A tiny hand clasping the finger of a large hand—it is a familiar image. An image of infancy that evokes the baby’s vulnerability and trust, and the adult’s gentleness and responsibility. An image of caring. Behind the image is a story of family and societal choices. Do the baby’s mother and father hold jobs? What were their options for returning to work or staying with their newborn? Perhaps the large hand belongs not to a parent but to a teacher in a child care center, a neighbor who takes children into her home, or the baby’s grandmother. Who else is nearby in the care setting? Are other large hands reaching out to hold the baby, or are other small hands reaching up for the adult?

This journal issue is about the care of the nation’s youngest children, those who have not yet turned three. As used here, the term “care” encompasses a rainbow of different care settings and caring individuals—parents and grandparents, nannies and neighbors, family child care providers and child care centers. The journal issue compares our understanding of the caregiving that babies need with the capacity of today’s parents to ensure that those needs are met day after day.

Why focus just on children under age three? The decision is controversial. Because development is continuous, categories based on age can be artificial and misleading. Nevertheless, the “under-threes” have been singled out in recent years. Sparked by the Carnegie Corporation’s Starting Points report in 1994 and spurred by newly popularized research on brain development, media attention to infants and toddlers surged during the 1990s. Amidst the excitement, some exaggerated claims were made about the uniqueness of the first years of life, prompting the National Academy of Sciences to caution that the focus on the period from birth to age three “begins too late and ends too early.” We agree. No claim is made here that development stops or even pauses at a child’s third birthday party. Instead, we distinguish this age group because the responsibility for children who are still so dependent and vulnerable poses unique demands on caregivers and care settings. A baby depends utterly on his or her caregiver to make the vast world safe, manageable, and welcoming. To share the care of a child who cannot yet walk or talk carries special meaning and weight for all involved.

All the same, the special character of the earliest years of life confounds policymakers, professionals, and the public. What is the best care that is feasible to provide to infants and toddlers, now that more than half of America’s babies have a mother who works outside the home? There are over 11 million children under age three in the United States, and this year nearly 5 million of them will spend about 25 hours a week in the care of someone other than a parent. This is a revolution in caregiving, and it leaves Americans uneasy. Is there a single desirable balance between care by parents and by others, or are there many appropriate solutions? Parental decisions regarding both employment and child care reflect the family’s circumstances and preferences, to be sure, but they are also influenced by public attitudes, employer policies, and government programs. By improving the caregiving
options available to families, society can support the well-being of both families and children—if we can come to agreement on our goals and priorities. That is the terrain covered in this journal issue.

In emphasizing the balance families strike between employment and caregiving, this journal issue leaves out many aspects of care that shape infants’ development. Mentioned but not discussed in detail are economic supports, health care, early intervention services for infants with developmental delays or disabilities, parent education and support programs, and the child welfare system that steps in when parental care is inadequate. These are important services, critical to the well-being of many children. Two reports included in this issue, one by Levine and Smith and one by Bodenhorn and Kelch, describe innovative efforts to strengthen and integrate health, parenting, and child development services. However, these allied service systems have been addressed in earlier issues of The Future of Children, and they are not examined again here. Instead, this issue focuses on the question of whether enough is being done to support the everyday caregiving on which infants and toddlers rely so trustingly.

The first three articles included in this issue review recent research on child development, child care, and public attitudes that has emerged over the last ten years. The next three articles discuss the ways that employers and governments both here and abroad help parents manage the demands of work and the care of their babies. The last six articles in the issue, called “Reports from the Field,” recount the stories behind new efforts to strengthen the care given to the nation’s youngest children. Taken together, the articles point to the need to improve the entire array of caregiving options—from care by parents themselves, to care by relatives, and care provided in licensed homes or centers.

This overview article opens with a brief look at the dramatic, multifaceted development that takes place during infancy, and highlights the influence that caregiving has on development. It discusses how caregiving has changed in the last half-century, with increasing maternal employment and use of nonfamilial child care, and it reviews the ambivalence of public reactions to these shifts. Finally, the article looks closely at the adequacy of family leave and child care subsidy policies designed to help American families manage the demands of work and caregiving. It argues that further action by government, employers, and community institutions is needed to strengthen all the caregiving options families use, to ensure that a nurturing environment surrounds every young child’s development.

The Human Promise of Infancy

Vivid images of early development have captured the attention of the media, policymakers, and the general public. Recently, the most striking have been brightly colored reproductions of brain scans showing dramatic differences between the brains of children exposed to terrible or positive environments during the first years of their lives. The article by Thompson in this journal issue adds depth to these images by describing the captivating behaviors of babies and toddlers as they master new skills and understanding, delighting their caregivers.

Development Is Multifaceted

Thompson emphasizes that early development is designed to yield a well-rounded human being, as he explains that growth during the first three years of life transforms not only the infant’s brain but his or her body, mind, and person. While millions of synapses are forming and being pruned in the “biologically exuberant” growing brain,8 the infant is also learning to decipher and speak an elaborate native language, figuring out how the physical world works, coordinating a complex set of growing muscles and bones, and discovering how to harness the dynamism of emotions and relationships with others. The early years lay the foundation for the child’s later cognitive achievements, mastery of social skills, and emerging sense of self-esteem and respect for others.

While early learning looks natural and unremarkable, its significance should not be underestimated. Physical, intellectual, and social learning occur together as a baby and

---

**Recommendation**

School readiness investments should encompass supports for the healthy, well-rounded development of infants and toddlers, who are mastering the social, emotional, and cognitive skills required for success in school and beyond.
c a regiver go through the day’s routine—talking, exploring, playing, and cuddling. Thompson’s article points out that important aspects of social and emotional mastery such as curiosity, task persistence, adaptability, and self-control take root in the rich soil of these early experiences. As a committee of scholars at the National Academy of Sciences wrote in a 2000 report, the first years of life set “either a sturdy or fragile stage” on which the child builds the intellectual and academic skills that will be called on in school and other life contexts.

Development Depends on Caregiving

The process of development, scientists agree, intertwines genetic factors, inborn forces of maturation and growth, and responsiveness to both environment and experience. In other words, nature powers much of early development, but its course depends heavily on the experiences and protections that caregivers provide. Many influences that shape development are determined by the infant’s caregivers—the parents and others who are responsible for the child’s routine care and overall well-being. In Thompson’s words, “the irreducible core of the environment of early development is people.” Caregivers provide food and physical safety; they nurture and reassure the infant; they provoke and respond to the toddler’s overtures; they offer playthings and challenges; and they surround the child with language.

These caregiver actions are remarkably natural, argues Thompson, although attentive caregiving cannot be taken for granted. Common problems that impede caregiving include depression and stress that may be rooted in the adult’s own experiences as a child or caused by more immediate life problems. Infant/caregiver relationships are also disrupted when competing demands pull caregivers away either physically or psychologically. Therefore, Thompson calls on society to value the caregivers who mean so much to infants, for instance, by ensuring that welfare and employment policies permit parents to remain home during the months after a child’s birth, and by providing better training and more compensation to caregivers outside the family. Similarly, the article by Knitzer in this issue urges federal and state governments to invest more in programs like Early Head Start that help vulnerable caregivers forge positive relationships with the children who depend on them. The essence of caregiving that supports child development is a relationship with an adult who is both attentive and responsive to the infant’s or toddler’s concerns, discoveries, and achievements. It is people who matter the most to babies.

Recommendation

Impacts on young children’s access to attentive, nurturing care should be a key criterion when policymakers and advocates judge policies that affect adults with caregiving responsibilities.

New Configurations of Caregiving

Caregivers and caregiving environments matter to the development of babies and toddlers—psychological science speaks clearly on that point. Sociologists, economists, and demographers weigh in on the topic as well, because among the most striking sociological changes of the last 50 years is the transformation of caregiving within families. Mothers, and particularly mothers of very young children, have entered the labor force in a growing tide. The article by Phillips and Adams in this journal issue reports that 61% of American mothers with a child under age three were employed in 2000, compared with only 34% in 1975. Today, work enters into the relationship between mother and baby very early. In 2000, report Phillips and Adams, 56% of mothers with a baby under age one were employed. In the wake of that shift, parents have orchestrated a myriad of alternative arrangements to care for their children during work hours.

According to Phillips and Adams, a major multisite study of families found that for three of four babies, some form of nonparental child care began during the first year of life—often as early as three months of age. Although for many infants, child care means staying with a grandmother, the proportion of children under age three who spend their days in child care centers has almost tripled in the last 20 years, rising from only 8% to 22%. Taken together, increasing maternal employment and the growing reliance on child care add up to what Phillips and Adams call “a dramatic reapportioning of care” away from parents to a variety of other caregivers.

Although the change in caregiving has been steady and gradual, it has attracted notice by the American public. Attentive care should be every child’s birthright—about that there is little debate, but heated discussions arise.
Analysis and Recommendations

over how to provide such care for babies in the face of women’s growing professionalism and importance as family breadwinners. There is no consensus about the balance between parental employment and caregiving that is right for all families. No experts have offered a winning vision of how to accommodate work and family, and parents have not joined hands to press employers or government for family-friendly policies. Why not? A closer examination of recent trends and public values concerning family self-sufficiency, caregiving, and the role of government offers a partial explanation.

Should Mothers Work?

Rates of employment among mothers of children under age three have risen consistently during the last half-century and they show no signs of slackening. Sociologists offer different explanations for the employment trends: work requirements imposed on welfare recipients, the eroding wages of men, women’s response to the growing risk of divorce, women’s career aspirations, and modern-day materialism. Very few experts suggest that significant numbers of women will turn their backs on employment, however. Rather, women are returning to work earlier than ever after childbirth—most by the third month.

The impact of a mother’s wages on the family’s budget is a persuasive factor in many households. In two-parent families, mothers contribute about one-third of the family’s income. The Congressional Research Service reports that, in 1997, the median income for two-parent families with a nonworking wife was $36,027, whereas families with two working parents earned $60,669. And one economic trend analysis of changing family incomes during the turbulent 1970s and 1980s revealed that a mother’s income played an important role in stabilizing the family’s standard of living in the face of economic uncertainty.

Moreover, families with new babies tend to be young, and vulnerable economically. Although statistics are seldom reported on children under age three, 22% of children under age six lived below the poverty line in 1997 (set that year at about $13,000 for a family of three), and nearly one-third did not live with both parents. In families that struggle with poverty, as has long been the case, maternal employment is taken for granted.

American attitudes toward maternal employment have been surprisingly unaffected by the rising proportions of mothers in the labor force. A flood of recent polls and surveys summarized in the article by Sylvester in this journal issue shows that by margins of three or four to one, Americans continue to believe that it is best if a parent is home to care for very young children. From an international perspective, the American ideal of the stay-at-home mother seems out of step with the times. In most European countries, maternal employment has been accepted for much of the twentieth century, and it is now expected after a child is a year old. (As the article by Waldfogel in this issue points out, most European countries offer paid parental leave for a year after a birth.)

In the United States and other English-speaking nations, however, the public has resisted the norm of maternal employment, especially during the first years of life. Here, public reactions to parents’ decisions to work and use child care sometimes suggest that materialism and concern with status have overshadowed more fundamental family values. As one sociologist put it: “Working mothers, especially mothers of preschoolers, still face mixed responses among the American public who, although affirming their legal right to work, remain divided about the wisdom of and reasons for so many young mothers in the labor force. Are they working because they need to or just because they want to buy more things?”

When the topic is single mothers and welfare policy, however, public attitudes about good parenting and employment reverse sharply. In what strikes some as a double standard, poor mothers are praised not for remaining home with their children but for working and even combining jobs and education to get ahead economically. The debates over welfare reform in 1995 and 1996 made the power of public opinion on this topic very clear, as a 60-year-old program that provided cash benefits to enable poor single mothers to be home with their children was replaced by a program offering time-limited benefits linked to job training and work requirements. To the public, in other words, the value of family self-sufficiency trumps the value of having a parent as caregiver for the very young—if the family’s economic independence is at stake.

A Role for Child Care

The decade of the 1990s marked a crucial transition in public acceptance of the idea that child care is essential, even for infants and toddlers, if mothers are obliged to work. To help low-income mothers enter the labor force,
Sylvester reports, the public is willing to pay for child care. Indeed, public support has held up during an impressive increase in funding for child care subsidies for low-income families. Since 1992, combined federal and state subsidy funding has nearly tripled. In 1999, fully 1.8 million children received child care subsidies each month, and about one-half million of those children were under age three. As important as it has been to the development of American child care policy, however, this public support for subsidies does not yet represent a full-blown embrace of child care, or a commitment to create a system of safe and reliable child care services.

Research examining children’s experiences in child care underscores the need to address the quality of infant and toddler care. Not only do physical hazards often exist even in licensed child care settings, but harsh, inattentive, or unresponsive relationships between caregivers and children also threaten children’s development. Observers in large-scale, multisite studies of child care provided in both center and home settings have found that half the care settings experienced by infants and toddlers are poor or only fair, not good or excellent. No one type of care has proven superior to others for children under age three, however. For example, one study found that children who were six months of age fared best when they were alone with their caregivers. A follow-up study revealed that as toddlers, the children benefited from being in a center environment with educated teachers and plentiful opportunities to explore.

When the focus is on children under age three, many Americans hesitate to embrace the idea of group care in centers or family child care homes where the caregivers are not known to the parents. So called “institutional” care is not, according to focus groups and surveys, a desirable option for the very young. Nor do many parents agree with professionals and researchers that training increases the ability of caregivers to offer the love, stimulation, and physical attention that infants and toddlers need. When children are age three or four, however, the value of exposure to group experiences, trained teachers, and learning materials is more apparent to parents and policymakers alike. The statistics on the use of child care during the first three years of life reported in the article by Phillips and Adams in this journal issue parallel these opinions. Of the infants and toddlers whose mothers worked in 1997, 27% were cared for by a relative, 22% in centers, 17% in family child care homes, and 7% with nannies.

Alarming media stories about inattentive or abusive child care situations have heightened concerns about the risks of placing babies in nonfamilial care. Rather than fueling demand for more government intervention to ensure the safety and quality of child care settings, however, concerns about child care have reinforced the American emphasis on the decision-making role of parents. Most child care subsidies (and the federal child care tax credit that benefits a wide swath of middle-income American families) can be used to pay for any care that is operating legally, whether it is provided by a next-door neighbor or by a for-profit child care center. The burden of choosing acceptable care is left to the parents, whereas public investments in quality improvements are minimal and regulations are unevenly enforced. In such a laissez-faire policy climate, poor quality care too often is allowed to put children’s development at risk. What can be done? A later section of this article considers ways of using public subsidy funds to improve the child care options available to parents.

Who Is Responsible?

A variety of government policies affect caregiving by all families. For instance, tax, employment, and welfare policies obligate parents to work or enable them to remain home; and both regulatory and funding policies shape the market of child care services where parents shop for nonfamilial care. As Sylvester notes, however, American values concerning self-sufficiency and childrearing mingle with attitudes toward government to create a narrow social focus on family responsibilities and privacy. The tradition of American family policy is to assume that “citizens will provide for their own needs through employment; the government steps in only in the event of family breakdown or loss of employment.” Indeed, the article by Knitzer in this journal issue describes how federal funding for children targets those who are poor, maltreated, and vulnerable.

Knitzer argues that government efforts are focused on supporting the economic role of families, and little attention goes to their caregiving role. By contrast, in most of the European countries described in the article by Waldfogel in this issue, governments use the tools of public policy to advance positive goals for families and children—especially during the first three years of life. Policies seek to encourage childbearing while ensuring that
women and men have equal opportunities in education and employment. The public in such countries expects government and business leaders to provide working conditions, leave and benefit policies, and publicly funded child care programs that will help parents balance work and caregiving.\textsuperscript{20}

In contrast, when asked directly in public opinion surveys, parents in the United States seldom call for government help in resolving the work/family dilemmas they face.\textsuperscript{7} That finding seems surprising. Perhaps, in this country, parents do not want government authorities to dictate family decisions. Some may fear government scrutiny of their caregiving, others may not want to appear to be unable to manage their responsibilities. Instead, American parents take it upon themselves to find their own, personal solutions to the tensions between the demands of employment and caregiving.\textsuperscript{12}

### Supporting Choice, Providing Options

A core tenet of the American value system is an emphasis on individual rights, followed quickly by an emphasis on family privacy and integrity, and a preference for market forces over government action. All these values and preferences contribute to a climate in family policy that emphasizes choice. In a nation as diverse in cultures and demographics as the United States, it makes sense that successful family policies have built systems that offer a wide array of choices. Hopefully, families will be treated fairly, even as they choose contrasting ways of balancing their work and caregiving responsibilities.

For instance, support for “parent choice” has been a much-touted goal of the last decade’s child care subsidy systems, and now most subsidies are paid through vouchers that do not oblige the recipient to use a predetermined type of care. Previously, public agencies often contracted with specific child care programs (usually centers) to serve subsidized children. Like the tax dollars returned to families who deduct child care expenses from their taxes using the Dependent Care Tax Credit, subsidy vouchers are a flexible form of assistance to parents.\textsuperscript{34} Even so, these policies are criticized for not supporting many choices parents would like to make. For example, as Phillips and Adams explain, subsidy vouchers cannot be used to purchase costly child care options. Conservatives argue that the provision of child care subsidies discriminates against families in which one parent chooses not to work in order to care for the children.\textsuperscript{35} A broader lens could integrate attention to child care and family policies, including supports for both parental and nonparental care, in the same discussion.

The article by Waldfogel in this journal issue highlights the value of policies in other countries that give parents the flexibility to make different caregiving and employment choices. Such policies offer parents equivalent support regardless of what mix of parental care and child care they use. That article’s international comparison underscores the fact that, in the United States, scant public funding exists to support any of the options families use to balance work and caregiving. In the words of one policy analyst, “Without paid parental leave, parents of limited means find it difficult to care for an infant (or toddler) at home. Without having subsidized child care facilities, parents find it difficult to place a preschool child in a desirable facility.”\textsuperscript{36} Proclaiming the rights of families to make their own work and caregiving choices is mere rhetoric, unless it is backed up by supports that offer families across the income spectrum viable options for remaining home, securing quality child care, or combining the two. As Waldfogel notes in her article, “What is best for one child or one family may not be optimal for another child or family,” and the choice that works for a child or family at one time may not be suitable a year later.

In fact, no care option is currently extensive, affordable, reliable, or good enough to enable American families at all income levels to feel confident that the right relationships and experiences will surround their vulnerable young children. The articles in this issue highlight three particular policy challenges:

- Few parents have access to paid parental leave, part-time work schedules, and income supports sufficient to allow them to remain home as caregivers for even six months. Low-wage workers who have the fewest options overall are the least likely to enjoy flexible employment with family-friendly benefits.

- Formal, licensed child care for infants is costly, scarce, and too often of poor quality. Large groups and child-adult ratios, low wages that lead to staff turnover, and lack of training undermine the quality of the relationships between caregivers and children that are the heart and soul of early caregiving.
Child care arrangements with relatives, available to some families but not to many others, can be flexible and trustworthy, or fragile and unsatisfactory. Although public subsidies can now go to pay relative caregivers, few communities have created networks of information and support to strengthen the care these individuals offer to children.

As flawed as they are, these are the major options that families rely on to care for infants and toddlers. Viewing them as a continuum of alternatives that every family may tap at one time or another focuses attention where it should be—on common problems and cross-cutting solutions. The reports included at the end of this journal issue discuss a series of recent efforts to improve services for infants and toddlers, and to take small initiatives to scale. Armed with a broad understanding of problems and public priorities, and heartened by concrete experiences, policymakers and practitioners can start work building new supports for families with babies.

Recommendation

Government policies should assure that all families have supports for childrearing during the first years of life, including leaves for parents who choose to be home and access to good child care that is safe, affordable, and appropriate to the child and family.

The next section of this analysis examines two key policies that help parents manage the demands of work and caregiving. The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) gives many employees the right to an unpaid, job-protected 12-week leave to care for a newborn and tend to other family concerns, and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is the major source of funding for child care subsidies that low-income families can use to offset the cost of child care while they work. In each case, a federal policy action sets in place a framework (a mandate in the case of the FMLA and a block grant to the states in the case of the CCDF) that is implemented and elaborated by state governments and the efforts of private employers and community institutions. For the families covered by these policies, the right to family leave and access to child care subsidies create better options for both spending time at home and turning outside to arrange child care.

Time at Home: Family Leave

For many families, as for the general public, the most appealing caregiving arrangement for a new baby or a toddler is care by a stay-at-home parent. Parental care offers a baby continuity and security, along with the depth of feeling and attentiveness that accompany the parent-child bond. It gives the parent a chance to participate in the baby’s development, rejoicing in each step forward while anticipating the next. It ensures that crucial information about the baby’s needs and experiences does not fall through the cracks of communication between parent and caregiver. However, for most American families today, it also means that one parent must stop contributing income to the family budget. Realistically, the question in most households is whether a parent can afford to stay home at all with the new baby.

Since 1993, when the FMLA became law, about one-half of American workers have had a legal right to take 12 weeks of leave to care for a new baby or a foster or adopted child, or to handle an illness in the family—without losing their jobs. The report by Asher and Lenhoff in this journal issue describes the political battle to pass the FMLA, outlines the provisions of the law, and highlights its limitations. Popular support for family leave was important in sustaining momentum behind this legislation, and public opinion now strongly favors providing pay during periods of leave.47

After the law passed, the nonpartisan federal Commission on Leave contracted for surveys of the law’s impact on employers and employees to be conducted in 1995 and again in 2000. The findings from these surveys show that, although employers resisted the law’s passage and do not support the imposition of such government mandates, most report that complying with the law has not been burdensome (85% in 1995 and 64% in 2000 called compliance easy). Nor has it cut productivity for the great majority (93% in 1995 and 84% in 2000 reported no negative impacts on productivity).48 The Department of Labor’s Web site provides the following summary of the survey findings:

“[The FMLA] has succeeded in replacing the piece-meal nature of voluntary employer leave policies and
A report on the survey of employees conducted in 2000 shows that 18% of all the leaves taken (short and long) were used by parents to care for a newborn or to welcome a foster or adopted child. A special analysis of leave use by parents with young children indicated that over one-third of the mothers (36%) and one-third of the fathers (34%) who took leave used it for newborn care. Clearly, the existence of job-protected leave helps many families with caregiving during the first life-changing weeks after a birth.

Limited Eligibility for Leave
As important as it is, however, the FMLA has significant limitations both in its coverage and in the help it provides. As Asher and Lenhoff explain, the law applies only to employers with 50 employees or more. Moreover, within covered worksites, the only employees eligible for leave are those who have worked for the employer for 12 months and 1,250 hours (about 25 hours per week). Overall, the Department of Labor reports that about two-thirds of the American labor force work for employers (public and private) who are covered by the FMLA, and 55% of all workers (but only 47% of private-sector workers) are eligible for leaves. Not covered by the law, therefore, are those who are just entering the labor force, employees who have changed jobs, or those who work part-time or on a temporary basis. These workers, along with those at small companies, are also unlikely to be offered leave by their employers on a voluntary basis. In other words, the workers not covered by the FMLA are those who are most likely to need its mandate to secure a leave.

Now that research shows the FMLA’s requirements are not damaging to most businesses, it is important to make the guarantee of 12 weeks of leave universal, first by extending the law to cover midsized businesses (those with 25–50 employees, encompassing 13 million more workers), then to include small businesses. Innovative strategies that may not be entirely employer-based will then be needed to provide equivalent protection to part-time, temporary, and recently hired workers.

Recommendation
State and federal governments should extend the protections of the Family and Medical Leave Act to workers in midsized and eventually small businesses.

Unpaid Leave
The second key limitation of the FMLA highlighted in the report by Asher and Lenhoff is the fact that, because the leave guaranteed by law is unpaid, it is of practical value only to those employees who can forego earnings for up to three months. This limitation is regularly cited as a key reason why only 16% of FMLA-covered employees take leave each year. Overall, one-third of leave-takers received no pay while they were away from their jobs. This may be one reason why 54% of the leaves taken are shorter than 10 days in duration, rather than the 12 weeks guaranteed by the FMLA.

In practice, many employers go beyond the mandates of the law and choose to offer paid leave (which is why no more than one-third go without pay during leave). However, as the article by Friedman in this issue makes clear, voluntary employer benefits provide more advantages to highly-paid workers than they offer to low-wage workers. The 2000 survey of FMLA usage indicates that four of five high-wage workers (80%) who earn over $75,000 per year were paid during their leave. By contrast, only one of four workers (26%) who earned less than $20,000 per year received any compensation during leave. Clearly, low-income parents facing a strained budget and the added costs of a new baby understand that they cannot afford to avail themselves of the FMLA’s unpaid leave. To them, the law is no more than an attractive phrase. To make the guarantees envisioned by the law and its public supporters real to the families who need them the most, a strategy must be devised for paying parents during FMLA-covered leaves.

Recommendation
State and federal governments should provide income to those who take family leave for newborn care through a funding pool that combines public funds with contributions from employers and employees.
Caring for Infants and Toddlers

Leaving Welfare for Employment

The parents who are least likely to benefit from the FMLA’s protections are those who are attempting to move from welfare dependence to work and self-sufficiency, because they are new employees who are likely to receive low wages and no fringe benefits. These families remain, for a time, connected to the welfare system now known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF. As the article by Knitzer explains, welfare reform changed society’s expectation of the poor single mothers who qualify for cash assistance (one-third of whom had a child under age three in 1999). Work requirements now confront welfare recipients even when they have infants less than a year old. Knitzer also points out that welfare rules in twelve states require work by women whose babies are no more than three months old; in four states, work must begin at six months. The other states require work when the child is age one, or later.

The minimal FMLA standard provides three months of leave to families of all income levels, most of whom have some assets and two parents who can share household and caregiving tasks. However, the challenges faced by new mothers on welfare are much steeper, as they single-handedly cope with a new baby and the myriad problems of poverty, while simultaneously seeking to enter the labor market, secure benefits like sick time and paid leave, and find affordable and acceptable child care arrangements for their babies. The interests of American taxpayers are best served by helping these mothers succeed by extending more assistance to them for the first year of the child’s life as they set up viable ways of handling the pressures of low-wage employment and child care.

Recommendation

No state should require welfare recipients to work before their babies are six months old. A one-year exemption from work requirements is more appropriate, given the disproportionate difficulties that poor single mothers face in meeting the needs of their babies as they strive toward self-sufficiency.

The extensions and corrections to the FMLA that are recommended here stop well short of providing American working parents the same opportunity to remain home to care for their infants that their counterparts in most industrialized countries enjoy, as the article by Waldfogel explains. Indeed, a recent review of international developments regarding parental leave notes that “worldwide, 128 countries of the 172 responding to the International Social Security Association in 1999 provided at least some paid and job-protected maternity leave.” The international average is now 16 weeks of paid leave. Nonetheless, the changes to American leave policy suggested here are important steps toward establishing a more equitable approach to family leave—one that provides equivalent protections to workers up and down the wage scale. When a universal and fair structure is in place, later reforms can and should extend the duration of paid leave to at least the ten months recommended in the article by Waldfogel, or the one year we recommend for welfare families. By doing so, the nation’s leaders can show their esteem for the relationships between babies and their parents that are so crucial to early development.

Turning to Child Care: Subsidy Funding

Even with increased access to family leave, working mothers soon will find themselves searching for child care, hoping to find caregivers who are warm, reliable, and responsive. Yet, while the nation’s youngest children are entering child care in growing numbers, earlier and earlier in their lives, few would claim that the decentralized child care market is prepared to offer them the safe, stimulating, nurturing care they deserve. On the contrary, of all child care services, care for infants and toddlers is the most scarce, expensive, and disappointing from a quality perspective. Combined with improved leave policies that would give parents more opportunity to care for their babies themselves, improved child care policies are needed to ensure that the caregiving that takes place outside the family is affordable, trustworthy, and good for babies.

A closer look at the largest governmental investment in child care, the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) that funds child care subsidies to help low-income families pay for care, suggests that more could be done to protect these most innocent Americans. The growth of child care subsidy funding during the 1990s has been an important step toward coherent public investment in child care. As is the case with the FMLA, however, the CCDF has limitations. If those limitations are addressed, the next generation of child care investments can further strengthen the child care options available to parents.

The Future of Children 15
**Increased Access and Affordability**

The most immediate challenge that parents of infants confront, when they start a search for child care, is that of affordability. Phillips and Adams report in this issue that center-based care for one infant costs about $6,000 per year, which is more than 14% of the median income of $43,275 for a three-person family in 1999. The high cost of care hits low-income families even harder. To help them pay for child care while they work, the CCDF provides federally funded child care subsidies to low-income families with a child under age 13. To be eligible, families must be working or seeking to leave welfare and can earn no more than 85% of the state’s median income. Parents are assured maximum freedom to choose any child care provider who meets applicable state standards. Within those broad parameters, states design their subsidy programs and set more specific eligibility rules, reimbursement rates, and procedures. As the article by Knitzer reports, in 1998 the federal allocation for the CCDF was $3.5 billion in federal funds, to which $1.7 billion in state matching funds was added. Even after significant increases throughout the 1990s, however, the CCDF could help only 12% of the 15 million children estimated to be eligible for federal assistance, leaving many struggling to pay the steep cost of care for children under age three.

**Improving Quality**

The CCDF is a funding program, not a law imposing mandates or requirements like the FMLA, and as currently structured it does little to ensure or upgrade the quality of services available to families. But it could contribute to quality. The studies of child care mentioned earlier have yielded a simple recipe for quality infant and toddler care. According to the National Academy of Sciences, young children benefit from care that offers them ample verbal and cognitive stimulation, sensitive and responsive caregiving, and generous amounts of attention and support. These positive experiences are most prevalent when the children are in small groups, when the child-adult ratios are low, and when caregivers are educated, well-compensated, and stable in their roles (turnover among child care staff averages 30% per year).

All these features of good care for infants and toddlers contribute to its cost, however. The CCDF subsidy program, therefore, can use funding to encourage quality improvements. For instance, raising the ceilings on allowable payments and using differential rates to recognize care that is demonstrated to be of higher quality are methods of supporting quality. A more flexible approach already built into the CCDF is the requirement that states use 4% of their federal child care funding for quality improvement. These funds can support activities to educate consumers about child care, to expand supply, or to strengthen programs by providing training, offering stipends to encourage staff retention, or creating toy lending libraries or facility improvement grants.

Establishing a set-aside for quality is an important step, but it will take significantly more than 4% of subsidy funding to have a detectable impact on the quality of the care provided in the sprawling American market of diverse child care services. One challenge is that the number of child care programs keeps growing. The number of child care centers nationwide expanded by 21% from 1990 to 1997, whereas the number of registered family child care homes more than doubled. As noted earlier, subsidy funding nearly tripled over that period. Models exist for linking program expansion with parallel investments in program quality, as demonstrated by the reports in this journal issue by Fenichel and Mann on Early Head Start, and by Lucas on military child care. When the dramatic expansion of Head Start began to erode the quality of programs, federal legislation stipulated that about 25% of

**Recommendation**

Public funding for child care subsidies should be significantly expanded and sustained, given the reliance of low-income families on maternal earnings and the high cost of infant and toddler child care.

**Recommendation**

The federal government should significantly increase the percentage of CCDF funds earmarked for quality improvements and link the percentage to future expansions in subsidy funding. State policymakers should add funding and invest quality dollars based on input from community leaders, advocates, child care representatives, and parents.
funding increases should go to quality improvement. The 4 to 5 million infants and toddlers in child care deserve no less protection.

**Strengthening All Types of Care**

The broad, flexible subsidies provided by the CCDF have given low-income families more access to a variety of types of child care. To permit parents unfettered choice of child care providers, states have channeled 85% of the CCDF funding to vouchers that can be used to pay any legal child care provider identified by the parent (some states also give cash to parents). Vouchers and cash payments do little to improve the quality of child care, but they do allow subsidies to flow to the full range of care settings in which infants and toddlers are found, providing resources to caregivers of all types, including relatives and others who may not be licensed.

As explained in the report by Zinsser in this journal issue, many families prefer to have relatives care for their infants and toddlers, and indeed 27% of children under age three are cared for by relatives. The fact that public funds now support this informal, familial type of care has sparked both debate and innovation. State child care agencies and child care professionals are devising creative ways of offering information and support to a continuum of caregivers and child care settings that stretches from care by parents on the one hand, to care in professional centers on the other.

**Conclusion:**

**Government as a Partner to Parents**

The alert reader has no doubt noticed that the recommendations throughout this article are directed primarily toward policymakers in federal and state governments. This is not a coincidence. The earlier discussion of public attitudes emphasized the American tradition of assigning only a limited role to government when it comes to family concerns, especially concerns as intimate and important as decisions about caregiving in the first years of life. The article by Sylvester in this issue described the skepticism many Americans have about the ability of “government institutions” to help address children’s needs for safety, love, and attention. The image of a faceless, domineering bureaucracy seems the antithesis of the intimate, caring relationships that children need. However, the article by Knitzer offers an alternative image of elected officials and the agencies they lead standing beside parents and community organizations, as partners offering financial assistance and oversight to complement the concrete caregiving efforts of child care providers and family members.

Most commonly, discussions of the balance between work and caregiving focus not on government leaders but on working mothers and their employers. The article by Friedman describes the leading strategies that family-friendly employers have developed to help their employees soften the collision between demands from work and home. In the booming economy that dominated the 1990s, tight labor markets made recruitment and retention of staff problematic, and work/family programs and policies gained popularity. In practice, however, family-friendly workplace policies are offered by a small percentage of employers and they target primarily highly paid staff—the employees whom employers work hardest to recruit and retain. For example, a Harvard business school graduate asked during an interview, “What’s your company going to do about my two-year-old daughter?”

The results of such negotiations between parent and employer, of course, reflect the power each one brings to the bargaining table, and so work/family initiatives designed for the manager trained at Harvard seldom trickle down to the ranks of low-wage workers who are easily replaced. Indeed, many low-wage workers get by without even basic employer-provided benefits, such as

**Recommendation**

Appropriate strategies for overseeing, informing, and supporting the different types of caregivers who work with infants and toddlers should be devised by professionals, supported with public funds, and made available to caregivers of all types—child care centers, licensed family child care homes, relatives, and parents.
health care or paid vacation days.\textsuperscript{42} The fact is that businesses are engaged in business, and competitiveness and profits define their success. They will invest in work/family supports, or not, to the extent that doing so enhances productivity or provides a return on investment. That is understandable. It is not the role of business to assure equity throughout society. That role is assigned to government, our elected leaders.

Therefore, responsibility for ensuring fair access to supports for families must be given to government with its toolbox of regulations, legal mandates, and funding to pay for tax incentives, subsidies, and service programs. As one corporate consultant put it, “A family-friendly society is much preferred to a family-friendly corporation.”\textsuperscript{53} By taking steps to build on the important policies established during the 1990s—the Family and Medical Leave Act and the Child Care and Development Fund—we can move a long way toward creating a society that is more friendly toward infants, toddlers, and their families than the society with which we entered the decade of the 1990s.

There is not time to wait. Each year, almost 4 million children are born and another 4 million pass their third birthdays and move from toddlerhood to the challenges of preschool. Their small hands are reaching up toward their parents and caregivers. As those hard-pressed adults respond to the children’s appeals, it is time for the broader society to add another steadying hand. We should give America’s infants and toddlers the strongest foundation we can, through support for the caregivers who shelter and raise them.

\textit{Mary Larner, Ph.D., Richard E. Behrman, M.D., Marie Young, M.S.W., Kathleen Reich, M.P.P.}

---

**ENDNOTES**


8. See note 1, Bruer, p. 11.


23. Blank, S.W., and Blum, B.B. *A brief history of work expectations*.

25. See note 11, Committee on Ways and Means, pp. 599–641, for data on the Child Care Development Fund.


33. See note 12, Michel, p. 9.


39. See note 5, National Research Council, pp. 297–327. The upcoming issue of The Future of Children (Fall/Winter 2001), 11(2) will review the impacts of welfare reform on children.


49. See note 12, Michel, p. 271.
