

It takes a policy ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

U.S. politicians love to pose as defenders of family values. Unfortunately, this pose is often, perhaps usually, one of remarkable hypocrisy.

And no, I'm not talking about the contrast between public posturing and personal behavior, although this contrast can be extreme. Which is more amazing: the fact that a long-serving Republican speaker of the House sexually abused teenage boys, or how little attention this revelation has received?

Instead, I'm talking about policy. Judged by what we actually do — or, more accurately, don't do — to help small children and their parents, America is unique among advanced countries in its utter indifference to the lives of its youngest citizens.

For example, almost all advanced countries provide paid leave from work for new parents. We don't. Our public expenditure on child care and early education, as a share of income, is near the bottom in international rankings (although if it makes you feel better, we do slightly edge out Estonia.)

In other words, if you judge us by what we do, not what we say, we place very little value on the lives of our children, unless they happen to come from affluent families. Did I mention that parents in the top fifth of U.S. households spend seven times as much on their children as parents in the bottom fifth?

But can our neglect of children be ended?

In January, both Democratic candidates declared their support for a program that would provide 12 weeks of paid leave to care for newborns and other family members. And last week, while the news media was focused on Donald Trump's imaginary friend, I mean imaginary spokesman, Hillary Clinton announced an ambitious plan to improve both the affordability and quality of U.S. child care.

This was an important announcement, even if it was drowned out by the ugliness and nonsense of a campaign that is even uglier and more nonsensical than usual. For child-care reform is the kind of medium-size, incremental, potentially politically doable — but nonetheless extremely important — initiative that could well be the centerpiece of a Clinton administration. So what's the plan?

O.K., we don't have all the details yet, but the outline seems pretty clear. On the affordability front, Mrs. Clinton would use subsidies and tax credits to limit family spending on child care — which can be more than a third of income — to a maximum of 10 percent. Meanwhile, there would be aid to states and communities that raise child-care workers' pay, and a variety of other measures to help young children and their parents. All of this would still leave America less generous than many other countries, but it would be a big step toward international norms.

Is this doable? Yes. Is it desirable? Very much so.

When we talk about doing more for children, it's important to realize that it costs money, but not all that much money. Why? Because there aren't that many young children at any given time, and it doesn't take a lot of spending to make a huge difference to their lives. Our threadbare system of public support for child care and early education costs 0.4 percent of the G.D.P.; France's famously generous system costs 1.2 percent of the G.D.P. So we could move a long way up the scale with a fairly modest investment.

And it would indeed be an investment — every bit as much of an investment as spending money to repair and improve our transportation infrastructure. After all, today's children are tomorrow's workers and taxpayers. So it's an incredible waste, not just for families but for the nation as a whole, that so many children's futures are stunted because their parents don't have the resources to take care of them as well as they should. And affordable child care would also have the immediate benefit of making it easier for parents to work productively.

Are there any reasons not to spend a bit more on children? The usual suspects will, of course, go on about the evils of big government, the sacred nature of individual choice, the wonders of free markets, and so on. But the market for child care, like the market for health care, works very badly in practice.

And when someone starts talking about choice, bear in mind that we're talking about children, who are not in a position to choose whether they're born into affluent households with plenty of resources or less wealthy families desperately trying to juggle work and child care.

So can we stop talking, just for a moment, about who won the news cycle or came up with the most effective insult, and talk about policy substance here?

The state of child care in America is cruel and shameful — and even more shameful because we could make things much better without radical change or huge spending. And one candidate has a reasonable, feasible plan to do something about this shame, while the other couldn't care less.

-reprinted from the New York Times

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