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.

This brief shares a policy agenda to better support all of the care arrangements that families use. Grounded in what we learned from parents and primary caregivers, it highlights five transformative investments that would put the care arrangements families want within reach and set all children 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 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.

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.
>
> ***—Danielle, mother in North Carolina***

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

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 we spoke to 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.

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.
>
> ***—Mercy, mother in New Mexico***

Policymakers should create a program of direct cash for caregivers to pay parents and other trusted caregivers who care for young children. Additionally, 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.

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.'
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> ***—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.

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.

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?

To learn more, read CSSP's report, *The Care Families Use, The Care Families Want: How Policy Can Better Support the Care of Young Children*.