

Essay: How the enduring belief about child care – I don't want someone else raising my kid – hurts us all ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Excerpts

What do you do for child care when your kids are on break from school?" I asked a new acquaintance in my home town recently. She explained that she'd worked out her schedule so that when she was working, her husband was home, and when her husband worked, she was home with them.

"Oh, that's so nice you both have that flexibility," I said.

"Yes!" She said, "We don't like the idea of someone else raising our kids."

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The Center for American Progress finds that more than half of Americans live in child care deserts, census tracts with at least fifty children and no licensed child care providers, or so few options that there are more than three children for every spot in licensed care. Where we live, in Utah, more people live in child care deserts than in any other state—roughly 77 percent of the population.

My friends from outside Utah often assume that's because of the religious and cultural backgrounds of Utahans, reducing the need for child care because of the commonality of traditional breadwinner/caregiver households. Yet in Utah, 62 percent of mothers of young children participate in the labor force, a number lower than the national average of 69 percent, but certainly not as distinctive as many would guess.

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When this person's older kids were in school for 6 hours a day, five days a week during the school year, were their teachers "raising them," I thought about asking? Surely, she didn't think dads who worked full time while their spouses cared for their children were ceding responsibility for "raising the kids" to their wives? And how many hours in child care did a child need to spend per week, before they were being raised by someone else? 40 hours? 30 hours? There are 168 hours in a week. Where was the line between socializing with and being cared for by trained early educators, and being raised by them?

I took a deep breath, and reminded myself my new acquaintance and my relative hadn't invented this kind of thinking. Despite the modern realities of economic and family life requiring that most parents work for pay, antiquated thinking about child care is all around us. Just a few years ago, Idaho State Representative Charlie Shepherd voted against a bill that would increase support for child care in the state because he felt mothers should be caring for their own children. "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." He later apologized, saying he'd misspoken and merely intended to praise mothers.

Amidst an ongoing child care availability crisis worsened by the rapid inflation of child care costs, expired federal aid and a dwindling, low-paid labor force, Congress has also failed to increase its role in creating a sustainable, affordable, high-quality child care system.

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Why are we so afraid of letting others join us in raising our children? Just what are we so afraid of?

My hope is that the current national conversation on the child care crisis and how severely it limits parents' work options and well-being will lead us to build and fund a child care infrastructure that gives every parent access to this kind of nurturing and learning for their children. Maybe a system like that could transform our cultural biases about child care and end these myths for good. But if ever again someone tells me they don't use child care because they don't want someone else raising their children, I'll know what to say:

I don't want someone raising my child for me either. But I am so glad my family and millions of others have found trusted providers to raise them with us.

Related link: The history of child care in the U.S. ^[3]

Some states are taking childcare funding into their own hands - but congress must act [4]

Region: United States [5]

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