

FAMILY

How to Solve the Summer-Child-Care Nightmare


For one, stop pretending we don't need to.


By Elliot Haspel



Alec Soth / Magnum

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TO ALL THE frantic parents who've survived yet another year of the summer-child-care shuffle: I salute you.

It's a well-established fact that in the United States, finding summer child care can be hell. In a nation with lengthy breaks from school—and no guaranteed paid time off from work for adults—parents are left largely on their own to cobble together camps and other, frequently expensive, arrangements. New data confirm just how tough this can be. A recent Gallup poll found that nearly half of parents with school-age children “wished their children could have participated in summer programs, or participated more than they did.” By far the top reason for this unfulfilled wish was cost, followed by program schedules not aligning with job schedules.

Solving this problem isn't so complicated; it's not like, well, trying to coordinate camp schedules. Summer programs need more public funding to reduce prices for parents and increase the number of slots for children. (To quote *The Atlantic's* Annie Lowrey on the state of public investment in child care, in a line that should hang in the office

of every politician: “The math does not work. It will never work.”) Barriers limiting access to summer care for lower-income families—such as a lack of transportation—also need to be broken down.

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These ideas are not new. Legislators a half century ago were fighting over some of the very supports parents are asking for now. Yet since then, summer-child-care policy has been marked by a succession of near misses, half efforts, and false starts. The good news is that recent years have brought glimmers of hope as cities and states have implemented programs that illustrate the power of government action—and one national legislative proposal is offering a potentially transformative solution. But to finally create a national summer-care policy that can meet most American families’ needs, it is crucial to understand the past and avoid the mistakes that led to this care void in the first place.

THE UNITED STATES’ summer-child-care nightmare can be traced to 1971 and President Richard Nixon’s veto of the Comprehensive Child Development Act. That bill—at the time the most ambitious national child-care legislation ever proposed—would have jump-started a federally funded, locally run network of child-care programs. It passed through Congress with bipartisan support, including a 63–17 vote in the Senate. But Nixon’s veto, in which he called the bill a “long leap into the dark” that would have seen the government take over child-rearing, forced both parties to limit their vision.

The congressional bill had imagined broad support for nearly all families with school-age or younger children. Instead, government-supported child care became synonymous with welfare, and the question became how to design an assistance program that would help only low-income families, and only for a brief period.

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Around this time, an advocacy and legislative movement focused on child care for school-age children was also beginning to develop—targeted mainly toward after-school care, not summer care. In 1983, Congress held its first Children's Caucus hearing, focused on the issue of “latchkey children,” those with no adults at home after school. The first national conference on latchkey children soon followed, bringing together researchers, advocates, policy makers, and child-care providers. Many participants spoke of the negative consequences for kids lacking adequate after-school options, and aftercare soon got grafted onto the K–12 education-reform agenda.

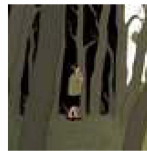
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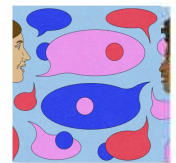


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This all culminated in two different pieces of policy: the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG), passed in 1990, which provides federal funds for states to offer child-care assistance to low-income families, and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program, initiated by Congress in 1994, which provides federal dollars for schools and their communities to develop better after-

school options. The funding from both programs has helped millions of families over the years—but summer care, by and large, has fallen through the cracks. Although CCDBG dollars can be used for summer care, the funds are limited; in 2019, only one in nine eligible families even received aid. And as Joan Lombardi, a former director of the federal Child Care Bureau (since replaced by the Office of Child Care) and the author of *Time to Care: Redesigning Child Care to Promote Education, Support Families, and Build Communities*, told me, the majority of the 21st CCLC grants “went to schools and consortia of schools [that] most often followed a school-year schedule,” leaving parents to “scramble” to cover summer.

What’s more, the governance over those programs has produced a cleaving effect. Child-care subsidies rest with the Department of Health and Human Services; after-school funds are overseen by the Department of Education. This means that no single entity is responsible for making summer care work. Until the past few years, in fact, no major federal policies have been aimed exclusively at summer care.

STEP BACK FOR a moment and consider what summer would feel like if care options were abundant and affordable. Imagine significantly less stress for parents—not just over the summer but also throughout the year—and so much more joy, laughter, and connectivity for children. The thousands of dollars saved could be repurposed toward family well-being: finally dealing with a clunking car, paying for a child’s dental work, enjoying a cross-country trip to see grandparents.

Lately, there has been an uptick in government action toward that vision, driven in part by the need to respond to the coronavirus pandemic's impact on children. Most of this has occurred at the state and local levels. But efforts have now reached Congress: Last month, Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut introduced the Summer for All Act, the first major federal public-policy swing at summer care.

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The bill would authorize \$4 billion spread over four years, and \$1 billion a year after that, for two grant programs to be administered by the DHS. (The funds would supplement those of existing programs.) The first grant would help community-based organizations such as nonprofits and camps expand their offerings—by, for instance, increasing the number of slots for kids or reducing costs. The second grant would allow states to close the gaps in summer-care options and try innovative solutions, such as making museums free to families over the summer. Recipients of the funding from either grant must prioritize access for groups that most lack it, such as lower-income children. But the gains stand to be widespread, with families of all stripes potentially benefiting from more options and lower fees.

Murphy's bill is not a slam dunk; for one, it only authorizes the funding, which would still need to be approved by a Congress that currently has trouble passing budget-related bills. But it is a firm stake in the ground declaring that the problem of summer

care cannot be ignored—and that the government has a responsibility to address it. In an interview, Murphy explained to me that his interest in summer care was spurred by the pandemic and broader negative trends in children's well-being. “What kids who have grown up in the pandemic and the smartphone era have lost access to is socialization,” Murphy told me, pointing to the dangers of children being stuck at home all summer. “We have got to get them out of their houses, off their smartphones, plugged into activities they love, making new friends.”

The federal government's pandemic response showed how advantageous public investment in summer programming can be. According to an analysis by the nonprofit Afterschool Alliance, which advocates for better out-of-school-time policies, school districts nationwide spent at least \$2.4 billion of pandemic-relief funds specifically on summer programs. In 2022, for instance, pandemic funds helped Tulsa Public Schools offer its four-week summer program—with activities including “gardening, robotics, and field trips, in addition to academic enrichment”—free to 10,000 K–12 students. In 2021, California started an Expanded Learning Opportunities Program for children in pre-K through sixth grade that now has \$4 billion in annual funding to work with; its goal is to help every school serving this age group offer at least 30 days of summer or other non-school-day programming, in addition to after-school care. (The 30-day minimum is a requirement to get funding.) These services are provided on an income-based sliding-fee scale, with no cost for students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Of course, summer care does not need to run only through schools. The plethora of camps and community programs that already exist provide numerous benefits: Some have more flexible hours than school-based options do, and many have, across the years, provided children with novel experiences in new settings, wonderful memories, and lifelong friends. Nor are camps and schools mutually exclusive. Since 2022, the American Camp Association and the National Summer Learning Association have been testing “camp-school partnerships,” in which camp attendance is integrated into students’ schooling and facilitated by their school district. Whether these sorts of initiatives can work at scale is a question mark, however. Tom Rosenberg, the chief executive of the American Camp Association, told me that in any attempt to widely increase the accessibility and affordability of summer care, “public funding is an important mechanism.”

Murphy said that he sees such funding as crucial not only for the present but also as a long-term investment. “The reality is,” he told me, “when kids spend a summer alone, they end up needing extra resources later—so we eventually spend bad money instead of good.” Indeed, a 2019 National Academies of Sciences report on summer care concluded that summertime can either narrow or exacerbate developmental gaps, depending on the quality of services offered to children, and that kids need both structured and unstructured summer activities. Those developmental impacts call for a focus on equity. Lombardi, the former Child Care Bureau director, believes that any solutions must start with the principle that all children, regardless of income, should be able to access out-of-school-time services, including summer care.

This reframing underscores how foolhardy it is for Americans’ child-care needs to be addressed via a set of siloed policies and funding streams rather than through comprehensive legislation to support early child care, before- and after-school care, and, yes, summer care. Households’ child-care needs are not best dealt with piecemeal. If the government truly wants to support families, it can’t pretend otherwise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elliot Haspel is a child-care-policy expert and the author of *Crawling Behind: America's
Childcare Crisis and How to Fix It.*

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