

Childcare is so expensive, only the wealthy can afford it ^[1]

Author: Labaton, Vivien

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EXCERPTS

Should only wealthy people be able to have kids in America? According to a new report, childcare center fees for two children is higher than median rent payments in every single state in the United States. Another recent report shows that childcare costs more than in-state college tuition in most states. After I pointed this out in an op-ed, and proposed a solution to make child care more affordable for working families, readers took to the comments section, the vast majority of which tracked the following sentiment, as expressed by one commenter: “If you cannot afford to take care of your own kid(s), don’t have any or give them up for adoption.” I found the comments distressing, because the sentiments expressed by the commenters naturally lead to the conclusion that only the rich should have children.

As a country, we have a love-hate relationship with people scrambling to get by. On the one hand, there is anger and resentment at the mere suggestion that America should look out for those who are struggling; on the other, people love a rags-to riches-story—it’s the American dream. And people who make it are iconic figures in our national story, from Henry Ford to Oprah to Jay Z. The catch: We only like these stories after the fact.

While it’s true that these folks did a lot to help themselves, in most instances there was also some government support along the way—whether that’s public housing, public education, or another subsidized program. When the view that government shouldn’t have a role in helping families collides with the extreme economic inequality in this country, the impact raises profound questions about our social contract and what kind of country we should be. For all of the talk about family values, do we actually value families irrespective of whether they are rich, poor, or somewhere in between?

From the looks of it, from online comments to the halls of Congress, we don’t. It took 20 years to finally pass the bill to reauthorize the major childcare program we have for low-income families—the Child Care and Development Block Grant. When it finally passed, it mandated higher child care standards without the financial resources needed to help states to pay for them, and did very little to make sure that the five in six low-income children who are eligible but don’t receive help from the program actually get support. The fact is that we have hardly any policies in the U.S. that actually support families—whether that’s affordable child care, paid family leave, or policies that help us take care of our aging parents—unlike many other industrialized countries ranging from Austria to Sweden. The U.S., for example, is one of only two countries in the world not offering paid maternity leave to working women.

We take a lot of national pride in being a country that creates economic opportunity and allows upward mobility. But as it becomes harder and harder for people to fulfill basic needs, like child care, we need to decide what kind of country we want to be. Several years ago Bill Clinton gave a talk in which he said, “The whole 21st century is a contest between the clenched fist and the open hand.” A clenched fist is selfish, every person for herself, and an open hand acknowledges that we’re all in this together and we all benefit from public resources that help families make it work. Looking at our current state of affairs, in which it’s common for hardworking families to work multiple jobs and still barely be able to pay the bills or take a sick day, I’d argue that the clenched fist approach isn’t working.

Child care now costs more than rent and in-state college tuition in most states, leading to women dropping out of the workforce for the first time in years; millennials have put off having kids; parents are declining promotions or taking lower-paying jobs so they don’t lose the childcare assistance they need to earn a living and make sure their children receive quality care.

Having children isn’t like buying a whirlpool bathtub or a fancy car, and it certainly should not be reserved for the wealthy. Childcare and other supports for working families are an investment in our future and the country we want to be. Let’s do more than pay lip service to the American dream—let’s help people start living it.

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