

Small Children, Sizeable Needs.(Statistical Data Included)

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If children represent our future, why have governments and employers done so little to provide for their care?

The United Nations has heralded the new millennium as a time that will bring about the eradication of many childhood diseases and social conditions that have caused continued suffering, but lasting solutions are still far off. However, a number of creative initiatives by various countries may signal the advent of a new era of greater protection and security for the children of working parents around the world.

For decades, most developed nations have recognized the need for programs that support working families and help protect their children. Now, rapidly developing countries are also embarking upon ambitious efforts to offer work related child care and other programs supportive of families.

Early Models

Policy development in the area of child care has taken some surprising turns over the past 60 years. One of the earliest excursions into the development of child care policy in the workplace took place in Brazil in the 1920s. The socialist oriented government of that period enacted a law requiring factories in urban areas to provide child care for employees. As a consequence, child care facilities were developed near factories in Rio de Janeiro and other large urban areas. The law remained on the books despite the suspension of the Brazilian constitution in 1933, but was rarely enforced.

When factories upgraded their facilities or changed locations, little attempt was made to move the daycare centers with them. Nevertheless, some child care centers established under the laws of the 1920s maintained their programs well into the 1970s. Patricia Burness, the former chief of staff to the California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, conducted research in the 1970s on efforts of the Brazilian government to provide child care. In some old, dingy, industrial areas, Burness found a few child care centers that traced their roots to the policies enacted in the 1920s. There have been no attempts by subsequent Brazilian governments to provide work-related child care.

In Ecuador in the 1980s, President Leon Febres-Cordero supported enactment of child care laws, though the laws were, in fact, fostered by his wife, Eugenia Febres-Cordero. As in many South and Central American

countries, the spouse of the president in Ecuador automatically oversees government programs that benefit children. In keeping with that tradition, Eugenia Febres-Cordero served as president of Ecuador's National Family and Children's Institute (INNFA). During her tenure, Febres-Cordero helped introduce a law through the Ecuadorian congress that required all employers with 50 or more employees to arrange for or provide child care for their workers. The law was enacted as an attempt to provide more job opportunities for low-income parents in the country.

Ironically, the law initially had the opposite result, especially for women. The largely male dominated leadership in the 574 corporations with more than 50 employees interpreted the law to read "50 or more women employees." Fearing that they would have to comply with the law, employers stopped hiring women when they had employed 49. Thus, a law that had been intended to stimulate employment of low-income women actually hampered their chances of finding a job. The employers also read the law to mean full-time employees and hired predominately part-time workers.

The International Child Resource Institute, a nonprofit organization established in 1981 devoted to the development of improvement of children's programs worldwide, worked with INNFA to clarify the law. To that end, the Institute identified two sections within the Ecuadorian tax codes that substantially benefit employers who arrange for human services--including child care--for their employees. Beginning in 1985, compliance with the law increased. The Ecuadorian government also developed a series of work-related child care centers to demonstrate its own compliance with the law.

Despite the significant gains achieved during the Febres-Cordero regime, when Febres-Cordero left office in 1988, the policies related to workplace child care were, once again, largely ignored. Nevertheless, part of the Febres-Cordero government's legacy is greater awareness among employers regarding their workers' need for child care and other support services. Subsequent governments have supported policies that have led to enactment of combined child care and childhealth programs for lower income families.

The Ecuadorian "Guarderías" are centers that combine child day care with medical care by staffing a pediatrician who often serves children in the center, as well as families from the nearby communities. Because the status of doctors is lower in Ecuador than in many other countries, the salaries of doctors who participate in the program is

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not an obstacle to government funding for these centers.

Wartime Need

In the United States, the development of employment related child care and family policies has followed the political and social tides of war, economic development, prosperity, recession, and resurgence. The advent of World War II and the wartime economy led to the first largescale need for work related child care in the United States. As the need grew for women in traditionally male dominated employment areas, American employers were forced to remove barriers to the full employment of women.

Child care and related services for children were clearly among the most significant obstacles to women's participation in the wartime economy. The enactment of policies largely based on public-private partnerships were at the forefront of this effort. National legislation established child care centers for those who worked in factories related to the war effort. Child care was subsidized by the government to assure that all mothers who needed the care could take advantage of it. After all, in many cases, Rosie the Riveter was a mother. The care was designed to accommodate the multiple shifts of many factories that operated around the clock.

Around the nation, hundreds of centers were established by 1942 and continued to operate until the end of the war. In California and New York City; these daycare centers continued to operate after the war. In California, the state legislature required California school districts near factories or offices related to the war effort to maintain their child care centers after the war. In such areas as Vallejo, Richmond, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco in northern California and Santa Monica and San Pedro in southern California-major shipbuilding venues-child care centers developed and constructed during the war continue to operate today.

Most of the ship building at these locales was carried out by Kaiser Industries, a major contributor to the wartime economy that employed several thousand workers during the war. Though the construction of destroyers and battleships has long since ceased in these waterside cities, many of the child care centers spawned there are now entering their 48th year.

While the state of New York closed most of its child care centers in 1945, New York City voted to maintain its commitment to work related child care.

Investment in the Future

Many U.S. companies recognize that supporting their brightest employees with such provisions as child care provides these companies with a competitive edge in recruiting women, reducing absenteeism, increasing productivity, and lowering the rate of turnover and cost of retraining new employees. Early developers of quality employee benefits packages also found that developing attractive child care benefits brought them positive publicity that could begin to offset some of the costs of developing those benefits.

In the 1980s, the Union Bank, a financial institution based in the cities of Stockton and Los Angeles, California, commissioned a study that provided substantial justification for persuading employers to provide greater work and family benefits to employees. The study, conducted by Sandra Burud and Associates of Pasadena, California, tracked human resources statistics before and after the creation of a near-site child care center for Union Bank's employees. The study showed that for every three dollars

Union Bank spent on employee benefits, the bank saved four dollars in reduced recruitment costs, reduced absenteeism, increased training opportunities, increased productivity, and improved public relations. This study is one of the few that actually provided a cost/ benefit assessment of company-funded child care programs

In 1984, a series of scholarly publications provided some of the earliest consistent information to U.S. employers and child care providers on the benefits of investing in employer supported child care. [1] Today, more than 3,000 U.S. companies provide child care or related services for their employees. Across the country, such services as voucher programs, contracts with independent child care vendors, centralized phone support systems where parents can call for information on available child care, parent-education programs, and child care centers are now considered as strategically and economically beneficial initiatives.

Puerto Rican Initiative

Despite a few voluntary initiatives, the United States still has no clear national agenda to promote work related child care centers. The territorial government of Puerto Rico, however, has taken steps to study the importance and viability of work related child care. In 1997 and 1998, Puerto Rico enacted public law Number 84, which requires all government divisions to develop on-site or near-site child care programs to meet the child care needs of employees. More than half of the government divisions have complied with the law.

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Among them is the Department of Corrections, which has developed an on-site child care center for its central office employees, and the Office of the Governor has established a child care center near the Puerto Rican White House. The latter, known as the Casita Rosa ("Little Pink House"), is located in a residence formerly occupied by officers of the Spanish military in the early 19th century. The building, constructed in 1812, overlooks the harbor in Old San Juan and serves the infants, toddlers, and preschoolers of the governor's staff.

The government's support of employee child care has begun to have an impact on the private business sector in Puerto Rico. Private companies that wish to compete for the best local employees are now beginning to develop their own child care plans.

The Dutch Model

Generous family support programs, including social welfare programs, and strong Dutch cultural traditions kept the majority of Dutch mothers at home until the 1980s. As a consequence, the Netherlands was late entering the work and family child care arena. In recent years, however, the government and the private sector have forged a strong bond in developing work and family programs. Throughout the country, municipalities are following national policy directives that call for development of greater options for employees' families. The policy has led to the implementation of a system that requires communities to plan for local child care.

If an employer in the Limburg region of the southern Netherlands wishes to build a new facility or expand its employee base in the area, it must determine the number of new child care spaces it will need based on the number of new employees. It must then pay into a local child care fund for the expansion of child care spaces, either at its own child care center or one operated by the community, or it can make arrangements with a private or public child care provider to directly establish child care services for its employees.

The Dutch child care system has expanded rapidly during the past decade, with corporate-sponsored child care leading the way. Several hundred large private Dutch companies provide child care for their employees. One private, nonprofit national child care provider, Stichting Kinderopvang Humanitas (Foundation for Child Care Humanitas), has tripled the number of child care programs over the past decade to more than 120, including resource and referral services and family day care centers serving many thousands of children, primarily in collaboration with corporations and local governments. A wide variety of companies from the national telephone company to

Phillips Electronics make provisions for more than 10,000 children of their employees.

Mother of Invention

Numerous local and national efforts to improve the lot of children have begun to make a difference even in impoverished regions in developing countries. One innovative program is based in Lucha De Los Pobres--which means "struggle of the poor"--a city of about 25,000 inhabitants outside Quito, Ecuador, high in the Andes mountains. The town is populated by squatters on what is primarily government property. The community has formed a comprehensive network of child and family services that rivals some of the most sophisticated in the world. The town is divided into five zones, or manzanas, each with about 5,000 inhabitants. Each zone has developed and oversees health care, elder care, child care, family day care, schools, and family support services.

Electricity was brought to the town just a few years ago, and water still arrives by tanker truck. Despite the challenges of daily life at 12,000 feet, the citizens of Lucha take part in joint decision making and community building activities each month, such as health planning and senior service planning, as well as child care.

Another program targets the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, one of the poorest regions in the world. Primary school teachers from this area are forced to retire at 65, and following retirement they often fall into the same crushing poverty as others in their villages. Eight years ago, a local community development agency, the Area Development and Cooperation Organization (Fudeco); the Dominican International Center on Aging; and a U.S.-based Catholic order, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, launched a project to address the needs of the retired teachers and the area's preschool children.

Through the project, retired teachers are offered paid retraining as preschool teachers and provided the opportunity to serve as directors and teachers at preschool and child care centers. Since the project was launched in the 1980s, more than 500 teachers have participated, and 42 village children's centers have been opened. These teachers, known as "professors," have emerged as community leaders, involving parents in the programs and mobilizing a wider array of local and national resources.

Recently, at the 85th birthday party of one of the most successful professors, the wiry, white-haired woman remarked, "I thought my life was over at 65, but these have been my most productive years. I'll probably think of retirement again in about 10 years." Success stories like these are testimony to the power of imaginative solutions.

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In the end, child care programs can make a difference throughout the community and across generations.

Measuring Success

In the past few years, a number of standards have been devised to measure and assess the quality of children's programs. Such assessment has led to a dramatic improvement in the quality of child care around the world. The assessments are valuable because children's programs have been developed piecemeal, and questions have arisen regarding the quality and impact of these programs.

There is significant debate over how best to measure the quality of children's programs, particularly in the area of early childhood development and education.² Early childhood programs run the gamut from support services for children traumatized by war in the former Yugoslavia to early education and stimulation centers in the slums of Brazil to child care centers in rural Georgia and in-home family day-care systems in Gosford, Australia.

Certain areas of child care can be evaluated directly. Maternal and child-health programs can be measured, for instance, through clear progress indicators such as reductions in infant and mother mortality and morbidity. Immunization programs can be measured through the reduction of preventable child-hood diseases. But the effectiveness and impact of early childhood development and education programs may take many years to evaluate.

Will children in child care develop the social and cognitive skills that will help them lead full and productive lives as adults?[3] Will the tremendous learning explosion that takes place during the first years of life be enhanced by the efforts of those who serve the youngest children? These are questions that must be answered if we are to determine the effectiveness of early childhood programs.

Meanwhile, one thing is certain. As more and more women enter the workforce, children will continue to need the support of government and industry, as well as the nurturing of the community..

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NOTES

(1.) E.F. Ziglier and E. W. Gordon, eds.. Day Care:

Scientific and Social Policy Issues (Boston, MA: Auburn House, 1982).

(2.) S.L. Burud, P.R. Aschbacher, and Jacquelyn McCroskey, Employer Supported Child Care (Dover, MA: Auburn House, 1984).

(3.) D.A. Phillips, ed., Quality in Child Care: What Does Research Tell Us? (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children Publications, 1987).

(4.) The author retains copyright on this article.