

A CENTURY FOUNDATION BOOK

# Time to Care

## Redesigning Child Care

*to Promote Education,  
Support Families, and  
Build Communities*

JOAN LOMBARDI



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## Foreword

In the years immediately after World War II, just 12 percent of American women with children under six years of age were in the labor force. Over the next half-century, that share multiplied more than fivefold. At the same time, the labor-force participation of women with school-age children also soared, from just over one-quarter to slightly more than three-quarters.

The lion's share of those increases occurred during the past generation, but the trends have been evident for long enough that one might reasonably have expected the nation to have responded in significant ways to such a fundamental social transformation. As most other developed nations experienced comparable increases in the number of working mothers, they adopted a variety of public policies that enabled families to gain access to reliable child care. In the United States, however, the role of government at all levels with respect to child care has remained limited, fragmented, and underfunded for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most significant has been the long-standing and still politically potent ambivalence toward mothers in the workforce who have young children.

As a result of this passivity on the part of government, the market for child-care services in the United States leaves much to be desired, and the situation is much more difficult for low-income parents. Although child-care workers receive notoriously poor wages, the cost of care to very low-income parents averages almost one-quarter of their earnings. At a

time when “market-based solutions” have gained political currency in addressing problems confronting the nation’s health-care system, public education, and Social Security, its child-care system provides a sobering example of the consequences of minimal government involvement in the provision of a public good—something that benefits society at large as well as individuals.

Joan Lombardi presents an alternative vision for ensuring American families that their children will have access to high-quality, affordable child care. Formerly the director of the federal Child Care Bureau and deputy assistant secretary for policy and external affairs in the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services during the Clinton administration, Lombardi examines effective local and state initiatives as well as the military child-care system. These models help to define policies that she believes would strengthen child care in the United States. In addition to describing new policies and programs, she pays close attention to formulating a political strategy for transforming the way we talk about child care in order to broaden support for a stronger public role.

Lombardi believes that one of the challenges facing those trying to elevate the importance of child care on the national agenda is to shift the perception of the issue as primarily one of parental responsibility to one of common concern as an educational priority. From World War II through the 1996 welfare reform act, child-care policy in the United States has been guided by the needs of adult workers. Child care first became part of the public agenda when the country needed women in the workforce to support domestic production after Pearl Harbor. The war’s conclusion, and the return of men to the workforce and their wives to their homes, caused child-care funding to disappear almost immediately. Significant new federal assistance did not become available again until the passage of the Family Support Act in the late 1980s. Then, once more, the primary concern was to assist adults—this time to encourage them to work rather than remain on welfare. The welfare reform act also provided funding for child-care services to enable welfare recipients and low-income families to work but did not include adequate provisions related to the quality of the child care.

The obvious relationship between child care and the education of preschoolers has been neglected in part because of institutional disconnections, along with political and ideological predilections. While child care is primarily administered by human-service agencies, paid

for primarily by parents, and provided by a range of institutions—including community-based organizations, churches, schools, and small, family-run programs—public schools are supervised by local boards under state oversight and financed mainly through local property taxes.

Lombardi argues that one catalyst for transforming child care into an educational issue may be recent neurobiological research that demonstrated the rapid pace of brain development in a child's early years. Because two out of three children under the age of six now spend at least part of their day in child care, the importance of making sure child-care providers are offering safe, clean, fully staffed services seems evident. Lombardi suggests that if child care came to be perceived as an educational priority and a family support, the public might not be as willing to accept the current market-based system. And while it is difficult to imagine the public school system rapidly subsuming child-care responsibilities, especially for children under four years of age, Lombardi believes that some features of the nation's public support for higher education may be adaptable to child care.

Over the years, as The Century Foundation supported work on inequality, poverty, and welfare, it became clear that the availability of adequate and affordable child care plays a critical role in finding solutions to these problems. The importance of child care to these issues was evident in such works as Blanche Bernstein's *Saving a Generation*, Robert Haveman's *Starting Even*, Richard Nathan's *Turning Promises into Performance*, and *Breaking Away: The Future of Cities*, a collection of essays edited by Julia Vitullo-Martin. Now the increasing information about the importance of early influences on children, particularly in terms of educational achievement, has created a strong interest in further exploration of this subject.

Many of our leaders have struggled for years to find ways of addressing the child-care difficulties that large numbers of their constituents confront. In this book, Joan Lombardi provides them with a road map for beginning the long-overdue process of reversing a history of neglectfulness.

Richard C. Leone, *President*  
The Century Foundation

## Preface

**M**ore than thirty years ago I stepped inside my first classroom and was greeted by a small group of wiggling three-year-olds. I knew right away, when I looked into their very young faces, that the time we spent together was important to their development. Those early experiences caring for young children grounded my conviction that child care is an educational opportunity. Yet it was not until I became a parent myself that I understood the emotions of the child-care issue. I remember how our young daughter would run to greet her father when he picked her up from child care. I remember beginning the search for part-time care for our eleven-month-old baby boy. Just thinking back to those days, recalling my worries and my joys, knowing that I was so much luckier than most, strengthened my resolve to help make child care a better place for all children and families.

It was from those two perspectives, as a provider and as a parent, that I moved on to the world of policy shaping and policy making. Along with many others, I spent hours and days, months and years writing reports, gathering statistics, listening to stories, rallying with fellow advocates, pursuing a common goal—real choices for parents in the care of their children. Along the way we increased resources and took some important policy steps forward. Unfortunately, the gaps are still very wide: between what we know and what we are able to do, between parents with resources and those on limited budgets, between rhetoric and real action.

By the mid-1990s, child care reached the national agenda, and I had the good fortune to represent the issue at the federal level. From that position I gained a deeper understanding of both the policy potential and the challenges. By the time my tenure in government came to a close, more and more people had come to see child care as an important work support. Yet many of us knew that child care as a work support was only half the picture: The real potential for child care is the enormous opportunity it provides to promote education and support families. Yet the United States still remains far behind other nations in recognizing the realities of the child-care issue.

This book has a straightforward message. In the twenty-first century we can no longer afford to ignore child care. Most children in the United States will spend time in non-parental care for part of the day on a regular basis during their childhood. Child care is a third setting—outside the time children spend with parents at home or with teachers at school—yet necessarily connected to both. It includes a continuum of care by family, friends, and neighbors; family child-care providers; and child-care centers. We need to redesign child care in the United States, taking advantage of the “opportunity time” children are in care to promote child and youth development, to reach out and support family life, and to help build the spirit of community. This calls for significant increases in public, private, and civic investment. To do less means abandoning the core values of equal opportunity and the importance of the family.

I started writing this book in 1999, a time when welfare-reform implementation was in full swing, the economy was booming, education reform was in the air, and an election was on the horizon. I worked on it when the election of the president remained undecided, when education moved to the top of the domestic agenda, when our world shook in terror and sadness on September 11, 2001, and when the debate over the reauthorization of child care and welfare began and a new interest in early education emerged. I completed my work before the final chapter was written in this Congress. Yet I remain sure that even if new resources are secured in this round, we still will have a very long road ahead. I have tried to look across the country and read the emerging signs that can provide a map for the journey we face.

Many people have contributed to this effort along the way. I am grateful to the parents and providers who have shared their stories with me and with others, helping to bring life to flat words and dry statis-



tics. Early in the process, the editorial assistance of Laura Colker and Amy Dombro and the research assistance of Mary Bogle and Amy Cubbage helped me get started and keep going. Debra Al-Salam provided excellent research support, helping to track down and recheck the hundreds of references used in this book, and Nancy Davidson provided critical editorial support to complete this book. I extend my sincere appreciation to those who provided input and advice, including Mark Greenberg, Dick Clifford, Anne Mitchell, Helen Blank, Yasmina Vinci, Linda Smith, the anonymous reviewer, and the many, many colleagues who commented on specific chapters or sections. I would like to thank Nancy Steele, who polished the finished manuscript, and Janet Greenwood for her support during the publication process. I am grateful to The Century Foundation for its resources and technical support throughout the project, and especially to Greg Anrig, Beverly Goldberg, and Eric Rhodes. I am particularly grateful to Peter Wissoker and the staff of Temple University Press for giving me the opportunity to make this book a reality. And finally, I thank my husband, Neville, and my children, Nisha and Michael, for believing in my work and supporting me every step of the way.

## Contents

Foreword	ix
Preface	xiii
1 Reframing Child Care	1
2 Looking Back: Child Care in the United States in the Twentieth Century	29
3 A Good Beginning: Redesigning Child Care as Early Education and Family Support	54
4 The New Neighborhood: Redefining Education After School	94
5 The Caring Community: Rekindling a Commitment to Our Children	128
6 Toward Redesigned Child Care: A Call for Investment and Reform	166
Notes	193
Index	219

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## Reframing Child Care

Whether I was on a plane, attending an event in Washington, D.C., or visiting a welfare office, the stories were always the same, but always deeply personal. They came from fathers as well as mothers. They came from people who made minimum wage and people who worked at the highest rung on the corporate ladder. The words varied, but the message was usually the same: Can I talk to you about my child-care situation? Can you help me?

During the two years I served as the first director of the federal Child Care Bureau, I heard a range of questions and emotions about the care of children while their parents work. A father who called early one Monday morning could barely get the words out: “We just left the baby at the child-care center. How will I know she’s really safe?” When we held a national child-care conference in a downtown hotel, we set up a resource room for experts who were attending from across the country. Throughout the meeting hotel employees kept stopping by, saying, “What is this about? Can I get some information, too? Can I tell you what happened the other day? Last year? With my toddler? With my teen?”

While I was having breakfast before an out-of-town meeting, I spoke with a waitress, a single mom who told me that she just could not get by. Her mother used to “watch the kids” until “they got to be too much for her.” Then her sister took over, but now her sister wants to go back to work, too. Without a family member to help care for her children,

and unable to pay for child care, she said that she may have to go back on welfare.

The questions kept coming. A woman called from the Midwest: "Just how old does a child have to be before you can leave her home alone?" A father from New York talked to me on the train. He had read all the studies and wanted to know about accreditation of child-care centers: What did I think? Was that the answer? A grandmother from California wrote to ask where she could get financial support because she was spending about a third of her wages on child care for her two grandchildren. A friend of mine who had been home with her young daughter for thirteen months told me, "I've started to feel as if my brain is melting." The tension was affecting her marriage. She decided to go back to work part time, but she could not find good child care. She was angry.

By the time my own son turned twelve, he no longer wanted to go to his after-school program because there was not enough going on there to occupy him once he finished his homework. I kept thinking about what an opportunity all that valuable time provided, and I started to look at other programs. There were few choices for this age group; there were transportation issues, and then there would be the summer months. My husband and I were lucky that we had options. But it brought home to me once again, in a very personal way, how hard it is for working parents. Faced with these decisions, they feel very alone. Nothing seems to fit their reality. I wondered how long it would take to address this child-care crisis.

## **Acknowledging the Need**

The influx of women into the workforce was one of the most significant social changes of the twentieth century. The number of women in the workforce who have preschool children has increased by more than five times, from 12 percent just after World War II to 64 percent in 1999; at the same time, labor-force participation of women with school-age children increased from 27 percent to 78 percent (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Over the past twenty-five years, women with children of all ages have been returning to work, with significant increases in the number of working mothers who have very young children.<sup>2</sup>

Tragically, this social movement in the United States, in contrast to that in most other developed countries, took place without a corresponding effort to revolutionize the child-care system. A deep ambiva-

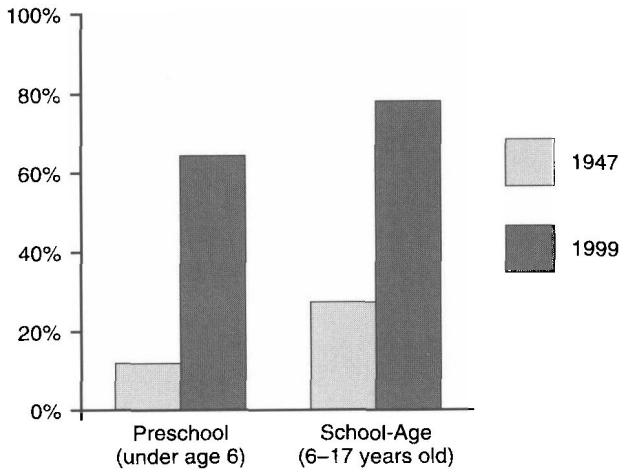


FIGURE 1. *Percentage of women in the labor force, by presence and age of youngest child: A comparison of the years 1947 and 1999.*

Included are women ages sixteen or older who work any number of hours for pay or profit, and those who work at least fifteen hours per week without pay for family enterprises.

Data for 1994 and later years are not directly comparable with data for 1993 and earlier years because of introduction of a major redesign in the Current Population Survey (household survey) questionnaire and collection methodology, and the introduction of 1990 census-based population controls, adjusted for estimated undercounts (Anne E. Polivka and Jennifer M. Rothgeb, *Monthly Labor Review*, September 1993, Vol. 116 [9], pp. 10-28).

Source: U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, "Background Material and Data on Programs within the Jurisdiction of the Committee on Ways and Means," 2000 *Green Book*, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., WMCP: 106-14 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2000), Section 9, Table 9.1, pp. 571-73. Figure by Debra Al-Salam.

lence characterized the entrance of women into the labor force, causing the country to close its eyes to the fact that more children, at increasingly younger ages, were spending many hours in settings outside their homes. Despite widespread concern that poor child care might harm children, the public seemed uninterested in doing anything about it. It was as if recognizing the problem and supporting working parents would create a giant magnet, drawing women into the workforce, disarming their maternal instincts, and leaving their children neglected. Rather than responding by helping families and by providing a healthy environment for children to develop, for most of the century the United States tried to avoid the issue, as if hoping the need for child care would go away. But it did not.

Over the years, public policy toward child care has reflected deep feelings about the role of mothers and work. In the early 1900s, the country responded to the needs of poor widows by establishing pensions to support mothers while they remained home with their children. This was the forerunner to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and later Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), commonly known as welfare. Throughout most of the century, child-care support was provided only when it was needed on a temporary basis, such as when women were called to work as part of a national emergency. However, the expectations were always the same: that women would return home and that the need for child care would disappear.

Yet by the late 1960s, more and more women were steadily moving into the workforce. The United States was finally poised to make a serious investment in child care, as other industrialized countries had done. Once again, however, cultural ambivalence about working mothers created an obstacle. In 1971, after years of public debate, President Richard M. Nixon vetoed the Comprehensive Child Development Act, warning that child care would lead to communal child-rearing. This single action set the child-care agenda back for decades: While other countries moved ahead, the United States stood still.

In the meantime, the number of women moving into the workforce continued to grow. Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich notes, “Starting in the 1970s, the loss of manufacturing jobs required many women to work in order to maintain family incomes that previously had been sustained by one male worker.”<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the lack of adequate child care and other factors contributed to an increase in the number of women on welfare. As working mothers with very young children became more commonplace, the expectation that the country would support poor women to stay home began to change. By the mid-1990s, a demand to “end welfare as we know it” led to the passage of the 1996 welfare-reform bill. Columnist Ellen Goodman called it “the end of a long cultural debate about motherhood as we knew it,”<sup>4</sup> since for the first time in modern history, the public expected mothers—at least very poor mothers—to work rather than to receive support to stay home. On the other hand, child care was finally beginning to be seen by some as an asset, an important work support for low-income families.

Outside the welfare context, however, poll after poll indicates that public ambivalence toward working mothers with young children continues.<sup>5</sup> Too often the child-care debate is reduced to the question:

Should mothers work or stay home? We have been forced to talk about work and family in black-and-white terms even though we know the situation is gray. Many women go in and out of the workforce. Sometimes they are home and other times they are working, depending on a number of life situations, including where they live, the ages of their children, the availability of care, and their family goals and needs at the time.

A second and related “either-or” question usually follows: Which has more impact on children, child care or family? As in the “stay at home or work” debate, many people are looking for black or white answers and find in the research whatever they want to see. Common sense tells us that in reality, both influences are important. Just as the quality of family life affects children, so does the place where they may spend twenty to thirty hours or more each week outside the home, especially when they are very young. In a study that asked children what they really think about working parents, Ellen Galinsky argues that it is time to move beyond the either-or debate.<sup>6</sup> The impact of work on children depends on how their parents feel about their work, whether it spills over into family life, what support is available along the way, and what happens at home when the parents are not working. Furthermore, much depends on the age of the child; yet the debate goes on as if children who are three months old will feel the same effects as children who are thirteen.

More recently, some have assumed that the answer to the child-care dilemma is for mothers to work from home. However, this is only a partial answer (and one often used to deny the realities of child care). As anyone with young children knows, there is only so much work one can sneak in during nap time. Beyond those hours, children need adult supervision and attention. And for many parents—especially for low-income parents—working at home is not an option.

Continuing the either-or debate sidesteps the realities facing most families and contributes to a sense of collective denial regarding the need for child care. A parent’s decision to work is not static, and it does not result in hard-and-fast, wrong or right answers. Indeed, child care cannot be reduced to either-or questions. In the twenty-first century, most children in the United States will be in child care at some time in their lives, probably starting at a young age. Many mothers will work full time, for economic and personal reasons. Their children will need child care. Other mothers and fathers will be able to work part time and

remain home for longer periods of time, depending on family needs and the flexibility of their employers. Yet they too will need child care, even if it is for fewer hours.

Finally, child care is not just an issue for working families. In 1999, about one-third of nonworking American mothers with children under age five used some type of non-parental care, on at least a part-time basis.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, while children may be in care for less time when they are young, this situation often changes; as they grow older and their mothers return to work, there is an increasing likelihood that children will need care in the afternoons and usually over the summer months.

Child care is here to stay. Some families may need less of it than others, but it is a service that will be used by most children in America. In a landmark study of the science of early childhood released in 2000, the National Research Council noted that it is in child care that “most children first learn to interact with other children on a regular basis, establish bonds with adults other than their parents, receive or fail to receive important inputs for early learning and language development, and experience their initial encounter with a school-like environment.”<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging the need for child care is a first step toward making change. The next step is to understand how and why the current system is failing.

## **Recognizing that Market Forces Alone Will Not Work**

While much of child care used to be provided free by family members, over the years it has increasingly become a paid service. According to The Urban Institute’s 1997 data from the National Survey of American Families, 48 percent of working families with children under age thirteen had child-care expenses. Working families with younger children used paid care more often, with 60 percent paying for care.<sup>9</sup> Even when families rely upon relatives, friends, and neighbors, these providers often are paid. Historically, paying for child care has been seen as a private burden, not a public responsibility. It was assumed that market forces would produce what consumers need at a price they could pay if they had the right information to make informed choices. However, the reliance on market forces alone has failed children, families, and the providers who serve them.



A review of child care, conducted by Deborah Vandell and Barbara Wolfe and published in 2000 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, describes market failure as “a situation in which a market left on its own fails to allocate resources efficiently.” The report notes two causes of market failure in child care: parents’ lack of information, and what economists call “externalities,” which means that the benefits of quality care accrue not just to the parents and the child, but to society in general. If the benefits of a service are less apparent to the immediate consumer, there may be less demand for it.<sup>10</sup>

Even when families realize the benefits of good care, they often are not able to afford it. Vandell and Wolfe refer to child care as an “imperfect capital market” since “the parents of young children tend to have low incomes relative to their permanent incomes, and they may face borrowing constraints that reduce their ability to pay for high-quality care.” The market failure perpetuates itself because the demand for high-quality care is too low; therefore compensation remains low, and the more qualified staff seek other jobs. This results in declining quality “unless intervention occurs.” From this economic perspective, the clear evidence of market failure in quality child care indicates a need for public-sector intervention. Since the quality of child care affects school readiness and later school achievement, such intervention is justified as a means to ensure equal opportunity, particularly for low-income families.<sup>11</sup>

These economic forces in child care have been compared with a three-legged stool. The three legs—availability, affordability, and quality—are interrelated parts of the same system. Whether care is available depends on the supply of providers in a community, access to the care, and whether it is affordable. At the same time, whether families can afford child care depends on the cost of that care and the resources available to help families pay for it. In turn, the quality of care is highly dependent on the cost of providing the service and on what families are willing and able to pay.

### The Supply of Child Care Is Not Adequate

Children are cared for in different ways when parents work. Some families manage to care for their children themselves, either by working split shifts or by bringing children to work with them. Yet most families make some non-parental arrangements for their children while they work. Some children are cared for by relatives, others by non-relatives.