

Elliot's provocations: The minimum viable child care fallacy ^[1]

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Excerpts

I dislike the economic case for child care. I'm not talking about my take on the role of employers, but the near-constant way lawmakers and advocates of both parties rest their case for supporting child care on its function as an economic driver. Instead, I think we need to reposition child care as essential to family freedom and national prosperity – a driver of societal health and well-being.

The nuance is that, of course, child care is an economic driver. But here's the thing: if the primary reason we need a child care system is to allow parents to work, then the policy target quickly becomes what I call the minimum viable child care system. That is not equivalent to—is, in fact, in direct opposition to—a sustainable, high-quality child care system that works well for parents, educators and children.

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Child care has long been in market failure, but it's frankly a failure the broader market has been willing to tolerate, like a business accepting a certain amount of inventory shrinkage.

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Nowadays, the argument—an argument I have made quite explicitly myself—is that because other low-wage sectors have raised their base compensation, child care can't keep up. The shortages are getting worse, the pain deeper. Tolerance wanes.

Yet follow that to its logical conclusion: if child care offering \$12 an hour used to be OK while programs were competing against the McDonalds and Walmarts of the world also offering \$12 an hour, and now McDonalds and Walmart are offering \$17 an hour, then all we have to do is get child care up to \$17 an hour. Right? Minimum viability. There is no broader case.

Because economically speaking, the quality of the day-to-day interactions between a child care educator and a toddler are of little concern. Whether that educator is making poverty wages and can barely keep a roof over her head and the heads of her own children is immaterial. Whether the parent feels comfortable with the child care situation is immaterial. Care itself is immaterial. So long as there is a warm body in that classroom and the meat packing plant worker doesn't have to miss his shift, The Economy has not been harmed: our investment is returned.

...

All to say, American child care rests quite literally on a foundation of labor exploitation and a desire to put in the least amount of funding possible.

...

After all, if we are seeking a healthy return on investment, then paying more money into the system than is strictly required to keep a not-terrible amount of slots open is a poor investment.

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It is worth reiterating that even in countries with far more progressive governments and far stronger labor unions, child care educators suffer poor wages. Why? Tim Jackson, Director of the U.K.'s Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, put it this way in a recent speech:

“In the so-called social contract of neoliberal economics, wages follow productivity. Because care takes time, care workers are condemned to pitiful wages, insecure jobs, impossible working conditions and—pandemic aside—the lowest ranks in the status game played out in modern society. Capitalism condemns care, not accidentally, not inadvertently, but systematically.”

(I would add two things: first, the wages-follow-productivity idea that drives much of modern economics is very much a myth; just look at

CEO pay. Second, we cannot speak about how care is treated without acknowledging the fact it is overwhelmingly performed by women, and gendered expectations around care—care that is “valorized but not valued,” per scholar Emma Dowling—exist even in the most ‘equal’ of societies.)

Jackson’s conclusion is, I suspect, one reason it has been difficult for U.S. child care champions to fully embrace stay-at-home parents and relative caregivers in major policy proposals. It is hard to simultaneously make an economic growth argument and fully honor care.

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Indeed, to see the ultimate hollowness of overfocusing on economic production, consider elder care. A dementia-stricken 85-year-old is no longer producing, and will never again produce, anything of significant economic value. Yet it is clear to most that we would be morally impoverished, indeed give up a bit of our national soul, to simply cast that person aside.

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The lack of child care is absolutely a barrier to parents, especially mothers, having jobs and careers they desire. The economic productivity argument, though, cares little for the quality or stability of jobs, cares little if working conditions support health and flourishing. The idealized image of the growth economy is not empowered women but a stock market rising with no end in sight – a goal that generates a gravity well of minimum viability.

To transform child care, then, we must reposition it in the American mindset – beyond babysitting, beyond a bridge to work.

Recasting Child Care

To get away from the minimum viable child care fallacy we must do two things: first, explicitly position child care among higher ideals than mere work enabler; and second, crafting policy proposals aligned with such a vision.

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My point is to suggest that we are fighting the child care battle on the entirely wrong terms.

Alongside shifts in the zeitgeist must come shifts in actual policy proposals. If I may ask your indulgence to quote myself: “To maximize its popularity, such a plan should help with the early years as well as after-school and summer care, and follow the lead of some Nordic countries with stipends for stay-at-home parents. The simplest, strongest plan to capture the public’s attention could be to mimic the public-school system, and propose universal and free child care. Ideally, any plan would be tied into a suite of pro-family policies that includes paid family leave and a monthly allowance for helping with general child-rearing costs.”

Whatever the particulars of this next generation of proposals, they must be grounded in the fundamental ideas that child care—indeed all care—is patriotic, care makes America stronger as a nation and as a people, and care’s relation to economic growth is a secondary benefit rather than its primary purpose.

...

A child care system built in pursuit of improving labor force participation and corporate productivity begets child care policy built in pursuit of the minimum viable system. A child care system built in pursuit of healthy, prosperous, and free children and families—upon which rests a healthy, prosperous, and free nation—begets child care policy of which America can be proud.

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