



Putting Families in the Driver's Seat

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INTRODUCTION

Every parent wants their child to be safe, well cared for, and given the best possible start in life. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to raising children. Parents know their children's unique personalities, developmental needs, and the values they hope to instill better than anyone else on the planet. Public policy should trust them to choose the care arrangement that best reflects their family's needs.

Too often, however, childcare policy assumes that expanding center-based day care is the primary goal. But in reality, day care is only one option among many, and it is certainly not the option many parents would choose if they had complete flexibility.

Rather than subsidizing one model of care over the others, policymakers should remove unnecessary barriers, expand access to a wide range of high-quality options, and empower families to choose the arrangements that best support their children. When families have meaningful choices, children thrive, parents are better able to balance work and caregiving responsibilities, and communities are strengthened.

BACKGROUND: *How We Got Here*

While center-based day care is often presented as the gold standard—both in popular culture and in public policy—that simply isn't what many families

say they want. Research shows that many parents prefer care provided by a parent, grandparent, relative, or trusted home-based provider, particularly when children are very young.¹

Nor does the evidence support treating day care as the preferred outcome for every child. Federal evaluations of Head Start found no lasting academic benefits,² and long-term negative effects on children's achievement and behavior have been identified in at least one state-run pre-K.³

Meanwhile, unnecessary regulations have increased costs and reduced childcare options, particularly for home-based, faith-based, and other community providers that many families prefer.

SOLUTIONS: *Paths Forward*

Families don't need government to raise their children. They need public policy that makes it easier to care for them in the ways they believe are best. A flourishing childcare system expands opportunities, respects parents' decisions, and remains neutral among safe, high-quality care options.

- 1. Trust Parents:** Parents—not politicians or bureaucrats—are best equipped to determine the care arrangement that best meets their children's needs.
- 2. Expand Choices:** Public policy should support a diverse childcare ecosystem—including parents, relatives, home-based providers, faith-based organizations, nannies, and childcare centers—rather than favoring one model over another.
- 3. Remove Barriers:** Policymakers should reduce unnecessary regulations, encourage innovative caregiving models, strengthen the caregiving workforce, and support flexible work so families have the freedom to choose the arrangements that work best for them.

LIST OF SPECIFIC BILLS

- * American Caregivers Act (Federal Model Legislation):** Creates a new pathway for families to access affordable, non-medical in-home child care through trained caregivers placed by qualified sponsoring organizations.⁴ This would expand family choice, create flexible caregiving opportunities, and increase access to trusted home-based care without creating a new taxpayer-funded entitlement.

- * **American Caregivers Act (State Model Legislation):** Authorizes states to establish a flexible framework that expands access to affordable, non-medical in-home child care through trained caregivers and sponsoring organizations, giving families more home-based caregiving options while strengthening the local caregiving workforce.⁵
- * **Respect Parents' Childcare Choices Act:** Promotes greater neutrality across childcare arrangements so families are not disadvantaged based on the type of care they choose.⁶
- * **Working Families Childcare Access Act:** Modernizes tax policy to give families greater flexibility in how they save and pay for childcare expenses, recognizing that parents use a variety of caregiving arrangements.⁷
- * **State Childcare Regulatory Reform:** States should regularly review childcare regulations to ensure they protect children's health and safety while eliminating unnecessary barriers that reduce provider availability and limit parents' choices.

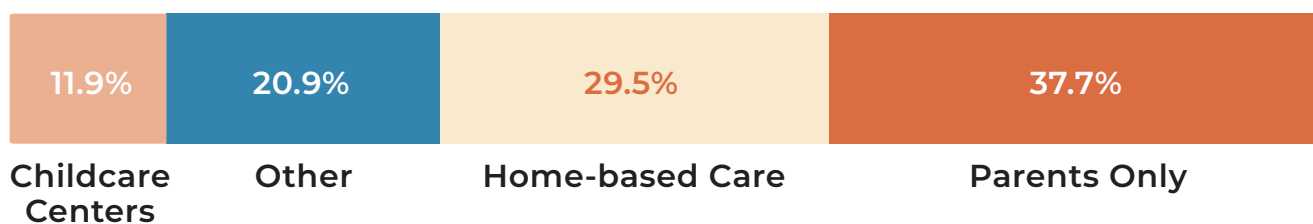
Parents Want Choices, Not One-Size-Fits-All Child Care



Nearly 6 IN 10 PARENTS would choose informal care over a childcare center even if formal care were free and conveniently located

Sources: "Survey Results: What Keeps Employed Parents out of the Child Care System?" *Bipartisan Policy Center*, Aug. 8, 2022. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/article/survey-results-what-keeps-employed-parents-out-the-child-care-system/>.

How American Children Are Cared For



Source: Chris Kolmar. "US Child Care Availability Statistics." *Zippia*, Jun. 20, 2023. <https://www.zippia.com/advice/us-child-care-availability-statistics/>.

STATE SPOTLIGHT: TENNESSEE

Tennessee recently modernized its childcare framework by eliminating unnecessary barriers while maintaining strong health and safety protections.⁸ The reforms demonstrate that states can reduce costs, expand provider choice, and preserve quality at the same time.

MISPERCEPTIONS VS. FACTS

MISPERCEPTION: Families overwhelmingly prefer center-based care over other options.

FACT: Many families prefer other arrangements. Nearly six in ten parents say they would choose informal care over a childcare center—even if formal care were free and conveniently located.⁹ Other polling found that just 6% of parents believe a daycare center is the ideal arrangement for young children.¹⁰

MISPERCEPTION: Families who care for children themselves don't need public policy support.

FACT: Many families make significant financial sacrifices so a parent, grandparent, or other relative can care for young children. While 66% of families earning more than \$75,000 use daycare or preschool,¹¹ 57% of families earning less than \$30,000 rely on family care.¹² Public policy should support families, not just one type of childcare arrangement.

MISPERCEPTION: Childcare subsidies will reduce costs.

FACT: When the government gets involved, prices go up. To lower costs, policies should focus on expanding the supply and diversity of providers. A Mercatus Center study found that modest changes to child-staff ratios could reduce annual childcare costs by between \$850 and \$1,890 per child, without reducing quality.¹³ There are also ludicrous examples of regulations dictating the minutiae of daycare facilities, such as very specific art supplies and the number and size of balls and other toys, which drive up costs without improving quality.¹⁴

BOTTOM LINE

Families flourish when public policy supports a broad range of caregiving options rather than privileging a single model. The strongest childcare system is not the one that offers every family the same solution, but one that gives every family the freedom to find the solution that works best for them.

ENDNOTES

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- 10 Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson. “The State of the American Family.” *Public Agenda (via ERIC)*, 2000. <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED445786>.
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- 14 Carrie Lukas and Charlotte Whelan. “America Needs Better Daycare Options.” *The Heritage Foundation*, September 10, 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/BG3526.pdf>.