

Childcare

by Robert Jawitz

Childcare for a family of four is the second costliest budget item (less only to housing). The reason for this is that to survive in this money oriented economy, both the husband and wife must work. The income the second wage earner makes is only slightly more than the childcare costs. With the relief from high housing costs, the savings will enable one of the wage earners to stay home to rear the children.

Childcare is very demanding. Children, from early on, are seeking constant stimulation and require almost continuous attention including feeding, changing, bathing and play. The parent that accepts these duties gives up his or her adult interests (education, career, hobbies, partying) and becomes a nurse and a playmate to the children. Many parents look forward to these duties and see parenting as the legacy of his or her or their lives. Many, however, feel overwhelmed by these duties and have chosen the work force and the accompanying childcare costs as an alternative to full time parenting.

The issue of quality of childcare now comes into the equation. There should be no question that the best childcare comes from the parents, particularly the mother. The bond of the mother and to a lesser degree the father provides a level of sympathy, oversight, wisdom and sense of responsibility that no hired substitute can provide, no matter how professional or well-trained.

Still, for the parent who is overwhelmed by the childcare duties, even with the lessening of the financial strain of housing costs, some other alternatives should be available or the stressed overwhelmed parent won't give quality childcare. One alternative is for the two parents to share the childcare duties. With the lessening of housing, childcare and food costs, only one income should be required and that can be satisfied by two half-time incomes. Another alternative is to get support from the extended family, particularly the grandparents.

Grandparents also have the sympathy, oversight, wisdom and sense of responsibility that parents have and are better qualified than any paid substitute. They may even have more wisdom, because of their experience, than the parents. However, they don't have the energy. Many grandparents take the full childcare duties when circumstances require it, like for single parents, but it is a big sacrifice. The best model for the participation of grandparents is for part-time support. They should be there when the responsible parent has an emergency, has a conflict or just gets harried. They should be there to give some relief just for the parents to have some time off. But mostly, they should be there to provide the children the exposure to the wisdom and experience of another generation, to provide some-input on some difficult parenting issues and to be a warm friend to the children. For quality childcare, the frequent participation of grandparents is essential.

For this reason, RMI has developed the living model where the grandparents and even the great-grandparents live nearby. Nearby can be within the same community, but, ideally, should be in the same family compound. Here the generations can share all the duties of the homestead, including help with the family business, food production, food preparation, transportation, healthcare and childcare.