

To fix America's child care, let's look at the past ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In what might be the most contentious election campaign season yet, the main presidential candidates seem to agree on at least one issue – that the policy around child care for American families needs improvement.

Donald Trump has said he would expand tax credits to enable families to better afford child care, and Hillary Clinton has expressed her commitment to expanding access to high-quality, affordable child care.

The U.S. is one of the few economically developed nations with a patchwork of care that fails to address the ongoing needs of families with children. Despite the fact that a majority of U.S. parents are in the paid labor force, there is a dearth of affordable quality child care.

We are professors and researchers of social policy. We too struggled to find and afford high-quality care for our children. Our difficulties led us to examine U.S. child care policy in “In Our Hands: The Struggle for U.S. Child Care Policy.” Like us, most families in the U.S. struggle to find quality, affordable child care.

The U.S. has a long history of child care policy initiatives. What can we learn from history to improve the possibility of creating a national child care policy that works?

The early years

U.S. child care began as a charity enterprise in the late 19th century when settlement houses – which provided services and education in poor communities – opened nurseries to keep the children of factory workers in urban industrial centers safe while their mothers toiled.

The first government-sponsored child care was not created until the World War II era. During that time the iconic symbol of a working woman, Rosie the Riveter, was created as part of a propaganda campaign to encourage women to join the paid labor force to assist in the war effort.

Legislation known as the Lanham Act was passed to support the war industry. As part of this legislation, US\$52 million was provided from 1943-1946 to subsidize high-quality, full-day, year-round child care for up to six days a week.

The child care supported by these funds enabled women to work when their country needed them. It was short-lived. This funding ended in 1946 and women were sent home to give up their jobs to returning veterans.

Federal policies post war

Until the mid 1960s – close to 20 years – child care did not receive much attention. In 1965, the early childhood program Head Start was created to support part-time preschool programs for low-income children between three and five years old.

This program was part of President Lyndon Johnson's effort to address some of the educational gaps experienced by economically disadvantaged children when they began school. Head Start continues today. Its programs have been expanded to include support for pregnant women and low-income children from birth to age three as well as children with disabilities.

The 1970s witnessed more women entering the workforce. In 1971, Democratic Senator Walter Mondale introduced the Comprehensive Child Development Act (CCDA), a bipartisan bill to provide care for all U.S. children.

Feminists, unions and employers came together to support the legislation. These proponents used arguments that noted the unfairness of forcing parents to choose between work and family obligations.

Opposition to this bill expressed in legislative testimony and responses to subsequent efforts was grounded in fears of conservative groups that the government would create unreasonable mandates for religious child care centers and require women to place children in uniform child care arrangements.

In 1972 President Richard Nixon vetoed it.

In his veto, Nixon played on Cold War fears that public child care would “Sovietize” American families. He said it would, “commit the vast moral authority of the National Government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach.”

The 1980s

For over 30 years following Nixon’s veto, little effort was made to create broad national policies to address the universal child care needs of U.S. families.

For example, in 1988 the Act for Better Childcare Services (ABC), a less comprehensive bill, was introduced by Democratic Senator Christopher Dodd and Republican Senator John Chafee to address the child care needs of low-income families.

During the legislative hearings for ABC, advocates, including parents, state legislators and administrators, and representatives of both liberal and conservative interest groups pointed to the growing body of research that showed the importance of quality education on childhood development. They also argued that workers who had stable child care would be more productive and less likely to leave their jobs.

Initially, this bill passed both chambers of Congress. Due to technical difficulties, however, it needed to pass the House again. Instead of returning the bill to the House, a series of compromises led to the creation of the Child Care Development Block Care Grant, which provided funds to states for child care for low-income families. More recently, funds have also been provided to improve safety and quality of child care.

The 1990s

In the late 1990s, two major federal policies relating to child care were passed: the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and a compromise to support the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), widely known as “Welfare Reform.”

However, both had limitations. The funds that were provided through PRWORA supported only the child care needs of low-income families.

While the FMLA is not limited by income level, it provides only 12 weeks of unpaid leave for parents who adopt or give birth to a child, as well as for parents or guardians caring for sick relatives, including children (or themselves). These benefits are available only to employees who have worked 1,250 hours in the past 12 months for companies that employ at least 50 employees.

With the exception of some minimal tax credits that were created in the 1950s and have not kept pace with inflation, existing federal child care policies (as discussed above) only help parents in temporary and extreme circumstances: birth, ill health and temporary poverty. They do not meet the regular and ongoing needs of working families.

A window of opportunity?

Child care needs cut across gender, race, socioeconomic status, party lines, geography and ideologies. The current interest in child care demonstrated by both major presidential candidates could provide a rare opportunity for bipartisan agreement.

What can we learn from this history?

In this election, both Chelsea Clinton and Ivanka Trump have issued public statements indicating that their parents understand that government has a role to play in helping parents access child care.

History tells us that personal investment can make all the difference: In 2007, as a result of his daughters’ struggles, Republican Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska coauthored the FMLA with Senator Dodd.

History also tells us that unless we can come together to create a universal policy that will serve all American families, we may be left with one more piece in a patchwork of policies that fails to address the overarching needs of most working families.

We believe there is a window of opportunity to develop broad-based support not only across party lines but across sectors – business, faith organizations, feminists, employers and unions.

Advocates could take advantage of this. A coalition, cutting across party lines, could work together to create a clear agenda around child care policy. Child care providers have been an undervalued low-wage workforce for far too long. They too need to be heard, as they are an important voice within this coalition.

The question is, this time around, could a divided Congress be persuaded to cooperate around this shared issue despite a history of gridlock?

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