

Meeting children's needs when parents work

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Introduction

With the dramatic increase in maternal employment (see Figure 1), family life in the U.S. has changed significantly. Forty years ago, two thirds of American children had a stay-at-home parent. Today, the reverse is true: only one third have a stay-at-home parent, as 46 percent live with two working parents and 20 percent live with a single working parent.¹

As family life has changed, so have public expectations of families. Forty years ago, President Richard Nixon said: "A welfare mother with pre-school children should not face benefit reductions if she decides to stay home. It

is not our intent that mothers of pre-school children must accept work."² Indeed, in Nixon's time, women on welfare were only required to work if they had children age 16 or older. In 1979, work requirements were extended to women with children age 6 or older, and, in 1988, to women with children age 3 or older. In 1996, with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, work requirements were extended to all mothers, regardless of the age of the child. States do have the option to exempt mothers with children under the age of 1, but a substantial number of states (20 as of 2006) either have no exemption or an exemption lasting only 3 to 4 months.

As expectations for low-income families have changed, the availability of work supports for low-income families has increased. Most notably, there have been sharp increases in the Earned Income Tax Credit and in funding for child care subsidies. Yet, in most other respects, policies have not kept pace with the changes in working families. Schools, the major institution providing care for children while their parents work, have for the most

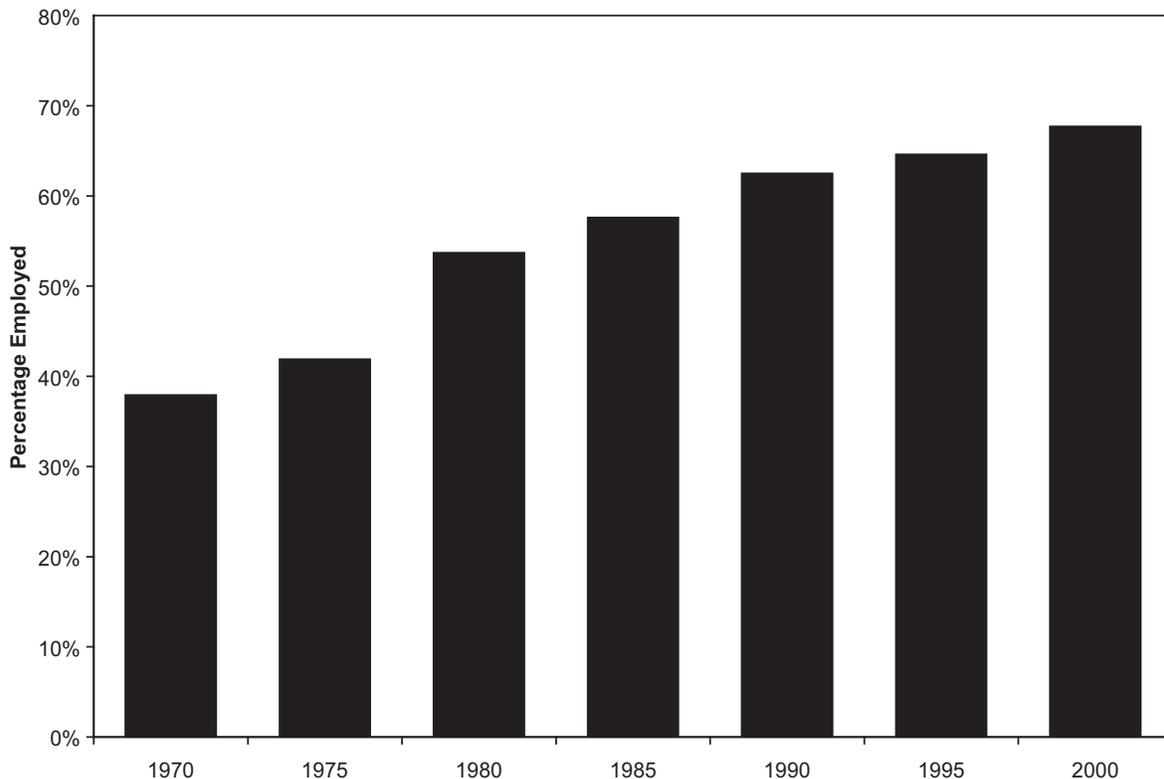


Figure 1. Growth in maternal employment since 1970.

Source: J. Waldfogel, *What Children Need* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

part not changed to adapt to the increase in parental employment. Schools in the US are open about 30 hours per week, 180 days per year, notably less than schools in many other advanced industrialized countries. As a result, US schools cover only one third of the hours a parent working full-time will be at work or commuting between the birth of a child and the child's 18th birthday.

Employer policies have also not adapted very much to address the growth in working families. Despite anecdotal reports about the growth in work-family policies, employers still provide little and uneven access to benefits such as paid time off, help with child care, flexible work hours, and basic benefits such as family health insurance. Low-income and part-time workers receive the fewest benefits.³ Table 1 shows that access to paid sick leave is far from universal and is least common among low-paid and part-time workers. Similarly, only a small minority of workers receives any help with child care; typically that help involves the provision of information and referral services (rather than subsidies or on-site child care), and again that help is skewed to the best-off workers. To a large extent, working parents, and particularly those who are low-income, are left to fend for themselves.

What do children need and how we can meet those needs when parents work? I first review what we know from research about the effects of parental employment and non-parental child care on child outcomes. Then, I suggest policy changes to better meet the needs of low-income children whose parents are working. Americans have strong values about work and family issues, and these values should inform our policymaking. Three values are particularly relevant in this context: respecting choice, promoting quality, and supporting employment. We must also keep in mind two key principles for allocating limited public resources—efficiency and equity. Whatever policies we enact in this area should promote child well-being and should also be informed by these core values and principles.

Parental employment, child care, and child outcomes

How parental work and nonparental care affect child outcomes depends on contextual factors including the age of the child, other characteristics of the child, family factors (such as race, ethnicity, income, wealth, socio-economic status), and factors related to employment (such as its timing, quality, and intensity). Any effects of parental work will likely operate through influencing family environments, in particular income, parenting, and home environment, and child care and after-school care. I summarize the research separately by the age of the child, but do not discuss variation by other factors in detail. There has been a large amount of research on the

Table 1
Access to Paid Sick Leave and Employer-Provided Child Care Assistance

Type of Occupation/ Work Hours	Percent with Any Paid Sick Leave	Percent with Any Child Care Assistance
Service occupation	36%	9%
Blue-collar	46	8
White-collar	74	19
Part-time workers	23	8
Full-time workers	69	16

Source: H. Holzer and D. Nightingale, eds. "Work-Family Policies" in *Workforce Policies for a Changing Economy* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2007).

Child care assistance includes programs such as information and referral services, on-site child care, and help paying for child care.

links between parental employment, child care, and child outcomes and this research has been quite variable in quality. In my review, I place the most weight on studies with the strongest causal design. This means that I emphasize evidence from random assignment (experimental) studies or, where those do not exist, quasi-experimental studies, or other studies using rigorous empirical methods to establish causality.

The first year of life

Paid parental leave is associated with better maternal and child health, lower maternal depression, lower infant mortality, fewer low birth-weight babies, and more breast-feeding, preventive health care, and immunization.⁴ Unpaid leave does not have the same protective effects.⁵ Less is known about fathers' leave-taking, but it appears that when fathers take leave, they are more involved in infant care such as changing diapers and feeding the baby.⁶

It is also well-documented that maternal employment in the first year, particularly if full-time, is associated with poorer cognitive development and behavior problems, for some children.⁷ The effects of maternal employment vary by type and quality of child care, the quality of parental care, and family income. In particular, the quality of parental care and child care—sensitivity and responsiveness to the child—is crucial.

Children age one and two

For children in this age group as well, evidence suggests that quality of care matters. Research generally finds no adverse effects of maternal employment on cognitive development for children in this age group, but there may be higher levels of behavior problems if children are in poor quality child care more than part-time.

The research also shows that high-quality child care produces cognitive gains, with no adverse effects on behav-

ior.⁸ Children in group child care do have more illnesses but these are typically minor, and nonparental child care may be protective in terms of reducing physical discipline in the home.⁹

Children age three to five

Of ten welfare-to-work experiments that encouraged or required mothers of preschoolers to work, seven found no effect on child cognitive outcomes, while three found positive effects. Observational studies typically find no effects of maternal employment at this age on cognitive outcomes, but again find some adverse behavioral effects if children are in poor quality child care more than part-time.¹⁰ In terms of health effects, maternal employment may lead to increased risk of child obesity, but child care for children this age is associated with reduced physical discipline and domestic violence.

Again, the quality of nonparental care matters. High-quality preschool programs produce substantial cognitive gains, particularly for disadvantaged children, and reduce later problems such as crime.¹¹ More typical school- or center-based care programs also produce cognitive gains.¹² Prekindergarten programs have particularly beneficial effects on school readiness and school achievement.¹³ Finally, a recent random assignment study finds that Head Start has positive effects on cognitive performance and reduces behavior problems.¹⁴

School-age children and teens

The large literature on this age group generally finds few associations between parental employment and child outcomes.¹⁵ The research also suggests that, where effects of parental work are found, these depend on the age and other attributes of child, as well as timing, quality, and intensity of work. The same welfare-to-work programs that had positive effects on young children had no effects on children age 6 to 9, and adverse effects on older children.¹⁶ The research also indicates that the effects of parental employment, when present, operate through income, parenting, and child care arrangements. One study found that adolescents whose mothers moved from welfare to work reported improved mental health; these families made substantial income gains, without reducing time together.¹⁷ In contrast, another study found that adolescents whose mothers were assigned to welfare-to-work reforms did less well in school; effects were strongest in families where the adolescents had younger siblings and presumably were asked to take on more responsibility for them.

With regard to child care, “self-care”—children spending time without adult supervision—becomes more common as children age, and occurs about a year earlier if mothers work. There are two types of self-care: self-care alone at home, which is not necessarily problematic; and self-care with peers, which is linked with poorer outcomes for children.¹⁸ Access to out-of-school programs at or near

school is limited. Only one in four school-age children of working parents attend a program at school as their primary form of after-school care, and the quality of these programs is highly variable.¹⁹

Implications for policy

Looking across these age groups, seven key steps would help better meet the needs of children when parents work:

1. Give parents more flexibility, through expanding family and medical leave rights and introducing a right to request part-time and flexible hours.
2. Break the link between employment and essential family benefits, especially health insurance.
3. Allow parents the option to stay home in the first year of their child’s life, by providing a year of paid parental leave and at-home infant child care programs for low-income parents.²⁰
4. Improve the quality of care for infants and toddlers.
5. Improve the quality of care for preschoolers.
6. Increase access to high-quality out-of-school programs for school-age children and youth.
7. Experiment with a longer school day or school year.

A crucial question is whether we have the political will to make these kinds of changes. I think we do. Polls indicate that most Americans support improving child care.²¹ Over 80 percent agree there is a serious shortage of affordable and good-quality child care, and a majority support quality-improvement initiatives such as tightening regulations and expanding Head Start. There is widespread support for publicly funded universal preschool, which is popular with state governors and legislators as well as business leaders. There is also widespread support for publicly funded after-school programs.

Learning from the UK

As part of its commitment to end child poverty, the UK has emphasized employment and making work pay (through measures such as a new minimum wage and working families tax credit), but the UK antipoverty strategy also includes increased investments in children and families, especially those with young children. The list of child-focused investments is impressive and includes:

- paid maternity leave extended from 6 to 9 months, and eventually 12 months; paid paternity leave to be extended as well;
- parents of children under age 6 given right to request part-time or flexible hours;

- universal part-time preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds;
- greatly expanded child care subsidies;
- increased child cash allowances, especially for families with young children;
- move toward extended school days to provide out-of-school care for school-age children and youth;
- expanded early childhood programs in low-income communities, and the establishment of Children's Centers to coordinate services for families with children in every community; and
- more (increases in welfare benefits, maternity grants, baby bonds, 10 year child care strategy, increased spending on education, etc.)

Conclusions

The bottom-line message is clear: we can, and should, do a much better job of meeting children's needs when parents work. We know what children need, and we know how they are affected by parental employment and nonparental care. It is also clear that most Americans care deeply about children and are willing to spend money on them, but they want that money well spent. There is now solid evidence to help us direct resources wisely to benefit children and our country.

It is time to move on from debating about working mothers. Most children now have working parents, who are looking for more help from government in meeting their children's needs. And we now know better than ever before what investments make sense. If we truly care about increasing the life chances of the next generation, the time to invest is now. ■

¹J. Waldfogel, *What Children Need* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

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³J. Waldfogel, "Work-Family Policies," in *Workforce Policies for a Changing Economy* eds. H. Holzer and D. Nightingale (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2007).

⁴P. Chatterji and S. Markowitz, "Does the Length of Maternity Leave Affect Maternal Health?" NBER Working Paper No. 10206 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau for Economic Research, 2004); C. Ruhm, "Parental Leave and Child Health," *Journal of Health Economics* 19 (2000): 931-960; S. Tanaka, "Parental Leave and Child Health across OECD Countries," *Economic Journal* 115 (2005): F7-F28; L. Berger, J. Hill, and J. Waldfogel, "Maternity Leave, Early Maternal Employment, and Child Outcomes in the US," *Economic Journal* 115 (2005): F29-F47.

⁵S. Tanaka, "Parental Leave and Child Health across OECD Countries."

⁶S. Tanaka and J. Waldfogel, "Effects of Parental Leave and Working Hours on Fathers' Involvement with Their Babies: Evidence from the

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⁷J. P. Shonkoff and D. A. Phillips, eds., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000); and E. Smolensky and J. Gootman, eds., *Working Families and Growing Kids: Caring for Children and Adolescents* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2003).

⁸J. Waldfogel, "Child Care, Women's Employment, and Child Outcomes," *Journal of Population Economics* 15 (2002): 527-548.

⁹M. Meyers, D. Rosenbaum, C. Ruhm, and J. Waldfogel, "Inequality in Early Childhood Education and Care: What do We Know?" in *Social Inequality* ed. K. Neckerman (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004); and J. M. Love, E. Eliason-Kisker, C. M. Ross, P.Z. Schochet, J. Brooks-Gunn, and D. Paulsell, *Making a Difference in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers and Their Families: The Impacts of Early Head Start* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2002).

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¹²M. Meyers and colleagues, "Inequality in Early Childhood Education and Care?"

¹³W. S. Barnett, C. Lamy, and K. Jung, "The Effects of State Prekindergarten Programs on Young Children's School Readiness in Five States," available from the National Institute for Early Education Research at www.nieer.org, 2005.

¹⁴M. Puma, S. Bell, R. Cook, C. Heid, and M. Lopez, "Head Start Impact Study: First Year Findings" (Washington, DC: U.S. DHHS, ACF, 2005).

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¹⁸E. Smolensky and J. Gootman, eds., *Working Families and Growing Kids*.

¹⁹J. Waldfogel, *What Children Need*; and D. Blau and J. Currie, "Pre-School, Day Care, and After-School Care: Who's Minding the Kids?" in *Handbook on the Economics of Education* eds. E. Hanushek and F. Welch (Amsterdam: North Holland, 2006).

²⁰At-home infant child care is a program that provides a subsidy for eligible low-income parents to provide care for a child under the age of one, using the same funds that would otherwise be used to subsidize care by a child care provider. Minnesota and Montana currently have such programs.

²¹J. Waldfogel, *What Children Need*.

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