

The 30 hours childcare debate ^[1]

Blog

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EXCERPTS

Will 30 hours childcare be enough to meet the needs of parents or do we need to have a greater conversation about what role childcare can play in modern society and what this childcare needs to offer?

There is much talk at the moment about why and how the Government proposes to support families. The pilot for the 30 hours free childcare has been announced whilst the Early Years sector (that provide these 30 free hours) are highly suspicious of the intention to provide the correct funds.

The battle for fair funding has spanned governments of hues of red, yellow and blue and we are now hoping that Mr Cameron will resolve this issue; he would be the first Prime Minister who agreed to a funding review. His problem however will be how we create a fund that not just narrows the achievement gap but also closes the estimated funding gap of £157m for 2016 /7 and £480 million by 2019/20 20.. Whether his Ministers and civil servants will listen is yet to be seen....

But what of parents? On paper the 30 hours is a great offer. The message they are receiving is that it is free, flexible and available. Parents have long been worrying about the costs of childcare but remain less concerned about the factors that make it expensive. The challenge is that the childcare offer needs to be more than just accessible and affordable, it also needs to be useable and desirable to families. Most importantly, it needs to be of a high quality; all children benefit from good quality childcare but it really matters to poor children.

It is widely recognised that economic issues are an important part of the debate over childcare policy. These issues include, but are not limited to:

1. the responsiveness of childcare demand and supply to process
2. the efficiency of the childcare market
3. the economic rationale for government subsidies
4. regulation of childcare and the role of employers in providing child care

What do we know about UK parents? Nowadays, 49% of families have both parents working full time. This is not surprising as the cost of raising a child is estimated to be £230,000 - an increase of 63% since 2003. There are 2 million lone parents, 90% of whom are women which equates to 25% of all families with dependent children. A report by Joseph Rowntree said that low paid workers think childcare support is one of the most important things that could improve their lives.

British Dads work some of the longest hours in Europe and 67% say that is the only way to stay on top of their workload with 18% staying longer at work more often than not causing them to miss dinner with their family at least once a week.

Working and raising a family in tandem is becoming the norm and with it comes lots of pressure. In Modern Family Index 2016 conducted by Working Families and Bright Horizons, the worry of balancing childcare is taking its toll on parents.

Childcare will help but it's not the only answer. Anne Marie Slaughter, previously advisor to Hillary Clinton and a great advocator of women 'having it all,' reflected more deeply in her recent book *Unfinished Business*. She talks about how the work life balance is broken and how to fix it. She refers to the lesson she learned from her own two sons who, despite having a Father willing to be the lead parent and a Mother with a tremendously supportive boss in Hillary Clinton, did not cope with their mother leaving them for part of the week. She reflected that childcare helps but it's a wider issue of understanding workplace practices that support families to work. It's true she is reflecting practice in the US where there is shockingly low amount of maternity leave for women but the point that childcare will be a panacea is a good reminder.

In the report, 53% of the parents had experienced a childcare breakdown and people managed it differently. In millennial households, parents are more likely to work flexibly and share family responsibilities but in others only 14% of parents shared childcare. Parents tend

to use sick leave (28%) and annual leave (35%) to cover childcare. More Mums than Dads took time off to manage childcare although one reason for this was not because Dads were not involved (more than one in five working Dads share care responsibilities and 35% drop off their children to school everyday) but because Dads, especially young Dads, were wary of telling their employers the truth about family responsibilities and childcare. In fact, 44% of dads said they were stressed trying to combine work and family life and 35% would down shift to a less stressful job. 28% would take a pay cut to work less hours or be willing to work more flexibly but none of this is possible if childcare is unaffordable, especially as money worries is the highest cause of tension in the household. Overall 59% said balancing childcare significantly impacts on work with 75% needing to change their work life to avoid burnout.

There is a move to more flexible working. Millennial parents are more likely to work flexibly and 25% of people have a caring responsibility beyond childcare. 17% of Millennials would feel confident to ask their employers about reducing work hours, working remotely or placing boundaries on work time and of course that would also benefit home life by reducing the time and cost of commuting.

I suggest we need to talk to parents and find out what childcare needs to look like for them and for us. We are already struggling with underfunding, mixed quality and the outcomes of some rushed and unproven policies such as the A to C GCSE requirement. (This specific policy has led to an 80% drop in recruitment of practitioners and apprentices in a time when the Government wants to increase childcare by 100% !)

Parents are under great financial pressure given the cost of housing and the insecure economic circumstances. Parents are not in a position to make up the shortfall in the cost of childcare. Parents have to work more flexibly and they are under pressure. We need to start a conversation to make parents better informed. The Government has created a childcare marketplace and we need the customers to be better informed because well informed customers drive quality. It is unwise for the Early Years and the Government to talk about the 30 hours in simplistic terms otherwise we risk a rush to the bottom on price.

Our task is to understand parents better and then inform them about the one key element that will affect their children. Our mantra must be high quality is key.

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