

How to build a better child care system ^[1]

The coronavirus has highlighted how necessary good child care is.

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EXCERPTS

Suddenly everyone — parents, caregivers, workers, employers, policymakers — is acutely aware of child care’s relationship to American labor markets. The Los Angeles Times, HuffPost, The Washington Post, CNN.com and FoxNews.com have run variations on the headline, “You Can’t Reopen the Economy Without Child Care.”

It’s a widespread concern because it’s obviously correct. Millions of Americans have been flailing since mid-March, juggling work and kids against a backdrop of growing exhaustion and anxiety.

Work takes time and energy. So does caring for children. It’s impossible to do both as simultaneous, full-time projects and stay sane. Parents can’t go back to their factories, offices, dealerships or stores until child care programs and the country’s pre-K-12 school system reopen.

With the economy struggling and the unemployment rate near 15 percent in April, it’s easy to fixate on how child care enables parents’ jobs. But child care isn’t just a place where children exist while their parents go to work. It’s a place where they can learn, develop and grow.

That’s why the current clamor about child care’s role in restarting the American economy shouldn’t focus exclusively on restoring access. As families and their children come out of the stress of prolonged social isolation, the country must also improve child care quality.

Children under the age of 5 spend an average of 28 hours a week in the care of a non-family member. During this time, their brains are growing rapidly: the human brain reaches 80 percent of its size by age 3, and 90 percent by age 5. That’s why neuroscientists call this period of development “sensitive” or “malleable”: regularly positive experiences with a trusted, safe and reliable caregiver can have long-term benefits, while constantly negative, neglectful experiences can have long-term consequences. The quality of those 28 hours of child care a week matters as much to children’s development as access matters to parents’ employment.

Access to affordable, quality child care has long been a challenge in the United States. In most places, even basic health and safety standards are low. Large parts of the care system are unlicensed and unregulated altogether. Child care workers are underpaid, so much so that the median income for a child care provider in every state in the nation is within the eligibility requirements for food assistance.

Indeed, child care in the United States is a “system” in name only. While recent changes to the federal child care subsidies program, which is supposed to help working families get quality care, have raised standards somewhat, the program lacks enough funding to meet families’ needs — even with the emergency injection of \$3.5 billion under the CARES Act.

Today, it is estimated that more than half of the child care system is still shut down because of the pandemic. When children do finally return to child care, their needs won’t be the same. As parents like us trudge back to our jobs, most of our kids will be carrying pandemic-related burdens out of their homes. During the pandemic, many have had drastically less social interaction with their peers and faced economic precarity and food and housing insecurity. Some will struggle to navigate fears and emotions about leaving their homes and spending time with others after months of being warned against it.

Child care workers’ jobs were hard before. These challenges will make them harder.

In the short term, Congress needs to move more funding directly into the pockets of child care providers to keep the lights on, retain staff members and purchase critical cleaning and personal protective equipment. Most federal spending on child care is in the form of subsidies that go directly to families. Those dollars won’t reach struggling child care programs until families resume using child care.

Child care programs must also prioritize children’s mental health as the crisis recedes. Congress should provide greater funding for mental health supports in child care programs. This funding would enable child care providers to hire mental health coaches to help address children’s complex needs; conduct universal developmental and behavioral screenings to identify children who need more and targeted help; buy social emotional learning curriculums and interventions; provide training on managing stress, trauma, loss, anxiety and challenging behavior in young children; and hire family navigators who can assess families’ needs and connect them to services in the community — like housing or job support.

The country should make similar investments in supporting child care workers' mental health. These providers, like many Americans, will transition back to work carrying stress, anxiety and other challenges. These may be worsened as they address — and absorb — the trauma many children bring to their child care centers.

Beyond the immediate emergency, the child care system in the United States needs more funding — much more. That's Congress's job, but states also have a role in deciding how much money families can use through their child care subsidies. States need to raise these subsidy rates so that providers have access to a living wage and benefits. States also receive federal funding to raise child care quality. They should invest this money in meaningful enhancements, like helping providers get higher levels of education or bolstering the child care mental health infrastructure, and stop investing in things that don't work, like occasional training workshops.

Fortunately, all of these criteria are already required in Head Start, the federal early education program that operates in nearly every community in the nation. Congress can improve the quality of child care by expanding the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships model, a Department of Health and Human Services program that requires partnerships between Early Head Start and child care programs. Through this approach, child care partners agree — and receive the needed resources — to meet rigorous Head Start standards, which include access to mental health coaches, research-based curriculum, universal screening and family engagement.

The Covid-19 crisis has crystallized the fact that child care programs are essential to our way of life. But any infusion of resources now or in the future must be linked to a focus on supporting children's mental health, development and learning, raising standards and tightening accountability at both the federal and state levels.

Child care shouldn't mean children roaming around while a babysitter sits idly by. It's where children's brains grow. We need to treat it as such. Yes, child care is about parents getting back to work. But, odd as it seems to have to reiterate, child care should also be about children.

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