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Overlooked Too Long: Focusing on the Potential of Infant-Toddler Child Care

Joan Lombardi

Child care appears to be emerging as a national issue. After decades of being relegated to the minor leagues of American policy, child care for working families has become front-page news. It has been almost 50 years since the passage of comprehensive child care reform. The Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971 would have provided for a network of child care programs, ensured federal standards, and provided funds to train caregivers, among other provisions. Unfortunately it was vetoed, setting back child care for decades.

It has been more than 15 years since I wrote *Time to Care*, a book calling for the country to redesign the child care system to promote education, support families, and build communities (Lombardi, 2003). Since then, my own children have grown up, yet the next generation faces the same issues. Parents continue to pay a substantial portion of their income for child care and the child care workforce remains grossly underpaid, affecting every aspect of quality care. In far too many American communities, the supply of care is limited, with child care deserts becoming part of the new lexicon.

For families with infants and toddlers, the challenges of finding affordable quality care can be overwhelming. About 61 percent of American families with children under three are working. The realities these families face every day have been overlooked too long. While we are taking some very important steps to address the needs of families with very young children, we still have a long way to go to put the child care issue front and center.

Bright spots; but much more attention needed

Driven by the science, and coupled with new public and philanthropic initiatives, there seems to be new energy and interest in focusing on the 12 million children under age three across the country, particularly those facing adversity. For example:

- Over the past decade, the launching of the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program has focused new resources and strategies on supporting families with very young children.
- Early Head Start, which was launched 25 years ago, has set the standard for how to deliver high-quality comprehensive services to the most vulnerable.

Yet it is estimated that both of these important services together still serve less than 10 percent of the eligible population.

At the same time, paid family leave has only inched forward. Decades after the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act, which provides for 12 weeks of unpaid leave, a substantial portion of families are still not eligible. While paid leave has also emerged on the national stage, it has been more rhetoric

than reality. Some progress has been made in states such as California and New Jersey.

Child care as an opportunity

There is a clear need to significantly increase resources and innovation in infant-toddler child care. While some important new resources targeted at this age group have been set aside through the Child Care and Development Block Grant, we still meet only a fraction of the demand for quality services.

Given the sensitivity of the first few years of life, and the importance of the family, there has been a long-held ambivalence about child care for very young children. However, the realities of life today demand that we move this issue to the top of the child care agenda. Very young children may be spending more than a thousand hours each year in alternative care, including with family, friends, and neighbors, family child care providers, and in centers. If children are in full time care, they may be spending many more hours. These hours and days provide a critical opportunity to support families, reducing their stress and promoting health and early education for their children. For this to happen, we need new resources, new strategies and a new orientation that moves from child care as a deficit to child care as an opportunity.

We need to *re-vision* infant-toddler child care as multi-generation support—a core support for both children and families. In 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) and partners launched the nurturing care framework, which called for good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving, and early learning experiences (WHO, 2018). This integrated vision should be part of the future of child care, much like comprehensive services are in Early Head Start, which address all developmental needs of children, including health and education, and assures strong family engagement.

The fact that parents interact with their child care provider every workday provides an opportunity to reach and support them in new ways—from providing parent information and networks to referrals to a host of other supports such as housing, job training, financial management, mental health, and other services that enable positive parenting. Finally, part of the vision for the future of infant-toddler care has to include grandparents, who often play a significant role in the lives of their grandchildren. This means more direct support for caregiving and new ways of co-locating elder care and child care.

What needs to happen?

A new vision is not enough; it must be followed by increased resources and new ways of organizing services. Child care for infants and toddlers is one of the most under-resourced human services. It is time to make financing a priority, with a substantial proportion of any new funding at the federal, state, or local level targeted to the youngest and most vulnerable children. At the same time, we have to rethink how we develop a diverse delivery system that can provide quality and support parental choice. Our current voucher system alone cannot assure quality, supply, or affordability while it is plagued by low reimbursement rates and/or high co-payments. A combination of increased resources, new revenue streams, and new financing mechanisms are needed. At a minimum we need the following four action steps:

Increase the supply of quality comprehensive programs. Efforts should be launched at the federal and state levels to drive more resources directly into creating a better supply of infant-toddler programs. Like higher education institutions, programs serving infants, toddlers, and their families need new facilities and ongoing support to create high-quality programming. They cannot just rely on portable assistance like vouchers to finance their startup or ongoing operations.

Develop an infant-toddler scholarship system. The voucher system itself needs an overhaul. Rather than calling them *vouchers* we should call them *scholarships* to reflect more clearly that this is an education support. Moreover, reimbursement rates for infant-toddler care must reflect the true cost of providing quality care, rather than just what the market will bear.

Connect child care providers to quality support in communities. Child care providers too often have been isolated and without adequate supports. Every community should establish a network of support for providers from centers to family child care to family, friends, and neighbors. Such a quality hub could grow out of an Early Head Start program, a child care resource and referral, a school, or other community agency. In addition, family, friend and neighbor care could be supported through a system of home visiting.

Recognize and support infant-toddler child care providers with adequate compensation. There are few jobs as important in the 21st century as “caring jobs” from infant care to elder care. Caring jobs are as much a part of the future of the country as tech jobs or green jobs. We need to build higher education capacity, new career pathways, and ongoing financial incentives for people to enter and remain in the infant care field.

Signs of hope

In the past few years, the issues of child care, equity, and the importance of the first thousand days of life have all seen a resurgence of interest. At the same time, the federal government has focused some attention on the continuum of services and more and more states are planning for children under three. These and other actions are hopeful signs. Yet we still have a very long way to go to create the kind of child care supports that both children and families need. There is still *time to care*; the question is, will we take the opportunity or overlook it once again?

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About the Author



Over the past 45 years, **Joan Lombardi** has made significant contributions in the areas of child and family policy as an innovative leader and policy advisor to national and international organizations and foundations and as a public servant. She currently directs *Early Opportunities LLC*, a strategic advisement service focused on the development of young children, families, and the communities that support them.

She served in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as the first Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development (2009-2011), as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and External Affairs in Administration for Children and Families, and as the first Commissioner of the Child Care Bureau, among other positions (1993-1998).