Why it took so long for politicians to treat the child care crisis as a crisis [1]

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EXCERPTED

America is a little matryoshka doll of panic right now; pop open each layer to reveal a new, worrying scenario. For months the country was focused on reopening the economy, which had its own complicated set of problems. But only recently has a broader swath of America tuned into the mess nestled inside it, one that parents have been sitting with for months: what to do with the kids.

There has been no federal plan to help American parents with child care, and they continue to wonder whether schools will really open their doors come the new school year. That lack of action is in direct contrast to other crises that have struck America recently. After the financial crash of 2008, there was a bailout and a stimulus plan. After the protests against police over the last few months, officials in cities and states responded with promises of better actions in the future but also, immediate policy implementation: New York state repealed a law that had shielded police personnel files, while the Minneapolis City Council voted to begin a process that could eventually lead to the dissolution of the city police as it's now known.

But on child care and school, a specific, urgent response has been missing, or at least one that acknowledges our new reality. President Trump threatened to withhold federal funding for education if schools didn't open back up, counter to schools' insistence they need more money to provide a safe education amid the pandemic. While the CARES Act, an omnibus COVID-19 relief bill signed into law in late March, gave extra stimulus funding to families with children, schools and child care businesses so they could remain afloat, a Democratic-backed bill to give a $50 billion bailout of the child care industry has gotten little attention. Teachers around the country have voiced doubt that necessary safety measures for in-school teaching will be sufficient, and Los Angeles Unified School District, one of the country's largest school systems, has decided not to reopen classrooms when schools go back in session in August. Some worry that while distance learning is safer, socially different children and those without stable internet connections or computers — who are already at the margins in normal times — will fall irrevocably behind.

There is no cohesive solution to America's child care problem. But the relative inattention to this crisis, one that's so foundational to a functioning society, the economy and family units across the country, is revealing. It shows that for all the changes that have happened in American life — more female elected officials, a MeToo movement and a workforce that is around 47 percent female — our power dynamics remain fundamentally skewed. We are failing to collectively understand what our most critical and pressing problems actually are.

"Care in general has always been seen as a sideline issue," Vicki Shabo of the left-leaning think tank New America said. "A nice-to-have and not something that's necessary, and not something that's central for adults to be productive in the economy." Of course, now we're seeing how much of a misunderstanding that is. In a country where most men and women work even when they have children, having child care is inextricably linked to economic productivity — and not having it often hurts women most. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data from 2015 found that in households with children under 6, women spent an hour a day doing child care, compared to the 25 minutes of care provided by men. It's easy to extrapolate this trend for pandemic times: American women will bear the brunt of the school and child care crisis.

Yet, child care in particular hasn't often found itself at the forefront of political debate. Experts and activists I talked to for this story all used the same framing to talk about why: an American narrative that child care problems are individuals' problems, not society's.

"If you think about child care traditionally before the pandemic, you probably didn't think about it too much before you had kids," Melissa Boteach, vice president of income security and child care at the National Women's Law Center, said. "Then you have kids, you're in the most stressful and resource-strapped part of your life: You're operating on three hours of sleep a night, you're financially squeezed, because at the very time you're taking off of work, you have diapers and wipes and formula and whatever else. You're in this total daze of early motherhood. That's probably not the time when you say, 'You know what, I'm going to call my member of Congress.' You're feeling it like a personal issue."

Child care isn't necessarily seen as a macroeconomic issue or a driver of labor force participation or GDP, Shabo said. And because of that, she said, it often takes a backseat to economic issues like wages when lobbying efforts happen. This is not to say that child care issues don't

get attention — in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries, which featured several female candidates, child care plans took a more front and center role in the campaign than they had in the past. One leading candidate, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, co-authored a 2004 book, "The Two-Income Trap," which was about the ways the rising incomes of households with two full-time employed adults belied the heavy costs of essentials like child care. Warren thought child care costs were among the reasons the American middle class was in an economic crisis.

"Our workplaces were built for white men," said Danielle Atkinson, the founder and director of Mothering Justice, a Detroit-area advocacy group for working families. The fact that parents are left to fend for themselves from birth to kindergarten and then during the after-school, pre-dinner hours, is an American tradition that seems to assume a readily available, at-home caregiver. (Atkinson pointed out the inextricable role black women have played in American child care; enslaved women often took care of white children.) The nuclear family with a stay-at-home parent (usually a mother) is an ideal that persists, or at the very least lingers in American life: only 18 percent of Americans in a 2018 Pew Research Survey thought it was ideal for both parents to work full time.

"This conversation about school is really a conversation about work," Atkinson said. "The conversation about returning to school is not based on health. It's about returning those workers to working and not looking after their children, so those children have to be somewhere." Essential workers in particular are being forced to make difficult choices about their children's care — many essential-worker jobs are lower wage — and many child care providers are in strapped situations. The work of child care providers, Atkinson said, is often undervalued — their median annual wage in 2017 was a little more than $22,000 annually, which is just above the federal government's poverty line for a family of three — and as Boteach pointed out, those workers could continue to risk greater infection rates as schools and work open back up. She highlighted the plan put forth by Senate Democrats, the Child Care Is Essential Act — which would provide a bailout to the suffering industry and additional money for those providers to buy personal protective equipment — and cited an estimate that the U.S. child care industry would need a $9.6 billion injection monthly to survive the pandemic.

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