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Child Care Coverage in

U.S. Newspapers

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For many families, current economic reality requires that both parents work outside the home; consequently, most Americans accept child care as a fact of life. New work requirements for welfare recipients have accelerated the need for more child care and recent brain research has emphasized the importance of its quality if children are to grow with the capacity to learn and thrive. Yet the public believes child care is a private problem to be resolved by the individual family rather than be addressed by society as a whole. In 1998, a Harris poll reported that most Americans (60%) believe that child care is primarily a family's responsibility. Similar questions about education or health care produce very different results. Americans acknowledge the overall societal implications of those benefits.

News coverage can have a strong influence on how the public and policy makers interpret and respond to social issues. To advocate effectively for high quality, adequately supported child care and early childhood education, advocates must be able to articulate a clear message that resonates with specific audiences. They have to make their case well, and make it publicly. This means they must understand the current public conversation regarding child care policy issues and how the issue is being framed in the news. Similarly, if journalists are going to tell the story of child care as it is debated by different stakeholders, they should know what parts of that discussion are being emphasized and which, if any, are being neglected.

For these reasons, we wanted to know how the news was covering child care. To find out, we analyzed news coverage and editorial content on child care as it has been discussed in the nation's major newspapers over the last five years. We first present our methods for sampling the coverage, then what we found in the analysis, and finally our recommendations based on those findings for child care advocates and for journalists covering the issue.

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The public believes child care is a private problem to be resolved by the individual family rather than be addressed by society as a whole

Methods

We examined five years of news coverage to determine how the issue of child care was being portrayed in 18 of the nation's major newspapers (see Table 1 for the list of newspapers).^{*} Our first step was to search those papers electronically to determine how often the term "child care" appeared each year. We considered this the "universe" of child care stories. Next, from that universe, we selected a random sample of 500 articles to examine more closely. We then determined how many of these 500 dealt substantively with child care issues. To qualify as substantive, at least one-third of the piece had to discuss child care issues, to ensure that the reference to child care was not simply a passing one. The 110 pieces that met this definition were then read and analyzed in depth. Because the sample was selected scientifically, we can generalize our findings to the universe of child care pieces in the 18 newspapers over the five years.



^{*} Our intent was to examine the nation's top twenty newspapers based on circulation. However, two newspapers, the *New York Daily News* and the *Newark Star Ledger*, either were not available electronically over the five year period or had unreliable data and so were eliminated from consideration. The remaining 18 newspapers were analyzed.

Findings

How often does “child care” appear in newspapers?

From 1994 through 1998, the term “child care” appeared in 27,435 articles, editorials, op-eds or letters to the editor in the nation’s major newspapers (see Table 1). However, the vast majority (78%) of these articles contained insubstantial references, as when child care was mentioned in a list of budget categories in articles on governments’ funding priorities, or included in a list of other issues of concern to female voters, for instance.

Most of the pieces were news or feature stories (66%); 16% were columns or op-eds. Twelve percent were letters to the editor and 5% were editorials. There were 1,517 more pieces with the term “child care” in 1998 than in 1994. The term appeared most frequently in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Dallas Morning News*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Arizona Republic*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The *New York Post* had the fewest mentions of child care.

Table 1. The number of articles including the term “child care” in major U.S. newspapers, 1994-1998.

Newspaper (listed by circulation)	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	Total
<i>Wall Street Journal*</i>	46	26	22	36	35	165
<i>USA Today</i>	70	95	130	147	177	619
<i>New York Times</i>	337	360	370	384	476	1,927
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	722	620	578	669	732	3,321
<i>Washington Post</i>	267	399	320	336	515	1,837
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	452	454	418	428	508	2,260
<i>New York Newsday</i>	363	313	263	339	334	1,612
<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	124	131	156	232	286	929
<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	243	230	164	194	243	1,074
<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>	213	244	117	173	196	943
<i>Dallas Morning News</i>	441	449	548	566	650	2,654
<i>Boston Globe</i>	213	219	184	305	511	1,432
<i>Phoenix Arizona Republic</i>	515	485	377	414	442	2,233
<i>New York Post</i>	0	0	0	4	68	72
<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	449	465	345	356	453	2,068
<i>Minnesota Star Tribune</i>	286	308	302	369	403	1,668
<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	274	233	185	155	142	989
<i>Cleveland Plain Dealer</i>	295	370	320	319	328	1,632
Total	5,310	5,401	4,799	5,426	6,499	27,435

*The *Wall Street Journal* provides only abstracts to the electronic news databases we searched. Full text was searched in all other newspapers.

What is being said about child care?

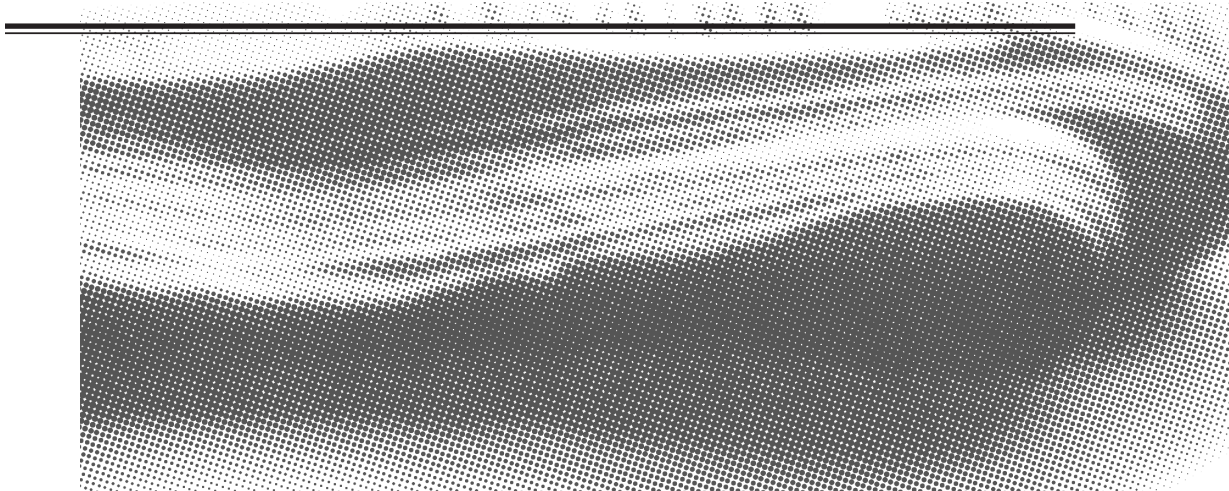
Most of the substantive pieces concerned government action of some kind: either new government initiatives (33%), such as welfare-to-work, subsidies, or tax breaks for child care, or the licensing and oversight of child care (19%). (See Table 2.) (Pieces were considered substantive if at least one-third discussed some aspect of child care.) Of all the key concepts or phrases related to child care and early childhood development, government subsidies and issues about low income working families appeared most often and were closely integrated.

The next two most frequent topics were advice for parents (10%) and stories about crimes or tragedies in child care settings (9%). Other topics, such as labor and compensation issues for child care workers, profiles of providers or families seeking child care, research or study results, family-friendly work policies or other issues each received about 5% of the substantive coverage.

Nearly half (47%) of the sample of substantive stories were predominantly focused on some policy issue related to child care. This proportion increased significantly over the five years we analyzed: in 1994, 35% of stories were policy-focused, while in 1998, 66% of stories were policy focused. This means that in the early years, substantive pieces were more likely to focus on advice to parents and stories about crimes or tragedies; later in the sample period, policy-focused stories significantly displaced those more episodic types of coverage. The policies covered included child care subsidies, child care availability for welfare/Workfare participants, tax breaks for at-home moms, and regulation of child care providers. Most of these pieces did not focus on changes in welfare; welfare was the predominant policy issue in only 12% of the overall sample, or 25% of the policy-focused pieces.

Table 2. Primary subjects of child care pieces (N = 110).

Primary Subject	Percent of Pieces
New government initiatives	33
Child care licensing and regulation	19
Advice for parents/news you can use	10
Crime and tragedy in child care settings	9
Labor and compensation issues	8
General child care issues	5
Profiles of child care workers and families	5
Release of study or research results	5
Family-friendly work policies	2
Other	5



Who is speaking in child care stories?

We examined the roles of quoted speakers because there is some evidence that readers give direct quotes more weight and consideration than something paraphrased, and because such analysis can tell us whether certain perspectives were frequently represented while others were missing.

Advocates and parents are the predominant voices in substantive coverage of child care, with each being quoted in about a quarter of the coverage (see Table 3). Child care providers (16%) and government agency representatives (14%) follow, trailed by business people (12%), researchers or academics (11%), and politicians (10%). We rarely hear from children or youth directly, or social workers, legal professionals, or clergy. No elementary school teachers or health professionals were quoted in child care stories.

Table 3. The roles of speakers in newspaper pieces on child care, 1994-1998 (N=110).

Speaker Type	Percent of stories in which the speaker type appeared*
Advocate	24
Parent (not in the role of advocate)	23
Child care provider	16
Government agency representative	14
Business person (not child care provider)	12
Researcher/professor	11
Politician	10
Child/youth	5
Social worker	5
Lawyer/judge	3
Clergy	<1

*The percents will not add to 100 because more than one speaker type could appear in any given piece.

* * *



The voice of advocates (24%). Advocates were the predominant speakers quoted in stories on child care. They appeared in stories about all of the policy issues discussed above. Sometimes quotes from advocates were used to paint the picture of the problems surrounding child care in the U.S.: “We’re spending more on prisons than on child care facilities.” Most of the time, advocates were quoted calling for action to improve child care. However, the solutions advocates promoted most often were vague calls for cooperation rather than specific policy recommendations. The following quotes represent this common theme:

“We need a national commitment to child care, then the details can be worked out.”

“We need a broader, more generous vision of why we have children and what they deserve.”

“I hope to get policy makers to think in a different way about the problem.”

“Stakeholders must be willing to join forces to search for solutions.”

When advocates were more specific, they called for concrete solutions for some aspect of improving child care availability or quality, ranging from proposals for redirecting resources to support for specific pending legislation. These specific calls to action were rare, however.

The voice of parents (23%). Parents provide a vital element for journalists by embodying the personal aspect of the story. In coverage of child care, parents are often quoted describing the dilemma of whether to stay at home with a young child or return to work; worrying over establishing a reliable child care network; and dramatizing the high cost of child care. In a typical story about the challenges faced by first-time parents, one mother muses about her changed priorities since giving up her career, saying “maybe pregnancy destroys half your brain cells”; another says that “staying home is a sacrifice but you love [the children] and you want to do the best for them.” The parents quoted in these stories personalize the problem in a sympathetic way that readers can relate to; they describe their struggles with the issues related to child care but rarely link their personal story to social policy that may help families cope with these struggles.

The voice of child care providers (16%). Quotes from child care providers help illustrate the problems with the current child care system in the U.S. Providers are portrayed as being caught in the middle of the debate over who will pay for child care. As one provider notes in a story on affordability of child care, “The parents are in a squeeze, and we’re in a squeeze.” One subsidized-care provider owed \$21,000 by the county has decided to turn Workfare families away; she says, “I feel bad about it, but I can’t afford not to get paid.”

Occasionally a “lifestyle”-type portrait of a child care provider paints another picture, illustrating the caring, competent child care teacher who loves kids: “I want them to face the world with confidence and believe they can do what they want,” one infant-care provider says. “I see a lot of them try to stand up from crawling. Some are afraid of falling, but we tell them they can do it.” However, this portrayal is rare; most child care providers’ quotes focus on their own frustrations with low pay, difficult parents, or government bureaucracy. While child care providers are in a unique position to educate parents and policy makers about how good care can help children develop, they are rarely quoted on this topic.

The voice of government (14%). Government agency representatives at the federal, state and local level are quoted in two kinds of stories. In pieces on making welfare reform work, some agency representatives are advocates for affordable, accessible child care: “People were having to forgo jobs because they weren’t assured they had child care to start the job,” a county human services director says. “We want to make sure that if someone gets a job offer, nothing gets in their way.” Some government representatives, however, illustrate a more adversarial perspective: government case-workers in the Bronx, for instance, express their belief that mothers are using the lack of child care as an excuse to get out of working. One tells a would-be Workfare participant, “Can you survive on less money? No? Well, you have to find somebody [to take care of your children]—a neighbor, a friend, somebody. You have 10 days. No more excuses.”

Government representatives also appear in stories related to oversight and regulation of child care providers, especially in the wake of a crime or tragedy in a child care setting. They describe their surprise inspection processes to monitor providers, and defend their oversight measures as “adequate to protect the health, safety and well-being of children.”

The voice of business (12%). The business person category specifically excluded child care providers themselves; for the purposes of this study, an owner of a child care center was considered a child care provider, not a business person. Most of the pieces quoting business people focused on the issues surrounding the struggle to balance work and family demands. When business people spoke, they chronicled how individual employees or companies were coping with child care, rather than focusing on the larger issue of family friendly work policies overall. The speakers in these stories were predominantly human resource personnel explaining how child care benefits help attract prospective employees, or discussing the difficulties of providing a good work/family balance, usually because of the cost of family-friendly policies. Other business people discussed offering child care in a unique setting (e.g., a ski resort) or offering new services to families with young children, such as the founder of ParentNet which makes “kiddie cameras” so working parents can check in on their children over the Internet. Other business representatives were quoted in stories about regulating USIA’s au pair program or the issues of regulating child care as a business generally.

Where are the politicians? Politicians were included in 10% of the pieces, less than we would expect for a contentious political issue. By contrast, in an earlier study we did on news coverage of children’s health, politicians were the number one speaker type. Child care is frequently framed from a policy perspective as an issue that government should do something about. However, the relative lack of politicians as quoted sources on this issue highlights the fact that no prominent politicians other than the Clintons have seized the issue and carried the banner of child care in a visible way. One op-ed writer observed that the most injurious outcome of the President’s impeachment scandal was that it squandered the political momentum that had built behind the President’s support of child care and other children’s issues.



How is child care being framed?

News is organized, or framed, in order to make sense out of many-sided and subtly shaded issues. Inevitably, some things are left out of the frame while others are included. Similarly, some features may be pushed to the edge of the frame, while others remain more central. The frame is important because whatever facts, values, or images are included are accorded legitimacy, while those mentioned at the fringe or not included are marginalized or left out of public discussion. The news frame will significantly contribute to how the issue is considered and talked about by the public.

We compiled and categorized the frames on child care within the 110 substantive pieces in our random sample, and found that they fell into distinctive clusters of perspectives (see Table 4). While many stories had a dominant frame, most pieces included several frames. The frames described here are those which appeared most often in the pieces reviewed.

Overall we found that child care is being framed primarily as an issue of parents getting what they need in order to go to work rather than as an issue of children getting what they need in order to grow. A strong case is being made for the necessity of child care for an efficient and productive work force. The challengers, on the other hand, frame the issue as one where parents have the exclusive responsibility of caring for their children. The following are the predominant frames on child care.

Table 4. Frequency of different frames in newspaper pieces on child care, 1994-1998 (N=110)

	% of pieces containing the frame*
Dominant Frames in Child Care Newspaper Pieces	
Government should help pay for child care	25%
Child care lets families be economically self-sufficient	15%
Child care providers need better training	12%
Family-friendly policies help employers attract and retain employees	8%
Frames Opposing Government Subsidies for Child Care	
It's best for kids to be at home with their parents	8%
If you can't take care of your kids, don't have them	<5%
Keep government out of the home	<5%
Least Common Frames Supporting Child Care	
Investing in child care now prevents problems later	<5%
Care after school is essential for school-aged children	<5%
The early years are the most important for child development	<5%
Child care providers need better wages	<5%
Child care is a public responsibility, whether you have children or not	<5%
Child care should be provided by people who want to be with children	<5%

*The percents will not add to 100 because more than one frame could appear in any given piece.

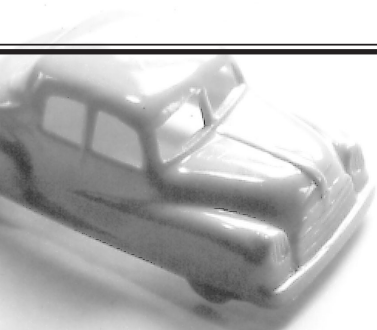
Dominant Frames in Child Care Coverage

Government should help pay for child care. This frame appeared in 25% of the sample, more than any other frame in the coverage. A strong case is made that government should subsidize child care as a means of helping parents cope with the burdensome costs of this necessity. Advocates of this frame assert that the government has a legitimate role in helping American families care for their children. This frame was used in support of welfare reform less than a third of the time; the majority of stories using this frame presented child care subsidies as a general social program that would benefit all families.

Child care lets families be economically self-sufficient. In this frame, which appeared in 15% of the sample, child care is a mechanism for strengthening the workforce and the economy by helping families work. Proponents argue that housing and day care can consume half or more of a working family's income, and poor women who are not provided with adequate child care are likely to slip (back) into welfare. (Studies showing the large proportion of family income consumed by child care costs were good news hooks.) Half of the time this frame was used in support of welfare reform; the other half of the pieces describe child care's role in helping working families achieve financial goals, without reference to welfare. A variation of this frame applied to students: child care on campus allows students to continue their education. Arguments supporting "special needs" child care appeared here as well, where parents with swing-shift jobs can't succeed without overnight child care, for example. In this frame, child care benefits parents as workers; children and their needs are almost absent from the picture. A rarely articulated related frame had a feminist bent, stating that child care is essential if women are to enter the workforce and become autonomous.

Child care providers need better training. About 12% of the sample contained the frame supporting the argument that child care providers need to be better trained to improve their ability to care for children. Tragedies and crimes in day care settings provide the dramatic jumping off point for proponents of this frame. The extreme cases of children coming to harm under providers' care are the images used to support the argument: a child dying after being violently shaken by a nanny; SIDS deaths while babies are in the care of providers who have not been told to lay them to sleep on their backs. The frame is dominated by complaints about "unscreened and poorly trained teenagers" acting as au pairs and parents reacting in fear to well-publicized cases of abuse in day care centers. These pieces focus on training that would make children safer; training that would help providers give more nurturing, stimulating care is rarely discussed.

Family-friendly policies help employers attract and retain employees. This frame, appearing in 8% of the sample, describes how employers benefit by offering child care and other family-friendly policies. However, the focus is on how these policies benefit employers by allowing them to attract employees, not on corporations stepping up to share child care costs on principle. The implication is that in a weaker economy, when it is not so hard to attract top employees, these programs would be expendable. The frame is supported with studies showing that workers want to be valued as "whole" people with families and outside interests.



Frames Opposing Government Subsidies for Child Care

Opposition frames were not as pervasive in the substantive coverage. Three emerged:

It's best for kids to be at home with their parents. About 8% of the coverage included the perspective that children thrive best when cared for by their own parents. Not everyone expressing this frame would necessarily be against government helping pay for child care, but they see that as a necessary evil. The argument supported by this frame is that children will likely not get the attention they need in child care settings, derisively called “surrogate care.” Proponents of this frame believe that children grow best with the kind of nurturing that comes from the undivided attention of loving parents. Proponents chastise society for not providing families the support they need to accomplish this; they say society is cheating its children, making them victims of a society that “values time spent working more than time spent raising children.” Republican proposals for child care tax credits are seen as best for kids because they keep parents — mothers — at home.

If you can't take care of your kids, don't have them. Bitterness toward welfare recipients permeates this frame, which appeared in less than 2% of the coverage. A strong emphasis on parental responsibility is used here to argue against government assistance with family issues. Government subsidies are seen as “financial incentives for parents to spend less time with their children” or a “forcible transfer of wealth” from parents who stay at home and sacrifice additional income to two-income families. As one proponent noted, “No one helped me with the cost of raising my kids, because I didn't have them until I could afford to.”

Keep government out of the home. Proponents of this rare frame (appearing in less than 1% of the sample) argue that it is not the government's role to regulate family matters; parents' needs for child care will best be met by contractual agreements made in an unfettered marketplace. While not always articulated in its pure form, this libertarian frame does have fervent proponents and persists.

Least Common Frames Supporting Child Care

The following frames, while containing important elements of advocates' messages, were not frequently covered; they were expressed in less than five percent of the substantive pieces over five years.

Investing in child care now prevents problems later and care after school is essential for school-aged children were related frames making their case for child care primarily in reference to preventing future problems such as teen pregnancy and violence among adolescents.

The early years are the most important for child development was included in a minority of stories, but was asserted rather than explained. There was very little detail on how good care stimulates proper child development.

Child care providers need better wages. This frame is supported with facts about the low wages most child care providers receive (stated to be about \$12,000 per year in most news reports). The low wage leads to high turnover, cited as a problem for maintaining high quality care.

Child care is a public responsibility, whether you have children or not was included in a handful of pieces about subsidies, employers' responsibility for child care and the importance of early childhood development.

Child care should be provided by people who want to be with children, while a critical component of the definition of “quality” in child care, was rarely articulated. It appeared as one item on a check-list of what parents should look for in a child care provider.

The public should invest in 0-5 education, just as it does in K-12 education was not found in any piece.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The lines of debate on child care are drawn between the personal responsibility of parents to provide for their own families' needs and the role of the government or other institutions in helping meet this vital demand. The evidence presented here suggests that needs of parents, rather than children, are the focus of news coverage. Overall concern is for the health of the workforce, not the family or the child. Newspaper coverage on child care between 1994 and 1998 reflects the tendency to position child care as a necessary evil rather than as a social good. This emphasis will be an obstacle for those who want to expand the frame to include the needs of children and the benefits to the community at large.

Recommendations for Advocates

The good news for child care advocates is that when child care is discussed in substantive articles, advocates have been successful in framing government support for child care as a necessity apart from welfare reform. News coverage clearly presents the need for child care and the reasonable role for government on this issue. In that sense, child care has been made a policy issue.

The bad news is that child care is framed more often as an issue about parents getting into the workforce than as an issue of high quality development for children. The parents, rather than the children, are portrayed as the key benefactors of child care. Further, the argument that child care helps create strong communities for everyone, whether they have children or not, is virtually absent from the debate.

Advocates can better make their case for high quality, accessible and affordable child care by making specific demands, creating news about child care, focusing attention on policy events, clarifying arguments, cultivating new spokespeople and linking child care to early childhood development.

Be specific about what changes would make a difference. Talk about *specific* policy solutions to advance child care agenda. General statements such as "We need a national commitment to child care" are not as productive in advancing policy as calls for specific elements that would comprise that national commitment. The discussion should emphasize *how* society can publicly support child care, not *whether* we should. This will be a technical or political discussion that can be honed by advocates with specific legislative options.

Continue to create news to keep child care on the agenda. For example, studies showing the gap between family income and child care costs were good news hooks. Sometimes simply releasing new data is enough to attract news attention and expand the frame in a specific way. Pay special attention to reports linking early childhood development with child care, and make sure the journalists you know get copies.

Continue to focus media efforts around key policy events. To the extent that child care issues will be resolved by government action, politicians will have to be a part of the process and be prominent spokespeople on the issue. With a few exceptions, they are not weighing in on the topic. The White House conference in early 1998 stimulated a good deal of response from advocates, providers and columnists, but not much from politicians other than the President. When politicians are compelled to take a stand on the issue, especially in the form of promoting legislation, they will likely dominate the coverage. For example, in a separate analysis we did of child care coverage from the *Kansas City Star* in 1998, Missouri Governor Carnahan was a frequent character in stories in the first half of the year when he was promoting specific child care legislation. The discussion of the issue had to include broader societal impacts of subsidies for child care, since the legislation raised that issue on the public agenda. In the second half of the year, the coverage in the *Kansas City Star* reverted to more common themes for child care stories: advice and news-you-can-use for parents and tales of unique child care situations, both individual-oriented frames.



Clarify arguments, images and frames for each of the three main beneficiaries of child care: working parents, children and society. Over the last five years child care has been framed as important because it improves the ability of families to work. The focus on government subsidies is closely linked to the ability of families to be self-sufficient economically, whether or not they receive government assistance. The benefits of high quality child care and early childhood development programs are not absent from the debate, but neither do they have a strong presence. Those frames need more frequent and sharper articulation to have a vital role in the public discussion.

Articulating the elusive “quality” should be a major part of this effort. Currently in news coverage it is mentioned but not defined. The conditions for high quality care need to be spelled out and easily recognized. Journalists need to know to ask about them and advocates need to discuss them. For example, one story primarily about the pending cutback of government funding for a community-based child care center in Dallas listed as evidence of its high quality care the fact that most teachers and the director each had been there almost 30 years. This type of detail about what constitutes “quality” is rarely included in news coverage.

Cultivate new spokespeople as advocates. Journalists need individuals through which to tell stories; parents and child care providers have compelling stories to tell. These speakers are currently well represented in coverage, but they tend not to be quoted in the role of advancing specific policies. Advocates should work with child care providers and parents to help them understand the policy debates around child care and to encourage them to participate in media events and interviews. Journalists rely on the perspectives of these highly involved individuals; they should be prepared to articulate their experiences and perspectives in a way that helps make the case for policies that support accessible, affordable, high-quality child care.

Another important constituency to cultivate as advocates for child care might be K-12 teachers and administrators. If being ready to learn is a key outcome for high quality child care, one would expect to hear from elementary school teachers on the issue, either advocating for higher quality programs (the way university professors talk about high schools), or simply explaining what preschoolers are being made ready for, yet none were quoted in the coverage on child care over the five years. Public support for child care was rarely compared to society’s investment in public education, though certainly that is a reasonable analogy.

Link the importance of child care to early childhood development. Cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Joe Grady recommend using a series of metaphors when discussing child care to emphasize the centrality of early childhood development in the discussion.¹ For example, the shaping metaphor (“as the twig is bent, so grows the tree”), the nutrition metaphor (“the better the mind is nourished, the better it develops”), and the cultivation metaphor (“young children are like plants at their most tender and critical stage”) all emphasize that what happens to children when they are young influences who they become as adults. This idea, if taken seriously by the public and policy makers, would mean increased support for comprehensive child care that serves families’ needs but also provides rich, stimulating environments where children can thrive.

¹ Lakoff, G., and J. Grady. “Why Early Education Benefits All of Us.” In S. Bales (ed.), *Effective Language for Discussing Early Childhood Education*. Washington, DC: Benton Foundation with the Human Services Policy Center at the University of Washington, 1998.

Recommendations for Journalists

Journalists can help clarify child care issues for the public by identifying the stakeholders, investigating the issue, and reporting stories that help the public and policy makers see the relevance of today's policies for tomorrow's society. Our analysis of child care in the news told us a good deal about what is being reported, but it also identified gaps in reporting on this issue. Those gaps must be filled in part by child care advocates and other stakeholders as they talk about the issue and make news. But journalists can help fill the gaps in reporting on child care by probing deeper and asking questions that help illuminate child care issues discussed less frequently. For example,

In France, 99% of three- and four-year-olds attend preschool; in New York, all four-year-olds go.² Where are the toddlers in your state spending their days? Are there plans for providing voluntary or mandatory universal preschool? Who supports it, and why? What does a good program look like? What are the alternatives?

The state shares in the responsibility for giving each of its citizens the best chance—a fair chance—to succeed. Traditionally, it has assumed this role by licensing child care providers, subsidizing child care for low income families, and by trying to raise the standards for child care. What is the state buying with its child care dollars? Is this adequate? Is the state meeting its current obligations? Where are the gaps, and what suggestions are being made to close them? How do we compare to other states?

Advocates say that investing now will lead to savings later. They maintain that children who are cared for well learn to learn, do better in school, and become better adults. What do politicians say? If they agree about the importance of early childhood development, is that concern reflected in their legislation and budgets?

What does “quality” mean when it comes to child care? What does it look like? What do children in a high quality setting do in a typical day, and how does that prepare them to learn when they reach school-age? What is the benefit of quality child care beyond academic performance?

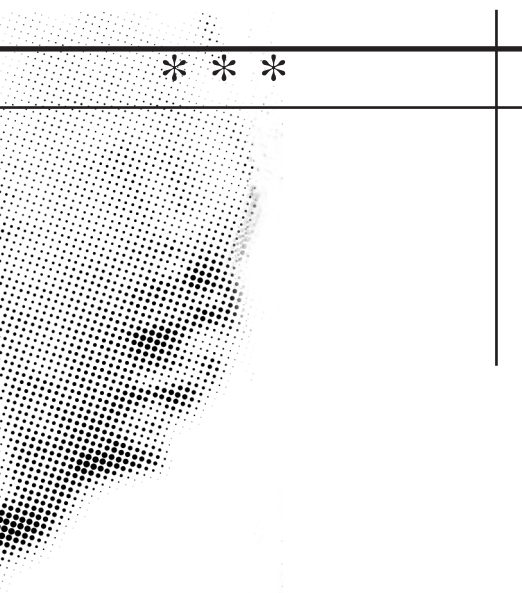
² Little Hoover Commission on California State Government Organization & Economy. *Caring for Our Children: Our Most Precious Investment*, September 1998.


In more and more communities, child care is no longer the exception, it is the norm. We now have more children, more single parents, more families with two parents working outside the home, and more welfare recipients entering the workforce. And, more children are in pre-school, even when a parent is at home. What new pressures does this put on the child care industry? How are those pressures being met? Who is working on improving the situation, and what are they doing?

There are severe shortages of child care in rural and minority areas, and for infant care and odd-hour care. Tens of thousands of children are currently on waiting lists. What is the need in your community? What is being done to meet that need? We frequently see feature stories profiling an unusual child or unusual child care setting, but rarely is that connected to an analysis of the system. How much odd-hour or special care is needed in your area? Who provides it? Who is working to make it more extensive, what are they doing, and what are the prospects for success?

Research has shown that high quality child care gives children a chance to reverse the negative effects of growing up impoverished. How much high quality child care is available to poor people in your area?

Query politicians. If child care is necessary for working families and high quality child care is not readily available or too expensive, what should government do? What actions are they taking? What have they done in response to welfare reform, and for those families not eligible for aid? One working mother in the San Francisco Bay Area knew she would have to return to work when her child was six weeks old in order to keep her job. She tried to get on a waiting list for child care while she was still pregnant, and was told that nothing would be available for her in time. But there were slots available for welfare recipients. What is government doing to prevent working women from leaving their jobs in order to qualify for subsidized care?





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