

Crushed by the cost of child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The difficulty of obtaining good, affordable day care is well known as a problem afflicting the working poor. But increasingly, middle- and upper-middle-class parents are finding that day care is hard to find or access and that even when it is available it is startlingly costly. Among the mothers I spoke to, one sent her daughter to a day care proprietor where the owner secretly had another woman mind all eight babies all day long; another signed up for a slot at a local day care when she was newly pregnant. Her daughter is now 5, and she is still on the wait list.

The cost and the scarcity of day care has helped create what the sociologist Joya Misra calls "the motherhood penalty." While women without children are closer to pay equity with men, women with children are lagging behind because they find that working doesn't always make sense after considering the cost of child care. When women earn less than their partners, they are more likely to drop out of the work force, and if they do so for two years or more, they may not be able to get back in at anything approaching their prior job or earnings. The cost of taking care of one's children outside the home is now so high that many women cannot be assured of both working and making a decent income after taxes and child care costs.

Professor Misra, who teaches sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, has analyzed data from thousands of parents from different social classes. One study of middle-class academic parents was based on hundreds of surveys and focus group interviews and 17 one-on-one interviews. Many talked about the shock of day care costs, which can eat up 30 percent of one income in a two-salary couple, Professor Misra says. In 35 states and D.C., even the cost of center-based day care (let alone a nanny) is higher than the cost of a year of a public college. More anecdotally, day care costs for middle-class New Yorkers can easily equal from \$25,000 to \$30,000 per child. In New York, child care is the single greatest expense among low-income families in the city, surpassing both food and housing.

Child care is a towering expense for parents like Carla Bellamy, a professor of anthropology at Baruch College in Manhattan who holds a Ph.D. from Columbia, earns \$74,000 a year and lives with her husband and their two children, a newborn and a 4-year-old. Her husband is a composer and the executive director of a music organization. Only 9 percent of women in the work force make \$75,000 or more, so Professor Bellamy is relatively privileged.

But even with a combined household income of \$110,000, she and her husband struggle to afford day care. (It was a story I heard echoed when I spoke with other female professors, who sometimes took sick days even when they were healthy so they could stay home and not have to pay for baby sitters.) "Our entire disposable income goes to child care," Professor Bellamy, 41, says. "It's not a tragic story, but is tiring and tiresome. I have a career, I work really hard, and yet I get no break."

Professor Bellamy fleetingly thought about spending her summer vacation working at a restaurant as a waitress or a host, but that's the time that academics typically use to do the writing and research that ultimately helps them get tenure - or not.

And it's not just New York City. Ainsley Stapleton, 36, an accountant based in Arlington, Va., describes herself as middle class. But with three children, all of whom are in preschool or day care, she calculates that she spends 87.6 percent of her take-home pay on day care.

"It makes me want to cry a little," Ms. Stapleton said by phone from her office. In the past, she said, she and her husband have bounced around the question of whether "he should quit or I should, but both of us enjoy working."

Jane Dimyan-Ehrenfeld, 37, a lawyer in Washington, D.C., who works for the federal government and who is the mother of two, struggled since she was first pregnant to get her first child into quality day care near her home. "The competition is unbelievable," she says. So she sent her older child to a local home day care. After nearly three years, she says, she discovered that the proprietor at the home day care who was supposed to be taking care of her infant daughter was instead selling herbal supplements all day upstairs, and on one occasion, on the road, leaving her daughter and seven other children to be cared for by one aide, in a home with two giant snakes and attack dogs supposedly kept in a very different part of the house.

Ms. Dimyan-Ehrenfeld says that she checked the center's references before she enrolled her daughter and that the owner seemed very warm. She discovered the truth when the one aide who had been caring for the children was fired and told the parents what had been going on at the home day care center. Startled by both the undersupervision and the fact that the exotic animals weren't kept away from the children, she immediately pulled her daughter from the center. Her younger child now has a nanny and her older child is in a private preschool. That has meant, however, that she earns 50 cents, after paying for all that, in each biweekly pay period. "And I am a lawyer!" she exclaims.

Even for experts like Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, 44, of Kirkland, Wash., a founder of a nonprofit group centered on these issues, MomsRising, obtaining day care isn't easy. Ms. Rowe-Finkbeiner had a "heck of a time" getting her children off years-long waiting lists for local day care centers and preschools. "I applied early, and my daughter only got in when she was 3," Ms. Rowe-Finkbeiner says. "Access is a problem across the socioeconomic spectrum."

That includes parents like Carly Fox, an educator and organizer for a legal services organization who is a single mother of a 3-year-old and earns a little too much at \$42,000 to be eligible for a government subsidy for day care. She cobbles together child care by working at home sometimes and by relying on her mother, her father, a cousin, a neighborhood sitter and time swaps with other parents.

For Yvette Nunez in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, the expense of day care is even more challenging. Ms. Nunez is raising her three children on her own, yet her former employer, a supermarket, required her to work on weekends. That increased her day care bill by \$75 a week. Even with subsidies, she was paying out almost all of what she was earning from her 18-hour-a-week job. She finally quit to take care of her children. She is now unemployed, she told me as her 2-year-old wailed in the background. She really wants to get back to work but for now simply cannot afford to do so. Ms. Nunez lives on government assistance and a small amount of child support. For many parents, the promise of prekindergarten programs, proposed earlier this year by President Obama, is a start. But it's not going to stanch the financial desperation that takes hold in many families before their children are 5 and able to go to school.

"As we have resisted institutionalizing the day care system in this country, ordinary workers on their own have created D.I.Y. child-care networks," says Kathleen Gerson, a sociologist at New York University who is now studying these networks in Silicon Valley. "What is our strange commitment to seeing care as a purely private individual act rather than one embedded in the larger community?" she asked.

We see day care as a private responsibility. Part of the problem is that we sometimes have a problem with the idea of "day care" itself. Professor Gerson and other sociologists saw something I had seen as well among my middle class acquaintances: a discomfort with center-based day care and even the term "day care," preferring terms like "educational enrichment" and, yes, preschool. Across the world, though, people count on the availability of day care and see it as a collective good: Americans don't tend to do so as readily. More access to quality early childhood care would help. But those solutions go only part of the way. The most radical solution of all is the most obvious: we need high-quality, universal, subsidized day care. And we should not be ashamed to ask for it.

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