

The men pushing to open the economy clearly don't need child care ^[1]

There's no way to send people back to work without providing safe, affordable child care, but the men in charge don't seem to care.

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EXCERPTS

Waffle House reopened. I'm comfortable enough in my own body that I don't need to go to the barber shop, or the gym. I don't need to go to the movies, because I live in the future and have subscriptions to approximately 18,000 streaming services.

What I need is for somebody to come take my children. A school bus. A babysitter. A freaking traveling circus. It doesn't really matter. My economy cannot "reopen," life cannot return to "normal" for me, until fully functional child care comes back on line.

I'm not the only one, but if you listen to various state governors or the president of the United States, you'd think that the only parts of the country that need to be reopened are businesses and churches. Politicians want people to get back to work as soon as possible, but they seem to have no idea that without child care, a huge swath of the workforce will remain tied to their homes.

As of this writing, 43 states have closed schools through the end of the academic year. That list does not include New York state, where Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio continue to joust over the issue. But if you are a tri-state area resident who expects to send your kid to school before the fall, I have a bridge in Brooklyn I'd like to sell you.

For most families, there is no child care without school. In America, school is pretty much the only free or subsidized child care our government provides. Without reliable, affordable, and Covid-free child care, going back to work is simply not an option for many parents.

The school closings only deepen a reoccurring problem most parents face: the summer. In a society that has decided to outsource child care responsibilities to the school system, the fact that this system goes on an annual months-long holiday is already a nightmare for working parents.

Now, the coronavirus pandemic is blowing apart the kinds of summer child care relief that parents rely on. Summer school is not happening. Summer camp is not happening. Summer youth sports leagues are not happening. The coronavirus makes it dangerous to dump your little disease vectors with their grandparents. Where the hell are parents supposed to put their kids during long summer days when they're supposed to go back to work?

Middle- to upper-income families may be able to find babysitters or nannies once sheltering-in-place orders relax. But lower-income families—the families who most desperately need as many wage earners as possible in the household—are going to be entirely screwed. I've seen a number of stories explaining how gym owners in Georgia plan to reopen while following social distancing protocols. But I haven't seen a single day care provider explain—or even be asked to explain—how social distancing is supposed to work with a bunch of 10-year-olds. That's probably because child care providers still haven't solved the age-old problem of "Stop touching me!"

As it is, the child care facilities that are still operating are facing immense challenges. In California, day care providers for essential workers are struggling to find cleaning supplies. And they can't take in children who have any kind of illness, even if it's likely that a child's running nose is just the result of seasonal allergies. Working parents already hoard their sick days (if they're lucky enough to have them) to cover a child's illness instead of their own. I don't think this country has thought through what would be required to make it feasible for every sick person or child to stay home when they're feeling ill. Businesses might be desperate to resume making profits, but I don't see them clamoring to give out uncapped sick days to their workers.

Rushing to reopen the consumer economy without having a solid plan to reopen, and subsidize, the child care economy is madness. But it's not entirely surprising when you consider that so much of our society still functions on the presumption of two-parent families in which one parent doesn't have a full-time job. It's like we're trapped in a mid-20th century sitcom, where one person is expected to have a job and the other person is expected to be an all-powerful genie with lots of time on her hands.

We've seen the proof of our anachronistic ideas about child care throughout the pandemic. The needs of single parents have largely been ignored during "flatten the curve" policy-making. And every day there seems to be a new story about all the ways homeschooling is crushing working parents, because being a full-time teacher is incompatible with being any other kind of full-time employee, even if you are

working from home.

At least working from home gives parents the opportunity to try to serve two masters. Going back to in-person work, without access to child care, will force families to make terrible decisions, at a time when nearly everybody feels the threat of layoffs and unemployment breathing down their necks. If you are lucky enough to still have a job at one of these businesses that is reopening, how can you tell that job that you have to miss work to take care of your kids? Most people can't bring their children to work, and even if they can, have you ever tried to get a kid to keep a face mask on? Most kids can't last through Halloween wearing a mask all night. The feats of strength and juggling that some states are asking working parents to do as they "phase in" reopening simply can't be done if you have a youngster.

I can only assume that the reason our public response to the Covid-induced child care crisis has been so nonexistent is because the consequences fall primarily on women. When the demands of the economy conflict with the needs of our children, women are expected to figure it out. Women are expected to mental-load the schedules and invent the solutions. Women are expected to be everywhere at once. And women are blamed if they miss the meeting—even when the useless business meeting and the useless school assembly meeting are happening at the exact same time.

There's already some statistical evidence of the toll this gender disparity is taking on professional women, and we've only been without schools for a few weeks. In academia, we're already seeing that journal submissions authored solely by women are down, while solo-authored male submissions are actually up.

The pandemic exacerbates gender inequalities still too common in domestic life, at the same time as it strips away supports women rely on to manage that unfairness. If women do most of the cooking, families can no longer supplement that domestic labor with trips out to eat. If women do most of the house cleaning, fortunate families can no longer supplement that work with domestic service providers, and many people have probably noticed that the house gets a lot messier when nobody can ever leave it. Working parents have more domestic work to do during the crisis, and yet have exactly the same amount of professional work to accomplish. That burden is falling more heavily on women, and it seems like employers and politicians don't even notice.

The government must put working parents, especially parents in the "primary caregiver" seat, in a position to succeed. These reopening plans fail to show even a cursory appreciation for the practical challenges working parents are facing during the pandemic. The crisis should be showing us how essential affordable child care is to economic vitality, something other industrialized nations have already figured out. Instead, our country seems myopically obsessed with putting capitalism back to work without giving parents any backup (market-based or otherwise) to balance their jobs and their families.

As a father and husband who works hard to fight gender norms and is committed to coequal parenting, I've found juggling the dual responsibilities of employment and child care to be challenging since schools closed. But my wife hasn't slept in five weeks. Turns out that I'm a better father in my own mind than I am in practice. Who knew that my wife spends time and effort cutting the sandwiches she provides into little shapes, and that my coddled offspring expect such artistry as an inducement to eat their freaking lunch?

It is on me to do better and to reduce the gender imbalance in my own home. But the only meaningful solution has been for me to do less professional work and make more sandwiches. If the government wants people to get back to work, it's going to have to provide the resources parents need to work. If it's not reasonable to open up the schools and it's not reasonable to greenlight summer camp, then it's not reasonable to reopen the hair salon and force some working mother to spend more money on child care than she'll make from her day at work. The only people I should have to explain this to are childless yuppies who have yet to realize that life is an expanding web of complications and responsibilities, until you are mercifully allowed to die.

I bet if we elected more women, the order of operations for reopening the economy wouldn't be so ass-backwards.

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