

Child care for all is Blair's conference rallying call [GB] ^[1]

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See text below.

EXCERPTS Universal access to flexible child care, including guaranteed provision between 8am and 6pm near all Britain's schools by the end of a third Labour term is to form the centrepiece of Tony Blair's new offer to the nation at the Labour conference next week. The extension of help for child care is being billed as the type of support that Britain's families want. It was being stressed yesterday that the help will be flexible, and will be extended to middle class parents, and not just to the poorest 20% who currently benefit from the government's Sure Start scheme. But the government - on grounds of prohibitive costs - will not cover the complete cost of child care for the middle classes. In 2002-3 parents spent £3bn a year for child care. At present the only universal government programme is free part-time early education places for three- and four-year-olds. The offer comes as Labour's leadership struggles to ensure the conference moves on from the decision to invade Iraq and instead supports efforts to ensure democratic elections in Iraq. The help with child care will cover both three- to four-year-olds, and all parents with children of school age. The child care drive is important both to the government's anti-poverty and welfare to work policies. The help will come in the form of both credits and government subsidies to improve the provision of child care, including nurseries, children centres and help at home. The theme will be prominent in speeches by the prime minister, the education secretary Charles Clarke and industry secretary Patricia Hewitt. No 10 is aware that current child care is an inadequate and often inflexible patchwork. There is still only one registered child care place for every four children under the age of eight. A typical nursery place for a child under two costs £134 a week, nearly £7,000 a year. In London the figure is as high as £8,730 a year. Nearly 1.3m parents find they cannot access child care places at all. Ministers have also set a target of 2m child care places by 2008. Gordon Brown has also announced funding for 2,500 children's centres by 2008 aimed at 30% of the poorest wards in the country. - reprinted from the Guardian

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