

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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The Battle over Child Care

A Survey of Recent Articles

Is there a child-care crisis in America? A speaker at a White House conference on the subject a year ago said, to much applause, that there is a crisis “so acute that child care workers in many areas of the country are unable to find adequate day care for their own children.”

Though this image of mothers stymied in their desire to rush off to care for other people’s children by their inability to hand off their own seemed to put the situation in a slightly absurd light, there is little doubt that many youngsters are not being given the good care they need. Six out of seven day-care centers are “mediocre to poor” in quality, according to a 1995 study cited by Michelle Cottle, an editor at the *Washington Monthly* (July–Aug. 1998).

Last January, a few months after that White House conference, President Bill Clinton unveiled a \$21.7 billion daycare proposal, involving block grants to the states and tax credits for low- and middle-income families and businesses. But what is the essential problem? That the federal government has been laggard in subsidizing high-quality daycare, as Cottle and other liberals maintain—or that the children are not in the arms of their mothers, as conservatives insist? Each side has a spin on the facts.

Ben Wildavsky, a staff correspondent for the *National Journal* (Jan. 24, 1998), provides some unambiguous statistical background. In 1997, nearly 42 percent of women with children under six were working full-time, five percent were looking for work, 18 percent had part-time jobs, and 35 percent were not working outside the home. Liberals like to combine the part-timers with the other mothers who are working or want

to be, to show that most mothers with small children—65 percent—are in the work force (compared with only 12 percent a half-century earlier). Subtext: *this is the wave of the future*. Conservatives lump the part-timers in with the stay-at-homes, to show that most moms with small children—53 percent—are at home with them at least part of the day. Subtext: *the traditional family is still the norm, and it’s not too late for wayward working mothers to repent*.

According to the Census Bureau, 10.3 million preschoolers—or slightly more than half of the nation’s 20 million children under five—had mothers in the work force in 1994. Six percent of the youngsters were cared for by the mothers themselves, either at their workplaces or while working at home, and 43 percent were cared for by other relatives, including fathers (18 percent) and grandparents (16 percent). The rest—a slight majority—of the preschoolers with working moms were in the care of non-relatives. Only 29 percent—three million toddlers and infants—were in formal day-care centers (21 percent) or nursery schools (eight percent).

A recent study of 1,675 federal employees with preschoolers being cared for by others found the (mostly middle- or upper-income) parents satisfied with the arrangements. But Carol J. Erdwins, Wendy J. Cooper, and Louis C. Buffardi, psychologists at George Mason University, report in *Child & Youth Care Forum* (Apr. 1998) that the parents whose toddlers or infants were being cared for in their own homes by relatives or au pairs were significantly more satisfied than those whose children were in day-

care centers or in the homes of baby sitters or child-care providers. Interestingly, “the more education parents had, the less satisfaction they reported,” the authors observe. They speculate that “better educated parents would have more knowledge of child development and environmental influences on children and might, therefore, view their child care with a more critical eye.”

The first three years of a child’s life, according to several studies, are critical for brain development. A 1997 report from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), which is conducting a study of early child care in 3,100 families around the country, said that while maternal stimulation and the home environment were much more important for a child’s cognitive and language development, a young child in “high quality” daycare, with “positive caregiving and language stimulation,” was not at a disadvantage. “There’s a growing consensus among child development experts,” Cottle writes, “that what matters most in day care for infants and toddlers is the children’s relationships with caregivers.”

But daycare workers generally are poorly paid, making on average only \$6.89 an hour, notes Margaret Talbot, a senior editor of the *New Republic* (Nov. 17, 1997). Competition from the “informal” part of the market—that “great reserve army of (mostly) women” willing for modest wages to take children into their homes and tend to them along with their own—depresses the wages of workers in the formal daycare centers. Turnover among these workers is high, Talbot points out, “which can be harmful to young kids, who need to form secure attachments to their parental stand-ins.”

“While child care experts and advocates talk about the importance of good caregivers and high program standards,” says Cottle, “they all stress that more money must be made available to extend these benefits to more families.” Clinton’s proposal would be “a fine place to start.”

Diane Fisher, a clinical psychologist and mother of three, is skeptical. “There is simply no evading the vast difference between parents and providers, between even the highest-quality care and a real home,” she writes in the *Women’s Quarterly* (Spring 1998). The problems with daycare, she says, “go beyond the matter of ‘quality.’ It is simply unethical

of day-care advocates to dismiss serious concerns such as the reasonable age for children to begin full-time day-care or the importance of a mother staying with babies as much as possible during those critical first three years, or the risks of 10-hour day-care days for any child under five.” (When very young children spend many hours in daycare, the researchers in the NICHD study found, there seems to be some adverse effect on the mother-child relationship.)

Another critic, Allan Carlson, editor of the *Family in America* (July 1998), concedes that daycare may be necessary for some families, but he sees no justification for giving it “preferred political status.” Like many conservatives, he favors ending income tax preferences for commercial child care. That might mean, for example, replacing the Dependent Care Tax Credit with “a universal early childhood tax credit” of \$700 per child for “all tax-paying parents with children through age five.” He also would loosen local zoning laws and federal labor regulations, so as to encourage part-time work, flextime, telecommuting, and at-home businesses.

Interviewed in *New Perspectives Quarterly* (Special Issue, 1998), Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a founding text of the modern feminist movement, is asked whether parents can “have it all without damaging the kids,” and whether it is a good thing for both parents to be working 80 hours a week while their children “are shunted off to child care.” In reply, she says she favors more flexible work hours, shorter work hours—and “better, more affordable child care. Whatever criticism of child care there may be, the fact is that without child care there can be no equality for women.”

But in an interview reprinted in the same issue, the late historian Christopher Lasch calls the feminist demand for expanded child-care facilities “positively harmful.” He does not maintain that women should devote themselves exclusively to raising children and not work. Lasch contends that “the more time parents spend working outside the home, the weaker the family, already in critical condition, will get.” In his view, a “radical restructuring” of the workplace is needed to let parents “raise their own children, instead of turning them over to the care of others. Caring for their own children, after all, is what most parents would like to do.”