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Dear Colleague:

I am pleased to send you a copy of Public Agenda's recent report on the perspectives of parents, employers, and children's advocates about the daily care of young children. This research was funded by Danforth, Ford, David and Lucille Packard, and Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundations.

Necessary Compromises: How Parents, Employers and Children's Advocates View Child Care Today captures the essence of what most parents want for their children and reveals significant concerns about child care that warrant respectful attention. A majority of parents strongly believe that care at home by a parent is far and away the best option for the development of young children, a view shared by employers and advocates alike.

Almost half of the sample in this study say they use no child care at all and are foregoing bigger homes and better careers in order to have one parent stay at home to pass on to their children the love, attention, and values they believe are best.

Bill Raspberry, of the *Washington Post*, captured the essence of this study perfectly in a piece he wrote just a few days after the report's release. I enclose it here along with our study.

Sincerely,

Deborah Wadsworth
President

Enclosures

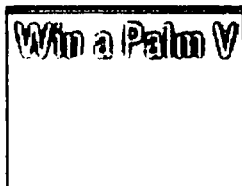


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William Raspberry

Opinion Columnist



Day-Care Daze

By William Raspberry

Friday, August 25, 2000; Page A31

E-Mail This Article

Printer-Friendly Version

Mothers of young children may be working more--and catching up to men in terms of income--but they are enjoying it less. They hate the compromises they have to make, hate needing the money their jobs afford and hate above all the thought of strangers raising their children.

They are not (as many politicians and policy-makers seem to assume) clamoring for big-government child-care programs, though they would like some arrangement--special tax relief, for instance--that might make it easier for them to stay at home during their children's early years.

These findings from a new report by the Manhattan-based nonprofit research group Public Agenda are surprising only if you've been seduced into seeing American parents as divided into two warring factions: liberals, who want the government to take over the child-rearing function so mothers can pursue their careers without sex-based disadvantage, and conservatives, who are sure the road to social disintegration was paved when women began swapping motherhood for a paycheck.

The report, "Necessary Compromises," is an apt description of how actual parents confront the child care issue. While Labor Department statistics show that two-thirds of mothers of preschool children are working outside the home, Public Agenda found that 70 percent of parents of children age 5 or younger believe it best for one parent to be at home with them. Sixty percent doubt that even a top-notch day-care center is a close equivalent of a stay-at-home parent, 63 percent worry about physical or sexual abuse in day-care centers, and 78 percent say the best alternative to parent care is to rely on grandparents or other close relatives.

True, some of the 800 parents interviewed for the report had high praise for their particular day-care centers, but most saw even the best outside arrangements as a compromise.



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- Marjorie
Williams

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"It seems that many parents who rely on child care for their young children tend to follow a similar process when deciding on a child-care arrangement," the report said. "First, they struggle through the decision to go back to work and whether to rely on child care, and then they struggle to find a trustworthy provider. But once all the soul-searching and legwork is behind them, it seems, most parents tend to be comfortable and content with their choices."

Still the struggle is one many parents would rather not have to undertake. Fifty-three percent of those interviewed said they thought the government should give bigger tax breaks to families in which one parent stays home. Asked what should be the main focus of public policy on families and work, 30 percent called for improvements in the cost and quality of child care while more than twice as many--62 percent--favored making it easier and more affordable for one parent to stay home.

But sometimes outside child care is the only realistic option, and the parents in the Public Agenda study were strikingly nonjudgmental about parents who can't stay home with their children. Two-thirds agreed that having one parent remain at home is "an unrealistic option for most families these days," and 87 percent agreed that mothers who work outside the home are "just as loving and committed to their children" as those who don't. Even the majority who would rather stay home want high-quality day care available, particularly for the nation's poorest families and for single parents.

Deborah Wadsworth, Public Agenda's president, sees these competing emphases revealed in the survey not as the opposed opinions of warring partisans but as the mixed feelings of internally conflicted individuals. She hopes the political debates of this election season will take those conflicts into account.

"Even as parents debate within the family on the best course of action, even as they make sacrifices to act on their decisions, even as they become more comfortable and committed to their arrangements as they experience them, they rarely blame or judge or ridicule or demonize those in different circumstances who come to different conclusions.

"Such open-mindedness and graciousness might make a nice change of pace for a policy discussion."

Indeed it might.

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NECESSARY COMPROMISES

How Parents,
Employers
and Children's
Advocates
View Child
Care Today

