

## Preschool or Child Care?

Besides preschool and school readiness, much public enthusiasm is tied to child care that offers working parents safe, affordable, and nurturing places to leave their young progeny. If taxpayers will cover those costs, so much the better, at least in the eyes of the beneficiaries. Although welfare reformers care more about access to day care per se than do preschool advocates, the latter energetically exploit the public's presumptive appetite for it to advance their own cause.

This topic would be far tidier and more coherent if a bright line divided child care from preschool. But of course there is no such thing. Most preschool programs serve a day-care function, too, affording parents a place where their daughters and sons will be cared for, given snacks and games as well as a cognitive boost, while they themselves work (or do chores or sip tea.) Such programs also provide “socialization” for youngsters who might not otherwise have much interaction with kids and adults outside their homes.<sup>21</sup> And many a day-care program serves an educational function, too, as staffers talk and read to their young charges, play games with them, or habituate them to useful school-readiness routines like standing in a line, saying please, and putting books back on the shelf.

Commercial operators of programs for young children commonly blur the line, suggesting to parents that they offer both early

education *and* child care—with a curriculum and learning goals as well as flexible hours, naps, meals, before- and after-school coverage, and other conveniences for working moms and dads. And no doubt they do some of both. The firm that describes itself as “the largest provider of early education and care in the nation” even manages that straddle in its corporate name: KinderCare. So do many smaller operators. A quick Internet search brought up Prep & Play Preschool and Daycare Center, St. John’s Daycare & Preschool Center, and—covering all bases—Immanuel Lutheran Playschool, Preschool, Pre-Kindergarten & Daycare.

Amalgams like these make practical sense, not just for marketing purposes but also in terms of meeting kids’ needs and satisfying parents’ preferences. What father would want his child simply “looked after” during working hours if the youngster could also be learning? No decent mother yearns for her toddler to be “taught” but not cared for. And parents who work eight or more hours a day need their kids tended for a longer period than pure preschools traditionally offer.<sup>22</sup>

Blurring this line, in other words, works for program operators and parents even as it confounds the policy discussion and politics involved. (It also sorely complicates the quest for clear data about who is getting what sorts of services from what sorts of providers at whose expense.) For this tangled set of services and arrangements taps into two separate policy domains and two different concepts of “society’s obligation.”

It’s self-evident that millions of working families who now pay for child care themselves would welcome its public financing, and it’s also clear that some disadvantaged children could benefit from solid preschool education. Pre-K advocacy organizations have determined that their cause benefits from muddying the distinction between those two sets of services, but policy makers ought to make

the line as clear and bright as they can. The United States already has a host of programs that address each of these objectives, and sound policy would start by appraising what they accomplish and how they might be improved.

The state plainly has an interest in upgrading its human talent across the board, as well as in narrowing harmful and unjust learning gaps and ensuring that everybody has a fighting chance to develop their intellect and skills to the maximum. Yet it's not self-evident that society has a compelling interest in paying for pre-K education except insofar as it demonstrably and durably accomplishes one or more of those objectives.

Nor is it obvious that the state has a compelling interest in paying for day care for the children of working parents unless they would be unable to work *without* that subsidy and therefore have to turn to welfare, crime, or some other socially costlier alternative.

In any event, these are not the *same* state functions, nor do they necessarily involve the same youngsters, nor are they best carried out in the same way. Child care for working parents, for example, needs to start with toddlers, if not infants. Perhaps intensive educational intervention for severely disadvantaged children does, too. But what's provided to these different populations of youngsters does not need to, and probably ought not, be identical. Neither social mission is a clear summons to "universality," considering that most working parents make their own child care arrangements and that many five-year-olds—thanks again to parents and those arrangements—arrive in school ready to learn what kindergarten teachers want them to learn.