

Speaking Out

Prime Time Reality TV is No Place for Babies

Amy Baker and Connie Valk

Suppose that you were an infant who was handed over to a total stranger for several days. How would you feel? You would probably cry, cling, and despair over the loss of your parents. You would have a difficult time sleeping, and perhaps refuse to eat. When you were returned to your parents, you would be afraid to trust them, worried that they would hand you over to someone else again.

NBC's new series, *The Baby Borrowers*, asks five teen couples to set up a home, get a job, and care for a baby. A nanny stands by, but the nanny isn't any more familiar with the babies than the teenagers are. Parents observe and "score" the teens' parenting skills. In the episode aired on July 2, one child cried constantly in the arms of his teen father; the teen mother couldn't handle the crying and refused to care for the child. They argued over who would diaper the child, and who would pick up him up when he cried. One of the real parents became angry over the way her child was being treated, but not enough to withdraw her child from the show.

The show is meant to help the young participants to see what kind of parents they would make, to learn if they could handle adult responsibilities, and to test their relationships. Nonetheless, this is a shocking way to treat babies. Zero To Three, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting the healthy development of infants, toddlers and their families, has publicly stated that *The Baby Borrowers* "exploits young children with potential harmful consequences."

Early childhood specialists at Children's Institute agree. Research on infant brain development and attachment theory proves that infancy is the period when children learn to trust – or mistrust – the adult world. It is the time when children learn whether their feelings are important – or not.

Working parents entrust their children to caregivers every day in our society. However, quality child care programs know the importance of gentle transitions from parents to caregivers and of continuity of care for the child. Quality child care centers assign one caregiver to each child and family, and they make sure the caregiver-child-parent relationship is uninterrupted – optimally until the child turns three.

At Children's Institute, we provide research-based training and work with scores of early care and education professionals who seek current information on how to increase the quality of care for infants and toddlers. During our sessions, which are certified by WestEd's *Program for Infant/Toddler Care* (PITC), we are impressed by the enthusiasm of caregivers who want to understand more deeply the connection between brain development, relationships and healthy social-emotional growth.

Knowledgeable caregivers understand that babies must be protected, and not exploited in the pursuit of entertainment.

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