

Individualism and Early Childhood in the U.S.: How Culture and Tradition Have Impeded Evidence-Based Reforms

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Abstract

“Individualism” – defined as a belief in the primary importance of the individual and the virtues of self-reliance and personal independence – is deeply rooted in United States tradition and culture. Its opposite (dependence or collectivity) is disparaged and rejected, as can be seen by the stigma attached to “socialism,” “welfare,” or other programs seen as government “handouts.” This paper argues that individualism is a myth that has impeded the development of early childhood policy, resulting in a gap between what we know children need and what we provide for them. As a result, the U.S. ranks last or near to last on measures of child well-being in comparison with peer nations. The author argues that the U.S. should develop public programs such as paid parental leave, and access to subsidized early childhood care and education (termed “educare”), recognizing a collective stake in young children’s needs for both nurture and education.

I. Introduction

This paper explores the impact on U.S. family policy of a particular ideology that is deeply embedded in the American psyche and seen as one of our proudest and most cherished traditions. This quality has been called by many names, including “personal liberty,” “self-sufficiency,” “individual responsibility,” or my personal favorite, stubborn frontier style “rugged individualism.”

In this paper, I will use the term “individualism” to refer to this tradition. The American Heritage Dictionary defines individualism thus: “a belief in the primary importance of the individual and the virtues of self-reliance and

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personal independence;" ... "a doctrine holding that the interests of the individual should take precedence over the interests of the state or social group."¹⁾ It is seen by most segments of society as a quintessentially American value. It is admired in our national icons, from George Washington to John Wayne and Arnold Schwarzenegger, and its opposite (dependence or collectivity) is disparaged and rejected, as can be seen by the stigma attached to "socialism," "welfare," or other programs seen as government "handouts." As I will show, the culture and tradition of individualism has had a major impact in the U.S. on development of laws and policies towards the family.

As appealing as this tradition may seem, it perpetuates a myth that is harmful to children. I will argue that the focus on individualism in U.S. custom and tradition impedes family law reforms designed to address the evidence-based, critical needs of early childhood. This tradition is a primary reason why the ecology of childhood in America is so toxic and why America lags so far behind peer nations in providing for the well-being of its youngest and most vulnerable citizens.

II. Exploring Individualism in U.S. Tradition/Culture

Individualism is a deeply rooted tradition in the United States. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner, writing in 1893, identified certain qualities as the quintessence of the American character. Pointing to the importance of multiple frontiers in the settlement of the United States he claimed: "[It is to] the frontier [that] the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier."²⁾

1) AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 893 (4th ed., Houghton Mifflin & Co., Boston, New York, 2000).

2) Frederick Jackson Turner introduced this notion in 1893 in a speech entitled "The

The term “rugged individualism” was made famous by Herbert Hoover in a speech, made shortly before he won the presidential election of 1928. In his speech he traced the rise of U.S. power in the Post World War I years. “We were challenged with a ... choice between the American system of rugged individualism and a European philosophy of diametrically opposed doctrines of paternalism and state socialism. The acceptance of these ideas would have meant the destruction of self-government through centralization ... [and] the undermining of the individual initiative and enterprise through which our people have grown to unparalleled greatness.”³⁾ Elected to office, he is best known for his failure to respond effectively to the economic crisis that culminated in the Great Depression. His successor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, although elected four times, was demonized by conservatives for spending tax dollars on social welfare programs to provide a universal safety net.

Even after the victory of Democrat Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential campaign, individualism arguments have continued to resonate powerfully with the American public and opponents of social spending have been able to characterize support for children’s health insurance and aid to the states during an economic crisis as fundamentally un-American forms of “socialism” and “wealth redistribution” inimical to the free enterprise system. At this writing, our new president and Congressional supporters of a stimulus package are grappling with the challenge of explaining to the American people why spending on programs such as food stamps, government funded health care, public housing, and unemployment insurance, stigmatized in tradition and culture as “government handouts,” could be essential to the recovery of the American economy. Because dependency is so stigmatized, the rhetoric of social solidarity and common obligation toward the most vulnerable members of society often seems to have very little traction in U.S. political discourse.

Significance of the Frontier in American History,” at the World Congress of Historians held in Chicago. He argued that Americans “were a rugged, self-made race of men, forged in adversity through the pioneering experience, reborn and purified into a breed unique on earth.” See All About History, <http://www.allabouthistory.org/rugged-individualism-faq.htm>; Electronic text of Turner speech, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/TURNER/>

3) Herbert Hoover, *Victorious Campaign Speech of October 22, 1928*, <http://www.pinzler.com/ushistory/ruggedsupp.htm>

Another manifestation of U.S. individualism is found in our attitudes towards international treaties and especially the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. Opponents in the U.S. have blocked ratification of this convention, making the U.S. the only nation with a functioning government that has failed to do so. Critics in the U.S. misinterpret the Convention because they view it through the lens of individual autonomy and see it as pitting children against parents. Rather than seeing it as a commitment on the part of government to assist and support children and their families, they see it as an intrusion on parental authority and the thin edge of the wedge of state intrusion into the private sphere of family life. The moral panic over the CRC empowering children is matched by a similar moral panic over the CRC disempowering the autonomous family. The notion that “the broad autonomy rights guaranteed by the CRC comprise a significant attack on parental rights,” is an example of common misconceptions about the CRC that is rooted in the notion that the highest value is necessarily autonomy, as opposed to other values such as solidarity or protection of vulnerable persons.⁴⁾

The tradition of rugged individualism is a myth that distorts U.S. family policy. The work of Professor Martha Fineman has exploded this myth.⁵⁾ As she explains, everyone is an inevitable dependent at some point in the journey from birth to old age. “Caregivers” – those persons (mostly women) to whom our society assigns responsibility for caring for the young, ill and elderly – are “derivative dependents” because they are uncompensated in the wage economy yet still need and consume resources. Fineman has shown that dependency is not a character fault but a fact of life. Given this reality, it is a mistake of policy to view citizens as inherently autonomous. Instead, the role

4) David M. Smolin, *A Tale of Two Treaties: Furthering Social Justice through the Redemptive Myths of Childhood*, 17 EMORY INT'L L. REV. 967, 978 (describing attacks from critics of the CRC); Jonathan Todres, *Analyzing Opposition to U.S. Ratification of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 19-33, in JONATHAN TODRES, ET AL, THE U.N. CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD: AN ANALYSIS OF TREATY PROVISIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF U.S. RATIFICATION (2006),

5) Martha Albertson Fineman has written many books, including *THE AUTONOMY MYTH: A THEORY OF DEPENDENCY* (2004) and *THE NEUTERED MOTHER, THE SEXUAL FAMILY AND OTHER TWENTIETH CENTURY TRAGEDIES* (1995) and numerous law review articles, including *Cracking the Foundational Myths: Independence, Autonomy, and Self-Sufficiency*, 8 AM. U.J. GENDER SOC. POL'Y & L. 13 (2000), exploring the gap between myths of rugged individualism in family law and the actual realities of inevitable and derivative dependency.

of a “responsive state” should be to meet the needs created by inevitable and derivative dependency. In her more recent work, Fineman has proposed an even more universal “vulnerability thesis,” that would refocus policy-making on “the vulnerable subject” rather than on the traditional notion of the autonomous or independent agent.⁶⁾ Key to her argument is the principle that “vulnerable” should not be used to describe groups (the young, the old, the disabled, the unemployed, the ill, etc.) but rather as an overarching description of the human condition. We are all vulnerable, from the moment of birth until the moment of death. This recognition of our common vulnerability allows us to overcome barriers of identity politics that currently divide us and impede reforms. Fineman highlights two major barriers to the reform she proposes: 1) the tradition that conceptualizes “equality” as synonymous with sameness of treatment and (2) the traditional fear of government involvement in family affairs and emphasis on individual autonomy, a phenomenon that I have described in this article as “individualism.”

III. How Tradition Affects Children’s Policy: An Ecological Model of Childhood

One method for visualizing the impact of culture and tradition on policy is through an ecological model of childhood.⁷⁾ This model, adapted from the work of social scientists such as Urie Bronfenbrenner and James Garbarino, illustrates how culture and tradition, as embodied in law, influence the daily lives of children. The ecological model places the child at the center, surrounded by overlapping and intersecting circles representing the “microsystems,” defined as places where the child actually spends his or her

6) Martha Albertson Fineman, *The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition*, YALE J.L. & FEMINISM, 1 (2008).

7) I discuss this model in detail in HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: THE TRAGEDY OF CHILDREN’S RIGHTS FROM BEN FRANKLIN TO LIONEL TATE 21-23 (Princeton 2008); *Cleaning Up Toxic Violence: An Ecogenerist Paradigm*, in HANDBOOK OF CHILDREN, CULTURE, AND VIOLENCE 415-436 (Dowd et al eds., Sage 2006); *Ecogenerism: An Environmentalist Approach to Protecting Endangered Children*, 12 VA. J. SOC. POL’Y & LAW 409-47 (2005); *Reframing the Debate about the Socialization of Children: An Environmentalist Perspective*, 2004 U. CHI. L. FORUM 85-165 (2004).

time. These may include the family, the neighborhood, day care or school, the faith community, the peer group, etc. The spaces where microsystems overlap, are called “mesosystems.” For example, when a parent or older sibling picks the child up at day care, family and school intersect. As they walk home, and stop in the playground, family, neighborhood and peer group microsystems intersect, forming a mesosystem. As in a natural ecosystem, organisms are affected by the interplay of many factors. A dangerous neighborhood can threaten a child regardless of how strong and stable the family, and positive messages about achievement and responsibility from parents may be drowned out by negative messages from bullying or aggressive peers.

The ecological model is not limited to the zones in which children live, study and play. Other zones where children may rarely go, such as the parent’s workplace, the health care system, the economic markets, are represented by concentric circles surrounding the Microsystems. These “exosystems” have an indirect impact on children. A workplace that requires mandatory overtime, or denies parents leave to care for a sick child, affects the child’s world as well as the parent’s world. An economic market that undervalues child care and teaching of young children, so that persons in these professions have low wages and low status, has an indirect but profound effect on children.

The final piece of this ecological model is the “macrosystem.” A macrosystem is described as the patterning by history, power and ideas of the broader society in which the child lives. All of our collective prejudices, politics, and ideologies, and our religious and moral values together create the cultural macrosystem. Under an ecological model, tradition and culture are situated in the macrosystem. “Law” is a means for circulating the macrosystem’s values throughout the entire macrosystem in which the child lives. Like blood in the body or streams and rivers in the environment, law permeates the systems and carries with it the powerful values of culture and tradition. Reforming the law, especially family law, when new evidence challenges the wisdom of a deeply embedded tradition or culture, is extremely difficult. Whenever one observes a gap between science and policy, the culprit is most likely located in macrosystemic values that impede policy makers from adopting, and citizens from supporting, evidence-based policies.

IV. Early Childhood and the Gap Between Science and U.S. Policy

The role of individualism in shaping family policy can be seen in many areas, from policies towards poor families to laws on alimony at divorce. In this paper, I will focus on its implications for laws and policies with respect to early childhood. Early childhood is a term that requires further definition. In international law, a “child” is a person who has not yet reached the age of majority (18 years of age in the U.S.).⁸⁾ “Early childhood” may have many different meanings, depending on the speaker and the context. Some experts define early childhood as the period from birth to three. In the U.S., we talk of children older than two and under age five as “preschoolers.” This term makes sense in the U.S. context because publicly funded schooling generally begins with kindergarten at age five or first grade at age six. But in the international context, some form of public education often begins during the first year or by age three.⁹⁾ In the U.S., we use the term “preschool” to refer to educational programs (usually private half day programs) for children not yet eligible for kindergarten. We use the term “pre-K” (pre Kindergarten) to describe a relatively new set of programs providing voluntary publicly funded schooling for four-year-olds. We use a different term, “day care”, to define programs whose primary focus is on providing care and supervision for children of working parents beginning in infancy and covering young children’s after school hours as well.¹⁰⁾

From a policy perspective, rather than defining the period of early

8) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, G.A. Res. 44/25, U.S. GAOR, 44th Sess., Supp. No. 49, U.N. Doc. A/RES/44/25 (12 December 1989) (hereinafter “CRC”).

9) The crèche system in France and the Asilo Nido and Scuola Materna in Italy are examples. See ERMENEGILDO CICCOTTI, ENRICO MORETTI, & ROBERTO RICCIOTTI, I NUMERI ITALIANI: INFANZIA ED ADOLESCENZA IN CIFRE 208-217 (Istituto degli Innocenti 2007).

10) Sandra L. Hofferth, *Child Care in the United States Today*, THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN, Vol. 6, No. 2, 41-45 (1996). It is difficult to describe the patchwork of programs that comprise early childhood education and early childhood care in the U.S. Sandra Hofferth lists child care centers, nursery schools, Head Start, public prekindergarten, family child care, in-home providers, and relatives as sources of care. In addition, care needs of children may be served by other programs including recreation programs, and programs for children with disabilities or special needs.

childhood based on local schooling and child care options, we should focus instead on the developing child's needs. According to the National Research Council Institute of Medicine, a focus on "birth to three begins too late and ends too soon."¹¹⁾ It ends too soon because it fails to capture the three, four and five year olds who are not yet full day students in our public schools and begins too late because birth is a poor line of demarcation in planning for children's education and development. Clearly, family policies towards pregnancy, maternal and infant nutrition and lactation affect the child's educational success and cognitive capacities. In this paper, I will follow the lead of the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre's latest report card and use the term to refer to children who have not yet attained mandatory schooling age. In the U.S., mandatory schooling begins at age six and thus early childhood, for purposes of my discussion, means children under six.

Current research establishes beyond doubt that early childhood is a period of critical importance in human development.¹²⁾ "From the time of conception to the first day of kindergarten, development proceeds at a pace exceeding that of any subsequent stage of life."¹³⁾ While this fact has been obvious from simple observation, new technologies, including brain imaging, have allowed scientists to explore more deeply the process of neurological development in the period of early childhood. This neurological research has produced four core findings.¹⁴⁾ First, we know that brain development is influenced by both genetics and the child's experiences and environment. While children are born with certain innate qualities, the environment in which they grow is a critical determinant of their life chances. Second, we know that later cognitive and social attainment builds upon foundations laid down earlier. Thus, the lack of

11) NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE, FROM NEURONS TO NEIGHBORHOOD: THE SCIENCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT 7 (National Academy Press, Washington, D.C. 2000) (hereinafter "Neurons").

12) For overviews of current research by groups of experts, see, e.g., National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *Closing the Gap Between What We Know and What We Do* (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, Cambridge MA 2007) (hereinafter "Closing the Gap"); Neurons, *supra* note 11.

13) Neurons, *supra* note 11, at 386.

14) Innocenti Report Card 8, *The Child Care Transition: A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries*, <http://www.unicef-irc.org/cgi-bin/unicef/Lunga.sql?ProductID=445> (hereinafter "Report Card 8").

sound early childhood foundations has life-long implications. Third, we have learned that the child's cognitive, linguistic and social competencies are all linked together and cannot be viewed in isolation. It is not a theory but a scientific fact that "loving, one-to-one interaction, along with adequate nutrition, constitutes the essential input for infant brain and emotional development."¹⁵⁾ Fourth, we have learned that there is a predictable sequence of sensitive periods in neural development. During these periods, trauma or nutritional and physical deprivation produce stress hormones that actually can disrupt the developing brain's architecture. These core findings are not merely hypothetical; they are supported by advanced neurological studies of the developing brain.¹⁶⁾

For purposes of framing policies for early childhood, these core findings expose one major disconnect between U.S. policy and the science of child development. We have tended to treat child care and education as two separate functions. Historically, day nurseries or day care evolved during the mid to late nineteenth century to meet low income families' needs for supervision of their children while they worked. Nursery schools appeared in the early twentieth century as a form of education intended to contribute to the child's development, and they served mostly middle class and upper class families.¹⁷⁾ Parents have been seen as primarily responsible for providing care and nutrition to their children, relying on their own private financial resources and with assistance only to facilitate work. Day care or after school programs are seen as a service, generally provided through the for-profit economy, and are to be paid for by parents' who wish or choose to work.¹⁸⁾ Policies have evolved to support day care for poor parents who cannot afford it, in order to keep them off the welfare rolls. But day care is not viewed as an obligation of the state to the child.¹⁹⁾ By contrast, the obligation to provide universal public

15) *Id.* at 6.

16) J.J. Heckman, *Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children*, 312 SCIENCE 1900, 1902 (2006); Neurons, *supra* note 11, at 182183; Closing the Gap, *supra* note 12, at 28; Innocenti Report Card 8, *supra* note 14, at 6-7. For an overview collecting other studies, see JANE WALDFOGEL, WHAT CHILDREN NEED (2006).

17) Abby J. Cohen, *A Brief History of Federal Financing for Child Care in the United States*, THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN, Vol. 6, No. 2, 27 (Summer/Fall 1996).

18) Louise Stoney and Mark H. Greenberg, *The Financing of Child Care: Current and Emerging Trends*, THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 1996).

19) Jane Knitzer, *Federal and State Efforts to Improve Care for Infants and Toddlers*, FUTURE OF

education has become firmly rooted in U.S. culture. However, we perceive it as beginning only when children are sufficiently mature to begin studying the “3 Rs” (reading, writing and ‘rithmetic) in a traditional schoolroom setting. Nursery schools for ages 3 to five are popular as a form of optional early enrichment that parents may wish to provide to their children. However, they are not traditionally integrated into the public education system and they are not structured to meet working parents’ needs for day care.

The core findings noted above suggest that, instead of drawing a line between child care and education, we should focus on the interconnectedness of early childhood care and education. The science tells us that education begins at birth and indeed before birth, and nurturing care and emotional security are an essential component of education throughout early childhood and indeed throughout life. This data about the needs of children and about their vulnerability as developing organisms is widely accepted by experts and has been made known to policy-makers around the world. The inseparable relation between care and education is also well known. Yet, as noted by the scientists at Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child, in the U.S. we are failing to put this knowledge into practice. Such a gap between what we know and what we do is cause for serious concern.

V. Comparing the U.S. and Peer Nations

1. *International Comparisons*

My claim that the United States is failing to meet the basic needs of its children is based on more than mere subjective judgment or a naive desire to attain unreasonable levels of perfection. My judgment is borne out by data comparing the well-being of children in peer nations, data that shows the U.S. ranking at or near the bottom of the list in almost every category.²⁰⁾ The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti Research Centre has

CHILDREN Vol. 11, No. 1, 88 (Spring/Summer 2001).

20) For a comparative discussion of child poverty and child well-being in the U.S. and other nations, see Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, *Race, Culture, Class, and the Myth of Crisis: An Ecogenerist Perspective on Child Welfare*, 81 ST. JOHN’S L. REV. 519 (2007).

conducted a series of studies and issued a series of “Report Cards” comparing the status of children in countries that belong to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD countries).²¹⁾ The 2005 study looked at poverty. We know that poverty, and its accompanying stresses, including nutritional deficits and emotional traumas, correlates strongly with adverse outcomes for children. The U.S., at 21.9 percent, had a higher percentage of children living in poverty than all but one (Mexico) of the twenty-six OECD countries for which data was available.

UNICEF defines children as living in poverty if they live in a family with an income of less than half the national median income. The 21.9 percent figure in the Innocenti Report Card 5 is measured *after factoring in* transfers through publicly funded income supports and social programs. Most OECD countries significantly reduce child poverty rates through such transfers. In order to place child poverty policies in comparative perspective, one must look at the rates both before and after such transfers. For example, France has a “market rate” (the rate before transfers) of child poverty of 27.7 percent, higher even than that of the U.S. But France slashes its child poverty rate by 20.3 points, to a mere 7.5 percent, through social spending programs. The U.S., with a “market rate” of child poverty of 26.6 percent, reduces its poverty rate by only 4.7 points through social spending. The U.S. also spends a much lower proportion of its GDP on such programs, when compared to other rich countries. No OECD country that devotes 10 percent or more of its GDP to social spending has a child poverty rate greater than 10 percent, and no OECD country that spend less than 5 percent of their GDP on such benefits has a child poverty rate of less than 15 percent. The U.S. spends a meager 3 percent of its GDP on supports for children and families.²²⁾

Poverty is not the only measure of child well-being. The Innocenti Centre’s Report Card 7 identified six dimensions of child well-being: (1) material well-being; (2) education; (3) health and safety; (4) family and peer relationships; (5)

21) Innocenti Report Card 5, *Child Poverty in Rich Countries*, <http://www.unicef-irc.org/cgi-bin/unicef/Lunga.sql?ProductID=371> (hereinafter “Report Card 5”); Innocenti Report Card 7, *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries*, <http://www.unicef-irc.org/cgi-bin/unicef/Lunga.sql?ProductID=445> (hereinafter “Report Card 7”); Innocenti Report Card 8, *supra* note 14.

22) Woodhouse, *supra* note 19, at 522.

behaviors and risks; and (6) subjective well-being. The U.S. rated poorly in every area. Despite its relative affluence as a nation, the U.S. had the highest relative poverty rate, with more children living in deeper poverty, when compared to the national median, than any other country studied. Its infant mortality rate was 7 per hundred thousand while the mean for OECD countries was 4.6. Rates of accidental death among children were 22.9 per hundred thousand while the mean rate of OECD countries was 14.3. The U.S. was dead last in health and safety out of 21 countries—20th in infant mortality, 18th on low birth weight, 20th in accidental death, and 13th in immunizations of children 12-23 months of age. As is well known, the U.S. lacks universal health care for children. In family and peer relationships, the U.S. ranked at the bottom with the highest numbers of children living in single parent or step families, identified as risk factors for poor outcomes for children. In risky behaviors, the U.S. ranked next to worst, ahead only of the United Kingdom. In education, the U.S. ranked 14th.

Innocenti Report Card 7 noted that data were unavailable to compare early childhood in the different OECD nations. The newest Innocenti report card, issued at the end of 2008, remedies this gap in data concerning early childhood. The authors argue, as I have argued above, that child care and education are inseparable. Instead of focusing on child care as distinct from education, they identify a critical period of transition from home to childcare and schooling. They utilize the latest research findings to identify the basic universal developmental needs of children in the zero to six age group. They point to several parallel revolutions that have radically changed the shape of childhood in developed nations.

First, the work/family revolution has changed the places in which childhood unfolds. Working parents are a fact of life. Report Card 8 remarks that “Today’s rising generation in OECD countries is the first in which a majority are spending a large portion of childhood not in their own homes with their own families but in some form of child care.”²³⁾ The average percentage of children in OECD countries aged birth to three who are in child care is 25 percent. In the U.S., fully 40 percent of children birth to three and 60 percent of preschoolers are in some form of childcare. The U.S. Census Bureau

23) Innocenti Report Card 8, *supra* note 14, at 3.

reports that 72 percent of all mothers and over half of mothers of infants under one are now in the workforce.²⁴⁾ Second, as I have outlined above, Report Card 8 argues that the scientific revolution has expanded our understanding of the process of child development and has established beyond doubt the impact of both genetics and environment on children's growth. The third revolution is the children's rights revolution. The principle that children have a right to policies aimed at promoting their best interests, and that governments have an obligation to promote such policies, has taken center stage after the near universal adoption of the CRC. This children's rights revolution has shifted the focus from what governments, faced with many competing, powerful and well-funded interests, are inclined to give, to what children actually need.

In line with this new focus on children's needs, the Innocenti Centre Report Card 8's study of early childhood identified a number of benchmarks for measuring the degree to which OECD countries are meeting their youngest citizens' needs during their first five years. These benchmarks, drawn from examination of the data on children's development and measured by comparison with standards set by programs in OECD countries, are as follows: (1) a minimum entitlement to parental paid leave (one year at half pay); (2) a national plan with priority for disadvantaged children; (3) a minimum level of subsidized and regulated childcare for under threes (places for 25 percent of children); (4) a minimum level of access to subsidized and accredited early education services for four year olds (places for 80 percent of children for at least 15 hours a week); (5) a minimum level of training for all staff (80 percent of staff); (6) a minimum proportion of staff with the highest level of training (50 percent with early childhood study degrees and certification); (7) a minimum staff to child ratio (for 4 year olds, no greater than 15 to 1 and class size no larger than 24); (8) a minimum level of public funding for zero to six year old education and care (not less than 1 percent of GDP). Added to these benchmarks were two more general criteria: (9) a low level of child poverty (less than 10 percent); and (10) universal outreach, so that the

24) Fifty-one percent of mothers who gave birth to their first child returned to work within four months. Julia Overturf Johnson and Barbara Downs, *Maternity Leave and Employment: Patterns of First Time Mothers 1961-2000, Current Population Reports*, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p70-103.pdf>.

neediest and most marginalized children actually do receive the benefits of the aforementioned policies.²⁵⁾

Overall, after examining all these benchmarks, the U.S ranked 17th of 21 countries studied. With zero weeks of paid parental leave, the U.S. tied for last with Australia on the first benchmark. While the U.S. ranked 5th in enrollment of under threes in licensed day care, there was a large gap between the need for care and access to care. In the U.S., as compared with peer nations, rates of employment of mothers of children zero to three far outpaced access to licensed day care.²⁶⁾ The U.S. ranked 16th out of 21 in enrollment of four year olds in early education. The percentage of GDP spent by the U.S. on day care and early childhood education was below the OECD average (0.6% compared to 0.7%). And, as the study noted, the trends were not encouraging. While OECD nations such as Korea (at .02%) were rapidly increasing their spending, U.S. spending was declining. The U.S also ranked near the bottom on universal outreach to the most vulnerable children, as evidenced by an infant mortality rate that is second from worst among all OECD countries.

2. *A Closer Look at Child Care and Early Education in the U.S.*

The critique of early childhood programs in the U.S. is not limited to sniping by foreign critics. Studies by U.S. experts of current programs for early childhood confirm that American children and families suffer under a chaotic patchwork of programs that fail to meet many children's needs. As one study stated, "the [child care] system that has evolved is really no system at all, but rather a collection of funding streams that requires no uniform standards of care and provides no uniform administrative structure for services."²⁷⁾ In his book *Child Rights and Remedies*, Professor Robert Fellmeth reviews existing

25) Innocenti Report Card 8, *supra* note 14, at 13-14.

26) Innocenti Report Card 8, *supra* note 14, at fig 3, 21. As I noted in a recent paper, because of ambiguous data from the U.S. Department of Education, the Innocenti Report Card data on early childhood programs may overstate the numbers of 3 and 4 year old children enrolled educational programs in the U.S. See Woodhouse, *Servizi per la prima infanzia: un'analisi comparata della realta' statunitense* (paper delivered March 13, 2009 at Universita' di Firenze, on file with author).

27) Abby J. Cohen, *A Brief History of Federal Financing for Child Care in the United States*, THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN, Vol. 6, No. 2, 26 (Summer/Fall 1996).

programs for child care using U.S. Census data.²⁸⁾ He reports that twelve million children are in day care but twelve million more are income eligible for day care but do not receive it because of funding and outreach failures. Only 39 percent of children of working mothers were in licensed home care or day care while the rest were cared for by relatives and friends. Census data were particularly revealing of the shadow population that is *not* in day care. Respondents to the 2000 Census reported 45,000 preschoolers in “self-care,” 432,000 in sibling care and 565,000 with “no regular arrangement.”²⁹⁾ In other words, about one million U.S. children under age five are in the care of minor siblings or completely on their own.

Unequal distribution of day care across income and racial groups was also revealing. Reliance on a private market system where parents must purchase day care and reliance on tax credits or deductions to subsidize some of these parental expenditures produces striking inequalities. In a typical lower income minority community, only one opening in a licensed day care facility existed for every ten to twenty children in need of day care. In a middle class community only a few miles away, the ratio of slots to children was typically five times greater.³⁰⁾ High costs of day care explain the high numbers of children reported by the Census Bureau as being in “self-care.” A family with two young children and both parents working full time at minimum wage would have to spend two thirds of its income on childcare, leaving only \$7,000 for rent, food, transportation, health care, clothing and other basic necessities. A single parent with a toddler would have to pay 60 percent of her net pay for childcare, leaving a paltry \$5,000 for all other needs. Meanwhile, the bulk of tax subsidies go to middle class families via tax credits and deductions.³¹⁾

There are several federally funded programs in place to assist families in affording day care, but they are chronically underfunded and difficult to

28) ROBERT C. FELLMETH, *CHILD RIGHTS & REMEDIES: HOW THE U.S. LEGAL SYSTEM AFFECTS CHILDREN* 330-343 (Clarity Press, Atlanta, GA, 2d ed. 2006).

29) *Id.* at 330.

30) *Id.* at 331-332.

31) Douglas J. Besharov & Paul N. Tramontozzi, *Child Care Subsidies: Mostly for the Middle Class, An Example of “Trickle Down Liberalism”?* WASHINGTON POST, May 2, 1988, available at University of Maryland Welfare Reform Academy, www.welfareacademy.org/pubs/childcare_edu/chidlcare-0588.shtml (noting that only 17% of tax subsidies for child care went to low income families).

access.³²⁾ Most federal dollars are distributed in the form of “block grants” to the states. In 2003 just 2.5 million children out of the 24 million children in day care or eligible for day care assistance were served by these programs.³³⁾ Block grants are a form of funding that does not increase as the pool of eligible recipients increases (for example, in an economic downturn) but is instead a fixed sum doled out to the States. To add to the pressure on poor families, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the federal program for supporting poor children, imposes a lifetime limit on how long a parent may receive assistance and also requires that mothers return to work full time (35 or more hours per week) by the child’s first birthday, or even earlier, in order to remain eligible. As noted earlier, many government subsidies for day care come in the form of tax deductions. Tax deductions are of little help to poorer families who pay little or no taxes. Parents earning less than \$10,000 annually may deduct 30 percent of their childcare costs, but this benefit is rarely accessed because at such low income levels parents do not owe taxes.³⁴⁾ Parents earning over \$28,000 annually may claim 20 percent of childcare costs from their taxable income to a maximum of \$2,400 for one child. Even assuming families at this low income level had accrued a tax liability, this sum still falls far short of covering the actual costs of full time day care for infants and toddlers, which averages between \$5,000 and \$10,000 a year.³⁵⁾ While

32) Louise Stoney & Mark H. Greenberg, *The Financing of Child Care: Current and Emerging Trends*, THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN Vol. 6, No. 2, available at www.futureofchildren.org/information2827/information_show.html; Deborah Phillips & Gina Adams, *Child Care and Our Youngest Children* THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN, Vol. 11, 48 (Spring-Summer 2001).

33) FELLMETH, *supra* note 28, at 330-332. These federally funded programs include the Child Care Development Block Grant, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Block Grant, and the Social Services Block Grant.

34) U.S. tax policy also reflects the strong cultural bias towards “individualism” and against “social welfare.” Programs supporting low income families are more acceptable to the public when labeled “tax credits or deductions.” A “nonrefundable” tax credit can be taken out of the taxes the taxpayer would otherwise owe. A “refundable” tax credit gives rise to a refund of a portion of the money’s expended on child care even if the taxpayer owes little or no taxes. The “Earned Income Tax Credit” (EITC) is a payment from government to working families who are very low income and do not pay taxes. Deductions from income taxes (the most common form of child care tax subsidy) are least advantageous to the poor and most advantageous to upper income families. One study showed that out of \$4 billion in tax subsidies for child care, more than one third of the dollars went to families earning more than \$50,000 a year. See FELLMETH, *supra* note 28, at 334 and n. 22.

35) *Id.* at 155, 333.

middle class families spend about 7 percent of their income on day care, poor families must spend approximately 27 percent on day care.³⁶⁾ As this overview shows, unlike access to public schooling which is free to all and paid for collectively by tax dollars, access to day care is a costly privilege beyond the means of millions of working families.

Statistics on quality of care in the U.S. are also troubling. The most common form of day care—"babysitting" or "family day care" provided by an individual, usually a woman, who looks after children either in their own home or in her own home, in exchange for payments from the parent—is largely unregulated and lacks any standards for training or licensing for facilities.³⁷⁾ Studies have concluded that quality of care even in licensed day care centers was generally mediocre. Poor implementation of existing certification and inspection rules, the lack of any recognized national certification standards or continuing education requirements for staff, high turnover of staff (20% to 30% per year) and low rates of pay combine to hamper the effectiveness and even safety of day care programs. A teacher in a day care center earns about one half the pay of a teacher in elementary school and, unlike teaching positions, day care jobs usually lack any health benefits or retirement plans—sending a powerful message about how much we actually value our youngest children.³⁸⁾

Access to early childhood education, the other piece of the early childhood puzzle, has also been problematic in the U.S. The two concepts—of early childhood education and of early childhood care—have developed along two separate tracks. While working parents' needs give rise to day care for children zero to five, affluent parents' desire to enrich their children's social and cognitive environment gave rise to the nursery school for children three

36) Louise Stoney & Mark H. Greenberg, *The Financing of Child Care: Current and Emerging Trends*, THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN Vol. 6, No. 2, available at www.futureofchildren.org/information2827/information_show.html.

37) Compare the system of "maternal assistants" in France, providing for accreditation, training and monthly inspections for home-based child care providers with up to three children in their home, setting standards and providing as well for vacation, retirement and health benefits. See Syndicat Professionnel des Assistant Maternel, <http://www.assistante-maternelle.org>; Assistante Maternelle, <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nourrice>.

38) See, e.g., SHEILA B. KAMERMAN & ALFRED J. KAHN, STARTING RIGHTS: HOW AMERICA NEGLECTS ITS YOUNGEST CHILDREN AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT 181 (1995).

to five. Nursery schools were designed as part time learning spaces for children not yet old enough for public school. They were usually half day programs that did not provide transportation and did not include a meal, and thus were not very useful for children of single parents or with both parents in the work force. In fact, Americans have come to use the term “preschool” to cover a wide range of settings, from Montessori or nursery schools to day care centers that claim to provide some educational component. As can be seen from this brief overview of U.S. policies and practices, the disconnect between care and education together with the privatization of responsibility for early childhood care and education, have produced large gaps between children’s needs for care and education in early childhood and access to affordable resources.

VI. Tracing the Impact of Individualism on Early Childhood Policies

Why is the U.S. so far behind peer nations in developing a system of publicly supported early childhood care and education?³⁹⁾ Abby J. Cohen captures the answer in one word—individualism. “Several core American values have impeded efforts to establish, maintain, and expand public financing for child care. Primary among these is the belief in individualism, particularly the freedom of individuals to raise their own children without government interference The values of individualism and family autonomy, taken together, have supported a position that government is an appropriate source of help only when a family—or the country itself—is in crisis.”⁴⁰⁾ As Cohen illustrates, American child care policy has been driven by

39) Sweden, Denmark, Norway France, Germany, Spain and Japan are among the many that have developed day care systems. Heather S. Dixon, *National Daycare: A Necessary Precursor to Gender Equality with Newfound Promise for Success*, 36 COLUM. HUM. RTS. L. REV. 561 at note 12 (2005); Jane Waldfogel, *International Policies Towards Parental Leave and Day Care*, FUTURE OF CHILDREN, Vol. 11, No. 1, 105 (Spring/Summer 2001).

40) Cohen, *supra* note 27, at 27. See also Deborah Phillips & Edward Zigler, *The Checkered History of Federal Child Care Regulation*, 14 REV. RES. IN ED. 3-4 (1987) (hereinafter “Checkered History”)(describing child care policy as an “uncoordinated patchwork” of programs serving fragments of the population and varying widely in quality).

national crises. The Great Depression, World War II, the War against Poverty, the Gender Equality Revolution, the Crisis over Welfare Reform, all produced child care innovations and reforms, each focused on a specific problem. But as each crisis passed, we turned our attention to other issues. American policy makers failed to articulate a coherent set of principles to justify public investment in early childhood.

Child care policy has also been driven by another form of crisis—individual family crisis—with admission to programs conditioned on proof that the private family has somehow “failed” or fallen apart. Day care first developed as a service for families deemed inadequate to the task of parenting. A report from the Children’s Bureau in 1963 stated, “the child who needs day care has a family problem which makes it impossible for his parents to fulfill their parental responsibilities.”⁴¹⁾ This feature has created barriers in the form of stigma and shame over needing help and in the form of reducing a sense of solidarity that recognizes all children, not just children of failed families, as meriting support. Ironically, the failure to put into place a comprehensive program for early childhood has caused the most vulnerable age groups to fall between the cracks. Children zero to five are more likely than older children to be abused or neglected and less likely to be reported than school age children, they are more likely to suffer nutritional deficits because they are not participating in school lunch or food stamp programs, and they are more likely to suffer from undetected physical and mental health conditions because they are not seen and tested regularly by professional educators and care takers. Children pay a high cost for our attachment to the myth of family autonomy and rugged individualism.

2. The Example of Head Start and the Veto of the 1971 Comprehensive Child Development Act

“Child care regulation lies at the heart of one of the thorniest and most fundamental policy issues, namely private versus public responsibility for child-rearing. As a consequence, political discussions of child care regulation are rarely guided by theories of child development or research on components

41) Checkered History, *supra* note 40, at 7.

of child care quality. They are characterized instead by heated controversy about working mothers, the importance of family privacy, and social-class-linked concepts of appropriate childrearing environments.”⁴²⁾ A comprehensive history of child care in America is beyond the scope of this article, but this discussion will focus on a particular point in U.S. history when publicly supported early childhood care/education surfaced on the national agenda and was defeated by values of individualism and family autonomy. Over thirty-five years ago, in 1971, the U.S. Congress passed a bill titled the “Comprehensive Child Development Act.”⁴³⁾ It would have provided free child care for all families earning up to forty-four percent of the median income, and made care available on a sliding scale to families earning up to seventy-five percent of the median income. It was hailed by its authors as a major step in promoting the well-being of all children. “Quality comprehensive programs can help all children and should be available in this country—to a voluntary basis—to all children as a matter of right, regardless of economic, social and family background. Preschool in this country has become a privilege for the very rich and, to the extent that public programs are currently provided, for the very poor.”⁴⁴⁾

Despite widespread support for the Comprehensive Child Development Act from a broad coalition of labor, church, social welfare, and citizen’s organizations, President Nixon vetoed the Act on December 9, 1971. President Nixon recognized the need to expand access to day care for children of working mothers and the important role played by preschool programs in preventing abuse and neglect and leveling the playing field for children from poor families. He praised the Head Start program, enacted in the 1960s to serve poor at risk children, the success of which had been the inspiration for Congress’ new more comprehensive universal program. However, he flatly rejected the involvement of the federal government in an area he considered

42) *Id.* at 3.

43) S. 2007, 92d Cong. (1971), also known as the Mondale-Brademas Act. See Nixon, National Daycare, for a discussion of this initiative. See also Abby J. Cohen, *A Brief History of Federal Financing for Child Care in the United States*, FUTURE OF CHILDREN Vol. 6 No. 2, 26 (1996); Martha Minow, *What Ever Happened to Children’s Rights?*, 80 MINN. L. REV. 267, 274-275 (1995).

44) Remarks of Sen. Mondale, Congressional Record, Sept. 1971, p. S30969, quoted in *Checkered History*, *supra* note 40, at 15. See also Cohen, *supra* note 27, at 32; Minow, *supra* note 43, at 274-275.

fundamentally private. He shared his “conviction that the federal Government’s role wherever possible should be one of assisting parents to purchase needed day care services in the private, open market, with Federal involvement in the direct provision of such services to be kept to an absolute minimum.” In his veto message he called the legislation “deeply flawed” and the “most radical piece of legislation to emerge from the Ninety-second Congress.” He condemned it as a threat to “the family in its rightful position as the keystone of our civilization” and a “long leap into the dark for the United States Government and the American people.” He saw the legislation as diminishing “parental authority and parental involvement with children—particularly in those decisive early years when social attitudes and a conscience are formed, and religious and moral principles are first inculcated.” He concluded with the words: “for the Federal Government to plunge headlong financially into supporting child development would commit the vast moral authority of the national Government to the side of communal approaches to child-rearing over against the family-centered approach. This President, this Government, is unwilling to take that step.”⁴⁵⁾

This attitude was nothing new. Americans had long been wary of government intervention in child care. The 1930 White House Conference on Children addressed these fears, when it stated: “No one should get the idea that Uncle Sam is going to rock the baby to sleep.”⁴⁶⁾ At first Uncle Sam’s role was limited to convening conferences. But during the New Deal response to the Great Depression, Uncle Sam had sponsored mothers’ allowances.⁴⁷⁾ During World War II, federal funds supported day care in order to free female workers for war work.⁴⁸⁾ But over the preceding decades pressure had been growing for a more robust role of the federal government in providing for the day care needs of increasing numbers of working mothers. In addition, support was growing for the educational value of early childhood programs, especially for children from disadvantaged families.

45) All of these quotes are taken from *Richard Nixon Veto of the Economic Opportunity Amendments of 1971*, John T. Wooley & Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online] (Santa Barbara, CA: University of California), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=3251>.

46) Cohen, *supra* note 27, at 27, & n. 8.

47) *Id.* at 28 (discussing WPA funded nursery schools).

48) *Id.* at 29-30 (discussing Lanham Act funding of day care for children of war workers).

Despite President Nixon's shocked reaction, the idea of federally designed and funded services for young children should not have come as a surprise by 1971. The model for the 1971 Act was Head Start. Head start was initiated in 1965 as a federally funded program for low-income three-to five year olds from the poorest families and communities. It grew out of President Lyndon Johnson's "War Against Poverty," and reflected a belief that early intervention in the lives of children whose poverty placed them at risk could prevent poor developmental outcomes. It was not envisioned as a form of day care, but rather as a form of prophylactic early educational intervention in which parents would be partners in the child's learning process. Head Start was widely popular among experts in child development because it empowered poor parents. As longitudinal research became available, data finding that children who had been in the program actually performed better when they reached school age added to its popularity.⁴⁹⁾ New programs such as Early Start for very young children followed on the heels of Head Start. Despite controversies over measuring the impact of Head Start it has remained popular with the public. However, Head Start has always been and remains a program for the very poor. It is open only to families living in poverty according to the federal guidelines. While the median income for a family in the U.S. is about \$60,000, and the estimated costs of meeting a family's basic needs are at least \$40,000 annual income,⁵⁰⁾ a family of four earning \$22,500 would not qualify for Head Start. Due to funding shortfalls and difficulty of access, Head Start actually serves only about 40 percent of the eligible population.⁵¹⁾ Clearly, the popular support for Head Start did not translate into widespread support for universal federally funded programs of

49) Checkered History, *supra* note 40, at 13; Josh Kagan, *Head Start*, in Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society, www.faqs.org/childhood/Gr-Im/Head-Start.html

50) Nancy K. Caughen & Sarah Fass, *Measuring Income and Poverty in the United States, FACT SHEET* (Bat'I Ctr. For Children in Poverty, New York, N.Y.) http://nccp.org/publications/pub_707.html.

51) FELLMETH, at 333. A child is eligible if his family's income is at or below the federal poverty guidelines. For a family of two, the 2009 guidelines set a ceiling of \$14,570; for three, \$18,310; for four, \$22,050. The 2009 federal poverty guidelines are available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/09fedreg.pdf>. To place these figures in context, the median family income in 2007 was about \$60,000. (Data obtained from the Census Bureau, Fact-Finder web page at <http://factfinder.census.gov>).

centralized design complying with uniform licensing criteria, such as those available in many of our peer nations. In the aftermath of the Presidential veto, tax credits for affluent families grew while child care supports benefitting low income families stagnated. The major share of federal subsidies for child care shifted from programs aimed at low income families to tax credits benefitting non poor families.⁵²⁾

2. *The Continuing Cultural Influence of Individualism*

A series of studies of attitudes towards child care demonstrates that the distrust of government and the primary reliance on individual families expressed in Nixon's 1971 veto reflect a deep seated ambivalence in the American public at large.⁵³⁾ As these studies show, most American feel strongly that decisions about child care are an intensely personal matter and should be left to parents to decide. A majority feel that government should provide financial assistance to parents who need it in order to access day care. But only 29 percent felt that government should be directly involved in the provision of day care. Americans believe in the values of early childhood education as well as in self-sufficiency. A large majority of those polled, 73 percent, favored increasing funding for federal programs such as Head Start, serving low income children. By a greater than three to one margin, they felt it was more important for mothers on public assistance to work to support their children than for them to stay at home. At the same time, almost 70 percent felt it was better for children if the father worked and the mother stayed home. Many parents expressed doubts about the quality and safety of day care even as they were aware of studies showing the benefits of early childhood education.

As these responses show, a conflict has developed between the deeply held belief that all families should be self sufficient and the deeply held belief that mothers should be at home caring for young children. A conflict has also developed between Americans' belief in a fair start for all children and their belief that child care and education are a private family matter. These conflicts

52) *Checked History*, *supra* note 40, at 23.

53) Kathleen Sylvester, *Caring for Our Youngest: Public Attitudes in the U.S.*, *FUTURE OF CHILDREN* Vol. 11, No. 1, 53 (Spring-Summer 2001), available at www.futureofchildren.org.

are destructive of social cohesion, producing resentment among two earner families struggling to afford day care who perceive their tax dollars as enabling single mothers on public assistance to stay at home while they must work. With some 60 percent of mothers of young children employed full time, and quality day care out of reach for so many, these conflicting beliefs cannot continue to coexist.

VII. Conclusion

In the U.S., neither our day care nor our education systems are meeting the needs of early childhood. As a result, we are failing to invest in the human capital that will ensure our continued prosperity and health. At this writing, the administration of President Barack Obama has just arrived in Washington, D.C. While the previous administration of George W. Bush favored a privatization model, this model has fallen at least partially out of favor after the 2008 economic collapse. An examination of the Obama Agenda suggests a greater willingness to invest in infrastructure and human capital as a whole, including investing in programs for children.⁵⁴⁾ The Obama/Biden Agenda includes a zero to five initiative, paid parental leave initiatives, day care initiatives, early childhood initiatives, and addresses hunger and poverty. Yet it retains the fragmented approach already noted above. Day care, Head Start, zero to five, income supports and paid family leave are scattered among the family agenda, the education agenda and the poverty agenda.

The Obama/Biden Agenda is a good start but, perhaps out of concern that a bold move will be seen as too radical, it tends to mirror the structural defects in our current policies and lacks a unifying theme. To develop support for an integrated policy, we must revision the period of early childhood as a unified whole. In his first address to a joint session of Congress, President Obama appeared to be making such a bold move when he promised “to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education—from the day they are born to the day they begin a career.”⁵⁵⁾ By embracing a policy of

54) See Whitehouse, Obama & Biden Agenda, www.whitehouse.gov.

55) Remarks of President Obama to Joint Session of Congress, February 24, 2009, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/remarks-of-president-barack-obama-address-

access to education *from birth*, and by including day care as a part of education policy, Obama has taken a giant step toward closing the gap created by a system in which education is seen as something we provide to older children as a necessity, but consider a luxury when it comes to babies, toddlers and children under four.

We must commit to meeting children's needs, beginning at birth and continuing through their school years, for both care and education, for both nurturing and cognitive stimulation, for both nutrition and healthcare, and we must recognize that none of these elements is possible without being integrated with the others and all are matters of the general welfare and demand public investment. We need a terminology that integrates rather than separating the concepts of nurturing care and education. Colleagues at this symposium suggested the term "educare," and I will use it in my concluding comments.

Early childhood "educare" policy should include financial support for parental leave during the child's first year, to ensure the secure attachment and one-on-one interaction during the earliest months that experts tell us are an essential foundation for the child's future educational and social attainments. It should include access to affordable health care and relief from poverty. It should provide for licensed educational day care settings for children, infants and toddlers once their parents have returned to work. Publicly supported educare must be available to all children in the zero to five age group, either free of charge or on a sliding scale so that it is affordable to all. Educare must be designed to meet the child's evolving needs for nurture and structured learning. Hours of operation and services provided must be designed to match children's and parents' schedules. Nutritious meals and quiet or nap times, along with developmentally appropriate learning activities, are an essential component. Benchmarks must be set for staff training, accreditation and continuing education. Educare must be seen not as a service (or handout) to parents but as an important aspect of the general welfare of the nation, a necessary investment in human capital that pays solid dividends. Moreover, educare must be seen as every child's right, creating a seamless continuum of preparation for life, from birth to mandatory schooling

and, eventually, school graduation and shouldering of the responsibilities of citizenship. Parents must be partners in rather than merely consumers of educate.

It will not be possible to accomplish these reforms as long as Americans view care and education during early childhood as an individual responsibility of persons who choose to have children rather than as a shared investment in our human capital infrastructure that benefits society as a whole.