

Bernie Sanders's universal childcare plan would mean Millennials like me could start families ^[1]

Don't get any wild ideas about grandkids, Andy and Sharon, it's just a blog post.

Author: Millard, Drew

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EXCERPTS

I am in my 30s, in a long-term partnership, and do not have children. There are a lot of reasons why this is the case. I worry I'm not emotionally mature or responsible enough to have a child, and that I'd screw them up like in that one Philip Larkin poem. But nobody is truly "ready" for kids — you just have one, hope for the best, and learn from your mistakes as you make them. Whenever my partner and I even talk about having children, it's always in the abstract, mainly about how we could totally be parents if we were rich.

The financial burden of having children is immense, and that's not accounting for lifestyle changes that often accompany parenthood. Many new parents find themselves in need of a larger house or vehicle, or potentially reorienting their career path so that they can make more money, work closer to home, or leave the workforce for a while so they don't have to pay for childcare. As my partner put it when I told her I was working on this blog post, "Sometimes, it feels like the only way to afford having a child is to work a job that pays so well that you'd never actually be able to see them."

Having children is as much a financial decision as it is an emotional one, and for many Millennials, the numbers just don't add up. It costs about \$13,000 per year to have a child, and according to the Center for American Progress, dropping a baby off at a licensed daycare facility costs an average of \$1,230 per month. A combination of graduating school into a recession and high student loan debt means that even if a young person does manage to make more than the average Millennial's salary of \$47,034, there's no guarantee they'll be squirreling money away to cover those costs. It's no wonder that Millennials are twice as likely as their parents to wait to achieve financial security before raising kids, and that the percentage of new mothers under the age of 35 has decreased, while the percentage of mothers with postsecondary degrees has risen. It's no wonder that the American birth rate is the lowest it's been since 1972. Though I swore I would never make a joke like this, I truly cannot imagine having kids in this economy.

Understandably, early childcare is on the minds of our Democratic presidential candidates. The websites for Sens. Elizabeth Warren, Amy Klobuchar, and former South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg each feature daycare/early education plans promising that, if enacted, most households would spend no more than seven percent of their income on childcare. Because these are Democrats we are talking about, each of their plans get a little wonky and have a tendency to sound pretty good on paper before you realize they're complicated and end up leaving lots of people out in the cold. Klobuchar's plan specifies that it apply to "families making up to 150 percent of their state's median income." Warren's would give free, high-quality child care to families earning less than twice the state's poverty line and require them to pay once they crossed that threshold — according to the poverty line in my home state of North Carolina, for example, this would mean that a single parent making as little as \$33,000 per year would have to pay for child care under Warren. True to form, Buttigieg's plan manages to be both vague and overly detailed, Michael Bloomberg's uses technocratic language to mask the fact that it won't really do anything, and Joe Biden's involves sending parenting coaches to parents' houses (presumably to remind them to leave the record player on at night).

Even under the best of circumstances, these plans don't seem that great. They boil down to, "You get cheap or free child care if you're so poor that you can't afford most other stuff, or you pay a non-insane but still significant amount of money for child care." Contra those proposals, yesterday, Sen. Bernie Sanders announced a plan that would create a system of free child care programs that would function as an extension of state public school systems. While the proposal is similar to one that the Sanders offered in 2011, that one didn't go anywhere (clearly) and was meant to start as a 10-state pilot program. This one would apply to every state, cost \$1.5 trillion dollars, and be paid for by taxing the shit out of billionaires.

Even if Sanders's plan is a pipe dream, at least it's nice to see a potential leader of the country thinking this way. Once you mentally shift the burden of responsibility away from the individual, all sorts of possibilities open up.

Obviously, if Sanders was elected president, this is the sort of sweeping legislation that would be a real motherfucker to get passed, even if the Democrats enjoyed majorities in both the House and Senate. Surely, his opponents on both sides of the aisle will attack him for proposing something so expensive and potentially disruptive to our social fabric, regardless of how it might reverse declining birth rates

and maybe even pay for itself in the long run (more kids today = more tax dollars tomorrow).

I'm not really interested in rebutting any potential arguments against Sanders's plan here, because sometimes, feasibility isn't really the point. Instead, the point of a plan like this is to reframe the way we think about child care — not as a luxury to be paid for by the wealthy or through taking on debt, but as a public service that should be available, for free, to parents in the modern economy. The key difference between Sanders's plan and, say, Warren's, isn't that hers would be free for those who need it most and his would be free for all, it's that Sanders's places the onus of figuring out child care on the government and not the people already busy raising their kids.

Even if Sanders's plan is a pipe dream, at least it's nice to see a potential leader of the country thinking this way. Once you mentally shift the burden of responsibility away from the individual, all sorts of possibilities open up. Finland (which, to be fair, has a population roughly equal to that of Minnesota's), for example, gives all parents a free "baby box" that, writes The Independent, "contains around 50 of the most vital products needed for the first year of a baby's life," including clothes, bibs, diapers, little baby socks and hats, and a sleeping bag (the box itself can be used as a crib). It might not be the same as universal child care — nor am I saying that my partner and I would immediately have a kid if someone offered us a free box of baby stuff — but knowing that your country, in some way, is helping ease the burden of child-rearing can be a powerful message of hope.

Related link: Sanders unveils \$1.5 trillion universal childcare plan ahead of South Carolina debate [3]

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