

# We asked all the 2020 Democrats how they'd fix child care. Here's what they said. <sup>[1]</sup>

The American child care system is failing everyone. Now it's finally become an election issue.

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## EXCERPTS

If you're a working parent of an infant or toddler in America, it can sometimes seem like none of your options for child care are good ones.

You can send your child to day care, but that costs more than \$900 a month in many states. In several states, care for an infant costs more than the average rent. And it costs more to send an infant to day care in Massachusetts for a year than it does to send a freshman to the University of Massachusetts Amherst, as Bryce Covert reported at the New Republic last year.

Cost is only part of the problem. For a lot of parents, it's hard to even find a day care center — some high-demand facilities have years-long waiting lists, and some rural areas have no providers at all. What's more, not all providers are high-quality — as Jonathan Cohn reported at the New Republic in 2013, most day care centers have fewer caregivers per child than experts recommend, and some states have few or no training standards for workers.

Working parents who don't use center-based day care can hire nannies, but that's often even more expensive. Those who can't afford either option often rely on a family member or neighbor for care, but such arrangements aren't always reliable, said Kim Kruckel, executive director of the Child Care Law Center, a San Francisco-based nonprofit.

Some parents are actually paying so much for child care that "they're becoming homeless," Kruckel said. "They're keeping their job, they're paying for child care," but "they're living with their relatives, or they're living in an RV, or they're living at the park."

Now, after years of being treated like a side issue, child care is finally moving toward the center of the national conversation. A lot of that is due to Sen. Elizabeth Warren, who has made child care a centerpiece of her campaign for the Democratic nomination for president in 2020. But other candidates are also unveiling their own proposals — on Wednesday, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) released a "Family Bill of Rights" that includes plans to make child care more affordable.

When she was a working mom of young children, Warren told Vox, "child care was the boulder that almost crushed me." And things aren't much better today: "How many mamas and daddies have been sidelined because they don't have access to high-quality child care that they can afford?" she asks.

Democratic candidates have talked about child care in the past, but Warren's plan, which would create a network of federally subsidized care providers, is more specific and more aggressive than what they've proposed, as Kara Voght reports at Mother Jones. And it comes at a time when other efforts to make child care more affordable are gaining steam in Congress and in cities around the country, and when state and local candidates raising young kids are making child care an issue on the campaign trail.

"We're in a transformative moment in American politics," Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA), a sponsor of a wide-ranging child care bill in Congress, told Vox in a statement. "Thanks to the record number of women who ran for office last year, including many young moms, the challenges of finding and affording child care are finally being given the attention they deserve."

Child care is a huge issue for families, many of whom spend as much as a third of their income on the service; for workers, who are frequently underpaid; for women, whose careers are disproportionately affected by child care struggles; and, of course, for children, who can benefit enormously from high-quality care in their early years. Now that the issue is finally getting attention on a national scale, Vox is taking a look at where each of the 2020 Democratic candidates stands.

Of the 23 presidential contenders we surveyed, six support reforms aimed at ensuring universal or near-universal access to child care for American families. Several others have proposals that would alleviate some of the burden — for example, by providing universal preschool — but wouldn't fully address all the problems with America's child care system. Meanwhile, some candidates have yet to put forth any plan at all.

For the first time in many years, parents struggling with child care are seeing their concerns reflected in the national conversation. And

when they cast their votes in the primaries next year, they'll have the opportunity to choose between candidates who are actually addressing those concerns on the campaign trail and those who have yet to do so.

### **The child care system in the US today isn't good for anyone**

In America today, "getting decent child care is like winning the lottery," Warren told Vox.

Difficulties finding child care fall especially hard on moms, who still shoulder the bulk of child care responsibilities in families. A 2018 study found that rising child care costs led to an estimated 13 percent decline in the employment of mothers of young kids, while a survey conducted the same year by the Center for American Progress found that moms were 40 percent more likely than dads to say child care problems had harmed their careers.

It's not just about moms dropping out of the workforce to care for kids — in another Center for American Progress poll, 42 percent of mothers said they would look for a higher-paying job if they had better access to child care, and 31 percent said they would ask for more hours at work. The numbers are even higher for women of color, with more than half of black mothers and 48 percent of Latina mothers saying they'd look for a more lucrative job if child care weren't an issue.

Meanwhile, the high costs of child care for families don't translate to high wages for child care workers, most of whom are women and about 40 percent of whom are women of color. As Sarah Kliff noted for Vox, child care workers earn an average of \$10.82 an hour, about a third of what elementary school teachers make.

And America's child care system (or lack thereof) is also bad for kids. The first few years of a child's life are crucial for brain development, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, and high-quality care during that time can boost children's social and cognitive skills. Poor-quality care, on the other hand, can leave kids less prepared for school.

"These early years matter most," Kruckel said, "and this is when our society consistently insists on giving people the least help."

In recent years, that's been starting to shift. Cities like New York and Washington, DC, have started universal prekindergarten programs, offering free or subsidized preschool to 4-year-olds (and sometimes 3-year-olds as well). These programs have been successful — DC's led to a 10 percent increase in labor force participation among moms of young kids after it went into effect in 2009, as Bryce Covert reported at Vox.

But there's no equivalent on a nationwide scale. And parents are still largely on their own when it comes to the care of kids ages 0 to 3, which typically costs families even more than care for 3- and 4-year-olds. Federal and state governments offer child care subsidies to low-income parents through the Child Care and Development Block Grant program, but the subsidies are often too low to make a difference, and not all day care centers accept them, said Taryn Morrissey, a professor of public administration and policy at American University and the co-author of *Cradle to Kindergarten: A New Plan to Combat Inequality*. The program is also underfunded, with current funding sufficient to serve only about 15 percent of families who are eligible based on their income, according to the Urban Institute.

Earlier this year, the Trump administration proposed a \$1 billion, one-time investment in child care infrastructure as part of its 2020 budget. States could apply for the funding and use it to support child care providers but would have to "establish targets for reducing unnecessary regulatory or other requirements that limit the supply or increase the cost of child care," Ivanka Trump, who has made child care one of her signature issues, told NPR in March.

But critics say that regulatory rollbacks could put kids' safety at risk, and that the Trump budget fails to address the current lack of federal funding for subsidies and provider pay. "This is not a true investment in child care," Catherine White, the director of child care and early learning at the National Women's Law Center, wrote in March. "It's a hoax."

So Vox decided to survey the candidates who have officially entered the 2020 Democratic primary to find out where they stand on this issue — and analyze how their responses stack up against what experts say kids, parents, and child care workers actually need.

The results fell into a few categories. Six Democrats have said they support comprehensive child care plans that would address all the problems experts have identified: cost, availability, and provider pay. Some others support tax credits for child care, which experts say can help but don't address the full scope of the problem. A few support universal pre-K but don't have a plan for kids under 3. Finally, some support another plan, have no platform on the issue yet, or haven't gotten back to us. We'll discuss each group below.

### **These candidates support universal child care**

*Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA)*

"My universal child care plan would guarantee access to high-quality, affordable child care and early learning to every kid from 0 to 5 in America," Warren told Vox.

The plan, announced in February, would create a network of locally run but federally subsidized child care options — a combination of center-based day cares, preschools, and in-home day care facilities. Workers at the facilities would be paid on a par with public school teachers.

When her children were young, Warren said, "I wanted child care where the child care workers were there from week to week and month to month, not leaving because they simply couldn't afford to stay as child care workers."

For all families making less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line, child care will be free. For everyone else, it will be capped at 7 percent of family income (according to Warren, families today typically spend between 9 and 36 percent of their income on child care).

Warren would pay for the plan with a tax on families with a net worth of more than \$50 million.

“We are the wealthiest country on the planet,” she said. “High-quality care and early education shouldn’t be a privilege that’s reserved only for the rich; it should be a fundamental right.”

The senator’s plan addresses what experts say are the three biggest problems with child care in America: cost, quality, and worker pay. According to an analysis by the financial services company Moody’s, it would boost the number of kids in formal child care from 6.8 million to 12 million. Moody’s also says the plan would stimulate economic growth by freeing up disposable income among working- and middle-class families, and by creating jobs in child care centers. The company calls the plan a “fiscally responsible proposal that would scale up federal childcare programs that are already in place and shown to be effective in meeting the challenges of providing high-quality child care.”

The plan has received its share of criticism. Some argue that child care should be free to everyone, regardless of income. Meanwhile, some child care experts advocate for direct subsidies to families to allow them to pay for whatever kind of care best meets their family’s needs. “Everybody deserves to have what fits best for their family,” Kruckel said — “that might be your neighbor, that might be your grandmother, that might be the family daycare provider down the street.”

Or it might be a parent. As Kliff pointed out at Vox earlier this year, a child care proposal recently put forth by the left-wing People’s Policy Project also includes a subsidy to help stay-at-home parents meet child care needs. Warren’s plan in its current form doesn’t include such a subsidy, though her team told Kliff she hasn’t ruled it out for the future.

Criticism aside, by making child care an early and central part of her campaign, Warren has set herself up as the candidate to beat on the issue. A few others, however, have said they support reforms that are nearly as sweeping.

*Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA)*

A spokesperson for the Harris campaign told Vox that she supports the Child Care for Working Families Act, a bill introduced this year by Sen. Patty Murray and Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA), of which Harris is also a co-sponsor.

The bill is similar to Warren’s plan. It would provide increased federal funding for infant, toddler, and preschool programs, with the goal of access to child care for all kids under 13. It would also raise child care workers’ wages to the level of elementary school teachers with comparable experience. It would ensure that no family spends more than 7 percent of their income on child care, as long as they earn less than 150 percent of their state’s median income.

The biggest difference between the plans is that the Child Care for Working Families Act builds on the existing Child Care and Development Block Grant program, while Warren’s plan creates a new system. But both the Child Care for Working Families Act and Warren’s plan are essentially paths to universal child care, Morrissey, the Cradle to Kindergarten author, said: “Both of these plans would be huge improvements for everybody.”

*Beto O’Rourke*

The former Texas Congress member was also a co-sponsor of the Child Care for Working Families Act. In addition, the candidate supports universal preschool for three- and four-year-olds and “would expand access to education and training programs, and demand that all workers, including child care workers, be guaranteed a living wage of at least \$15 per hour,” campaign communications director Chris Evans told Vox.

“Beto is committed to ensuring that children have access to high-quality early childhood programs and that families do not have to make an impossible choice between going to work and providing care for their children.”

*Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT)*

“Bernie has been a longtime supporter of universal child care and early education for all as the best way to address disparities in access to high-quality education,” a campaign spokesperson told Vox.

In 2011, Sanders sponsored the Foundations for Success Act, which would have established a grant program with the goal of providing “child care and early education to all children 6 weeks old through kindergarten.” The proposed program would have begun with 10 states, with more phasing in after three years.

The 2011 bill never came to a vote, but Sanders’s spokesperson says that as his presidential campaign moves forward, “Bernie will continue to show how our movement will tackle the major issues facing America, including the need for universal child care.”

*Rep. Eric Swalwell (D-CA)*

Swalwell is a co-sponsor of the Child Care for Working Families Act in the House, and told Vox in a statement that as president, he would push for Congress to send him such legislation to sign.

“I’m the product of a working family — my dad was a cop, and my mother raised four of us while also helping make ends meet by selling wedding cakes and handmade dollhouses out of our garage as well as operating a day care in our living room,” he said. “I know quality, affordable child care is absolutely crucial to working families’ ability to dream bigger.”

*Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN)*

Klobuchar is a co-sponsor of the Child Care for Working Families Act, and a campaign spokesperson told Vox that she would support the

legislation as president. Earlier this year, Klobuchar introduced the Child Care Workforce and Facilities Act, which would provide grants to states to expand child care facilities or train child care workers.

### **These candidates support tax credits for child care**

*Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY)*

Gillibrand is one of several candidates who support using the tax code to help families pay for child care.

As part of her Family Bill of Rights, a slate of proposals released on Wednesday, Gillibrand proposed a major expansion of the child and dependent care tax credit.

Under current tax law, many families can deduct child care expenses from their taxes, up to \$3,000 per child. But many low-income families can't take advantage of the credit because it only applies if you make enough money to owe income taxes. Gillibrand's plan would double the maximum credit to \$6,000 per child and make the credit fully refundable, so even families who don't owe taxes would get the money.

Her plan also includes assistance to states to create universal preschool programs.

Gillibrand's tax credit increase would be significant, but in many areas with a high cost of living, even \$6,000 per child is still a drop in the bucket when it comes to the annual cost of child care. And a tax credit doesn't necessarily do much to remedy the shortage of high-quality providers around the country.

In general, tax credits can't address all the problems with child care in America, Kruckel said. "Those don't really get at the problem, which is that the majority of families cannot find or afford child care," she explained.

*South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg*

Buttigieg has said at campaign events that he supports some form of child care assistance, possibly in the form of a tax credit, though he has not yet gone into specifics. "I do support the concept of a child care allowance, or a child allowance, be it in the form of a tax credit or however we want to set it up," Buttigieg said at an April town hall.

*Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO)*

A key part of Bennet's presidential campaign platform is the American Family Act, a bill he introduced that would expand the child tax credit (different from the child care tax credit; the tax code is confusing) to pay families \$300 a month per child under 5, and \$250 a month per child between 6 and 16. The credit would phase out for higher-earning families, beginning at \$130,000 in annual income for single parents and \$180,000 a year for couples. The American Family Act isn't a child care plan, per se, but it would certainly help families afford child care.

Bennet also supports expanding the child care tax credit to help low- and middle-income families, as well as expanding early childhood education, according to a campaign spokesperson.

*Rep. Seth Moulton (D-MA)*

Moulton told Vox in a statement that he supports a recent proposal by the advocacy group the Children's Defense Fund, which would expand the child tax credit and the child care tax credit and make them fully refundable, as well as making child care subsidies available to families making up to 150 percent of the poverty line. "At a cost substantially less than other plans, Congress could pass these policies in today's hyperpartisan environment and make a real, immediate difference for American families," Moulton said.

*Marianne Williamson*

Williamson said in a statement to Vox that she supports a new child care tax credit worth up to \$14,000 per child, which would be paid directly to child care providers on a monthly basis. She also supports increased wages for child care workers, and universal preschool.

### **These candidates support universal preschool**

*Julián Castro*

As mayor of San Antonio, Texas, Castro in 2012 spearheaded Pre-K 4 SA, billed as a universal preschool program. The program served nearly 8,000 kids as of 2018 and is free for families making less than 185 percent of the poverty line, though for high-income families, it's actually more expensive than private preschool, according to Politico.

When he announced his candidacy in January, Castro made "pre-K for the USA" part of his platform, promising "universal prekindergarten for all children whose parents want it." That puts him on a par with Warren as a candidate making child care a major part of the 2020 agenda.

But prekindergarten starts at age 3 or 4, and Castro hasn't yet introduced a formal proposal to improve access to care for kids under 3. A spokesperson for the campaign told Vox that Castro planned to release his own child care policy in future, and noted that the candidate had praised Warren's universal child care plan.

*Andrew Yang*

On his campaign website, the business leader promises that if elected, he will "direct the Department of Education to work with states to create a plan for universal prekindergarten education." He also proposes a variety of benefits for single parents, including tax breaks for

child care and “the creation of responsibility-sharing networks, allowing single parents to work with each other for childcare and other responsibilities.”

A spokesperson for the campaign said the candidate was not yet ready to release further details on his child care proposals.

*Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ)*

A campaign spokesperson told Vox that Booker supports universal access to preschool.

*Rep. Tim Ryan (D-OH)*

“We live in the wealthiest country in the world, and as President, I will ensure that every American can receive quality, affordable childcare,” Ryan said in a statement. “That starts with providing universal preschool, creating a tax code that lifts families up, and lowering the costs by creating subsidies and incentives for families and childcare centers.”

### **These candidates support something else — or haven’t taken a stand yet**

*Joe Biden*

Biden has not released a child care plan yet. But as vice president, he supported President Obama’s proposal to triple the child care tax credit. “That alone will lead to a dramatic increase in the number of women able to be in the workforce and will raise our economic standards,” he said in a 2015 speech.

In 2016, he supported Hillary Clinton’s proposal to ensure that no family had to spend more than 10 percent of its income on child care. While less detailed and sweeping than Elizabeth Warren’s plan, the proposal did include universal preschool for 4-year-olds, as well as a provision to increase child care workers’ pay.

*Mayor Bill de Blasio*

One of de Blasio’s biggest moves as mayor of New York City was establishing the city’s universal pre-K program in 2014. The program is now the largest in the country, enrolling about 70,000 students, according to the New York Times (up from just 19,000 in 2013). In 2018, about 94 percent of pre-K programs in the city met a standard of quality associated with better school outcomes, the Times reported, up from 77 percent in 2015.

De Blasio mentioned the New York universal pre-K program in a video announcing his presidential candidacy, but has not yet released a formal child care plan for his presidential campaign or responded to Vox’s request for comment.

*John Hickenlooper*

A spokesperson for the Hickenlooper campaign said that if elected, the former governor “would provide subsidies on a sliding scale” for child care. “He believes we have to make child care affordable for every family,” the spokesperson said.

*Gov. Steve Bullock (D-MT)*

“Universal access to voluntary, early childhood education will help prepare children to excel in school and life, and give parents greater opportunity to find work and provide for their families,” Bullock said in a statement. “As president, I’ll bring people together to give parents the option to enroll their children in high-quality and accessible public child care.”

Bullock also said that as governor, he had presided over the first public investment in prekindergarten in Montana history.

Gov. **Jay Inslee** (D-WA); Rep. **Tulsi Gabbard** (D-HI); former Rep. **John Delaney** (D-MD); and Miramar, Florida, Mayor **Wayne Messam** have not yet answered Vox’s questions about child care.

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