

Work-Family Balance Solutions Must be Found in Private Sector, New Research Asserts

Tough budget times mean new government policies to help parents care for children and elders unlikely

With both federal and state governments hamstrung by budget deficits, it is employers and community institutions that are in the best position to help employees balance work and family, according to an analysis by child policy experts published today in the new issue of the Princeton-Brookings [The Future of Children](#) journal.

American society's composition and family roles have changed dramatically since *Leave It to Beaver*, with the majority of American women employed outside the home, an explosion of single-parent families, and older Americans increasingly needing care from younger relatives. These changes greatly complicate the challenges of meeting family responsibilities while holding down a job, note journal editors Sarah McLanahan of Princeton, Jane Waldfogel of Columbia, and Brookings senior fellow Ron Haskins,

While there are government programs to help working parents, such as the \$3.5 billion per year in child-care tax credits and about \$30 billion in federal and state spending on early childhood programs and child care, the majority of Americans do not currently rely primarily on government policies and programs—but on themselves and their employers.

Work-family conflict will remain on the nation's agenda for many years to come, the editors note. "In the near term, improvements are likely to be achieved primarily by voluntary changes in work policy by employers and by adaptations made by communities and families themselves. Researchers should press on with their analysis of proposals for new federal and state work-family policies, and advocates should continue lobbying for government action at the federal and state level, but the movement to help families find a healthier balance between work and family life should not hinge on the prospect for government action," they warn.

Devising strategies to meet the challenges of work-family conflict requires rethinking some common assumptions—that work-family issues are of concern to women only, that employer and employee interests necessarily collide, and that families, employers, and in some cases government, are the only essential actors. In fact, male employees too face conflicts in managing family and work responsibilities. Workplace flexibility policies that make it easier for employees to meet their family care responsibilities have been shown to benefit employers as well. And other sectors of society, such as preschools, schools, health care providers, and other community organizations can also help address work-family challenges by, for example, changing the hours they are open or providing more coordination of care.

The authors note that although these community institutions have an important role to play in work-family issues, they need to update their policies to reflect changing needs, such as changing their hours of operation to recognize there are many two-parent working families. Schools can also relieve work-family problems by expanding after-school care, and local nongovernmental organizations such as the Community Way and parent fees are the most feasible source of funding for expansions.

The Future of Children Journal: "Work and Family," Volume 21, Number 2, Fall 2011. The papers are:

- **Changing Families, Changing Workplaces** by UCLA's Suzanne Bianchi. Bianchi documents the dramatic changes in the American family and workplace over the past fifty years. The share of married mothers in the labor force has risen from a little over a quarter in 1960 to more than 70 percent today. During the 1960s, only 10 percent of mothers were at work within three months of giving birth; by the early years of the twenty-first century that figure had risen to over 40 percent, with 64 percent of women back at work within twelve months after a birth. In 2009 single mothers had an overall labor force participation rate of 76 percent. Bianchi examines research on ways to refocus employers on what an employee accomplishes—as opposed to the number of hours they work—showing that this new mindset has produced flexibility in work schedules accompanied by lower commuting times, more and better sleep, more energy, and lowered work-family conflict for employees—all without a loss in productivity, and accomplished in the absence of government mandates.

- In **Policies to Assist Parents with Young Children**, University of Virginia's Christopher Ruhm examines family leave policies in the U.S. and Europe. He concludes that short to moderate periods of parental leave (ranging from three to twelve months) are unlikely to have negative repercussions in the labor market and are likely to have benefits for child and family well-being. Periods of leave in excess of a year have less clear-cut benefits for children and families and pose some risks in terms of employment and earnings. Ruhm suggests that moderate extensions of U.S. leave entitlements (up to several months) would improve child and family well-being by increasing mothers' time at home with infants and could also improve mothers' job continuity. He also suggests that the leave be paid to facilitate its use, particularly by low-income parents, and recommends improving both the quality of and access to early childhood education and care.
- **Families with School-Age Children** by Kathleen Christensen of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Michigan State's Barbara Schneider, and Donnell Butler of the Educational Testing Service, examines the support that parents provide to older children, explains why that support is important for child health and development, and shows how overly rigid work demands interfere with it. The authors suggest reforms such as scheduling parent-teacher meetings outside of work hours, providing more services at schools, and providing child care before school, after school, and during school vacations. They caution that schools are not likely to implement such changes in the current economic climate; instead, they argue that workplaces may be the better place for reform. They recommend flextime arrangements that allow parents to coordinate their work schedules with their children's school schedules, and policies that allow workers to take short periods of planned or unplanned time off. Many companies that have implemented such policies, the authors say, have benefited through employee retention and higher job satisfaction.
- **Children with Health Issues** by Harvard Medical School's Mark A. Schuster, UCLA School of Medicine's Paul J. Chung, and Katherine D. Vestal of Children's Hospital Boston discuss changes that might make the workplace more responsive to the needs of families with sick children without placing an undue burden on their employers. They write that discretionary leave, funded through employer-employee cost sharing, would allow these families to respond to routine, acute, or short-term health care needs of a child. The authors detail some of the ways in which the system now makes demands on families, and they provide examples of ways in which the burden might be alleviated: enhancing comprehensive primary care through patient-centered medical homes, and coordinating care with community-based resources, such as schools (where children already spend much of their time).
- **Families and Elder Care in the Twenty-First Century** by Ann Bookman and Delia Kimbrel of Brandeis University looks at the increasing numbers of elderly and the care they require from family members, who often may need time off from work on short notice or for extended periods of time to give this care. Although government policies address some elder care needs, the authors note that they do not provide adequate support for chronic illnesses, home care services, or long-term care. Just as with child care, adult caregivers are at the hub of care coordination, managing multiple systems to provide care for their elderly relatives. As the population ages, an increasing share of employees will be involved with elder care, which will likely shape understandings of work-family balance. As more Americans age and require care, the constituency for better work-family supports will grow ever larger, the authors note.
- **Workplace Flexibility: From Research to Action** by Ellen Galinsky, Kelly Sakai, and Tyler Wigton of the Families and Work Institute explores the disconnect between employee needs and desires for workplace flexibility and the fact that many employees, particularly those who are less advantaged, have no access to flexible work arrangements and that even those who have such flexibility hesitate to use it. The authors show that flexibility offers several advantages to employers, including greater employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention, as well as better health. A significant body of research shows that adopting flexibility in the workplace enhances productivity and is good for companies' "bottom line." It also shows that when employees are offered workplace flexibility, they tend to use it conservatively, minimizing costs to employers.

- In **The Role of the Government in Work-Family Conflict**, Heather Boushey of the Center for American Progress focuses specifically on the role of government, arguing that public policy has not kept pace with the changes in the American family and workplace. Boushey looks at a variety of pilot and experimental programs implemented by private employers and governments to provide workplace flexibility, and finds that flexibility can be increased without adversely affecting employers. She calls on policy makers to update labor standards and social insurance to reflect the country's changing demographics, noting that paid family and medical leave is a missing piece of the nation's social insurance infrastructure and that states are developing viable programs that can serve as a model for federal policy makers.
- In **International Perspectives on Work-Family Policies: Lessons from the World's Most Competitive Economies**, Alison Earle of Northeastern University, Zitha Mokomane of the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa, and Jody Heymann of the Institute for Health and Social Policy at McGill University, show how the world's most competitive nations offer quite generous work-family supports suggesting that it is possible for such supports to coexist with a robust economy. The authors identify the world's most competitive 15 countries, as well as China and India, and find that every one of these countries, except the United States, guarantees some form of paid leave for new mothers; in addition, all but the U.S. and Switzerland guarantee paid leave for new fathers.

To read the policy brief:

http://www.futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/21_02_PolicyBrief.pdf

To read the executive summary:

http://www.futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/21_02_ExecSummary.pdf

To read the full journal:

http://www.futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/21_02_Ful%20Journal.pdf

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