

Why affordable quality childcare must be a national priority ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Seven months ago, I sat in my doctor's office looking at the faint flutter of a miniature heartbeat, confirming that my husband and I are expecting a baby this fall. After the smiles and happy tears, we had some important phone calls to make. Not to the prospective grandparents or to our closest friends: we needed to get on childcare waiting lists.

When I was 10 weeks pregnant, my husband and I toured childcare centers throughout Washington, D.C., prepared with questions about teacher qualifications, developmentally appropriate activities, and national accreditation. We filled out forms and turned over hundreds of dollars for the privilege of being on a waiting list of unknown length.

Our situation is not unique: competition for childcare slots, particularly for infants, is fierce. Most centers have few openings and come with hefty tuition fees. But even in the midst of this selective process, my husband and I are incredibly aware of how fortunate we are. We have several high-quality childcare options available to us, and we have the means to afford them.

But the vast majority of American families are not so fortunate.

Childcare is quickly becoming unaffordable to many families who depend on it to hold down a job so that they can make ends meet. Nationally, 65 percent of children have either a single parent or both parents in the workforce. Yet the average annual cost of a childcare center exceeds \$10,000, and can top \$16,000 a year in some locations. On average, families living in poverty spend more than a third of their income on childcare. Meanwhile, a middle class family of four earning up to \$48,000 spends on average one-fifth of their income on childcare. And while child care costs have steadily increased over the years, wages for typical middle class families have remained stagnant.

Policymakers and those seeking office must be held accountable for affordable, high-quality childcare. A new proposal from the Center for American Progress, or CAP, has outlined a plan for doing just that, allowing families to save more of their earnings.

Under CAP's plan, low-income and middle class families would qualify for a High-Quality Child Care Tax Credit worth up to \$14,000 annually. To ensure that families are not forced to cover exorbitant child care costs upfront, the tax credit would be made directly to the childcare provider. Depending on their income, families would contribute between 2 and 12 percent of their income to providers to supplement the cost of childcare. All told, this proposal would save families at least \$2,000 each year compared to the current average cost of full-time, center-based childcare.

The High-Quality Child Care Tax Credit would also address another pressing issue in the country's childcare system: the lack of quality options. Most brain development occurs before a child even sets foot in a kindergarten classroom, underscoring the importance of ensuring that all children have access to nurturing and enriching environments from infancy. To encourage providers to improve their quality, the tax credit proposed by CAP would, over time, be directed to providers that meet quality standards developed and enforced by states. This approach offers childcare providers the financial support to help them achieve better quality, while also helping parents identify quality programs that meet their children's individual needs.

To promote a highly qualified childcare workforce, we must also make important changes to the way we treat those entrusted with our children's development and care. The average child care worker currently earns less than \$22,000 per year — below the federal poverty level for a family of four. CAP's proposal would support an average wage of \$16 an hour and require that states include wages as part of the quality standards to which they hold child care providers accountable. Given that the interaction between a childcare provider and a child is often the biggest component of quality, ensuring that workers do not live in poverty must be part of a childcare solution.

Come early 2016, I will learn the fate of my long-awaited and highly-coveted childcare spot. Regardless of the outcome, I know that I'll be able to figure out a solution that best fulfills my childcare needs. But until our elected leaders act, millions of families will continue to wait for childcare arrangements that meet their needs as working parents and their child's developmental needs. As a country, we cannot afford to wait any longer. We must demand that our leaders make childcare affordability and quality a top priority.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: affordability ^[4]

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