

Catching up with France on day care^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Pretty much from the moment I got pregnant, neighbors and friends began urging me to apply for a spot in one of France's state-run day care centers.

I'd just smile politely. I figured this was another of those foreign habits - like eating horse meat - that I'd observe from a respectful distance. I couldn't fathom government employees changing my baby's diapers. And I couldn't really fathom day care in general. Didn't it cause attachment issues, or worse? I planned to hire a nanny.

Eventually - propelled by curiosity, a looming book deadline and the fact that everyone else was doing it - I applied for a spot in the "crèche" (rhymes with "mesh"). It was a long shot anyway; in our area, only one in three applicants got in. I heard that it helped to sound desperate. So once my daughter was born - my first child - I sent a follow-up letter with my sob story: a full-time job, no family in France to help out, and a 5-week-old baby who, tragically, was hearing almost no French.

Strangely, this worked. She got a spot for the fall, when she'd be 9 months old. Before long, I was dropping her off at the crèche around the corner four days a week. To my surprise, it wasn't a baby gulag. The people who worked there were caring and capable. It was subsidized by the state, with a sliding scale based on income, so I could afford it. My daughter seemed delighted. And I was getting my work done. Six years later, I've sent three kids through both the crèche and France's free universal public preschool and come out converted.

Nowadays, when I describe this conversion to my American friends - about how I can't believe that in the United States parents are practically on their own until kids turn 5 - I no longer feel like a brainwashed alien. Something is changing in America. A new interest in early childhood is driven by studies showing how powerfully and permanently children's brains are shaped when they're very young, and how the enormous gap between rich and poor children is already in place when they start kindergarten. The latest research by academics, including the Nobel laureate for economics James J. Heckman, says that fixing that gap is much easier when children are very small. Crucially, it's also much cheaper.

President Obama has pledged to get all poor and low-income 4-year-olds into prekindergarten, continuing a trend started by states like Oklahoma and Georgia. The city of San Antonio is starting a much watched pre-K program. Hillary Rodham Clinton recently announced "Too Small to Fail," a project aimed at children ages 0 to 5.

Other countries are focusing on these years too. Preschool enrollment now averages 77 percent in developed countries, up from about 30 percent in 1998. In Germany, where many mothers are still expected to fetch their children from school at lunchtime, a new law guarantees state day care for all children older than a year. Even in Japan - home of the salaryman - the prime minister just announced plans to create more day care so mothers could work.

This isn't the first time Americans have urged the government to do more. In the early 1970s a sweeping national child care bill made it to President Richard M. Nixon's desk. But he vetoed it, pushed by conservatives who claimed that if it was too easy for women to work, the traditional American family was doomed.

It was doomed anyway. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's most recent figures, 54 percent of American women with children age 3 and under are in the work force, as are 63 percent of those with children ages 3 to 5. Over all, 67 percent of women with children under 15 go to work. In other words, the dearth of decent child care isn't keeping mothers at home; it's just making their lives much harder.

Those private day care centers, preschools and nannies that most Americans pay for out of pocket are among the most expensive in the world, and their quality is uneven at best. In all those debates about whether women should "lean in" and how to juggle work and small children, increasingly someone is pointing out the elephant in the room: it would all be a lot easier if parents were getting some help.

None of this means that French-style crèches will soon be popping up in American cities. American solutions will have to be home grown. Still, one pocket of America already has a program that looks a lot like the French crèche. Babies are accepted from 6 weeks old. Fees are subsidized, and charged on a sliding scale. Quality is carefully monitored. There's usually a big scramble to get a spot. It's the Department of Defense, which runs one of the country's largest networks of day care centers, for the children of American servicemen and -women. I bet that, like me, they had no trouble getting used to it.

Pamela Drukerman is a journalist and the author of "Bringing Up Bébé: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French

Parenting."

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