

Childcare

David R. Riemer

Parents of every economic status who need to provide safe childcare for their pre-school children understand well the challenge of finding affordable, qualified childcare providers. The difficulty also arises for school-age children who need childcare before the school day starts, after it ends, during school holidays, or over the summer when school is out of session. For both pre-school and school-age children, the childcare challenge can be especially severe if parents need to work the second or third shift.

Part of the problem is practical: that is, literally finding a trustworthy, reliable, conveniently located provider who is willing to take on another child. An equally important part of the problem is economic. Childcare costs a lot. According to a 1916 report, the national average cost for one child at a childcare center was \$196 per week, which (assuming 50 weeks a year) totals \$9,800 per year.¹

The cost data comes from a survey by Care.com, an international organization that specializes in childcare services. Based on a survey of 1000 U.S. parents, the organization also reported that in 2016:²

- 40% of parents said childcare costs caused tension in their relationship;
- 20% of families said they had fewer children than they would have liked because of the high cost of child care;
- 73% of working parents said their job has been affected because childcare plans fell through at the last minute, with 64 percent having to use sick days and 54 percent being late to work as a result.

Childcare contributes to employment insecurity in multiple ways. Parents' net income takes a big hit from the high cost of childcare itself. They earn less to begin with when, if childcare arrangements fall through, they feel compelled to miss work. Both economic impacts diminish parents' capacity to set aside money for their children's other needs, e.g., books, music lessons, or college education. Finally, the various personal stresses that childcare issues may induce (e.g., relationship disputes, family planning anxiety and regret, worry about job stability and promotion), in combination with the inherent anxiety

¹ Kerri Anne Renzulli, "This Is How Much the Average Americans Spends on Childcare," *Money*, August 9, 2016, <http://time.com/money/4444034/average-cost-child-care/>. The report found that an after-school sitter set the average family back by even more: \$214 for 15 hours of work a week.

² Katie Bugbee, "How Much Does Child Care Cost," *Care.com*, <https://www.care.com/c/stories/2423/how-much-does-child-care-cost/>

that arises from placing an infant or toddler in what may be a stranger's hands, can trigger problems at work that result in the worst forms of employment insecurity: losing the job, and thus experiencing a huge drop in income.

The best solution is to provide free childcare for every child. Ultimately parents should have the ability at no cost to enroll their children in high-quality early childhood education programs. "Free" of course means free to the parents as users of childcare, in the same sense that enrollment of children in public K12 schools is free. Obviously, there will be a large cost: let us say \$10,000 per child per year on average.

But the cost is one that the public should bear for many of the same reasons that taxpayers in general finance K12 education. Millions of U.S. parents (and grandparents, aunts, uncles, and others) will experience a genuine if unquantifiable gain in economic security. Providing free childcare to parents who are in school, training, seeking jobs, or working will also be a boon to the parents' physical and mental health.

Most importantly, the children themselves will benefit enormously, assuming the childcare providers that receive public funds are properly vetted. The reduction in parents' economic stress will have a positive effect on their children's health. The children will also benefit from well-designed childcare experiences. High-quality early childhood education in particular has also been shown to improve children's future outcomes.³

³ "High-quality preschool gives children a strong start on the path that leads to college or a career. Research shows that all children benefit from high-quality preschool, with low-income children and English learners benefiting the most. A substantial number of studies demonstrate the benefits of high-quality pre-k programs. These include long-term research on Perry Preschool, the Abecedarian Project, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, as well as ongoing studies of the preschool programs in Tulsa and Boston and New Jersey's Abbott Preschool Program, among others. Economists also have shown the benefits of early education investments, which generate approximately \$7 for every dollar invested. However, the potential of preschool can only be realized if programs are of high quality. ... Many long-term studies show that preschool can reduce the likelihood that a student will need to participate in costly special education programs. ... One cost model estimates that high-quality programming costs in the range of \$8,521 per child with a class size of 20 to \$10,375 per child with a class size of 15, if the program is a full-day, year-round, and led by a teacher with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education." Marjorie Wechsler, Hanna Melnick, Anna Maier, and Joseph Bishop, "*The Building Blocks of High-Quality Early Childhood Education Programs*," *Learning Policy Institute*, April 20, 2016, <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/building-blocks-high-quality-early-childhood-education-programs>