

# Opinion: How the gig economy puts children's development at risk and what we can do about it <sup>[1]</sup>

Unpredictable schedules and pay and limited access to benefits like health care and parental leave can threaten the ability of workers' children to learn

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## EXCERPT

When I first met 7-month-old Kiernan, he was the spitting image of his big brother, Keller, on whom I'd performed cochlear implant surgery for his hearing years earlier. The boys' parents and I were hopeful that their similarities would also extend to the incredible post-surgery outcomes Keller had achieved. When the world of spoken language was opened up to him, Keller went on to speak and read above grade level.

But one stark difference threatened Kiernan's chances of similarly reaching his full educational potential. His father, Peter, an information technology expert, had been a full-time employee with benefits at the time of Keller's surgery. But he had since been laid off and hired back by the same company — as a part-time contracted employee without benefits. The family was no longer sure how or when they might afford Kiernan's surgery.

Peter is one of a growing number of Americans who are part of the gig economy, trading stable employment and benefits for an arrangement in which they get paid per task or project. This trend is welcomed by many as a driver of innovation or a "free market safety net," lifting some workers out of unemployment and providing others with needed flexibility and supplemental income.

But too many others, like Peter and his family, have been harmed by the gig economy. These jobs, which employed up to 36 percent of all Americans full or part time in 2018, rarely offer access to employer-provided health insurance, paid sick time, paid family leave, minimum wage guarantees or basic labor protections. The absence of such safeguards doesn't threaten only workers' well-being. Because of the paradox of early childhood — that this critical period of life is all about the adults in a child's world — the gig economy leaves workers' children vulnerable as well, posing particular risks to the early brain development that lays the foundation for all future learning.

Consider, for example, that research has found that unpredictable and nonstandard work schedules, common among gig workers, can undermine children's development. One study suggested that toddlers whose mothers work nonstandard hours demonstrate lower-than-average cognitive skills, while another found that those in preschool are more likely to struggle behaviorally. Such schedules interfere with regular mealtimes and bedtimes, which are critical to healthy development. They are also associated with inconsistent and poor-quality child care arrangements, because high-quality centers often require predictable drop-off and pickup times.

While the "disruption economy" may be an important driver of innovation, we must ensure that it does not also disrupt the healthy development of our next generation.

A lack of employer-provided benefits also threatens to impede children's development. Kiernan's story clearly illustrates what's at stake for some kids without access to health insurance, but the absence of other benefits like paid parental leave can also take a toll. The advantages of parental leave for children are well documented and range from better language and socioemotional outcomes during toddlerhood to increased breastfeeding in infancy, which itself is associated with enhanced cognitive development.

As we emerge from the current economic crisis, we must fundamentally rethink the American social safety net, which was built in the mid 20th century, when steady employment and employer-provided benefits were the norm. Now, for scores of Americans, alternative work arrangements like freelancing, permanent part-time positions and online gig work are the new normal. The recent passage of California's Proposition 22 — which was backed by gig economy giants like Uber and Lyft and will allow those companies to continue treating workers as independent contractors rather than employees — demonstrates that we cannot count on employers alone to look out for our nation's workers. (A disclosure here: My husband is an adviser to Lyft, but this article was written independently.)

But what might a social safety net for the era of gig work look like? What can we do to protect gig workers and their children?

Believe it or not, we can apply what we know about foundational brain development in children to inform a new system of worker protection, simultaneously aiding children and their parents. Put simply, what children need most during the early years — security (i.e., protection from toxic stress), enrichment (i.e., rich language input) and time (i.e., the opportunity for nurturing interactions with caregivers) — is exactly what their parents need as well. If Covid-19 has taught us anything, it is the inextricable link between our families and our economy. By recognizing this link, and striving to meet the needs of families, we can identify the three most essential protections for working parents.

The need for security can be met through the provision of portable benefits, including health care and retirement savings that are tied to individual employees, not specific jobs or employers. As the Aspen Institute explains, these benefits should cover independent contractors and part-time workers, not just traditional employees, with companies contributing a fixed rate based on how many hours an individual works for them.

The need for enrichment can be met by reducing unpredictability in workers' schedules and ensuring better pay for those who do work irregular or nontraditional hours. Scholars at the Brookings Institution and the Economic Policy Institute have identified a host of promising reforms in this arena.

Finally, the need for time can be met through paid leave — parental leave and sick leave that allow a parent to care for a child — and unemployment insurance. A recent study underscores how important this would be for children. Researchers found that parents who lost their jobs and their income during the Covid-19 crisis had more negative interactions with their children, while many parents who lost jobs but did not lose income reported that interactions with their children improved. In essence, the CARES Act had extended the benefits of unemployment insurance to many Americans — like gig workers — who typically go without. And it led to improved parent-child interactions.

While the “disruption economy” may be an important driver of innovation, we must ensure that it does not also disrupt the healthy development of our next generation. Fortunately, several states and cities are already experimenting with some or all of these proposed policies. Other localities can and should pass similar legislation that extends the same protections to all workers, including those in the gig economy, and the federal government should encourage them to do so. Kiernan — who continues to wait for his cochlear implant as his parents search for a way to afford the surgery — and countless other children are depending on it.

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**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

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