

# Hillary Clinton's preschool revolution? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

For the first time in U.S. history, Americans may be about to elect a president whose signature issue is early childhood.

"If we want our children to thrive in tomorrow's economy, we must invest in our children's future today, starting with our youngest learners, especially those from our most vulnerable and at-risk communities," Hillary Clinton told The Hechinger Report in an exclusive email interview conducted through her campaign staff. "I've made a career out of fighting for children and families."

And while that's a great talking point, crafted by an experienced politician, it's also true. Over the course of her 40-year career, Clinton has returned again and again to the trials and tribulations of the nation's youngest. While at Yale Law School, she added an extra year to her studies to take courses in child development. As a young attorney, she worked for the Children's Defense Fund, an advocacy group. As first lady of Arkansas, she introduced the state to home visiting, a service for expectant and new mothers that has been shown to help women living in poverty raise healthier, more academically prepared kids.

And as the nation's first lady, Clinton advocated for the passage of the 1997 State Child Health Insurance Program, which now covers about 8 million children, and she pushed for the creation of Early Head Start, a federally funded care and education program for infants and toddlers living in poverty. She also wrote her first book, "It Takes a Village," about the importance of investing in young children.

In all her campaigns — from her 2000 Senate campaign to the current presidential race — Clinton has made paid parental leave and universal preschool key talking points.

"She's been light-years ahead on the issue throughout her life," said Neera Tanden, co-chair of the Clinton-Kaine Transition Project and president of the Center for American Progress, a progressive policy think tank. She's also a rumored favorite for a position on Clinton's potential White House staff. "Much of the country has now come to where [Clinton] was a long time ago," Tanden said.

If it's true that the public is finally ready to spend additional tax dollars on services for children in the earliest years of their lives, then a President Hillary Clinton could lead the massive overhaul we need to catch up with the rest of the developed world in our treatment of young children.

"We're lucky to have one candidate who has a track record like that," said Kris Perry, head of the First Five Years Fund, an advocacy group that advises both Republican and Democratic politicians on early childhood policy. Perry pointed out that if Clinton were to win the presidential election, she would likely have to work with a Republican House and Senate. "Her leadership will matter because she'll elevate it in conversations," Perry said. "But it doesn't mean her way of doing it is the best way."

The First Five Years Fund is betting that lawmakers from both parties will be more willing to work on the issue because of voters' priorities, not because of presidential dictates. The group's latest annual poll, conducted by two polling firms, Public Opinion Strategies and Hart Research, supports the idea that additional investment in young children is increasingly important to voters. In the nationally representative sample, 90 percent of voters across both parties agreed with the statement: "The next president and Congress should work together to make quality early childhood education more accessible and affordable to low- and middle-income families."

The support for taking action on early childhood remained bipartisan, even when pollsters specified that the federal government would be involved. Fifty-four percent of Republicans, 70 percent of independents and 91 percent of Democrats said they agreed that there should be "a federal plan to help states and local communities provide better access to early childhood education."

"Even our angriest respondents think [Democrats and Republicans] should work together on this," Perry said. And yes, they actually measured "anger" as part of the poll.

Politicians seem to be listening. In addition to the dozens of governors and hundreds of state senators and representatives who have pushed for local changes in recent years, the issue has moved front and center in the presidential campaign in a way not seen for at least two decades. Even Donald Trump, whose campaign did not respond to requests for comment, put forward a proposal to reduce the cost of child care through tax deductions. (Experts on both sides of the aisle said his proposal would only help the upper-middle class and

wealthy.) As Trump is not known for proposals meant to increase federal spending on social programs, the fact that he suggested a tax break to blunt the cost of child care was seen by many as a sign of how important the issue has become.

“At the highest level, early childhood is really moving into the spotlight,” said Katharine Stevens, a resident scholar and early childhood policy expert at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank.

And though Stevens managed to avoid mentioning Clinton’s name even once during a half hour interview about the future of early childhood policy, she did suggest that the candidate’s depth of knowledge and detailed proposals could be a disadvantage.

“I feel like if any candidate comes in pushing a particular set of solutions, it runs the risk of shutting down an important public conversation,” Stevens said.

That is certainly possible. It’s also possible that once Clinton raises preschool and other early childhood issues as president, she will again become the flashpoint for all the concerns we have historically had about women joining the workforce en masse and abandoning their children to the care of drab governmental institutions. Proposals to increase federally supported child care in the 1970s and again in the 1990s gained a lot of steam, but were ultimately defeated by concerns, raised mostly by the right, that such programs would lure women into jobs and away from motherhood.

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