



The Public and Private Logics of Child Care in Germany and the United States

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For most new parents, the decision to return to work depends on finding child care. This is especially true for mothers, who remain primarily responsible for childrearing in all industrialized nations, despite many changes over the past century.

The difficulty of securing daycare varies drastically from country to country. In 2013, for example, Germany declared that every child over the age of one has the legal right to a space in a public day care facility. In the fall of 2016, Germany's highest court took this mandate one step further, when it ruled that parents may sue for lost wages if they cannot find a place for their child in a public day care center. This decision came in response to a suit filed by three mothers who claimed that authorities neglected to create the necessary day care slots required by the 2013 ruling. Because the mothers could not find a child care center with any openings in their hometown of Leipzig, their lawyers argued that they were unable to return to work after giving birth, resulting in a loss of earnings. The court agreed in its October 20 decision.

Who Should Help Care for Children?

This development in German law may seem odd to Americans, but it fits Germany's long history of offering governmental support for families, and follows from that nation's more recent efforts to encourage and support paid employment by mothers. From the perspective of many countries around the world, the American system actually looks more unusual, because it considers family challenges a private matter. Among western industrialized countries, the United States has some of the most overworked parents, the lowest public commitment to caregiving, and highest rates of maternal and child poverty.

The German court's recent decision is part of a broader global conversation about who is responsible for the care of children in an era when two out of three mothers in economically developed countries work outside the home. In Germany's case, the government's decision to offer high-quality, low-cost, universal day care helps to spread the expense of childrearing across society – confirming that it is not only parents' job to raise children. The German approach is not just a matter of charity for families; it brings real economic gains. Readily available child care is known to have a positive impact on women's employment decisions.

The court decision likewise signals to German mothers that they can and should return to work after giving birth, and that the government has a duty to facilitate their reentry into the labor market. By providing universal public child care, and giving parents the legal right to sue if they can't access this service, German law sends the message that the answer to "who should care for children?" is, in part, society as a whole, acting through government services.

Child Care in the United States

The German example stands in sharp contrast to America's current approach. In many U.S. communities, securing day care for children can be very difficult or impossible. The United States has no universal child care prior to the start of elementary school, which begins around age five. Limited federal programs like Head Start are largely reserved for the poorest citizens. Without public options, the vast majority of American families have to find private solutions.

Families that must turn to the market find vast differences in the cost, quality, and availability of care. A recent New America Care Report found that full-time center-based day care in the United States runs an average of \$9,589 a year for children ages zero to four – higher than the average cost of in-state college tuition – and

costs even more in dense urban areas. Until 2013, there were no national regulations governing quality of service, staffing, or health codes for day care facilities, leaving standards to vary widely. Sociologists Julia Wrigley at the City University of New York Graduate Center and Joanna Dreby at State University of New York at Albany found that the death rate for infants was seven times higher in home-care settings than in daycare centers. The lack of federal regulations means that wealthier families are able to provide safer, higher quality environments for their children than lower-income families.

Limited access to child care hampers economic growth by inhibiting parents' ability to participate in the paid labor force. In the current period, however, the U.S. economy relies on parents to work outside the home and simultaneously raise the country's next generation. Parents are supposed to do this with no reliable child care system and few federal family benefits. A lack of public support introduces what economist Nancy Folbre and sociologist Paula England call the "free rider" problem, because childbearing creates benefits for all of society, yet mothers bear a disproportionate share of the costs. Along with sociologist Michelle Budig, England found that mothers pay, on average, a seven percent wage penalty for each child they have, with the exact size of this "motherhood penalty" varying by race, age, marital status, and number of children. And the penalty mothers pay is smaller in countries where cultural attitudes are more favorable towards maternal employment.

Public Child Care Helps Resolve the Free Rider Problem

Universal childcare helps resolve the free rider problem and reduce motherhood penalties. Countries like Germany socialize the cost of childrearing so that mothers and their immediate families alone do not have to bear the full responsibility.

Will the United States move toward a more shared approach to child care? The issue was on the agenda in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Candidate Hillary Clinton proposed to cap the cost of childcare, guarantee paid family leave, and institute universal pre-kindergarten education for four-year-olds, while candidate Donald Trump more modestly proposed a limited paid leave for mothers, but not fathers, plus a new income-tax deduction for child care expenses (a measure that would help higher-income families but not the neediest).

Whether any of these new steps are taken or not, women in the United States are a long way from having the legal right to sue for lost wages. But Americans might want to learn from various parts of German family policy. By understanding that child-raising is a socially shared responsibility from the start, the United States could both strengthen family incomes and wellbeing and jump start a more vibrant national economy.