Center *for the* Study *of* Social Policy
Ideas into Action

Five Policies to Support the Care for Young Children

Families use a variety of care arrangements when their children are young, including care provided by parents, family members and other trusted caregivers, and early childhood educators across a range of settings.

Recent research from the Center for the Study of Social Policy highlights the importance of all of these arrangements for children and families today. Based on interviews with 51 parents and primary caregivers across the country, we find that families typically rely on multiple care arrangements when their children are young, either juggling arrangements simultaneously or switching from one to another over time as their circumstances or needs change. The vast majority of parents we interviewed also said that their preference would be to use a variety of care arrangements in the future, though the characteristics of the individual arrangements and the way they would sequence or combine these arrangements would look quite different if they were all adequately supported.

This brief shares a policy agenda to put the care families want within reach, and better support all of the arrangements that families use. Grounded in what we learned from parents and primary caregivers, it highlights five transformative investments that would set young children and their families up for success: paid leave and a universal package of parental supports; free, quality early care and education; direct cash for caregivers; family forward work; and community early learning supports.



For more findings from CSSP's research, see our report *The Care Families Use, The Care Families Want: How Policy Can Better Support the Care of Young Children*.



Paid Leave and a Universal Package of Parental Supports

To adequately support care provided by parents, parents were clear that the first step is providing adequate paid parental leave, so that parents have financial support to take time off work and care for their children and themselves when they welcome a new baby. They were also clear that paid leave alone is not enough. Paid leave needs to be paired with a package of parental supports—so that parents receive the help they need to be healthy and well during a significant life transition that can be joyful but also exhausting and challenging.

Paid leave is the foundation. As Kristin* in North Carolina explained, the lack of paid leave in the United States adds to the stress that parents are under when they bring a baby home from the hospital:

> My job doesn't really give you maternity leave. They offer you maternity leave that's not paid. That's not the same thing as paid leave. But a lot of people don't realize that, oh, she's out, she had a baby, not knowing that [she's] out because she had a baby, but she's at home struggling because she's not making money even though her husband's working. They just, oh, she had a baby. Oh my god, the baby's so cute. She's seen all the pictures, but you're not seeing the depression and everything that she's going through behind it.
>
> ***—Kristin, mother in North Carolina***

Kristin had a solution: "If they just mixed a little bit of Canada and just a little bit of Australia together, then we might have a little plan."

In addition to paid leave, which is available to parents in almost every other country, parents shared the importance of caring for their own health and well-being at this critical time. As Danielle in North Carolina explained:

> The most important thing a caregiver should do is take care of themselves because if you don't, you're not going to be able to give your best self to whoever you're caring for. You're going to give them 60% or 50% of you, and you want to be at a full 100% in order to care for somebody the best that you can."
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> ***—Danielle, mother in North Carolina***

* All names in this brief are pseudonyms, to protect the privacy of the individuals interviewed.

Paid Leave and a Universal Package of Parental Supports



Parents shared the need for a wide range of supports for parents, from an extra set of hands at home to help manage during those first few weeks with a newborn to specialists like lactations consultants, nurse home visitors, and clinical mental health providers for parents experiencing postpartum depression or related issues.

Patience in Massachusetts reflected on the enormous benefit of the postpartum nurse who came to her home after her first child was born in the Netherlands. The nurse—called a *kraamverzorgenden*—came every day for the 2 weeks after the birth of her child, to care for both mother and baby. The service was free. As Patience explained:

> They clean, they cook, they take care of you. They take you in the shower. They take the baby, they shower the baby too. They watch you, your health, for that 2 weeks, and then they make records and they leave…I couldn't get up much. I couldn't move around much, it was so helpful.
>
> ***—Patience, mother in Massachusetts***

The nurse cared for Patience's health as well as the health of the baby, and helped with the everyday household tasks that can be challenging—if not impossible—when recovering from child birth and caring for a newborn. Patience wished she could have received a similar service when her second child was born in the United States, and recommends that parents here be offered the same service.

Other parents spoke of the need for more specific services, including new parent support groups, clinical mental health therapy, physical therapy, and more. Some states and communities do offer paid leave and perinatal or postpartum supports to promote parents' health and wellbeing.[1] But those supports are not universally available, and parents often have to jump through significant hoops or piece together resources from a number of different organizations or agencies to get the full range of assistance they need.

To support the care of young children, policymakers should enact a federal program of paid family leave that would provide financial security to parents so they can stay home with their children at least for the first year of life, which is what the majority of parents we interviewed wanted. Federal policymakers should also fund, and state and local leaders should help shape, a universal package of parental supports to promote the health and wellbeing of parents during this period. This package would offer a range of voluntary services that parents could choose from, including therapy, support groups, and home visiting by nurses and others who can care for parents as they care for their babies.



Free, Quality Early Care and Education

The vast majority of parents want their children to attend high-quality formal early care and education at some point before they enter kindergarten. To make this feasible for families with low and moderate incomes, it needs to be widely available, and it needs to be free. As Crystal in North Carolina observed, "nobody can afford daycare if you [are] paying a mortgage." Most of the parents we interviewed were only able to use formal early care and education if it was free—as they turned to Head Start, state-funded pre-K, or other programs that did not charge tuition. Many parents said that in an ideal world, they would send their children to a program like the free ones they used, but called for more resources for those programs to ensure quality care. They specifically named the need to improve teacher pay and retention, so that children have consistent caregivers; to lower ratios, so that teachers had time to give each child the attentive and nurturing care they need; and to improve the facilities or activities offered, so that children have the materials and space to explore and learn.

As Crystal dreamed:

> If they could ever open up a Head Start to all kids, that would be lovely. Regardless of race or demographics, whatever, if they could open up the Early Head Start to all children, that would be a blessing because they learn even being with peers…and it's never too early to learn something.
>
> ***—Crystal, mother in North Carolina***

Parents recognized that free, high-quality early care and education was especially important for families who were already stretched thin. As Cassandra, a grandmother in North Carolina, shared, for families like hers to access early care and education, it should be free "with no out-of-pocket costs." Danielle in North Carolina observed that free child care would be an especially big help for single parents.

To support the care of young children, policymakers should make significant federal investments in early care and education—so that families across the country can access high-quality child care that is tuition-free, where teachers are paid wages that accord with the value of their work so they can care for themselves and provide attentive and nurturing care to children, where student-teacher ratios are low, and where all programs have the space and materials to foster children's exploration and growth. Families should not need to sit on waitlists or meet additional conditions such as work requirements to access early care and education. It should be available in a range of settings, including elementary schools, community-based centers, and home-based programs. And finally, parents should be able to send their children part time, so they can combine formal early education with other types of care such as parental or relative care, as many parents wish to do.



Direct Cash for Caregivers

To support families who would like to rely on parental care for longer than a program of paid family leave supports, or those would like to use care provided by a relative or other trusted caregiver who is not a licensed child care provider, we need a federal program to compensate parents and other caregivers of young children directly for the care they provide. As Mercy in New Mexico put it:

> I think if family and children's services can afford to pay foster families to take care of children, I think that there should be funds made available for families who would like to stay home with their kids. Not saying completely, fully cover that, but there should be some funds available to just help parents who want to stay home with their kids…I don't think any family should have to struggle to pay their bills if their community has the funds to help.
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> ***—Mercy, mother in New Mexico***

Omar in Massachusetts reasoned that families who would like to "homeschool" their young children need help to pay the bills and also buy educational materials. Jessica in New Mexico recommends that all communities adopt the tribal program that she relies on to pay her own mother to care for her children. As she explains: "I think a lot of communities could benefit with what my community has, is this child care program to be able to pay their own community members to provide child care in their home…And a lot of communities don't have this child care resources provided to them and I'm just really grateful and thankful for my community to have that."

To support the care of young children, policymakers should create a program of direct cash for caregivers to pay parents and other trusted caregivers who care for young children. Families should be able to access direct cash for caregivers at the same time as they access free formal early care and education, so that families who would like to combine part-time formal care with part-time parental care or care provided by a relative or other trusted caregiver can do so.

Family Forward Work

To make it possible for parents to combine part-time or full-time work with caregiving, they also need to see significant changes in the way work is organized, and workers are treated. The parents we interviewed described repeatedly getting "called out" because they had to miss work to care for a sick child, losing jobs because of their caregiving responsibilities, or taking pay cuts so they could work jobs that allowed them to control their schedule and have more flexible hours so they could be there for their children. Sandra in North Carolina had worked in a pharmacy for years, but when her second child was born with a serious health condition, she almost lost her job before human resources explained that she could apply for FMLA so her job was protected when she needed to be at the hospital for days at a time. In the end she decided "I no longer wanted to work for them because I just felt like what mattered to me didn't matter to them," and she turned to work as a home health aide. Work in home health enables her to care for her children's health and be involved in their schooling, but as she explains: "I'll be honest, it does not pay well."

Many parents, like Sandra, want to be able to combine waged work with caregiving, but not have their care responsibilities take second place. As Monique in North Carolina shared:

> I just wish that there was a way that we can work, but also if we need to take off, we can be there for our child if they're sick or an accident happens without being told, 'Okay. Well, you got to make sure you get back and get this done, or you can't get paid for this.'
>
> ***—Monique, mother in North Carolina***

Many parents also want to work part time, or "school hours," so they can earn an income while also being an active parent in their children's lives. Fabienne in Massachusetts explained that when she talks to social service providers trying to help her family, she says, "Give me a job, give me a job, give me a job," but she needs "mothers hours" so she can be there for her twins when they get out of child care every day.

To support the care of young children, there need to be significant changes to the structure of work in the United States. Policymakers should significantly increase the minimum wage, so that parents can make enough to support their families even if they work less than full time or their hours fluctuate due to their caregiving needs. They should enact paid sick days in addition to paid leave, so that parents who need to take time off work to take their children to well-visits or care for them when they experience routine—but often quite frequent—illnesses can do so without worrying how they will pay the bills. Parents also should be guaranteed some predictability and control over their schedules, so they can request time off if an event comes up at their children's school, and not be expected to take on extra hours or have their hours change at the last minute if they do not have child care in place. Finally, other countries have experimented with shorter work weeks and the right to request part-time work, which would address parents' desire to combine caregiving with part-time waged work. Policymakers should explore these ideas too.



Community Early Learning Supports

For families who would want a parent, relative, or other trusted caregiver to care for their children when they are young, they also need resources and programming in their communities to foster connection and learning. Trang in Massachusetts said she would love to see more enrichment programs for children under 3 years old, such as story time at the library, "so parents can play with their children" and also meet and learn alongside other children and caregivers.[2]

Parents called for more resources for playgroups, community activities and events, home visiting, and educational materials. They also wanted more public spaces where they could bring young children so their children can be active and connect with others regardless of the weather.

Some parents shared the need for better indoor gathering spaces for young children: Marissa in New Mexico shared that they have good parks in her city, but she wishes there were community centers for young children: "I know they have a teen center, but they don't have a center for little kids…[where they could go] with their parents and have stuff to do with them…maybe arts and crafts or just even parenting classes." Sophie in Massachusetts suggested a school "that was open to caregivers and their kids" and would have "a little indoor playground," where mothers could go when breastfeeding and children could socialize.

Other parents shared the need for better outdoor spaces: Selena in New Mexico wishes there were better outdoor spaces in her Pueblo, "a nice park" because "that's how they get their tantrums when they have too much being inside, they got to be outside." Anna in Massachusetts also wanted more outdoor activities. As she reflects:

> We have also quite forgotten that we come from the earth, do you know what I mean? That connection between a human being and nature is so necessary, and sometimes we take it for granted, it's like we don't give it the importance that it deserves, and that is where I feel we fail. That is why sometimes we feel so low, or things like that.[3]
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> ***—Anna, mother in Massachusetts***



David in New Mexico would love to see his community build a large child-friendly park:

> The kind of park you can go and spend the whole day. Huge place. I think of when I was growing up, the nearby park had a boating lake, and it had a little steam train and it had a farm on it and a woodland walk. It was a huge place. It was a whole day. It was like, what are we doing today? We're going to the park. We won't be back until dark. And that's kind of missing here.
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> ***—David, father in New Mexico***

To support the care of young children, policymakers will need to rethink how communities function and support families. What families need in one community to foster connection and learning may be different from what they need in another community, but all families need spaces and resources that enable their children to socialize and parents to learn from other parents and caregivers. Policymakers at the federal level should invest in this work, and communities should drive it in collaboration with parents and caregivers.

Finally, parents shared that families with young children also need more information about all of the supports that *are* available in their communities. Many parents did not realize that the supports they needed were available until the need was acute, and they had to spend significant time and resources hunting down this information. Many parents we interviewed took it upon themselves to share the information they had acquired with parents in their networks. As Mia in Massachusetts shared, we need "More information. Spread the word. I have helped mothers like, 'Oh, you can go here to get this, or you can go there to get that.' But that's information I'm giving to them that I wish was given to me. You know what I mean?" Ivy in New Mexico recommends that every new mother be given a resource list:

> [New mothers] should be sent a letter in the mail saying, 'Here are some local resources for your mental health. Here are some psychologists that have some openings in your area. Here are some pelvic floor therapy positions. Here are the home visiting. Here are some volunteers. Here are these nonprofits that support you.' A lot of the information, I had to find my own. I had to ask people, I had to Google. It wasn't just information that was readily available to me.
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> ***—Ivy, mother in New Mexico***

Parents wanted information to be vetted as well as readily available. Valerie in Massachusetts recommended that hospitals, Social Security offices, and WIC offices that provide food and nutrition assistance to young families all offer information about resources—that was how she found out about a playgroup she attends every week with her two youngest children.

Conclusion

Putting these policies and programs in place would require significant investment at the federal level, as well as ongoing work in states and communities to implement and tailor these supports to meet the needs of children and families now, and as they change over time. But advancing this agenda is a necessary and worthwhile investment in our future—because what could be more important than ensuring children receive the loving, nurturing, and attentive care they need?



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Endnotes

1 For an example of a program providing a particularly comprehensive package of supports to postpartum mothers and families, see Embrace in San Francisco, available at: https://embraceblackcare.org/. For home visiting see Healthy Baby Healthy Child in Boston, available at: https://www.boston.gov/government/cabinets/boston-public-health-commission/childrens-and-newborn-health/healthy-baby-healthy-child#services.

2 Vietnamese original: *giống như trước 3 tuổi á chị, em muốn, giống như là …cái thứ nhất như cái group bây giờ vậy á, có thể là, có thể tới rồi cha mẹ cùng chơi với con và tổ chức mấy cái group yêu thích, cái event, hay là story time(?) … như hiện tại bây giờ.*

3 Spanish original: *Eso se nos ha olvidado mucho también que venimos de la tierra, ¿me entiende? Esa conexión del ser humano con la naturaleza es tan necesaria, y a veces lo damos por sentado, como que no le damos la suficiente importancia que realmente tiene, y ahí es donde yo siento que fallamos. Por eso es que a veces nos sentimos tan decaídos o cosas así.*