'My warning to parents is simple: one in five children put into nursery early will develop mental health problems'

By Nigel Farndale, The Telegraph 11.3.06

A paragon of bronzed Australian manhood, Steve Biddulph is not. He is tall, thin and toothy, with dark hair frosting at the temples, and a voice so soft you strain to hear it. Endearingly, when asked to describe himself, he says: "I'm awkward, anxious, gangling and uncoordinated, but it has proved…" He pauses. "No, it's too self-indulgent to talk about it." Oh, go on, I say. "No, I can't." I think he was going to say that it has proved to be an advantage - because, paradoxically, his mildness of manner gives weight and potency to his words.

This 53-year-old author of some of the world's most popular parenting books - four million sales and counting - is, in his quiet way, angry about the increasing use of day care for babies. He argues that placing children younger than three in nurseries risks damaging their mental health, leaving them aggressive, depressed, antisocial and unable to develop close relationships in later life. This, indeed, is the subject of his new book, Raising Babies, published tomorrow.

Steve Biddulph, the parenting book author, with Joseph Farndale

The Tasmania-based therapist, whose previous bestsellers include Raising Boys, directs his gentle wrath at the one in 20 British parents who "slam" their children into full-time nursery care, from 8am to 6pm, from the age of six months.

But isn't he just stating the obvious, I ask? No mother uses day care as a first choice. In an ideal world, most would rather stay at home, for the baby's first year at least, but financial considerations force them back to work. "Mmm, mmm," Biddulph says in that earnest, empathic way therapists have. "Money certainly comes into it. But the 'slammers', as I call them, tend to be affluent, urban professional couples -so they do have a choice. It is the cultural norm for everyone in their circle to use day care."

In a whispery, Antipodean accent, Biddulph concedes that what he is saying can seem obvious, however: "Only, now, there is hard science to back up the common sense. One in five children put into nursery too early develops mental health problems. If you treble the hours of care, you treble the damage.

A new study in the UK, which followed the lives of 3,000 children from babyhood, has shown that a baby's brain grows whole new structures in response to the love and caring firmness given during its first two years of life. If this kind of intense love is not given at the right time, these areas of the brain do not develop properly.

"The National Institute of Child Health and Development in the US, meanwhile, conducted a recent study of 1,000 children, which showed that three times as many children - 17 per cent - had noticeable behaviour problems in the 'more than 30 day care hours a week' group, while only six per cent had these problems in the 'under 10 hours a week' group."

In Britain, nearly 250,000 children under three attend nurseries full-time, Biddulph adds, and the Labour Government has made expanding nursery places a key part of its family policy. To this end, it has created more than 1.2 million new child-care places for the youngest children since it came to power in 1997. "The Blair Government is all about control-freakery," Biddulph says. "They want women working and babies in crèches. They even have a 'toddler curriculum' in which 'development boxes' are ticked. Who speaks for human values in all this?"

So what advice would he give Tony Blair, or indeed that father of a new-born child, David Cameron? "I'd say they should give parents an actual choice: a guaranteed return to work; the possibility of job sharing; flexible work hours and financial support for while they are still at home. I'd also say look at the Scandinavian model. They have 12 months' parental leave there. It's not gendered, so you can swap. You can do half and half, or both at the same time. It works. Even though the Swedes spend six times as much as the British on crèche facilities, they hardly ever use them. There are only 300 six-month-old babies in Sweden who go to nursery, whereas it is 30,000 in the UK.'

Biddulph paints a grim picture of British nurseries: "Babies lying in rows of cots, then milling about in garish rooms through their toddler years, aching for one special adult to love them." What no one likes to talk about, he says, is that, in nursery care, children are often looked after in bulk - on a 1:3 or 1:8 ratio, compared with 1:1 at home. "It's like fast food, we can enjoy the convenience of drive-through." The nursery staff, he adds, are often underpaid teenagers with minimal qualifications, with a turnover rate of 40 per cent a year. "The worst nurseries are negligent, frightening and bleak - a nightmare of bewildered loneliness."

I ask if there is anything more than anecdotal evidence to prove that sending under-threes to nursery leads to mental health problems. "You can measure rising levels of the stress hormone cortisol in a baby's saliva. It is so sensitive, you can take a sample from a stressed baby then, after it has had a cuddle from its mother, take another reading and it will have dropped.

The cortisol readings for children in nursery were double what they were at home." For babies under a year old you need a one-to-one carer - the same one - so that the baby can build up a relationship. "Brain development depends upon this fine-tuning between the baby and the carer."

I tell him that we have three young children and that, when my wife went back to work, each time we hired a nanny. "Well,

nannies come out a lot better in the research than nurseries," he says, "because it is a reasonable imitation of what would happen with the mother at home. Stable, kind and committed. Nannies can work well as a halfway solution, but only if parents are lucky with the person they find."

Isn't all this utopian theorising of his just about making working mothers feel guilty, I ask? "Mothers are adults and we infantilise them if we say we mustn't make them feel guilty. They are grown-ups who can think for themselves. They know that guilt is in their minds for a reason. Guilt is the reason we don't drive at 100 miles an hour through a built-up area."

Some "slammers", he suggests, end up never bonding with their children: "They can never get the rhythm. The danger for people who are only with their children half the time is that their children won't want to know them when they grow up. There are many people in Britain who barely see their parents. Perhaps once a year at Christmas. The British never had a very good handle on love."

Crikey, as Australians are wont to say. But Biddulph can get away with this generalisation because it turns out that he was born and raised in Yorkshire. His father was a draughtsman in a steelworks there. "My childhood was pretty rugged one way or another, so I learned what not to do. Self-esteem wasn't encouraged. Suppression of feelings was. But my parents did their best. At least they didn't put me in a nursery."

How was his relationship with his father? "Attenuated: 10 phone calls a year. But we really got to work on it over 12 months, then he got liver cancer and was dead within 12 weeks. We had done the hard stuff and could just enjoy each other's company and hang out."

So Biddulph wasn't in day care as a baby - yet he turned out "awkward and anxious". We'll let it go, because he also turned out to be successful in his career. And, judging by his books, he seems to have been a good father to his two children: a son, aged 22, and a daughter, 15.

Does he feel under pressure to have a perfect family? "I never do media in my own country, so as not to expose my children to that pressure." He and his wife, Shaaron, have been together for 30 years, he says, and married for 22. "We were hippies. We got married because the hospital in Tasmania wouldn't let de facto fathers be present at the birth - so we had to have a licence."

It is time for his close-up now. The Sunday Telegraph's photographer has arrived. As the picture desk has requested a baby to be in the shot, we are also joined by my one-year-old son, Joseph, and his nanny, Stacy. Biddulph muses that it was lucky that he said positive things about nannies.

As a final thought, I ask him about the self-help book industry: doesn't it work by creating problems? "I hate the self-help industry," he says. "I think it's a dreadful genre." So he doesn't think he's part of it? "No. I don't think you can change your life overnight. A book can be like a friend who helps you get a sense that other people have been there. But there are no formulas for happiness. There is only one thing that will buy wisdom in this life and that is suffering."

Crikey again. He sounds like a flagellant. "No, it's not that. It's just, if you can get through a bad time in a marriage, say, you're going to be much better and stronger for it. Some day you will wake up and feel stronger because you have dealt with something other people haven't."

In his case? He pauses before answering. "A miscarriage. It was a tough time in our relationship. But what I mean is that, generally, impressive people never have an easy life."

Life is so unfair for people who have had an easy time of it, I tease: I blame the parents. "Well, it's a high-risk strategy to advocate bad parenting," he counters dryly. Touché.