

Investing in very early education ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents of children under the age of three depend on regular daycare so that they can go to work. But several times during September and October, they found themselves wondering what they would do if all the daycare centers were to close.

During the first two months of the school year, daycare workers affiliated with Na'amat, the largest women's advocacy organization in the country, many of whom earn only minimum wage or slightly above, threatened to initiate a major strike that would shut down over 260 daycare centers nationwide and would wreak havoc on the daily schedules of thousands of families. Na'amat, in response, passed the buck to the Treasury and the Ministry of Industry and Trade, which determine the fees parents pay for licensed daycare centers, claiming that without authorization to raise fees, it could not afford to give daycare workers a pay raise.

The strike threat was defused in early October; all sides temporarily backed down and the government agreed to a four percent hike in the fees that parents pay. But the threat of the strike shined a spotlight on the subject of daycare centers in Israel, raising several questions regarding their current status and what can and should be done to improve them.

The national public school system, from kindergarten to the end of high school (K-12 as it is often called), is under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and provided for free to all children (though many schools charge high fees for extra educational activities to supplement the regular curriculum). Attendance is compulsory at kindergarten for all children aged five, and children as young as three may enroll at state-provided kindergartens.

But the situation for toddlers and children younger is quite different. Daycare centers are private entities and are operated by non-profit women's organizations, such as Na'amat, WIZO, Emunah and Herut Women. Despite their independence, the fees that accredited daycare centers may charge are set by the state and typically range from 1,500 to 2,000 shekels per child per month (\$410 - \$550), depending on the age of the child and other factors. These fees may be subsidized, in part or in whole, by the Ministry of Industry and Trade according to pre-determined eligibility requirements, but most middle-class families have incomes that make them ineligible for any subsidy.

Surprisingly, daycare centers are not supervised by the Education Ministry, but by the Ministry of Industry and Trade. "The reason daycare centers are under the authority of the Ministry of Industry and Trade, and not the Education Ministry, is that the original justification for them was solely to enable women to get back into the work force as soon as possible after childbirth," says Ora Goldhirsch, a psychologist specializing in preschool education for the Ministry of Education. "Since the daycare framework was connected to increasing employment, it seemed right for the Ministry of Industry and Trade to be responsible for them. They were regarded as a form of babysitting services for working women, and there did not seem to be justification for the state to pay for babysitting.

"But they have long ago stopped being considered babysitting services alone. If the children are going to be in such frameworks, it is imperative that their developmental needs be met by professional staff."

"We are not talking about babysitting," agrees Talia Livni, the national chairwoman of Na'amat, "but about the most important period in the development of a child. This should be regarded as an investment with multiple returns throughout the lives of the children."

Na'amat has called on the state to expand the free and universal educational services it provides for children from the age of three and above to cover daycare for children as young as a few months old. Given extensive studies in many countries around the world, indicating that early childhood education, especially at younger ages, can have profound implications for a child's future success, coupled with the fact that the public investments that give a nation the most rewards are in education and infrastructure, there would appear to be a good case to be made for this view and for ensuring that the daycare environments in which children are placed enrich their lifelong learning skills to as great an extent as possible.

However, the Ministry of Industry and Trade did not respond to The Report's requests for comments on this suggestion.

Few people anywhere oppose some form of public provision of universal education for children, since virtually everyone understands that the benefits that accrue from a more highly educated work force are shared by every citizen, particularly through the higher GDP that then drives higher average wages and living standards at all levels.

But this was not the case for most of history; universal public education is very much an invention of the modern, industrialized world. The case for preschool has been even harder to justify to a public that for a long time regarded the framework of kindergarten as more of a place of play for children than learning.

In fact, Israel has been relatively progressive in stressing the importance of kindergartens and nurseries; the first kindergarten was opened in Rishon Lezion as far back as 1898.

Very early childhood education, sometimes known as "pre- K," for pre-kindergarten, is still regarded by many as a luxury mainly intended to free working parents from the burden of child care. According to most professionals, however, this view is wrong.

"There is no 'minimum age' for beginning to educate a child," stresses Goldhirsch. "Children learn from the moment they leave the womb and we cannot wait even one day from the perspective of investing in the child's development. There are claims that learning begins even prenatally. Clearly, the most important elements for children in the first years are the parents, with attachment and bonding with parents of the first importance, giving children confidence and trust in their environment and those caring for them."

There are several studies underpinning the importance of early-childhood education for lifelong success, measured in any number of ways. For example, a major research effort conducted in 2004 by James J. Heckman and Dimitriy V. Masterov of the University of Chicago concluded that "an accumulating body of evidence suggests that early childhood interventions are much more effective than remedies that attempt to compensate for early neglect later in life... Education, perseverance and motivation are all major factors determining productivity, both in the workplace and beyond it.

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