

# Day care culture war [US] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

In public debates on matters relating to families, children and sex, our culture has become thoroughly dysfunctional. When researchers offer new findings or some incident sparks a new discussion, we quickly polarize and -- verbally, at least -- start shooting at each other.

The culture-war approach to child care, teen pregnancy and many other issues is exactly wrong. It breeds contempt across artificial barriers and makes it more difficult to identify problems that can be solved. Why in the world should mothers who hold jobs outside the home be cast in public debates as the enemies of mothers who, at some point or another, chose to stay home with their children? The skirmishes might be good for talk shows. They don't help a society that needs to make it a little easier for women and men to manage the balance between work and family.

Two recent studies underscore, in quite different ways, the imperative of moving from polarization to problem solving. Take, first, the already famous child care study released last week by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The study found that the more time toddlers spend in child care, the more likely they are to be aggressive, disobedient and defiant when they enter kindergarten.

The same study, by the way, also found that children enrolled in high-quality child care performed better on tests of language, knowledge and memory than children who stayed at home with their mothers.

The findings set off explosions all over the country. Working mothers complained, as one did to the Los Angeles Times, that the study was "just another bad rap for working moms." One stay-at-home mom countered that the study confirmed what she had always thought: "Oh, it's all so true."

Who can blame parents -- mothers especially -- for reacting personally? The culture-war style makes it inevitable that one side or the other will feel under assault.

But the study in question does not have to be seen as an attack on working mothers. If it turns out that there are problems with child care we didn't know about, two responses are plausible. The first is to improve the quality of child care. The second is to find ways of reorganizing work -- and expanding the incomes of low- to moderate-income parents -- so more people have more options to spend more time with their children.

These approaches are not mutually exclusive. What's required is a truce.

Those on the "conservative" side of the day care culture war need to acknowledge what many of them already know: Large numbers of children are going to be in child care no matter how many studies are done. Society thus has an interest in making that care better.

Those on the "liberal" side need to acknowledge what many of them also already know: There appears to be no perfect substitute for parental time with young children. Therefore, the labor market shouldn't penalize parents as much as it does when they try to meet their obligations at home.

Again: Parents who take care of their children at home and parents with children in child care are not each other's enemies. The enemy is our collective failure to acknowledge we're not doing as well as we could by our children.

A heartening sign that the culture wars can be overcome came in a study released this week by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. The standard argument on this issue is predictable: One side says you reduce teen pregnancy by promoting abstinence, the other says you achieve that goal by giving teens access to contraception.

It turns out that the majority of Americans, adults and teens alike, reject this polarity. Three-quarters of adults and 56 percent of teens think the two strategies go together. They agree with the "conservatives" that teens should be encouraged not to be sexually active. But they also agree with liberals that sexually active teens should have access to contraception. There is a practical continuum here, rooted in a moral view. It's better for unmarried teens to avoid premature sex than to use contraception, but it's better to use contraception than to get pregnant.

As Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign put it, "seeing teen pregnancy as some sort of subsidiary question in the culture wars over contraception" gets in the way of solving the problem.

So here's our choice: Adults can wage culture wars against each other, or they can take practical steps to help toddlers and teens. Which will it be?

-Reprinted from The Washington Post

**Region:** United States <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** child development <sup>[3]</sup>

infant/toddler <sup>[4]</sup>

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