

National Child Care

National Child Care Debate

Imagine a country in which nearly all children between the ages of three and five attend preschool in sparkling classrooms, with teachers recruited and trained as child care professionals. Imagine a country that conceives of child care as a program to welcome children into the larger community and awaken their potential for learning and growing.

So begins one of the chapters by Hillary Rodham Clinton in her book *It Takes a Village*. The discussion represents yet another attempt to erect a national system of child care. In the early 1970s, Senator Walter Mondale pushed the Child Advocacy Bill through Congress only to have it vetoed by President Nixon. Again in the late 1980s, Congress flirted with socialized day care when Senator Christopher Dodd proposed The Act for Better Child Care.

Fortunately, the bill went nowhere.

But has the time come again for a national discussion of day care? Hillary Clinton proposes that the United States adopt the French model of institutionalized day care: "More than 90 percent of French children between ages three and five attend free or inexpensive preschools called *écoles maternelles*. Even before they reach the age of three, many of them are in full-day programs." The First Lady then goes on to present the French experience in glowing terms and provides additional examples to bolster her push for a national day care system.

Many social commentators believe our contemporary day care debate has dramatically shifted from whether the federal government should be involved to how the federal government should be involved. What was once in the domain of the family has shifted to the government due in large part to the

increasing number of women in the work force. During the Carter Administration, a federal child care tax credit was enacted and the budget for this tax credit has mushroomed to billions of dollars annually.

The debate is changing as well because the child-rearing patterns in America are changing. Through most of our history, women traditionally assumed primary responsibility for rearing children. Now as more and more mothers head off to work, nearly half of the nation's children under six years old are in day care facilities.

This dramatic shift from child-rearing within the family to social parenting in day care facilities is beginning to have frightening consequences. Stories of neglect, abuse, and abandonment are merely the tip of the iceberg of a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry that is largely unregulated.

Sadly, this change in the way we raise children has been motivated more by convenience and selfishness than by thoughtful analysis of the implications. Psychologist Burton White, author of *The First Three Years of Life*, laments that "We haven't moved to day care because we were seeking a better way of raising children, but to meet the needs of the parent, mostly the mother. My concern is that this trend constitutes a disastrous effect on the child."

This essay looks at the important issues concerning the subject of day care. What are the implications of a nationally-subsidized day care system? How does day care affect early childhood development? What are the psychological costs? What are the social costs? What are the medical costs? These are just a few of the questions we will try to answer in these pages. Psalm 127 reminds us the children are "a gift of God." Before we develop national programs that may harm our children, we need to count the costs and make an informed decision.

Use and Misuse of Statistics

Hillary Rodham Clinton isn't the only national figure proposing a nationally-subsidized day care system for the United States. In his 1996 State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton also proposed a national day care system.

Before we discuss the potential impact of a national day care system, we must deal with the use and misuse of statistics. Proponents of national day care frequently say that the traditional family is dead and that two-thirds of mothers with preschool children are in the work force.

Let's set the record straight. Reporters and social commentators have frequently said that less than 10 percent of U.S. families are "traditional families" with a breadwinner husband and homemaker wife. The 10 percent figure actually comes from the U.S. Labor Department and only counts families with an employed father, a stay-at-home mother, and two children still at home. Using that criteria, my own family would not be a traditional family because we have three children, not two children, still at home. Dr. Jim Dobson's family would not be a traditional family because his two children no longer live at home. In fact, a mother who works out of her home would not qualify as a member of a traditional family. I think you can see the problem. The 10 percent figure is artificially restrictive.

What about the number of women in the work force? Again, we need to check the definition used to define working women. The Department of Labor figure counts mothers who work part time (as little as one hour per week) as well as women who have flexible hours. The figure also counts mothers who work seasonally. Furthermore, it counts mothers who work from their homes. Again, you can see that this number is artificially inflated.

According to the recent Census Bureau data, 54 percent of the 17 million children under the age of five are primarily cared for by a mother who stays at home. An additional seven percent represents “tag-team parents” who work different shifts and share child-rearing responsibilities. And another four percent have “doubletime mothers” who care for their child while they babysit other children or earn income in some other way. Thus, the primary child care arrangement for 65 percent of all preschool children is care by one or both parents.

This isn't exactly the figure you will hear during a national debate on day care. Instead of hearing that two-thirds of mothers with preschool children are in the work force, we should be hearing that two-thirds of all preschool children are cared for by one or both parents.

Actually the percentage should be even higher. Another 11 percent of preschool children are cared for by grandmothers or other relatives. This would mean that a full 76 percent of all preschool children are cared for by a parent or close relative. But don't expect the mainstream media to use this figure when debating the so-called “crisis of child care.”

Perhaps that is the most important lesson of this debate. President Clinton and the First Lady, along with countless child care advocates, want to talk about the crisis of child care. Statistics that do not justify federal intrusion into the family are ignored. Before we start down the road to socialized day care, we need to consider whether the problem is as acute as portrayed.

Psychological Costs

At this point I would like to discuss the psychological costs of day care. Now that we have been effectively conducting an unofficial experiment with day care over the last few decades, the evidence is coming in disconcerting evidence of the psychological harm done by institutionalized care. Jay Belsky,

a child care expert at Penn State's College of Health and Human Development, says "It looked like kids who were exposed to 20 or more hours a week of nonparental care in their first year of life what I call early and extensive nonparental care, and here comes the critical phrase, of the kind that was routinely available to families in the United States today seemed to be at elevated risk. They were more likely to look insecure in their relationships to their mothers, in particular at the end of their first year of life."

Unfortunately most parents are unaware of this growing research. So is the average citizen who will no doubt be convinced by "experts" that we need a nationally-subsidized system of institutional care. Marjorie Boyd, writing in *The Washington Monthly*, found that "Practically everyone is for day care, but practically all the evidence says it's bad for preschoolers in all but its most costly forms. Most people do not know that psychologists and psychiatrists have grave misgivings about the concept because of its potential effect on personality; nor do they know that the officials of countries that have had considerable experience with day care are now warning of its harmful effects on children."

The concerns can be categorized under three areas: bonding, personality development, and substitute care. Bonding takes place in the hours and days following birth, usually between the mother and the child. Bonding demands consistency, and day care interrupts that consistency especially when there is not one person providing the primary care for the child. Children placed in a day care center too early are deprived of a primary care giver and will manifest psychological problems.

Personality development is another concern. Most children will get off to a better start in life if they spend the majority of their waking hours during the first three years being cared for by their parents and other family members rather than in any form of substitute care.

A final concern is the negative effect of substitute care on a child. Jean Piaget has shown that children are not capable of reflective thinking at young ages. For example, they do not have a concept of object permanence. If you hide a ball, the infant will stop searching for it because it has ceased to exist in the child's mind. In the same way, when mom leaves the day care center, she has ceased to exist in the mind of the child. The mother may reflect on her child all day while at work, but the child has erased her from his or her mind.

These then are just a few of the psychological concerns knowledgeable people have about institutionalized day care. Before we begin to fund national day care, we should stop long enough to discuss the impact such institutionalized care would have on our children and the nation.

Additional Psychological Costs

Another concern is what Dettrick Bonfenbrunner calls "social contagion." Poorly supervised day care creates an atmosphere that socializes the children in a negative manner. For example, Bryna Siegel (psychologist at Stanford University) reported in her nine- year study that day care children were "15 times more aggressive... a tendency toward more physical and verbal attacks on other children." By that she did not merely mean that the children were more assertive, but that they were more aggressive.

J. C. Schwartz and his colleagues have shown that children who entered day care before they were twelve months old are more physically and verbally abusive when they are older. They found this abuse was aimed at adults, and also found these children were less cooperative with grownups and less tolerant of frustration than children cared for by their mothers.

Christians should not be surprised by these findings given our biblical understanding of human sinfulness. Each child is born a sinner. When day care workers put a bunch of "little

sinners" together in a room without adequate supervision, sin nature will most likely manifest itself in the environment.

Proponents of socialized day care begin with a flawed premise. They assume that human beings are basically good. These liberal, social experiments with day care begin with the tacit assumption that a child is a "noble savage" that needs to be nurtured and encouraged. Social thinkers ranging from Jean Jacques Rousseau to Abraham Maslow begin with the assumption about human goodness and thus have little concern with the idea of children being reared in an institutional environment.

Christians on the other hand believe that the family is God's primary instrument for social instruction. Children must not only be nurtured but they must also be disciplined. Children are to be reared by parents in the context of the family, not in institutionalized day care.

Over the last three decades, America has been engaged in a social experiment with day care. As more and more children are put into institutionalized care, we are reaping the consequences.

Emotionally scarred children who have been "warehoused" in sub-standard facilities are more likely to drop out of school, be arrested, and end up on welfare rolls. The cost to society in terms of truancy, delinquency, and crime will be significant.

E. F. Ziglar (Yale University) has said that "When parents pick a day care center, they are essentially picking what their child will become." This is not only true for the individual child; it is true for society. As a nation we have been choosing the children we will have in the future by promoting day care, and the future does not look good.

Financial and Medical Costs

Finally, I would like to look at the financial and medical costs of day care. The financial costs can be significant. Many women who place their children into institutional care fail to estimate the additional (often hidden) costs of their choice. Quality day care is not cheap nor are many of the other costs associated with going to work.

Sara Levitan and Karen Cleary Alderman state in their book, *Child Care and the ABCs Too* that "The cost of preschooler's day care services added to work expenses can easily absorb the total earnings of some women working part time." They continue,

Disregarding the cost of transportation and other work-connected expenses or the imputed cost of performing household tasks in addition to work (overtime duty), it is apparent that the daily salary of at least half of working women did not provide the cost of a single child's day care meeting federal standards.

By contrast, the value of a mother is vastly underestimated. Financial analyst Sylvia Porter states that the twenty-five million full-time homemakers contribute billions to the economy each year, even though their labor is not counted in the gross national product. She calculates that the average mother contributes nearly \$30,000 a year in labor and services. She arrived at this figure by calculating an hourly fee for such functions as: nurse-maid, housekeeper, cook, dishwasher, laundress, food buyer, chauffeur, gardener, maintenance person, seamstress, dietician, and practical nurse.

Health costs are also considerable. Young children are still in the process of developing their immunity to certain diseases, and are more likely to get sick when exposed to

other children on a daily basis. While some ailments are slight, others can be very serious. For example, infectious diseases (especially those involving the middle ear and hearing ability) are three to four times as prevalent in group care as compared to home care.

Dr. Ron Haskins and Dr. Jonathan Kotch have identified day care attendance as the most significant factor associated with the increased incidence of bacterial meningitis. Likewise, cytomegalovirus (the leading cause of congenital infections in newborns) has also been linked to day care centers. These and other correlations should not be surprising given the intimate contact with so many unrelated children in an environment of playing, sleeping, eating, and using toilet facilities.

As we have seen in this discussion, the costs of day care are high. As Christians we must begin with the biblical foundation found in Psalm 127 that children are "a gift of God." God has entrusted us with our children for a period of time. We cannot and should not shirk our responsibility or pass that responsibility on to others.

At the moment, this nation seems poised to implement a comprehensive, national program of day care. Before we develop national programs that may harm our children, we need to count the costs and make an informed decision.

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