

NHPR's Rewind: What we can learn from Italian child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child care in the U.S. is expensive. For a typical family, child care can take up to a third of the household income. For years, Democrats and Republicans have debated tax deductions, subsidies, and how to provide quality and reliable childcare for families of all income. With these problems and questions, it is useful to study child care models in other countries. NHPR's The Exchange did just that on November 8, 1995 when it explored Italian methods of child care.

Rebecca New, a UNH associate professor of early childhood education, highlighted differences with childcare in Italy and how we might apply similar methods in the U.S. Specifically, she talked about renowned Italian child care approach Reggio Emilia.

Child care in Italy reflects the country's cultural values. One important principle is that children in Italy are seen as citizens with rights; they are entitled to have child care provided. Therefore programs such as day care are seen as a public service that should be available to anyone that needs it, much like the way we think of having clean water to drink or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP is a federal program that varies from state to state but is designed to cover uninsured children in families with incomes that are modest but too high to qualify for Medicaid. It was created in 1997).

Such an approach to child care has led Italy to have some of the most progressive social services, child care policies, family leave policies, and family support policies in the world. Child care services are covered by taxpayers in Italy. Citizens, including those without kids, feel providing these services are part of a broader societal goal. It is seen as a critical element of a societal responsibility. Approximately 12 percent of a city's budget is dedicated to infant, toddler, and primary school programs.

UNH's New brought up a specific type of childcare in Italy: Reggio Emilia. Named for the northern Italian community where it developed after World War II, Reggio Emilia reflects Italian cultural values around children's needs and family rights and responsibilities. What makes it distinct is the role of the teacher in a child's learning.

The teacher is seen as a co-learner and collaborator alongside the child. In this way, teachers give children as much decision making power as possible. While Reggio Emilia resembles the Montessori approach (also developed in Italy), there are key differences. For instance, in the Montessori approach, teachers are viewed as guides who observe children without interfering with them, and the curriculum is pre-determined.

Italy's solutions to the issue of child care are not without their own problems. Retaining community support is a challenge in ever growing urban areas, where many parents may feel disengaged with the local community.

In her discussion with NHPR's Laura Knoy, New addressed the problems of transferring a child care system like Italy's to the U.S. While Italy is community centered on its approach towards child care, the U.S. is more individualistic; parents take charge in finding and paying for their child's care. New suggested this self-reliance dates back to early pioneer days when we were forming our national identity.

However, she said "It's becoming clear that we can't always manage to do things by ourselves. A collective and collaborative effort is not only sometimes more fun and more personally satisfying, but in fact, it is more effective". Additionally, she stated that transitioning U.S. child care to a method like Italy's will be difficult if the U.S.'s mentality stays convinced that children's needs are private matters.

New also expressed her concern about children's future. Today, even though providing high-quality child care for children can be burdensome and expensive, studies demonstrate that it has the biggest economic payoff for parents.

Changes are being made, and this can be seen right here in New Hampshire. In 2007, a law mandating public kindergarten programs state-wide passed, making New Hampshire the last state in the nation to fully adopt public kindergarten. While full day kindergarten programs have been on the rise in New Hampshire since 1990, this law allowed them to spread more quickly around the state.

Yet there are still many districts that do not offer full day kindergarten. However, on May 4 2017, the New Hampshire House of Representatives voted to pass a bill to fund full-day kindergarten, a gesture that could lead to more full day kindergartens in the future.

-reprinted from New Hampshire Public Radio

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/17/06/nhprs-rewind-what-we-can-learn-italian-child-care> [2] <https://www.nhpr.org/post/nhprs-rewind-what-we-can-learn-italian-child-care> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/international> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/childrens-rights> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/civic-engagement> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/social-policy> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/early-childhood-education-and-care> [8]

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