

The Importance of Affordable High Quality Childcare

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The United States is the wealthiest nation in the world and yet its childcare services are dismal. Most industrial nations offer much better childcare services than the United States including several months of paid maternity leave and in some cases paid paternity leave as well. As a professional career-oriented mother with a son growing up in the 1980s I have spent many sleepless nights worrying about affordable quality childcare. That is why when I heard Mr. Donald Trump and his daughter Ivanka detailing their plan for affordable quality healthcare recently, it was like music to my ears. Soon after I noted that Secretary Hillary Clinton also has put forward a substantial childcare plan. I wish if only Mrs. Clinton or Mr. Trump was running for president 30 years ago, their plans would have alleviated my anxiety over childcare.

My husband and I were extremely busy in the 1980s developing our careers and raising our son in Minneapolis, MN. After a successful career in academic research my husband wanted to try industry and got a senior research scientist job at 3M. At the same time I got a visiting faculty position at the University of Minnesota in the Fall of 1981. We had both been at Socorro New Mexico for a year and my husband was with the Petroleum Research Center and I was a visiting faculty in Computer Science and because the town was really small my husband took care of our son during the time when I taught classes. But we could not do this in Mpls which was a very large city. My husband's job was very demanding and so childcare was mainly my responsibility. I was fortunate to have had my mother living with my sister nearby. However, my mother wanted to be independent and so had a near-full time job as a seamstress. Still I had lot of help from my mother to take care of my son and between my mother and myself we tried to do our best raising my son. But we still needed outside help and so my son attended Learning Tree, a daycare center a few mornings a week. It was heart wrenching for me to drop him off when he was just two years old and go to work. I remember one morning he was sick and I had classes later in the morning. My mother had gone to work and it was not one of his Learning Tree days.. So I had to stop him off at a babysitter in the apartment block where we lived. He cried a lot when I dropped him and so as soon as I finished my teaching I rushed home without even staying for my office hours to pick him up. It is not easy to develop a career when you have childcare worries, but because I was in academia and my hours were flexible except for teaching times and so I was able to cope

Soon after in Fall 1982 we bought a condo and thankfully I made friends with a neighbor Martha who loved my son as if he was her own. She did not have children and so between my mother together with the Learning Tree, Martha and myself my son was well taken care of and we were happy for a short while. But in Fall 1983 I got a job at Control Data Corporation and the demands on my time were much greater. Also, soon after my mother got critically ill. The following year was a nightmare, but still Martha helped me a lot. My mother passed away when my son was just five years old in Fall 1984. The next four years were the toughest years for me. As long as Martha was there it was fine. However, Martha and her husband took long vacations to Florida during the winter months, At that time whenever my son got ill I had to take the day off.

After about five years of working in the Industry my husband wanted to get back into Academia and in 1986 he got a plum faculty position at the University of Exeter England and develop the separation process center. He took the position for a couple of yeas and so spent 8 months of the year in England and 4 months in Mpls (at University of MN). Another reason he took the position was to decide whether he wanted to live in the USA or return to England where he had lived since he was 14. This made matters worse for me with the childcare situation as well as uncertainty about my future. Fortunately one of my sisters moved in with me from England with her two children while her husband was ding his medical residency in NYC. So for a while things were OK. But then we had enormous problems between my nephew (who was 3 years older to my son) and my son. I felt .that such an arrangement simply could not work and so asked my sister to leave with her children and get an apartment which they did. There were lot of hard feelings between us sisters. My other sisters also got involved in the arguments that ensued and it created such a tense situation between all of us. Even today I am deeply hurt by this experience.

So after the unpleasant incident I got a series of nannies. We tried three of them before we got the perfect nanny who had an associate degree in child care. Between Martha, the nanny and myself we had a great arrangement with the childcare. The nanny was expensive and we could hardly afford it, but still I wanted to get the best for my son and still develop a career.

In the meantime my husband had made a big name for himself in colloids science and so got a research faculty position at MIT and I urged him to take it as I really wanted to live in the US. At that time my husband also felt that US would offer much better opportunities for all of us. So he took the position in Fall 1988 and after a few months I moved to Boston in January 1989. Because my husband's hours were flexible my childcare problems were over when my son was 9 years old. My husband would leave around 6am for work and I would drop our son at school and the go to work. My husband would return around 3pm just in time to pick my son from school and I would get back around 7 or 8pm. Even during the weekends my husband would go to work in the morning while my son and I did lot of fun things together (e.g., playing tennis, scrabble). Then I would work in the afternoons or we would go to the library as a family or some events in Boston.

So coming back to Mr. Trump's or Mrs. Clinton's childcare proposal how would that have helped me? First of all we had only one child because my husband felt that I was too career oriented and could hardly manage one child and so two children for him was out of the question. Mr. Trump says that he would provide up to 6 weeks of paid maternity leave for mothers. Mrs. Clinton would provide 12 weeks of paid maternity leave. This would have been a big help for me to have another child. However I am not sure whether I would have had another child as I felt strongly that the Mother must spend the first year full time with the child. With my son I was finishing my PhD when he was born and so spent the first year with him full time and nursed him for 11.5 months. I would take my son to the university when I had my supervision while my husband stayed with him in my office. Therefore 6 weeks or even 12 weeks full time of paid leave would likely not have been sufficient for me. I might have had to negotiate working some of the time from home which might have been difficult at that time with no Internet facilities. Still such paid maternity leave might have been helpful for me and at least given me a choice (ideally I would like 12 months of paid maternity leave).

Second, Mr. Trump's tax credit (and some benefits from Mrs. Clinton's plan) would have been so beneficial to me. I would have added another 5K in addition to the 15K I was paying for childcare to get even better care for my son especially in the earlier years. For example, I could have hired a nurse to take care of him when he was sick so that I would have peace of mind at work. There were still on-call nursing facilities available in the 1980s even though they were very expensive. Also, I need not have deepened on my sister for childcare if I could have gotten tax credit.

After experiencing firsthand the trials and tribulations of providing affordable high quality childcare for my son, I have brought up child care issues when serving on committees at work. For example, when was at Honeywell I served on the diversity taskforce. While the main focus of this taskforce was on promoting women and minorities, I brought up the issue of child care. During my early days at UTDallas I participated in a women faculty taskforce and discussed the possibility of having a daycare center in the campus. While this plan was pursued further, I believe that due to the various regulations it was not feasible to implement such a plan.

Based on my own experience with childcare issues and my efforts on providing quality childcare at work, I believe that the push has to come from the very top – that is, the President of the United States of America. Therefore, I urge the next president of the United States, whether it be Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton to take this matter seriously and pass legislation so that millions of hard working mothers around the country can balance motherhood, marriage and career without being anxious.