Caring for Our Youngest: Public Attitudes in the United States

Kathleen Sylvester

SUMMARY

Families make choices about employment and care for their children in a context that is shaped by public policies and colored by public opinion. Debates over whether the government should increase funding for child care or do more to help parents stay home with their children reflect tensions among strongly held ideas about family life, work, and the role of government. This article summarizes the results of public opinion polls that probe attitudes about parent and government roles and responsibilities with respect to children’s care.

The polling findings yield three main lessons:

- The American public believes that parents should be the primary influence in their children’s lives and that it is best if mothers can be home to care for the very young.
- The public also values family self-sufficiency and understands that low-income families may need child care assistance to balance child rearing and employment responsibilities.
- However, skepticism about the appropriateness of government involvement in family life limits public support for proposals that the government act directly to provide or improve child care.

From these lessons, the author draws several conclusions for policymakers:

- Policies focused on caregiving should respect the rights of parents to raise their children by ensuring that an array of options is available.
- Public programs should help families who are struggling economically to balance their obligations to work and family.
- Rather than directly providing child care services, government should fund community-based child care programs, and provide flexible assistance to help families secure the services they need and want.

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By almost any measure of public opinion, Americans strongly support the idea of helping young children get a good start in life. Indeed, the public supports investments in children above other national priorities. A 2000 poll by the Opinion Research Corporation International conducted for Fight Crime: Invest in Kids found that 68% of respondents rated “providing access to after-school programs and early childhood development programs like Head Start” as a higher priority than cutting taxes.¹

Yet in recent years, as policymakers have debated plans for investments in programs for young children, supporters of early childhood initiatives and child care legislation have struggled to make their case amidst growing tensions. These tensions arise as policymakers and the public face the difficult question of whether, and how much, government should help families with young children. When it comes to what the government’s role should be in raising young children, it appears that the public has strongly held—and sometimes conflicting—beliefs.

These beliefs came into sharp focus in a number of polls conducted as the national elections approached in 2000. Pollsters and politicians attempted to gauge public opinion about a range of issues that fall within the broad category of family values. The polls looked at policy proposals on issues such as child care and government support for early childhood education. They also examined how Americans view parental responsibility, the roles of women and men, the role of government in helping families, and the extent of society’s obligation to its least advantaged citizens. These polls provided a snapshot of how the American public views the relationship between government and families at the close of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The results indicated that the public’s concern for children is shaped by a complicated set of beliefs. Americans’ strongly held values—including the importance of family, work, and equal opportunity—are intrinsic to our nation’s character. Those beliefs have come to fix the boundaries of public support for government interventions on behalf of very young children.

**First Things First: The Primacy of Parents**

Public attitudes often change as social norms change. Yet, one constant is the public’s belief that parents should bear primary responsibility for raising their children. That opinion does not waver whether children are babies or teenagers.

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**Figure 1**

**Many California Adults Agree that Families Benefit if Mothers Remain Home**

Results from a poll of 2,021 California adults, including 1,601 parents, conducted by telephone April 25–May 1, 1999.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage of Survey Respondents Agreeing with Statement: “It is much better for the family if the father works outside the home and the mother takes care of the children.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All respondents</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonparents</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male parents</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female parents</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, working parents</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, working female parents</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, working male parents</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, working female parents</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Public Attitudes in the United States

Necessary Compromises, a report published in 2000 by the nonpartisan opinion research firm Public Agenda, noted in its introduction, “Most parents consider [child care] an intensely personal decision and a family responsibility—few are looking for a governmental solution.” The findings of Necessary Compromises were based on a nationwide telephone survey of 815 parents of children age five or younger. Public Agenda conducted additional interviews with parents of children ages 6 to 17 and adults who were not parents. The report also included responses from a nationwide mail survey of 218 employers and 216 children’s advocates. The results of the project? Public Agenda found that “There is solid consensus on what people consider most desirable: a parent at home, either mother or father, at least for the first few years of a child’s life.”

Other polls also support the finding that Americans overwhelmingly feel that parents need to be spending more time with their children, particularly if those children are very young. In a September 2000 poll, Women’s Voices, by Lifetime Television and the Center for Policy Alternatives, 800 women and 400 men nationwide were asked about stresses on family life. In that poll, both women and men responded that “parents spending more time with their children would be the best way to strengthen values in our country.” This was especially true of mothers with younger children.

Part of this consensus about the importance of parental involvement in young children’s lives may be due to a growing public understanding of the importance of the first few years of life to children’s long-term development. Over the past eight years, information about human brain development has reinforced the public’s instincts about what is best for the very youngest children. One catalyst for this new interest was the 1994 report, Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children. The report, produced by Carnegie Corporation of New York, highlighted the critical importance of quality care in the first three years of life. In 1997, a follow-up report, Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development, emphasized the opportunities in the early years to promote healthy development and learning.

Recent polls show that information about the importance of early care is beginning to permeate the public consciousness. For instance, in 2000, ZERO TO THREE, Civitas, and the BARIO Corporation sponsored a survey called What Grown-ups Understand About Child Development: A National Benchmark Survey. The survey questioned some 3,000 adults, including more than 1,000 parents of children under age six. In that poll, 69% of those surveyed said the statement that “Children’s capacity for learning is pretty much set from birth and cannot be greatly increased or decreased by how their parents interact with them,” was definitely false. Another 16% responded that the statement was “probably false.” This heightened attention to the early years contributes to public support for the notion that parents should spend time with their children—especially when they are very young.

When it comes to a choice about whether the stay-at-home parent should be a mother or a father, the public continues to favor mothers. As Figure 1 shows, both women and men feel that the responsibility for raising children should fall primarily to mothers. A 1999 Los Angeles Times poll, Raising Children in California, asked 1,601 California parents about their attitudes toward child rearing. In the survey, 68% of fathers and 69% of mothers felt that it is “much better for the family” if the father works outside the home and the mother stays home with the children.

This view appears to be changing little over time. A 1999 report based on the results of the National Opinion Research Center’s biennial General Social Survey of 3,000 adults found that, in 1994, only 11.6% of Americans believed a wife with a preschooler should work full-time. This rate was largely unchanged from the 10.7% recorded back in 1988.

Ambivalence Toward Maternal Employment

Inconsistencies do arise in public opinions about mothers’ roles. In September 2000, The Washington Post, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University conducted a poll called, Issues in the 2000 Election: Values. In that poll, 79% of the nearly 1,500 registered voters surveyed agreed somewhat or strongly with the state-
ment, “It may be necessary for mothers to be working because the family needs money, but it would be better if she could stay home and take care of the house and children.” But a 1997 Pew Research Center poll, *Motherhood—A Tougher Job, Less Ably Done*, provides an example of contradictory attitudes toward women’s roles. That poll of 1,101 women nationwide found that most women prefer to work, at least part time, rather than staying home full time with their children. However, the same poll found that only 17% of women believe that the increase in mothers working outside the home is a good thing for society.9

Although women and men would like mothers to be able to stay home with young children, demographic trends are moving in the opposite direction. According to a 2000 Census Bureau report, in the majority of married couples with children, both parents were working. The Census Bureau reports that, in 1998, both spouses were employed at least part time among 51% of married couples with children, compared with 33% in 1976. Even married or single mothers of very young children were likely to work at least part time: 59% of the women with babies younger than age one were employed in 1998, compared with 31% in 1976.10

These trends have set in motion a conflict between two core American values: the notion that mothers have primary responsibility for children and the notion that all American families should be economically self-sufficient. When those two values clash—that is, when the public perceives that there is a compelling economic reason for mothers to go to work—Americans seem more willing to support government investments in the care and education of very young children.

**A Recognized Need for Child Care**

A look at two interlocking public policy issues—child care and welfare reform—is instructive. World War II marked the beginning of the federal government’s involvement in child care. As millions of American men went to war, millions of American women went to the factories. Because these women were viewed as sacrificing their roles as mothers to help America win the war, Americans had few qualms about public support to ensure that their children received good care; the federal government funded child care centers across the nation.11

At the end of the century, however, the issue that drove spending for child care was not patriotism, but self-suf-
ficiency. Passage of welfare reform again made child care an issue of broad public appeal. Why? Because it tapped into Americans’ core beliefs in the value of work and self-sufficiency. In 1988, when Congress made its first attempt to reform the welfare system, the resulting law, called the Family Support Act, provided limited funds to subsidize child care for welfare recipients. Two years later, Congress expanded federal support of child care for low-income working families.11

When the debate over welfare was renewed in the mid-1990s, some advocates for welfare families took the position that women receiving welfare should not be required to work. They cited two reasons: that work requirements were effectively forced labor and that women on welfare should be able to stay at home with their children during the critical early years.

In the end, their position was rejected, and public support for the values of fairness and self-sufficiency won out. Why should some parents of young children get government support to stay at home when other parents of young children don’t have that choice? The new welfare law allowed states to exempt new mothers from the work requirement until their children reached age one, but some states have adopted even stricter requirements. Wisconsin, for example, requires work after 12 weeks.

To ensure that welfare recipients are able to work, the 1996 federal welfare reform law included significantly more federal spending on child care subsidies for people who are receiving or leaving welfare. The measure gave states increased funds for child care subsidies (creating the Child Care and Development Fund), as well as flexibility to spend part of their welfare block grants on child care, and it had strong public support. A 1998 telephone survey of 1,762 adults by the Pew Research Center, *Deconstructing Distrust: How Americans View Government*, indicated that 74% of respondents favored increasing federal spending on child care for low-income families; 31% favored it strongly.12 (See Figure 2.)

Two years later, *Necessary Compromises* highlighted the same theme. As the report noted, “We also found great sympathy for families who need two incomes to survive, or parents raising children alone (almost one third of those

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**Figure 2**

**National Sample of Voters Favor More Child Care Spending for Low-Income Families**

Results from a telephone interview survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,007 adults from February 19–22, 1998, conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates.

Responses to the statement: “Now I am going to read you a list of some programs and proposals that are being discussed in this country today. For each one, please tell me whether you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose it. … Increasing federal spending on child care for low-income families.”

we surveyed either are single parents or had been single parents at some point) . . . By a greater than a three to one margin, parents say it is more important for parents on public assistance to use child care so they can work or go to school than to stay at home (71% versus 20%).

That same study also highlighted another prevailing parental attitude that influences the issue. More than 6

in 10 parents surveyed said they are very concerned about abuse and neglect in day-care centers. The public, sympathetic with this concern, supports efforts to improve child care for those who must use it.

In general, federal spending patterns show that political leaders have heeded these poll findings. The Child Care and Development Fund reached $2 billion in 2001, with states contributing billions of dollars in additional funds.

Support for Family Leave

Another example of how Americans sympathize with parents’ efforts to balance work and family can be found in the public’s reaction to the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Family and medical leave began as a women’s issue in 1984 when a federal district court struck down California’s maternity-leave law as discriminating against men, and the Women’s Legal Defense Fund vowed to save it (see the article by Asher and Lenhoff in this journal issue). If the issue had continued to be known as maternity leave—and had remained solely a women’s issue—it would not have succeeded as a public policy because it seemingly benefited only families with newborn children.

However, the FMLA’s supporters—originally women’s groups and children’s organizations—learned to reframe the issue. They began to talk about the 12 weeks of unpaid leave promised by the FMLA as a minimal labor standard that enables families to balance work and family priorities after childbirth and during serious illness. The legislation attracted broad support by focusing on the well-being of children, respecting the integrity of the family, and offering a benefit to working families.

Eight years after its passage, family leave remains popular with the public. Indeed, most would like to see family leave benefits expanded to include paid leave. In the survey, What Grown-ups Understand About Child Development, 88% of parents with young children and 80% of all adults supported paid parental leave. When asked how the leave should be paid for, survey respondents supported expanding disability or unemployment insurance to include paid parental leave. About 40% of respondents supported 3 months or less of paid parental leave for mothers, about 25% favored 4 to 11 months,
and almost one third favored 1 year or more.\(^5\)

The FMLA is also popular because its implementation does not entail government intrusion into family life. The policy falls squarely in line with the public’s belief that families should care for their own, with the government cast in the role of supporting families.

**What Is Government's Role?**

Attitudes toward the role of government in the lives of families are deep-seated. While parents and the public endorse the idea of government helping to defray the costs of child care for parents, they draw a bright line between financial support and primary responsibility. In the June 2000 poll, *What Grown-ups Understand About Child Development*, 73% of parents with young children and 65% of all adults supported government financial assistance to help families pay for quality child care.\(^5\) But in a 1999 *Los Angeles Times* poll, *Child Care in California*, which surveyed 1,601 parents in the state, only 18% of respondents felt that government should have primary responsibility for ensuring access to affordable child care.\(^6\)

In other words, the public does not want government to become a babysitter. Why? One reason may be that, in general, the public is skeptical about the competence of government. An August 2000 survey by the Gallup Organization, with a national sample of more than 1,000 adults, found that 54% said that the government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses; only 38% responded that government should do more to solve our country’s problems. These results are similar to those obtained in several Gallup polls over the past six years.\(^14\)

Similarly, the survey, *Issues in the 2000 Election: Values*, demonstrated that, in general, people are more likely to trust their state and local governments than the federal government. As Figure 3 shows, the poll found that 58% felt that religious, charitable, and community organizations do a better job than government of providing services to people in need. Just 29% of respondents felt government could do a better job, and 9% volunteered the response that both should provide services.\(^8\) This reflects the public’s general preference for services that are community-focused and community-based.

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**Figure 3**

**American Adults Prefer Services Provided by Community Organizations**

Results from a poll of 1,557 adults across the United States surveyed in May and June of 2000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of respondents choosing each alternative when asked the question: “Some people believe that religious, charitable, and community organizations can do the best job of providing services to people in need. Others believe that the government can do the best job of providing services to people in need. Which comes closer to your view?”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizations:</strong> 58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Government:</strong> 29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Both:</strong> 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neither:</strong> 2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Don’t Know:</strong> 2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Successful Government Efforts to Help Families

What lessons can policymakers and children’s advocates take from these polls? First, policy interventions should respect the rights of parents to raise children as they see fit. Second, policies should help families balance their obligations to work and family. And third, government should keep its direct involvement in early childhood care to a minimum, while maximizing its support for community-based assistance to parents. Successful state initiatives for young children reflect these lessons, as the following two brief examples show.

Smart Start: Self-Sufficiency and Choice

One of the best examples of how state initiatives can heed public values comes from North Carolina. The state’s highly regarded Smart Start Initiative recognizes that all parents are concerned about high-quality care for young children and aims to improve early care programs by providing better training for early childhood teachers.

When the idea was first debated in 1993 and 1994, an organized effort to stop Smart Start portrayed it as an effort to take children away from families and put them in organized child care. Smart Start supporters reframed their proposals to show the public that the effort was designed to recognize parents as primary decision makers in matters related to their children. Smart Start backers explained that whatever decisions parents made about child care, the initiative’s goal was making sure that the care was of high quality. These supporters did not advocate solely for center-based systems of child care; the initiative also offers resources and support to family members who care for young children.

This approach was somewhat at odds with the view of some children’s advocates, who often define “quality” as center-based programs with universal standards. But Smart Start’s supporters recognized that not all parents want their young children to attend child care centers that are regulated or subsidized by government. The initiative focused instead on improving the quality of all child care settings, and its supporters refused to single out center-based care as superior to other forms of care.

Smart Start honors Americans’ reverence for work and self-sufficiency by making early care better for all families and providing subsidies to needy families to ensure that lack of child care does not keep them from holding down jobs. Finally, the program honors parents’ own choices. It allows parents to make decisions about how their children will be cared for—whether their children will stay with an aunt, or with a neighbor down the street, or in a child care center.

Welcome Baby: Community-Based Support

One of the reasons that parents like choice so much is that they generally prefer services delivered close to home—by people from their own communities. The importance of this idea was borne out by another successful state program—Vermont’s Success by Six.

Success by Six offers home visits for every family with a newborn or a newly adopted child. New parents receive a “Welcome Baby” bag filled with items, such as diapers, books, and toys. Home visitors focus on making parents feel at ease, answering questions related to child development, and making referrals to other community services. One important aspect of the program is that the home visitors are people from the community. These home visitors know the neighborhoods they serve, and their presence is not perceived as a government intrusion on family privacy. Vermont parents give high marks to the program and cite its close connections to families as one reason for a 49% drop in child abuse from 1990 to 1998.15

Conclusion

If, as this analysis suggests, the public’s core values set the boundaries of public support for government interventions on behalf of very young children, those boundaries are becoming clearer. The public’s concern for the very youngest children remains steady. But the public—
and parents themselves—believe strongly that families should retain primary responsibility for caring for those small children.

The government’s role, the public believes, is to assist those familial efforts without interfering with them. One of the most important ways that government can support parents is by ensuring that parents who have to work to support their families do not have to worry about the safety of their children. This means that government should try to ensure that child care is adequate and available for all families—and that families who need child care subsidies to enable them to work should receive them.

Parents and the public also want choices. They want options for their children. Perhaps the best role for government is ensuring that parents’ options are good ones and that services are delivered close to home. Within these boundaries, the partnership between government and families on behalf of young children offers many opportunities to serve those children well.

ENDNOTES