Advice from two experts on how Biden and Harris can tackle America's child-care crisis [1]

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EXCERPT

There is a child-care crisis in the United States that preceded the coronavirus pandemic but has been worsened significantly in the past year.

Until now, most of the energy and attention around helping children has focused on safely reopening schools — but the emergency in child care is at least as acute. Affected are not only the nearly 12 million children under age 5 and their families that rely on providers for care but also the economy — which can't really recover if working parents have no help caring for their children.

Congress passed a coronavirus relief bill in late December that included $10 billion for child care — which, according to the nonprofit Center for American Progress, could help many child-care providers survive for a few months if the funds are distributed "quickly and efficient."

"But without further relief and the promise of sustained investment in the child care sector, America could be facing a child care shortage so severe that many parents may not be able to rejoin the workforce, hindering an economic recovery," the center said in a report.

This post offers some guidance to the Biden-Harris administration on how to finally address the country's child-care crisis. It was written by Sharon Lynn Kagan, a professor of early-childhood and family policy at Columbia University's Teachers College and co-director of the college's National Center for Children and Families, and Caitlin Dermody, research assistant at the National Center for Children and Families.

By Sharon Lynn Kagan and Caitlin Dermody

> One, two, buckle my shoe; three, four, open the door
>
> Five, six, pick up sticks; seven, eight, lay them straight

Childhood lessons are often worth revisiting. Invoking the nursery rhyme that imparts the rudiments of counting, we suggest that the Biden administration focus on what really counts — improving the well-being of America's young children by: "buckling" up and taking stock; "opening" the door to new thinking; "picking up" the best strategies from other countries; and "laying straight" actionable strategies.

Encouraged by the news that the likely next education secretary is experienced with and committed to early-childhood education and care, we call on the new administration to create a national office for children that lays out a vision, an agenda and a budget, and inspires state-level offices to do the same.

One, two: Buckle up and take stock. The early years matter!

Much like a presidential administration's early days, a child's earliest years are the "imprinting" time — the critical moments when we can and must set the future course. Decades of research have shown that investments in children's youngest years matter consequentially to their development and, subsequently, to the future of society. For young children, family investments of time and support lead to healthy physical and cognitive maturation.

Likewise, societal investments in high-quality resources and services yield countless economic and social benefits, including reductions in welfare dependence, special-education service referrals and criminal activity.

But sadly, a quick look at U.S. data shows that today's early-childhood services are not fully paying off. The programs patched together by states are episodically funded and inconsistently delivered, creating program redundancies and precluding equity and efficiency. Services privilege 3- and 4-year-old children over infants and toddlers.

The early-childhood workforce remains undercompensated and underappreciated, and parents struggle to discern what services exist and

how to access them. We need to buckle up and take stock of what we know: The early years matter, but we are failing to meet the standards of quality, equity, sustainability and efficiency necessary for supporting our children, our economic trajectory and our society's well-being.

Three, four: Open the door to new thinking!

The challenges to better serving young children are chronic and enduring despite perennial attempts to improve and enhance conditions. We must open the door to new thinking that focuses not only on the supply of programs, but also on their effectiveness and coordination.

To be effective, funded programs must be buttressed by an infrastructure that supports a well-trained workforce. This infrastructure must also include governance entities that foster efficiency, functional data systems that provide timely information to improve services, robust regulatory approaches that advance quality, and accountability systems that promote equity.

The new thinking here isn't just about mounting programs, but also about building an infrastructure that renders them effective. It is about coordinating services to meet the holistic needs of children by linking health, education, labor, social protection and family supports, making access convenient for families and continuous for children.

And new thinking entails recognizing that all the early years are important and coordinating a continuum of services that span the years immediately before birth well into the primary years of schooling.

As other countries have demonstrated, a commitment to effective, coordinated and comprehensive child and family services — within the structure of the government and the zeitgeist of the nation — is critical to maximizing the benefits of investments for children, families and society.

Five, six: Pick up the best strategies from other countries!

To make these changes, America doesn't need to reinvent the wheel. Rather, we need to swallow our pride and/or put aside the notion that we are dealing with a unique set of circumstances, and learn from other nations (often those with which we routinely compete) that serve their young children far better.

As my colleagues and I (Kagan) have documented in two major studies, these countries provide continuous, robust and coordinated services, including parenting supports, paid family leave, comprehensive health services, universal preschool, or easily accessible and affordable early-learning options in diverse settings.

For example, to improve quality, we should examine the content and adoption of Australia's national Early Years Learning Framework and its approach to professional advancement.

To foster continuously improving services, we should study England's inventive and comprehensive use of data.

To expedite governance and coordination, we should examine Singapore's Early Childhood Development Agency and Australia's Children's Education and Care Quality Authority.

And to advance comprehensive services, we should explore South Korea's approach to integrated child-care and health provisions as well as Finland's peri- and postnatal supports for parents that make education and community play centers ubiquitous.

Other examples abound, but the bottom line is that, while we have a way to go, solid, adaptable blueprints are there.

Seven, eight: Lay straight actionable strategies!

Drawing from other nations, here are doable, contextually relevant strategies the Biden administration could pursue:

Create a White House Office for Children (WHOC) at the federal level and support the establishment of State Offices for Children (SOC) where they do not exist.

The WHOC should encourage a national dialogue about children by, for example, taking a page from the White House Conferences on Children — meetings hosted by U.S. presidents, from Theodore Roosevelt to Richard Nixon, to improve the lives of children across the nation.

The WHOC should set forth a comprehensive vision that prioritizes the well-being of young children, taking cues from other countries. Such a vision should be accompanied by an annual agenda for children and bolstered by an annual children's budget.

The WHOC should activate a national research entity that fosters a coordinated research agenda, advances the preparation of diverse scholars, and provides support for focused research in the understudied areas of finance, governance, workforce, equity and accountability policies that foster the best childhood outcomes.

Finally, and essential to the accomplishment of the above, the WHOC and the SOCs must lead cross-agency planning and coordination to bring coherence to the mélange of disparate early-childhood services and to promote their coordinated and efficient distribution.

Again, countries all over the globe are already implementing these strategies. The United States should not be last on what should be a first-step agenda.

President Biden and Vice President Harris, you have got the toughest and, next to parents, the most important jobs in the world. We need you to buckle up and support the holistic development of children and our nation by supporting policies that create effective and coordinated delivery of high-quality services for all young children.

Valerie Strauss is an education writer who authors The Answer Sheet blog. She came to The Washington Post as an assistant foreign editor for Asia in 1987 and weekend foreign desk editor after working for Reuters as national security editor and a military/foreign affairs reporter on Capitol Hill. She also previously worked at UPI and the LA Times.

Region: United States [3]

Tags: policy [4]

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