

Child care is too expensive. What if it were free? ^[1]

One weird trick to fix our broken child care system. Early education in the US is endlessly convoluted, and a massive expense for lower- and middle-class families. What if the solution were as straightforward as making child care a “good” job?

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Early education in the US is endlessly convoluted, and a massive expense for lower- and middle-class families. What if the solution were as straightforward as making child care a “good” job?

When I graduated from college in the mid-2000s, I moved to Seattle to find a job waitressing. After weeks of handing over résumés, I was still unemployed. Then I saw an advertisement in the local alt-weekly for a teacher’s assistant position at a preschool, just across the street from the University of Washington. I’d babysat, usually for around \$2 an hour, since fifth grade. Infants, toddlers, 4-year-olds: I’d spent endless hours with them all, sometimes all at once, sometimes even overnight. I had great references. I got the job, which paid \$8 an hour — just over the state’s then-minimum wage of \$7.16 — almost instantly.

In the toddler room, where kids were between 1 and 2 years old, another teacher and I handled the care of a dozen squawking, endlessly curious kids. The job, as anyone who’s worked in a child care center or preschool can tell you, is incredibly physical; I was sore every night in some new way.

This was before the Affordable Care Act, and I had no health insurance. I caught colds and flus from the kids, got the familiar tingle of strep throat, but instead of getting antibiotics, I let it ride out, lucky it didn’t get worse. I was living with three friends in a small house nearby and watched as the \$500-a-month rent, plus \$80 a month for a subsidized bus pass, ate up the majority of my paycheck. I tried to cut costs by grazing on the leftovers of the food provided for the kids for breakfast and lunch. My small savings, accumulated over the summer while working at a dude ranch, began to dwindle.

When a friend told me about a nanny agency that could get me at least \$13 an hour, paid time off, and a stipend for health insurance, how could I say no? I could’ve taken some night classes to get my early childhood accreditation, but that would bump my pay by a dollar, maybe slightly more. I loved those kids, and I honestly loved the group care environment, which would stand in stark contrast to my long, lonely days as a nanny. But I couldn’t survive on the pay long term. So I became a statistic: one of hundreds of thousands of workers who leave early childhood care and education — an umbrella term for home child care, child care centers, and private and public preschools for children under 5 — every year for higher-paying work, whether at the Starbucks down the road or in the K-8 public school system.

The vast majority of early childhood jobs, at least as they’re currently conceived, are not good jobs. The pay is breathtakingly low: In 2019, the median was \$11.65 an hour, or \$24,230 a year. As a result, turnover is incredibly high. A recent study in Louisiana found that every year more than one-third of early childhood educators leave their jobs. Not for competitors, not for slightly higher-paying jobs. They leave the sector altogether.

Between 43 and 54 percent of early childhood workers are enrolled in some form of government assistance; in most states, the share of the workforce living below the poverty line is somewhere between 15 and 25 percent. An ongoing study of 49 early childhood education (ECE) centers in Seattle and Austin found that 42 percent of the workforce was food-insecure. Like other fields with low pay and the subsequent stress and anxiety that accompany poverty, workers have higher rates of chronic disease and are two to five times more likely to report clinically depressive symptoms.

Child care workers are paid so little, yet the cost of care continues to rise. “Child care is my second mortgage,” one friend, who’s solidly middle-class enough to have a first mortgage, told me. “I’m lucky that I don’t have student loans, because there’d be no way for me to pay those plus what I’m paying for two kids,” said another. Parents love their children’s teachers and caregivers, but when confronted with the reality of their low pay, they also wonder: Where is all the money going?

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE IS A TOTAL MARKET FAILURE, AND HAS BEEN, WHETHER WE
REALIZED IT OR NOT, FOR DECADES

These are the hallmarks of a broken system. The cost of care places an unsustainable burden on parents, working to hollow out the middle class and close it off to lower- or working-class parents, but the wages keep many practitioners teetering on the edge of poverty, prompting many of those most adept at the work to seek employment elsewhere. Early childhood care is, as one policy expert put it to me, a total market failure, and has been, whether we realized it or not, for decades.

How do you fix a fundamentally broken system? It's not as simple as blowing it up and starting over. The failure is so textured, so tied up in ideas of gender and race, of women and work, of "choice" and "kids are best cared for at home," solutions thus far have largely been piecemeal: Add an incentive here, cut a cost there, even take the big step of establishing universal pre-K. Some of these reforms have meaningfully changed kids' (and parents') lives, but the entire process feels, as Lea Austin, executive director of UC Berkeley's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, put it to me, "like pouring water into a bucket with a hole in the bottom."

The first step toward lasting reform has to be a conceptual one, the sort that will have cascading effects on the entire sector and our society as a whole. We can start thinking of early child care and education the same way we think about public parks or sanitation or libraries or public schools: as a public good, foundational to a functioning society regardless of whether you directly benefit from its existence. Like other public goods, access shouldn't be limited by employment, income, or location, and those who make it run should, at the very least, be paid a living wage.

This scenario is only possible, of course, when and if early childhood care is robustly funded with tax dollars, just as public schools are. To be clear, tax dollars are already being used to inadequately prop up the system, whether in the form of vouchers for parents, pay supplements for teachers, incentives for practitioners to pursue ECE degrees, or government assistance programs such as Medicare and SNAP for child care workers who cannot pay their bills or provide for their families with their current wages. What if we stopped using tax dollars and massive additional portions of our income to keep pouring water in the bucket, and just plugged the hole?

That sounds like a straightforward solution, and in some ways it is. In other ways, it's endlessly complicated. The conversations most people have about child care usually start with the astronomical cost, touch on the difficulty of waiting lists, glance toward the difficulty of finding a "good fit" (often code for perceived quality), and then stop. Families somehow figure out a way to make it work, even if that means someone dropping out of the workforce, relying on informal "kith and kin" care, or emptying out savings, and then everyone breathes a deep sigh of relief when the youngest kid hits kindergarten. The struggle to pay for care is acute, but ultimately too short-lived to accumulate political might.

That can change. Regardless of whether you have children, whether you have three in care or yours have already left the home, we can identify the burden — and the way it exacerbates racial inequities, sustains the gender pay gap, discourages parenthood, and generally makes life really, really hard for millions of people — and agree it doesn't have to be this way.

In the United States, child care (like paying for higher education) is conceived of as an individual problem, with individual solutions. There is an alternate reality for the United States, a clear fork in the road we didn't take. Back in 1971, the Comprehensive Child Development Act made its way through Congress with overwhelming bipartisan support. Building on the success of Head Start, which had launched in 1965, the Child Development Act would've made high-quality child care available for all on an affordable, sliding scale basis. Nixon vetoed the bill — a move that, as Anna K. Danziger Halperin, a historian of the child care movement, explains, "surprised even officials within his own administration."

The reasoning, according to Halperin, was fear from the right wing of the Republican Party that the bill would encourage women to join the workforce, thereby destroying the "integrity" of the middle-class family unit, while also providing solutions that felt dangerously close to communistic, "un-American" care. There was also conservative concern that the bill was an "overreach" into the lives of low-income people, and that its primary beneficiaries were families of color. As Elizabeth Palley, a professor who studies the history of child care, told Vox's Anna North, "White people don't want to pay for Black people's children to be cared for."

Decades later, patriarchal fear is still alive and well, as evidenced by the state of Idaho's rejection of \$6 million in early education funding in March. "I don't think anybody does a better job than mothers in the home, and any bill that makes it easier or more convenient for mothers to come out of the home and let others raise their child, I don't think that's a good direction for us to be going," state Rep. Charlie Shepherd said during the discussion of the bill. "We are really hurting the family unit in the process."

It's too simple to just blame a bunch of right-wing conservative men for where we've found ourselves; the idea of child care as an individual responsibility was, however inadvertently, supported by feminists as well. After Nixon vetoed the Child Development Act, the broad coalition that had worked to get it through Congress dispersed, including various feminist groups whose focus shifted to getting more women into jobs and combating the gender discrimination that faced them once there.

"They stopped fighting for child care, and other sorts of collective issues, and really focused on individual professional success," Halperin tells me. "When you think of child care as a personal choice, it creates all of these new inequalities. Women of color, Black and immigrant women — they end up caring for the children of professional women. Those professional women, in turn, don't want their whole paycheck going to child care, so it gets undervalued and underpaid."

This attitude has long been part of the critique of second-wave feminism. In its focus on getting women into the workforce, the movement lost sight of the inequities that were reproduced and exacerbated in the process. Indeed, many white, educated women were satisfied with the child care situation as it was, even with low pay levels for workers, because it still fundamentally worked for them. As more and more of those women entered the workforce, regulations that govern the ratio between children and caregivers expanded, and insurance, real estate, and staff turnover costs continued to rise.

Finding affordable, reliable care has never not been a problem for lower-income women, particularly for women of color. But as early as 1979, Columbia professor Jane Price, author of *How to Have a Child and Keep Your Job*, was referring to the difficulty of finding care, particularly in the suburbs, as “a crisis.” Price predicted that the problem, if ignored, would only get worse, and she was right. Between 1970 and 2000, the cost of care per child rose 200 percent; today, the average cost of care for families with children under 5 hovers around 10 percent of a family’s monthly income, with many families paying considerably more.

The pandemic has clarified just how dire the situation has become, and there are hopeful steps forward in raising pay and creating universal or sliding scale programs in pockets all over the United States. President Joe Biden’s stimulus plan includes more than \$25 billion to support child care centers and \$15 billion in child care assistance to families, as well as a \$3,600 annual tax credit for every child under 6 (and \$3,000 a year for children between 6 and 17). Richard Nixon he is not; his forthcoming infrastructure bill will have a child care component, too.

But any lasting solution to our current crisis demands a shift in our thinking when it comes to accessing high-quality early childhood care: from a personal responsibility to a public good. If you have children, this shift will directly benefit them — but it will also benefit you, as their parent, and whoever else’s mental and financial load is lessened as a consequence. It will benefit employers, who, as the pandemic has shown, rely on their employees having access to reliable care. It will benefit their coworkers without children. And, for countless reasons, it will benefit the caregivers themselves, providing a pathway into the middle class, but only if we transform ECE work into a “good job.”

There’s a pretty straightforward way to do this: Pay early childhood teachers like public school teachers. Providing quality care is expensive. It just is. In fact, it is too much for individual families to bear — just like hiring teachers to provide care for K-12 students would also be too much to bear, and is the reason we have a publicly funded school system. Even if you don’t have children, you can see the benefits of a public school system. The same should hold true for a publicly funded care system, in whatever form that might take.

"THERE’S A PRETTY STRAIGHTFORWARD WAY TO DO THIS: PAY EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS LIKE PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS"

Right now, depending on the state, a pre-K teacher with a bachelor’s degree can make up to 50 percent less than a kindergarten teacher. In Vermont, the difference is about 17.2 percent — the sixth-smallest such gap in the country. Lawmakers know it’s still not enough. H 171, currently moving through the legislature in Vermont, with two-thirds of the House of Representatives signed on as co-sponsors, aims to close the pay gap entirely, while also paying off existing student loans for educators in the system in order to increase retention.

The state bill, if passed, would add an estimated \$13 million to the yearly budget. As with its previous bailout of the industry during the height of the pandemic, the legislature seems to understand that a healthy economy is only possible with a healthy child care system. H 171 promises to fundamentally remake the child care system in the state: No family would be asked to pay more than 10 percent of their income for care, hundreds would be able to stay in their profession, and it would significantly decrease the 10.9 percent of Vermont care workers who, as of 2020, lived in poverty. Just imagine the effect that a similar bill would have in Tennessee (where 22.9 percent of the ECE workforce is in poverty), or Nebraska (29.2 percent), or New Mexico (27.4 percent).

“The people who do the work are the linchpin of good child care and good early learning,” Lea Austin, with UC Berkeley’s Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, explains. “The stability of the workers in a particular program, the continuity of their relationships with children, all that is disrupted when we have turnover. It’s disruptive to the children and their families, and it’s disruptive to the centers, who have to do the hiring, recruiting, training, and all those costs, and it’s disruptive to the employees who remain in the program, who have to take on extra work. There’s a ripple effect, all around.”

There’s a ripple effect when the job is unstable, and there’s a different ripple effect when you stabilize the job. Decrease the stressors in workers’ lives — their need to worry about groceries or their own children’s care or health care — and they become better workers. This is particularly important for child care and child education, which calls workers to be fully engaged and attentive. “It seems obvious,” Austin says, “that we would want anyone working with children to be healthy and supported and as present with children as they possibly can be. We have to provide the conditions for them to do so.”

Most advocates, policymakers, and caregivers that I spoke to agreed that a publicly funded system should not simply require existing elementary schools to extend care. This is where choice can really be preserved: If you’d rather your child go to the home of a certified caregiver in your neighborhood, or someone from your same cultural or linguistic background, those caregivers can also receive funding. They’re entrepreneurs and small-business owners, who, as any politician will tell you, form the backbone of the American middle class. And, in this case, they’re almost all women, and an estimated 40 percent are women of color.

“When we talk about universal child care, that doesn’t mean that all kids, from 0 to 5, need to be in school,” Juliet Bromer, a research scientist at the Erikson Institute in Chicago, tells me. “It means honoring these places and spaces that families have long relied on. For some people, that might be a center, but for many, it is not.” Bromer points out that when we talk about “quality,” we often talk about low ratios of teachers to children and accreditation, which is important but misses less quantifiable components. “One dimension of quality, especially for Black and brown children, is being in a setting where you’re really able to see yourself,” Bromer said. “That really happens with home care, particularly for Black boys, who, in a school setting, have to have this sort of vigilance.”

That’s exactly the sort of care that small providers like Miren Algorri, who has run a child care center in Chula Vista, Texas, since 1997, wants to provide. It’s most possible when she and her employees are making a living wage, which is what she, along with her union, Childcare Providers United, has been agitating for in the state of California.

"If we could have quality care, and keep this small ratio, it would be a dream come true," Algorri says. "To have that peace of mind, knowing that at the end of the month, we'd have some money left to buy a book! I'd have an extra \$20, as opposed to wondering, 'How do I pay my electric bill?' I live very close to the border, so a lot of my colleagues are postponing their medical checkups, because they usually go over the border to Mexico. Why should we have to do that? Why do I have to put my health on the back burner so I can continue to perform as a public worker?"

Like many forms of feminized labor, child care has long been thought of as part of the domestic, private sphere — something that comes "naturally" to women and, as such, something that any woman can do well, instead of a discrete skill. I'm personally good with children not because I'm a woman, but because I spent years figuring out how to do the work, and I'm not nearly as good with kids as the people who've made this their life's work. Not even the scarcity of child care over the past year and the rippling effects on the economy and millions of parents' mental health has effectively driven home just how essential, how valuable, this work really is.

"The job of caring for and educating young children is so hard, and so complex," Lea Austin explains. "People understand that it's low-paid work, but they have no idea how low. I've found myself in meetings, even with people who work in the sector, in various policy roles, and you put out that number, that the median wage for a child care worker is \$11.65 across the country, and that more than half of ECE workers use aid programs, and sometimes there's an audible gasp. When people make that connection and understand the consequences, they find it shocking and egregious."

"OUR WORK IS INFANTILIZED AND MINIMIZED, AND THE VAST MAJORITY OF IT IS DONE BY WOMEN LIKE MYSELF, A WOMAN OF COLOR"

Yet most people don't make that connection. As Austin explains, "work performed by women and performed by women of color is historically undervalued. We have a convergence of those two categories in the ECE workforce."

"Don't get me started on the racism and sexism," Algorri told me. "Our work is infantilized and minimized, and the vast majority of it is done by women like myself, a woman of color."

It's incredibly difficult to elevate any occupation that's undervalued. When a type of labor is not considered a skill or is conceived of as something that people "naturally" want to do for free, it keeps wages down. When wages are low, employers have to lower their necessary qualifications, which in turn reinforces the idea that the work is unskilled. In most child care centers in the United States, teaching assistant positions require only a high school diploma or GED, plus a background check. Teacher positions require an associate or bachelor's degree in ECE, but the pay bump is so small that many who obtain their certification, which extends to children in third grade, move to the K-8 system. Various government programs have attempted to "upskill" the profession, encouraging existing care workers to pursue certification, but the low pay remains a consistent barrier.

"I've seen providers have to close their doors because they cannot find or pay an assistant," Algorri says. "I've been lucky, but I've sacrificed a lot to keep the quality of assistants over the years. It's disheartening, because providers will have to downsize, going from a license for 14 kids down to eight or six, because they just can't afford to keep paying, which then causes issues in the community because people need care for infants or toddlers but they can't find it anywhere."

There's demand, in other words, but at current pay levels, inadequate supply, which can lead to "child care deserts" — places where infant to 3-year-old care is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to find, no matter the cost — in urban, suburban, and rural areas. In *Crawling Behind: America's Childcare Crisis and How to Fix It*, Elliot Haspel points out that as many as 95 percent of Americans live in child care deserts, where three or more children are in need of care for every available spot; people with above-average income are as likely to live in these areas as people with less income. The number of centers and homes providing care simply cannot keep pace with the demand. Before the pandemic, centers, some of them the only infant-to-3-year-old providers in the area, were closing at alarming rates. As of March 2021, an estimated 20,000 care centers have closed permanently.

In its current figuration, child care is not a lucrative business. Unlike so many other industries, demand is simply not enough to spark the creation of new businesses. That's how broken the market is, and without a significant refiguration of funding sources, it's not going to change. In Texas, like many states, the state workforce commission has allocated funding to subsidize students pursuing degrees in "high-growth, high demand, and emerging occupations that are critical to the state and local economies." Depending on the location in Texas, targeted occupations include registered nurses, electricians, dental hygienists, respiratory therapists, and many more.

As Cathy McHorse, who heads up the United Way's Success by 6 program in Travis County (home to Austin), told me, early childhood educators are nowhere to be found on the list. "Child care would qualify," McHorse says. "But we can't be a 'targeted' occupation because the job doesn't make a living wage. You'd get the degree, and your wages wouldn't change."

Betsy, who currently lives in South Carolina, has a bachelor's of science in child development. She's worked in the field for 14 years, and most recently worked as a teacher's aide for a Montessori public charter school, pulling in \$19 an hour because of previous experience. She lives in a 600-square-foot apartment with her dog, and had to take on a second job waiting tables to cover costs. "I was so miserable and exhausted," she says. She lost her Montessori job with the pandemic, but has been making solid money — around \$25 an hour — tutoring kids doing remote school. Now those kids are back in full-time school, and she's applying to preschool teacher and kindergarten assistant positions. The highest she's been offered is \$15 an hour, which, she says, you can make at Target for a lot less effort. She's decided to drive for Uber Eats instead.

In Missouri, Danielle has worked as a senior development teacher at a center that doubled as a university learning laboratory for four years, and has a degree in ECE with a focus on teaching young children. Her salary is currently just over \$28,000, and even though she splits rent for a small home with her partner who works at a nonprofit, they still struggle to cover costs from month to month and live paycheck to paycheck. Her student loans have been in forbearance since she graduated from college in 2019. She recently watched a coworker leave her position to work at a bank, where she now makes double her old salary. Other coworkers regularly leave for fast food jobs.

At a previous center, the director would often tell workers to be mindful of just how lucky they were, despite their low pay, to have health insurance and paid leave. “But these are basic needs of employees,” Danielle tells me. “Health insurance is a need, not a want. Paid leave is necessary for teachers to still maintain their own lives outside of work.”

“It makes me feel so underappreciated that teachers working in K-8 are taken more seriously and paid way more than ECE educators,” she continues. “But there is a vast difference in how our society views K-8 teachers compared to ECE.”

All over the country, there are people who feel called to the work, who want to continue doing the work, but simply cannot afford to keep doing the work. Because in the end, none of the piecemeal solutions actually address the real problem: that instead of figuring out ways to make care into a public good and caregiving into a good job, many people still think that women, preferably children’s own mothers, should be doing this work for free.

“Here in Charleston, there are many [ECE] jobs that start at \$9 and \$10 an hour,” Danielle explains. “The profession seems to be looked at as a babysitter, something that a housewife can do for some extra cash,” she says. “But that’s not how we provide quality education and care, and that’s not a living wage.”

Over the past 50 years, the decline of the American middle class has been inseparable from the decline in unionized manufacturing jobs, which paid well enough for many families to be supported by a single salary. As those jobs disappeared, more and more middle-class women entered the workforce, spiking the demand for child care outside the home. The two shifts cannot be untangled: As one sector declined, another rose, at least in part, in response. Both were performed by a mix of workers with and without college degrees, but for many reasons, including a burst of anti-union sentiment and a resistance to viewing child care as a skilled profession, the child care workforce did not unionize en masse. Even as the workforce became more and more essential, the jobs never even came close to providing the sort of pay and benefits that made a manufacturing job a potential pathway to the middle class.

Those manufacturing jobs aren’t coming back, at least not in any approximation of what they once were.

Instead of waxing about their decline, we could shift our attention to transforming a whole sector of existing jobs, jobs with incredibly high demand, jobs that serve as the backbone of our personal and public lives, into good, middle-class jobs. This transformation could have cascading effects on the lives of the existing, majority-white middle class, many of whose middle-class salaries depend on the ability to access care. The greatest economic effect, however, would be to open up the middle class to over 2 million caregivers — and remember that 40 percent are women of color.

UC Berkeley’s Center for the Study of Child Care Employment has calculated what it would cost to transform each state’s current system into one that was “values” based, with a “well-qualified and fairly compensated early care workforce” providing high standards of care. In Missouri, where Danielle lives, the proposed increase in funding would raise salaries for early educators with bachelor’s degrees to \$49,626 (on par with elementary and middle school educators) and teacher’s assistants to \$29,776. Both positions would come with benefits including paid time off and health insurance.

With this proposal, Danielle’s current income would be doubled. “It would change my life significantly,” she says. “It could lead to me living a comfortable, less stressful life. I could pay off my debts, my student loans, and even be able to save for my future.” Doubling pay might seem extreme, but these salary increases aren’t exorbitant. What they are is stabilizing: for the millions of kids in care, for the millions of parents who depend on it, but also for the millions of women who do this work.

“The stimulus plan is an interesting opportunity to say, we’re capable of making significant investments in people when everyone can see the need,” Molly Sullivan, the director of national initiatives at First Children’s Finance, says. “We don’t often publicly talk about not being able to afford child care. It’s often a private struggle that we keep out of the spotlight, and I think there’s an opportunity to see this as a wake-up call. It’s okay to acknowledge that what we were doing in the past wasn’t working, so let’s build a system that didn’t exist.”

That system will be complicated. You can read about what happens when you extend universal pre-K, as New York, Boston, Nashville, San Antonio, Charlotte, and a handful of other cities have, and don’t consider what sucking the older students out of the system does to drive up the price of toddler and infant care. You can deliberate whether the funding should come directly from the federal government or remain the provenance of the states, and how that will reinforce existing discrepancies in educational outcomes in places like Idaho and Mississippi that refuse federal dollars. Some people told me there’s too much demand in some areas with universal pre-K, with the same long waiting lists as private preschool, and others directed me to complicated rules about when a pre-K student enters the system, which then make it difficult to give a kid an extra year, if they need it, before moving on to kindergarten.

It’s a tangled set of problems, set against a backdrop of historical and cultural prejudices — and an undeniable part of the current quagmire, as Anna North recently argued, is the sheer number of hours that Americans have to work to arrive at a living wage. But as Sullivan put it to me, “as a country, we have proved that we can tackle big, complicated, incredibly complex things, from the WPA to the Covid vaccine rollout. This is just an area where policy has not really ventured yet.” At least not in a substantive way that doesn’t just fiddle with the margins — and at least not since 1971, when Nixon chose that other fork in the road, and mired us in our current, broken approach.

We've shown that we can care about inequities even when they don't primarily affect us. We've shown that we can support public projects even when we are not the primary beneficiaries. If you're drowning in child care costs right now, probably none of this will get done in time to help you. That's the thing about conceiving of child care as a public good: It will serve you, someday, in ways you might not yet appreciate. A public good is good, in some way, for everyone. Plug the hole in the bucket, and the benefits overflow.

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