

Five myths about child care ^[1]

Author: Haspel, Elliot

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EXCERPTS

Democrats in Congress are working furiously toward an agreement on a social programs bill that would, among other things, set up free universal prekindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds and provide subsidies to make child care free or low-cost for 90 percent of U.S. families. That these provisions have remained in President Biden's whittled-down Build Back Better package shows how far we have come as a country since 1971, when President Richard Nixon vetoed a universal child-care bill after labeling it anti-family. But we still haven't dispelled some misconceptions about this sector.

Myth No. 1 - Child care is so expensive because it is over-regulated.

Child-care costs can be backbreaking, eating up between 14 and 35 percent of budgets for lower- and middle-income families. Many Republican and libertarian commentators blame heavy regulation. A 2015 report from the right-leaning Mercatus Center at George Mason University suggested that "removing costly regulations of the child care industry could provide greater benefits to all families by lowering the cost of care without sacrificing quality." Economist and former Bloomberg Opinion columnist Noah Smith similarly opined that "regulatory overhead" and high rents must be to blame.

But health and safety standards or professional training requirements aren't the main reason for the costliness of child care. We know this because the child-care market was badly broken well before regulations began to become more robust. As far back as the 1989 National Child Care Staffing Study, conducted by scholars at the Child Care Employee Project, the child-care system was noted for its low wages and high turnover, despite substantial parent fees. In deeply Republican states that generally eschew government regulations, including Wyoming and Alabama, child care remains scarce and compensation low.

The dominant driver of costs is personnel, which takes up between 60 and 80 percent of expenses. And yes, most states have regulations requiring a low ratio of children to staff. But most child-care providers would adopt these ratios even without regulations: It's a naturally personnel-heavy industry, and studies have shown that low child-to-provider ratios and small group sizes improve child-care quality.

Myth No. 2 - Only affluent families want child care.

This summer, a frequent hit on the Biden child-care proposals was that they represented, as Ohio Senate candidate J.D. Vance posited, an "elite" preference. Sociologist Brad Wilcox and law professor Helen Alvaré wrote in the Hill that the president's plan "favors the family preferences of one group, our elites, rather than giving parents of every social background the choices they really want."

The reality is that the demand for child care crosses socioeconomic lines. More than two-thirds of U.S. children under 6 have all available parents in the workforce and therefore require nonparental care. Moreover, one-third have a parent who works nontraditional hours (that is, on evenings or weekends), and these children are overwhelmingly from lower-income backgrounds. A YouGov poll commissioned by conservative group American Compass found that nearly half of middle-class families thought the best arrangement for them was some amount of paid care.

What Vance and others are picking up on is the vast diversity in the types of care American parents want, preferences often mediated by the constraints of their financial situation. These include, but are not limited to, caring for their children themselves in addition to paid care.

Myth No. 3 - Child care and pre-K are totally separate.

Politicians often speak of child care and prekindergarten as if they are two distinct programs. The New York Times reported during an earlier round of Build Back Better negotiations that while Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) "has repeatedly raised concerns about spending on paid leave, child care and child tax credits, he has said he is 'all in' on the goal of universal pre-K." Even Biden, speaking to rally support for his social programs as president-elect last December, clearly distinguished between the two: "I'm not talking about day care. I'm talking about universal pre-K that is starting at age 3, 4."

Pre-K, however, is merely a form of child care — and child care is inherently educational. These misunderstandings stem from both a historical cleavage and a continued under-appreciation of how child brain development occurs.

The earliest child-care programs were set up in the late 19th century as ill-funded holding pens for the children of poor or widowed mothers, who worked despite society's disapproval. The first pre-K programs, on the other hand, targeted middle-class parents and attempted to distinguish themselves from child care when they were established in the early 20th century. Historian Sonya Michel has written that child care has been treated as pre-K's "poor cousin," even as the quality of the child-care sector has transformed.

From a child development standpoint, little daylight exists between care and learning. Young children build neural connections based on relationships with caregivers, and academically focused activities are occurring in a majority of all child-care settings. This is why many other nations prefer more encompassing terms: Britain, for example, frequently uses "the early years," while the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development utilizes "early childhood education and care."

Myth No. 4 - Paid child care hurts child development.

A frequent argument against deeper public investment in child care is that it's not as good as being cared for by a parent. Former American Enterprise Institute scholar Katharine Stevens has been a vocal supporter of this theory, pointing to an older U.S. study that showed negative socio-emotional effects and more recent (and heavily criticized) studies of Quebec's child-care system that purport to show that child-care exposure leads to criminality.

The important distinction here is between low-quality child care — characterized by high child-to-adult ratios and poorly prepared educators — and high-quality care. Steven Barnett, co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, has stated: "Yes, children are harmed by disorganized, stressful environments — which is why we must ensure child care is high quality. Other studies find positive impacts of higher quality programs and also that maternal employment is not a negative."

In general, research from many countries, including the United States, finds that quality paid care and parental care can help children thrive and have equal outcomes for well-being. These studies also find that the early literacy and numeracy skills, as well as socioemotional development, of lower-income children may get a significant boost from participating in quality care.

Myth No. 5 - Biden's plan would let the government control child care.

The most recent attacks on the child-care provisions of Build Back Better have centered on the idea of overreaching state authority. Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-N.C.) suggested that the proposal would amount to a government "takeover" of child care, while Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell echoed that "Washington Democrats Want a Blank Check to Take Over American Childcare."

This is clearly false. The measure in no way allows the federal government new authority to control what occurs inside child-care programs. It provides funds to make care affordable, raise workforce compensation and support the development of high-quality programs. It would offer the federal government zero influence over curriculums and would be state administered. (In fact, states would have to opt in — and parents choose whether to participate.) All types of child-care settings, including those run by churches and other faith communities, would be included.

The fact is that all 50 states currently have a child-care subsidy program primarily funded using federal dollars via the Child Care and Development Block Grant. President Donald Trump even signed a bill increasing funding for those block grants. Forty-four states and the District fund pre-K programs. Similarly, Head Start has existed for 56 years with little controversy.

Region: United States ^[3]

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