

Conservative values support investing in child care as infrastructure. Here's why. ^[1]

Done right, Biden's plan to expand child care could be as foundational to our nation's prosperity as any shovel-ready bridge or tunnel project.

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EXCERPTS

Conservatives have struggled with how to invest in families. Conservative values around the family form a matrix that can seem impossible to detangle: There are fiscal concerns, traditional social and religious values around gender and work, and tension over protecting family privacy versus making it a focus of public investment. These values can sometimes push conservatives in different directions on child care and other investments in early childhood.

Until lately.

The anti-spending Tea Party movement that gripped the GOP 10 years ago has given way to a more populist economic agenda, with Republicans putting forward plans to help families with young children ranging from child allowances to paid parental leave. The pandemic accelerated these discussions, revealing how intertwined caregiving needs are with the economy and exacerbating the strain on working parents — especially mothers. The result was a bipartisan vote last year for the first-ever national paid leave program, along with expanded child care support.

While those pandemic measures were temporary, the debate hasn't gone away. In fact, it's gaining traction, as President Joe Biden is pushing to incorporate care into his infrastructure bill. Biden's plan puts forward a kitchen sink of care policies, including but not limited to universal preschool, child care tax credits, an expanded Child Tax Credit and paid leave for family and medical reasons.

So far, Republicans have stonewalled the Biden plan for its top-line cost and the semantics of calling care "infrastructure." And to be sure, Biden's plan includes many things only loosely related to our nation's infrastructure, even if broadly defined to include physical and human capital.

For instance, Republicans are rightly concerned that certain provisions — such as his corporate tax hike and minimum wage proposal — could compromise economic growth. Similarly, they are right to point out that prodigious government spending will catch up to us, and it's going to take more than taxing the rich to deal with it. Tensions remain in the party over whether supporting working parents and single parents tilts the playing field against two-parent families and stay-at-home parents.

But there are good reasons for Republicans to engage with Biden's plan. His proposals on early childhood, in particular, deserve a closer look. Done right, they could be as foundational to our nation's prosperity as any shovel-ready bridge or tunnel project.

Polling shows that the majority of Republicans support policies such as paid leave and pre-K. Demographic data confirm the need: A majority of parents with young children are in the labor force, nearly one-quarter of children are being raised in a single-parent household, and 41 percent of women are the sole or primary breadwinner in their household. Yet ours is the only developed nation without paid leave, and child care support has failed to keep up with inflation.

Faced with these realities, a deeply fractured Republican Party may find consensus around greater childhood investment, with growing support across the party, from President Donald Trump to Sen. Mitt Romney, and among its chattering class, from the Never-Trump National Review to American Compass.

The GOP has led on these issues before. After all, it was Republican President Gerald Ford who signed the first child care tax credit into law; President George W. Bush who expanded the credit in 2001 with a Republican-controlled Congress; and a Republican-led Congress that passed a significant expansion of the Child Tax Credit as recently as 2017, with Trump being the first to include paid family leave in a presidential budget.

Republicans should use this opportunity to refine Biden's plan into a more targeted version that, done right, would deliver increased support and choice to millions of families.

Here are five reasons conservative values favor expanding federal support for child care and other investments in early childhood.

1. It should be easier for parents — regardless of their income level, family structure or work arrangement — to spend time with infants.

This is often discussed by conservatives with respect to stay-at-home parents and traditional values — and at its worst, patriarchy — but it is wholly consistent with more progressive views as well. And for good reason. The literature on childhood development overwhelmingly highlights the importance of parents being present and engaged early in a child's life. In her book, "What Children Need," Columbia University economist Jane Waldfogel finds that a parent being actively present during the first year of a child's life matters for a baby's healthy development and secure parental attachment, which is linked to a host of positive emotional, physical and mental health outcomes for children.

Yet we've embarked on a historic experiment — an anomaly in the developed world — where the majority of parents work, but there's a lack of policies and norms to support parents caring for their children early in life. Policies such as paid parental leave would help; currently, one in four mothers returns to work two weeks after having a child, and many fathers take no time at all. (Research also shows that fathers with access to paid leave wind up being more involved in their children's lives later on). Another policy that would enable parents to spend more time with children includes boosting wages through wage subsidies such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and economic growth, which could allow parents to scale back hours to spend more time at home or even go down to one income. Employers, too, are not off the hook, and should create more space for flexible schedules and balancing of family priorities.

2. We should maximize care options for working parents instead of applying a one-size-fits-all solution.

For the hours that parents are away, we'd all benefit from children being in high-quality care, given the critical stage of development that affects their lifetime trajectory. My sense is the overarching Republican concern around Biden's plan — perhaps even more than the cost — is that it would push children toward full-time institutional and center-based care by age 3 or earlier, reducing parental choice and worsening children's outcomes. Republicans, such as J.D. Vance in the Wall Street Journal, have pointed out the trouble with universal child care and the now-infamous Quebec study (co-authored by the Obamacare architect Jonathan Gruber), which showed increased behavioral issues, especially among young boys, when full-time, center-based care becomes the norm.

This is why Biden's proposal for a refundable tax credit for child care or preschool is far superior than his proposal for universal preschool, and in fact, the former fully negates the need for the latter. Republicans should support the tax credit component, which in essence is a massive school choice program for early childhood care and education. Parents who need care outside of the home can choose to send their children to center-based care, help pay for a nanny, enroll their children in a local church, a dual language class, or afford high-quality preschool, all of which could be full-time, part-time, or something in between.

To be sure, some conservatives will always be uncomfortable with the idea of subsidizing child care, viewing it as devaluing stay-at-home parenthood. But the vast majority of parents — including Republican parents — require some type of care outside the home at least some of the time, and for many, high-quality care is out of financial reach.

3. Faced with constrained resources, federal support should not be universal but instead should be targeted toward the most vulnerable.

While all of us would appreciate an offset in child care costs or a child allowance, it is particularly important for low-income and disadvantaged families. This is for two reasons. First, child care costs are a significant barrier to work for low-income households in particular, for whom the alternative is often public assistance. Low-income parents who receive child care assistance are more likely to be employed and have better family financial health. Second, high-quality care is especially effective at improving disadvantaged children's outcomes. Almost the entirety of the literature on the benefits of high-quality child care and preschool is for disadvantaged children, suggesting that universal care is significant overreach; targeting more federal support to the most vulnerable children is more efficient spending.

Even if conservatives aren't subsidizing child-related expenses for everyone, they should still seek to bring down everyone's child care costs and address the supply side issue of care, a policy area that is particularly underdeveloped by liberals. We should be seeking to eliminate regulations that don't directly improve care but limit its supply. As it happens, Biden's plan may inadvertently reduce the number of caregivers, by raising standards and mandating higher wages, and reduce in-home care solutions.

Republicans should lead the charge on increasing the supply and retention of caregivers and providing them opportunities for career advancement that's not wholly dependent on federal support. Here, the Bipartisan Policy Center has led the way on promoting apprenticeships and vocational training for caregivers that could begin as early as high school, which could dramatically increase the supply of caregivers and reduce costs.

4. We should invest where there are the greatest improvements in economic opportunity.

These days, our opportunity debate tends to focus on young adults (free college) and older adults (retraining), not young children. But early investment in children has a significantly higher return than intervening later in life. For Republicans concerned about a future of slower growth and productivity, investing in early childhood may be the single best economic investment they could make. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman finds a 7 percent to 13 percent annual return on investment from early childhood interventions for disadvantaged children, including improved educational and career prospects as well as reduced health and criminal expenses. He even goes so far as to claim that it would be one of the best ways to reduce the federal deficit and grow the economy, if properly structured.

Similarly, paid parental leave is associated with greater economic opportunity in real time. In the absence of paid leave, the majority of low-income parents go on welfare or take on debt. A 2012 study by Rutgers found that paid leave reduced a woman's likelihood of using food stamps by 40 percent in the year following her child's birth. Contrary to critics, there is little to no evidence of compromised promotion,

discrimination or reduced hiring of women with short periods of paid leave.

5. Any new spending should include a review of existing government programs.

The proposed pay-for under Biden's plan is higher taxes on wealthy individuals and companies. While I understand the political appeal of this approach, this low-hanging fruit only has so much juice to squeeze. What's more, there are a lot of competing demands for the revenues from taxing the rich, not the least of which is servicing our trillions in debt, which will become a whole lot more painful with rising interest rates. It's time that when we start proposing new programs, we also conduct a systematic review of those that already exist, as Romney proposed in his child allowance. Ideally, the review would go beyond shifting care programs to reorganize our spending more comprehensively, such as means testing old-age entitlements, in order to begin rebalancing spending between older and younger generations.

In addition to reviewing existing spending, Republicans shouldn't just rail against the top-line numbers of Biden's plan and instead do the hard work of pulling out the individual programs and right-sizing them to something more. For example, a paid medical and family leave program is estimated to cost over \$100 billion a year, but a paid parental leave program is less than a tenth of that. Universal preschool may cost \$200 billion, but partially offsetting child care costs for low- and middle-wage earners would be significantly less.

Ultimately, a care infrastructure will be most sustainable and beneficial if it has bipartisan buy-in from both sides, as have nearly all of our successful social and economic investments in decades past. This will require significant flexibility from liberals as well as conservatives. While liberals have arguably spent considerably more energy on care issues, their solutions are far from perfect. For example, liberals continue to bundle different types of paid leave together under a single policy, when every other country in the world treats them separately. Also, the possibility of significant business disruption and fraud is high if workers can take up to 12 weeks of leave annually, intermittently, and for almost any reason. Proposals for universal public preschool seem to skip past the emergent issues in our public K-12 system, which is falling behind our global peers; we shouldn't just add to the system without trying to better understand how to make the existing one better. And few on the political left have proposed reorganizing current spending to make room for such investments, instead adding higher and higher tax and debt obligations.

Investment in early childhood care should be an obvious cause for Republicans to champion. At issue is the importance of healthy families, freedom of choice and the cultivation of economic opportunity. As someone who has been a full-time stay-at-home mother, a full-time working and commuting mother, and everything in between, I understand that these conversations are very personal, every family is unique, and family situations change.

What public policy should do is seek to create more options for parents trying to navigate through care and work, not fewer. It should be informed by more voices, not fewer. This is why the conservative voice is so critical in the care economy debate — why Republicans should take every opportunity to engage and improve upon Biden's plan and why Democrats should take every opportunity to listen.

Region: United States ^[3]

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