caregiving is an activity that responds to the basic needs of young people in group care for reliable and dependable caregivers who are ready to help with minor instrumental tasks as well as major crises that may arise. As child and worker negotiate the many tasks of daily life together, they become more attached to each other. With attachment comes dependency formation; the young person learns that he or she can depend on the worker. “Children securely supported in their dependency strivings are the ones who ultimately achieve secure independence . . .” (p. 48). If our aim is to help young people function

effectively and independently, care giving is the “real” work of child care.

While a developmental perspective calls attention to needs that children commonly have, Maier emphasizes the importance of dealing with each young person as an individual. This theme is discussed throughout the volume. Children within a residential unit are likely to have reached different developmental stages and each will have a unique personality and temperament. Consequently, the same handling will mean different things to different children; it is the child care worker’s responsibility to ensure that, in handling a situation, an appropriate message is communicated to the youngster. For example, two different children involved in the same incident of disruptive behavior may need to be responded to differentially, depending on the needs of each. As Maier says:

For child care workers to expect of themselves or be required by the program design “to be laterally consistent” is neither a natural nor a desirable objective. Contemporary child development knowledge suggests that the focus in care has to be upon finding a proper enmeshment with the unique child and to proceed accordingly . . . (p. 46).

Anyone who has worked as a group child care worker knows the difficulties involved in providing such individualized treatment. Cries for consistency are sure to be raised by colleagues, supervisors and even the children themselves. It is not hard to visualize a program descending into chaos and confusion where expectations become unclear and predictability is lost. Indeed, the present reviewer once worked in such a program, and it was not a pleasant experience for workers nor, likely, a helpful one for children. Evidently, individualizing treatment has its dangers and difficulties, yet Maier shows us how important it is to do so. His concern is not that there will be too much individualized handling but that individual care considerations will be abandoned in favor of organizational requirements. In his view, this will result in a group care environment where formality and universal standards will prevail, making it difficult to meet individual care needs.

One of the great challenges of child care work is to meet both individual needs and program or organizational requirements without sacrificing either. In Chapter 9, Maier offers a penetrating analysis of the strains and stresses of doing child care work within an organizational context. As he views it, the struggle is one of “reconciling *primary* care requirements of children . . . with the program’s *secondary* or-

ganizational demands . . ." [emphasis in original] (p. 161). He makes some suggestions about how this can be done but, more important, he calls on child care workers to advocate for care requirements to counterbalance the organizational considerations that tend to receive priority.

There are no easy ways in which to reconcile the two sets of needs; each has to be met if children are to be effectively served. However, Maier's reminder that child care workers should be primarily concerned with individual needs is timely and important for, in times of increasingly complex organizational systems and declining budgets, the pressures for standardization (at minimum levels) of the care function are sure to increase.

Appropriate educational preparation is important if child care workers are to be able to fulfill the complex role expectations outlined in this volume. The final chapter of the book, the only one co-authored (with Jerome Beker), describes major trends that impact the field and their implications for child care education. The authors point out that the key issue in child care education is not so much the acquisition of knowledge and skills but "learning to use what one knows contextually . . ." (p. 204). The practice of developmental child care, where events and interactions are given their meaning by the specific circumstances, decidedly calls for the ability to think and act contextually. The authors make several important suggestions, some involving considerable restructuring of child care education, about how educational programs can help child care workers develop the judgment and perspective required for effective practice.

In addition to the foregoing, the book also contains several other chapters dealing with a range of topics, from the use of space in group care to supervision. These essays are interesting and valuable in their own right but they are somewhat out of place in this volume, as they are only tangential to the topic of developmental group care. Indeed, given the importance of what Maier has to say in the essays that *do* deal with developmental child care, one inevitably wishes that the volume had maintained a tighter focus on that topic. As well, the book would have been enhanced if the author had written an original concluding chapter for this volume. Aside from serving the purpose of tying together the main themes, it would have been interesting and valuable to have access to Maier's latest reflections and observations.

These are minor shortcomings in the context of the total work which, it is hoped, will become widely used by practitioners, students and academics. The developmental perspective holds much promise for the child care field and is likely to become increasingly influential. Child care professionals will find this book an excellent source of ideas

and information. Moreover they will find that, although it is a scholarly work dealing with a complex subject matter, this is a very readable book, rich in child care vignettes and practical examples. Finally, readers will appreciate the strong sense of caring and concern for young people, and for their child care workers, that Henry Maier conveys throughout the pages of this book.

**About the Author:**

Peter Gabor is Associate Professor of Social Welfare at The University of Calgary. He has been involved in the child care field for close to two decades and has held positions as a front-line worker, agency director, government program manager, and consultant. Peter has long been active promoting child care professionalization and education; more recently he has developed an interest in, and is conducting research on, accountability and evaluation in child care.

