
Workplace Wars: How Much Should I Be Required to Meet the Needs of *Your* Children?

Claudia Mills

Johnny's mom leaves work early to coach Johnny's soccer team; Katie's dad leaves work early to attend Katie's kindergarten graduation—while other, childless (or, alternatively, childfree) workers stay late to pick up the slack. Johnny's mom and Katie's dad both receive, as part of their benefit packages, health insurance for Johnny and Katie, as well as the opportunity to contribute to a tax-free childcare account—benefits not available to colleagues without children. While many applaud such company efforts to assist working parents, struggling under a dual burden of employment and parenthood, recently a chorus of voices has been raised to challenge “family-friendly” policies, charging that they are friendly to families at the expense of unfairness to fellow workers without children.

Are the special needs of parents ones we should be seeking to meet? If so, who is this “we”—the government, employers, fellow workers? What policies in the workplace are most fair to parents and non-parents alike?

Responsibilities, Choices, and Needs

One first answer here, which I hear from some of my most environmentally conscious friends, is that the rest of us should bear no responsibility whatsoever for parents' special needs, because people shouldn't be becoming parents in the first place. In a world as crowded as ours, and as environmentally threatened, people should not be having children at all. Admittedly, those in Western, developed nations are not currently reproducing at greater than replacement rates; nonetheless, it is these children who have the heaviest and most destructive “ecological footprint.” One of my friends, environmentally outraged, refused to speak to his own brother after his third nephew was born! Few of us subscribe to this draconian environmental ethic, however. Children provide such a great part of the good of life that it seems unreasonable to expect people to forgo the central life experience of

parenthood in exchange for environmental benefits that are speculative and diffuse.

On the other end of the spectrum, it is claimed that the continued production of children is a positive good for all of us, and parents are thus to be congratulated, and heartily and humbly assisted in their endeavor. According to this view, those who do not have children, far from being paragons of environmental virtue, are parasites on those who do. Sylvia Ann Hewlett, chairman of the National Parenting Association, is quoted in the *Denver Rocky Mountain News* as saying, “Children are 100 percent of the future and we are all stakeholders in their future because they are the folks who will be paying our Social Security. If you are a childless adult you are kind of a free rider on the effort

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of raising children.” But this view as well seems overstated. Collectively we may need and want *some* people to be having children, but we hardly feel the more, the better. And most of those who have children don't approach the having of children in this light, as a duty grimly assumed for the benefit of humankind generally.

We are left, then, with a middle position. Having children, I claim, is a morally permissible but not morally mandatory choice that persons make to enrich their own lives. This would seem to support the view that the consequences of this choice—the increased needs that parenthood brings—should be regarded by and large as the responsibility of the parents alone. After all, if they didn't want to assume those burdens, they could have refrained from having children. We see a similar reaction in other areas of life in which special needs flow from voluntary choices rather than



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from the vagaries of chance and the uncertainties of fortune. We question whether we should be collectively providing medical care for those whose medical problems arise from poor lifestyle choices: smoking, over-eating, risky sexual behaviors. Moving closer to our current topic, some question whether welfare payments should be provided to poor mothers who repeatedly bear children out of wedlock.

However, even as we question the provision of assistance in such cases, by and large we do continue to provide it, and to feel morally uncomfortable with the refusal to provide it. Our response to need, we hope, is not in the first place dictated by a detached judgment regarding the cause of that need; we aspire to be more open-hearted than that. However, as the need in question becomes chronic rather than acute, and poses a less dire threat to life and health, we rethink our willingness to offer aid. We would rescue a child drowning in a pond, however she came to be floundering there; we don't feel the same way about repeatedly picking up our neighbor's child from day care, when he *could* leave work on time but chooses to stay late. In the latter case, we may wonder whether we have left the realm of "needs" behind altogether.

Yet it may be a mistake to press too heavily on the voluntariness of the choice to bear and raise children. While this is indeed a choice we make, it seems to be

misrepresented as a (mere) "lifestyle choice." Having children is such a central part of a full human life, something Aristotle felt comfortable including as a fundamental element in *eudaimonia*, human flourishing. While some—and perhaps a growing number—obviously define flourishing for themselves differently, it is hardly eccentric to view a full human life as including children of one's own (biological or adopted) to love and care for. Life without children seems importantly similar, in my view, to life without sex. There are those who live a full and joyous life without sex; yet most of us don't feel that sex is something we can simply ask people to renounce, as the price of absolving themselves of responsibility for any future offspring (although some of us do). So, while we can consider the bearing and raising of children as a choice, it is not a choice which most people feel blithely free to take or leave, especially given heavy societal pressures and expectations to reproduce.

It is not clear how relevant this concession is, however, to the question we are pursuing here. For even if we accept that parents' special needs don't flow from choices we can reasonably ask them to forgo, we may be wary of workplace policies which place too much weight on the meeting of particular, personal needs. To be blunt, "To each according to his needs," is not, contrary to what many Americans in a recent opinion poll

reported believing, a creed enshrined in the American Constitution. While I will argue below that allocation according to need *is* an important principle at the level of government policy, in the workplace other competing principles—such as allocation according to effort, or to accomplishment—command greater allegiance.

In the case of meeting parental need, it would seem strikingly unfair to most of us to pay parents more than non-parents for the same work, on the grounds that they have greater income requirements. In the past considerations such as this provided the rationale for paying men higher salaries (as family “breadwinners”) than women without dependents. It is not only the sexism here that troubles us, but also the unfairness of giving greater pay to one employee than to another for the same contribution.

If we move toward the other extreme, however, of disregarding need, we can arrive at some seemingly ludicrous results. Should one worker complain that another, who suffers a heart attack, receives considerably greater benefits from his company-provided health insurance policy than she does from hers? Lisa Benenson, editor of *Working Mother* magazine, is

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quoted in the *New York Times* as asking, “If the person at the desk next to you gets cancer, do you think of them as ‘earning’ more because their health dollar costs are higher?” However, the health insurance case is a special one, which can’t be generalized too far. The whole idea of health insurance is based on a commitment to risk-sharing; if we were just going to pay for our own health-care needs, unwilling to take a chance on having to pay for anybody else’s, we wouldn’t have gotten health insurance in the first place. We recognize that health insurance is in some respects a lottery, in which we may emerge as either winners or losers.

A better example to test our willingness to match benefits to needs might be: Suppose a company provides each employee with three days of bereavement leave annually, as needed. Would it make sense to allow the non-bereaved to use this leave to enjoy summer barbecues or time at the spa? Here, while intuitions may differ, this doesn’t seem to me absurd. As we shall see below, many employers are moving in precisely this direction, of providing an extensive and variable menu of benefits from which both parents and non-parents can choose at will. Of course, what employers are willing and financially able to provide

for all may fall considerably short of what employees in special circumstances need. But here it may be unreasonable for the needy to expect their plight to be addressed by their employer rather than by a general societal safety net.

My conclusion so far, then, is that greater parental need is an insecure foundation for greater parental benefits—partly because the need flows from a voluntary choice (although one that is hardly trivial or eccentric), partly because we are only moderately willing to apportion workplace benefits according to need, in any case.

A more promising approach, I suggest, proceeds as follows. Whatever we decide about the choice to have children, and our appropriate response to the needs generated by it, nobody benefits when children are not raised well. It may or may not be in my interest that you have children; but it is definitely in my interest that your children, once here to share the planet with me, grow up to be as happy, loving, good, and decent as possible. This is one kind of argument that supports the provision of free public education to all children, financed by the contributions of taxpaying parents and non-parents alike. What good does it do anyone to have children growing up uneducated? And, we can also ask, what good does it do anyone to have children growing up with poor parenting? So even if we understand the choice to have children as one that implies the responsibility to assume at least some of the additional burdens involved in raising these children, we all—parents and non-parents alike—have a stake in seeing these children raised well. We all share an interest in the optimal raising of our future citizens, neighbors, colleagues, and friends.

Now, this argument appeals to the enlightened self-interest of non-parents, regarding the raising of other people’s children. It may therefore seem to fall short of grounding actual moral obligations. What if someone were to listen to the argument just offered, and shrug and say, “Maybe I’m being foolishly shortsighted in not wanting to assist you with the raising of your children, but, frankly I just don’t care”? Here my response is that one of the deepest problems of political philosophy is to establish actual obligations on the part of those who profess not to care about the collective benefits to be generated by collective cooperation: those who don’t want to pay their share for national defense, or environmental protection, or other public goods. It is simply not feasible to permit individuals to opt out at will on the provision of collective benefits, while still remaining full-fledged citizens and members of our common life. Moreover, I argue that it is morally imperative (and not merely optional) for us to ensure that all persons’ *basic* needs are met, simply out of respect for basic human rights. Thus, we all bear some responsibility for meeting all children’s most basic

Genetics and Criminal Behavior

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This volume brings together a group of essays by leading philosophers of science, ethicists, and legal scholars, commissioned for an important and controversial conference on genetics and crime. The essays address basic conceptual, methodological, and ethical issues raised by genetic research on criminal behavior but largely ignored in the public debate. They explore the complexities in tracing any genetic influence on criminal, violent, or antisocial behavior, the varieties of interpretation to which evidence of such influences is subject, and the relevance of such influences to the moral and legal appraisal of criminal conduct. The volume provides a critical overview of the assumptions, methods, and findings of recent behavioral genetics.

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needs (for food, shelter, health care, and education), not as a duty owed to these children's parents, but as a duty owed to the children, as our fellow human beings, themselves. However, current workplace policies aim beyond the bare meeting of basic, universal human needs, toward facilitating good, rather than just minimally adequate, parenting.

Now, the appeal to the widely shared benefits of optimal child rearing can take us only so far. Raising happy, healthy children is an important societal goal, but it is not our only societal goal. Indeed, raising happy, healthy children is not even the only goal of those children's parents, who presumably continue to care about other aspects of their lives as well: their work, their marriages, their contributions to the larger community. So we need now to consider actual policy proposals regarding the treatment of parents and non-parents in the workplace, and in the community beyond.

How Far Do We Go?

If we recognize compelling reasons to provide at least some assistance to parents in child rearing, what does this mean in practice? Who should be assisting parents, and how? There is currently a wide range of options possible. The federal government provides tax breaks for parents by giving a \$2,800 tax deduction for each dependent in a family, as well as an additional dependent-care credit (up to \$4,800), and has recently added a \$500 per child tax credit. There are calls for greater governmental subsidization of day care, and for stricter governmental regulation of day care. Employers can provide more or less "family-friendly" policies, ranging from the provision of health insurance benefits for family members, to tax-free dependent-care accounts, to on-site, company-sponsored day care, to flextime and other ways of structuring a more accommodating workplace. And fellow workers and neighbors also lend various amounts of informal assistance: staying late when working parents need to be at home, watching children when working parents need to be at work.

Note that some family-friendly policies make it easier for parents *not* to work (by easing the financial burden imposed by children, and so reducing the need for parents to generate additional income); some make it easier for parents *to* work (by, for example, providing high-quality, affordable day care). Which kind of policies we favor will depend on our other views about how children are best raised: by stay-at-home parents or by working parents. I will not enter that debate here, except to say that, just as children are an important part of a flourishing, full human life, so is work. Just as I am reluctant to ask workers to forgo being parents, so am I reluctant to ask parents to forgo being workers. I do happen to think it is beneficial for chil-

dren to see both male and female parents as making some (paid or unpaid) contribution to the world beyond the home. But even if I didn't, I would not want to insist that parents—or any of the rest of us—are required to do *everything possible* to raise the *best possible* children. I will return to this issue below.

At this point, our question is, given the desirability of some family-friendly policies, who should bear the cost of putting family-friendly policies in place? I want to argue that it is best if this cost is shared as widely as possible, by all members of society. For the good in question—the raising of healthy, happy children—is a public good, equally shared by all. Thus, it is preferable, in my view, to provide family benefits through general governmental revenues. This would include tax deductions for dependents (I would limit this to deductions for *two* children, to address the environmental concerns raised above), deductions for child care as a legitimate business expense, and (in an ideal society) provision of welfare services and health care to all children, as to all persons generally.

I find it more problematic when differential benefits are provided to parents not by the government, but by employers (and more problematic still when working parents, through their own informal arrangements, simply impose a greater share of work on childless workers). Here it does seem to me that the provision of differential benefits to working parents violates our strong, long-standing commitment to the principle of equal pay for equal work. Elinor Burkett, author of *The Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless*, says (in a *Denver Post* article), “If compensation packages given to parents are worth \$10,000 more than those given to non-parents, then we’re compensating parents for their fertility and not their work.”

Thus I would argue for company policies that, as far as possible, treat parents and non-parents alike, by extending to all the benefits needed primarily by parents. This would mean offering a mix-and-match menu of benefits from which all workers could choose: health insurance for dependents, additional vacation time, flex-time, and so forth. The case for uniform (but more generous) benefits goes like this. Employees have many needs, beyond the need to care for small children. As we move through the cycle of life, the need to care for growing children is replaced by the need to care for aging parents (though some, in the so-called “sandwich generation,” may face both needs simultaneously). Employees who struggle with poor health would welcome a less strenuous schedule. Benefits such as flextime and enhanced personal leave (e.g., the typical European worker receives six weeks of annual leave, to our two weeks) would greatly enrich the lives of all workers, parents and non-parents alike. Many commentators have observed the extent to which the early twenty-first century workplace deforms and degrades human life.

Juliet Schor, in *The Overworked American*, argues that leisure time has declined steeply for Americans in the past three decades. We work longer for less satisfaction, neglecting other passions and interests. It would be in the interest of all of us to adopt, as Jerome Segal has recently argued, a more graceful and humane pace of life. Theda Skocpol, Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard, suggests that the solution to the workplace wars lies in looking for “ways to modify working conditions to facilitate both family and community involvements by everyone. In that way, contributions by parents can be considered one of a range of ways in which people engage in caring work and civic involvements.” Even now some employers allow, and encourage, their employees to do a certain amount of community service on company time; employers could offer employees a choice of release time for *either* community service *or* family commitments.

Extending this idea still further, we might suggest that government offer tax benefits to its citizens for a range of important and life-enhancing activities: for dependent care generally, rather than child care more

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narrowly (as is the case with most of the deductions in the current tax code); for continuing education; and even for various other rewarding activities. The core idea here is to permit, and indeed to promote, the seeking of our own flourishing in our own chosen way.

Having It All

Would uniformly more benign workplace (and tax) policies solve the conflict between working parents and non-parents?

It may seem that uniform policies here would do violence to Aristotle's famous injunction to treat likes alike, and unlikes differently. Working parents may still complain that uniform policies would continue to leave them significantly disadvantaged at the end of the day. They have the same health stresses of their own as non-parents, the same obligations to elderly parents, the same need for a more graceful and humane pace of life. Plus, they have *kids*. So they need financial support and release time to meet parental obligations in addition to what they need just to *live*. Moreover, in our society at the present time, this double burden (triple burden? quadruple burden?) is especially likely to fall on women, who still assume a disproportionate share of childcare and other domestic responsibilities.

Here, though, is where I think working parents go too far. Part of maturity, indeed part of living gracefully, is to accept that all resources, including life itself, are finite. Quite simply, the time I spend doing x will be time I will not spend doing y. It would be unreasonable for parents to expect to face no consequences whatsoever for their choice to become parents. While the gendered inequities here trouble me deeply—mothers generally face greater consequences for their choice to become mothers than fathers do for their choice to become fathers—I don't think the best way to address these is to introduce further divisive inequities between parents and non-parents.

While I cannot document this, I suspect that some of the most bitter conflicts with working parents comes from those who consciously chose not to have children so as to pursue other valued objectives. Workers who are not currently parents, but were in the past, may be able to sympathize with working parents, even as they may mourn that certain benefits were not in place when they were struggling to balance home and work. (Of course, some are not: "I struggled without affordable day care; you should have to struggle, too.") Workers who are not currently parents, but will be someday, have a clear interest in seeing family-friendly policies put firmly in place, though this may not be an interest they are able fully to recognize (many of us have stories of friends who made a comically abrupt turn-around here on the day they discovered *they* were about to become parents). Those unable to have children may have less sympathy for working parents' laments: they would give anything to be able to assume such a double "burden." And those who made the decision not to have children just so that they could concentrate on professional success, or a strong marital relationship, or other interests, may well think: I made my choice and I'm living with it; why can't you live with yours?

A memory from my adolescent years comes to mind here. In the days before backpacks, I would limp home every day from school under the groaning weight of a huge armful of heavy textbooks. My best friend Debbie skipped and scampered beside me, unencumbered with any books whatsoever. Finally, one especially hot and weary afternoon, I asked her if she might want to help me out by carrying a few of my books. Her answer stayed with me for the next thirty years. "Claudia," Debbie told me, "if I wanted to carry home textbooks, I'd carry home textbooks, and I'd study, and I'd get good grades, but I don't want to carry home textbooks, so I don't." Her message was clear: if I wanted the good grades so badly, I would have to carry the weight of books that went with it.

To learn to live with our choices, and the inescapable limits they impose on us, is to give up the pipe dream of having it all. Yet one of the cruel paradoxes of our time is that just as parents are entering the work force in record numbers, the expectations for what counts as

adequate parenting are also increasing. The less time parents have to give to parenting, the more we have come to expect of them as parents. Recent years have seen a staggering proliferation of extracurricular activities for children, all of which require parental chauffeuring, zealous attendance at games, endless recognition ceremonies. We not only have to be dutiful soccer moms, cheering at every soccer game, but, with children playing in two sports simultaneously, and studying two musical instruments, we have to cheer at every soccer game *and* every swim meet *and* every piano recital *and* every violin recital, as well as coach their Destination Imagination teams and plan extravaganzas for Vacation Bible School. We have seen the rise of what has been called "hyper-parenting"; we have taken too seriously the goal of *optimal* child rearing, as opposed simply to good parenting.

Now, it is admittedly difficult for individuals to act alone to buck societal trends. Working parents do feel intense pressures today—both to parent as if they were not workers, and to work as if they were not parents. But the sad, or perhaps not so sad, perhaps liberating and joyous, truth is that this can't be done. The sooner we accept this truth, the better it will be for us as workers, as parents, as human beings.

A rich and full life is a great good. I for one do not want to force people to choose between work and parenthood; and we all share some responsibility for meeting children's basic needs and assisting parents in raising tomorrow's citizens. It is best when this responsibility is met by broadly shared tax policies and governmental programs, and by workplace policies that offer a more humane and graceful way of working to parents and non-parents alike. But working parents also need to be realistic and non-hubristic, to accept the limitations of time and life, and experience the distinctive joy that such acceptance can bring.

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Sources: Scott Lehigh, "Childless Give Birth to Revolt for Equality," *Denver Rocky Mountain News* (May 23, 2000) (and reprinted from the *Boston Globe*); Lisa Belkin, "The Backlash Against Children," *New York Times (Magazine)*, July 23, 2000; Bill Briggs, "Pampered Parents? Childless Employees Beginning to Grumble About Inequalities," *Denver Post* (July 9, 2000); Elinor Burkett, *The Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless* (Free Press, 2000); Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (Basic Books, 1992); Jerome Segal, *Graceful Simplicity: Toward a Philosophy and Politics of Simple Living* (Henry Holt, 1999); Theda Skocpol is quoted from the *Communitarian Network*, "Feedback from Communitarian Update # 27" (May 16, 2000); Alvin A. Rosenfeld, Nicole Wise, and Robert Coles, *Hyper-Parenting: Are You Hurting Your Child by Trying Too Hard?* (St. Martin's Press, 2000).