

# Child care at work? New report and conversation questions the role business should play in our nation's child care <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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

### Excerpts

Elliot Haspel is clear about one thing regarding business and child care: he believes that on-site child care or business-supported child care does have a role to play in solving our national child care crisis. Plenty of people benefit from having child care attached to their work, and certain industries—he cites hospitals and airports among them—require a high degree of in-person attendance. Taking care of kids isn't just good for the kids themselves, it's actually good for business.

The problem, according to Haspel, comes when our country begins to rely on big business to subsidize public goods – like health insurance for instance. Businesses may have a role to play, but history has shown businesses to be effectively looking out for their bottom line over employee well-being, particularly in the face of economic downturn, shareholder pressure or the “fickle” nature of the dynamic business market.

In his recently released report, co-published with the Better Life Lab at New America (where I work as a staff writer) Haspel lays out the case for why relying on business to improve our country's child care could be problematic. Haspel presented his report in a webinar which was followed by a panel discussion, much of which revolved around advocates who proposed a more inclusive “both and” structure.

“On-site child care programs can be part of a broader system,” Haspel said during the webinar. “Some of the best [child cares] in the world exist as part of an on-site program.” The question he asks is: who is child care for? “If all you want to do is get parents to work, you don't want to invest in a high-quality system. You just want a minimum system that works ok.”

Haspel has already written extensively on this topic – from denouncing the push for private equity in child care to cautioning the country on using tax breaks for business-supported child care. He proposes instead a business community that supports a larger publicly-financed child care system, one which has on-site care as part of the solution.

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If you accept child care is mere “work support,” then sure, leaning on employers makes some sense. My argument is that child care is so, so much more than just a work enabler.

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The more we entrench child care as a job-linked benefit, the harder it will be to transition away from that model, both politically and practically. So, if we want to replicate the employer health insurance model and get 50 percent of the country getting their child care via employers—bringing along job lock, volatility, limited options and inefficiencies, all while leaving millions out in the cold—then I think we need to be honest with ourselves about the tradeoffs.

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Haspel: “Both-and” doesn't work when you're trying to squeeze the same balloon, and “both-and” doesn't work when there are opportunity costs. While I appreciate that some businesses are stepping up (I try to emphasize every time I talk about this that the intentions here are largely good!) and I wouldn't tell them to stop.

What I would say is that policymakers need to stop using taxpayer money to incentivize them. Doing so comes at the cost of advancing more universal approaches or approaches that prioritize particular populations (like lower-income families), reinforces child care as a mere work support, and gives more political power to big business and investor-backed for-profit child care chains, both of which have shown themselves unaligned with the costs of an affordable, universal, pluralistic system with well-compensated early educators.

Gale: The presentation and discussion included a concept in child care that I don't think gets enough attention: the “minimum child care viable fallacy.” If all you want to do is get parents to work, you don't want to invest in a high-quality system. You just want a minimum system that works ok.

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There is a difference between an incremental step on the path towards an effective system and a step that takes us down a different path. The pursuit of widespread employer-linked child care is the wrong path for America.

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