Childcare during COVID: Reimagining a broken system [1]

This is what child care could look like
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EXCERPTS

Imagine a childcare system that allows parents to send their babies and toddlers to high-quality care, regardless of their financial resources. Cost is determined on a sliding scale according to income; some families pay as little as $51 a week. Caregivers are paid competitively, given avenues for career development, and are eligible to receive medical and retirement benefits. Families working non-traditional hours have access to 24/7 services. For older kids, there's care before and after school, and even during vacation and teacher training days.

This may sound like a dream from some distant Scandinavian childcare utopia, but such a program already exists in the United States. Only for members of the military, though.

In 1989, the Military Child Care Act paved the way for Department of Defense (D0D) employees to obtain sliding-scale care for their children from birth to age 18 in DoD-run child development centers and from contracted home-based providers. For all the wistful imaginings of a better system (if only), for all the hemming and hawing over solving the childcare crisis in this country, there's a solid, working example right under our noses. "We already have hundreds of thousands of kids in a large childcare system," said Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, co-founder of MomsRising. "It took a public investment."

Of course, the pandemic has painfully highlighted the lack of such a public investment in childcare. Childcare providers have been forced to shutter and countless businesses currently teeter on the verge of collapse, taking an estimated 4.5 million child care slots with them. Meanwhile, many parents are struggling to work amid limited to no childcare for young kids and the demands of remote learning for older ones. Women are dropping out of the paid workforce at alarming rates, often to provide childcare for their kids. "It has really rattled the system and fractured it even further," says Lea Austin of UC Berkeley's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment.

According to Austin, and several other childcare experts, this is a moment to envision a different approach to childcare altogether. The current patchwork of imperfect individual solutions is so broken, it demands building something new. "There is no turning back," Austin says.

Researchers and advocates often use the military model to effectively say, "This is what childcare could look like." This is both because it is considered a gold standard for care, and because it already exists. It is a proof that a federally funded, high-quality, widely accessible childcare system works—not in Paris or Stockholm, but right here in the U.S. It's a concept favored by 72 percent of voters nationwide, according to a recent poll by the First Five Years Fund, which also found that the pandemic has only strengthened these convictions. "We are trying to deliver what is clearly a public good in a market-based system," says Austin. "That means what parents have access to is always going to be directly tied to what [they] get paid. We could never get a public school system to work if that's how it worked."

Elizabeth Palley, who researches family policy, argues that a free public system for kids age zero onward is the ideal, but it's one that currently feels out of reach. That is in part because of biases against putting young children in child care, despite the fact that many children do receive non-parental care early on. "I can't even get my head around the feasibility of that in this country," she said. Some localities, like New York City and Washington, D.C., as well as states including Oklahoma and Georgia, have managed to introduce universal pre-K, but that's a somewhat easier hurdle to clear. Care for that age group is less expensive compared to those under the age of 3, because they require a lower caregiver-to-child ratio.

But, short of the oddly utopian vision of extending free public education beyond the arbitrary mark of kindergarten, there is the sliding-scale approach, as in the military model. This requires government investment that allows parents to pay according to their means. Ideally, Austin envisions a range of childcare programs, from in-home to school-based, that are contracted through state or local strategies with federal funding.

These programs would need to serve kids up until at least age 13, because parents need help before school and after school, as well as coverage during summer break. "We act as if there's always someone to pick up a child at 3 p.m. and [cover] summers and everything else when schools are closed," says Katie Hamm, vice president of Early Childhood Policy at American Progress. She adds that some parents

who work non-traditional hours need weekends and evening coverage. “We haven’t caught up to modern families and the economy,” she says.

It’s critical that government funding goes directly to providers, many experts say. The current status quo sees subsidies administered through “portable vouchers” that low-income families use to help cover childcare costs. As a report from American Progress explains, providers are often disinclined to accept these vouchers because they are “reimbursed based on child attendance rather than enrollment,” which makes revenue unstable. These subsidies generally don’t cover the true cost of providing childcare.

As it is, many childcare providers are paid poverty-level wages; and, among early childcare providers, Black women are paid notably less than their white peers. Rasiene Reece Carter has provided home-based childcare for nearly 21 years—and for 17 of those years, she’s worked seven days a week. “I work 18 hours, 19 hours, sometimes,” she said. “When you take someone that’s working that many hours and break down how much we’re getting paid… it’s sad,” she says. Additionally, she doesn’t get paid sick days. “We can’t even afford to be sick. Many of us are forced to work sick.” Carter adds, “We have no retirement.”

Austin argues that reimagining childcare should go well beyond merely establishing a living wage for providers.“My big-picture hope and dream would be that early care and education is understood to be, and funded as, a critical infrastructure support in this country, and that they’re sought-after jobs,” she says.

The experts I spoke with largely agree on these broad sketches of a theoretical childcare system: sliding-scale services, contracts with existing providers, decent pay and benefits for workers. When you get down to the nitty-gritty, there are differences: President-elect Joe Biden’s childcare plan calls for free pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds, as well as tax credits or sliding scale childcare for low-income and middle-class families with a cap of seven percent of their income. On the other hand, Elizabeth Warren’s plan calls for free childcare for families earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line, with all other families paying on a sliding scale, with a 7 percent cap. As Palley put it, Biden’s plan is “great,” and Warren’s plan is “better.” (Bernie Sanders proposed free childcare and pre-K for all.)

The first hurdle to any plan is funding, but then comes the essential question of how money gets spent. “Local autonomy” in the implementation of federal funds is critical, says Clarissa Doutherd, executive director of Parent Voices Oakland, a grassroots organization advocating around childcare. Otherwise, childcare services will fail to meet the specific needs of communities. “That should be led by those most impacted, and that is BIPOC women of color, people of color, working-class folks, and immigrant communities who have struggled to support their families and also have been seen as non-productive in our communities because they require care,” she says. “That’s really who should be leading the movement for access to childcare.”

Needless to say, these essential voices are often ignored. “The care of young children largely rest on femme-identified folks in our community and they are often not the decision-makers around policies,” she says. “They are often not designing programming.” Parent Voices Oakland is “trying to move the narrative from ‘impoverished mothers seeking welfare’ to ‘powerful activists,’” says Doutherd. Recently, Alameda County’s Measure C, which introduces a half-cent sales tax increase to, in part, provide childcare, was approved. “It was parents and childcare providers working together,” she says. “It was a collective effort led by women of color.”

There is some reason to be optimistic about the possibility of such a broad-strokes vision of childcare becoming reality. Nicole Rodgers, founder of the think tank Family Story, notes that we’re in an unprecedented moment where childcare is being recognized as basic infrastructure, even by conservative right-wing politicians. “This is, relatively for the United States, a radical rethinking,” she says. “That’s new.” Public opinion is strongly in favor of federally funded childcare as well. If Democrats win in Georgia in January, it paves the way for change. The question is just how much.

While Biden’s plan calls for free pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds, and tax credits or slide-scale childcare for low-income and middle-class families, Palley notes “there will inevitably be compromises.” She adds, “I saw what happened with the public option for the ACA and so, am less hopeful than I wish I could be.” She notes that several other issues, like healthcare, may be on the agenda first. “That is the problem with child care,” she says. “It never, ever is first.” “Something has to give,” Palley continues. My fear is childcare is going to be that thing of ‘It would be nice to do this, but we’re not going to do that right now.’”

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In fact, the U.S. has come close in the past: in 1971, Congress passed a bill with bipartisan support to fund a national daycare program. Nixon vetoed it, decrying its “family-weakening implications,” and the momentum dissipated. “We’re sort of still living the legacy of the second wave feminist backlash and the organizations that built up at that time to push traditional nuclear families as superior and... the idea of women as our natural caregivers.” She adds, “At the time, and still today to some degree, the easiest way to resist feminist demands for equality was to completely neglect childcare needs, because that made women the de facto providers.”

Now, amid the pandemic, women are dropping out of the workforce, many to take care of their kids, and experts say that “hard-won progress on closing the gender wage gap may also be set back decades.” It’s hard not to feel like we’ve returned to that 1971 “moment of potential,” as Rodgers put it. A chance for a do-over. But what will it take to finally make a childcare system happen, and in the fullness that is needed? “We need, sort of, a revolution,” Palley says with a laugh. She wasn’t joking.

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