



The Future of Children

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Caring for Infants and Toddlers

Caring for Infants and Toddlers: Analysis

During the first three years of life, the infant's brain and body, mind and personality take shape, influenced by everyday experiences of learning and nurturing provided by parents and other caregivers. But how is caregiving itself managed by today's families now that more than 60% of mothers with infants and toddlers are employed?

This journal issue considers the caregiving options and supports available in the United States and abroad to families with children under age three—including parental leave and child care. It assesses the strengths and limitations of the options available in the United States and recommends improvements to help families of all income levels give their babies the best start possible in life.

People Matter Most to Early Development

The United States has 11 million infants and toddlers, with 4 million births each year.

- ▶ Development during the first three years is dramatic, rapid, and important. It lays the foundation for later cognitive accomplishments, social skills, self-esteem, and respect for others.

- ▶ People offer the critical inputs for infant development—food and physical safety, comfort and reassurance, playthings and challenges, language and social feedback. More than anything else, relationships matter to babies.

Mothers in the Labor Force

The last 50 years have reconfigured the roles played by mothers of very young children. Now most mothers combine caregiving and employment.

- ▶ 61% of mothers with children under age three were employed in 2000, compared with just 34% in 1975.
- ▶ Mothers with jobs and new babies typically return to work just three months after giving birth.
- ▶ Maternal employment trends reflect the continued influence of many factors:
 - work requirements are now imposed on welfare recipients,
 - the erosion in men's wages has jeopardized family incomes,
 - the risk of divorce and poverty prompts women to secure work experience,

- career aspirations motivate women as well as men.
- ▶ In two-parent families, mothers contribute about one-third of the family's income—families with two workers earn around \$24,000 more than the \$36,000 earned when only one parent works.
- ▶ Public opinion, however, lags behind these trends. By margins of 3:1 or 4:1, the American public prefers that a parent (usually the mother) remain home to care for very young children—except if the mother's income keeps the family off welfare.

Dramatic Shifts in Caregiving

- ▶ Close to 6 million infants and toddlers are regularly cared for by someone else while their mothers work, many beginning as early as three months of age. Very young children spend an average of 25 hours a week in child care.
- ▶ When mothers are working, 27% of infants and toddlers are regularly with their fathers, 27% are with relatives, 22% attend child care centers, 17% go to family child care homes, and 7% are with nannies.
- ▶ The use of centers as a source of care for children under age three has nearly tripled since 1977.
- ▶ Children benefit from care in safe surroundings with ample verbal and cognitive stimulation, responsive caregiving, and plenty of attention. But of all child care services, care for infants and toddlers is the most scarce, expensive, and disappointing from a quality perspective.
 - For a one-year-old, care in a center or licensed home costs almost \$6,000 per year.
 - Half the child care settings (homes and centers) serving infants and toddlers are rated by researchers as poor or just fair in quality.

Creating an Array of Stronger Supports

Public ambivalence about how families should balance employment and caregiving for very young children has impeded realistic debate about the care of infants and toddlers. However, the 1990s brought about two important policy initiatives that strengthen the caregiving options available to families: family leave and expanded subsidies for child care.

- ▶ The Family and Medical Leave Act, passed in 1993, guarantees many employees of larger companies the right to take 12 weeks of job-protected but unpaid leave to care for a newborn (among other family concerns). The law's scope, however, is limited:
 - The law applies only to companies with 50 employees or more, and to individuals who have worked for that employer for 12 months and 1,250 hours.
 - The law requires only unpaid leave, which many workers cannot afford to use.
 - Low-income workers are the employees who are least likely to be covered by the law, to take leave, and to be paid during leave.
- ▶ The federal Child Care Development Fund provides subsidies to help low-income families pay for child care. Combined federal and state funding for child care subsidies tripled during the 1990s.
 - In 1998, child care subsidy funding amounted to \$5.2 billion in state and federal dollars.
 - About 500,000 infants and toddlers were among the 1.8 million children whose families received subsidies.

- Even with increases throughout the 1990s, however, the subsidies reached only 12% of the 15 million children estimated to be eligible for assistance.
- The subsidy program helps families pay for all types of child care, but it does little to improve the quality of the care that is available.
- ▶ Both of these government policies, the Family and Medical Leave Act and the Child Care Development Fund, help families balance work and caregiving. The recommendations that follow suggest ways of extending their reach and strengthening their provisions.

This analysis stresses the role of government, although a growing number of private employers have instituted policies to help families manage both work and family concerns. Such private efforts do not reach the majority of American families and cannot substitute for government action. We look to our elected officials and the agencies they lead to offer families of all income levels equitable access to good caregiving options, so they can give their babies the best start possible in life.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

School readiness investments should encompass supports for the healthy well-rounded development of infants and toddlers as they master the social, emotional, and cognitive skills required for success in school and beyond.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Impacts on young children's access to attentive, nurturing care should be a key criterion when policies that affect adults with caregiving responsibilities are evaluated.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Government policies should assure that all families have supports for childrearing during the first years of life, including leaves for parents who choose to be home and access to good child care that is safe, affordable, and appropriate to the child and family.

RECOMMENDATION 4

State and federal governments should extend the protections of the Family and Medical Leave Act to workers in mid-sized and eventually small businesses.

RECOMMENDATION 5

State and federal governments should provide income to those who take family leave for newborn care through a funding pool that combines public funds with contributions from employers and employees.

RECOMMENDATION 6

No state should require welfare recipients to work before their babies are six months old. A one-year exemption from work requirements is more appropriate, given the disproportionate difficulties faced by poor, single mothers of infants.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Public funding for child care subsidies should be significantly expanded and then sustained.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The federal government should significantly increase the share of the Child Care Development Fund that is earmarked for quality improvements and link that percentage to future expansions in subsidy funding.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Appropriate strategies for informing and supporting those who care for infants and toddlers should be supported with public funds and put in place to strengthen caregiving by child care centers, licensed family child care homes, relatives, and parents.

Article Summaries

Development in the First Years of Life

Ross A. Thompson, Ph.D.

The foundation for any discussion of how we care for infants and toddlers must be the interests and needs of the children themselves, so this article provides an overview of development during the first three years of life. The author describes the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional achievements of infancy, and reviews the interplay between inborn growth processes and the ways in which development responds to children's environments and experiences. Arguing that caregivers (both parents and child care providers) are the essence of the infant's environment, the author concludes that society should take a more supportive stance toward the families and caregivers on whom infants depend.

Child Care and Our Youngest Children

Deborah Phillips, Ph.D., and Gina Adams, M.A.

This article uses data from new, national studies of families to examine the state of child care for infants and toddlers. These studies have yielded complex findings, but the article lifts up key themes with respect to children's early exposure to child care, the impacts that child care experiences have on development, and the difficulty that families have in finding high-quality care for their infants and toddlers. Overall, the authors explain, child care settings where quality is compromised are distressingly common, and children in working-poor families are the group most often exposed to poor-quality care. The authors call on communities, businesses, and government to give more support to parents as they seek the right care for their infants and toddlers.

Caring for Our Youngest: Public Attitudes in the United States

Kathleen Sylvester, M.A.

This article summarizes the results of public opinion polls about parent and government responsibilities with respect to children's care. The author explains that the American public would prefer to see a stay-at-home parent as the primary caregiver for young children, but also emphasizes family self-sufficiency. Therefore, there is public support for providing child care assistance to help low-income families manage employment. More generally, however, skepticism about government involvement in family life limits public support for direct policy action to provide or improve child care. Drawing on these lessons, the author urges policymakers to respect the rights of parents of infants and toddlers by providing a flexible array of caregiving options and public programs, especially for families that are struggling economically.

Employer Supports for Parents with Young Children

Dana E. Friedman, Ed.D.

This article examines the supports that employers provide to help parents with young children juggle demands on their time and attention. It reviews the availability of traditional benefits, such as paid vacation days, and newer family-friendly initiatives like flextime and on-site child care. Evaluations suggest that such initiatives can improve staff recruitment and retention, reduce absenteeism, and increase job satisfaction. However, the low-income workers who need assistance the most are the least likely to receive or take advantage of it. The author concludes that the most valuable workplace benefit for employees is a family-friendly workplace culture, with supportive supervision and management practices.

Federal and State Efforts to Improve Care for Infants and Toddlers

Jane Knitzer, Ed.D.

Can government help mothers and fathers manage their economic and parenting responsibilities? This article examines how federal and state governments currently act as partners with the parents of young children—through tax policies, family leave mandates, cash benefits and subsidies, and funding for direct service programs. The author finds that while significant federal policies focus on the economics of family life, far less policy attention addresses the challenges that parents face as caregivers. Child care, despite its importance for children's development, is seen by policymakers primarily as a service that enables parents to work, and so opportunities to promote child development through high-quality care go untapped. However, some states have creatively combined federal and state resources to provide new services for infants and caregivers.

International Policies Toward Parental Leave and Child Care

Jane Waldfogel, Ph.D.

Looking abroad, this article compares policies regarding parental leave, child care, and flexible early childhood benefits in ten modern industrial nations in North America and Europe with those offered in the United States. The author finds that this country offers the least support of any kind to families. Interesting variations exist among the other nations in the emphasis they place on parent leave versus child care supports for families with children under age three. Each policy mix creates incentives that influence parents' decisions about employment and child care. The author urges the United States to adopt universal, paid parental leave; help parents cover more child care costs; and improve the quality of the child care that is offered.

Reports from the Field

These short articles focus on action and innovation by describing new efforts to strengthen the care given to the nation's youngest children. These are not reviews of research but stories written from the point of view of participants, promoters, and leaders. The first three reports address the dilemmas parents face as they juggle work demands with the daily care needs of their babies and toddler. They describe family leave, reliance on relative caregivers, and the comprehensive child care system established by the military. The last three reports document ambitious efforts to integrate and enrich the array of services that specific communities offer families with very young children. Taken together, these six descriptive accounts illustrate the excitement and struggles facing those who set out to create new supports and options for families as they care for the youngest members of our society.

- ▶ **Family and Medical Leave: Making Time for Family Is Everyone's Business**
Lauren J. Asher, M.P.A., and Donna R. Lenhoff, J.D.
- ▶ **Child Care Within the Family**
Caroline Zinsser, Ph.D.
- ▶ **The Military Child Care Connection**
M.-A. Lucas, M.Ed.
- ▶ **Early Head Start for Low-Income Families with Infants and Toddlers**
Emily Fenichel, M.S.W., and Tammy L. Mann, Ph.D.
- ▶ **Starting Points: State and Community Partnerships for Young Children**
Michael H. Levine, Ph.D., and Susan V. Smith, M.P.H., M.P.A.
- ▶ **Implementation of California's Children and Families First Act of 1998**
Karen A. Bodenhorn, R.N., M.P.H., and Deborah Reidy Kelch, M.P.P.A.

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