

# Why child care should be a right—not a perk <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

When Judith Warner, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, started investigating the challenges low-income parents face getting childcare, she didn't expect to have her findings hit home in such a personal way.

"What struck me over and over again was a 'There but for the grace of God' feeling," Warner says of her interviews with nearly three dozen parents, providers, advocates and policy experts. "We all know what a struggle it is to get good child care and pay for good child care. Unless you are really well off, the stress of childcare is a financial stretch for everyone in the United States."

Warner would know—she literally wrote the book the topic; *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* tackles how hard it is for middle- and upper-class mothers to juggle everything. Her interviews with countless middle class women all led to the same conclusion: The pressure to be perfect parents to our children is literally driving us mad.

We all know professional women who left the workforce because it made more financial sense to stay home than to pay for day care. Now imagine what it would feel like if child care remained completely out of reach financially without a job—and now imagine that that job pays the minimum wage and doesn't guarantee regular hours. Now you know what life is like for the majority of working moms.

In her new report, *Jumping Through Hoops and Set Up to Fail: Parents Speak Out About Child Care Assistance*, Warner interviews families to reveal a vicious cycle: parents are increasingly looking for childcare to get jobs that make it possible to get public childcare assistance. On top of this, the report says that mothers are often "treated in an insulting, demeaning way"—just because they're poor.

According to the Center for American Progress, families can pay an average of \$1,486 each month for child care (typically an infant and a toddler). That works out to eight weeks of groceries, fourteen weeks of health insurance, and 24 weeks of student loan payments—in other words, a serious economic toll for low-income families. And the impact is especially disheartening if you know just how much some mothers do every day to keep their heads above water.

Princess Mack is a 46-year old mother of four children in Denver. She works with Denver Human Services, helping low-income mothers connect with the services they need to support their families. Mack knows first-hand what it's like to be in her clients' shoes: When found herself out of work after moving to Colorado in 2005, the employees at the government offices she had to turn to for child care services made her feel "demeaned"—"like it was us against them."

The system itself prevented women like Mack from gaining access to the benefits the needed by forcing them away from their jobs—having to submit paperwork during business hours or having to wait entire workdays to see a caseworker (who might then unexpectedly be out). Often, because of administrative errors like lost paperwork, a mother would be forced to begin the entire process over again.

Low-income mothers, and single low-income mothers especially, are forced into a system where they are penalized for simply trying to do what's best for their children. In doing so, they face horrifying levels of stress and mental health issues.

Another mother Warner interviewed, a 24-year-old with four children ranging in age from two to eight, was expelled from her GED program when she missed a deadline for a paper. Despite having a learning disability that her program didn't recognize, her school day started at 9 A.M.—the same time she was supposed to drop her children off at the voucher-supported child care they attended. Between being late (after dropping off her kids) and her late paper, she was kicked out, and now her kids might lose their day care.

It goes without saying that all this stress takes a serious toll on families. Research compiled by the Center for American Progress found that gaps in children's cognitive abilities at different income levels is seen as early as nine months of age. The impact on cognitive development increases substantially by the age of two, and only continues to grow as children age. There is a multi-generational impact of the stress of poverty, with the difficulties faced by parents trickling down to their children. These children are inheriting stress because of circumstances outside their control—and this stress will likely have long-term effects on their development and, ultimately, academic and professional achievement.

What do we need to do next? Separate work from child care, Warner says. In a system where child care is treated as a reward, we send a

bad message to women and children. "This is a punitive message. It says, 'We don't trust you. We will only give you this if you do what you are 'supposed' to be doing.'"

For families struggling with so much out of their control, Warner suggests, it's time for a major intervention—both societal and governmental—to ensure that all women are able to work in a way that lets them be independent and ensure the security of their families.

-reprinted from Glamour

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

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