

America's parents want paid family leave and affordable child care. Why can't they get it? ^[1]

With so many women in Congress, the nation looked closer than ever to affordable child care and paid family leave. So far, nothing. We found out why.

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EXCERPTS

CENTENNIAL, Colo. – The dilemma at dinner concerns a little less than \$25 and how much it's worth to this family of four.

Whitney and Tim Phinney couldn't have imagined how much time they would spend scrutinizing amounts like these, weighing options that never seem ideal. But then they had children in America.

Tim, a stay-at-home dad in suburban Denver, is struggling. He would prefer to return to his career, but the family can't afford full-time child care – and the long days with kids and away from work have taken a toll.

Tim tells his wife, Whitney, he wants to attend a mental health therapy group Wednesday. But Whitney, who works two jobs and goes to school, says she won't get home in time. Whitney could cut her workday short, costing the family \$15. Or Tim could take their two kids, Brennan, 4, and Sunny, 2, to the drop-in day care at a cost of \$22.50.

Leaving work early isn't ideal. Neither is losing \$7.50 on child care – an amount of money that has become maddeningly consequential.

"Having kids for us has been financially devastating," Whitney said. "That sounds dramatic, but it's really true. ... We're on this financial ledge, where if something good doesn't happen ... we're going to get pushed off."

The Phinneys' struggle is typical of millions of American families trying to balance work and kids in a country that has long lacked affordable, quality child care and paid parental leave, despite polling that shows public support for both and research laying out the drawbacks of not having either.

With both parents working in more and more American families, an unprecedented number of women in Congress and support from a Republican president and his daughter, the nation appeared on the cusp of changing all that.

But so far, nothing.

Working parents feel the frustration every day, lamenting how difficult and expensive it is to raise a family in America. Outrage-inducing stories pop up daily on social media, on TV and in the grocery checkout line.

It turns out not everyone shares working parents' urgency.

Some businesses – and their lobbyists to Congress – don't want to sign on to federal legislation that would provide relief for child care costs and require paid leave. Some companies do provide family-friendly perks to their employees, such as paid parental leave. But major business lobbying groups have balked at laws that would require all employers to provide those kinds of benefits. Among the issues: Smaller companies say mandated paid leave, as an example, could cripple their businesses.

But it's more than businesses and their lobbyists. Polling continues to show many Americans don't see the need for the federal government to get involved in affordable child care – or, for that matter, for women to work.

Nearly half of all Americans still believe kids are best off if one parent stays home with them, preferably the mother. Many say they don't want to pay for child care for other people's kids. Some say federal policies for working parents instead would penalize parents who choose not to work.

Those attitudes contribute to inertia in Congress, insiders say. When Ivanka Trump, the president's daughter and policy adviser, got to Washington to push for paid leave and affordable child care, she found conservatives in Congress were nowhere near ready to sign on.

"I actually thought the first year (of the presidency) would be around debating the policy, which is where we are today," Trump said. "The first year and a half was explaining what paid family leave was and why it made sense ... which was not something I had expected."

Meetings and policy debates in Washington have indeed picked up. More stakeholders are joining the conversation. Insiders on Capitol Hill say the political heat around child care and parental leave is hotter than ever.

Yet a solution remains out of reach: Federal proposals for what action to take and how to pay for it diverge wildly.

"I see this child care issue as part of the whole global 'What's wrong with Washington?'" said Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a Democratic front-runner for the 2020 nomination, who is pushing for universal child care as part of her candidacy. "It's an issue that matters to families. It's mattered for a long time now. And people are pushing harder and harder for change."

'It's not going to work': Some businesses balk at federal paid leave

Before having her own kids, Whitney Phinney acknowledges she thought of paid leave and subsidized child care as "handouts."

"I've definitely evolved my perspective from an individualistic 'Everyone just needs to take care of themselves; no one's going to help you out' to 'Hey, it's our job as a society to help support each other, and that means supporting kids and raising kids and taking care of kids,'" she said.

When Whitney had Brennan, she had no paid leave. Tim had one week of paid leave and one week of paid vacation he saved up for the birth. So Whitney was off, without a salary – a financial hardship for the family. And Tim had to keep working to pay the bills, so he wasn't there to support her emotionally, or take time to care for himself.

Money was tight, and their mental health suffered.

"That was a really hard start, and I think if things could have been different in that time – if Tim could have stayed home for 12 weeks with no financial repercussions, I think our life now would be totally different," Whitney said. "It snowballed."

Americans want paid leave for parents – overwhelmingly.

And they don't have it – overwhelmingly.

It's not that all workplaces are against expanding paid leave. More employers are recognizing it's good for business: It helps them hold on to highly trained workers.

But some businesses balk at the idea of federal paid leave. They don't want to be told to pay for a certain policy themselves. Some don't want to share the cost via paying a tax, either. And if they do offer paid leave, they want to decide who gets it and how much.

"Trust us to treat our employees well," said Brad Close, who heads public policy and advocacy for the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB), whose member companies each have 100 or fewer workers. "Please don't make a 'one size fits all' for every business out there. It's not going to work for the little guys."

Congress could pass paid leave without the business community's stamp of approval, but "it'll help," said Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, sponsor of The FAMILY Act, the Democrats' main legislation, which funds time off for qualifying life events through a payroll tax.

Some big corporations support a federal policy. But the ones that have offered headline-capturing paid leave and child care assistance aren't necessarily doing it to pressure Congress for a federal mandate.

"Companies who do this are doing it ... for their employees, and of course they use it as a recruiting tool," said Marc Freedman, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's vice president for workplace policy.

In fact, a majority of Americans back this approach: They say paid leave, required by a federal mandate or not, should be paid for by employers, not the government, according to the Pew Research Center.

As companies add the benefit, some experts say pressure increases on Congress to finally ensure all workers can access paid leave.

Others caution that the conversation is still just beginning.

"This is a big, complicated question with many different pieces to it that need to be worked out," Freedman said.

Many companies skeptical of a federal mandate understand offering paid leave is the right thing to do, said Rose Arriada-Keiper, vice president of global rewards for Adobe. The problem, she said, is how to keep a business running while key employees are out for months.

"I think a lot of companies struggle with having that forced on them," she said.

Even at Adobe – where parents get 16 weeks of paid leave after a new child arrives, plus an additional 10 weeks for women who give birth, and where top leaders support the FAMILY Act – paid leave has been frustrating for some managers.

Smaller companies say the hardship of a federal program could be especially acute for them because they have fewer resources when it comes to staffing and finances.

The NFIB insists the U.S. doesn't need a federal mandate – a 2016 survey found 73% of its members offered paid time off for reasons such as vacation or sickness to full-time employees. However, just 18.3% of its surveyed businesses specifically offered paid maternity leave, and only 19% of working Americans have access to paid family leave, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Many large companies aren't pushing for a federal mandate. They're busy trying to outbid their competitors for highly coveted recruits – especially in tech.

"It's a war for talent out here" – especially for women, said Alan May, Hewlett Packard Enterprise's chief people officer. "We're just upping the game."

HPE expanded its policy on May 1. It offers parents six months of paid leave at full salary and lets them apply to work a part-time schedule for up to three years after bringing a new child home.

Still, some businesses say they hope their paid-leave policies push Congress to do more – and they're backing proposals already on the table.

Levi Strauss, for instance, offers up to eight weeks of paid parental leave for all workers, a policy implemented in 2016. It has worked well, the company says, and it also supports the payroll-tax-funded FAMILY Act.

"There is a lot to be said for business making the case for why this is helpful for companies, that it hasn't hindered or hurt or caused an undue cost," said Anna Walker, Levi Strauss's vice president of public affairs.

The U.S. economy would reap more than \$500 billion a year if women ages 25 to 54 were part of the workforce at the same levels as their German and Canadian peers who have access to family-friendly benefits, according to a projection from the Department of Labor's chief economist.

Small businesses often don't have the money or time to rehire and train, let alone pay for new parents to take time off – so some of them do support federal paid leave, even if it would mean a small payroll tax. For instance, the Main Street Alliance, which represents roughly 30,000 small businesses, backs the FAMILY Act.

Thanks to a paid-leave tax in New Jersey, Tony Sandkamp says a valued employee was able to take time off from Sandkamp's custom cabinetry business when his wife had twins. After drawing wages from the state fund, the worker eventually returned to the job.

"It helped me maintain ... a skilled employee who is very difficult to replace," Sandkamp said. Finding and training a new worker could cost about \$30,000, he said, compared with the roughly \$2 a paycheck he says goes toward paid leave.

Plus, he said, "it helps level the playing field and keeps my employee from getting cherry-picked by bigger employers."

What child care means when you don't work 9 to 5

After navigating that first maternity leave, the Phinneys have tried endless arrangements to keep a healthy home life, balancing financial needs with career goals, mental health with family time. Whitney has been a stay-at-home mom. Tim has been a stay-at-home dad. They have alternated working full-time. Tim tried working nights but couldn't sustain it.

In 1975, more than half of mothers stayed home with their kids, but today both parents work in 70% of families with children. Child care costs on average \$12,350 to \$13,900 a year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In some cities, it's double that.

The Phinneys are in the red every month. Whitney is working two jobs – full-time as a research assistant at a college and part-time as a tutor at a community college. Right now, Tim cares for the kids, but there's still preschool for Brennan to pay for, plus a few hours a week of day care for Sunny, too.

"Preschool is important and prepares them for school, and I want what's best for my kids," Whitney said. Plus, Tim appreciates the short break here and there.

They supplement with savings, which Whitney says will run out soon. There's nothing for emergencies, nothing for vacations, nothing for babysitters.

If Tim, who has spent most of his career as a warehouse associate, went back to work, they'd have to send the kids to preschool full-time, and the fee would skyrocket from \$490 a month to \$2400 a month. Finding a salary that makes that math work is no easy feat.

"It's always been kind of like Goldilocks and the three bears. We've been trying to find the right balance, whether it was money, time together, sleep," Tim said. The child care system in the U.S., he said, "doesn't take into account what people's likely work schedules would be. You wouldn't be able to find night (care) as easily. You always have to find the best fit, and then just kind of make it work from there."

Nationally, only 8% of center-based providers offer child care during non-standard hours, according to a recent report by Child Care Aware of America. When it comes to evening hours and overnight care, those numbers drop to 2% and 6% respectively.

But the need is high: About 43% of all children under 18 in the United States have at least one parent who works an irregular schedule, translating to about 31 million children who may need non-standard care, according to CCAA.

For many Americans, that's not a hypothetical.

These are the parents driving delivery trucks before shops open and cleaning office buildings after hours, the overnight emergency workers and health aides with rotating shifts, the families for whom child care options are few and far between.

If you're a parent working nights, and you find a place like Dee's Tots, you clamor for a spot – and hope you can afford it.

Deloris and Patrick Hogan run the 24-hour day care out of their home in New Rochelle, New York.

On a Thursday in August, Deloris hunches over her kitchen counter cutting up freshly harvested cucumbers, strawberries and red bell peppers from her vegetable garden. Patrick scrapes the cheese off a few slices of pizza for their pickiest eaters.

The children, all under 10, eat dinner on two plastic tables in a room ringed with books, art supplies and toys. Then they join Dee in vacuuming the floor that will soon hold rollaway beds.

Marisol Valencia, a single mother of two who juggles two jobs to support her family, said she would be unemployed without Dee's.

"I would have to go on welfare," said Valencia, 35, who works as a merchandise stocker for Nabisco during the week, a job that often requires working past 11 p.m. On Saturdays, she works at a supermarket.

"Sometimes you have family, but they would think you're taking advantage if you're always going to them," she said.

Valencia, whose ex-husband stopped paying child support a year ago, said she has juggled up to three jobs and worked seven days a week just to stay financially afloat.

"I can honestly say that I would not have a job or be able to support myself and my children without Deloris and Patrick," she said. "They have become my family."

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