

Childcare: not just for parents ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Worrying about paying for childcare is not on the minds of many of my peers in graduate school, let alone my students or undergraduate friends. Kids are a long way away, we think, if ever.

But there's an immediate and pressing crisis burning in the background, in our community and across the country. It's the lack of good childcare options for the urban poor and working class.

According to data released by the U.S. Census Bureau, almost half of all kids living with their moms are existing below the poverty line. A quarter of all women raising children are doing so by themselves, and women generally tend to be single parents more than men.

With 11 million kids under age 5 in childcare, more than 60 percent of all American families with kids, including those with two parents, also impact parents who are working and trying to find places for their kids to stay during the day. The average cost of daycare in our country is \$11,666 annually (this translates into \$972 a month), according to the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies.

Washington is the sixth most expensive state in the country for childcare costs, for infants, according to Child Care Aware of America, an advocacy group. And according to the Boston Globe, in Washington state it costs an average of \$12,108 a year to take care of infants, \$9,240 to take care of 4-year-olds, and \$5,412 to pay for school-age kids. Let's say you have two kids. Presuming that one's a toddler, and the other is in second grade, their collective childcare costs are almost enough to equal the cost of a good used car, each year, per family.

For many working-class parents, rent and food consume most of each paycheck. Funding daycare or kindergarten on top of that, during one of the most formative times in a kid's life, involves juggling either a second job or a complex web of sometimes fragile child-watching arrangements. These can break down in bad weather, or when an expense they hadn't planned for occurs, such as a flat tire or unexpected illness. The tire is not a big deal to a lot of us, but for a working parent, it can be lost shift time, lost money, and a desperate struggle to pay the bills.

At the UW, full-time childcare for infants can cost \$1,400-1,700 a quarter, \$1,200-1,500 for toddlers, and \$1,100-1,200 for preschoolers. Imagine paying for that on a student's budget. It can be done, but it's not easy.

What's more, according to the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, there are deep economic implications for our country's off-again attention to childcare as both a policy issue and a community challenge. Other countries pay their childcare workers better, closer to the pay of primary-school teachers. Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the UK all far outrank us in terms of their overall spending that supports childcare infrastructure.

One concrete thing we as consumers and voters should lobby for is more paid maternity leave to help with the transition to parenthood. French and German women get 16 and 14 weeks, respectively, and Polish women get about 26 weeks. Brazil and China provide at least 14 weeks off, with pay. In the United States, that number averages a very sad 12 weeks. Twelve weeks that don't have to be paid.

That's not right. Forgetting the moral implications, even a purely economic perspective supports investment in more consistent childcare policies, and paid leave for mothers. It would result in a less erratic system, and one less expensive for everyone. It would provide a social safety net for those we claim to value the most in our society: our kids.

But what can we as non-parents, do to support those who have kids? We can tell our legislators to prioritize programs that subsidize child care, and don't cut existing programs that do. We can also give to, or volunteer at, nonprofits like the Seattle-based Mary's Place, which provides a safe space for working parents to live while they look for more permanent housing. The shelter provides meals, health care, support groups for survivors of domestic violence, laundry, and clothes. For our part, even donating diapers - which are an expensive luxury for many - can help.

I am not a parent. I want to be someday soon. But you don't have to be a parent to care about making sure kids get to a safe place during the day while their parents are at work. Caring about child care means caring about parents, as well as the policies and priorities that surround it.

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