SEEDS SOWN TODAY

If, to improve American business, we will improve the lot of American workers, let’s not forget their American toddlers.

BY DEBORAH J. WALDMAN

Mention child care to the experts and the first things you’ll hear about are the Two As—availability and affordability. Which isn’t new. Those have always been the concerns of parents seeking care for their youngsters.

What is new is that parents are no longer the only people concerned with child care. Once considered a private matter, child care is increasingly recognized as a public responsibility. And though tackling the Two As is the short-term objective, the real reason corporate executives and legislators show interest is the Big E.

“I see it as an economic issue as well as a children issue,” says Laura Lee Reeder Simon, chairwoman of the Connecticut Commission on Children (and a 1950 graduate of SU’s College of Arts and Sciences). “Without [child care], women who must work—and most women who work must work—are in a very stressful situation. Without knowing that your child is going to be well taken care of, and without having that subsidized, it’s difficult for you to move off welfare or be productive in the work force without an incredible amount of stress.”

Because the number of women entering the work force has risen dramatically over the past two decades and the demand for care is growing faster than the industry can provide it, finding care is difficult for many parents and impossible for others. But that is only the immediate economic concern. The other factor, which has profound, long-term negative implications, is the questionable service being provided to those who can find child care.

“Who Cares for America’s Children,” a study released earlier this year by the National Academy of Sciences’ (NAS) Panel on Child Care Policy, reported that many children are cared for in settings that do not protect their health and safety, and that fail to provide appropriate developmental stimulation. These children spend half of their waking hours in situations that will inevitably have an adverse effect on them and ultimately on everyone around them. Unhealthy children often grow into unhealthy adults. The NAS panel concluded that the United States needs to address the child-care issue now, and it outlined three goals for a national child-care system:

• improving the quality of out-of-home child care;
• increasing the accessibility of child care for families no matter what their social, economic, and cultural circumstances; and
• enhancing the affordability of child care for low- and moderate-income families.

Achieving those goals will be neither simple nor cheap. It will require the cooperation of employers, private-sector organizations, and federal, state, and local governments. If implemented, the recommendations will require that public spending increase immediately by $5 billion to $10 billion annually, above the estimated $6.8 billion already spent on child care. Over the long run, the cost of good child care will require tens of billions of

DEBORAH J. WALDMAN, a 1982 graduate of the Newhouse School’s magazine journalism program, lives in Ithaca, New York, where she recently earned a master of fine arts degree in creative writing at Cornell University. She teaches at Cornell and at Ithaca College. She is a former reporter for the Concord (New Hampshire) Monitor and New Haven (Connecticut) Register. Her story on the resurgence of social-service priorities appeared in the September 1989 issue of Syracuse University Magazine.

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dollars from public and private sources. But according to John Palmer, dean of SU's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and chairman of the NAS panel, the benefits are worth the cost.

There is, Palmer says, "a growing recognition of how poorly prepared so many of our children are to take their places as productive members of society and the economy. Good child care is an important prerequisite. It is no longer an issue that's important just to those families, but to the economic and social health of our country as a whole."

From state to state—even from center to center—cost, regulation, and standards of child care vary widely. Although expert recommendations exist on everything from staff-to-child ratios to age-appropriate activities, final decisions on how to run a child-care program are left to individual states and centers. The result, according to the NAS panel, is "an amalgam of providers, programs, and institutional auspices that have little interconnectedness and [that] do not share a sense of common purpose or direction."

The group whose needs are most compromised by the lack of a national child-care policy is the poor. Between 1972 and 1980, the percentage of federal child-care dollars targeted specifically at low-income families shrank from 80 to 50. At the same time, direct consumer subsidies, which primarily benefit middle- and upper-income families, increased.

Care costs between $3,000 and $5,000 per child annually. Middle- and upper-income families spend about nine percent of their annual incomes on child care. Poor families spend an average of 23 percent, and those earning less than $5,000 a year may spend as much as half their yearly income on child care.

The cost often discourages people from seeking jobs outside the home; by the time they're through paying for child care, they may as well have not bothered to work. For families on welfare, it's a burden that is passed on to the taxpayer. If parents can't find care for their children, they don't work. If they don't work, they remain dependent on public assistance.

The biggest and most acclaimed of the federally funded programs for poor children is Head Start, which is designed not to provide day care, but to emphasize education, preventative health care, social services, and parental involvement. The idea is to give poor children a chance to catch up with their more economically advantaged peers, so they will be on even footing when starting school. But even though the program is successful, the government has not made the financial commitment necessary to guarantee that all eligible children can participate in Head Start. Currently it serves only one in five eligible children, and only 20 percent of the programs operate on a full-day basis.

Because Head Start is a preschool program paid for primarily with federal money, its curriculum is consistent from center to center. The same cannot be said of the more traditional care centers across the country, where programs run the gamut: at one end, highly structured situations offering educational instruction to toddlers; at the other, situations where children entertain and amuse themselves.

Among the complaints presented to the Michigan House Majority Task Force on Families during recent hearings on child care was that children in unregistered and unlicensed programs did not have a variety of activities to keep them busy during the day. "The provider did not have time to sit down and read to them," says state representative Mary Carney Brown, who has chaired her legislature's Committee on Constitution and Women's Issues. She holds degrees from SU's College of Arts and Sciences (1957) and School of Education (1969), the latter an M.S. in physical education. "Providers sometimes tried to use the television as the baby-sitter without screening for what was on. [They watched] whatever the provider wanted to watch."

Generally, this was a soap opera.

The disadvantages of a center that offers little more than meals and clean diapers are immediately obvious. But child-care experts say there is also harm in leaving children at a center that places too much emphasis on formal education that is not appropriate to their age.

"Children learn through experiences, by questioning, by being stimulated through materials, not by being taught," says Elsa Perkins Swetland, who teaches child-care occupations at the James Lorenzo Walker Vocational Technical Center in Collier County, Florida. Swetland holds a 1966 master's degree in child development and family relations from SU's College for Human Development.

Swetland advocates a more generalized environment for exploration. "You don't teach three-year-olds and four-year-olds, 'We are going to sit down today and learn the color red. This is the color red.'" she says. "First of all, they probably won't sit there too long unless you have a big club. ...And chances are they won't retain [the information] because they can't make sense of it, so they can't use it."

In addition to learning skills, children begin to develop self-esteem and the ability to interact with the world around them.
Children, especially infants, need close, positive, personal attention. Yet in some states, one care giver is considered enough to tend to six, seven, or even 12 infants. What happens when all 12 infants are crying, all 12 infants have wet diapers? Which does the care giver attend to, and what happens to the other 11?

“They learn very early whether they can, as I put it, steer or just have to ride,” Michigan representative Brown says. “If you think your actions have no effect, then what you do doesn’t matter. Very quickly [you assume] you don’t have to live by the rules. Then you have trouble in school, and the likelihood that we will see you in the mental health system or the corrections system will go up.”

Although it is unrealistic to blame all of society’s ills on inadequate child care, it is undisputed that environment plays a key role in personality development, and the quality of that environment is generally determined by the quality of the person running it. But in some states it doesn’t matter whether a care giver has a criminal record—the state doesn’t check before hiring. In others, it doesn’t matter whether the care giver knows little about children. In Florida, “they can get a job by being 18 and breathing,” says Swetland, who is also president of the Immokalee Child Care Center in Immokalee, Florida. “The regulations are pretty flimsy. [Staff members] are only required to take one 20-hour course, which they don’t have to start until three months after they’ve started working at a center, and they have a year to complete it. That’s all the rules say.”

Also contributing to less-than-adequate child care are less-than-adequate salaries. Child care is one of the lowest-paying industries in the nation—overall, wages are below the poverty level, and fewer than half of the workers receive health coverage. Because child-care is a labor-intensive industry, salaries comprise a substantial part of a center’s operating costs. And because of the low salaries and the demands of what can be a physically and emotionally exhausting job, the child-care industry has a turnover rate that has been estimated as high as 41 percent.

“The more you pay somebody the more likely you are to change the quality of the people who work for you,” says Swetland, whose center has a $400,000 annual budget, comprising federal money, private grants, and donations. The center can’t afford to pay its employees’ benefits, and is unsure how it will come up with the money needed to raise its starting salary to the new federal minimum of $4.25 in April. (Now, Immokalee pays $3.75 an hour for non-high school graduates.)

The child-care industry attracts a variety of employees, from mothers who work part time to be with their children to high school dropouts who love working with children but lack the education or skills to find a higher-paying job.

“It’s hard to say whether people come around looking for a job because they’ve got nothing else to do,” Swetland says. “A lot have tried McDonald’s or other places but find them not very rewarding. They get paid more, but they want . . . to nurture and foster children.

“I would hazard to guess that the majority of people in child-care situations are basically untrained people, as far as pursuing child development and early childhood education are concerned. At Immokalee, out of a staff of 25, there are 12 who don’t have high school diplomas or GEDs.”

Maureen Murphy, director of the Kinder Care Learning Center in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is in a minority in the child-care industry. With her 1981 M.A. in child and family studies from SU’s College for Human Development, Murphy could easily find a higher-paying job. But she has very personal reasons for staying at the center: nearly two years ago she had her first child, and unlike the 80 to 90 parents who leave their children in her center’s care each week, Murphy can’t tolerate the thought of being far from her son on a daily basis.

“It’s very difficult,” she says. “One of the reasons I’ve stayed in this field for a long time, despite the fact that it pays very little for someone at my level of education, is that I’m able to both work and be two rooms down from where my son is. I can see him whenever I want.”

Murphy empathizes with the parents who drop their children off at the center every day. It isn’t unusual, she says, for parents to exhibit guilt and mixed feelings when they say goodbye to their youngsters.

“It’s very hard on the parents of the youngest children,” she says. (The center accepts children six weeks old.) “In most cases they feel they must work even though they’d rather be with their babies. With first-time parents who have young babies, we’re likely to get lots of calls checking on how they’re doing, and it takes a while for the parents to bond with us and establish a kind of trust, where, even though they’ve checked it out ahead of time, they feel really comfortable with the situation.”

Sometimes the parents never become comfortable. Some stop working. Others worry, which doesn’t bode well for their on-the-job performances. Says Swetland, “If parents aren’t comfortable with their child-care situations, they’re not going to produce
the way they were hired to. Their minds are on the fact that they’re unhappy with their situations.”

The United States is one of the few Western industrialized countries that doesn’t have a national child-care policy. Why have we been so slow to acknowledge this need?

In Connecticut, Simon blames it on the political climate—“the development of a conservative view that any kind of child care is family busting.”

NAS panel chairman John Palmer believes it goes deeper. “A lot of it is embedded in the founding of the country,” he says. “We place much more emphasis on individuality as opposed to the public good—the distrust of big government, the notion that we do as much as possible in the private sector and within the family.”

No matter whose theory you subscribe to, the result is the same: our society doesn’t take child care as seriously as it should. Every year, business and the government spend millions of dollars to make sure employees don’t miss a day of work because of drug or alcohol problems, but by comparison spend almost nothing to make sure that those same people don’t miss work because of their children. And with more than half the labor force composed of dual-working couples, it’s safe to assume that many are going to miss work at some point because of their children, whether it’s short-term absence due to child or provider illness, or long-term absence when child care is unavailable.

The federal government has yet to ensure child care a status comparable to that of health care.

When health-care policies for the elderly and disadvantaged were proposed during the New Deal, they prompted a debate similar to the present debate over child care. It took more than 30 years for the government to adopt Medicare and Medicaid.

“I think day care and some of these other areas, such as [national] health insurance, are areas that may go through a similar evolution,” Palmer says. “Maybe we’ll have a system of federal support and a public role that will be a major advance beyond where we are now. But there’s still something different in our attitude about children as opposed to elderly people. With elderly people we more readily accepted the notion that they deserve and merit public support. Children have parents, and we’re very reluctant in some cases to provide public assistance, on the basis that the parents should be doing it.”

Which harks back to America’s “frontier individualistic mentality,” the idea that parents know what is best for their children, and the government has no business butting in. Among some factions, there is a belief that a national child-care policy would mean wresting from parents what has always been theirs—the control over and responsibility for raising their children. There is fear that national policy is a euphemism for rules and regulations that would force parents to adopt practices and strategies foreign to and inappropriate for them and their children. Nearly 20 years ago, President Richard M. Nixon vetoed a bill, created and passed by a primarily liberal Congress, that would have provided substantial funding for child care. In his opinion, signing the bill was tantamount to condoning socialized care.

Child-care advocates counter that the goal of a national policy is to develop uniform standards, not to create regulations that would impinge on people’s private lives.

“We know enough from research and past practices to know what constitutes adequate quality on an affordable dimension,” Palmer says. “Let’s promote that. Like the Food and Drug Administration setting out nutritional guidelines, let’s understand that there’s a scientific basis for knowing what is good and bad for children’s development.”

Change is inevitable. With more children in day care, the issue has begun to affect people at both ends of the political spectrum. There are fewer children today than 30 years ago—an undersized generation that will face unique challenges of adulthood in the early 21st century. Across the country, in state governments and private businesses, there are signs that today’s leaders are starting to see the importance of taking better care of their successors.

The bulk of the progress is being made on the state and local levels. In Missouri, for instance, the state government has nearly doubled the number of child-care slots that it subsidizes for low-income families, from 6,900 in 1988 to 12,700 for the current fiscal year. The state is also paying child-care costs for people who are in “income maintenance” programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or who are income-eligible—that is, participating in job training or an educational program. The cost to Missouri: $23.4 million, up from $10.6 million two years ago. As far as government leaders are concerned, the cost is worthwhile.

“An individual is 50 percent more likely to get a job if he or she has a high school diploma,” says Richard McClure, a 1980 Maxwell School graduate (M.P.A.) who is chief of staff for Missouri Governor John
Ashcroft. “We found that well over 50 percent of our AFDC recipients don’t have high school diplomas. . . . We knew that even if they had high school equivalency they needed job-training skills, so we implemented a program to assist people to get off welfare. We tried to remove the barriers that sometime prohibited people, like lack of child care. We also extended Medicaid benefits for up to a year. It’s pretty ambitious.”

Equally ambitious is the $1-million child-care center that the software company Lotus Development Corp. opened at its Cambridge, Massachusetts, headquarters last June. The center can accommodate up to 72 children who are three months to five years old. There is already a waiting list. Selection is by lottery and parents pay on a sliding scale, with Lotus helping subsidize the cost for parents whose annual income is less than $50,000.

Linda Turney, who received her SU bachelor’s degree in social work in 1988 and now works as a corporate child-care developer for the Child Care Resource Center in Cambridge, helped Lotus develop its center. Her responsibilities included everything from assessing the need—half of Lotus’s American employees were women—to choosing jungle gyms for the playground.

Turney believes that an on-site center enhances a company’s image. “It makes it seem as if they’re a very sensitive employer,” she says. “They really went the full nine yards. Flex time wasn’t enough. The other options they had tried weren’t enough. They listened to their employees and were sensitive and were really able to do it.”

“I think it is really going this way,” she says. “Even law firms are turning in this direction, especially as they know more and more women are entering the work force. The last figure I read was that 60 percent of couples today are both working. There’s no other option.”

The fastest-growing segment of the child-care industry is in the area of information and referral, which includes for-profit companies, such as the one Turney worked for, and not-for-profit agencies that receive the bulk of their funds from the government. Both types represent a part of what Palmer calls the infrastructure of the industry—the sources families can call on when trying to find child care and providers can depend on for everything from training to toys.

“All kinds of people call, at all levels of income,” says Beth Rougeux, the director of the Onondaga County Child Care Council in Syracuse and a 1983 graduate of SU’s School of Social Work. In the past two years, referral calls to the council have nearly tripled, from 1,200 in all of 1988 to 3,000 by August of this year.

Rougeux says that of the estimated 9,000 Onondaga County children under the age of five who need care, the council can account for half. The others are cared for through arrangements that are uncon­nected to the council. “There’s nothing wrong with that,” she says. “People choose care based on what’s comfortable to them. Obviously people may choose relatives or close neighbors because they’re comfortable with that and that’s very good. . . . But whatever type of care is chosen, it must be safe, reliable, quality child care.”

Rougeux has worked at the council since 1982. Although great strides have been made in the past two years—in­creased awareness of the council’s existence and more new centers opening in the area (some connected to Syracuse-area corporations)—she isn’t counting on significant changes at the federal level.

In that respect, Rougeux has a lot in common with other child-care advocates, none of whom are overly optim­istic that the government is going to make quick advances. Though both the House and the Senate have passed child­care bills in the past year, the bills are still in conference. Meanwhile, in June, President Bush vetoed a bill that would have required companies to grant workers up to three months unpaid leave for births, adoptions, or family medical emergencies. Bush objects to Washington dictating such policies to businesses.

Palmer is convinced that the family-leave bill will re­appear. “I think eventually it will happen,” he says, “But I don’t know whether eventually is five years or 25 years. I don’t see it happening in the near future.”

Laura Lee Simon, of the Connecticut Commission on Children, is cautious, but also optimistic. As the constituency for child-care issues grows, she explains, the number of initiatives and likelihood of success necessarily follow.

“I think,” she says, “that a myth has been perpetuated in the past decade that we have government on our backs, and I think that has been part of a philosophy that probably should be countered with the thought that we have government to pro­mote the collective good. Problems today are just too complex for states to do it alone, certainly for municipalities to do it alone, for families to do it alone. There has to be that partnership, that commitment. . . .

“Government doesn’t have to be seen as on the backs of people,” she concludes, “if it develops policies and obligations to make it possible for families to really be supported—not to act as a surrogate, but to support the needs of families.”