

Assisted living, daycare can be stimulating

I have never really believed in either daycare for babies and toddlers or assisted living for the elderly.

I thought that if both parents had to work, it was better to bring someone into the home to care for the child, if it could be afforded, rather than to cart them off to daycare.

And, I thought, that the elderly, too, were better off staying in their home with someone to assist them, again if they could afford it, rather than to enter an assisted living situation.

Of course I had considered both concepts only from afar. And, as with many untested philosophies, the reality is quite different.

Because my own experience now shows I was wrong.

Drawing similarities between caring for the young and the elderly is not so unlikely.

It's actually hard not to draw parallels between my 20-month-old granddaughter and my 80-year-old mom in what is truly a circle of life.

For example, as Allyson was learning to walk, my mother became dependent on a walker.

As Allyson is picking up new words, my mom is aware that words don't come to her as easily following a slight stroke.

And now that Allyson is running, jumping and climbing, my mom has had a setback and can only get around in a wheelchair.

Luckily, both are plucky.

Allyson, who has been in part-time day care since she was 6 months old, has just graduated to the 2-year-old room along with Jack and Jordan, with whom she has shared her babyhood.

Not only has she made the adjustment, but, after a perfunctory acknowledgment she continues to play when her Mom, Dad or even Grammy (sob) come to pick her up.

She makes it perfectly clear that she's stimulated and at home away from home.

My mom, faced with surgery for a benign tumor on her back that we hope will allow her to regain mobility and relieve her pain, tries hard not to complain and doesn't let us see her tears. Luckily, she also has her "Jack," who has been both advocate and companion.

But she has resisted assisted living, preferring to stay in her own apartment

in another city with practical nurses around the clock and her out-of-town children visiting intermittently.

It's not a good situation.

The right caregivers are hard to find. Cooking nutritious meals is not part of

their job. Some have tried to take advantage of her. And, although yes, she is surrounded by her own things and in a traditional high-rise apartment building, it is an isolated existence.

I recently accompanied Observer & Eccentric book reviewer Esther Littmann to an assisted living facility, The Trowbridge in Southfield, where she gives weekly book reviews on a volunteer basis.

It was an interesting hour. Littmann brought the book "True Colors," the autobiography by Bloomfield Hills resident Patricia Hill Burnett, home to an audience of 35 or so senior citizens.

Some wore in wheelchairs and a few were accompanied by nursing attendants. Several came in late, causing Littmann to stop and aid them in finding a spot. And, at one point, she went out and asked someone occupying the adjacent hall carpeting to stop so everyone could hear.

But all except one who fell asleep for a bit were completely engrossed in the lively review, which Littmann, a Bloomfield Hills resident, punctuated with



JUDITH DONER BERNE

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2000," scholarships, loans, math-science grants and all sorts of pork?

• On the fuel tax that was diverted into the general fund instead of into transportation improvements?

• On the vast pile of proposed constitutional amendments — balanced budget, line-item veto, school prayer, term limits? Which one is most important?

How do Democrats view the heay-handed domination of their party by public employee unions? How do Republicans view what has been called the "Dixie-ization" of their party, the takeover by the old Dixiecrat states?

Electing members of Congress involves more thought than that. We all need to pay attention to congressional issues.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

Voters should focus more on congressional elections

Sometimes I fear that television, the idiot box, has reduced us to a nation of presidential personality watchers.

We ignore the U.S. Congress at our peril. And most folks do ignore our 100 senators and 435 representatives. Many supposedly literate registered voters don't know which congressional district they live in.

Voters not only will elect 435 U.S. representatives this year, but they also will decide which party controls the House. It makes a difference, you know. And Michigan has several marginal districts that will decide the balance of power.

The Hill, a Capitol-watchers' paper, headlines that "Dems take aim at 10 vulnerable GOPers..."

No. 1 Democratic target in the nation is Dick Chrysler, a first-term congressman from Brighton. "If Chrysler falls to challenger Debbie Stabenow (D), as many expect, Democrats will be deeply indebted to the AFL-CIO. Nowhere in the nation has labor's \$35 million campaign against Republicans been more

conspicuous... Chrysler won with only 52 percent in 1994 in a district that voted for (President) Clinton by a wide margin in 1992... At the very least, the race will force Chrysler to again spend heavy amounts of his own money."

The Hill says No. 4 on the GOP's national "hit list" is Lynn Rivers, D-Ann Arbor, also a first-term whose district includes Northville, Plymouth and part of Livonia.

The challenger: "Retired businessman Joe Fitzsimmons is somewhat of an anomaly among Midwestern Republican candidates: He's socially moderate and pro-choice. His millions should help defray the costs of his campaign. But they may not so easily win over the mostly blue-collar, liberal district."

Conventional wisdom is that to win the GOP primary, one must be pro-life, but to win the general election, one must be pro-choice. Well, Fitzsimmons somehow got the nomination. It's a race.



TIM RICHARD

No. 10 Republican target is veteran House Democratic whip David Bonior of Mount Clemens. Says The Hill: "Former state party chairwoman Susy Heintz has moved back into the district where she grew up in order to challenge Bonior. She decided to run only after failing to recruit other viable Republican candidates," says The Hill — on target.

Those of us who knew Heintz in her

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Lawmakers should also address elderly driving safety standards

Because my son, Nathan, is 14, I read with more than passing interest news stories about the new, three-tiered licensing standards for teenage drivers that the Michigan Legislature passed last week.

Effective next April, the law will allow would-be drivers to get a learner's permit at age 14 years, nine months. This will allow teens like Nathan to drive with a supervising adult for 50 hours, including 10 at night. It also will require them to take driver's training and be free of tickets and accidents for six months.

At that point, teens will qualify for level-two licenses, which would allow them to drive free of adult supervision from 5 a.m. to midnight. Teens can obtain an unrestricted license six months later if they are free of accidents or tickets.

This new system is much tougher than the old one, which allowed a learner's permit at 15 and an unrestricted license at 16, after passage of a driver's training course. Teens who concentrate on safe and responsible driving, however, will be able to obtain an unrestricted license under the new system in about the same time as the old one.

Plainly, the new system will save lives. Automobile accidents are the third leading cause of death for Michigan youngsters aged 16-19, and although drivers 17 and under accounted for 2.9 percent of all licenses in Michigan, they made up 6.6 percent of drivers involved in car accidents and 6.5 percent of all fatalities.

Moreover, the new system will encourage teenagers not just to drive but to learn to drive well and safely. If you're anything like Kathy and me, among your greatest worries about your child will come the moment he takes off alone in the car and is late going back home. Maybe the 50 hours of supervised driving will do something to relieve a bit of the anxiety.

Now that the Legislature has addressed teen driver safety, I'd like to put in a plea for our lawmakers to take a look at elderly drivers.

One of the hardest things I have had to do in my entire life was convince my proud and stubborn father, who at age 80 was suffering from Parkinson's disease and the aftereffects of a series of little strokes, that he really ought to quit driving. Literally every time he took the wheel, he had an accident, and I finally had to argue that he would be better off not to drive than to have a judge take that decision from him.

There are 855,777 drivers in Michigan who are 65 or older, according to the Secretary of State's office.

Unlike teenagers who are convinced they are immortal and take commensurate risks, older people are, by and large, careful and safe drivers. Statewide, drivers 65 and older accounted for nearly 42 percent of all drivers, but they were involved in only 7 percent of total automobile accidents, according to 1994 statistics.

However, according to Patricia Waller, director of the University of Michigan Transportation



PHILIP POWER

Elderly drivers are more likely than younger ones to get tickets for failing to yield, turning improperly and running stop signs and red lights, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Moreover, the number of motor vehicle deaths per 100,000 people is higher for the elderly than for all other age groups except those under 30.

Research Institute, "If you look at the number of crashes per mile of drivers in their 80s when they're out there, they're worse than teenagers."

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Although plainly the issue here is a person's driving record, not his or her age, anybody who has ever tried to weigh safety against self-esteem for an elderly relative feels pretty lonely in today's regulatory climate. A family member, doctor or police officer can ask to have an elderly driver retested, but in the eyes of many older people, such a step is close to betrayal.

Would a statewide requirement that all drivers over age 70, say, be tested regularly be a better solution?

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047 ext. 1880.

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