

The no-win decisions of child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

In a recent article in The New Republic, "The Hell of American Day Care," reporter Jonathan Cohn investigates what he describes as the "barely regulated, unsafe business of looking after our children." Lax regulation leading to unsafe child care is indeed a critical issue that needs to be addressed; and so is the huge unmet need for affordable child care options for low-wage working parents.

Cohn acknowledges that the tragic example used as the frame for his article - a child care fatality - is relatively rare. But what is not at all rare - and what really gets to the root of the problem - is the heartbreaking, no-win choice the mother was faced with in trying to find child care that she could afford on her low wage.

Mothers across the country face this dilemma constantly. They too often work in jobs that don't pay enough to meet a family's basic needs. Or they want to work, or go to college for a shot at a better career, but can't afford child care. Or the welfare work requirement forces them into low-wage jobs where they can't afford child care.

Mothers with young children make up our nation's poorest families. If they earn the minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, that's roughly \$15,080 per year (though minimum wage jobs rarely provide full-time work because employers restrict hours to avoid paying benefits).

Wider Opportunities for Women developed the Self-Sufficiency Standard to calculate the wage a worker would need to earn in order to afford a family's basic needs, based on the family's size and geographic location. The tool shows that parents need to earn far more than a minimum wage, and if the family includes a young child or infant, the wage required is significantly higher due to the high cost of child care.

Our nation does have a child care assistance program that is supposed to help low-income working parents afford child care - the federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) block grant to states. This program is hugely helpful for the families it serves. Unfortunately, it only serves about 18 percent of eligible children, which means that 82 percent of eligible children do not receive the subsidy. Eligibility requires a parent to be both working and low-income. Waiting lists are swelling in every state - millions of parents wait for the child care they need in order to continue working.

What makes our lack of commitment to providing affordable quality child care for all families even more frustrating is that we know what children need for successful outcomes later in life. In fact, we know more than ever before about the kind of environment, interactions and experiences children need to support their cognitive, physical, social and emotional development.

We also know what working parents need. Other countries such as France provide examples of systems that provide quality care for children so their parents can work. And we have an example in our own country: the Military Child Care Act that transformed an abysmal child care system into a system that is the best in the nation.

If the need is so great, we know what to do, and the consequences of failing are so dire as illustrated by The New Republic article, then why haven't we created a national system of quality child care for all working parents?

Polls show that Americans believe that child care is a parent's personal responsibility and that there is no social obligation to help parents pay for it. The result of this prevailing opinion is that mothers buy the child care that they can afford: wealthier mothers are able to buy high quality care; poor mothers - mostly single mothers and women of color - usually cannot. Thus, a vicious cycle of inequity and inequitable outcomes continues.

In this country where all child care is financed with parent fees, child care providers struggle to cobble together resources to pay for their services. Where the ability of parents to pay is limited, providers barter with them, or serve families for free, or reduce rates. For the few families lucky enough to receive subsidies, the reimbursement rate to providers is low - four-fifths of states reimburse below the 75th percentile of the current market rate. Reimbursement is also unreliable - parents have to apply and re-apply frequently through an often cumbersome process. Even worse, states are whittling away at this already inadequate assistance. Erosions in payment are occurring at the same time that quality requirements are being ramped up, which might lead to even fewer affordable options for low-income families.

The child care subsidy program that is so critical to affordable services for working parents is bemoaned as lacking quality standards. But a system starved for revenue cannot enact quality improvements without more resources: increasing staff education levels requires increasing child care wages; enhancing the learning environment means buying more books and learning materials. Some states have initiated quality-rating systems, but in doing so they are often reducing the supply of direct child care services for low-income working parents in order to fund these efforts.

President Obama is proposing significant additional investments in our nation's early childhood system: pre-k, Early Head Start, Head Start, the federal child care block grant to states, home visiting, 21st Century Learning Centers, etc. But these pieces of our system are like pieces of a puzzle: some parents qualify for some of these services, and some of these services are only available to serve some children some of the time. Parents and providers have to navigate all these fragments and try to piece them together into a seamless system of service.

While all of these investments are sorely needed - and President Obama should be commended for his proposal - if we truly want to solve the problems faced by low-income working parents, then we need a seamless system: one that provides the secure, quality care children need for good outcomes, at an affordable cost that allows parents to remain employed.

Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund, has said, "No parent should have to choose between the child they love and the job they need."

I couldn't agree more. Until we build a system of affordable, quality child care for all families, we will continue to force parents into making no-win decisions.

-reprinted from Moyers & Company

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