

NECESSARY COMPROMISES

How Parents,

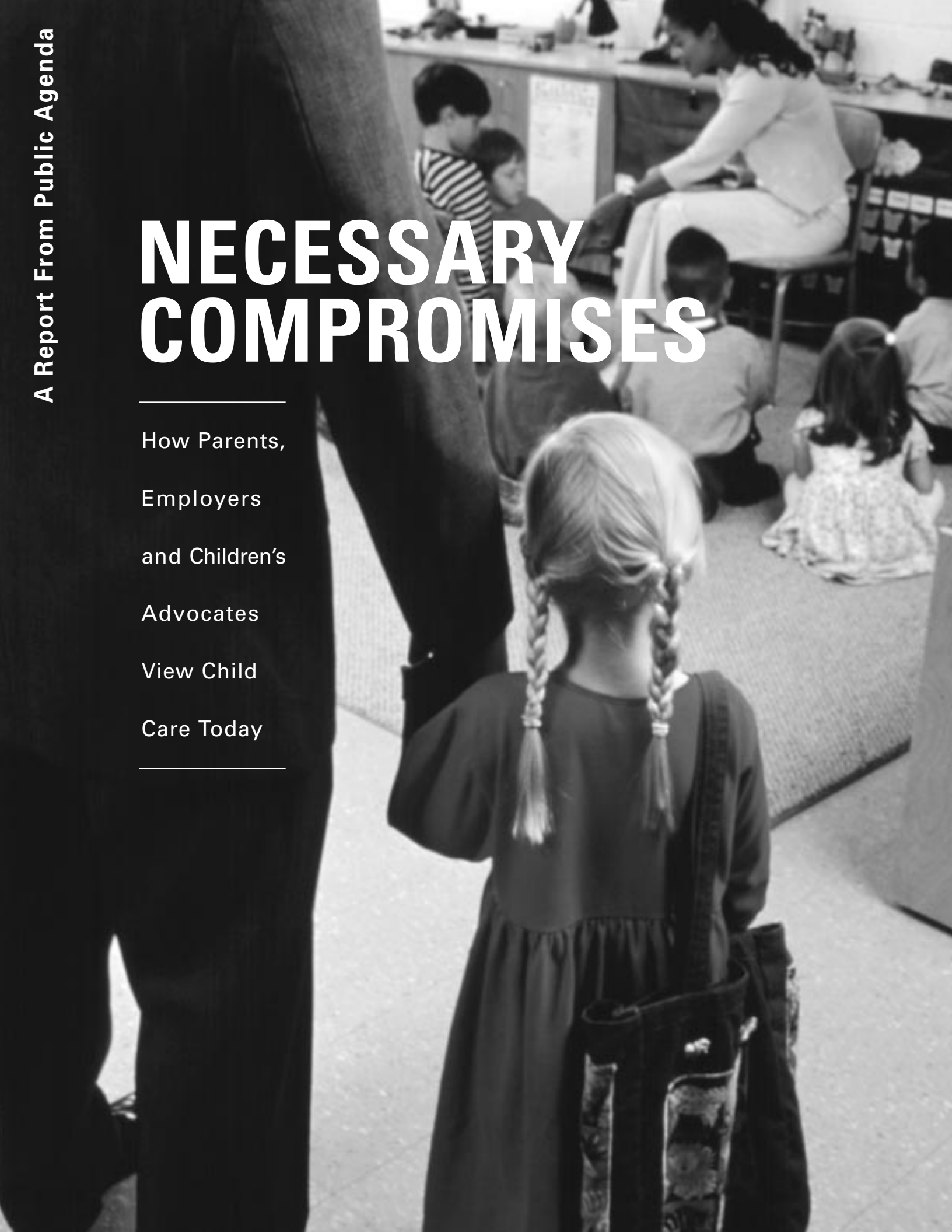
Employers

and Children's

Advocates

View Child

Care Today



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NECESSARY COMPROMISES

How Parents,
Employers
and Children's
Advocates
View Child
Care Today

A report from Public Agenda

**By Steve Farkas, Ann Duffett
and Jean Johnson**

**With Tony Foleno and
Patrick Foley**

ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help typical citizens better understand critical policy issues. Public Agenda's particular expertise lies in crafting research studies that explore different points of view with empathy and that probe beneath surface responses to capture the public's concerns and assumptions. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Our citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum. Our Web site, Public Agenda Online (www.publicagenda.org) provides comprehensive information on a wide range of public opinion and public policy issues.

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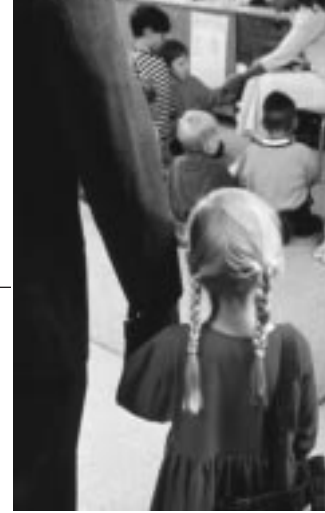
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INTRODUCTION

In some ways, the statistics from the Bureau of Labor say it all. In 1960, more than 80% of mothers with preschool children did not work outside the home. By 1997, almost two-thirds had joined the workforce, at least on a part-time basis.¹ The way American families live their lives has changed dramatically in just one generation.

Changing attitudes and expectations, changing economics and social norms—all have combined to transform how children are cared for on a daily basis. And while only a handful of Americans question the expanded opportunities open to women, or the need of many to work given today’s economy, more than a few have wondered about the consequences for children and what, if anything, society should do in response.

What Do Parents Want?

Necessary Compromises is an in-depth look at how three groups—parents, employers and children’s advocates—view these developments and some of the controversies and policy debates they have spawned. This three-part study was conducted by Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization that regularly examines public attitudes on public policy. The following foundations provided support for this research: The Danforth Foundation, The Ford Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and The David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

From the moment mothers began joining the workforce in large numbers, debates over child care jumped onto the nation’s op-ed pages and spread quickly throughout government and academia. Similar debates undoubtedly take place daily around many a kitchen table. For some Americans, the reality of today’s child care is a social experiment that begs for reexamination. Are these trends, they ask, really good for children or families or American society as a whole? Are we accepting a situation that robs far too many children of the careful one-on-one attention that only a loving parent can provide? Should we begin, in both individual and public decision making, a return to a time when most young children were cared for primarily by a parent?

Nostalgia Gone Awry?

For others, however, these are fanciful attitudes, nostalgia gone awry. From their perspective, today’s realities demand that we offer parents a range of options, including top-notch, high-quality day care centers, to insure that all children get the close attention and sustained nurturing they deserve. These Americans call for a rich array of support for families: increased parental leave, more employer support and flexibility, and a major investment in the country’s child care infrastructure—one that insures that child care and day care centers are safe, affordable, easily available, and ultimately enriching for the children they serve.

In a perfect world, these two approaches might not be mutually exclusive, and it is certainly not clear that most Americans would be comfortable with an absolute “either/or” choice. But in today’s political, social and economic climate, these two perspectives represent strikingly divergent visions of what we should be working toward. And such visions inevitably shape our judgments about where society should invest its energy and resources.

While only a handful of Americans question the expanded opportunities open to women, or the need of many to work given today’s economy, more than a few have wondered about the consequences for children

Show Me the Money

Beneath the surface of this overarching debate are some tough questions about money and responsibility. In Washington, the issues often boil down to how much government should invest to improve outside-the-home child care and make it more affordable, or whether government should increase tax relief for families that choose to keep one parent at home. Debates also center on what responsibility employers should assume. Some point out that employers benefit, along with families, when workers are not “stressed to the max” about child care. They say that

it is in employers' interests to offer improved child care benefits and expanded leave and flexibility for parents. Others envision a far more limited role, pointing out that employers are already under pressure to improve health and retirement benefits and that it is simply not realistic for any but the very largest organizations to do more.

Poor Decisions, Poor Planning

Finally, some ask whether our own values and personal decisions are leading us astray. Do too many of us choose the lure of larger houses, newer cars and better vacations over the more fundamental interests of our children? Do we leap too quickly to divorce, leaving children to pay the price when working becomes a necessity? Do we jump too quickly into parenthood, with little thought about the financial and emotional investment it takes to raise a child?

And yet—others quickly counter—it is so easy to judge. It is easy, they say, to pretend that families can survive on a single income, but that's not realistic for millions. It is easy, they say, to condemn people to lifeless, embittering marriages, but that may not be wise. It is easy, they say, to ignore human frailties, but where, in the end, does that leave us?

From Grandma to Nanny to Nursery School

So the debate continues, and it is indeed a complex, multileveled conversation that can be difficult to grasp. Facts are at issue. Interpretations differ. There are different considerations for middle- and low-income families and for families on public assistance, for two-parent and single-parent households, and for infants, toddlers, preschoolers and school-age children. There are many forms of child care,* ranging from in-home care by a relative or nanny to care at a professional day care center. Families often use many kinds of child care over a number of years and may in fact use several kinds of care simultaneously. There is also a steady stream of information and research coming from a variety of astute and constructive sources.

Necessary Compromises focuses its attention on just one slice of the issue—the attitudes, assumptions and concerns that drive the thinking of three key groups—parents of young children, employers and advocates who devote their working lives to children's issues. The research base for this report includes a series of one-on-one interviews with leading professionals and decision makers in the field, 7 focus groups held in different parts of the country, and mail surveys of 218 employers and 216 children's advocates. The centerpiece of the research is a nationwide random sample telephone survey of 815 parents of children 5 years old or under, and it also includes oversamples of parents of older children and adults who are not parents.

Parents of the Very Young

Several aspects of the study are distinctive. Although surveys by Gallup, Harris, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and others have included many thoughtful questions on child care, *Necessary Compromises* is unusual in its focus on the views of parents of very young children and its inclusion of both the employer and child advocate perspectives. Each of these groups is a central player in how child care debates and controversies are resolved; each has concerns and observations that should command the attention and respectful consideration of any fair-minded observer.

Perhaps it is not surprising that child care is an issue that sparks immediate and heartfelt response among parents.

Over the years, Public Agenda has surveyed Americans' views on issues ranging from retirement savings to health care reform to school vouchers. All are ultimately important to people, but the public's initial views on them are often quite hesitant, even muted. People know they should save to retire, but

Necessary Compromises is unusual in its focus on the views of parents of very young children and its inclusion of both the employer and child advocate perspectives

* In this study, we use the term "child care" to refer to any form of care provided by someone other than a child's parent. We use the terms "day care" or "day care center" to refer to care offered to groups of children in settings outside the home. Question wording in the surveys of parents, employers and children's advocates also made this distinction as needed.

most have given relatively little thought to the issue. People want good health care, but much of the reform debate passes them by. School vouchers ignite a firestorm of controversy among educators, yet most Americans admit that they actually don't know enough about them to really have a firm opinion.

Reporting on the Wear and Tear

Not so with child care. While parents may not necessarily understand the ins and outs of the congressional debate on tax credits, they do have the benefit of genuine firsthand experience with children and child care and sometimes protracted personal deliberation about the best courses of action. In focus groups for this project, even individuals whose children are grown or who did not have children could readily visualize themselves facing a child care dilemma. Child care is one public policy issue that most Americans seem to have an authentic feel for. Parents, of course, have to make some decisions about their

own children's care. They look at the options. They weigh the finances. They see the benefits and drawbacks for themselves and their children daily. In this study, parents bear witness to the wear and tear of coping with child care and to their own fears and compromises. Employers look at their workers and offer their views on what seems sensible and feasible given their organizations' needs and constraints. And children's advocates add a perspective and compassion gained from years of effort devoted to improving the lives of children, especially the nation's poorest children. *Necessary Compromises* attempts to give voice to these perspectives, allowing each group to communicate its concerns and priorities, its struggles and its goals.

In focus groups for this project, even individuals whose children are grown or who did not have children could readily visualize themselves facing a child care dilemma

CHAPTER ONE: THE PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITY

Most parents of young children say that they themselves, not government or employers or society in general, should bear the primary responsibility for child care. Few parents spontaneously propose that government offer additional services or subsidies to help them, and few voice resentment about career or financial trade-offs that they may make during their children's early years. Just 1 in 5 says making child care more affordable is a higher priority than alternatives such as improving schools, expanding health coverage or lowering taxes.

That's Our Job

For parents of the nation's very youngest children, child care is a personal issue, a matter they instinctively expect to handle themselves. When parents plan care for their children, when they confront choices and trade-offs or when they struggle with sacrifices, they look mostly to themselves to provide the answers. Rarely do they ask, "Why is the government not there for me?" or, "Shouldn't my employer do more to help?" Fully 60% of parents with young children—from newborn to age 5[†]—say it is the responsibility of parents to make sure they have child care when they need it, not the government's (22%) or their employer's (15%). As later findings show, parents of young children endorse a variety of measures to improve child care when they are asked about them, but there is little outcry for action, little self-propelled demand for government to step in. In the focus groups, parents typically discussed government's role in providing child care only when the moderators brought it up—they almost never initiated it themselves. Parents were only slightly more likely to bring up the responsibilities of the workplace. "I just don't think it's the company's responsibility to take care of our children," said a Jacksonville, Florida, dad. "That's our job."

The clear theme, recurring throughout the focus group discussions and through multiple survey questions, is that child care is an area parents expect to struggle with and resolve for themselves. The comments of this new mom in Walnut Creek, California, wrestling with her decision about returning to work, was typical: "Am I making the right decision by going back to work? Part of me is like, am I going back to

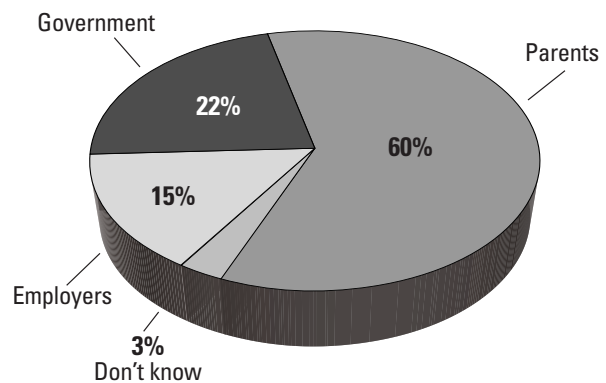
work just to keep up with the Joneses? Can I really survive if I really cut back and found something part-time? I need to make the right decision. I have to make it right now." Her comments are notable for their inherently personal perspective—at no time did she complain or wonder or wish that the government would pitch in to help.

It's Just How Life Works

At a time when many pundits bemoan what they see as increased reluctance by citizens to take responsibility for their decisions as individuals, parents say

Who is Responsible?

Who should take primary responsibility for making sure that working families have child care for their children?



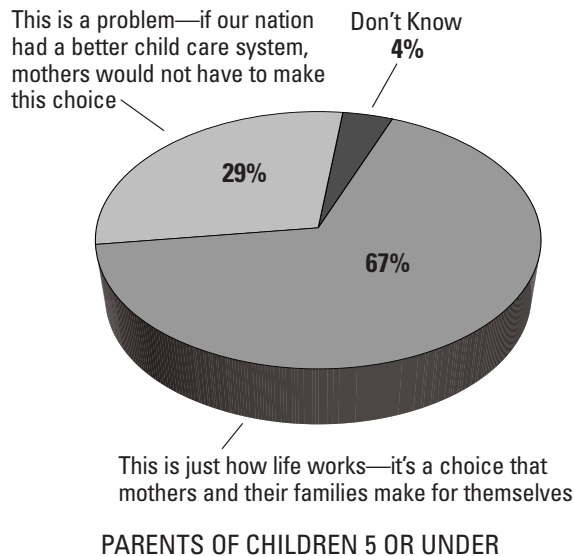
PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER

Note: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding or omission of some answer categories. Small percentage differences may occur due to rounding.

[†] Unless otherwise specified, the findings in this study refer to parents of children 5 or under. In the survey, parents with more than one child were asked to answer questions with their youngest child in mind.

Career Trade-offs

Nowadays, many mothers reduce their hours and responsibilities at work so they can be home when their children are young.



they are thinking hard, planning ahead and making hard choices—sometimes even sacrifices—when children arrive. Half of the parents we surveyed (52%) say they planned carefully what to do about child care before the birth of their child, and another 21% discussed the issue in general. Only 24% say this was something they “started to deal with only after the baby was born.”

Nor do parents express much resentment about the trade-offs they (mothers in particular) may be asked to make. In one survey question, respondents were asked to react to the statement “Nowadays, many mothers reduce their hours and responsibilities at work so they can be home when their children are young.” Sixty-seven percent responded by saying that “this is just how life works—it’s a choice that mothers and their families make for themselves.” Far fewer (29%) said that “this is a problem—if our nation had a better child care system, mothers would not have to make this choice.” Notably, 2 out of 3 mothers (67%) and fathers (67%) concur. Remember, too, that these are parents with young children—newborn to 5 years old—not empty nesters or voters without kids.

Who Should Foot the Bill?

Parents of America’s youngest children say they are responsible not only for finding adequate child care, but also for footing the bill. More than 7 in 10 (72%) say they should be primarily responsible for paying the costs of caring for their own young children; only about 1 in 4 (24%) says that since society as a whole benefits when children get good care, all taxpayers should help pay the costs. Even a majority of low-income parents—those earning no more than \$25,000 a year—believe bearing the cost is essentially their responsibility and not society’s (62% versus 33%).

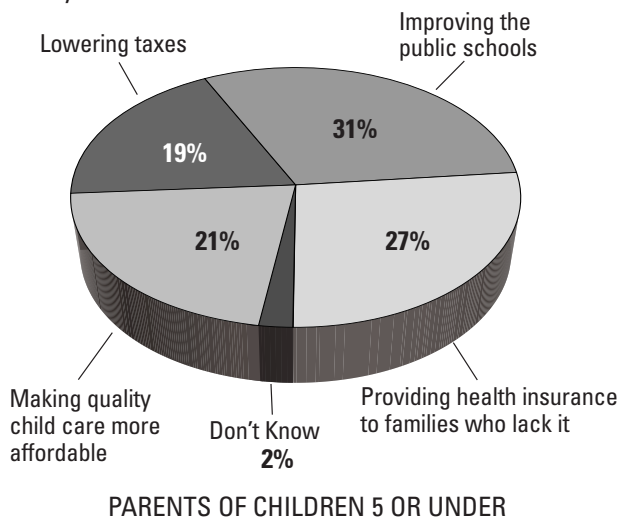
As will be seen in later chapters, this hardly means parents want no help from government or business; there are specific policies they would like to see implemented. But majorities of America’s parents—regardless of their income, the age of their children or their work status—hold themselves first and foremost accountable for the care of their children. All of this helps explain why “making quality child care more affordable” does not surge to the top of parents’ issue agenda. Even among parents of young children, only 21% choose this when asked which of 4 policy areas should be government’s highest priority next year. Improving public schools (31%), providing health insurance to families who lack it (27%) and lowering taxes (19%) are also pressing to parents, if not more so. Not surprisingly, parents of older children (12%) and people who don’t have kids (9%) are even less likely to choose the affordability of child care as the nation’s highest priority.

The Vision That Is Not There

One might imagine that parents in much of Europe—where governments are often key players in the child care arena—begin from a different starting point than American parents, expecting an array of social services organized to help provide child care and already quite familiar with these alternatives. And as we will see in later chapters, the large majority of experts, advocates and professionals attuned to child care clearly envision something similar to this “European model.” Almost 7 in 10 (68%) of the children’s advocates surveyed say that the best direction for government policy to take when it comes to child

Priorities for Government

When it comes to helping children and families, which should be the government's highest priority in the next year?



care is to move toward a universal, national child care system similar to that of many European countries, as compared with policies focused more sharply on tax incentives to enable families to keep one parent at home. (The views of children's advocates are discussed in greater detail in chapter 7.)

But most parents of young children do not currently share this vision. Asked if the country should move toward a universal child care system paid for by the government, improve the current system or simply leave things as they are, just 27% would move toward a universal child care system. This may be because parents are not familiar with such a system and therefore cannot envision how it might work. Or it may be, as many findings reported later suggest, that this vision simply does not resonate with their deepest concerns about care for young children or their instinctive sense that child care is first and foremost a personal matter.

Practicing What They Preach

That child care tends to be a highly personal issue that parents negotiate themselves is signaled by the variety of approaches they take to the issue—there is no single, standard practice, and practices change as chil-

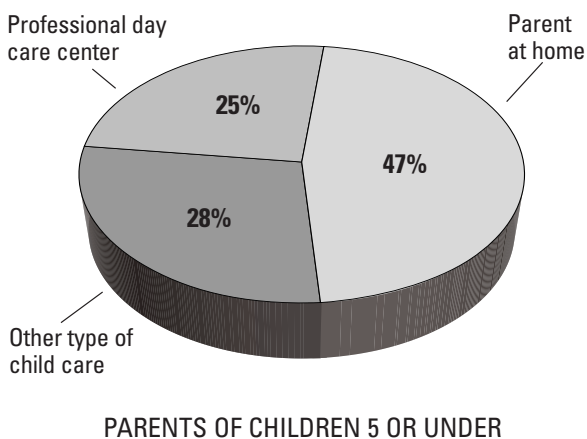
dren grow. The term “child care” itself encompasses many arrangements. Actually, in what may come as a surprise to some, nearly half (47%) of parents with children 5 or under surveyed here have decided *not* to use child care on a regular basis. Another 25% rely on professional day care centers at least part-time; and 28% rely on a variety of arrangements from relatives to baby-sitters to neighborhood moms who care for youngsters in their own homes.

Necessary Compromises

This study deliberately focuses on parents with young children 5 years old or under—815 were surveyed—simply because they are closest to the issue and can provide an invaluable perspective on what they want and need. Their attitudes depict an enormously complicated and nuanced reality, replete with tensions, hopes and necessary compromises. Decisions about how to care for young children today are anything but routine or preordained; there seems to be no one-size-fits-all model. So regardless of the child care they ultimately choose, most parents seem to approach the issue with care and thoughtfulness, alert to the stakes at hand.

Half Stay Home

Child care usage among parents of children 5 or under



CHAPTER TWO: CHILDREN CARED FOR BY PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM

For the vast majority of parents, having a parent at home full-time is by far the best way to provide care for children 5 years or under, and nearly half say they have made arrangements to do this. By overwhelming margins, parents say the love and sustained attention a parent offers simply cannot be replicated by other forms of care. Parents also believe that children raised by a stay-at-home parent are more likely to learn strong values and considerate behavior than children in child care. When a parent cannot be home, parents say, child care by a close relative is best. Despite their strong belief in and preference for one-on-one parental care, parents do say that other arrangements can be of high quality and of benefit to kids.

“No One Loves Your Children Like You Do”

At the most basic level, parents of young children believe that having a full-time parental presence at home is what’s best for very young children, and it is what most would prefer for their own family. The recurring, powerful refrain from the focus groups and survey findings is that whenever possible, nothing beats having a mother or father at home.

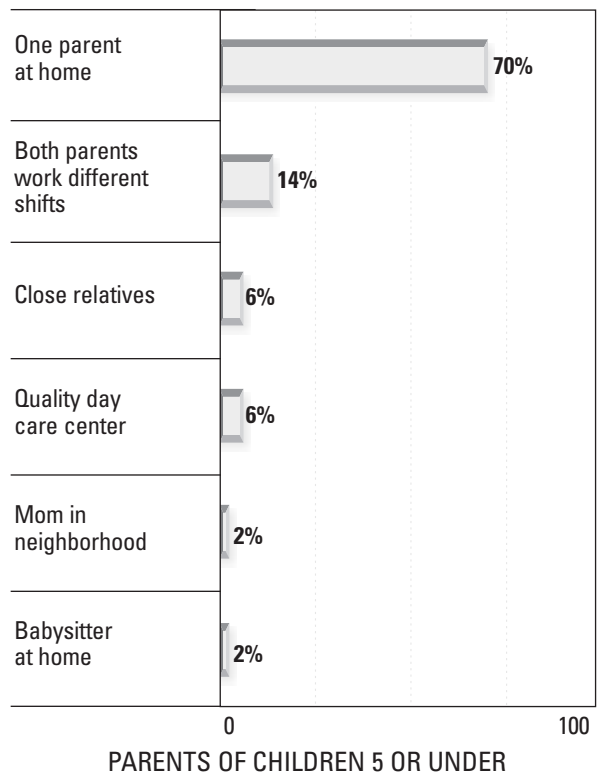
Asked to choose among 6 child care situations that might be appropriate for children during their earliest years, 7 in 10 (70%) parents say the best is to have one parent stay at home. Most parents with young children (68%) “would prefer to stay home with children when they are young,” with mothers (80%) far more likely than fathers (52%) to say this.

In finding after finding, regardless of question wording or emphasis, parents of young children reiterate this heartfelt judgment. Two out of 3 (66%) strongly agree that “if a family can afford it, it’s almost always best for the kids to have a parent at home full-time.” More than half (56%) *strongly* agree that “no one can do as good a job of raising children as their own parents.” By an overwhelming margin (81% to 1%), today’s parents say that children who spend the day with a stay-at-home parent are more likely to get affection and attention than those who are in quality child care. What’s more, 63% disagree that the care and attention children get from “a top-notch day care center” is just as good as what they would get at home with a parent.

Throughout the focus groups, among parents from across the country and from many different walks of life, there was a deep-seated conviction that it would be hard to simulate a parent’s love and attention even in the very best alternatives. “A child needs love,”

A Parent at Home is Best

“Best” arrangements for the care and development of young children



said a mom from the Chicago area. “I cannot honestly feel that, as great as any of the people in any of the day care centers could be, they could replace that nurturing love that a parent can give.” A grandmother in Jacksonville, Florida, said: “No one loves your children like you do. No one. I don’t care what people say about little Johnny because the fact of the matter is that no one loves little Johnny like you do if he’s your son or daughter.”

The New Generation of Mothers?

Many readers might assume that the nation’s younger generation of mothers would voice less traditional notions about families and parenting. After all, younger mothers between 18 and 29 have grown up in a society where mothers routinely work outside the home and where many families routinely rely on non-parental child care. But the judgments of these younger mothers are no different from those of other parents—their mindset too is that young children do better with a parent at home, and fully 80% say they themselves would prefer to stay at home when their children are young rather than work full-time.

Perhaps the most prominent “non-traditional” element in the thinking of the parents surveyed here is the broad acceptance that fathers, not just mothers, can be nurturing and entirely appropriate caregivers for young children. Fully 6 in 10 fathers (63%) and mothers (60%) of children 5 or under *strongly* agree that fathers are as capable as mothers when it comes to caring for the needs of young kids.

At Least until Age Two

These attitudes about families and child care gain even more energy and conviction when parents focus closely on what is best for children in their very earliest years. Virtually all parents (94%) think it is important for one parent to be home during this period, with 35% considering it to be “absolutely essential.” Numerous parents across the country described these years as a precious—and critical—time for them to bond with their children. Over and over we heard a similar refrain: “At least until 2...you can’t take back this valuable time,” from an upstate

New York mother of a 2-year-old. “Especially the infants. A child needs love,” from a widowed mom in Chicago. “I don’t think anybody else can give that kind of bonding that a mother can give to her child,” from a male college student in Chicago.

An Antidote to Moral Decline

While parents repeatedly spoke of the importance of children being cared for by a mom or dad who loves them dearly, findings from this study suggest another reason why so many parents are firmly committed to the ideal of stay-at-home parental care—they want to transmit their own sense of moral values and appropriate behavior along to their child.

Public Agenda has conducted dozens of focus groups over the past few years, and in virtually every one, respondents spontaneously lament problems of out-of-control kids, stressed-out parents and a general decline in civility and moral values. Although people often refer to the impact of schools or the media, the most prominent concern focuses specifically and directly on families. It is within the family, people say, that love and bonding take place, and it is within the family that kids are most likely to learn good values and behavior. These are tough times for families,

Reasons for Endorsing Parental Care

% of parents who:	
Think children are more likely to get the affection and attention from a stay-at-home parent than from well-trained caring people in child care	81%
Strongly agree that if a family can afford it, it’s almost always best for children if one parent is home full-time	66%
Disagree that a top-notch day care center can equal a parent in terms of care and attention	63%
Strongly agree that no one can do as good a job of raising children as their own parents	56%

PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER

At Home Parents Vs. Quality Child Care

Which children are more likely to get/learn each of the following—children who spend the day with a stay-at-home parent or children who are in child care with well-trained, caring people, or is it about the same?

	Children with stay-at-home parent	Children in child care	About the same
More likely to get the affection and attention they need	81%	1%	18%
More likely to learn the basic values such as being honest and responsible	44%	5%	49%
More likely to learn life skills such as how to share and get along with others	21%	46%	33%

PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER

people say, not because of economic hardships (though these obviously exist for some), but because they believe the moral climate is so corrupting for families.

These broader fears are echoed more than once in this study of parents. By a 64% to 25% margin, parents of children of all ages say it is harder for parents these days to raise children who are well behaved and have good values than to provide for their health and physical well-being. Staying home, as many parents perceive it, is an antidote to the declining moral tenor they see today.

The Kids Are Wilder

A California parent of a 5-year-old commented: “Today...you just want to make sure you still have good [sic] behaved kids. Trying to raise your kid to be good...loving, things like that.” One of the young people in Chicago who is not a parent observed: “There are good kids, and there are bad kids, and it really does depend on how a parent brings them up from when they are young, and instills good moral values in them and teaches them right and wrong.”

Parents are considerably more likely to believe that children fare better in terms of learning “basic values

such as being honest and responsible” if they are with a stay-at-home parent than if they are in a quality child care situation (44% versus 5%), although 49% say it’s about the same. “Some of the kids my kids have been around that have been in full-time day care are wilder and not as controllable,” said a New Jersey parent.

Acting on Their Beliefs

Not only are parents of young children convinced that a stay-at-home parent provides unparalleled nurturing and moral guidance, focus groups from this study suggest that many are acting on their beliefs and making financial and career sacrifices to do so. Public Agenda has studied many issues where Americans say individuals should be personally responsible for their actions, but where they often fail to follow through. For example, people say individuals—not the government or employers—should be responsible for preparing for their own retirement, yet many have actually saved very little for their later years.³

Putting Their Money Where . . .

When it comes to child care, however, focus groups conducted for this project suggest that many parents

are doing more than simply “talking the talk.” Again and again, parents talked about specific, concrete steps they had taken—consciously cutting back their lifestyle, living in a smaller home, forgoing more promising career moves, moving closer to grandparents—all to enable them or close relatives to care for their child.

A dad in New Jersey told us how he felt about the cutbacks his family had made. “Sure, we have a lot of friends that have two incomes,” he said. “They have nicer cars and had their house before we did. They were remodeling before we had our first house. We just think our kids will be better off in the long run.”

Careers On Hold

And a mom in Redwood City, California, told about the sacrifices she has made in her career in order to make sure her son always has a parent at home. “I know I make sacrifices. I have got just a run-of-the-mill job....I could go out there and find something else, a bigger company...but I don’t. I work for a small company, and it is a big sacrifice, because we want a lot of things but we don’t get them because we don’t make a lot.”

In fact, many parents take steps to ensure that, for the most part, their infants, toddlers and preschoolers are always under the care of a parent. As pointed out earlier, nearly half (47%) of the parents of children 5 or under surveyed say that in a typical week they never use non-parental child care. This is remarkable given the profound economic and social shifts that have taken place in recent years. Parents seem to have a crystal-clear vision of what they’d like to have happen; some attain it, others make the necessary compromises.

All in the Family

These attitudes—this commitment to an ideal of one-on-one home care—hardly amount to a give-no-quarter dogma that a parent ought to stay at home regardless of the circumstances. As we will see in chapter 4, most parents view high-quality non-parental child care as a viable—and sometimes even

preferable—option, depending on the needs and circumstances of the individual family.

But even if they acknowledge that other forms of care can be of excellent quality, their preferences still center on care that is close to home. If they themselves are not minding their children, a large majority (78%) of parents believe a grandparent or other close relative is the best alternative. Asked to rate 6 basic child care arrangements, virtually all (93%) rated having a stay-at-home parent as excellent or good, followed closely by 84% who rated relying on a close relative as an excellent or good option. Similarly, the third highest option was “having parents work different shifts so that one is almost always home” (72%).

“Sure, we have a lot of friends that have two incomes. They have nicer cars and had their house before we did . . . We just think our kids will be better off in the long run.”

— New Jersey Dad

In the focus groups, both parents and non-parents alike expressed similar views—and the comments almost invariably circle back to the question of trust. A father of a preschooler in New Jersey said, “I feel like she will do as she’s told if she’s with a relative. They really care about her and will closely monitor her activities....Family members really take extra care.” And when we asked a group of young adults in Chicago to describe their ideal child care, we heard comments such as “I just trust my family....To me that is the best” and “The ideal would be to have a relative take care of them.”

Other Arrangements Can Work

Despite this “if it can’t be a parent it must be a relative” sentiment, most parents do recognize that other arrangements can work, as long as they are of high quality. Almost 6 in 10 rate having a nanny or babysitter inside the home (57%) as an excellent or good option, and more than half say the same about bringing the child to a mom in the neighborhood (53%) or placing the child in a quality day care center

(53%). Many described extremely positive personal experiences with their child care providers.

A working mom from the San Francisco Bay area spoke about the valuable impact day care had on her young son: “What was my child getting out of this? What he was getting was to learn how to interact with other children...and know how to play and be separated from us....I saw a lot of positive in that, and it has helped him.” Another working mom, from Florida, described the relationship she has with her provider: “I think we went through about 4 or 5 different people, and finally we met a lady....We just immediately clicked...we just couldn’t say enough nice things about her....She fell in love with the baby. It was just wonderful.”

Ultimately What’s Best

For most parents, many forms of child care have the potential to be good as long as they include an affec-

tionate and responsible provider and a safe, orderly environment. And for most, the need for child care is here to stay. Parents readily accept that many families cannot manage without it, and in fact, most young children are in child care at least some time during their earliest years.⁴ Nevertheless, most parents of young children strongly believe that the love and careful one-on-one attention an at-home parent provides is unrivaled. This, they believe, is ultimately what is best for kids in their earliest, most formative years.

For most parents, many forms of child care have the potential to be good as long as they include an affectionate and responsible provider and a safe, orderly environment. And for most, the need for child care is here to stay.

CHAPTER THREE: TRUSTING IN THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

Parents regard day care centers with a substantial degree of wariness and distrust—especially when it comes to young children. Even though much of the policy debate at state and federal levels focuses on making child care more affordable, the preeminent concerns of parents revolve around questions of quality and trust. Parents express wide-ranging concerns about turning the care of their children over to people whom they do not know, and who may not be well-trained, well-paid or well-motivated. Moreover, they voice almost paralyzing fears about the possibility of neglect or abuse. Although parents give day care centers good marks on such measures as teaching kids to interact with other children, most fundamentally doubt whether professional day care can offer the kind of love and one-on-one attention young children need. Low-income parents voice even greater concern.

Child Care Equals Day Care

If parents of young children voice spontaneous enthusiasm for stay-at-home parental care, they voice equally spontaneous concern about professional group day care. And focus group discussions for this project make it clear that when parents envision child care, day care centers jump to mind. So prevalent is this association that focus group moderators had to make explicit efforts to expand the discussion to include other kinds of child care as alternatives to the stay-at-home parent. Once into the survey, this effort continued, with respondents repeatedly reminded that questions about child care referred to “any arrangement where someone other than a parent cares for a child on a regular basis,” with examples given such as a relative, neighborhood mom or day care center.

The near automatic link people make between child care and day care centers is important because the associations are often negative—sometimes dramatically so. A Florida parent recalled his family’s search for child care, saying, “We looked at day care centers for the convenience. But the more we looked, the more we thought, we better keep looking.”

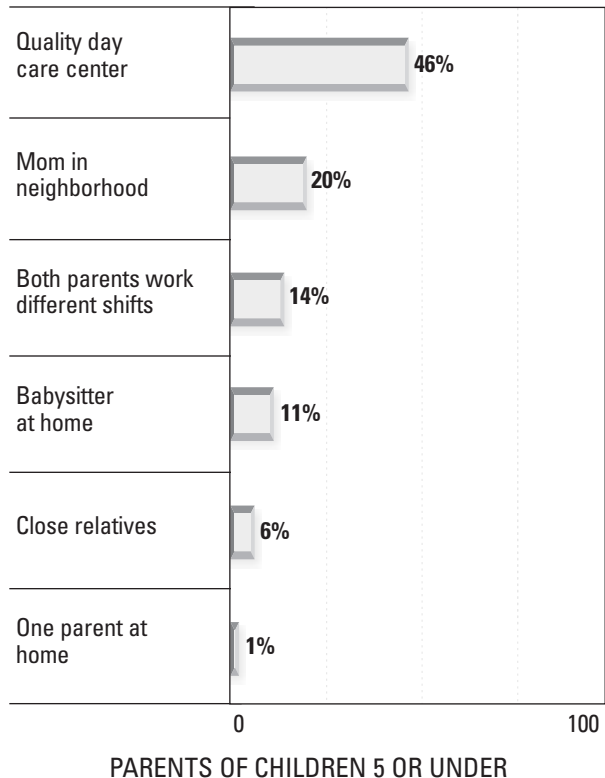
The Option of Last Resort

Although a majority of parents recognize that individual day care centers can, of course, be constructive places for young children to learn and grow, the

survey confirms the impression that day care is often the option of last resort for parents of young children.

Day Care Least Preferred

% of parents who say arrangement is their “least preferred”



When forced to choose among 6 child care arrangements that offer the best care and development for a young child—including a parent at home full-time, both parents working different shifts, a close relative, a baby-sitter or nanny, a mom in the neighborhood, or a quality day care center—almost half (46%) choose day care as their least preferred.

A dad in the San Francisco Bay area told of how his family moved closer to grandparents rather than use a day care center. “We were going to put our kids in day care. But when my wife’s mom heard about it she kind of freaked. ‘Don’t you read the paper? Don’t you know what goes on in day care?’ I said, ‘We have to put them somewhere, we can’t leave them at home with a bowl of food.’ So she said she would watch them.”

Not for the Very Young

There are several important components to parents’ reservations about day care centers. One important theme, described at some length in chapter 2, is parents’ conviction that only parents themselves can best provide the high doses of affection and attention that very young children need. These early years are seen as a perhaps unique chance for strong bonds to develop between parents and their children. Viewed in this context, a day care center—even when described as “top-notch”—is plainly seen as a compromise. A majority of parents (55%) say they would be very concerned that day care centers would fail to give young children “personal, one-on-one attention.” Concern grows even higher when 62% of parents say they worry that children might even be “neglected or left unsupervised” in day care centers. A child’s age is relevant—only 23% of parents say it is appropriate to place a toddler or infant in a day care center for a significant part of the week.

As we will see in Chapter 7, children’s advocates surveyed for this study generally have more positive views of the potential for day care to provide nurturing care, but even among this group, only 29% say it is appropriate to rely on a day care center in these very early years.

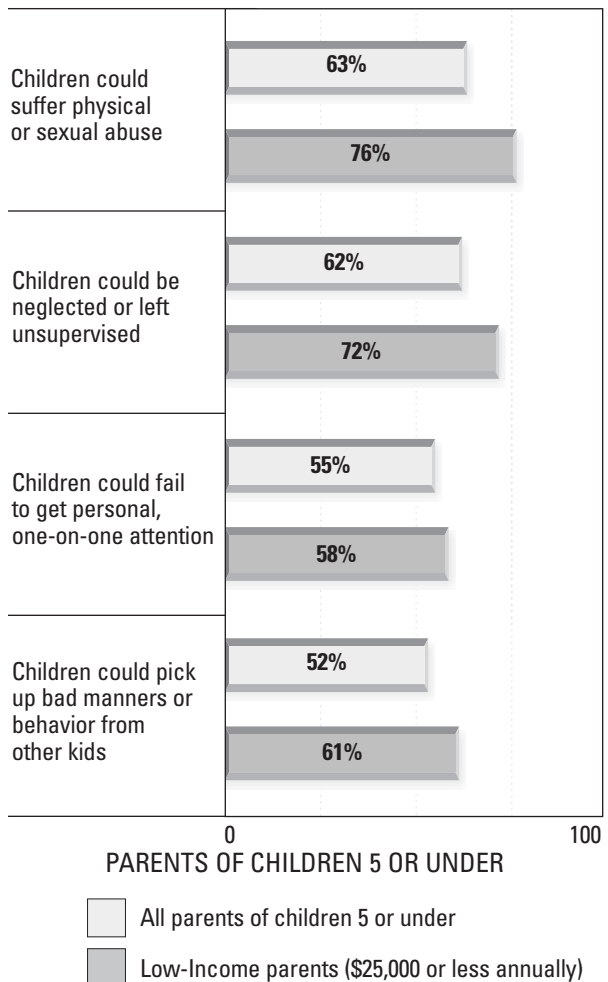
The Dread of Abuse

By far the most emotional concern regarding day care centers—an outright fear, instinctual, spontaneous and difficult to contain—is the dread of abuse. More than 6 in 10 parents (63%) say they are very concerned that “children could suffer physical or sexual abuse” in a typical day care center.

In almost every focus group, a famous story of child abuse was offered as evidence of how things can go terribly wrong when strangers care for children. “I guess I’ve been a little afraid,” confessed a New Jersey

Low Income Parents Even More Concerned

% of parents of children 5 or under who are “very concerned” that the following could happen in a typical day care center:



mom when asked if she relied on day care. “That McMartin case scared me. You hear stories about things that happen.” Here, the image of the accusations remained in her mind even though all the principals in the case have been exonerated.

Child care experts can easily point to studies suggesting that child abuse is extremely rare outside the home—indeed, that it is far more likely to occur in the home and to be committed by family and acquaintances than by child care professionals.⁵ When reality and perceptions diverge so emphatically, it is hard to resist the suspicion that misinformation and sensational news coverage are driving fears.

In the questionnaire, we gave parents the opportunity to acknowledge the media’s influence on their anxiety about physical or sexual abuse taking place in a typical day care center. But by a 73% to 24% margin, most parents—regardless of the age of their child—say parents are being sensible in voicing their concerns, not overreacting to horror stories they see in the media. (As we will see later, children’s advocates also say parents are wise to be concerned.) Still, in the focus groups, when parents voiced anxieties about safety in day care centers, they often referred to widely publicized cases of child abuse in child care situations, not firsthand knowledge.

The Fear of Being One in a Million

Perhaps the true effect of horror stories is not in creating misleading images of the typical day care center, but in tapping—and amplifying—parents’ pre-existing fears of strangers caring for their kids. Such stories are so powerful and continue to resonate precisely because they are a parent’s worst nightmare. Acknowledging it was highly improbable that something like this would happen to a child in a day care center, a New Jersey parent nonetheless said, “You don’t want to have your kid be that one in a million that gets hurt.”

To many parents, the fear that their children might suffer because they were given to the care of adults without familial connection looms large, posing an unforgivable—and therefore unbearable—risk. A New Jersey mom explained: “I could never live with

myself if I put my kids in a situation where they could be jeopardized. You read about the nut that drove her kids into the lake—this is their mother. Why would someone who has no blood relation to other kids treat them well? That’s my major fear. I let that cloud my thinking.”

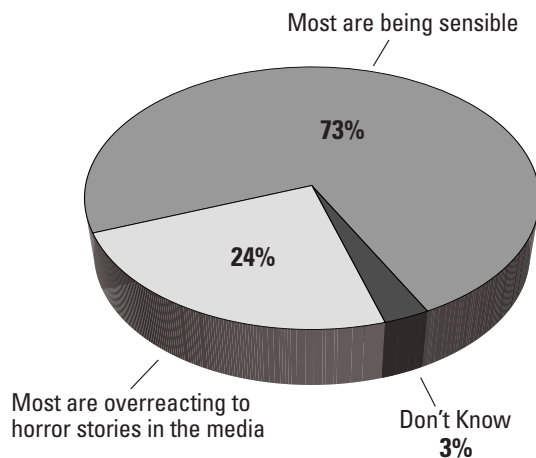
Bruises and Small Mix-ups

Parental fears persist even though almost 7 in 10 (69%) parents have visited a day care center in the past 5 years. It would seem that such visits do little to reassure parents. What’s more, stories of suspected neglect did occasionally emerge in the focus groups. “I had my baby in day care and I went to pick him up one day and he had fell [sic], he had a big lump on his head,” said a Florida woman. “She told me he was just playing and fell on his head....But another thing is when I would pick him up and get him home, it was like he was dying of thirst and hungry. That was every day. So I was thinking about that, too. They’re not feeding him, and now they’re not watching him. So I took him out.”

Some parents in the focus groups also spoke about less dramatic concerns they have with day care centers. They complained about kids continually

Sensible to Be Concerned

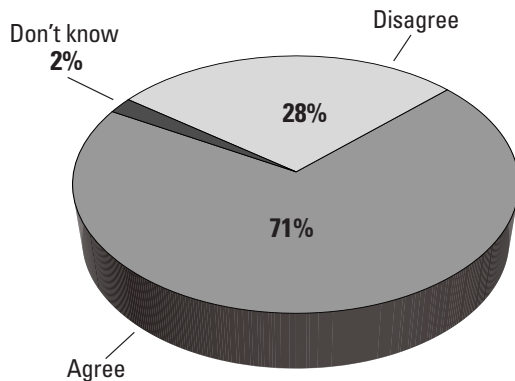
Which comes closer to your view about parents who are concerned about neglect or abuse in day care centers?



PARENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER 18

Distrust of Day Care

Parents should only rely on a day care center when they have no other option



PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER

catching colds, the low adult-to-child ratio and small mix-ups and mistakes that give them reason to pause. In the focus group in Jacksonville, Florida, one dad said, “We even write her name on her diapers so they know these are hers. Every time we pick her up...her diapers are still there, but yet she is wearing some other kid’s diaper, which I’m sure is a clean diaper, but I don’t know this kid.” And another parent in the same focus group said: “It seems like she [our daughter] is always sick. That is a big concern we have. We take her back and forth to the doctors. She is constantly sick, and we are always having to take her because of an ear ache or sore throat or whatever.”

Even Priests . . .

Suspicious of day care centers become more understandable when viewed in the context of a general loss of trust in their fellow citizens and in society overall. For parents in focus groups for this project and others Public Agenda has conducted, trust and a sense of community have been severely undermined and replaced by vigilance and wariness—the belief that nothing can be taken for granted. “You never know” was the widespread refrain.

“You never know about your neighbors,” said a Jacksonville mom. “There might be a predator or a

sexual offender or something staying next door to you and you’d never know.” No one—not even parents themselves—merited unblinking faith. “You read about priests and people you are supposed to respect and trust doing something awful to kids,” said one New Jersey dad in explaining his fears. “You can’t even trust parents with their own kids.” A San Francisco area dad described his family’s approach to child care: “We never go out, we don’t have extended family or baby-sitters. If there’s an office party, it’s my wife alone or me alone. It’s very difficult. We don’t trust other people, we’re very leery of letting our kids sleep over at friends’ houses. You just don’t know what can happen.”

An Icon of Social Distrust

Child care—particularly the day care center—has thus become an icon of social distrust, eliciting the harsh conviction that few can be trusted and little taken for granted. No wonder more than 7 in 10 agree with the statement “Parents should only rely on a day care center when they have no other option” (43% strongly, 28% somewhat). Nearly 6 in 10 (58%) parents strongly agree that “there is a big shortage of affordable day care centers where parents can feel confident their children would get good care.” In responses to an open-ended question about the most important things to look for in a child care arrangement for young children, parents were most apt to say they would look for guarantees of trustworthiness (24%)—such as a good reputation and good references—and the child care provider’s ability to be caring and loving toward kids (24%). Interestingly, only 11% of parents mentioned concerns about cost.

Low-Income Families Even More Concerned

Low-income parents (those earning no more than \$25,000 annually) have far stronger qualms about day care centers than parents earning more than \$75,000. And while paying for day care may in fact be more cumbersome for these low-income families, their chief and overriding concerns, like those of other parents, focus specifically and directly on issues of quality and trust. Low-income parents, for example,

are more likely to strongly agree that parents should rely on a day care center only if there is no other option—a 49% to 38% margin. Low-income parents are also far more likely to worry about the possibility of neglect or lack of supervision in a day care center (72% to 51%); children picking up bad manners (61% to 43%); or physical or sexual abuse (76% to 49%).

The heightened fear and wariness among lower-income families may well reflect their experience of what is available to them in their neighborhoods—a case of “what they see is what they are afraid they’ll get.” A low-income single mom in the Chicago area, for example, recalled that when her son was young she used “subsidized day care. I didn’t really like seeing a bunch of teenage girls watching him,” she said, “and I don’t think they really paid good attention to him—some of them would bring their boyfriends in and stuff like that. The kids were always getting colds, getting sick constantly.”

The Pluses: Basics and Getting Along

Despite their fears, parents do not entirely discount the benefits of a high-quality day care center, especially for children old enough to talk and to gain from interactions with other kids. Six in 10 (60%), for example, say that virtually all or most day care centers across the country do a good job “teaching children the basics, like their ABCs and colors.”

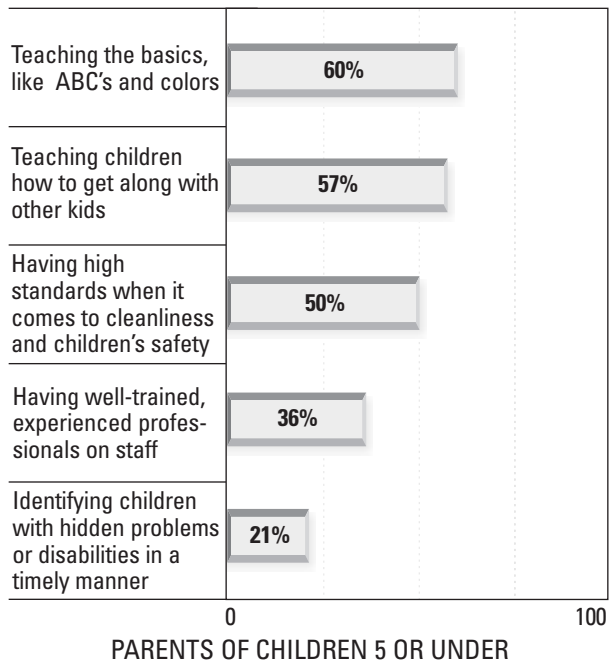
Another strong point for day care centers in the minds of parents is in helping to socialize kids. “They need to learn how to deal with other children,” pointed out a Jacksonville, Florida, mom, “and get used to being away from home so when they go to school they don’t freak out.” More than half (57%) of parents say virtually all or most day care centers do a good job “teaching children how to get along with other kids.” Day care centers also get good grades from 50% of parents of young children when it comes to having high standards on cleanliness and children’s safety.

Getting Minimum Wage

But professional day care is judged to be doing less well when it comes to having highly-trained, experienced professionals on staff (only 36% of parents say virtually all or most do a good job on this) or to identifying children with hidden problems or disabilities in a timely manner (21%). “The director at the day care center is probably educated, but the people that are watching your children are probably getting minimum wage,” said a Florida parent. “[If] you’re lucky, they may be educated. Because day care workers just don’t get paid that kind of money.”

Some Pluses for Day Care

% of parents who think “virtually all” or “most” typical day care centers in the U.S. do a good job of:



CHAPTER FOUR: IMPROVE CHILD CARE, DON'T ABANDON IT

Most parents recognize that many families do rely on child care, and they express substantial sympathy for working moms, single parents and families where both parents work. Despite their own preference for stay-at-home parental care, most say day care should be improved, not abandoned. They believe that high-quality day care can be especially helpful for the nation's poorest youngsters, for whom it may offer significant educational benefits. What's more, a large majority of parents of young children who do use professional day care are pleased with their current arrangement.

The Ordinary Exceptions

Though most parents view day care centers as an option of last resort, the majority also recognize that the optimum standard of one parent at home full-time is just not feasible for many families. Parents can easily visualize many ordinary exceptions and therefore they believe that outside-the-home child care is an important and necessary alternative that should be improved, not abandoned. (In chapter 5, we report on parents' views on a variety of proposals for improving child care.)

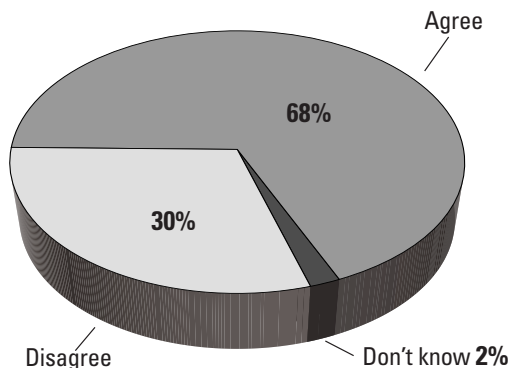
Few Judgments

Parents believe that economic necessity often requires families to make hard choices, so they don't pass

judgment on those who cannot afford the luxury of a full-time at-home parent. Said a Chicago parent, "I really feel for people who have no choice, and some people have no choice. They have to settle and maybe go a little bit lower in quality in terms of what they can do for their kids." Nearly 7 in 10 parents agree that "for most families these days, having one parent stay at home with the kids is not a realistic option" (37% strongly and 30% somewhat). A majority (57%) believe that most families with both parents working do so because they need two incomes to make ends meet, not because they want things they could really do without (18%) or even to be able to live in better homes and neighborhoods (22%). Parents in no way regard families in these situations as less loving or less attentive to their children's welfare. Two in 3 parents (68%) strongly agree that working moms are

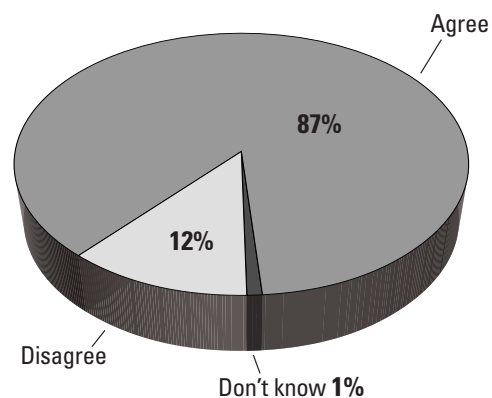
Sympathy for Families Who Need Child Care

Having one parent stay at home is an unrealistic option for most families these days. Do you agree or disagree?



PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER

Mothers who work outside the home are just as loving and committed to their children as those who stay at home



just as loving and committed to their children as those who stay home. And despite the strength of parents' conviction that young children do best with a stay-at-home parent, only 35% say that this is "absolutely essential." Most (60%) consider this important, but not essential. That is, they can readily visualize circumstances where children thrive even though the ideal is not possible.

"I Really Sympathize"

Single moms in particular garnered special sympathy in the focus group discussions; people thought parenting was difficult enough for couples, so anyone going it alone deserved help. "I can't imagine how I could grow my business and manage child care at the same time," said a New Jersey dad to a single mom after she described the day-to-day juggling she goes through with child care. "I really sympathize. It would be very difficult. I don't know how I would ever handle that situation." Seventy-seven percent strongly agree that "when it comes to raising children, single parents have it especially hard."

The issue of single moms—the image that came to the minds of focus group participants was typically single moms, not dads—did not trigger much finger wagging in the focus groups. For one thing, single parenting is not such a rare phenomenon; in this survey, almost a third of parents are either currently single (19%) or had been single when their children were younger (12%). And people recognize that life is complicated, that it may be better for couples to live apart than together, even if they have children and even if this makes raising them more difficult. While acknowledging the difficulties of going it alone, over half (62%) of parents who are currently single still say they are better off raising their children on their own rather than with the other parent. "I think if you can find someone that you can live with, it would be a better thing," said a single mom in Chicago. "But he [the other parent] was never home. He was with his buddies all the time...once he didn't come home for three nights and my baby was six months old. So I said, 'I'm not going to raise a child under these conditions.' I got [my son] out of that environment."

* Base: Respondents answering "absolutely essential" or "important but not essential" for one parent to stay at home full time.

When to Use Child Care

Which is better for parents to do in the following situations?

	Better to use child care	More important to stay at home
If a parent is very unhappy at home and wants to go to work*	83%	15%
If a parent is relying on welfare*	71%	20%
If having one parent stay at home would mean a substantial cut in family's living standard	37%	55%

PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER

If You're Not Happy . . .

It is also important to realize that, for most parents surveyed, economic necessity is not the only appropriate reason for using non-parental child care. If a parent is very unhappy staying at home and wants to go to work, parents* say it would be better to use child care than stay home, by an 83% to 15% margin.

Indeed, the only instance where many parents suspect misplaced priorities is when having a parent stay at home merely means a cut in lifestyle. Here, a 55% to 37% margin says the family should choose to have one parent stay home and accept the cut in lifestyle rather than put their child in quality child care. Here evidently, personal circumstances and experiences have an impact on attitudes. Almost 7 in 10 (69%) parents of children 5 or under who do not use child care say one parent should stay home and accept the cut, but only 42% who currently use child care agree.

Families Relying on Welfare

Another circumstance where parents say non-parental child care is preferred is when families are receiving public assistance. By a greater than 3 to 1 margin,

parents say it is more important for parents on welfare or public assistance to use child care so they can work or go to school than to stay at home (71% versus 20%)—and these are parents who believe that it is either absolutely essential, or at least important, for one parent to stay at home during a child’s earliest years.

Some might regard this finding as the quintessential double standard—a case of middle-class parents saying that professional child care is not good enough for their own children but fine for those on government assistance. But this would be a misunderstanding of the public’s reasoning and the particular set of values and concerns they bring to the issue of welfare.

Double Standards and Double Standards

At the height of the welfare reform debate in 1996, Public Agenda research showed that the American public was resolutely focused upon moving people from public assistance to work, and that they believed child care benefits were needed to make this possible for moms with young children. Large majorities of Americans, including those with welfare recipients in their own families, feared that children learn the wrong values if they grow up without seeing a parent working at a paying job, and also that welfare can be a “habit” that is passed on to younger generations. In addition, many Americans were resentful at what they viewed as a double standard inherent in the welfare system that existed at the time: while non-welfare families often had to compromise on the parent-at-home ideal by working and putting their kids in child care, mothers on public assistance were allowed to stay home. At the time, 76% of those questioned said it was “not fair to give mothers on welfare the benefit of staying at home with their kids when mothers who work do not have that luxury.”⁶

Thumbs Up for Head Start

There also seems to be a second strain of thought driving parents’ views that children from welfare families may benefit from being in professional day care. Just over half (51%) strongly agree that “the nation’s poorest children need low-cost, high-quality day care centers to have a fair chance of succeeding in

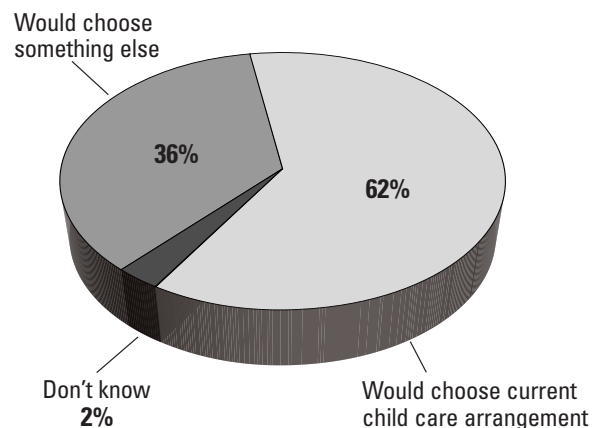
school and climbing out of poverty.” Children’s advocates surveyed for this study are even more passionate on this point, with 81% strongly agreeing with the same statement.

The notion that quality day care could help level the playing field for children born into poverty, and help prepare them for school, is broadly accepted. Six in 10 (60%) parents say increasing Head Start funding for low-income families would be a very helpful way to improve the care children get. In its 1998 study of attitudes toward racial integration and academic achievement in the nation’s public schools, Public Agenda found that 63% of African American parents and 52% of white parents believed “expanding preschool programs to help prepare low-income black kids for school” would be an excellent way to help African American students who are not doing well in school.⁷

As a group, parents divide on whether the effort to move welfare parents into the workforce when their children are very young has gone too far, and this may reflect something of a competition between two strong beliefs: one is that work is the only path out of welfare dependency, the other is that small children are best off with a parent at home. In the end, parents

Day Care Users Satisfied

If you could choose your ideal child care arrangement, would it be the one you currently have or something else?



PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER WHO CURRENTLY USE A PROFESSIONAL DAY CARE CENTER FOR THEIR YOUNGEST CHILD

in this study divide over whether “welfare reform is putting too much pressure on mothers to put their children in child care so they can work”—45% agree, but 43% reject the view.

Satisfied Customers

While parents of young children overall believe that child care and professional day care centers can be beneficial and appropriate choices for many, it is also important to point out that those parents who currently rely on a day care center for their youngest child—and 25% do so—are generally pleased with their choice. Perhaps they sought and ultimately found a top-notch facility, or perhaps they recognized that day care was a necessity and so made peace with their decision. However they arrived at day care, of the 1 in 4 who use it, most (62%) say they would stick with their current day care center even if they could switch to their “ideal child care arrangement.”

“My daughter is in a really cutting-edge kind of day care where they have a program where the teacher is consistently with the children,” reported a Walnut

Creek, California, mom. “It starts when they are in the infant room, and she stays with them until they get ready for kindergarten. She loves it. She’s learning so much, and she’s happy there.” A dad in Florida said, “... my daughters [have] grown tremendously since they’ve been there. The people running it are wonderful. I had nothing but good experiences. They were really, really nice. It was very clean. There weren’t too many children.”

Most families tend to become more comfortable and confident once their decision—to stay at home, or to work and rely on child care—is made.

This level of satisfaction may result from experience—now that they are doing it, they see that it works—or it may reflect a predisposition toward one option over the other. Also at play may be the very human tendency to learn to live with and make the best of a given situation.

“My daughter is in a really cutting-edge kind of day care where they have a program where the teacher is consistently with the children . . . She loves it. She’s learning so much, and she’s happy there.”

— California Mom

CHAPTER FIVE: WHAT'S A POLICYMAKER TO DO?

Most parents say their families have their own child care situation under control, and they are hardly clamoring for a large-scale government program to refashion how children are cared for. Parents are interested primarily in tax policies that would make it more possible and affordable for them to achieve their preferred situation, which is a parent at home full-time during children's earliest years. But because they recognize that many families do need and rely on non-parental child care, they want to improve the nation's child care options and day care centers—especially in terms of quality.

Child Care: Under Control

It seems that many parents who rely on child care for their young children tend to follow a similar process when deciding on a child care arrangement. First, they struggle through the decision to go back to work and whether to rely on child care, and then they struggle to find a trustworthy provider. But once all the soul-searching and legwork is behind them, it seems, most parents tend to be comfortable and content with their choices. By parents' own accounting, having thought through and settled upon the child care arrangement that works for them, they feel little day-to-day anxiety or stress over it.

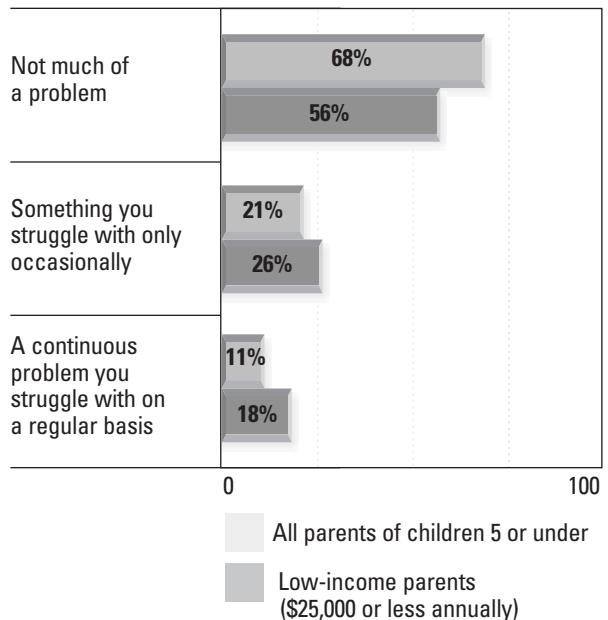
For most parents of young children, this particular routine of family life—having a reliable, responsible place for their kids while they are at work—seems stable and under control. In fact, nearly 7 in 10 (68%) say that in their family child care is not much of a problem, and only 11% say it is a continuous problem, one they struggle with on a regular basis. One might expect low-income parents (those making \$25,000 or less annually) to face more trouble, but they are only slightly more likely to say they struggle with it on a regular basis (18%).

Another sign that most parents who use child care are in a comfort zone is that most would stick with their current arrangement (68%) rather than switch to something else (32%), even if they could pick their ideal. This holds true regardless of the type of child care parents use or whether they are single- or two-working-parent families. A parent in the San Francisco Bay area described the in-home, licensed

child care that her 2-year-old goes to as the “perfect situation....She’s excited to go, she’s learning so much, and she comes home talking about all the kids she got to play with. It’s been such a positive experience.” Not only do most parents seem comfortable with their current child care arrangement, they also report that finding it was not particularly onerous. Only 25% say that when they were looking for child care they had “a serious problem finding the right arrangement” (40% say it was “relatively easy” and 35% “somewhere in the middle”).

Few Struggle Daily

For your family today, would you say that child care is:



Remember, when parents do struggle in their search to find the right child care, their effort is driven by concerns surrounding trust as opposed to practical concerns such as convenience or cost. More than half (57%) say the hardest part of finding the right child care was finding “something that was trustworthy” rather than convenient (11%) or affordable (14%). Several parents spoke about finally clicking with a person after meeting many potential candidates. One father said, “It took us a while to find someone we were comfortable with....We looked the situation over very carefully. It was a long process to decide....We feel very good about it now.”

Home Is Where the Action Is

These findings suggest that while the nation’s parents wrestle with the child care issue during certain stages—first when making the decision whether to use child care and then when searching for the right provider—they are hardly facing a child care crisis on a daily basis. Yet parents still believe there is a role for government to play, especially when it comes to helping them achieve their best alternative—having one parent home during a child’s earliest years. (Parents would also like employers to pitch in, and

their attitudes in this area—as well as the response of employers—are reported in chapter 6.)

As seen in previous findings, parents believe they are the ideal child care providers, especially when their children are very young. Because their beliefs on this front are so strong, their most vigorous interest focuses on government policies such as tax breaks that would reward families who keep one parent at home full-time. Nearly two-thirds of parents with young children (64%) say it would be very helpful if government gave “a much bigger tax break to parents who stay home to care for their children.” Not surprisingly, this proposal was especially attractive to parents who have already decided to forgo child care (72% say it would be very helpful), but even 58% of parents currently relying on child care concur.

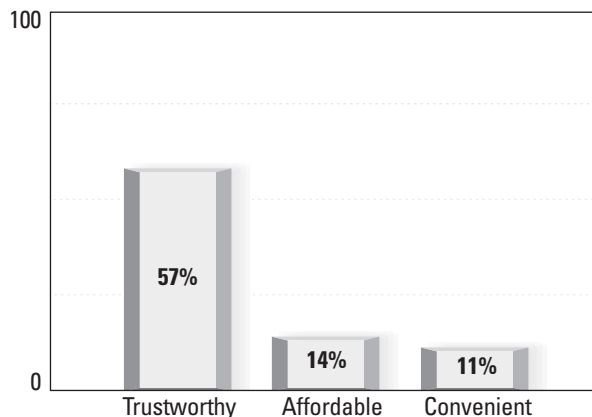
This idea arose consistently and spontaneously in the focus groups. “They should make it so one parent could afford to stay home,” said a Florida dad. “Cut my taxes so someone can stay at home....The answer is less taxes and give people their money so they can do what they want to with it.”

If You Had to Choose . . .

The survey findings corroborate the strength of this sentiment in several ways. If they had to choose, twice as many parents of children 5 or under say policy makers should concentrate on making it easier and more affordable for one parent to be home during a child’s first few years (62%) rather than on improving the quality and affordability of outside-the-home child care (30%). Parents also were asked whether they would prefer putting limited government resources toward a bigger tax break for families with a stay-at-home parent or for families where both parents work and use professional child care. More than half (53%) preferred to direct the tax cuts to stay-at-home-parent families, compared with just 1 in 3 (33%) who would opt to help families who use child care.

Looking for Someone They Can Trust

When you were looking for the right child care, which was the hardest part? Finding something that was:



PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER WHO CURRENTLY USE CHILD CARE

Not a Choice Every Family Can Make

While one parent at home is their ideal, many parents think this standard may be out of reach for most

families in the United States, and they are hardly in a rush to ignore their needs. In focus group after focus group, we heard parents talk about the sacrifices their own families have made in order to provide full-time parental, rather than professional, child care. But their comments were characterized by the sympathetic, nonjudgmental recognition that forgoing a second income is simply not a choice every family is in a position to make. Nearly 7 in 10 agree either strongly (37%) or somewhat (30%) with the statement that “for most families these days, having one parent stay at home with the kids is not a realistic option.” A self-employed dad of a 4-year-old daughter in Jacksonville, Florida, commented, “I’ve seen friends that have made a lot of sacrifices to be able to do it—to spend their time with their kids. But I realize that not everyone is fortunate that way. Some people have to put their children in child care and work.”

As seen earlier, most parents have concerns about the reliability and trustworthiness of professional child care. It is not surprising, therefore, that they look with favor upon proposals to improve the quality of the field. More than half (54%) of parents say that “tightening state regulations and licensing for outside-the-home child care” would be a very helpful way to improve the care children in this nation get.

“Half My Check for Child Care”

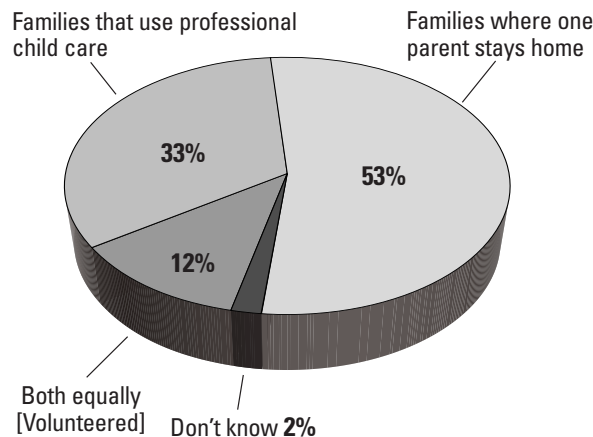
There is also support to make professional child care more affordable. Parents favor “giving families a much bigger tax break when they use professional child care”—48% of parents say this proposal would be very helpful. Again, it is not surprising that the parents who would benefit most directly—those now using child care—are more likely to say the proposal would be very helpful (56%) and that those who do not use child care are less enthusiastic (38%). A New Jersey mom described her firsthand experience needing help to pay for child care when her kids were young: “There was a point in my life where I had two children and had to work. I was paying out half of my check for child care, not including clothing, car expenses and insurance. I think there should be a break for those who have to work and get to keep less than half their check. A tax break would have made a big difference at that point.”

Help for Those Most in Need

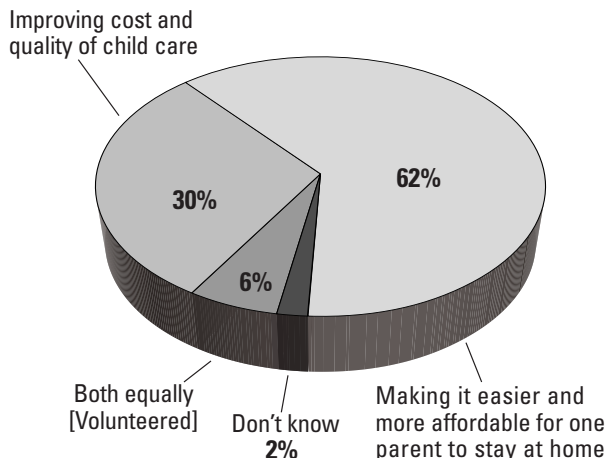
Other proposals also show parents have a sympathetic understanding and a desire to help working parents and families who are poor. As previously mentioned, increasing Head Start funding has strong support as a

Help Parents Stay Home

Assuming there is a limited amount of money, is it important for the government to give bigger tax breaks to:



Do you think public policies on families and work should focus more on:



PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER

helpful measure (60% say it would be very helpful), as does “extending the school day with after-school programs to accommodate the schedules of working parents” (48% say very helpful). In New Jersey, one of the parents who was from a stay-at-home-parent family sympathized with others who were not: “The problem is that there is such a need for day care because of what we’ve done to the two-parent family and single-parent family. It’s hard to have just one parent work.”

Not Sink or Swim

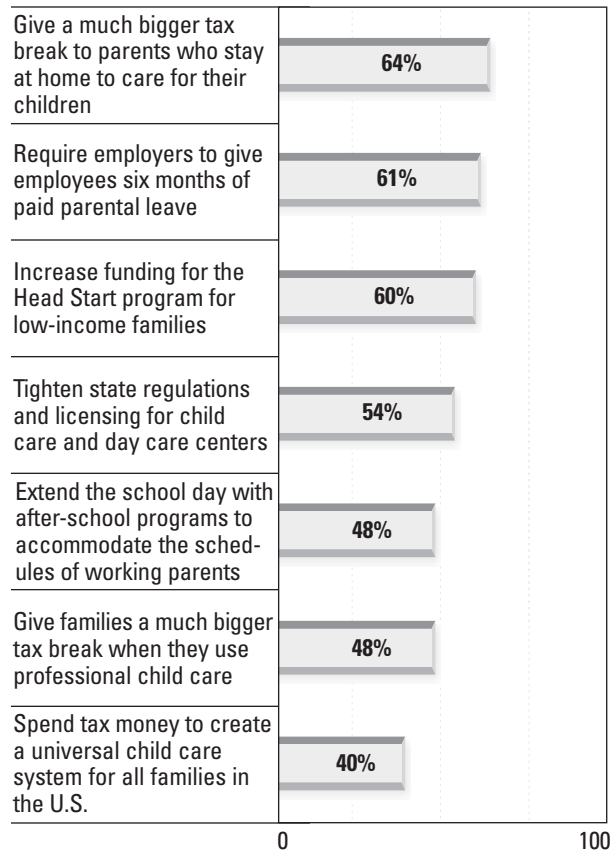
The upshot of these attitudes is that parental resolve—and action—to take individual and personal responsibility for the care of their children does not translate into a sink-or-swim outlook. Parents are interested in government policies that mirror their own values and preferences on how to best rear young children and that respond pragmatically to the real world.

Parents think a parent at home is the ideal, and policies that encourage and support this generate the most appeal. Parents also recognize that in many families today both spouses must work and rely upon professional child care, so they would like to improve the child care industry with tighter regulations. They believe that children born to poor families face a special challenge and want to help even the playing field with programs to prepare them for school and life.

But the overall vision is clear: rather than a broad scale and systematic government initiative that takes the lead in child care, parents would much rather see policies that bolster their effort to follow through with their favorite definition of child care—parents caring for their children.

Many Policies Endorsed

% of parents who say the following proposals would be “very helpful” as far as improving the care young children get:



PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER

CHAPTER SIX: EMPLOYERS' VIEWS

About half of working parents—especially low-income and single parents—are less than enthusiastic about their employers' efforts to help them balance work and family life, but most employers say they are doing the best they can. For their part, employers are sympathetic to the needs of working parents, but most say it's difficult to provide child care benefits given the practical considerations of running a business. On-site day care is a case in point: it is a popular idea among parents, but issues of cost and liability discourage many employers from providing it.

In this chapter, we explore the perspectives of working parents and their employers regarding child care issues. Like parents, employers juggle competing demands. They must calculate just how much they can feasibly do to help their employees balance work and family, given the pressure on them to meet the bottom line and to provide other benefits such as health care insurance and retirement plans. For this study, we interviewed 218 employers, including owners of small businesses and human resource professionals from larger companies.

Some Do, Some Don't

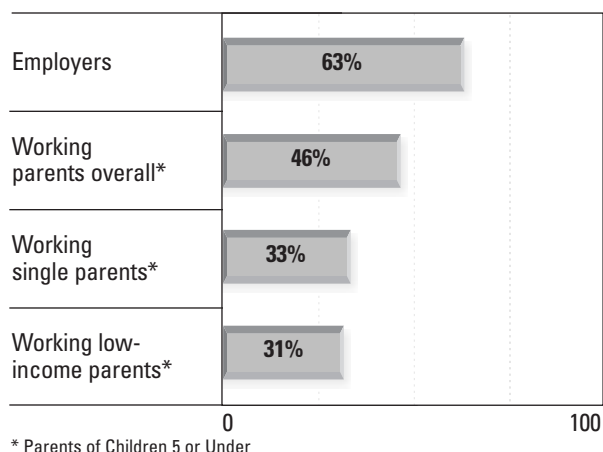
Working parents of young children are essentially divided on how much effort their employers put forth to help them balance work and family. Responses to the question “When it comes to making it easier for parents to juggle work and child care responsibilities, do you think that your employer is doing as much as can be expected or do you think that it could realistically do much more?” were essentially split: almost half (46%) say their organization is doing as much as can be expected, and just over half (52%) say it could realistically do much more.

Working parents were again evenly divided over whether their own employer could afford to provide significant child care benefits: 48% think their company probably could, and 49% think it probably could not. More broadly, only 25% of parents of young children strongly agree with the statement “Today’s employers are much more understanding when parents need time off to care for their kids” (although another 35% somewhat agree).

While working parents overall are divided on how well their employers are doing on the child care front, disappointment is more pronounced among two particular groups. Considerably larger percentages of low-income (68%)—those earning \$25,000 or less annually—and single (65%) working parents say their company realistically could do much more to make it easier for them to juggle work and child care responsibilities, compared with just over half (52%) of working parents with young children overall. It is not clear from this study whether these differences are due to a greater need and desire for child care assistance among low-income and single parents, or whether parents on these groups tend to be in jobs

How Are Employers Doing? Workers vs. Employers

% of each group who say their organization is doing as much about child care as can be expected



where employees have less discretion about working hours and where options such as telecommuting and job-sharing may not be practical.

What Do Parents Want?

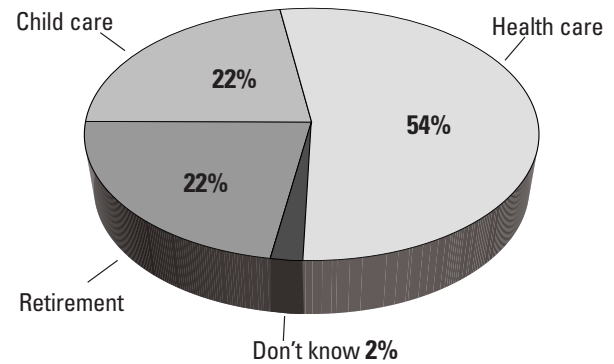
Working parents are attracted to many ideas about how employers could make child care easier for the workforce. One very popular notion is for employers to provide child care at the workplace. This idea is popular among parents of young children who work outside the home as well as those who are not currently in the paid workforce. More than 7 in 10 (73%) employed parents with young kids say they would be at least somewhat likely to use an on-site child care center if their employer provided one. Similarly, 70% of those who are either currently not working or self-employed say they would be at least somewhat likely to reenter the workforce on a full-time basis if they could work for an employer who offered such a benefit. Also, requiring employers to give employees 6 months of paid parental leave is considered a very helpful solution, according to 61% of parents of young children.

Employers: Doing What We Can

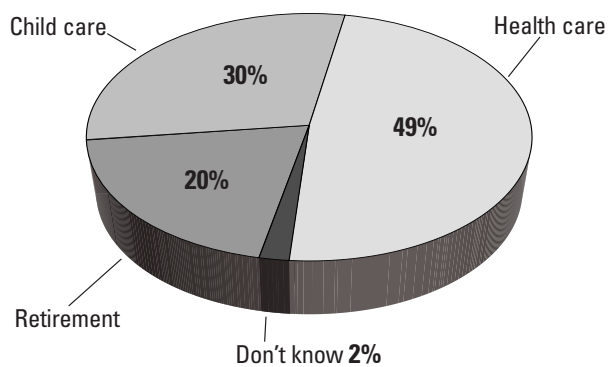
From the employers' perspective, working parents have very high expectations that seem to overlook the realities of what may or may not be feasible. More than 6 in 10 (63%) employers believe their own organization is doing the best it can in terms of being family friendly, compared with only 13% who say it could be doing a lot better. And in their own defense, employers offer evidence to back up this claim: the employers we interviewed say they are not losing talented employees—or struggling to recruit them—owing to inadequate child care benefits. Nearly 8 in 10 (79%) disagree with the statement “My company has lost good employees because we lack good child care benefits.” And only about 1 in 4 (26%) strongly agrees with the statement “The competition for good workers is so great that more and more companies will offer benefits such as flexible work schedules and extended parental leave to their employees,” although another 54% of employers somewhat agree.

Health Care a Higher Priority

If your employer could improve your benefits in one of these three areas, which would you prefer?

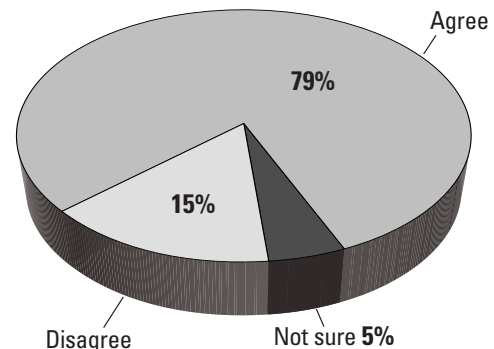


WORKING PARENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER 18



WORKING PARENTS WITH CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER

Retirement and health care benefits are much more important to my company's employees than child care benefits



EMPLOYERS

Practical Considerations

What’s more, employers seem to be extremely sympathetic to working parents and alert to the struggles they face. An overwhelmingly large majority of employers (82%) believe that having one parent at home is what’s best for the care and development of young children. A similarly large majority agree that “the high cost of living that forces most families to have both parents working” is a very (49%) or somewhat (31%) serious problem in the country today.

But employers say it is difficult for them to do more to help their employees with kids, given the practical considerations of running a business. More than 6 in 10 (62%) strongly agree that it is simply too expensive for most small companies to provide significant child care benefits. Almost as many (57%) strongly agree that when it comes to their own organizations, “flex-time and telecommuting may sound good,” but they need people at work during regular business hours.

Little Fear of Resentment

Employers must also take into consideration the needs of their workforce as a whole—parents as well as

people who do not have children. As more and more company perks seem to benefit parents—for example, the implementation of the Family and Medical Leave Act or the increase in the number of telecommuters or job sharers—the possibility of resentment among non-parents in the workplace becomes an increasingly popular topic of interest.⁸ But the employers we surveyed do not seem to have found this to be a big problem. Only 17% of employers strongly agree that other employees would resent it if their organizations gave special consideration or child care benefits to parents (although 35% agree somewhat).

Employers believe that child care benefits—while important—do not top the list of benefits that parents demand. More than 4 in 10 (44%) employers strongly agree that retirement and health care are much more important to their workers than child care benefits.

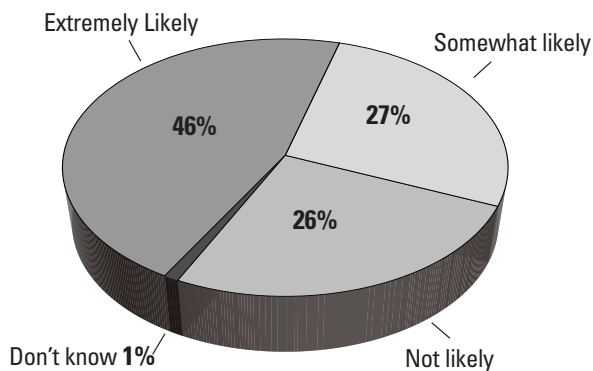
Which Benefits Come First?

Again, there is evidence to support the employers’ assertion. When we asked working parents overall which they would choose if their employer could improve their benefits in only 1 of 3 areas, more than half (54%) choose better health benefits, 22% a better

On-Site Day Care

Working parents are interested . . .

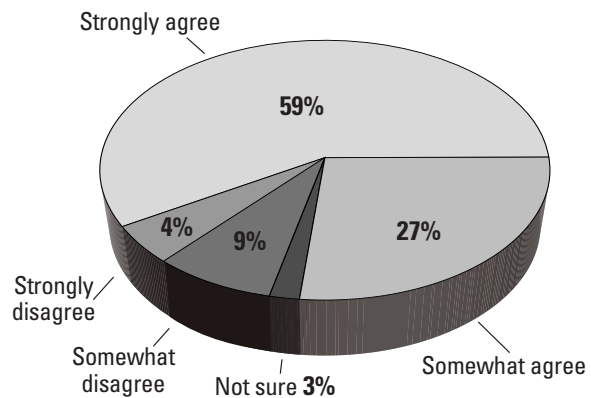
If your employer provided a high-quality child care center at your place of business, how likely would you be to use it?



WORKING PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER

. . . But employers say it's not so easy

The responsibilities and liabilities of on-site child care are too much for my company to take on. Do you agree or disagree?



EMPLOYERS

retirement plan, and 22% choose better child care benefits. Even among working parents with children 5 or under—those who would have the most interest in child care benefits—child care did not top the list. Almost half (49%) say they would prefer better health care insurance; 30% of these parents with very young children would indeed choose child care benefits, but about 20% would opt for a better retirement plan.

Case in Point: On-site Child Care

As we have seen, employer-sponsored, on-site child care is one of the most popular ideas among working parents, and in theory at least, it is popular among employers as well. Eight in 10 (81%) employers think on-site day care is more reliable than other day care

centers, and nearly 6 in 10 (58%) think giving companies tax breaks for providing it would be a very effective way to improve child care for young kids. Still, employers say it's not so easy. Six in 10 (62%) of those surveyed strongly agree that few companies have the expertise or resources to run high-quality day care. Similarly, 59% strongly agree that the responsibilities and liabilities of on-site child care are too much for their own companies to take on.

Nearly 8 in 10 (79%) [employers] disagree with the statement “My company has lost good employees because we lack good child care benefits.”

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE CHILDREN'S ADVOCATES

On one level, parents and children's advocates are on exactly the same wavelength. Both groups believe that having a parent at home is the best child care arrangement during a child's earliest years, and both, for example, back expanded parental leave. But while most parents of young children are convinced that there is no worthy substitute for the parent-child relationship, child advocates believe that top-notch day care centers could be designed to provide enriching, educational and nurturing care equivalent to that of a parent. Nevertheless, child advocates say professional child care as it exists today falls far short of their goals—especially in the way it serves disadvantaged children. Advocates would direct the nation's efforts mainly toward improving the cost and affordability of child care and day care centers.

This chapter focuses on the attitudes and priorities of children's advocates—the experts, professionals and activists who have devoted their careers to improving children's lives. The data are based on the responses of more than 200 respondents who are affiliated with the nation's leading children's advocacy organizations.

What Day Care Could Be

Like parents of young children, children's advocates clearly appreciate the value and importance of the parent-child bond. Indeed, 7 in 10 advocates (71%) and parents (70%) choose having one parent at home as the best possible arrangement for young children. But unlike parents, who see a parent's love as the fundamental, irreplaceable ingredient and who display an almost instinctive recoil against professional day care, advocates have a positive—even optimistic—vision of what high-quality day care centers could be like. What's more, their sense of where the problems lie is actually quite different from that of most parents surveyed. Parents, as we have seen, think it is unfortunate that there are not enough parents at home raising their own kids. Just 13% of advocates say this is a very serious problem, compared to 86% who say that a lack of high-quality affordable day care is a very serious problem.

Almost 8 in 10 (78%) children's advocates agree (36% strongly and 42% somewhat) that top-notch day care

centers can provide children with care and attention equal to that of a stay-at-home parent. One respondent, in a handwritten comment on her questionnaire, wrote: “[The] well-being of the young child is best promoted by the quality of their interactions with caring, competent, fully available, responsible adults. The setting—home, child care, neighbor—is much less important.” In contrast, a much smaller proportion of parents of children 5 or under (34%) give the nod to top-notch day care centers (9% strongly and 26% somewhat agree).

Seeing Eye-to-Eye with Parents

Which is the best child care arrangement during a child's earliest years?

	Parents of Children 5 or Under	Children's Advocates
One parent at home	70%	71%
Both parents working different shifts	14%	6%
Close relatives	6%	4%
Quality day care center	6%	13%
Mom in the neighborhood	2%	4%
Baby-sitter at home	2%	2%

“Just Because a Parent Stays Home . . .”

Children’s advocates also believe that it may be in the best interest of young children to spend some time—especially during the formative years—with people who have professional expertise in children’s development. When asked to think about the basic education and intellectual development that need to take place during a child’s earliest years, many more advocates say that “it would be better if children could spend some time with professionals trained in child development” rather than “most parents know what’s good for their kids and can do a good job” (58% versus 33%). “Just because a parent stays home doesn’t necessarily mean good parenting is happening,” wrote one children’s advocate. It may take some convincing, however, to sway parents toward this manner of thinking. Eight in 10 (80%) parents of young children believe that “no one can do as good a job of raising children as their own parents.”

The Status Quo Falls Short

Although they have high hopes for the potential of the nation’s child care system to provide caring, compassionate and nurturing care, children’s advocates believe the system as it currently stands falls far short. Eighty-five percent of the children’s advocates surveyed described “a shortage of well-trained, experienced professionals in day care centers” as a

very serious problem. And no more than a handful think most day care centers do a good job of identifying children with hidden problems or disabilities (6%) or having well-trained, experienced professionals on staff (8%). About half say most do a good job teaching the basics (52%) or teaching children how to get along with others (47%). (See table 7 for comparison with parents’ views.)

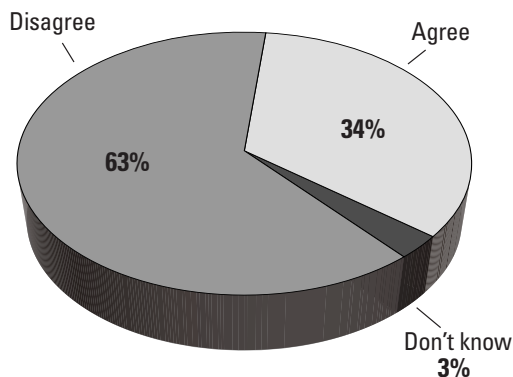
But advocates also believe that creating a high-quality child care system will inevitably require a greater investment. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a child care worker earns approximately \$7 an hour,⁹ and an overwhelming majority (88%) of children’s advocates think that “increasing the salaries of child care providers in day care centers” would be very effective in improving the quality of care. Almost 3 in 4 (73%) also believe that “government spending on the wrong priorities, with too little money going for child care” is a very serious problem when it comes to families and child care in America today.

Abuse: Sensible Fears or Media Driven?

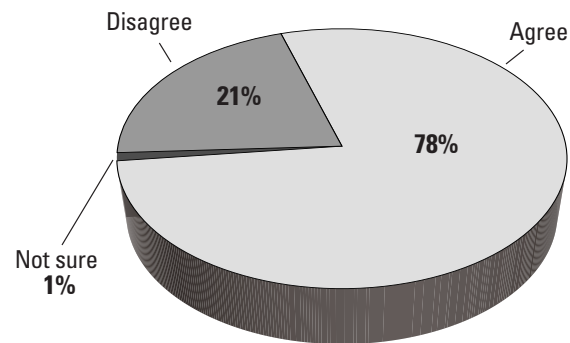
While children’s advocates share many of the public’s concerns about the quality of existing day care, there are some notable differences between the two groups. Only 1 in 8 (12%) advocates, for example, are very concerned about the likelihood of physical or sexual abuse of children occurring in the nation’s day care

Can Top-notch Day Care Compare With a Parent at Home?

When children go to a top-notch day care center, the care and attention they get is just as good as what they would get from a stay-at-home parent. Do you agree or disagree?



PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER



CHILDREN’S ADVOCATES

centers. Parents, as discussed at some length in chapter 3, are much more fearful, with more than half (53%) of those who currently rely on professional day care saying they are very concerned that children in day care centers could suffer physical or sexual abuse.

As previously mentioned, research studies suggest that abuses of this kind are rare in day care centers and are much more likely to be committed by family members, information that is presumably known to many experts in the field. Nevertheless, even though many probably know that the likelihood of abuse is low, a majority of advocates (56%) say parents with these concerns are being sensible rather than overreacting to media horror stories (76% of parents concur).

Helping Children in Need

According to advocates, it is particularly important to help level the playing field for children whose lives lack many of the benefits that accompany a middle-class lifestyle. An overwhelming majority (85%) strongly agree that “to help at-risk children from impoverished families, it is especially important to intervene with early childhood education.” Another 81% strongly agree that “the nation’s poorest children need low-cost, high-quality day care centers to have a fair chance of succeeding in school and climbing out of poverty.”

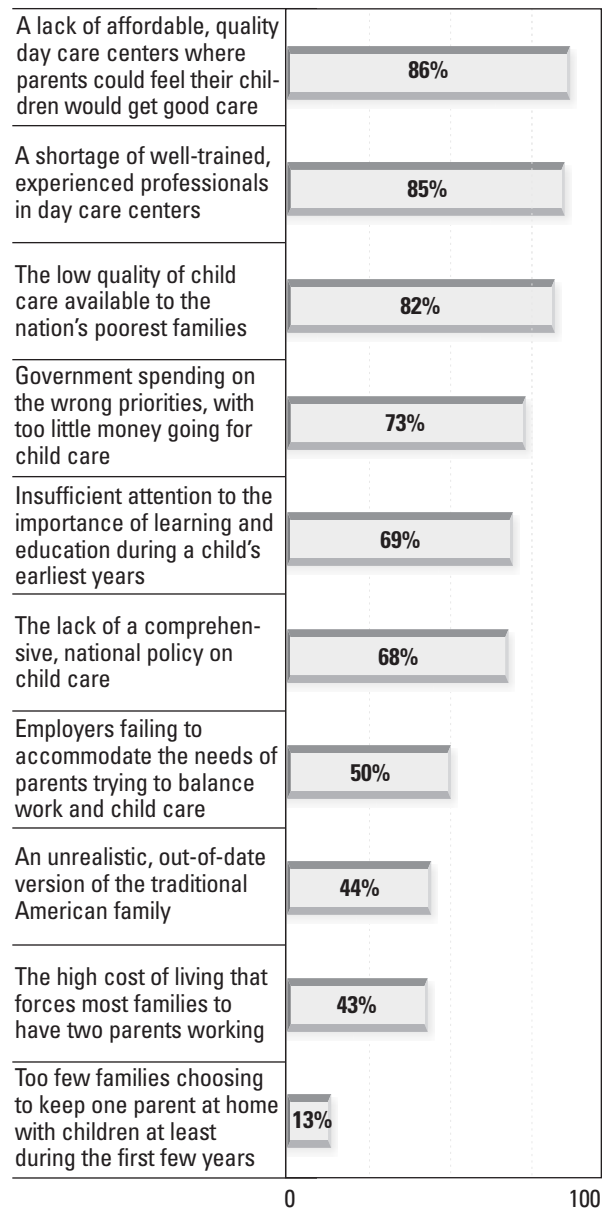
Advocates also think it’s especially difficult for poorer families to find affordable, high-quality child care. Large majorities think this is a “severe and hard to overcome” problem for low-income parents (88%), for those who work unusual shifts such as nights or weekends (87%) and for those who are on public assistance (79%). Similarly, more than 8 in 10 (82%) advocates believe that “the low quality of child care available to the nation’s poorest families” is a very serious problem in our country today. As noted earlier, low-income parents themselves are more likely than other parents to say they are very concerned that children in a typical day care center could be exposed to physical or sexual abuse (76%), be neglected or left unsupervised (72%) or pick up bad manners from other kids (61%).

Quality Care “Almost Nonexistent”

Lawmakers at the national level tend to engage in a child care debate that focuses mainly on questions

Advocates Focused on Improving Day Care

% of children’s advocates who say the following are “very serious” problems



CHILDREN’S ADVOCATES

about taxes: Should we offer tax credits to help low- and middle-income families pay for child care, or should we offer tax incentives to make it more feasible for them to have one parent at home full-time? Children’s advocates, for their part, would direct the nation’s energy less toward tax credits and more toward developing a first-rate system of child care. Although their vision can and does include benefits to help parents stay at home especially when children are very young—for example, more than 6 in 10 (62%) advocates think requiring employers to provide 6 months of paid parental leave would be very effective—children’s advocates focus most directly on measures to dramatically upgrade existing day care services. As one survey participant wrote: “Quality child care is almost nonexistent. It will not improve until child care licensing standards are raised, until education is a requirement [for] working with young children and until wages for early childhood professionals are increased.”

For example, when asked to choose the primary focus of public policy on families and work—either to improve the cost and quality of professional child care or to make it easier and more affordable for families to have one parent stay home full-time—advocates choose improving professional child care by a 67% to 27% margin. Similarly, almost 9 in 10 (88%) children’s advocates think that “increasing the salaries of child care providers in day care centers” would be very effective in helping to improve the care young children in the United States receive, compared with fewer than 3 in 10 (27%) who think that “creating a tax credit for parents who stay home” would be very effective. (See table 10.)

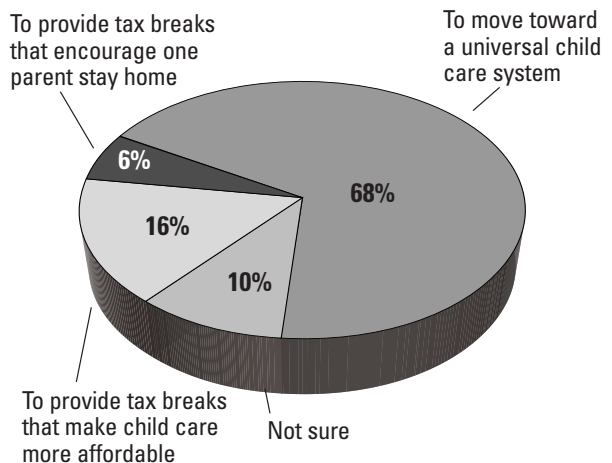
Benefits to Society

Children’s advocates also think the nation’s young children would benefit if society as a whole took on a larger responsibility for child care. Advocates are more than 7 times as likely to think all taxpayers should help pay the costs of raising children (86%)—since society as a whole benefits when kids get good care—than they are to say parents should be primarily responsible for the financial costs of raising young kids (12%).

As mentioned in chapter 1, a large majority of advocates (68%) think that when it comes to child care, government policy should move toward a more organized, national system, similar to the European model, rather than focus on various tax breaks. Parents, as we have also seen, voice little spontaneous desire for this broader “social network” approach. Instead they lean strongly toward the idea of tax breaks that may help make their current child care more affordable or might make it easier to have one parent stay home. This disparity between the goals of children’s advocates and those of parents may suggest that advocates have not successfully communicated their vision of what a top-notch child care system could offer to families, or it may reflect the strength of American parents’ fundamental belief that child care is a personal responsibility.

Less Support for Tax Breaks

The best direction for government policy to pursue when it comes to child care is:



CHILDREN’S ADVOCATES

AFTERWORD by Deborah Wadsworth

In recent years, a number of Public Agenda studies have captured the concerns of parents as they struggle to raise responsible children in the face of what they see as distorted values, enervating distractions, and dubious messages from society overall. Public Agenda studies have also documented a broad consensus indicting parents for the way many youngsters turn out these days. Large numbers of Americans say far too many kids today lack discipline, civility, and respect for others. Far too many seem to lack a consistent moral compass.

Raising Good Kids

In many ways, the parents whose voices are captured in *Necessary Compromises* seem to be trying to redress this situation. As they describe their struggles to provide the best of care for their own children in their very earliest years, parents talked again and again about their desire to raise “good kids,” and their need to arm their child against a world filled with casual temptations, careless role models, and dangers that seemed a distant threat to previous generations. To do this—to implant the values, the moral sensibilities, and the sense of self-respect they believe their children need—they trust no one as much as themselves.

Neither Liberal nor Conservative

Parents feel strongly that they are fundamentally responsible for the care of their children, and they yearn to be hands-on and near-at-hand in their child’s earliest years. Consequently, it’s hardly surprising that twice as many want policy to focus on making it easier for a parent to be at home than on making professional day care more affordable. Their perspective is neither liberal nor conservative—nor is it laced with nostalgia for a more traditional time. From their point of view, policy debates which focus solely on tax credits or subsidies for day care simply miss the essence of their concerns.

Stomach-wrenching Fear

By overwhelming margins, parents say very young children need the love and sustained attention only a

parent can offer. And they worry ceaselessly when their child is out of sight. Is my child safe? Is my child being cared for carefully?

The fear and mistrust of day care centers expressed so ubiquitously in this study were often painful to hear. In focus groups, parents talked repeatedly about the stomach-wrenching fear they feel at thought of turning their young child over to a stranger’s care. As a consequence, almost half have made the decision to avoid almost all non-parental child care, acknowledging that they often make trade-offs, financial and otherwise, to do so. Interestingly, having made this decision, their judgment contains little hint of rebuke for those who make—or have been forced to make—different arrangements. They simply refuse to arbitrarily sort parents into categories of good and bad based on their arrangements for child care.

Questions That Deserve Answers

Given the strong statistical evidence that most child abuse occurs in the home—not in day care—it would be easy to dismiss parents’ fears as the result merely of over-active imaginations and media-induced paranoia gone haywire. But parents’ fears are real and deeply-felt, and they are exacerbated by a widespread sense that our communities and neighborhoods have lost the common values and mores that were once so reassuring.

Those who are working hard to build broader support for improved day care services nationwide might do well to take heed of parents’ concerns, not dismiss them with a quick statistical flourish, as experts sometimes do. Fears that are strongly felt deserve respectful and thoughtful responses. Parents need to know that “those in charge” will extend every effort and take every precaution to insure that children are neither harmed nor neglected. Indeed, one of the most disturbing findings in this study is that low-income

Indeed, one of the most disturbing findings in this study is that low-income parents, arguably those most dependent on day care, voice even greater concerns about abuse and neglect than wealthier parents who have far more options.

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Competing Priorities

Child care is a preeminently personal area and few, certainly not the parents interviewed for this study, want to second-guess families' judgments or narrow their options in getting the best of care for their children. Indeed, if the country had gloriously ample resources and no competing priorities, most Americans—parents and non-parents, parents and professionals, employers and workers, young and old alike—would likely support expansive measures helping parents to be home with newborns and toddlers, giving parents of older children much more time with them, and taking broad steps to insure that day care is safe, nurturing, enriching, convenient, orderly and affordable for any family that needs it.

But there are competing priorities; there are choices to be made, and there is a policy debate that will continue well into the future. To launch a discussion that is clear and productive, we need to be candid with each other. Clouding over difficulties and trade-offs and allowing lack of specificity to produce a seeming consensus that will not hold gets us nowhere. Two areas seem especially problematic based on findings from this study.

The Advocates' Dilemma

There is no doubt that children's advocates are earnest in their concern for America's families and sincerely hope to speak for them and represent them in the complex world of policy debate. But although parents and advocates share many goals, there are indications from this research that they sometimes talk past each other. Advocates have a vision of what top quality child care could be—an array of choices and supports for families that offer children—whether they are mainly in professional day care or mainly at home—a full plate of educational and psychological enrichment. Advocates envision the best care that our current understanding of child development can buy, and they are especially committed to bringing these

benefits to children from poorer families who so often begin their lives and educational careers with strikes already against them. Advocates admit that their vision will require resources, but they argue passionately that this is an investment that can pay off handsomely in the future.

But advocates have not successfully transmitted this vision to the vast majority of America's parents. They may also have underestimated the strength of most parents' competing vision. No one would suggest that advocates who have thought

so carefully about these problems for so many years abandon their judgments and priorities just because they are not as initially popular as they had hoped. But it may be wise for advocates to revisit their plans and programs, listening hard to what parents say in their own voices—their fear and distrust of existing day care, their concern about children's moral development, their desire to stay close by every day when their children are small. It's very unlikely that the country will reach a consensus for action on child care without engaging some of their concerns.

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What Can Employers Realistically Do

The second problematic area concerns the employer's role. Many have focused on the workplace, and looked to employers as a potential and logical solution to some gnawing child care problems. After all, the reasoning goes, better parental leave, more flextime and job-sharing, telecommuting, better child care benefits, and especially on-site day care have enormous appeal to families, and employers themselves would benefit from having more satisfied and less stressed-out workers. The opportunity to drop in on one's child at on-site day care during the course of the work day would probably go a long way toward relieving parents' mistrust and anxiety. In focus

groups for this project, parents just loved the idea.

But such recommendations may prove to be naïve. When asked to prioritize among benefits that might be available, both employers and parents say health insurance is a higher priority than child care. And, while stories of magnificent child care programs initiated by some of the country’s major corporations—and the U.S. military—leave people yearning for more, employers surveyed here say, “This sounds nice, but . . .”

The reality is that employers will have to make choices, and few can probably do it all. What’s more, based on this study, many have reservations about just how practical some of these ideas are given their day-to-day operations. To make progress that lasts, the policy debate on child care needs to acknowledge these concerns and tackle them head on.

A Nice Change of Pace for a Policy Debate

In the coming months, as the debate among presidential, congressional and other political candidates accelerates, there will no doubt be attempts to politicize this issue, along with many others. But given the object of concern for this study—the care and nurturing of the very smallest children—I wonder

whether it might be possible for the various constituencies at work on the problem of child care—policy makers, advocates, and employers, and others—to set aside the rhetoric and ideology and give serious attention to the voices of parents who are struggling to do right, given their own personal situations.

Even as parents debate within the family on the best course of action, even as they make sacrifices to act on their decisions, even as they become more comfortable and committed to their arrangements as they experience them, they rarely blame or judge or ridicule or demonize those in different circumstances who come to different conclusions. Such open-mindedness and graciousness might make a nice change of pace for a policy discussion.

While stories of magnificent child care programs initiated by some of the country’s major corporations—and the U.S. military—leave people yearning for more, employers surveyed here say, “This sounds nice, but . . .”



Deborah Wadsworth, President, Public Agenda

TABLE ONE: Parents and Non-Parents—Views on Families

I am going to read you some statements about family and child rearing. Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with each.

% RESPONDING	PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER		PARENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER 18*		NON-PARENTS	
	Agree Strongly/Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/Strongly	Agree Strongly/Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/Strongly	Agree Strongly/Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/Strongly
When it comes to raising children, single parents have it especially hard	77 / 17	4 / 1	78 / 15	5 / 2	80 / 16	1 / 1
Too many people have children without giving enough thought to what it takes to raise them	75 / 17	3 / 2	80 / 14	4 / 1	83 / 11	3 / 1
It is generally best for children to grow up in two-parent homes	72 / 17	6 / 4	72 / 15	8 / 5	76 / 15	3 / 5
Mothers who work outside the home are just as loving and committed to their children as those who stay home	68 / 19	8 / 4	67 / 20	6 / 4	60 / 24	7 / 8
Generally, fathers are just as capable as mothers when it comes to caring for the needs of their young children	61 / 26	9 / 4	59 / 27	9 / 4	52 / 26	11 / 9
These days, too many new moms are under pressure to return to work too quickly after having a child	60 / 26	9 / 3	60 / 26	8 / 4	60 / 21	9 / 5
There are too few families today who decide to have one parent at home with children during the first few years	50 / 28	14 / 4	51 / 29	12 / 6	62 / 24	10 / 2
Parents make a mistake if they choose their careers and financial goals over staying at home when their children are young	30 / 27	25 / 15	32 / 25	25 / 15	44 / 26	20 / 6
Today's employers are much more understanding when parents need time off to care for their kids	25 / 35	16 / 20	25 / 36	16 / 19	28 / 36	14 / 17
Welfare reform is putting too much pressure on mothers to put their children in child care so they can work or go to school	21 / 25	23 / 20	19 / 24	23 / 23	21 / 25	27 / 17

Parents of children 5 or under: n = 815

Parents of children under 18: n = 805

Non-Parents: n = 214

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. An asterisk represents a finding of zero or less than one-half percent.

*Includes 361 parents of children 0-5 and 444 parents of children 6-17, reflecting the actual population of parents of children under 18 years old.

TABLE TWO: Advocates and Employers —Views on Families

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

% RESPONDING	CHILDREN'S ADVOCATES		EMPLOYERS	
	Agree Strongly/Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/Strongly	Agree Strongly/Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/Strongly
Mothers who work outside the home are just as loving and committed to their children as those who stay home	87 / 12	1 / *	53 / 31	11 / 5
To help at-risk children from impoverished families, it is especially important to intervene with early childhood education	85 / 14	* / 1	51 / 39	6 / 2
It is generally best for children to grow up in two-parent homes	57 / 32	8 / 1	78 / 17	2 / 1
These days, too many new moms are under pressure to return to work too quickly after having a child	51 / 39	9 / 1	24 / 37	19 / 16
Too many people have children without giving enough thought to what it takes to raise them	43 / 36	16 / 2	72 / 26	1 / 1
Generally, fathers are just as capable as mothers when it comes to caring for the needs of their young children	33 / 47	14 / 3	25 / 42	26 / 6
It's important for kids whose families are on public assistance to see their parent working or going to school, even if it means the children must be in child care	23 / 52	15 / 4	40 / 48	8 / 2
Welfare reform is putting too much pressure on mothers to place their children in child care so they can work or go to school	17 / 42	25 / 12	7 / 20	27 / 37
Parents make a mistake if they choose their careers and financial goals over staying at home when their children are young	8 / 22	39 / 27	27 / 30	29 / 12
Today's employers are much more understanding when parents need time off to care for their kids	5 / 41	30 / 17	16 / 55	17 / 7

Children's Advocates: n = 216 Employers: n = 218

TABLE THREE: Parents and Non-Parents—Views on Child Care

Now I am going to read you some statements about child care. Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with each.

% RESPONDING	PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER		PARENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER 18		NON-PARENTS	
	Agree Strongly/Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/Strongly	Agree Strongly/Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/Strongly	Agree Strongly/Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/Strongly
If a family can afford it, it's almost always best for the children if one parent stays home with them full time	66 / 24	7 / 2	68 / 22	7 / 4	73 / 18	6 / 2
There is a big shortage of affordable day care centers where parents can feel confident their children would get good care	58 / 24	8 / 4	57 / 23	9 / 4	51 / 24	10 / 2
No one can do as good a job of raising children as their own parents	56 / 23	14 / 5	53 / 24	15 / 8	54 / 23	15 / 7
The nation's poorest children need low cost, high quality day care centers to have a fair chance of succeeding in school and climbing out of poverty	51 / 30	11 / 6	54 / 29	9 / 6	60 / 23	9 / 5
When families need child care, it's usually best if they rely on grandparents or other close relations	48 / 30	16 / 5	48 / 28	16 / 7	55 / 25	12 / 6
It's important for kids whose families are on welfare to see their parent working or going to school, even if it means the kids must be in child care	47 / 38	8 / 4	53 / 33	9 / 4	47 / 36	10 / 4
Parents should only rely on a day care center when they have no other option	43 / 28	21 / 7	42 / 27	19 / 11	55 / 24	13 / 7
For most families these days, having one parent stay at home with the kids is not a realistic option	37 / 30	17 / 14	38 / 31	16 / 13	29 / 32	20 / 15
Too many children these days are being forced to learn too much at a young age	33 / 22	24 / 20	37 / 20	20 / 21	40 / 14	21 / 22
When children go to a top-notch day care center, the care and attention they get is just as good as what they would get from a stay-at-home parent	9 / 26	29 / 35	10 / 25	30 / 33	15 / 22	28 / 30

Parents of children 5 or under: n = 815

Parents of children under 18: n = 805

Non-Parents: n = 214

TABLE FOUR: Advocates and Employers—Views on Child Care

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

% RESPONDING	CHILDREN'S ADVOCATES		EMPLOYERS	
	Agree Strongly/Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/Strongly	Agree Strongly/Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/Strongly
Day care centers have to be more than just clean and safe—they must also provide learning and early childhood education	93 / 7	1 / *	70 / 24	3 / 1
The nation's poorest children need low cost, high quality day care centers to have a fair chance of succeeding in school and climbing out of poverty	81 / 16	3 / 1	37 / 38	15 / 9
When children go to a top-notch day care center, the care and attention they get is just as good as what they would get from a stay-at-home parent	36 / 42	16 / 5	9 / 36	26 / 27
If a family can afford it, it's almost always best for the children if one parent stays home with them full time	29 / 35	26 / 6	71 / 23	6 / 1
Too many children these days are being forced to learn too much at a young age	14 / 25	29 / 29	13 / 27	30 / 26
Parents should only rely on a day care center when they have no other option	4 / 10	29 / 53	27 / 31	27 / 13
When families need child care, it's usually best if they rely on grandparents or other close relations	2 / 27	46 / 20	21 / 41	29 / 7
If parents get tax breaks for using child care, they will be less likely to stay at home to raise their kids	1 / 9	30 / 55	9 / 33	32 / 23

Children's Advocates: n = 216 Employers: n = 218

TABLE FIVE: Advocates and Employers—Views on Problems Facing Families

How serious is each of the following problems when it comes to families and child care in America today?

% RESPONDING	CHILDREN'S ADVOCATES		EMPLOYERS	
	Very serious/ Somewhat serious	Not too serious/ Not serious at all	Very serious/ Somewhat serious	Not too serious/ Not serious at all
A lack of affordable, quality day care centers where parents could feel confident their children would get good care	86 / 13	1 / *	42 / 37	13 / 4
A shortage of well-trained, experienced professionals in day care centers	85 / 12	2 / 1	37 / 37	16 / 5
The low quality of child care available to the nation's poorest families	82 / 14	2 / 1	41 / 34	14 / 4
Government spending on the wrong priorities, with too little money going for child care	73 / 23	2 / 1	38 / 34	14 / 10
Insufficient attention to the importance of learning and education during a child's earliest years	69 / 26	5 / *	40 / 38	16 / 3
The lack of a comprehensive, national policy on child care	68 / 27	2 / 1	17 / 28	23 / 24
Employers failing to accommodate the needs of parents trying to balance work and child care	50 / 45	4 / *	11 / 38	39 / 8
An unrealistic, out-of-date vision of the traditional American family	44 / 39	11 / 5	31 / 33	13 / 17
The high cost of living that forces most families to have both parents working	43 / 44	11 / 1	49 / 31	15 / 5
Too few families choosing to keep one parent at home with the children at least during the first few years	13 / 40	35 / 8	35 / 37	20 / 5

Children's Advocates: n = 216 Employers: n = 218

TABLE SIX: Rating Various Types of Child Care

How good do you think each of the following child care arrangements are for the development and care of children during their earliest years?

% RESPONDING	Parents of Children 5 or Under	Parents of Children Under 18	Non-Parents	Children's Advocates	Employers
To have one parent stay at home while the other works full-time					
Excellent	71	70	67	52	65
Good	21	24	27	39	30
Fair	6	6	6	9	4
Poor	1	1	*	*	1
To have both parents work different shifts so one is almost always home					
Excellent	35	37	37	14	24
Good	37	36	42	34	47
Fair	18	17	12	35	21
Poor	10	9	9	16	7
To have a close relative look after the child					
Excellent	31	30	23	11	16
Good	53	53	57	63	52
Fair	14	15	16	19	27
Poor	2	2	2	5	4
To have a nanny or babysitter at home while parents work					
Excellent	16	15	14	7	9
Good	42	45	49	51	43
Fair	30	27	28	34	34
Poor	12	12	9	7	13
To place the child in a quality day care center					
Excellent	11	10	13	19	5
Good	42	44	43	60	36
Fair	34	35	36	17	40
Poor	13	11	8	3	19
To bring the child to a mom in the neighborhood who cares for children in her home					
Excellent	10	9	10	8	7
Good	43	52	48	49	31
Fair	39	32	28	31	44
Poor	8	7	11	10	17

Parents of children 5 or under: n = 815 Parents of children under 18: n = 805 Non-Parents: n = 214
 Children's Advocates: n = 216 Employers: n = 218

TABLE SEVEN: Performance of Day Care Centers

Think about a typical day care center in the U.S. About how many do you think do a good job on each of the following?

% RESPONDING	Parents of Children 5 or Under	Parents of Children Under 18	Non-Parents	Children's Advocates	Employers
Teaching children the basics, like their ABC's and colors					
Virtually all	16	16	14	9	9
Most	44	47	44	43	50
Some	27	25	23	42	29
Very few	6	5	8	4	5
Teaching children how to get along with other kids					
Virtually all	13	12	12	4	11
Most	44	46	40	43	52
Some	31	31	30	44	29
Very few	5	5	7	7	3
Having high standards when it comes to cleanliness and children's safety					
Virtually all	8	9	6	1	3
Most	42	45	44	30	41
Some	35	33	30	59	43
Very few	8	6	8	7	6
Having well-trained, experienced professionals on staff					
Virtually all	5	5	4	1	3
Most	31	33	28	8	19
Some	42	42	40	44	51
Very few	14	12	15	44	21
Identifying children with hidden problems or disabilities in a timely manner					
Virtually all	2	3	2	1	1
Most	19	17	18	5	15
Some	44	45	39	44	45
Very few	26	26	24	46	29

Parents of children 5 or under: n = 815 Parents of children under 18: n = 805 Non-Parents: n = 214
 Children's Advocates: n = 216 Employers: n = 218

TABLE EIGHT: Concerns About Day Care Centers

How concerned are you that the following things could happen in a typical day care center in the U.S.?

% RESPONDING	Parents of Children 5 or Under	Parents of Children Under 18	Non-Parents	Children's Advocates	Employers
That children could suffer physical or sexual abuse					
Very concerned	63	60	58	12	34
Somewhat concerned	26	27	26	34	43
Not too concerned	11	12	13	53	21
That children could be neglected or left unsupervised					
Very concerned	62	58	59	32	37
Somewhat concerned	31	33	31	52	51
Not too concerned	8	9	7	15	12
That children could fail to get personal, one-on-one attention					
Very concerned	55	51	41	55	42
Somewhat concerned	38	41	47	41	46
Not too concerned	7	8	8	4	12
That children could pick up bad manners or behavior from other kids					
Very concerned	52	48	47	13	37
Somewhat concerned	37	41	39	43	47
Not too concerned	10	10	12	43	15

Parents of children 5 or under: n = 815 Parents of children under 18: n = 805 Non-Parents: n = 214
 Children's Advocates: n = 216 Employers: n = 218

TABLE NINE: Parents and Non-Parents—Views on Child Care Policies

How helpful do you think each would be as far as improving the care that young children get?

% RESPONDING	PARENTS OF CHILDREN 5 OR UNDER			PARENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER 18			NON- PARENTS		
	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not too helpful	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not too helpful	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not too helpful
Giving a much bigger tax break to parents who stay home to care for their children	64	29	6	63	30	7	59	29	7
Requiring employers to give employees six months of paid parental leave	61	24	14	57	24	18	44	27	25
Increasing funding for the Head Start program for low-income families	60	30	8	61	29	8	56	33	9
Tightening state regulations and licensing for child care and day care centers	54	35	9	54	36	9	51	33	10
Giving families a much bigger tax break when they use professional child care	48	37	14	48	37	14	31	46	21
Extending the school day with after-school programs to accommodate the schedules of working parents	48	35	16	53	32	14	50	29	19
Spending tax money to create a universal child care system for all families in the U.S.	40	34	24	36	35	27	28	33	33

Parents of children 5 or under: n = 815

Parents of children under 18: n = 805

Non-Parents: n = 214

TABLE TEN: Advocates and Employers—Views on Child Care Policies

How effective would each of these ideas be in terms of improving the care young children receive in the U.S.?

% RESPONDING	CHILDREN'S ADVOCATES			EMPLOYERS		
	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not too Effective	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not too Effective
Increasing the salaries of child care providers in day care centers	88	9	2	33	44	20
Tightening state regulations and licensing for child care and day care centers	69	25	4	40	41	17
Extending the school day with after-school programs to accommodate the schedules of working parents	62	32	5	37	44	16
Requiring employers to give employees six months of paid parental leave	62	22	10	13	17	63
Encouraging employers to provide full health care benefits to part-time employees	57	26	12	22	26	46
Giving companies tax breaks when they provide on-site child care as a benefit to their employees	53	32	13	58	32	8
Increasing Head Start funding for low-income families	51	39	8	28	42	20
Expanding the federal tax credit that families can take for child care (also known as the Dependent Care Tax Credit)	43	45	9	27	46	19
Giving low-income parents government-financed vouchers to use at the child care arrangement of their choice	37	41	16	28	40	28
Creating a tax credit for parents who stay at home	27	39	28	41	32	22
Increasing government funding of child care and day care centers run by religious organizations	15	33	42	25	34	31

Children's Advocates: n = 216 Employers: n = 218

TABLE ELEVEN: Employers—Views On Child Care in the Workplace

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

% RESPONDING	EMPLOYERS		
	Agree Strongly/Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/Strongly	Not Sure
Few companies have the expertise and resources to run high-quality on-site child care	62 / 31	4 / 1	2
It's simply too expensive for most small companies to provide significant child care benefits	62 / 28	6 / 3	1
The responsibilities and liabilities of on-site child care are too much for my company to take on	59 / 27	9 / 4	2
Flextime and telecommuting may sound good, but my company needs people at work during regular business hours	57 / 30	11 / 2	1
Retirement and health benefits are much more important to my company's employees than child care benefits	44 / 35	10 / 6	5
Competition for good workers is so great that more and more companies will offer benefits such as flexible work schedules and extended parental leave	26 / 54	13 / 3	5
Other employees would resent it if my organization gave special consideration or child care benefits to parents	17 / 35	21 / 18	10
My company has lost good employees because we lack good child care benefits	5 / 13	24 / 55	3

Employers: n = 218

ENDNOTES

1. U.S. Census Bureau, “Employment Status of Women, by Marital Status and Presence and Age of Children: 1960-1998.” *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1999, Table 659. Labor force participation rate of married mothers of children under age 6—1960: 19%; 1997: 64%
2. “Which do you think is the best direction for government policy to pursue when it comes to child care?”; “To move toward a universal child care system paid for by the government, similar to many European countries”: 27%; “To tighten regulations and licensing requirements of the current child care system”: 48%; “To leave things as they are”: 20%; “Don’t know”: 6%
3. Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson, with Ali Bers and Ann Duffett, *Miles to Go: A Status Report on Americans’ Plans for Retirement*. Public Agenda, 1997, p. 10
4. S.L. Hofferth, K.A. Shauman, R.R. Henke and J. West, *Characteristics of Children’s Early Care and Education Programs: Data from the 1995 National Household Education Survey*. National Center for Education Statistics, 1998, Report no. 98-128
5. *Child Maltreatment 1998: Reports from the States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 1999
6. Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson, with Will Friedman and Ali Bers, *The Values We Live By: What Americans Want From Welfare Reform*. Public Agenda, 1996, p. 46
7. Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson, with Stephen Immerwahr and Joanna McHugh, *Time To Move On: African-American And White Parents Set An Agenda For Public Schools*. Public Agenda, 1998, p. 40
8. Lisa Belkin, “Your Kids Are Their Problem,” *The New York Times Magazine*, July 23, 2000
9. *1998 Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Occupational Employment Statistics, 2000, No. 68038: Child Care Workers. Median hourly wage of child care workers in 1998: \$6.61

METHODOLOGY

Necessary Compromises is based on a nationwide telephone survey of 815 parents of children 5 years old or under, as well as on additional interviews with parents of children 6 to 17 and adults who are not parents. It also includes responses from a nationwide mail survey of 218 employers and 216 children's advocates. The surveys were preceded by focus groups conducted in cities throughout the country and in-depth interviews with experts and practitioners in child care and children's issues.

The Telephone Survey

Telephone interviews were conducted with a random sample of 815 parents of children 5 years old or under, as well as 444 interviews with parents of children 6 to 17, and 214 interviews with "non-parents"—adults who do not have children under 18. The sample of "parents of children under 18" referred to in this study consists of 361 parents of children 5 or under and 444 parents of children 6 to 17, reflecting the actual population of parents with children under 18. Interviewing took place between June 1 and June 15, 2000, and the interviews averaged 26 minutes in length.

Interviews were conducted using a random sample of households and a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the country had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. Screening questions were asked to ensure that only those who met the requisite age-of-child and parental-status requirements were included in the final sample. The margin of error for the 815 parents of children 5 or under is plus or minus 3 percentage points; the margin of error is higher in comparisons of percentages across subgroups.

In addition to the national random sample of parents, interviews were conducted with approximately 200 each of parents of children under 18 years old in California, Florida, Illinois, Missouri, New Jersey and Texas. Interviewing took place between June 19 and June 27, 2000. Data for these state oversamples are available under separate cover.

The Mail Survey

The mail survey is based on the responses of 218 employers and 216 children's advocates who responded to a questionnaire first mailed on May 10, 2000, and again on May 22. The final day for accepting completed questionnaires was June 22. The question wording in the mail questionnaire was similar to the telephone survey of parents. For the survey of employers, 2,000 questionnaires were mailed and 218 returned, for a response rate of 11%. Employers were randomly selected from a list of owners of businesses with 5 to 49 employees and human resource professionals in companies with 50 or more employees. This list was purchased from Dun & Bradstreet. For the survey of children's advocates, 758 questionnaires were mailed and 216 returned, for a response rate of 28%. The children's advocates came from mailing lists supplied to Public Agenda by the Children's Defense Fund, National Association of Child Advocates, National Child Care Information Center and the Families and Work Institute.

The Questionnaires

The questionnaires were designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other nonsampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pretesting the survey instruments and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

Both surveys were fielded by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc., of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The Qualitative Research

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying the public's attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn from them to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews.

Seven focus groups were conducted in November and December 1999 with parents who have children of different ages, parents who use child care and those who do not, parents from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, working parents, single parents and members of the general public who do not have children or who have grown children. Focus groups took place in Old Bridge, New Jersey; Jacksonville, Florida; Chicago, Illinois; Walnut Creek, California; and Redwood City, California.

Public Agenda also conducted 13 in-depth telephone interviews with experts and practitioners in child care and children's issues to obtain grounding in the substantive topics of the day. Background research for this study included a review of the current literature and previous surveys.

RELATED PUBLIC AGENDA PUBLICATIONS

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