

We can't save the economy without universal child care ^[1]

A smoothly functioning economy is one in which people who want to work are able to do so.

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EXCERPTS

I've worked from home for seven years, but my workday is now punctuated by new sounds: the clamor of little feet and loud voices as my young upstairs neighbors learn from home.

Every state has closed schools in response to the coronavirus outbreak; some are not resuming the academic year. That has sent at least 55.1 million students home. But many parents have come to count on school as a form of child care while they go to their jobs. Both parents work in nearly two-thirds of married couples with children under the age of 18, and about three-quarters of single mothers and 84 percent of single fathers do. That's 22.6 million families that now have nowhere to send their children.

If parents are lucky enough to have a job that lets them work from home, they're doing so with children, who need a watchful eye and, if possible, something enriching to do. Things are even harder for anyone who still has to leave the house to go to work. Those people are now scrambling to find backup child care arrangements to keep their kids safe.

We don't normally think of public school as child care, but schools are generally a safe place for children when their parents go to work. We have lots of evidence that offering something similar for children at younger ages would allow even more people to be employed. And now we're witnessing the terrifying opposite: what happens to parents—and the economy—when free, accessible, quality child care is yanked away.

One of the older examples of the economic benefits of offering inexpensive, universal care for young children comes from Canada. After the province of Quebec instituted a universal child care program in 1997, its share of working women ages 26 to 44 reached close to 85 percent, the highest in the world. The increased number of women in the workforce elevated tax revenues so much that the program essentially pays for itself now.

Here in the US, Washington, DC, has been working toward something similar. In 2009 the city started offering free, universal preschool, which is now available for kids ages 3 to 4. The program increased the labor force participation rate for women with young children by 10 percentage points. You can dig back into US history to see a similar impact. During World War II, the federal government ran universal, low-cost child care for the Rosie's going into factories as riveters. Where it was available, women were more likely to work and to work longer hours.

But that program ended when the war did, and the US hasn't had universal child care since. We know our economy is suffering for it. The labor force participation rate for women in the US has fallen behind that of other developed countries, thanks, in part, to our lack of investment in early care. In 2016 alone, nearly 2 million parents with children age 5 or younger quit their jobs, turned down offers, or significantly changed their work arrangements because they had problems getting child care. The burden falls hardest on women, who are still expected to be the primary caregivers. Mothers who can't find child care are significantly less likely to be employed than those who can.

Tens of millions of parents of older children whose schools have closed have now joined their ranks. Their options are bleak. Since older people are at higher risk of complications from COVID-19, grandparents can't help. If child care centers are open, they're likely to be serving only essential workers. Many parents are trying to continue to work and care for their children at the same time—an arrangement that has health experts predicting a spike in pediatric injuries, given that there's only so much attention a person has to split between work and child care. It's unclear how long our political and business leaders can keep pretending that everything is normal and that parents can work as they did before without anyone else to watch their kids.

Eventually, the crisis will pass, and schools will reopen. But when they do, we shouldn't forget this painful lesson: A smoothly functioning economy is one in which people who want to work can do so. Affordable and accessible child care plays an enormous role in making that a reality. It's just as true for infants and toddlers as it is for middle and high schoolers. Just as we've made public school available to all, we should make free, high-quality care for children age 5 or younger available to all parents, too.

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