

## **Day Care Nightmare; `Prime Time Live's' Flawed Report:**

By Tom Shales,

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Diane Sawyer wades bravely into Toddler Hell tonight for a shocking 20-minute report to air as part of ABC's "PrimeTime Live," at 10 on Channel 7.

An investigative team from the show visited New Orleans day care centers that, though privately run, receive some state funds, and found two of them to be frighteningly negligent. Hidden cameras show, among other horrors, one baby being tossed headfirst into a crib, then being smacked repeatedly by an attendant.

The piece is guaranteed to give nightmares to working parents who have placed, or are thinking of placing, children in day care centers, an industry that has had a shaky enough reputation as it is.

It does seem odd, though, that only footage shot at New Orleans centers is used when, ABC News says, filming was done in 18 centers in four states over a 3 1/2-month period. New Orleans gets all the attention, according to ABC, in order to show "the range of care in the same general neighborhood and how impossible it is to know which to choose and what really goes on."

Indeed, the program doesn't offer any suggestions for choosing a day care center with confidence, other than calling up a network news division and asking it to do an investigation.

"PrimeTime Live" sent undercover producers posing as student volunteers into the centers with hidden cameras whirring. The most obvious failure of the centers is understaffing, with far too few adults around to supervise the activities of children at their most restless ages.

And so we see a child who throws up and is left without help for a long period, a 1-year-old who wanders aimlessly by himself until he arrives unnoticed in the kitchen and strikes a match (presumably the undercover producer with the camera would have intervened if he started to burn the place down), and other tykes who become virtual prisoners in highchairs or cribs, ignored for long lonely hours.

One of the centers is called the All-American School and has a

"Support Our Troops" poster on the front door. Another is called, with equally mordant irony, Enchanted World.

The report turns a bit sadistic when Sawyer gleefully shows some of the damaging footage to two parents who had just enrolled their son in one of the investigated centers. Of course the parents are appalled, and the camera zooms in, at one point in the hopes that the mother will cry. But she doesn't. Imagine how disappointed "PrimeTime Live" was by that.

This is a new kind of ambush journalism: ambushing the victims.

And the report, produced by Robbie Gordon, has a baldly condescending script in which Sawyer is called upon to belabor the obvious, to tell us what we are seeing and then say how awful it is, and to repeatedly describe the scenes at the centers as "bedlam," "mayhem," "chaos" and "total chaos."

"PrimeTime Live" has been something of a problem child itself for ABC News. The program, which no longer claims to be "live" and has long since jettisoned its silly studio audience, has yet to settle on a distinctive tone of its own. Sometimes it seems lurid and cheap. Sam Donaldson, who co-hosts with Sawyer, is a cornball embarrassment week after week, even though he remains disarming and invaluable in his role of pest and kvetch on "This Week With David Brinkley."

The segment on day care centers is certainly no masterpiece of journalism, but it does make its points loudly and unnervingly. No working parent is going to be able to watch it without feeling a terrible chill. What's a mother to do? Or, for that matter, a father? Maybe a future report will offer some guidance, or at least some hope.

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