

# American parents don't get how much life is about to improve <sup>[1]</sup>

If Democrats get Biden's proposals across the finish line, child care might finally be a workable, affordable option for millions.

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

In 1971, the United States came within a pen stroke of having a functional child-care system. With bipartisan support, Congress passed the Comprehensive Child Development Act—which would have created a publicly funded, state-run program with parent payments on a sliding scale of affordability—but President Richard Nixon vetoed it. Almost exactly 50 years later, the nation once again stands on the precipice of revolutionizing its child-care system. If Democrats can get their “Build Back Better” package across the finish line, the child-care and pre-K provisions would be arguably the greatest victory for American families in several generations.

Many may not realize quite yet just how enormous a change is coming. Even before the pandemic, about half of Americans lived in “child care deserts.” And when parents can find a slot, the cost is often backbreaking. The pandemic has made a bad situation catastrophic. Within the next few years, however, millions of American families will have access to an ample supply of free or very low-cost child care. It is no exaggeration to say that this will be a life-changing benefit for many of them.

As of now, the legislation contains provisions for, within three years, free universal pre-K, delivered by a combination of schools, Head Start programs, and child-care programs for every 3- and 4-year-old in the nation. Considering that only one-third of 4-year-olds and 6 percent of 3-year-olds are currently enrolled in a publicly funded pre-K, this will mean a huge increase in opportunity for children and a tremendous decrease in bills for parents.

The news is also good for parents of younger children. Child-care programs for infants and toddlers (which can also provide care before and after pre-K hours for older kids) are in free fall thanks to severe staffing shortages and a broken business model. The proposed bill puts real money into a system that will help pay educators the wages they deserve.

The child-care benefits will be available to parents on a sliding-scale basis. Parents making less than 75 percent of their state's median income will pay nothing for care. In West Virginia, for example, that means every family of four making less than about \$59,000 will have free child care. For those making 75 to 100 percent of the state median income, their maximum costs will be capped at 2 percent of their income—no matter how many young children they have. For those making 100 to 125 percent of the state median income, the cap will be 4 percent. For those making more than 250 percent, there is no cap.

What does this mean in practice? The overwhelming majority of American parents will pay no more than \$5,000 a year for child care. Millions will pay nothing. While the “Build Back Better” funding is provided for only six years, many policy experts believe it will last, because few politicians will want to repeal a benefit people come to depend on.

Sit with this picture. Where there has long been a wasteland of care featuring few affordable options and miserably paid staff, the seeds of sustainability are being planted. The transition will take a few undoubtedly tricky years—how could it not? Building a functional system is no small task. Then the nation should emerge into a landscape filled with high-quality choices that meet the needs of parents and children.

The anticipated ripple effects are hard to overstate. Families will save tens of thousands of dollars, an early-childhood workforce of more than 2 million will become financially stable, the economy will benefit from the additional labor that working parents will be able to perform, and children will receive early educational experiences that can help them thrive. Many families may even opt to have more children if the burdensome costs of child care are gone.

That said, we have to get there, and we have to build a system that will in fact work for people—especially those most in need. The first hurdle is that states have to opt in, and some Republican-controlled states may resist. However, the bill wisely allows localities to apply to participate if their state leaders prove obstinate, and enables the expansion of Head Start in regions where neither state nor locality is willing to step up.

Resisting the temptation to rush the program into place will also be crucial; one lesson of Quebec's child-care rollout in the late 1990s was that going too fast inevitably leads to inequities and cutting corners on quality. In an attempt to reach all eligible families in time, Quebec began relying heavily on for-profit providers while relaxing training requirements. Little attention was paid to ensuring that facilities were well designed to support children's development.

The U.S. can learn from these mistakes. A great number of new early-childhood educators will be required to serve the influx of children, and they will need to be trained. Additionally, many of America's child-care facilities are in rough shape, and will require significant upgrades to become effective parts of a new and improved system. The legislation contains funds for these activities, but enhancing the workforce and facilities will not happen overnight.

Building up child care's administrative infrastructure will also be key. Many state agencies that oversee child care are sclerotic, bureaucratic machines—the legacy of disinvestment and a welfare-provider's mentality whereby recipients are expected to use assistance for as limited a time as possible. Despite good intentions, agency ineffectualness has been on display recently as many struggle to get COVID-relief dollars to child-care providers. Even before COVID, applying for a child-care subsidy was a notoriously onerous process (as a character in Netflix's popular series *Maid* puts it, "I need a job to prove that I need daycare in order to get a job?!"). This is a perfect time to rethink administrative and governance structures to make them far more proactive and accessible.

Finally, it will be vital to center the parent "user" experience. Amid such a major change, happening in so many different settings, parents will need early and frequent communication. One truism about child care is that parental needs and preferences vary widely, and all of them are valid. Parents should be walking alongside policy makers every step of the way.

If and when the "Build Back Better" package is passed, there will surely be an instinct to talk about what did not make it in. The absence of paid leave, a policy that works hand in glove with early care and education, is particularly galling. Yet while acknowledging those shortcomings, people should also applaud what is a monumental achievement: Democrats are poised to rectify the failures of the past and, at long last, give families with young children the strong start they deserve.

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

**Tags:** affordable child care <sup>[4]</sup>

universal child care <sup>[5]</sup>

child care crisis <sup>[6]</sup>

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