Changes in the Child-Rearing Environment and Their Effect on Child-Rearing Anxiety

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Abstract: The child-rearing environment has drastically changed over the past fifty years. Many factors associated with the changes in the environment have resulted in heightened child-rearing anxiety among mothers. For example, advancement of industries, urbanization, and expansion of the information society have led to a change in family structure. Nuclear families that consist of only a few members have been replacing traditional extended families. In addition, close ties to neighbors in the community are extremely decreasing. Under such conditions, many women have no experience of playing with small children until they become mothers. Feeling a great deal of perplexity and anxiety in child rearing, many mothers cannot find anyone they can consult with nearby and they have a sense of isolation. It is an important goal to foster a support system for child rearing in which mothers can enjoy taking care of their children without isolating from a society. For this purpose, it is necessary to construct a community-based system according to the current social conditions, and child-rearing environment to support mothers in their fight against child-rearing anxiety.

Key words: Child-rearing environment; Child-rearing anxiety; Child abuse; Support for child rearing; Fathers' participation in child rearing

Introduction

Child-rearing anxiety is a major concern among childcare experts today. Various analyses and studies have been done regarding its causal factors. Among them, a change in the child-rearing environment surrounding children has had a great influence on the way children are taken care of. Therefore, it is important to study how this factor is related to child-rearing anxiety.

Changes in the Child-Rearing Environment

How the environment surrounding children has changed during the past half century will be illustrated in this section.

It is certain that the social structure has drastically changed, which has also resulted in a
profound change in the family structure.

With high economic growth, industries have advanced and the information society has prevailed in this half century. Urbanization has also advanced and new cities with many high-rise buildings have been born one after another. On the other hand, open areas and green spaces where children can play have rapidly shrunk.

The status of women has also changed: The level of women’s academic achievement has become higher and many women have entered the workforce seeking self-realization.

Naturally, these social changes have affected the conditions of the family.

In the past, a family was large, consisting of three generations including children, their parents, and grandparents. Families with more than ten members were common in those days. On the other hand, nuclear families consisting of three to five members are prevalent today. In addition, many different forms of families have emerged, reflecting today’s social conditions. For example, the number of new family types, such as households consisting of singles, single parent families and households without a father due to his transfer to a remote workplace, has been increasing.

The role of the community regarding child rearing has also changed. Communication among neighbors used to be frequent and people living in the same town used to know each other’s family members and circumstances very well. Nowadays, urbanization has advanced and many people live in condominiums or apartments rather than in single family homes. Consequently, it has become typical for people to want to avoid seeming to invade others’ privacy, and as a result they do not know their neighbors’ family structures or occupations.

A good example of this is the following: A three year-old child was temporary placed under the protection of the Children’s Welfare Agency because child abuse was suspected. When the investigation was carried out, it turned out that the neighbors did not know much about the child’s family, although the family had lived in the same apartment for more than half a year. Moreover, although the neighbors were aware of the child’s frequent cries day and night, they did not pay any particular attention to them.

**How Changes in the Child-Rearing Environment Affect Childcare**

Considering the description of changes in the child-rearing environment as described above, let us now examine how these changes have affected the way children are taken care of.

In the past, children grew up surrounded not only by their parents but also by many other adults and children, including other family members, relatives, and neighbors. Various people around a child played different roles in childcare depending on their relationship to the child.

Compared to today’s one-to-one basis childcare, the way a group of adults would care for a group of children better enabled caregivers to openly share their experiences, although an individual’s privacy was likely to be ignored. In my childhood, for example, my family consisted of six children including myself, my parents, my grandparents, and two relatives who were helping my family with housework and childcare.

In those days, this was not a mere case. A friend of mine was one of five brothers and sisters, and many people were always around his family because his parents ran a small business. Adults who were not even relatives cared for the five children during the daytime. Also, older brothers and sisters took care of the younger ones and they all played together. Their way of living left a good impression on me because the brothers and sisters seemed to enjoy it, experiencing many different phases of each other’s everyday lives.

Many young women of the present generation have been brought up in nuclear families. They have grown up with little experience of holding a baby in their arms, trying to make a baby happy, or playing with children, reflecting
the decreasing number of children in the society. Then, they get married and give birth to their own child. Therefore, in many cases, the first baby a woman hugs is her own — when she must begin caring for a child for the first time in her life.

A decade ago, I was surprised at a question asked by a mother who had to take her one month-old baby for a medical checkup. She asked me how she should touch and hold her baby. I thought she was joking, but she continued seriously, “My baby does not stop crying when I hold her in my arms. I could not find any direction for holding a baby in my arms in my childcare book, and there is no manual for mothers. Please tell me a good way to hold a baby in my arms.”

She told me that she had never held a baby in her arms before. Because it was the first time that I had met a mother in such circumstances, I concluded that the generation affected by the decreasing rate of childbirth had finally arrived. Above all, I was amazed that there was no one for her to ask such a simple question until she came to me.

It was in fact true that she was holding her baby very tightly so that she would not drop her. Her baby seemed unable to move and looked uncomfortable because her mother held her so tightly.

I explained to her that there was no correct way to hold a baby, and that the mother and baby come to know how to hold and be held respectively after the mother tries holding her baby many times. I also told her that the time would come when she would know the most comfortable way for herself and her baby to hold her baby in her arms, and at that point the baby would not accept the way others would hold her and she would cry until her mother held her. Then, I had the mother try holding her baby many times until she got accustomed to doing it and felt relieved.

Since her case, I have been asked the same question from time to time. Therefore, I have come to think that the isolation of mothers has to be taken into serious consideration, rather than merely looked at in surprise.

She was an ordinary, rather intellectual woman who lived with her husband and baby in a block of high-rise apartments. Her husband was busy with work and both pairs of their parents lived far from them. She did not have friends nearby either. Accordingly, no one could come to help her in caring for her child or in solving her problems.

We have to recognize that there are many mothers like her and that it is natural for them to feel a great deal of perplexity and anxiety because they do not have experience in caring for children. Furthermore, their perplexity and anxiety will be even greater when they believe they cannot make any mistake on child rearing because they should not acquire the skill of childcare by repeating mistakes.

In the past, there were many people around young mothers who helped them or gave them advice. Not only relatives, but also neighbors gave advice when they knew that an inexperienced mother was having problems in the care of her children.

Today, people are reluctant to seem to be invading an individual mother’s privacy and childcare is carried out behind the closed door of an apartment. Inexperienced mothers are at a disadvantage when facing childcare, and something has to be done right away to help them.

Although a great deal of information is available in the present information age, mothers do not necessarily know which information to rely on. It is probable for example that they cannot find any information that fits their specific problems, which would heighten their anxiety even more.

**Improvement in the Child-Rearing Environment and Alleviation of Child-Rearing Anxiety**

Measures against child-rearing anxiety among isolated mothers under today’s child-rearing
environment are discussed in this section.

From the standpoint of improving the child-care environment, it is most important to prevent mothers from becoming isolated. In short, mothers need someone to support them so that they will avoid the sense of isolation.

The following is an example of an isolated mother who successfully alleviated her child-rearing anxiety.

A competent woman working for a publisher quit the workforce when she had a baby. She wanted to take care of her baby by herself as a mother, rather than asking someone else to do it. Her life with a baby was stimulating and satisfying in the beginning. Soon her baby began what was called, “evening colic,” which lasted for several hours in the evening. She had to spend two hours struggling with the housework and her baby’s crying every evening.

She began to wonder why she had to be with her crying baby, and remembered the days when she was at work actively editing magazines. Once when her baby would not stop crying, despite hugging or rocking the infant, her frustration reached a point where she covered the baby’s nose and mouth with her hand. The baby stopped crying for a moment and stared at her with a reproachful look. The expression on the infant’s face made the mother realize the seriousness of her actions and this is when she thought of seeking the advice of a third party for the first time.

The mother then remembered a notice of a child-rearing group posted on the wall of the entrance to the apartment building. Although she did not expect much, she joined the group and told of her experience honestly to the group members. She received positive comments from many of the members and was encouraged by them. They told her that it was not worthwhile to worry excessively about such a single problem and that her experience was very common. She was relieved to know that it was not herself alone who had worries about child rearing. What was particularly interesting was that her baby did not cry that evening.

Subsequently, she became the leader of the child-rearing group.

Someone close to the situation needs to support a mother with child-rearing anxiety by listening to her, encouraging her, and thinking about the most constructive way to help her remove her child-rearing anxiety, and which is the most quick and sure method.

Fathers are the most appropriate supporters for mothers who have child-rearing anxiety. It is natural that fathers should share the burden of childcare because they are one of the parents and close to the mothers and their children. Without fail, fathers can alleviate child-rearing anxiety among mothers who tend to have a sense of isolation.

In the past, housework and childcare were regarded as women’s duties—not men’s. However, in the year before last the Ministry of Health and Welfare (restructured into the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare) produced a poster that said, “A man who does not look after his child is not qualified as a father.” The Ministry seemed to be encouraging fathers to participate in caring for their children in order to promote childcare that is free from anxiety in a natural way. Actually, today’s fathers often actively participate in caring for their children, and not because they are forced to do so. Many fathers can be seen enjoying child rearing in a positive manner.

It is not only fathers though who can help mothers—friends, parents, brothers, and sisters, or relatives can help them. In the medical field, doctors, nurses, public health organization representatives, clinical psychologists, and caseworkers can provide them with assistance. In the community, public health organization nurses, nursery school teachers, and volunteers at public health centers, nursery schools and children’s halls can cooperate with mothers to solve their childcare problems.

The most important thing in alleviating child-rearing anxiety is to recognize that such anxiety is very common among mothers and a mother is not alone.
There is a great difference between childcare conditions fifty years ago and those today; however, it is not a question of which is right or wrong, or that is, it is not possible or necessary to rebuild the child-rearing environment of fifty years ago.

From the standpoint of public health, today’s childcare conditions are excellent: As knowledge of hygiene has been disseminated among the public and cities have acquired advanced sanitation facilities, infectious diseases have drastically decreased. The fatality rates among babies and perinatal mortality rates, which are barometers for the maternal and child health standards, are among the lowest in the world. Commodities are abundant and convenience in everyday life has increased. Accordingly, it has become easier, in a way, to raise children.

Despite all the advantages described above, many mothers have child-rearing anxiety. Therefore, it is important to analyze the cause of such anxiety and to construct a system to support them in order that they can enjoy caring for their children under the current social conditions. This is the most efficient way to alleviate mothers’ child-rearing anxiety and to promote the sound growth of children.

**Measures to Support Child Rearing**

The widely adopted measures to support childcare consist of various forms of child-rearing groups. The scale of such groups varies depending on the community. In most cases, a new group leader replaces the existing one when the latter finishes raising her own children. Despite occasional changes and diversity in the forms of child-rearing groups, they continue to exist because group members are aware of the necessity of such groups and they cooperate with each other in continuing the groups’ activities.

Some child-rearing groups originate when four or five mothers who have children in the same age group gather over tea and sweets in the home of one of the mothers. The members of such groups gradually increase and they come to use the meeting room of one’s apartment building. Some groups are organized by the local nursery center as a childcare support center for mothers in the community. Others are organized by children’s halls for the young mothers of the residents, so that they are provided with various events, study sessions, and opportunities to talk to other mothers.

Recently, various types of information on child rearing as well as support for group activities have been provided through the Internet. A list of childcare support groups is available through Internet web sites. Details of childcare support activities by medical organizations and community health centers are also available through Internet web sites.

While, childcare support staff work in a wide range of fields. In order to develop human resources associated with childcare support, deliberate consideration should be given to the content of staff training and basic instruction to be given. Close communication among workers in these areas is also necessary.

**Conclusion**

The child-rearing environment has drastically changed during the last fifty years, producing many causal factors for child-rearing anxiety. In order to alleviate anxiety among mothers under current social and childcare conditions, it is not sufficient to support only those who are involved in maternal and child health. It is vital to construct a community-wide system to support childcare, which will lead to building the community of the twenty-first century in which everyone believes in child rearing that is anxiety-free and meaningful.

**REFERENCE**