

# KATHARINE B. STEVENS

## Raising Young Children at Home

Perhaps nothing is more crucial to parents and to society than ensuring the healthy development of children, from conception onwards. The care and raising of children, especially when they are young, is at the center of family life, shaping new human beings and laying the foundation for a nation's future.

The roots of human flourishing lie in children's earliest years. In just the first 1,000 days after birth, a child grows from a physically helpless infant to a running, jumping, climbing preschooler. Children's early cognitive, social, and emotional development is equally rapid, forming the bedrock for all dimensions of their wellbeing and achievement throughout life, and offering a critical inflection point for addressing many of society's biggest challenges.

For most of human history, children's early development unfolded within families, usually with full-time maternal care. But unprecedented economic pressures are now forcing both mothers and fathers to spend a great deal more time in paid labor outside the home. Increasingly, parents are unable to give their young children the time and attention that they want to, and that children need to develop well.

The dominant framing of this problem is as a "caregiving crisis," in which parents caring for their own children are "unpaid caregivers," incurring inordinate "financial, professional, physical, and

emotional costs" to their own wellbeing. "A childcare crisis is torturing American parents," a *Bloomberg Businessweek* cover story recently explained, starkly revealed as the COVID-19 pandemic "thrust" even more parents into "stressful and exhausting" roles as full-time caregivers "for months on end."

The consequent policy response is a push for increased government funding to expand nonparental, group preschool programs, promoted as "public education starting at birth." In this ever more influential, Brave New World vision, government will fund a nationwide "infrastructure of care" that excludes families: aiming to "cultivate the potential of young children" through outsourcing their care to paid professionals, so parents—"primarily mothers"—are "freed up to pursue paid careers."

Amidst overwhelming media and policy emphasis on expanding nonparental care, few ask parents outside the media and policymaking bubbles about their preferences for balancing work and the care of their young children. Those who do discover that, for the majority of parents, *raising young children*—not advancing their own careers—is what matters most.

In a 2021 American Compass survey, fewer than 1-in-5 married adults with household income under \$150,000 said that both parents working full-time with children in full-time childcare is the best

arrangement for their family. Overall, half of married mothers and almost half of married fathers said they would prefer to have one full-time earner and one stay-at-home parent while raising children under age five. Among working-class couples, over two-thirds said this is what they prefer.

Families' needs clearly vary. But what most parents want is to spend more time raising their own young children. And they understand that young children benefit from being cared for at home.

As parents recognize, deep human connection is the gateway to healthy early development. Research is clear that children are "hardwired" to develop within a small group of familiar, loving people and need strong, consistent relationships to develop well. A surge of neurobiological findings has shown that the ongoing, nurturing interactions occurring within young children's one-on-one relationships with loving caregivers shape the rapidly growing brain, with powerful, enduring effects on all domains of development.

So, while the world that children are born into has changed dramatically, what children need for healthy development has not. And the optimal developmental environment for most young children remains their own home.

# The roots of human flourishing lie in children's earliest years.

In the words of Nobel-prize-winning economist James Heckman:

**The “intervention” that a loving, resourceful family gives to its children has huge benefits that, unfortunately, have never been measured well. Public preschool programs can potentially compensate for the home environments of disadvantaged children. No public preschool program can provide the environment and the parental love and care of a functioning family and the lifetime benefits that ensue.**

As Heckman notes, high-quality programs can have significant benefits for low-income children, particularly those from single-parent households—the very children for whom good programs are often farthest from reach. Boosting access to high-quality childcare for the most disadvantaged children is a critical policy goal. But research has repeatedly found that even high-quality programs can have adverse effects on children when they displace the higher quality care that many children would otherwise receive at home.

Researchers remain especially worried that long hours in childcare may have particularly damaging effects on infants and toddlers. The largest study to date, by the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD), found that extensive hours in nonparental,

group care during infancy and toddlerhood predicted negative social-emotional outcomes from preschool into adolescence.

Yet little research has been done on how nonparental care specifically affects children under age three. In 2020, several researchers published an article in *Epigenomics* denouncing a “taboo on open debate” over the growing use of childcare for very young children:

**We have identified around 1,000 research reports, in different sciences spread over 30 years, that separating small children from their mothers has a variety of adverse effects. However, we have not identified a systematic review in any leading general medical journal and as far as we know, this is the first editorial on this topic.**

All the while, the upbringing of young children is increasingly framed as an especially time-consuming household chore that can be outsourced to paid strangers, like housecleaning or washing the car. Public investment in young children is now largely defined as government spending on nonparental care and education, demeaning the value of parental care in early development while normalizing the idea that people do not usually raise their own young children.

This is the wrong direction for policy. Not all parents can or want to stay home to care for young children. Parenting quality clearly varies. But, in most cases, the most valuable investment in children's development is parents' time spent providing nurturing care.

Loving family care is the foundation of healthy early development. Healthy early development, in turn, is the foundation of human flourishing. And while children's flourishing depends on families, a family's flourishing, too, rests in great part on the capacity to ensure their young children can thrive.

Our goal must be to reinforce the fundamental bonds of family: elevating—rather than displacing—the vital role of parents in raising their own children, especially during the first, foundational years of development. That is what most parents want. It is best for young children. And it lies at the heart of a stronger future for America.

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