

## Yes, minister, nurseries ARE bad for children. So why don't you do more for stay-at-home mums?

By Kathy Gyngell



No place like home: Finally, politicians have conceded there is a problem with the nurseries in which they encourage mothers to leave young children

Clinging to my leg, tears streaming down his face, my two-and-a-half-year-old son begged me not to leave him. But the nursery staff prised him off and hustled me out of the door, assuring me this was perfectly normal. It was his first morning at nursery and he would, they said, soon 'settle' once I left. It felt so wrong, so unnatural not to sweep him into my arms and stay when he needed me. But all the other parents had left their children crying, too — the room was full of wailing toddlers — and the pressure for me to do the same was intense.

The next morning the same thing happened, and the next. The nursery gave me an ultimatum: I could not stay and comfort him. Either I must leave now or they could not have him at the nursery. So I left, with my son, and never went back.

I have never regretted my decision that day: I looked after my son at home until he went to primary school. Twenty years on, he is a happy, socially aware and independent young man. For years, parents like me who believe that the best place for a young child is at home with a loving parent have been ignored or mocked as smothering, over-protective mothers. Go back to work and put your child in nursery where he can socialise, we were told by 'experts' and feminists. Don't feel guilty. Unfortunately, the politicians listened — and state-subsidised childcare grew as a result. Between 1995 and 2010, mostly under the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, for children under five years old it grew by 36.4 per cent. It's been an unmonitored social experiment on a huge scale. Now, finally, politicians have conceded there is a problem with the nurseries in which they encourage mothers to leave young children. This week, Education minister Elizabeth Truss said they are producing ill-disciplined children who are unable to sit still and learn when they move on to primary school.

At last, after years of the liberal establishment insisting that nurseries are perfectly fine, a Government minister has dared to tell the truth about them.

But I am deeply concerned that her proposed solution — making nurseries more regimented and disciplined — goes nowhere near the heart of the problem.

Indeed, the tragic irony is that the plethora of unruly children ill-fitted to school coming out of our nurseries is a direct result of successive governments' tunnel vision childcare policy.

It's a policy which, through tax advantages and financial incentives, encourages mothers to go out to work, leaving young children in nurseries.



Speaking out: This week, Education minister Elizabeth Truss said that nurseries are producing ill-disciplined children who are unable to sit still and learn when they move on to primary school



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Under Labour, working mothers were championed and childcare was considered best left to state-subsidised nurseries. It was taboo even to suggest that stay-at-home mothers were performing an equally valid role. The tragedy is that the Coalition seems to be continuing in the same vein. Young children learn in a loving, safe environment. They need commitment and one-to-one time with their mother or father, and family time. This is how they learn and how they develop manners — not by 'socialising' with their peers. No matter how dedicated the nursery staff, they simply cannot fulfil a toddler's needs in a nursery setting. For a start, the adult-child ratio the Government insists on makes it impossible: with one nursery assistant having four toddlers in her care, she simply cannot devote anything like the level of attention to them that a mother with one or two children can give.

In fact, the Government actually wants to increase that ratio to allow one adult to care for six toddlers.



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Second, with their high turnover of staff, nurseries cannot offer sufficient commitment to their charges. Young children were not born to be herded. They need to develop secure relationships with the people who care for them, otherwise they become insecure.

Young children need calm. Nurseries are, generally, big noisy places filled with constant activity. It leaves small children exhausted and stressed. Even 'quiet times' are usually anything but. As for instilling discipline, being disciplined by an adult who is not their parent or a relative is confusing for very young children.

The most comprehensive research studies have shown that daycare nurseries breed bad behaviour. A study in the U.S., which followed 1,000 children from birth to 15, found that those children who spent long hours in early daycare were more aggressive than those who had been cared for at home. This is because young children are not designed to socialise in large groups of their peers. It may promote a quasi independence — but of the wrong kind.

It leads to children bullying or being bullied for social survival. 'We let them fight it out,' is how one helper describe her nursery's approach.

The best person to instil discipline is a parent, because the child naturally wants to please them. As psychologist Oliver James explains: 'A responsive mother who is there for the child in the early years is the best possible care...

'Studies show that daycare is less good for under-threes than child minders, who are less good than nannies, who are less good than close relatives, who are less good than parents.'

Boys are especially vulnerable to having a mother's loving presence withdrawn. They respond by becoming more aggressive to cover up their insecurity.

In Sweden — long held up by the liberal establishment as the shining example of daycare provision — 95 per cent of two to five-year-olds are put in daycare, and psychological disorders among children have tripled since the Eighties.

According to the sociologist Jonas Himmelstrand, this is 'at the root of bullying, teenage gangs [and] promiscuity'.



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The mothers, meanwhile, report high levels of illness and depression. Is this really what the Government wants for our children and our mothers? The politically correct assumption is that every mother is desperate to rush back to work. In fact, a recent poll showed only 1 per cent of mothers actually wants to return to full-time work. But while their every instinct is telling them, as it told me all those years ago, not to hand over their child to the care of a stranger, this supposedly 'family-friendly' Government seems bent on making that harder and harder. David Cameron and Nick Clegg make great play of their devotion to their families. Yet they are pushing mothers back to work, with tax policies that discriminate against those who stay at home.



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As a result of writing about childcare and bringing up children, I hear frequently from mothers who are distraught that they have had to return to work, leaving their children in daycare, because the Government has made it financially impossible for them to remain at home.

Not only has it withdrawn child benefit from households where a single breadwinner earns £60,000, while families in which both parents work and pull in a combined income of up to £98,000 will keep every penny, more recently it announced that families with two working parents will get tax breaks worth £2,000 a year. The message is loud and clear: neither Cameron nor Clegg genuinely value the role of stay-at-home parents. Their policies are cruel to mothers and to children, and they don't bode well for the mental health or resilience of future generations.

Cameron and Clegg should create, at the very least, a neutral tax system that does not penalise mothers for staying at home.

And they should stop ignoring what all studies, mothers' instincts and millennia of evolution have told us: that the best place for a very young child is with their mother or father.