

Child care isn't cheap^[1]

Author: Mead, Sara

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EXCERPTS

"We're going to help you balance family and work," declared Hillary Clinton in her recent speech accepting the Democratic presidential nomination. "And you know what, if fighting for affordable child care and paid family leave is playing the 'woman card,' then deal me in!" Clinton, a long-time advocate for children and families, isn't the only one talking child care, however. Introducing her father, Donald Trump, at the Republican convention, Ivanka Trump promised he would, "focus on making quality child care affordable and accessible for all."

Clinton's plan to cap the costs of child care at 10 percent of income would do much more to help families - particularly low-income families - than Trump's proposal to make child care costs tax deductible (which would do nothing for poor and working families with no federal income tax liability). Still, as someone who believes American society needs to do more to support families and children, I'm pleased to see child care getting attention from both sides of the aisle in this campaign season.

But the way the candidates are talking about it also makes me slightly uncomfortable.

In framing the child care issue as one of affordability, both Clinton and Trump are sending an implicit message that child care costs too much. To be sure, child care is too expensive for many families. In Washington, D.C., where I live, the average cost of center-based childcare for an infant exceeds \$22,000 a year. Many middle-class families spend more on child care than they do on their mortgages. The burden on poor families is even greater, consuming more than one-third of their monthly incomes.

Yet while many families struggle with child care costs, what they pay often falls short of the true costs to care for young children well. Child care providers - often small businesses and nonprofit organizations - face a knotty financial challenge. On the one hand, what they can charge for care is limited by what families can afford. On the other hand, ensuring child safety and meeting state licensure requirements requires maintaining certain adult:child ratios, square feet of space per child and basic safety standards, limiting providers' ability to lower costs.

When you add up the costs of operating a child care program - rent, learning materials, food and, most importantly, caregiver salaries - revenues from parent fees barely cover the costs. Family-based child care providers, who care for children in their own homes, operate on even slimmer margins. And that's just to meet minimum standards. Operating a quality program, one with well-prepared and supported teachers; adequate books, toys, and learning materials; regular communication with families; and a rich variety of activities that support children's learning, costs even more.

In other words, while many families are spending more on child care than they can afford, it still may not be enough.

The real problem is not that child care costs too much, but that we as a society have failed to acknowledge that caring for children is demanding, labor-intensive and therefore costly. For most of human history these costs have been hidden by the oppression of women, whether through social norms that restricted them to the home sphere and excluded them from broader economic life, or, worse, the coerced and uncompensated labor of enslaved women. Acknowledging this history in no way discounts the contributions and love of women who cared for children in the past or of the many women who choose to work in child care or stay home to raise their children today. But as women have gained social and economic rights and increasingly participated in the labor market, the work - and costs - of caring for children moved into the market as well, making them visible for the first time. Yet the expectation that child care is cheap, unskilled "women's work" remains deeply embedded in how we think about child care costs and how we value the women who care for children.

As publicly funded early childhood programs have expanded in recent years, this mindset has also shaped design of public policies. State child care subsidies, designed to help low-income working families afford care, typically pay providers far less than the typical costs of care, let alone the costs of quality programs. The typical state-funded preschool program spends just \$4,489 per child, less than half the per-pupil spending in K-12 public schools, even though many state pre-K programs offer a full-school day (or longer) program and employ teachers with bachelor's degrees. Head Start, the federal program for children in poverty, provides more funding than the typical state

pre-K program, but less than K-12 schools, while also requiring extensive additional health, family engagement and comprehensive supports that K-12 schools don't offer.

Instead of confronting the true cost of care, both the current child care market and too many publicly funded early childhood programs rely on the continued oppression of some women - often women of color, often mothers themselves - who earn low wages in childcare jobs. Childcare workers are some of the lowest-paid in the entire economy, earning less than parking attendants, janitors or people who care for pets. National data show that nearly half of them qualify for food stamps, Medicaid, or other safety net programs. That's no way to treat the people charged with caring for the next generation of children.

Clinton has proposed a program to boost the skills and pay of early childhood workers, but these proposals have gotten far less attention than those to reduce families' costs. That's not surprising, given that programs to help middle class families are far more popular and easy to explain than efforts to improve childcare quality. But there's a risk that framing childcare issues primarily in terms of costs now will make it harder to fight for quality and compensation when it comes time to actually enact policies.

The hard reality is that giving all our children quality care that supports their development and prepares them to succeed in school requires someone - whether parents, government, or someone else - to spend much more on young children than we currently do. I'm thrilled that Clinton and Trump both want to talk about helping families pay for care. I just wish they'd also acknowledge the need to make childcare not just cheaper, but better.

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