
Family Practice and Family Policy: Mixing Work and Parenting

American families today are struggling to reconcile their need to earn a living with the needs of their children. As wages stagnate and housing costs rise, parents — whether single or coupled — find themselves torn between competing demands on their time: they can work less and have less income but more time to spend with their children, or work more and use the extra income to buy goods and services (such as child care) for their children. Surveys show that most parents feel ambivalent about these trade-offs. While they believe that they are doing their best under difficult circumstances, and cling to the notion that their children will benefit from the sacrifices they have made, they lament the loss of “family values” and criticize the parenting skills of others.

Families today are also straining to reconcile two competing cultural themes of the American experience: the drive for economic independence and material affluence, and the importance of family ties. The first theme is a prominent part of the American identity. It permeates and underpins our approach to public assistance and our emphasis on equal opportunity rather than equal outcomes. The second theme, the importance of family, resonates less powerfully in upwardly mobile, immigrant America; it is a tune periodically drowned in the pounding refrain of *individual* achievement and *individual* choice.

Recent economic trends have been forcing individuals to pool their resources, since a middle-class lifestyle now requires having more than one earner in a household with children. At the same time, however, cultural changes have made family ties more tenuous and conditional. Over a single generation, we have seen a major transformation in social attitudes toward sex, marriage, childbearing, and parenting practices. Expectations about gender roles have changed dramatically. Individual Americans are in the process of negotiating their place in a more fragmented, flexible social world and a rapidly changing labor market, and a clear normative consensus about what constitutes good parenting or a healthy family has yet to emerge.

The major family policy issue of our generation is how (or whether) the government can help parents — coupled or single — mix earning and child-rearing

responsibilities. This is an issue that cuts across the boundaries of class and ethnicity. But because of ongoing changes in the labor markets of advanced industrialized countries, it is an especially urgent issue for the least educated parents in our society. If they are to fulfill their dual responsibilities, they must have the assistance of a government actively committed to promoting their success in both endeavors. By leaving individuals to rely on private resources and support networks, U.S. public policies exacerbate existing inequalities and leave already-marginalized citizens little opportunity to improve their life chances or those of their children.

The major family policy issue of our generation is how (or whether) the government can help parents — coupled or single — mix earning and child-rearing responsibilities.

Working Mothers

Two changes in family relationships are at the core of the family policy debate: the increase in work force participation among mothers, particularly mothers of young children, and the tenuousness of marriage. These two developments are intertwined. Women who work may be better able to leave unhappy marriages. Husbands may feel more free to leave a woman with an independent income. But the causal relationship also works in the other direction: as marriage becomes less secure, women feel the need to maintain their individual ties to the labor market.

Since women were traditionally expected to be the nurturers in a family, complaints about “family breakdown” tend to be directed at their behavior. Conservatives often fault working women for putting their individual interests (career, personal fulfillment, and so on) above those of “the family.” Some defend-

ers of working mothers counter that economic necessity alone is responsible for women's increased labor force participation. Both groups tend to ignore the change in cultural expectations about women's work behavior. Today, most *men* as well as most women expect wives to contribute to the economic support of their families, especially if the children are of school age or older. In 1991, three quarters of all mothers of school-aged children, 60 percent of mothers of preschool children, and over half the mothers of children under two, were in the labor force.

Yet our public policies have done little to help working mothers combine earning and child-rearing responsibilities. In stark contrast to other Western nations, the U.S. grants little protection to women who temporarily leave the workplace for childbearing. The Family Leave Act, which was signed into law only this year, mandates that employers allow workers three months of maternity leave, but does not require them to pay mothers during that leave. In European countries, maternity leave is paid and employers are often required to hold a job open for an extended period, in case a mother decides to return to her previous position after a year or two at home with her child. In Sweden, mothers also have a right to reduce their work time to 30 hours a week.

Although women, many of them mothers, constitute a disproportionate number of part-time and temporary workers in the United States, we have been slow to extend workplace protections (such as health benefits) to such workers. Here again, the U.S. differs from countries with extensive welfare state systems, where women who work part-time often hold public-sector service jobs through which they enjoy a full range of work rights and benefits.

Today, most men as well as most women expect wives to contribute to the economic support of their families, especially if the children are of school age or older.

European nations also provide supplemental income assistance to working mothers — especially single mothers — in a way that helps them combine work with child-rearing. Most provide some kind of child allowance or benefit for any family with a child, regardless of family income. In the U.S., the Earned Income Tax Credit does provide income assistance to families whose earnings place them above the poverty level. But families must apply for this credit, and unless they make special arrangements with their

employer, they can only receive it at the end of the year. For these reasons, it is not an effective safeguard against hardship. The principle behind the tax credit is that "Hard work should be rewarded," and thus that working parents should have a significantly higher income than non-working ones. A more generous policy would ensure that the material needs of *all* children are adequately met.

Despite a decade of moralizing about "deadbeat dads" who don't support their children, only one in four lone mothers in the United States regularly receives the full amount of child support owed to the family each month.

The challenge of combining work and child-rearing is particularly hard on lone parents, and it has become more difficult as the economic security of households with children increasingly demands earnings from more than one source. Most working mothers need some kind of support from the absent fathers of their children in order to make ends meet. If this help is not forthcoming, they are often forced to rely on their families or government assistance.

Despite a decade of moralizing about "deadbeat dads" who don't support their children, only one in four lone mothers in the United States regularly receives the full amount of child support owed to the family each month. Although a number of federal reforms to improve child support collection were established in the 1980s, there is still little uniformity in state laws regarding divorce, child support, and custody, and the obstacles confronting interstate collection efforts are enormous. The decentralization inherent in a federal system, coupled with the fact that conflicts over child support require court action rather than simple administrative remedies, makes it difficult and costly for lone mothers to collect the money owed to them by absent fathers.

In many other industrialized countries, the situation is different: the state advances child support payments to lone mothers, and then collects whatever earnings it can from the father. If an absent father cannot pay, the state provides income support to the family. This system places the burden of determining whether or not a father will pay on an administrative agency, not on a mother pursuing her case in the courts. As a result, it increases the income, and improves the economic security, of working mothers.

Under our Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, the government only provides

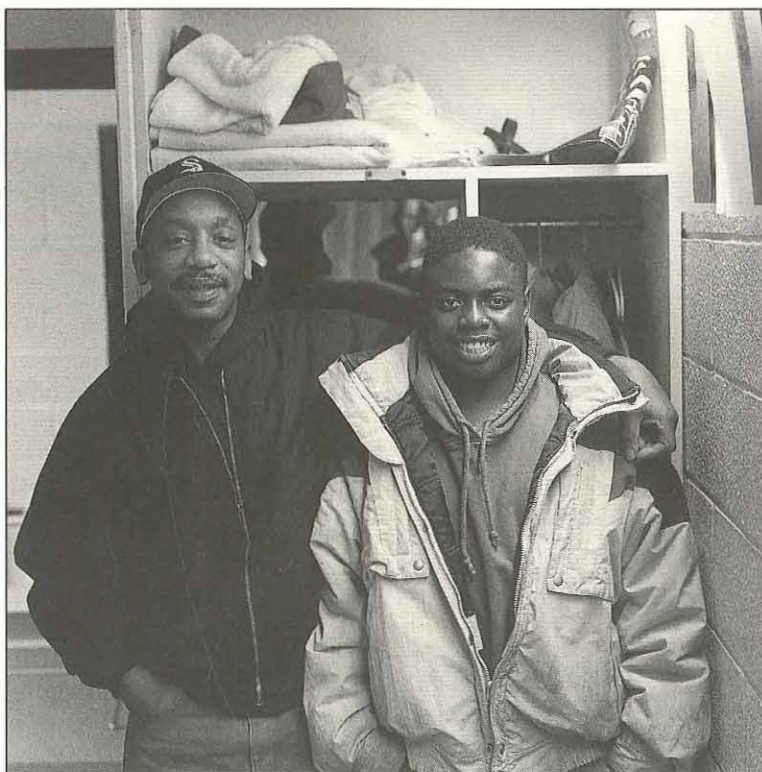
income support to a mother who is entirely without assets, and it reduces the income assistance and medical benefits available to the family if she earns "too much." (In most states, "too much" is between \$7,500 and \$15,000 a year for a family of three.) Medicaid coverage ceases when the family's income reaches about \$15,500. Our strict means-testing of poor families with children leaves little economic incentive for poor mothers to work part-time or in low-wage jobs. A poorly educated mother, or one who lives in an area with few opportunities for employment other than service jobs, may find that working reduces the economic support and services available to her children. For women in this situation, the desire to be economically independent and the desire to provide for the material needs of their children conflict.

Current debates over welfare reform have focused almost exclusively on the issue of economic dependence, rather than on the needs of poor children. This is ironic, given the history of the AFDC system. Thirty years ago, black women were more likely to be in the labor force than white women, and poor women were more likely to work than middle-class women. The AFDC system was amended and expanded in the 1960s in response to the argument that poor mothers

should be able to stay at home when their children were small, just as middle-class women at that time usually did.

But patterns of work behavior among women have changed. Middle-class married women are now more likely to be in the labor force than poor or unmarried women. These working mothers may feel ambivalent about the way in which they are juggling career and parenting responsibilities, but they feel no ambivalence about demanding that poor women join them in their struggle to find child care, sympathetic employers, and affordable health care. However, there is little recognition that if job growth is too slow to absorb potential workers, the rising labor force participation of educated middle-class women is likely to leave less educated women out of the labor market.

The public policy spotlight on the work behavior of poor mothers only peripherally addresses the key issue for all working parents: child care. A generation ago, when working-class women had high rates of labor force participation, they lived in tightly-knit neighborhoods where older female relatives or trusted neighbors were available to help care for their children. But as American families have become increasingly mobile, and as older women have entered and



remained in the labor force for longer periods, this source of informal, low-cost child care has disappeared. Today a majority of working mothers, both married and single, rely on non-relatives for child care, and surveys consistently show that parents worry about the quality of the care their children receive.

The failure to make high-quality preschool programs a central component of national family policy has serious implications for the social and economic integration of future generations.

Unfortunately, our public policies do little to ensure that young children have safe, secure environments in which to grow. State and local licensing regulations for child care providers vary significantly across jurisdictions. Most areas lack effective inspection mechanisms. There are no uniform professional standards for child care workers. Training and compensation are poor. There have been no attempts to link child care with systematic access to child health services.

Federal subsidies for child care do not encourage or enable working parents to choose high-quality child care options. Working parents can deduct only \$2,400 a year for day care expenses, though a national survey conducted in 1991 reported that average yearly child care costs were between \$3,600 and \$6,000 a year. The same survey highlighted differential use of preschool programs according to family income. It found that three quarters of all three- to five-year-olds with parents who earned more than \$75,000 a year attended such programs, while only 40 percent of young children from families with incomes under \$30,000 a year did so. Head Start, our sole government-sponsored preschool education program, is available only to poor children (and serves only 28 percent of the children eligible to participate). The program operates on a part-day basis and doesn't operate at all during the summer, and thus is not designed to meet the needs of working parents. The failure to make high-quality preschool programs a central component of national family policy has serious implications for the social and economic integration of future generations.

Higher Standards of Competence

Current family policy debates fail to highlight the fact that *our standards of "adequate" child-rearing have risen*. To establish themselves or to remain in the middle class in the next century, young people will have to be more socially competent, more adaptable, and bet-

ter educated than their parents. They will have to master electronic and computer skills and learn to negotiate working and residential environments that are more culturally diverse.

An increasing body of research tells us that early education and child-rearing practices during the formative years are critical in producing children who can "learn to learn." It is not enough to teach a child to sit still and respect authority; we are no longer trying to create manual laborers for assembly-line work. Rather, we want children with greater problem-solving abilities, analytic powers and interactive social skills. This means that we must have a higher quality of child-rearing than in the past.

Since the need for more and better early education has come at a time when wage stagnation and changing cultural expectations have brought more women into the labor force, the task of providing this education will fall to professional child care workers. But because child care and related services must be purchased at market prices, with the best care available only to those who can afford it, economic inequalities are increasingly translated, even among the youngest children, into inequalities in educational opportunities. And these early differences are only compounded by the huge disparities in the quality of public schools across districts.

To establish themselves or to remain in the middle class in the next century, young people will have to be more socially competent, more adaptable, and better educated than their parents.

Parents pass on to their children the skills that they possess. *But we cannot expect parents to pass on skills and learning that they do not have.* A new Department of Education survey has found that 90 million Americans — 47 percent of the nation's adult population — are functionally illiterate, and we have no coherent, accessible remedial system of education to help these citizens (re)join mainstream society. Educated, middle-class professionals expose their children to the kinds of skills they will need as adults in an evolving workplace. They use their disposable income to hire experts to teach their children other skills (sports, music, and so on). Working-class and poor parents live in districts where safe, socially stimulating after-school activities are no longer freely available, and they have neither the personal experience nor the disposable income to provide their children with such opportunities. Indeed, available research suggests

that important class and racial differences in child-rearing patterns persist and that working-class and poor parents may be socializing their children to fit into occupations and a social world that are rapidly disappearing.

Family policy debates should focus on this process of *child socialization*. Policymakers should be defining the positive characteristics that the next generation of Americans will require in order to function effectively as workers, parents, and citizens, and then set about restructuring a range of public and private institutions to provide the support needed to accomplish these objectives.

In spite of our peculiarly American emphasis on individuals, we live in an increasingly interdependent social and economic environment. We can no more go back to the Ozzie and Harriet family of the 1950s than we can return to the pioneer families of the last century. Public policies must assist parents in effectively balancing the competing demands of work and parenting as their children grow up and as the economy re-creates itself. This will require continually rebuilding and adjusting our institutions in order to promote the development of citizens able (and willing) to support us in our old age. We cannot leave the socialization of children to market forces and the luck of the genetic draw; the socialization of children is a *collective* responsibility. This is the principle that should undergird future reforms of American family policy.

— Katherine McFate

Katherine McFate is Associate Director of Social Policy at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, D.C. Sources: *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families*, Final Report of the National Commission on Children (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991); Robin L. Jarrett, "A Comparative Examination of Socialization Patterns Among Low-Income African-Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Whites: A Review of the Ethnographic Literature," Social Science Research Council Working Group on Communities, Family Processes, and Individual Development Working Paper, (1991); Katherine McFate, *Poverty, Inequality and the Crisis of Social Policy: Summary of Findings* (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 1991).

THE MARYLAND HUMANITIES COUNCIL

invites you to attend a conference on

"Family: Image and Reality"

Friday, November 5, 1993

9:30 AM - 12:30 PM

in the first-floor conference room at
601 North Howard Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

The conference is free and open to the public,
but reservations are required.

Call (410) 625-4830

Keynote address:

Stephanie Coontz
Professor, History and Women's Studies
The Evergreen State College

Responses:

Jai P. Ryu
Professor of Sociology,
Loyola College of Maryland

Herman Belz
Professor of History,
University of Maryland, College Park

Carolyn Colvin
Secretary of Human Resources,
State of Maryland

Established in 1976 at the University of Maryland and now part of the School of Public Affairs, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy was founded to conduct research into the conceptual and normative questions underlying public policy formulation. This research is conducted cooperatively by philosophers, policymakers and analysts, and other experts both within and outside the government.

All material copyright © 1993 by the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, unless otherwise acknowledged. For permission to reprint articles appearing in this publication, please contact the Institute.

STAFF:

Mark Sagoff, Director
Robert K. Fullinwider, Research Scholar
William A. Galston, Research Scholar
(on leave, 1993-94)
Peter Levine, Research Scholar
Xiaorong Li, Research Scholar
Judith Lichtenberg, Research Scholar
David Luban, Research Scholar
Jerome Segal, Research Scholar
Alan Strudler, Research Scholar
Robert Wachbroit, Research Scholar
David Wasserman, Research Scholar
Robert Costanza, Adjunct Research Scholar
Douglas MacLean, Adjunct Research Scholar
Arthur Evenchik, Editor
Carroll Linkins, Administrative Assistant
Barbara Cronin, Business Manager

Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742

Address correction requested.

THIRD CLASS BULK Non-Profit Organization U.S. Postage PAID Permit No. 10 College Park, MD

New address? Please cut out this address label and return it with correct address and zip code.