

POLICIES TO PROMOTE FAMILY SECURITY

A Comment on “Family Security: Supporting Parents’ Employment and Children’s Development”

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Shelley Waters Boots, Jennifer Macomber, and Anna Danziger propose policies to advance the security of low-income families by supporting parental employment and child development. In particular, they focus on policies related to child care, leave time and working hours, and Head Start.

To motivate their selection of policies, Boots, Macomber, and Danziger highlight four dimensions of child development that may be affected when low-income parents work and policy supports are inadequate. These dimensions are stability, health, nurturing, and activity. For instance, as they explain, the requirements of a low-wage job may interfere with a parent being able to provide stability in child care arrangements or family meal times. Similarly, parents working in low-wage jobs may not be able to take time off to bring their children to doctor’s appointments or to stay home with a sick child. The demands of work may also interfere with time that parents would otherwise have spent nurturing their children or arranging beneficial social activities for them.

Each policy the authors advocate is designed to address at least one of these challenges (although this is not always made explicit). In the first policy area, child care, the authors endorse Mark Greenberg’s proposal for guaranteed child care assistance for families who work at least 20 hours a week and have incomes up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level as well as his and others’ proposal to expand the child and dependent care tax credit, expand quality improvement efforts and (also under the quality heading) maintain children in subsidized child care for a period of time even if parents’ work hours are reduced, and increase funding for after-school programs through an expansion in the 21st Century Community Learning Program.

In the second policy area, leave time and working hours, Boots, Macomber, and Danziger call for the implementation of a right to request flexible work hours (similar to what was enacted in the United Kingdom and what has been proposed in Congress under the Working Families Flexibility Act), employer provision of seven days of paid sick leave a year to all employees working at least 20 hours a week (similar to an ordinance recently enacted in San Francisco and to legislation currently proposed in Congress), and employee-financed provision of two months of paid parental leave a year (modeled mainly on California's paid family leave insurance program).

In the third policy area, which the authors call comprehensive family supports, they focus their attention on Early Head Start and Head Start, calling for fully funding Head Start for families with incomes below the poverty level and expanding the number of Early Head Start slots for such families, designating Early Head Start and Head Start as hubs for services for low-income families, and strengthening connections between Head Start programs and child care programs (although this last proposal is somewhat unclear).

The policy proposals are quite detailed and are all accompanied with cost estimates. Several proposals the authors advocate are based on legislation currently under consideration in Congress or in state legislatures, while others draw on recent proposals by analysts at Washington think tanks. Overall, policies proposed are current, relevant, and certainly worthy of further analysis and discussion.

So what more might I add to what the authors have done? I would extend their analysis in three ways.

First, I would motivate the analysis somewhat differently. While framing the analysis in terms of the four challenges delineated above provides useful criteria by which policies can be judged, I would pay more explicit attention to how the policies would affect children's cognitive and social or emotional development, in addition to health and the other outcomes mentioned above. In this regard, it is particularly important to take into account what role the proposed policies might play in closing gaps in health and development between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.

Second, while I agree with the authors that after-school programs have an important role to play, it also must be acknowledged that the evidence base on after-school programs is not as strong as it might be. Currently, a good deal of controversy exists about the evidence on after-school programs, and the case for expanding these programs cannot be taken for granted. There is also an active debate about what goals we should expect after-school programs to achieve, and for which children. This is an important area that needs more research.

Third, in the comprehensive child development domain, I would not focus so exclusively on Head Start and Early Head Start. We need to weigh the costs and benefits of investing more funds in Head Start and Early Head Start with the costs and benefits of investing in other comprehensive child development programs that might be used to promote better health and development among children in low-income families while also supporting parental employment—programs such as nurse home visiting, family support programs, parenting programs, and other early care and education programs. Head Start and Early Head Start may indeed have advantages over other candidate programs. For instance, Head Start and Early Head Start programs deliver child care and thus may be more supportive of parental employment than parenting or family support programs. In addition, as a large and longstanding program serving low-income families, Head Start could perhaps be more feasibly expanded than other types of programs. But these advantages must be weighed against the potential advantages of other programs serving young children.

In summary, then, the authors have put together an interesting and timely set of policy proposals to help meet the needs of children in low-income families when parents work. Together, their proposals on child care, leave time and working hours, and comprehensive child development programs are an excellent starting point and certainly merit further consideration and discussion.