

## **30. Early Education and Child Care**

***Congress should*** end all federal early education and child care subsidies and programs and return early education and child care to the state, local, or family level, as provided by the Constitution.

The care and education of young children are a perfect example of one major theme of this *Handbook*: that even many vitally important things in society are not the province of the federal government. No one questions the importance of the education and care of young children: just witness the strong bipartisan support for almost any program catering to young children. Yet the importance of children's welfare does not mean that caring for children is an important function of the federal government. In fact, the importance of child care is partly what makes it unsuited to government control.

Consider an equally important influence in many children's lives: religion. Few Americans believe government should decide whether a child becomes Protestant, Catholic, or atheist. That is not because religious choice isn't important but precisely because it is. We demand the separation of church and state, not solely because it is in the Constitution, but because religion is an important aspect of personal conscience and belief. Child rearing, and its components child care and early education, is no more or less personal. Like religion, it is a way we shape our children's hearts, minds, behavior, and values. It deserves the same respect and protection from government intrusion for the same reasons.

### ***Good News about Preschoolers***

Underlying moves for more government preschool programs is the mistaken idea that today's preschoolers aren't prepared for kindergarten. The truth is that 70 percent of preschool-aged children already attend preschools, and the gap in participation rates between preschoolers from

high- and low-income families narrowed from 28 percentage points in 1991 to just 13 points in 1999. And, call it old-fashioned, but some parents still prefer to teach their preschoolers at home.

A recent Department of Education study of children entering kindergarten found that kids, whether in preschools or with parents, are in top shape on factors kindergarten teachers say are the most important for school readiness—health, enthusiasm, and curiosity. In terms of concrete reading and math skills, nearly all children entering kindergarten are proficient at recognizing numbers and shapes and counting to 10, and two in three know their ABCs.

American students are most competitive internationally in their early years. Consider France, England, Denmark, Spain, and Belgium where more than 90 percent of four-year-olds attend public preschools. International tests show that at age nine, when the benefits of preschool should be most apparent, American children outscore nearly all of their universally preschooled peers on tests of reading, math, and science.

Although American children have a strong start, the overall performance of older students continues to decline. Tests show that by 8th grade Americans start sliding down the international curve. By 12th grade, they hit bottom. The reasons for that decline are debatable, but one thing is certain—the slide from 4th grade to 12th grade can hardly be blamed on insufficient preschool.

### ***Preschool Benefits Wash Out***

Despite evidence that American preschoolers have a strong start, policy prescriptions for both targeted and universal preschool programs abound. As Vice President Al Gore put it, “The right kind of start—through quality preschool—can lead to higher IQs, higher reading and achievement levels, higher graduation rates, and greater success in the workplace.” Yet, after hundreds of experimental preschool intervention programs over more than 30 years, there is no evidence that preschool benefits children in the long term.

People who insist that every child should attend preschool invariably point to the Perry Preschool Project to show that preschool confers lasting benefits on kids. That 1960s’ project tracked 123 children deemed “at risk” through age 27. Half of them attended preschool as three- and four-year-olds; the other half didn’t. According to the research team, “Program participation had positive effects on adult crime, earnings, wealth, welfare dependence, and commitment to marriage.” The Perry research team

seized on those results to produce the oft-cited “fact” that preschool provides “taxpayers a return on investment of \$7.16 on the dollar.” It wasn’t long before independent peer reviewers uncovered sizable sampling and methodological flaws in the Perry study. For example, preschool participants, but not the control group, had to have a parent at home during the day, a factor that might have inflated the Perry findings. More important, in three decades the Perry results have never been replicated.

It is also instructive to look at findings from Head Start, the nation’s largest and oldest preschool program, that aims to increase “the school readiness of young children in low-income families.” In 1985 the Department of Health and Human Services undertook the first meta-analysis of Head Start research and found that “in the long run, cognitive and socioemotional test scores of former Head Start students do not remain superior to those of disadvantaged children who did not attend Head Start.” Researchers examined IQ scores, school readiness, achievement test scores, social behavior, achievement motivation, and self-esteem. Each time the results were the same. By the end of second grade, any short-term boosts from the program had washed out. The net gain to children was zero.

But the establishment has clung to the study’s remnants: although gains were not maintained over time, some children had experienced short-term boosts. This, the establishment argued, was Head Start’s job. If schools couldn’t maintain gains, that reflected a problem with the schools, not the program. That certainly sounds reasonable. But it’s also reasonable to question Head Start’s utility. If students test the same with or without Head Start after a year or two, what’s the point of sending them through the program in the first place?

The nonpartisan U.S. General Accounting Office conducted the most recent and thorough analysis of Head Start in 1997. After reviewing more than 600 citations, manuscripts, and studies, GAO concluded, “The body of research on current Head Start is insufficient to draw conclusions about the impact of the national program.” In a sense, the GAO is right: sloppy study designs and amateur methodological errors so riddle the literature that any claims about the success or failure of the program are not convincing. Given that, one might suggest that more research is needed before giving up on the program. On the other hand, one might also look for guidance from other programs that bear a striking resemblance to Head Start. On this, findings are conclusive: early intervention programs can boost children’s test scores, but those gains wash out within a few years of exiting the programs.

Finally, policymakers can look to Georgia, the first state to fund universal preschool for every four-year-old. Funded by Georgia's Office of School Readiness, researchers at Georgia State University recently completed the second year of a longitudinal study of children in the universal preschool program. The Georgia Kindergarten Assessment Program was used to assess the progress of participating children during their kindergarten year (1997–98) in five domains: communicative capability, logical-mathematical capability, physical capability, personal capability, and social capability. Findings revealed that 94 percent of the students were reported as capable in the first and second areas, followed by 97 percent in the third, 93 percent in the fourth, and 94 percent in the fifth. Student scores for this sample were then compared with those of all students across the state, and researchers concluded, "The study sample does not differ from the entire kindergarten population in GKAP capability scores." In other words, children in the universal prekindergarten program performed no better than students from the general population.

Furthermore, reports show that GKAP scores are essentially the same as they were before the adoption of universal preschool. Georgia state school superintendent Linda Schrenko has said that there has been an improvement of less than 1 percent on test scores and expressed the state's disappointment with the findings: "If you look at the whole test, from 1992 to 1996, we have gained nothing. . . . The only message you can get from it is that our kindergarten non-ready rate is the same, regardless of what we do."

As far back as 1987, when educators were debating the merits of universal preschool, child development scholar Edward Zigler warned: "This is not the first time universal preschool education has been proposed. . . . [In the past], as now, the arguments in favor of preschool education were that it would reduce school failure, lower dropout rates, increase test scores, and produce a generation of more competent high school graduates. . . . Preschool education will achieve none of these results."

What Zigler recognized is that a child's academic and personal growth turn on a lot more than preschool. Family, natural abilities, neighborhood, and life experiences easily outweigh the influence of preschool. Preschools may teach children how to count, follow directions, and get along; Zigler himself favors universal preschool as a means of achieving school readiness. But preschool alone, like Head Start alone, confers no lasting advantage. To put all children on an equal footing would require genetic engineering; surrogate parents; and, for many kids, home away from home.

## **No Child Care Crisis**

Shortly after hosting two White House conferences on early childhood brain development and child care, President Clinton proudly announced a \$24 billion child care plan in his 1998 State of the Union Address: “Nothing is more important than finding child care that is affordable, accessible, and safe. It is America’s next great frontier, in strengthening our families and our future.” Since that time, several dozen child care bills have been introduced in Congress.

Advocates for federal child care say that the increasing number of women entering the labor force has created a child care crisis. But census data suggest otherwise. Despite women’s entry into the paid labor force, roughly 70 percent of preschool-aged children are still cared for primarily by their mother, father, or a relative.

The facts show that child care in America is available, affordable, and of the high quality that parents seek. According to the most comprehensive nationwide survey on child care in the United States, which was cosponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services, 96 percent of all parents say they are satisfied or very satisfied with their current child care arrangements.

The White House argued that child care was in short supply. But the anecdotal stories offered as evidence did not paint a true picture. In fact, a recent study from the nonpartisan research organization Public Agenda reports that nearly 7 in 10 parents of young children say that child care is “not much of a problem.” Only 11 percent of families say child care is a problem they struggle with “on a regular basis.” That makes sense. According to the Profile of Child Care Settings, which was prepared under contract for the U.S. Department of Education, there is a 12 percent vacancy rate in commercial child care centers. In addition, there are roughly 1.1 million unregulated family day care providers, 40 percent of whom say they have room for more children. According to the profile, “The market seems to be working to increase supply as demand expands.” That study confirmed findings of earlier studies, including some by the Labor Department and the National Child Care Survey.

The White House argued that good-quality child care is available only for the wealthy. Again, the facts tell a different story. Only 30 percent of families regularly pay for child care, and child care fees have increased little over the past 20 years.

Moreover, more than 7 in 10 parents of young children say they should be responsible for the costs of caring for their own young children; only

24 percent say that all taxpayers should help pay the costs. Even a majority of low-income parents (62 versus 33 percent) believe bearing the cost is essentially their responsibility, not society's.

### **10 Reasons Children Don't Need a Federal Nanny**

1. The Department of Education has found that America's flexible approach to early education works: when they enter kindergarten, 94 percent of preschoolers are proficient at recognizing numbers and shapes and counting to 10, and two in three know their ABCs.
2. International tests show that by age nine, when the benefits of preschool should be most apparent, American children outscore nearly all of their universally preschooled peers on tests of reading, math, and science.
3. Studies show conclusively that Head Start and similar preschool programs result in no net gains to children.
4. Roughly 70 percent of preschool-aged children are still cared for primarily by their mother, father, or a relative.
5. According to a study cosponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services, 96 percent of all parents are satisfied or very satisfied with their child care arrangements.
6. Seven in 10 parents of young children say that parents should be responsible for the costs of caring for their own young children; only 24 percent say that all taxpayers should help pay the costs.
7. More than 70 percent of parents of young children say that having a parent at home is the best arrangement for young children.
8. Employers, unions, and local communities have responded to parents' demands for affordable child care. More than half of all families report having some employer benefit or policy that helps them to manage child care responsibilities.
9. Almost 70 percent of parents of young children "would prefer to stay home with children when they are young."
10. Although 68 percent of children's advocates surveyed say that the best direction for government policy to take when it comes to child care is toward a universal, national child care system, only 27 percent of parents of young children share that vision.

Certainly, it is difficult for some families to pay for child care. However, their needs should be addressed to the extent possible, as should the needs

of all families, by relieving the tax burden. When that is insufficient, families' needs should be addressed at the local level. For example, employers, unions, and communities have responded to working parents' demands for affordable child care. More than half of all families report having an employer benefit that helps them to manage child care responsibilities. Those policies have come about without pressure or tax incentives from the federal government. Dozens of unions, including the United Auto Workers, the United Steel Workers, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, have established child care programs for their members. There is every reason to believe that the child care needs of struggling families can be met with assistance from employers; unions; churches; charities; or, in some cases, local communities.

The White House painted a picture of parents incapable of judging quality. As Hillary Clinton put it, parents often “don't know what is quality. If somebody's nice to them, it doesn't matter that they don't know the difference between caring for a 1-year-old or a 4-year-old.” Again, the facts tell a different story. Because people are different, parents have more than one way of defining quality. The medley of parental demands manifests itself in a market with a choice of products—parental care, relative care, family day care, church-based care, commercial child care, and educational preschools. Some parents see quality as a feature of providers—whether a provider is warm and loving, reliable and experienced—while others see quality as linked to educational opportunities. However they define quality, the vast majority of parents say it is more important than either cost or convenience when selecting child care providers.

In the end, the whole child care debate may be irrelevant to how children turn out. “Virtually no research has examined the cumulative, long-term effects on children of attending child care arrangements of varying quality as preschoolers,” according to the National Research Council. In the short term, the National Institutes of Health has found that regardless of how much child care a child receives, the effects are dwarfed by the influence of family. Even if it could be proven that child care, or alternatively home care, is good for children, every child has unique needs. The best solution to the day care debate is to allow parents to make the decisions that require keeping the unique needs of each child in mind.

### ***The Right Response***

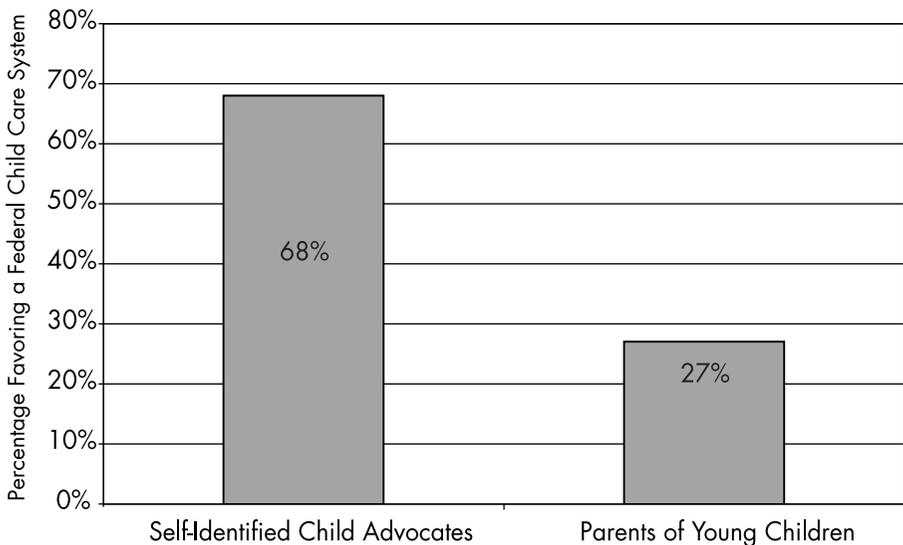
Parents do not want federal child care or early education programs; most prefer caring for their children themselves. According to Public

Agenda, while 68 percent of children’s advocates surveyed say that the best direction for government policy to take when it comes to child care is toward a universal, national child care system, only 27 percent of parents of young children share that vision (Figure 30.1). Most parents of young children say that having a parent at home is the best arrangement for young children.

Those findings are consistent with other polls showing that the overwhelming majority of parents, mothers and fathers alike, say they want to spend more time with their children—they simply can’t afford it. In the modern age when taxes are so high that it often takes two full-time breadwinners to raise a family, those choices have become enormously expensive.

An across-the-board tax rate cut would help all parents, those using parental care and those using day care. For some parents, that would mean more money for a different day care provider or preschool; for other parents, probably the majority, that would mean working less and spending more time with their children. We must remember that parents, not politicians, are best equipped to make decisions about child care arrangements—decisions that require keeping the unique needs of each child in mind. If the federal government could do one thing to help all young children have the best possible care, it would be to restore parental choice by cutting taxes.

**Figure 30.1**  
**Advocates vs. Parents**



***Suggested Readings***

- Farkas, Steve, Ann Duffett, and Jean Johnson. "Necessary Compromises: How Parents, Employers and Children's Advocates View Child Care Today." Public Agenda Report, 2000.
- Olsen, Darcy. "The Advancing Nanny State: Why the Government Should Stay Out of Child Care." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 285, October 23, 1997.
- . "12-Hour School Days? Why Government Should Leave Afterschool Arrangements to Parents." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 372, June 7, 2000.
- . "Universal Preschool Is No Golden Ticket: Why Government Should Not Enter the Preschool Business." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 333, February 9, 1999.
- Rector, Robert. "Facts about American Families and Day Care." Heritage Foundation F.Y.I. no. 170, January 21, 1998.

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