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Kibbutz kids

Method of rearing disputed

By SOL CANDEL
KIBBUTZ EIN HASHOFET — In the Israeli kibbutz, Ein Hashofet, the birth of a child is a happy event — for the parents and the entire community. A few short days after birth, the baby is taken from the mother and placed

in a "baby house." Here the baby will eat and sleep and in successive years move from house to house, living not with his parents but with his peers.

The increasing popularity of daycare centres means that more of our children will become subject to the advantages and disadvantages of multiple mothering on a limited scale. While the kibbutz is an extreme example, comparisons can be made.

Years ago, many psychologists claimed that institutionally raised children can never grow into normal human beings.

The kibbutz has shown that though it provides something other than a symbiotic relationship between mother and child, it still satisfies the need of the child.

The best known book on the subject is by Bruno Bettelheim, called Children of the Dream. The people I talked to; a child psychologist, metapelet (roughly translated as child educator) and parents disagreed with the theories outlined by Bettelheim.

"Bettelheim has keen perceptions," said Shifra Ben Zvi, a child psychologist who studied briefly under Bettelheim when he was here, "yet he was looking through glasses tainted by American society. He based his study on a seven week stay on a kibbutz which isn't long enough and he doesn't speak Hebrew. Also things have changed since then."

MULTIPLE MOTHERING

The metapelet takes over the care of the child as soon as it stops breast-feeding. In some kibbutzim they try to take the baby off the bottle as early as six months.

The advantage in having a metapelet is that she is specially trained to do her job. The one I spoke to, named Michelle, said she gave her heart and soul to her "children." The children often feel this and give love back to the metapelet. Michelle cited an example of a child who didn't want to leave her metapelet to go out with her mother.

Thus the child's affections are divided, which, according to Bettelheim,

interferes with the depth of mutuality between the child and mother. Even beyond that he thinks it can interfere with a person's ability to be intimate with anyone in later life.

PARENT-CHILD

"Kibbutz ideologists felt that by separating economic attachments between parent and child, there would be more emotional and intellectual contact," said Shifra. "And this, I think, is a healthy thing."

Bettelheim claims that the separation of emotional from physical care weakens emotional ties. He says that because of this multiple mothering, the limited time they are together, and the apparent helplessness of parents to do things for the child, the relationship is weak.

One isolated incident which I witnessed would seem to support Bettelheim's view. It involved the death of a woman about 45 and the lack of emotion shown by her son, age 22, the day after she died.

"She was sick for a long time, it (her death) came as no surprise," he said, continuing on his day-to-day routine.

Michelle said that as a mother she sees more of her children than most mothers in the city. The children visit their parents three to four hours every day. And there usually isn't a newspaper separating the father and the child.

Both Michelle and Shifra conceded that there are times when the parent is unable to help the child. This is especially a problem when the child has a bad metapelet. "But I always felt I could go to a metapelet as a mother and speak to her," Shifra said.

THE INDIVIDUAL

Bettelheim says that individuality is suppressed by the kibbutz in favour of group consciousness. The child is kept very busy all day with never a free moment to himself. From earliest childhood he is always with his group of 10 to 15 children. They are never alone.

The kibbutz tries to instill in them the spirit of co-operation not competitiveness. Kibbutz children never fight.

A national scholastic aptitude test showed that the performance of kibbutz high school students was well above average.

One exception I found was Hanna, 18, who decided not to complete high school. "When I was younger I was always running off to be by myself or with my rabbits," she said.

"We realize that the children, especially adolescents need privacy, but economic necessity dictates that four have to live in a room," said Shifra. One recent development is that children are allowed to keep personal possessions in their rooms.

A test showed that attitudes of kibbutz-reared students are just as diverse as non-kibbutz students. The doctor hypothesized that therefore the kibbutz was not as homogeneous as Bettelheim claimed.

DEVELOPMENT

According to Bettelheim, the child's social development is much quicker than a city child's. His immediate circle of personal associations is much larger than his counterpart in Canada. Growth in this direction is encouraged and, by the time children are of school age, they identify with the entire kibbutz.

However once their psycho-social development reaches the stage where they learn to make things together, their development stops.

Their development does not go on as that of western children, who, when they reach adolescence struggle for personal identity and choose between intimacy and isolation.

"Development among kibbutz children takes longer," Shifra said. "After high school everyone has to go to the army. While they aren't independent in the army, they are freer than they were in the kibbutz."

The kibbutz has a fund which enables young people to travel around the world when they return from the army.

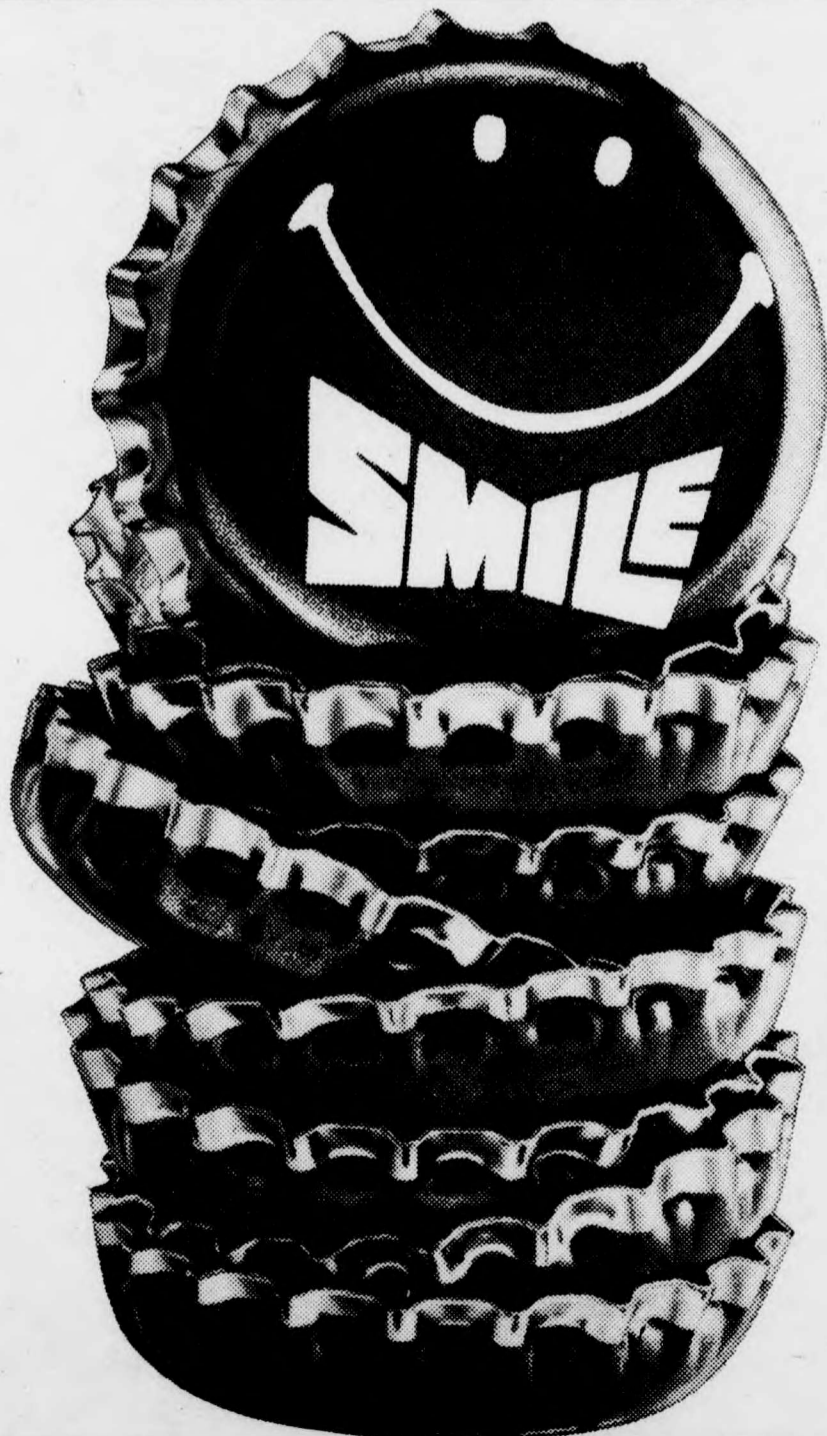
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