

*The* **BOISI CENTER** *for*  

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**RELIGION *and* AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE**

**Symposium on Religion and Politics**

**THE FUTURE OF MARRIAGE AND THE  
FAMILY**

**“A Comparative Look at Having and  
Raising Children”**

**Reading Packet 5**

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# BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER  
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

## Symposium on Religion and Politics

### THE FUTURE OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

#### “A Comparative Look at Having and Raising Children”

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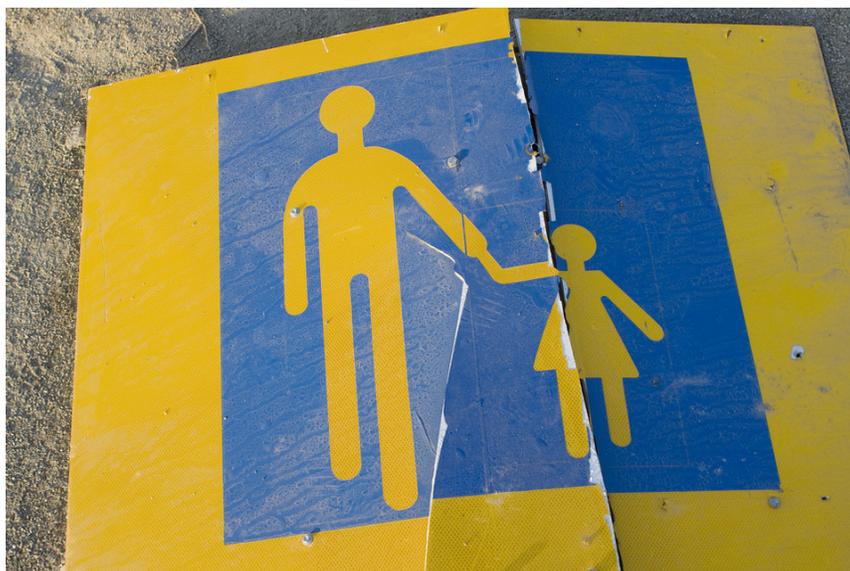
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### OPINION

# The Global Flight From the Family

It's not only in the West or prosperous nations—the decline in marriage and drop in birth rates is rampant, with potentially dire fallout.



Broken PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By **NICHOLAS EBERSTADT**

Updated Feb. 21, 2015 12:17 a.m. ET

“They’re getting divorced, and they’ll do anything NOT to get custody of the kids.” So reads the promotional poster, in French, for a new movie, “Papa ou Maman” (“Daddy or Mommy”), plastered all over Paris during my recent visit there. The movie sounds like

quintessential French comedy, but its plot touches on a deep and serious reality—and one not particular to France.

All around the world today, pre-existing family patterns are being upended by a revolutionary new force: the seemingly unstoppable quest for convenience by adults demanding ever-greater autonomy. We can think of this as another triumph of consumer sovereignty, which has at last brought rational choice and elective affinities into a bastion heretofore governed by traditions and duties—many of them onerous. Thanks to this revolution, it is perhaps easier than ever before to free oneself from the burdens that would otherwise be imposed by spouses, children, relatives or significant others with whom one shares a hearth.

Yet in infancy and childhood and then again much later, in feebleness or senescence, people need more from others. Whatever else we may be, we are all manifestly inconvenient at the start and end of life. Thus the recasting of the family puts it on a collision course with the inescapable inconvenience of the human condition itself—portending outcomes and risks we have scarcely begun to consider.

To evaluate the world-wide flight from the family, we can start in the U.S. Remarkably enough, we do not actually know the probabilities of getting married and staying married in America today, because the government doesn't collect the information needed to make an estimate. We do know that both marriage and *in situ* parenting are increasingly regarded as optional for child-rearing.

As of 2013, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, just over 40% of babies in the U.S. were born outside marriage, and for 2014 the Census Bureau estimated that 27% of all children (and 22% of “White” children) lived in a fatherless home. But the opt-out from the old family norm is even more advanced than these figures suggest. A 2011 study by two Census researchers reckoned that just 59% of all American children (and 65% of “Anglo” or non-Hispanic white children) lived with married and biological parents as of 2009. Unless there is a change in this “revealed preference” against married unions that include children, within the foreseeable future American children who reside with their married birthparents will be in the minority.

Now consider Europe, where the revolution in the family has gained still more ground. European demographers even have an elegant name for the phenomenon: They call it

the Second Demographic Transition (the First being the shift from high birth rates and death rates to low ones that began in Europe in the early industrial era and by now encompasses almost every society). In the schema of the Second Demographic Transition, long, stable marriages are out, and divorce or separation are in, along with serial cohabitation and increasingly contingent liaisons. Not surprisingly, this new environment of perennially conditional, no-fault unions was also seen as ushering in an era of more or less permanent sub-replacement fertility.

According to Eurostat, the European Union's statistical agency, the probability of marriage before age 50 has been plummeting for European women and men, while the chance of divorce for those who do marry has been soaring. In Belgium—the birth-land of the scholars who initially detected this Second Transition—the likelihood of a first marriage for a woman of reproductive age is now down to 40%, and the likelihood of divorce is over 50%. This means that in Belgium the odds of getting married and staying married are under one in five. A number of other European countries have similar or even lower odds.

Europe has also seen a surge in “child-free” adults—voluntary childlessness. The proportion of childless 40-something women is one in five for Sweden and Switzerland, and one in four for Italy. In Berlin and in the German city-state of Hamburg, it's nearly one in three, and rising swiftly. Europe's most rapidly growing family type is the one-person household: the home not only child-free, but partner- and relative-free as well. In Western Europe, nearly one home in three (32%) is already a one-person unit, while in autonomy-prizing Denmark the number exceeds 45%. The rise of the one-person home coincides with population aging. But it is not primarily driven by the graying of European society, at least thus far: Over twice as many Danes under 65 are living alone as those over 65.

Lest one suspect that there is something about this phenomenon that is culturally specific to Western countries, we have Japan, whose fabled “Asian family values” are now largely a thing of the past. Contemporary Japanese women have lifestyle options that were unthinkable for their grandmothers, including divorce, separation, cohabitation and remaining single. Japanese women are availing themselves of these new choices. Given recent trajectories, demographers Miho Iwasawa and Ryuichi Kaneko project that a Japanese woman born in 1990 stands less than even odds of getting married and staying married to age 50.

To be sure, unlike Europe and the U.S., Japan still severely stigmatizes childbearing outside marriage. Childlessness, on the other hand, is socially acceptable. Nowadays about one-sixth of Japanese women in their mid-40s are still single, and about 30% of all women that age are childless. Twenty years hence, by Mr. Kaneko's projections, 38% of all Japanese women in their mid-40s would be childless, and an even higher share—just over 50%—would never have grandchildren.

Much the same has been taking place around East and Southeast Asia for at least a generation. From South Korea to Singapore, China is rimmed by countries where marriage is being postponed or, increasingly, forgone; where networks of extended kin are withering due to extreme sub-replacement fertility; and where childlessness is on the rise.

Thus far the Chinese mainland has been conspicuously resistant to these trends. Yet according to the 2011 Hong Kong census, 22% of the Chinese territory's women in their late 30s were unmarried—almost the same as for Japan. Further, over 30% of Hong Kong's women in their early 40s are childless, more than doubling in 15 years. Similar, albeit somewhat less accentuated, tendencies are reported in Taiwan.

Formidable as the imperatives of Confucian familial tradition may be, they evidently can be overpowered by the more immediate attractions and pressures of modern life. Recognition of the fragility of the Confucian ethos in the face of a “me ethos” may help explain why Beijing saw the need in 2012 to amend its laws on the protection of the elderly. Those laws had already criminalized nonsupport of one's elderly parents; now elderly parents are allowed to sue their children for spending insufficient time with them.

America, Europe and the highly modernized reaches of East and Southeast Asia are affluent and “globalized.” But the undoing of previously accepted family arrangements is also under way in seemingly traditional low-income societies—Muslim-majority societies in particular. Although it has attracted strangely little attention, a flight from marriage within the Arab world is in process, led by masses of women who wish to bend or break the rules of family life to which their mothers had submitted.

According to the U.N. Population Division's “World Marriage Data 2012,” the proportion of never-married women in their late 30s was higher in Morocco in 2004 than in the U.S.

in 2009 (18% vs. 16%). By the same token, the percentage of single women in their early 40s was higher in Lebanon in 2007 than in Italy in 2010 (22% vs. 18%). And nearly 32% of Libyan women in their late 30s were unmarried in 2006—20 times the percentage barely two decades earlier, even higher than for Denmark in 2011 (29%).

Every stage of the Arab world's female flight from marriage is taking place on roughly a third of the GDP per capita, and just half the mean years of schooling, of the corresponding steps for societies from the affluent West or the affluent East. What this means: High levels of income and educational attainment are not preconditions for the new family revolution in those spots on the globe it hasn't reached.

Our world-wide flight from family constitutes a significant international victory for self-actualization over self-sacrifice, and might even be said to mark a new chapter in humanity's conscious pursuit of happiness. But these voluntary changes also have unintended consequences. The deleterious impact on the hardly inconsequential numbers of children disadvantaged by the flight from the family is already plain enough. So too the damaging role of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing in exacerbating income disparities and wealth gaps—for society as a whole, but especially for children. Yes, children are resilient and all that. But the flight from family most assuredly comes at the expense of the vulnerable young.

That same flight also has unforgiving implications for the vulnerable old. With America's baby boomers reaching retirement, and a world-wide "gray wave" around the corner, we are about to learn the meaning of those implications firsthand.

In the decades ahead, ever more care and support for seniors will be required, especially for the growing contingent among the elderly who will be victims of dementia, or are childless and socially isolated. Remember, a longevity revolution is also under way. Yet by some cruel cosmic irony, family structures and family members will be less capable, and perhaps also less willing, to provide that care and support than ever before.

That contradiction promises to frame an overarching social problem, not just in so-called developed countries but throughout the world. It is far from clear that humanity is prepared to cope with the consequences of its impending family deficit, with increasing independence for those traditionally most dependent on others—i.e., the young and old. Public policies are the obvious candidate for the task. But as the past

century of social policy has demonstrated, government is a highly imperfect substitute for family—and a very expensive one.

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bringing  
up  
bébé



One American Mother  
Discovers the Wisdom of  
French Parenting

*Pamela  
Druckerman*

THE PENGUIN PRESS  
New York  
2012

on a tray. Almost all of them reached for the helper. “Babies are drawn to the nice guy and repelled by the mean guy,” Paul Bloom explains.

Of course, these experiments don’t prove that—as Dolto claims—babies understand speech. But they do seem to prove her point that, from a very young age, babies are rational. Their minds aren’t a “blooming, buzzing confusion.” At the very least, we should watch what we say to them.

Chapter 6

day care?

When I call my mother to tell her that Bean has been accepted into a day-care center run by the city of Paris, there’s a long pause on her end of the line.

“Day care?” she asks, finally.

Friends back home are skeptical, too.

“It’s just not a situation I want,” sniffs a friend whose son is nine months old, about the same age Bean will be when she starts day care. “I want him to have a little more individual attention.”

But when I tell my French neighbors that Bean has been accepted to the crèche, as the full-time day cares are known here, they congratulate me and practically crack open the champagne.

It’s the sharpest difference between the countries I’ve seen so far. Middle-class mothers in the United States generally aren’t fans of day care. The very words “day care” conjure images of pedophiles and howling babies in dirty, dimly lit rooms. “I want him to have a little more individual attention” is a euphemism for, “Unlike you, I actually love my child and don’t want to institutionalize him.” American parents who can afford it tend to hire full-time nannies, then start easing

their kids into preschool when they're two or three. Those who must send their kids to day care do so warily and often full of guilt.

But middle-class French parents—architects, doctors, fellow journalists—are clawing past one another to get a spot in their neighborhood crèche, which is open five days a week, usually from eight to six. Mothers apply when they're pregnant, then harangue, cajole, and beg. Crèches are subsidized by the state, and parents are charged sliding fees based on their incomes.

"I felt that it was a perfect system, absolutely perfect," gushes my friend Esther, a French lawyer, whose daughter started at the crèche when she was nine months old. Even friends of mine who don't work try to enroll their kids in the crèche. As a distant second choice, they consider part-time day care or nannies, which are subsidized, too. (Government Web sites give all the options.)

All this gives me a kind of cultural vertigo. Will day care make my child aggressive, neglected, and insecurely attached, as the scary American headlines say? Or will she be socialized, "awakened," and skillfully looked after, as French parents assure me?

For the first time, I worry that we're taking our little intercultural experiment too far. It's one thing to start holding a fork in my left hand, and giving blank looks to strangers. It's quite another to subject my child to a potentially weird and damaging experience for the bulk of her toddlerhood. Are we going a bit too native? Bean can try foie gras, but should she try the crèche?

*I decide* to read up on this day care with a funny name. Why is it even called a crèche? I thought that was the name for a nativity scene.

It turns out that the story of the French crèche began in the 1840s. Jean-Baptiste-Firmin Marbeau, an ambitious young lawyer in search of a cause to champion, was deputy mayor of Paris's first district. It was the middle of the Industrial Revolution, and cities like Paris were

teeming with women who'd arrived from the provinces to work as seamstresses and in factories. Marbeau was charged with writing a study of the *salles d'asile*, free nursery schools for kids aged two to six.

He was impressed. "How carefully, I said to myself, society watches over the children of the poor!" he wrote.

But Marbeau wondered who looked after poor children between birth and age two, while their mothers worked. He consulted the district's "poor list" and set off to visit several mothers. "At the far end of a filthy backyard, I call out for Madame Gérard, a washerwoman. She comes down, not wanting me to enter her home, *too dirty to be seen* (those are her words). She holds a new-born baby on her arm, and a child of eighteen months by the hand."

Marbeau discovered that when Madame Gérard went off to wash laundry, she left her children with a babysitter. This cost her seventy centimes a day, about a third of her daily wages. And the babysitter was an equally poor woman who, when Marbeau visited, was "at her post, watching over three young children on the floor in a shabby room."

That wasn't bad child care by the day's standards for the poor. Some mothers locked kids alone in apartments or tied them to bedposts for the day. Slightly older kids were often left to watch their siblings while their mothers worked. Many very young babies still lived at the homes of wet nurses, where conditions could be life-threatening.

Marbeau was seized with an idea: the crèche! (The name was meant to invoke the cozy manger in the Christmas story.) It would be all-day care for poor children from birth to age two. Funding would come from donations by wealthy patrons, some of whom would also help oversee crèches. Marbeau envisioned a spartan but spotless building, where women called nurses looked after babies and counseled mothers on hygiene and morals. Mothers would pay just fifty cents a day. Those with unweaned infants would return twice a day to breast-feed.

Marbeau's idea struck a chord. There was soon a crèche commission to study the matter, and he set off to woo potential donors. Like any good fund-raiser, he appealed to both their sense of charity and to their economic self-interest.

"These children are your fellow citizens, your brothers. They are poor, unhappy and weak: you should rescue them," he wrote in a crèche manual published in 1845. Then he added, "If you can save the lives of 10,000 children, make haste: 20,000 extra arms a year are not to be disdained. Arms are work and work creates wealth." The crèche was also supposed to give a mother peace of mind, so she could "devote herself to her work with an easy conscience."

In his manual, Marbeau instructs crèches to open from five thirty A.M. to eight thirty P.M., to cover the typical workday for laborers. The life Marbeau describes for mothers isn't too different from that of a lot of working mothers I know today: "She gets up before 5 o'clock, dresses her child, does some housework, runs to the Crèche, runs to work . . . at 8 o'clock she hastens back, fetches her child with the day's dirty linen, rushes home to put the poor little creature to bed, and to wash his linen so it will be dry the next day, and every day the whole process is repeated! . . . how on earth does she manage!"

Evidently Marbeau was quite persuasive. The first crèche opened in a donated building on the rue de Chaillot in Paris. Two years later there were thirteen crèches. The number continued to grow, especially in Paris.

After World War II, the French government put crèches under the control of the newly formed Mother and Infant Protection service (PMI) and created an official degree program for the job of *puéricultrice*, a person who specialized in caring for babies and young children.

By the beginning of the 1960s, the French poor were less desperate, and there were fewer of them. However, more middle-class mothers were working, so the crèche began attracting middle-class families, too. The number of spots nearly doubled in ten years, reaching 32,000 in

day care?  
1971. Suddenly, middle-class mothers got sulky if they couldn't get a place in a crèche. It was starting to seem like an entitlement for working mothers.

All kinds of variants on the crèche opened, too. There were part-time day cares, "family" crèches where parents pitched in, and "company" crèches for employees. Guided by Françoise Dolto's insistence that babies are people, too, there was a new interest in child care that didn't merely keep kids from getting sick or treat them like potential delinquents. Soon crèches were spouting middle-class values like "socialization" and "awakening."

*I first hear* about the crèche when I'm pregnant, from my friend Dietlind. She's a Chicagoan who's lived in Europe since she graduated from college. (In Paris there's a whole caste of semester-abroad expatriates, who married their junior-year boyfriends or just never got around to leaving.) Dietlind is warm, speaks effortless French, and still charmingly refers to herself as a "feminist." She's one of the few people I know who's actually striving to make the world a better place. About the only thing wrong with Dietlind is that she can't cook. Her family subsists almost entirely on food from Picard, the French frozen-food chain. She once tried to serve me defrosted sushi, rice and all.

Despite this, Dietlind is a model mother. So when she tells me that her two sons, ages five and eight, attended the crèche around the corner from me, I take note. She says the crèche was excellent. Years later, she still stops by to greet the *directrice* and her sons' old teachers. The boys still talk about their crèche days with joyful nostalgia. Their favorite caregiver used to give them haircuts.

What's more, Dietlind offers to put in a good word with the *directrice*. She keeps repeating to me that the crèche isn't *fancy*. I'm not sure what this means. Does she think that I require Philippe Stark playpens? Is "not fancy" code for "dirty"?

Though I've put up a brave multicultural front for my mother, the truth is that I share some of her doubts. The fact that the crèche is run by the city of Paris seems kind of creepy. It feels like I'll be dropping my baby off at the post office, or the department of motor vehicles. I have visions of faceless bureaucrats rushing past Bean's bassinet, as she weeps. Maybe I do want "fancy," whatever that means. Or maybe I just want to look after Bean myself.

Unfortunately, I can't. I'm midway through writing the book that I was supposed to hand in before Bean was born. I took a few months off after her birth. But now my (already once extended) deadline looms. We've hired a lovely nanny, Adelyn, from the Philippines, who shows up in the morning and looks after Bean all day. The problem is, I work from home in a little alcove office. The temptation to micro-manage them both—to the irritation of everyone—is irresistible.

Bean does seem to be developing a decent passive understanding of Tagalog, the main language of the Philippines. But I suspect that Adelyn often ends up speaking Tagalog to her at our local McDonald's, since each time we pass by it, Bean points and shouts. Perhaps the nonfancy crèche is a better option.

I'm also amazed that, thanks to Dietlind, we have an "in" somewhere. I'm used to being out of synch with the rest of the country. Sometimes I don't know it's a national holiday until I walk outside and find that all the shops are closed. Having Bean in a crèche would connect us more to France.

The crèche is also tantalizingly convenient. There's one across the street from our house. Dietlind's is a five-minute walk. Like those nineteenth-century washerwomen, I could pop in to breast-feed Bean and wipe her snot.

Mostly, though, it's hard to resist all this French adult peer pressure. (I'm glad they're not trying to get me to smoke.) Anne and the other French mothers in our courtyard chime in about the wonders of the crèche, too. Simon and I figure that even with our "in," our odds of

actually getting in are small. So we go to our local town hall and apply for a spot.

*Why are middle-class Americans so skeptical of day care?* The answer has its roots in the nineteenth century, too. By the middle of the 1800s, news of Marbeau's crèches reached America, which had its own horror stories about poor kids being tied to bedposts. Curious philanthropists and social activists traveled to Paris. They were impressed. Over the following decades, charity-financed crèches opened in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Buffalo for the children of poor, working mothers. A few used the French name, but most were called "day nurseries." By the 1890s there were ninety American day nurseries. Many cared for the children of recent immigrants. They were supposed to keep these kids off the streets and turn them into "Americans."<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a separate "nursery school movement" in America to create private preschools and kindergartens for children aged around two to six. These grew out of new ideas about the importance of early learning and of stimulating kids' social and emotional development. From the start, they appealed to middle- and upper-middle-class American parents.

The separate origins of day care and preschool explain why, more than a hundred years later, "day care" still has a working-class connotation in America, while middle-class parents battle to get their two-year-olds into preschool. It also explains why today's American preschools often last just a few hours a day; it's presumed that mothers of the students don't have to work, or can afford nannies.<sup>2</sup>

One segment of American society that isn't ambivalent about day care is the U.S. military. The Department of Defense runs America's largest day-care system, with about eight hundred child development centers—or CDCs—on military installations around the world. The

bringing up bebe  
centers accept kids from the age of six weeks and are typically open from six A.M. to six thirty P.M.<sup>3</sup>

The American military's day-care system looks remarkably like the French crèche. Operating hours wrap around the workday. Fees are scaled according to parents' combined income. The government subsidizes about half the cost. And like the French crèche, the military's day-care centers are so popular they usually have long waiting lists.

But outside the military, middle-class American parents remain ambivalent about day care.<sup>4</sup> This is partly an issue of nomenclature. "If you call it 'early childhood education, zero through five,' they think it's worthwhile," says Sheila Kamerman, a professor at Columbia University who's been tracking day care for decades. These days it's often simply called "child care."

Americans remain consumed by the question of how even normal day care affects a child's fragile psyche. There are headlines on whether day care causes learning delays, makes kids more aggressive, or leaves them insecurely attached to their mothers. I know American moms who quit their jobs rather than subject their kids to day care.

They are often right to worry, since the quality of American day care is extremely uneven. There are no national regulations. Some states don't require caregivers to have any training. The U.S. Department of Labor says child-care workers earn less than janitors, and that "dissatisfaction with benefits, pay, and stressful working conditions cause many to leave the industry." Annual turnover rates of 35 percent are common.

There are some good day-care centers, of course. But these can be extremely expensive, or limited to employees of certain companies. And bad centers are amply in evidence, with poor kids getting especially bad care. Other centers—usually the expensive ones—treat babyhood like a college-prep course. Perhaps to calm nervous parents, a Colorado-based company boasts that, in its centers, children under the age of one are taught "literacy."

.....  
*French mothers* are convinced that the crèche is good for their kids. In Paris, about a third of kids under the age of three go to the crèche, and half are in some kind of collective care. (There are still fewer crèches outside Paris.) French mothers do worry about pedophiles, but not at the crèche. They think kids are safer in settings with lots of trained adults looking after them, rather than being "alone with a stranger," according to a report by a national group that advocates for parents. "If she's going to be tête-à-tête with someone, I want it to be me," the mother of an eighteen-month-old at Bean's crèche tells me. The mother says if she hadn't gotten a spot in the crèche, she would have quit her job.

French mothers do worry about the anguish they'll feel when they drop their children off at a crèche for the first time. But they view this as their own separation issue. "In France parents are not afraid of sending their children to the crèche," explains Marie Wierink, a sociologist with France's Ministry of Labor. "*Au contraire*, they fear that if they cannot find a place in the crèche their child will be missing out on something."

Kids don't learn to read in a crèche. They don't learn letters or other preliteracy skills. What they do is socialize with other kids. In America, some parents mention this to me as a benefit of day care. In France, all parents do. "I knew that it was very good, it was an opening to social life," says my friend Esther, the lawyer, whose daughter entered a crèche at nine months old.

French parents take for granted that crèches are of universally high quality and that the members of their staffs are caring and highly skilled. In French parenting chat rooms, the most serious complaint I can find about a crèche is from a mother whose child was served ravioli along with moussaka, a similarly heavy dish. "I sent a letter to the crèche, and they responded to me, saying their regular chef was not

there,” she explains. She adds, darkly: “Let’s see what happens the rest of the week.”

This certainty that the crèche is good for kids erases a lot of maternal guilt and doubt. My friend Héléne, an engineer, didn’t work during the first few years after her youngest daughter was born. But she was never remotely apologetic about sending the little girl to the crèche five days a week. This was in part so that Héléne could have time to herself, but also because she didn’t want her daughter to miss out on the communal experience.

The main question people in France ask about day care is how to get more kids into it. Thanks to France’s current baby boom, you can’t run for public office in France—on the right or the left—without promising to build more crèches or expand existing ones. I read about a program to turn disused baggage areas in train stations into crèches for the children of commuters (much of the construction cost would go toward soundproofing).

Competition for the existing spots in a crèche is—as the French say—*énergique*. A committee of bureaucrats and crèche directors in each of Paris’s twenty arrondissements convenes to dole out their available spots. In the well-heeled 16th arrondissement there are four thousand applicants for five hundred spots. In our less rarefied area in eastern Paris the odds of getting a spot are one in three.

Scrambling for a spot in a crèche is one of the initiation rituals of new parenting. In Paris, women can officially begin petitioning the town hall when they’re six months pregnant. But magazines urge women to schedule a meeting with the director of their preferred crèche as soon as they have a positive pregnancy test.

Priority goes to single parents, multiple births, adoptees, households with three or more kids, or families with “particular difficulties.” How to fit into this last, ambiguous category is the topic of furious speculation in online forums. One mother advises writing to town hall officials about your urgent need to return to work and your epic but ultimately

failed efforts to find any other form of child care. She suggests copying<sup>13</sup> this letter to the regional governor and the president of France, then requesting a private audience with the district mayor. “You go there with the baby in your arms, looking desperate, and you retell the same story as in the letter,” she says. “I can assure you that this will work.”

Simon and I decide to work our only angle: being foreign. In a letter attached to our crèche application, we extol Bean’s budding multilingualism (she doesn’t actually speak yet) and describe how her Anglo-Americanism will enrich the crèche. As promised, Dietlind talks us up to the director of the crèche that her sons went to. I meet with this woman and try to project a mix of desperation and charm. I call the town hall once a month (for some reason, as with French couples, most of the crèche courting falls to me) to remind them of our “enormous interest and need for a spot.” Since I’m not French and can’t vote here, I decide not to bother the president.

Amazingly, these attempts to massage the process actually work. A congratulatory letter arrives from our town hall explaining that Bean has been assigned a spot in a crèche for mid-September, when she’ll be nine months old. I call Simon, triumphant: we foreigners have beaten the natives at their own game! We’re amazed and giddy from the victory. But we also have the feeling that we’ve won a prize that we don’t quite deserve and aren’t even sure we want.

*I still have* my doubts when we take Bean to her first day of crèche. It’s at the end of a dead-end street, in a three-story concrete building with a little Astroturf courtyard out front. It looks like a public school in America but with everything in miniature. I recognize some of the kids’ furniture from the Ikea catalog. It’s not fancy, but it’s cheerful and clean.

The kids are divided by age into sections called small, medium, and large. Bean’s class is in a sunlit room with play kitchens, tiny furniture,

and cubbyholes full of age-appropriate toys. Attached to the room is a glassed-in sleeping area where each child has his own crib, stocked with his pacifier and stuffed-animal companion, called a *doudou*.

Anne-Marie, who'll be Bean's main caregiver, greets us. (She's the same lady who gave haircuts to Dietlind's sons.) Anne-Marie is a grandmother in her sixties, with short blond hair and a rotating collection of printed T-shirts from places her charges have traveled to. (We'll eventually bring her one attesting to her love of Brooklyn.) Employees have worked at the crèche for an average of thirteen years. Anne-Marie has been there much longer. She and most of the other caregivers are trained as *auxiliaires de puériculture*, which has no exact American equivalent.

A pediatrician and a psychologist each visit the crèche once a week. The caregivers chart Bean's daily naps and poops, and report to me about how she's eaten. They feed the kids Bean's age one at a time, with the child either on someone's lap or in a bouncy seat. They put the kids down to sleep at roughly the same time each day and claim not to wake them up. For this initial adaptation period, Anne-Marie asks me to bring in a shirt that I've worn so that Bean can sleep with it. This feels a bit canine, but I do it.

I'm struck by the confidence that Anne-Marie and the other caregivers have. They're quite certain about what children of each age need, and they're equally confident in their abilities to provide this. They convey this without being smug or impatient. My one gripe is that Anne-Marie insists on calling me "mother of Bean" rather than Pamela; she says it's too difficult to learn the names of all the parents.

Given our doubts about day care, we've compromised by enrolling Bean just four days a week, from about nine thirty to three thirty. Plenty of her classmates will be there five days a week, for much longer each day. (The crèche is open from seven thirty to six.)

As in Marbeau's day, Bean is supposed to arrive with a clean diaper. This becomes an almost Talmudic point of discussion between Simon

and me. What constitutes "arrival"? If Bean poops on her way in the door, or while we're saying good-bye, who changes the offending diaper? Is it us, or the *auxiliaires*?

The first two weeks are an adaptation period, in which she stays for increasingly long periods at the crèche, with and without us. She cries a bit each time I leave, but Anne-Marie assures me that she quiets down soon after I go. Often one of the caregivers holds her up at the window facing the street so I can wave when I get outside.

If the crèche is damaging Bean, we can't tell. Pretty soon she's cheerful when we drop her off and happy when we pick her up. Once Bean has been at the crèche for a while, I begin to notice that the place is a microcosm of French parenting. That includes the bad stuff. Anne-Marie and the other caregivers are mystified that I'm still nursing Bean when she's nine months old and especially when I nurse her on the premises. They're not thrilled with my short-lived plan to drop off pumped breast milk before lunch each day, though they don't try to stop me.

But all the big, positive French parenting ideas are in evidence, too. Since there's so much agreement anyway on the best way to do things, French parents don't have to worry that the caregivers aren't following their personal parenting philosophy. For the most part, the caregivers reinforce the same schedule and habits as parents.

For example, the caregivers talk to even very young children all the time at the crèche, with what seems like perfect conviction that the children understand.<sup>5</sup> And there's a lot of talk about the *cadre*. At a parents' meeting, one of the teachers speaks almost poetically about it: "Everything is very *encadré*—built into a framework—the hour that they arrive and leave, for example. But inside this framework we try to introduce flexibility, fluidity and spontaneity, for the children and also for the [teaching] team."

Bean spends a lot of the day just ambling around the room, playing with whatever she wants. I'm concerned about this. Where are the

music circles and organized activities? I soon realize that all this freedom is by design. It's the French *cadre* model yet again: kids get firm boundaries, but lots of freedom within those boundaries. And they're supposed to learn to cope with boredom and to play by themselves. "When the child plays, he constructs himself," Sylvie, another of Bean's caregivers, tells me.

A mayor's report on Parisian crèches calls for a spirit of "energetic discovery," in which the children are "left to exercise their appetite for experimentation of their five senses, of using their muscles, of sensations, and of physical space." As kids get older they do have some organized activities, but no one is obliged to participate.

"We propose, we don't force," another of Bean's teachers explains. There's soothing background music to launch the kids into their naps and a pile of books that they can read in bed. The kids gradually wake up to their *goûter*, the afternoon snack. The crèche isn't the department of motor vehicles. It's more like Canyon Ranch.

In the playground there are few rules, also by design. The idea is to give kids as much freedom as possible. "When they're outside, we intervene very little," says Mehrie, another one of Bean's caregivers. "If we intervene all the time, they go a little nuts."

The crèche also teaches kids patience. I watch as a two-year-old demands that Mehrie pick her up. But Mehrie is cleaning up the table where the children have just had lunch. "For the moment I'm not free. You wait two seconds," Mehrie says gently to the little girl. Then she turns to me and explains: "We try to teach them to wait, it's very important. They can't have everything right away."

The caregivers speak calmly and respectfully to the kids, using the language of rights: you have the right to do this; you don't have the right to do that. They say this with that same utter conviction that I've heard in the voices of French parents. Everyone believes that for the *cadre* to seem immutable, it has to be consistent. "The prohibitions

are always consistent, and we always give a reason for them," Sylvie<sup>15</sup> tells me.

I know the crèche is strict about certain things because, after a while, Bean repeats phrases she's learned. We know they're "crèche" phrases because the teachers there are her only source of French. It's like she's been wearing a wire all day, and now we get to listen to the tape. Most of what Bean repeats is in the command form, like "*on va pas crier!*" (we're not going to scream). My rhyming favorites, which I immediately begin using at home, are "*couche-toi!*" (go to sleep) and "*mouche-toi!*" (blow your nose), said when you're holding a tissue up to a child's face.

For a while Bean speaks French *only* in the command form or in these declarations of what's permissible and what isn't. When she plays "teacher" at home, she stands on a chair, wags her finger, and shouts instructions to imaginary children, or occasionally to our surprised lunch guests.

Soon, in addition to commands, Bean is coming home with songs. She often sings one that we know only as "*tomola tomola, vatovi!*" in which she sings more and more loudly with each line, while making a spinning motion with her arms. It's only later that I learn this is one of the most popular French children's songs (which actually goes "*ton moulin, ton moulin va trop vite!*"), about a windmill that's going too fast.

*What really wins* us over about the crèche is the food, or, more specifically, the dining experience. Each Monday, the crèche posts its menu for the week on a giant white board near the entrance.

I sometimes photograph these menus and e-mail them to my mother. They read like the chalkboard menus at Parisian brasseries. Lunch is served in four courses: a cold vegetable starter, a main dish with a side

of grains or cooked vegetables, a different cheese each day, and a dessert of fresh fruit or fruit puree. There's a slightly modified version for each age group; the youngest kids mostly have the same foods, but pureed.

A typical menu starts with hearts of palm and tomato salad. This is followed by sliced turkey *au basilic* accompanied by rice in a Provençal cream sauce. The third course is a slice of St. Nectaire cheese with a slice of fresh baguette. Dessert is fresh kiwi.

An in-house cook at each crèche prepares lunch from scratch each day. A truck arrives several times a week with seasonal, fresh, sometimes even organic ingredients. Aside from the occasional can of tomato paste, nothing is processed or precooked. A few vegetables are frozen, but never precooked.

I have trouble imagining two-year-olds sitting through a meal like this, so the crèche lets me sit in on lunch one Wednesday, when Bean is home with a babysitter. I'm stunned when I realize how my daughter eats lunch most days. I sit quietly with my reporter's notebook while her classmates assemble in groups of four at square toddler-sized tables. One of her teachers wheels up a cart filled with covered serving plates and bread wrapped in plastic to keep it fresh. There's a teacher at each table.

First, the teacher uncovers and displays each dish. The starter is a bright-red tomato salad in vinaigrette. "This is followed by *le poisson*," she says, to approving glances, as she displays a flaky white fish in a light butter sauce and a side dish of peas, carrots, and onions. Next she previews the cheese course: "Today it's *le bleu*," she says, showing the kids a crumbly blue cheese. Then she shows them dessert: whole apples, which she'll slice at the table.

The food looks simple, fresh, and appetizing. Except for the melamine plates, the bite-sized pieces, and the fact that some of the diners have to be prodded to say "*merci*," I might be in a high-end restaurant.

*Just who are the people* taking care of Bean? To find out, I show up one windy fall morning at the annual entrance examination for ABC Puériculture, one of the schools that train crèche workers. There are hundreds of nervous women (and a few men) in their twenties, who are looking shyly at one another or doing last-minute practice questions in thick workbooks.

They're understandably anxious. Of the more than five hundred people who sit for this test, just thirty will be admitted to the training school. Applicants are grilled on reasoning, reading comprehension, math, and human biology. Those who advance to the second round face a psychological exam, an oral presentation, and interrogation by a panel of experts.

The thirty winners then do a year of coursework and internships, following a curriculum set by the government. They learn the basics of child nutrition, sleep, and hygiene, and practice mixing baby formula and changing diapers. They'll do additional weeklong trainings throughout their careers.

In France, working in day care is a career. There are schools all over the country with similarly rigorous entrance standards, creating an army of skilled workers to staff the crèches. Just half of caregivers at a crèche must be *auxiliaires* or have a similar degree. A quarter must have degrees related to health, leisure, or social work. A quarter are exempt from any qualifications but must be trained in-house.<sup>6</sup> At Bean's crèche, thirteen of the sixteen caregivers are *auxiliaires* or similar.

I start to see Anne-Marie and other caregivers at Bean's crèche as the Rhodes Scholars of baby care. And I understand their confidence. They've mastered a field and earned the respect of parents. And I'm indebted to them. During nearly three years that Bean is at the crèche, they potty-train her, teach her table manners, and give her a French immersion course.

By Bean's third year at the crèche, I suspect that the days are starting to feel long and that perhaps she's not being stimulated enough. I'm ready for her to move on to preschool. But Bean still seems to like the crèche. She chatters all the time about Maky and Lila (pronounced Lee-lah), her two best friends. (Interestingly, she's gravitated to other children of foreigners: Lila's parents are Moroccan and Japanese. Maky's dad is from Senegal.) She has definitely been socialized. When Simon and I take Bean to Barcelona for a long weekend, she keeps asking where the other children are.

The kids in Bean's section spend a lot of time running around and shouting in the AstroTurf courtyard, which is stocked with little scooters and carts. Bean is usually out there when I pick her up. As soon as she spots me, she bolts over and bursts happily into my arms, shouting the news of the day.

On Bean's last day at the crèche, after the good-bye party and the clearing-out of her locker, Bean gives a big hug and kiss good-bye to Sylvie, who's been her main caregiver. Sylvie has been the model of professionalism all year. But when Bean embraces her, Sylvie begins to cry. I cry, too.

*By the end* of crèche, Simon and I feel that Bean has had a good experience. But we did often feel guilty dropping her off each day. And we can't help but notice the drip of alarming headlines in the American press about how day care affects kids.

Continental Europeans aren't really asking about that anymore. Sheila Kamerman at Columbia says that Europeans pretty much take for granted that high-quality day care, with small groups and warm, well-trained caregivers who have made the job a career, are good for kids. And conversely, they assume that bad day care is bad for kids.

Americans have too many misgivings about day care to take this for

granted. So the U.S. government has funded the largest-ever study of how early child-care arrangements correlate with the way kids develop and behave later in life.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the headlines on day care in America come out of data from this giant study. One of its principal findings is that early child-care arrangements just aren't very significant. "Parenting quality is a much more important predictor of child development than type, quantity or quality of child care," explains a backgrounder. Children fared better when their parents were more educated and wealthier, when they had books and play materials at home, and when they had "enhancing experiences" like going to the library. This was the same whether the child went to day care for thirty or more hours a week, or had a stay-at-home mother.

And as I mentioned earlier, the study found that what's especially crucial is the mother's "sensitivity"—how attuned she is to her child's experience of the world. This is also true at day care. One of the study's researchers<sup>8</sup> writes that kids get "high-quality" day care when the caregiver is "attentive to [the child's] needs, responsive to her verbal and non-verbal signals and cues, stimulating of his curiosity and desire to learn about the world, and emotionally warm, supportive and caring."

Kids fared better with a caregiver who was sensitive, whether it was a nanny, a grandparent, or a day-care worker. "It would not be possible to go into a classroom and with no additional information, pick out which children had been in center care," the researcher writes.

I realize that what we Americans should be fretting about isn't just whether bad day care has bad outcomes (of course it does), but how unpleasant it is for kids to be in bad day care. We're so concerned about cognitive development that we're forgetting to ask whether children in day care are happy and whether it's a positive experience for them while it's happening. That's what French parents are talking about.

Even my mother gets used to the crèche. She starts calling it “the crèche,” instead of “day care,” which probably helps. The crèche certainly has benefits for us. We feel more like we’re part of France, or at least part of our neighborhood. Thankfully, we put our ongoing “to stay or not to stay in Paris” conversation on pause. We can’t really imagine moving someplace where we’d struggle to find decent, affordable child care. And we can see the next excuse for staying in France coming down the pike: the *école maternelle*, free public preschool, with spots for just about everyone.

Mostly, we like the French crèche because Bean likes it. She eats blue cheese, shares her toys, and plays “*tomate, ketchup*” (a French version of “duck, duck, goose”). Also, she has mastered the command form of French. She is a bit too aggressive: she likes to kick me in the shins. But I suspect that her anger comes from her father, anyway. I don’t think I can blame day care for any of her faults.

Maky and Lila are still Bean’s dear friends. Occasionally we even take Bean back to the crèche to stare through the gates at the children who are now playing in the courtyard. And every once in a while, out of nowhere, Bean turns to me and says, “Sylvie cried.” This was a place where she mattered.

## Chapter 7

## bébé au lait

Warming up to the crèche turned out to be easy. Warming up to the other mothers there wasn’t. I’m aware that American-style instant bonding between women doesn’t happen in France. I’ve heard that female friendships here start out slowly and can take years to ramp up. (Though once you’re finally “in” with a Frenchwoman, you’re supposedly stuck with her for life. American insta-friends can drop you anytime.)

I have managed to befriend a few Frenchwomen in the time I’ve now lived in Paris. But most either don’t have kids or live across town. I’d just assumed that I’d also meet some other moms in my neighborhood with kids the same age as Bean. In my fantasy, we’d swap recipes, organize picnics, and complain about our husbands. That’s how it happens in America. My own mother is still close with women she met in the playground when I was small.

So I’m unprepared when the French mothers at the crèche—who all live in my neighborhood and have age-appropriate kids—are practically indifferent to me. They barely say *bonjour* when we plop our toddlers down next to one another in the morning. I eventually learn the names of most of the kids in Bean’s classes. But even after a year or

it stressful?" It probably would have been a few weeks earlier. I'd have felt overpowered by them or too worried to enjoy it. There would have been shouting, which—since our balcony overlooks the courtyard—our neighbors would have heard.

But now that I'm the decider, at least a little bit, having three kids on the balcony with hot chocolate actually feels manageable. I even sit down and have a cup of coffee with them.

One morning I'm taking Leo to crèche by himself. (Simon and I have divided the morning duties.) As I'm riding down the elevator with Leo, I feel a sense of dread. I decide to tell him firmly that there will be no shouting in the courtyard. I present this new rule as if it has always existed. I explain it firmly, while looking into Leo's eyes. I ask him whether he understands, and then pause to give him a chance to reply. After a thoughtful moment, he says yes.

When we open the glass door and walk out into the courtyard, it's silent. There's no shouting or whining. There's just a very speedy little boy, tugging me along.

## Chapter 14

# let him live his life

One day, a notice goes up at Bean's school. It says that parents of students ages four to eleven can register their kids for a summer trip to the Hautes-Vosges, a rural region about five hours by car from Paris. The trip, *sans* parents, will last for eight days.

I can't imagine sending Bean, who's five, on an eight-day school holiday. She's never even spent more than a night alone at my mother's house. My own first overnight class trip, to SeaWorld, was when I was in junior high.

This trip is yet another reminder that while I can now use the subjunctive in French, and even get my kids to listen to me, I'll never actually be French. Being French means looking at a notice like this and saying, as the mother of another five-year-old next to me does, "What a shame. We already have plans then." None of the French parents find the idea of dispatching their four- and five-year-olds for a week of group showers and dormitory life to be at all alarming.

I soon discover that this school trip is just the beginning. I didn't go to sleepaway camp until I was ten or eleven. But in France, there are hundreds of different sleepaway *colonies de vacances* (vacation colonies) for kids as young as four. The younger kids typically go away for

seven or eight days to the countryside, where they ride ponies, feed goats, learn songs, and “discover nature.” For older kids, there are colonies that specialize in things like theater, kayaking, or astronomy.

It’s clear that giving kids a degree of independence, and stressing a kind of inner resilience and self-reliance, is a big part of French parenting. The French call this *autonomie* (autonomy). They generally aim to give children as much autonomy as they can handle. This includes physical autonomy, like the class trips. It also includes emotional separation, like letting them build their own self-esteem that doesn’t depend on praise from parents and other adults.

I admire a lot about French parenting. I’ve tried to absorb the French way of eating, of wielding authority, and of teaching my kids to entertain themselves. I’ve started speaking at length to babies and letting my kids just “discover” things for themselves, instead of pushing them to acquire skills. In moments of crisis and confusion, I often find myself asking: What would a French mother do?

But I have a harder time accepting certain parts of the French emphasis on autonomy, like the school trips. Of course I don’t want my kids to be too dependent on me. But what’s the rush? Must the push for autonomy start so young? And aren’t the French overdoing it a bit? In some cases, the drive to make kids self-reliant seems to clash with my most basic instincts to protect my kids and to make them feel good.

American parents tend to dole out independence quite differently. It’s only after I marry Simon, a European, that I realize I spent much of my childhood acquiring survival skills. You wouldn’t know it from looking at me, but I can shoot a bow and arrow, right a capsized canoe, safely build a fire on someone’s stomach, and—while treading water—convert a pair of blue jeans into an inflated life jacket.

As a European, Simon didn’t have this survivalist upbringing. He never learned how to pitch a tent or steer a kayak. He’d be hard-pressed to know which end of a sleeping bag to crawl into. In the wild he’d survive about fifteen minutes—and that’s only if he had a book.

The irony is, while I have all these faux pioneering skills, I learned them in tightly scheduled summer camps after my parents had signed disclaimers drawn up by lawyers in case I drowned. And that was before there were Webcams in classrooms and vegan, nut-free birthday cakes.

Despite their scouting badges and killer backhands, middle-class American kids are famously quite protected. “The current trend in parenting is to shield children from emotional or physical discomfort,” the American psychologist Wendy Mogel writes in *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*. Instead of giving kids freedom, the well-heeled parents Mogel counsels “try to armor [their kids] with a thick layer of skills by giving them lots of lessons and pressuring them to compete and excel.”

It’s not simply that Americans don’t emphasize autonomy. It’s that we’re not sure it’s a good thing. We tend to assume that parents should be physically present as much as possible, to protect kids from harm and to smooth out emotional turbulence for them. Simon and I have joked since Bean was born that we’ll just move with her to wherever she attends college. Then I see an article saying that some American colleges now hold “parting ceremonies” for the parents of incoming freshmen, to signal that the parents need to leave.

French parents don’t seem to have this fantasy of control. They want to protect their kids, but they aren’t obsessed with far-flung eventualities. When they’re traveling they don’t, as I do, e-mail their husband once a day to remind him to bolt the front door and to make sure that all the toilet lids are closed (so a child can’t fall in).

In France, the social pressure goes in the opposite direction. If a parent hovers too much or seems to micromanage his child’s experiences, someone else is apt to urge him to back off. My friend Sharon, the literary agent with two kids, explains: “Here there’s an argument about pushing a child to the max. Everyone will say, ‘You have to let children live their lives.’”

The French emphasis on autonomy comes all the way from Françoise Dolto. “The most important thing is that a child will be, in full security, autonomous as early as possible,” Dolto says in *The Major Stages of Childhood*. “The trap of the relationship between parents and children is not recognizing the true needs of the child, of which freedom is one . . . The child has the need to feel ‘loved in what he is becoming,’ sure of himself in a space, day by day more freely left to his own exploration, to his personal experience, and in his relations with those of his own age.”

Dolto is talking, in part, about leaving a child alone, safely, to figure things out for himself. She also means respecting him as a separate being who can cope with challenges. In Dolto’s view, by the time a child is six years old, he should be able to do everything in the house—and in society—that concerns him.<sup>1</sup>

The French way can be tough for even the most integrated Americans to accept. My friend Andi, an artist who’s lived in France for more than twenty years, says that when her older son was six she found out that he had an upcoming class trip.

“Everyone tells you how great it is, because in April there’ll be a *classe verte* (literally, a green class). And you say to yourself, ‘Hmm, what’s that? Oh, a field trip. And it’s a week? It lasts a week?’” At her son’s school, the trips are optional until first grade. After that, the whole class of twenty-five kids is expected to go on a weeklong trip with the teacher each spring.

Andi says that by American standards, she isn’t a particularly clingy mother. However, she couldn’t get comfortable with the “green class”—which was to be held near some salt marshes off the western coast of France. Her son had never even gone on a sleepover. Andi still corralled him into the shower each night. She couldn’t imagine him going to bed without her tucking him in. She liked his teacher, but she didn’t know the other adults who’d be supervising the trip. One was the teacher’s nephew. Another was a supervisor from the play-

ground. The third, Andi recalls, was just “this other person [the teacher] knows.”

When Andi told her three sisters in the United States about the trip, “they completely freaked out. They said, ‘You don’t have to do that!’ One’s a lawyer, and she’s like, ‘Did you sign anything?’” Andi says they were mainly worried about pedophiles.

At an informational meeting about the trip, another American mom from the class asked the teacher how she would cope with a scenario in which an electrical wire accidentally fell in the water and a child then walked into the water. Andi says the French parents snickered. She was relieved that she hadn’t asked the question, but she admits that it reflected her own “hidden neuroses.”

Andi’s own main concern—which she didn’t dare raise at the meeting—was what would happen if her son became sad or upset during the trip. When this happens at home, “I try to help him identify his emotions. If he started crying and he didn’t know why, I would say, ‘Are you scared, frustrated, are you angry?’ That was my thing. I was like, ‘Okay, we’re going to go through this together.’”

The French emphasis on autonomy extends beyond school trips. My heart regularly jumps when I’m walking around my neighborhood, because French parents will often let small kids race ahead of them on the sidewalk. They trust that the kids will stop at the corner and wait for them. Watching this is particularly terrifying when the kids are on scooters.

I live in a world of worst-case scenarios. When I run into my friend Hélène on the street and we stop to chat, she lets her three girls wander off a bit, toward the edge of the sidewalk. She trusts that they won’t suddenly dash into the street. Bean probably wouldn’t do that either. But just in case, I make her stand next to me and hold my hand. Simon reminds me that I once wouldn’t let Bean sit in the stands to watch him play soccer, in case she got hit by the ball.

There are many small moments in France when I’d expect to help

my kids along, but they're supposed to go it alone. By accident, I often run into the caregivers from the boys' crèche leading a group of toddlers down the street to buy the day's baguettes. It's not an official outing; it's just taking a few kids for a walk. Bean has been on school trips to the zoo or to a big park on the outskirts of Paris, which I learn about only by accident weeks later (when I happen to take her to the same zoo). I am rarely asked to sign waivers. French parents don't seem to worry that anything untoward might be happening on these trips.

When Bean has a recital for her dance class, I'm not even allowed backstage. I make sure she has a pair of white leggings, which is the only instruction that's been communicated to parents. I never speak to the teacher. Her relationship is with Bean, not with me. When we get to the theater, I just hand Bean over to an assistant, who shuttles her backstage.

For weeks Bean has been telling me, "I don't want to be a marionette." I wasn't sure what that meant, but it becomes clear as soon as the curtains open. Bean comes onstage in full costume and makeup, with a dozen other little girls, doing deliberately jolty arm and leg movements to a song called "Marionetta." Not deliberately, the girls are way out of synch with each other. They look like escaped marionettes who've had too much cognac.

But it's clear that Bean, without my knowledge, has memorized an entire ten-minute dance routine. When she comes out from backstage after the show, I gush about what a wonderful job she did. But she looks disappointed.

"I forgot to not be a marionette," she says.

French kids aren't just more independent in their extracurricular activities. They also have more autonomy in their dealings with each other. French parents seem slower to intervene in playground disputes or to mediate arguments between siblings. They expect kids to work these situations out for themselves. French schoolyards are famously free-for-alls, with teachers mostly watching from the sidelines.

When I pick up Bean from preschool one afternoon, she has ~~just~~ come from the schoolyard and has a red gash on her cheek. It's not deep, but it's bleeding. She won't tell me what happened (though she doesn't seem concerned, and she isn't in pain). Her teacher claims not to know what happened. I'm practically in tears by the time I question the director of the school, but she doesn't know anything about it either. They all seem surprised that I'm making such a fuss.

My mother happens to be visiting, and she can't believe this nonchalance. She says that a similar injury in America would prompt official inquiries, calls home, and lengthy explanations.

For French parents, such events are upsetting, but they aren't Shakespearean tragedies. "In France we like it when kids brawl a bit," the journalist and author Audrey Goutard tells me. "It's the part of us that's a bit French and a bit Mediterranean. We like that our children know how to defend their territory and quarrel a bit with other children . . . We're not bothered by a certain violence between children."

Bean's reluctance to say how she got the gash probably reflects another aspect of the autonomy ethos. "Telling" on another child—known in French as *rapporter contre*—is viewed very badly. People theorize that this is because of all the lethal informing on neighbors that went on during World War II. At the annual meeting of my apartment's building association, many of whose members were alive during the war, I ask if anyone knows who's been tipping over our stroller in the lobby.

"We don't *rapporter*," an older woman says. Everyone laughs.

Americans don't like tattletales, either. However, in France, even among kids, having the inner resolve to suffer some scrapes and keep your lips sealed is considered a life skill. Even within families, people are entitled to their secrets.

"I can have secrets with my son that he can't tell his mother," Marc, the French golfer, tells me. I see a French movie in which a well-known

economist picks up his teenage daughter at a Parisian police station after she's been brought in for shoplifting and possessing marijuana. On the drive home, she defends herself by saying that at least she didn't rat on the friend who was with her.

This don't-tell culture creates solidarity among kids. They learn to rely on one another and on themselves, rather than rushing to parents or school authorities for backup. There certainly isn't the same reverence for truth at any cost. Marc and his American wife, Robynne, tell me about a recent case in which their son Adrien, who's now ten, saw another student setting off firecrackers at school. There was a big inquiry. Robynne urged Adrien to tell the school authorities what he'd seen. Marc advised him to consider the other boy's popularity and whether he could beat Adrien up.

"You have to calculate the risks," Marc says. "If the advantage is not to do anything, he should do nothing. I want my son to analyze things."

I see this emphasis on making kids learn their own lessons when I'm renovating our apartment. Like all the American parents I know, I'm eager for everything to be rigorously childproof. I choose rubber flooring for the kids' bathroom, lest they slip on wet tile. I also insist that every appliance has a kidproof lock and that the oven door is the type that doesn't get hot.

My contractor, Régis, an earthy, roguish fellow from Burgundy, thinks I'm nuts. He says the way to "childproof" an oven is to let the kid touch it once and realize that it's hot. Régis refuses to install rubber floors in the bathroom, saying that they would look terrible. I concede, but only when he also mentions the apartment's resale value. I don't budge on the oven.

*On the day* that I read an English story to Bean's class at maternelle, the teacher gives a brief English lesson beforehand. She points to a

pen and asks the kids to say the pen's color in English. In response, a four-year-old boy says something about his shoes.

"That has nothing to do with the question," the teacher tells him.

I'm taken aback by this response. I would have expected the teacher to find something positive to say, no matter how far off the subject the answer is. I come from the American tradition of, as the sociologist Annette Lareau describes it, "treating each child's thought as a special contribution."<sup>2</sup> By crediting kids for even the most irrelevant comments, we try to give them confidence and make them feel good about themselves.

In France, that kind of parenting is very conspicuous. I see this when I take the kids to the inground trampolines in the Tuileries gardens, next to the Louvre. Each child jumps on his own trampoline inside a gated area while parents watch from the surrounding benches. But one mom has brought a chair inside the gates and parked it directly in front of her son's trampoline. She shouts "Whoa!" each time he jumps. I know, even before I approach to eavesdrop further, that she must be an Anglophone like me.

I know this because, although I manage to restrain myself at the trampolines, I feel compelled to say "Whee!" each time one of my kids goes down a slide. This is shorthand for "I see you doing this! I approve! You're wonderful!" Likewise, I praise even their worst drawings and artwork. I feel that I must, to boost their self-esteem.

French parents also want their kids to feel good about themselves and "*bien dans leur peau*" (comfortable in their own skin). But they have a different strategy for bringing this about. It's in some ways the opposite of the American strategy. They don't believe that praise is always good.

The French believe that kids feel confident when they're able to do things for themselves, and do those things well. After children have learned to talk, adults don't praise them for saying just anything. They praise them for saying interesting things, and for speaking well. Soci-

ologist Raymonde Carroll says French parents want to teach their children to verbally “defend themselves well.” She quotes an informant who says, “In France, if the child has something to say, others listen to him. But the child can’t take too much time and still retain his audience; if he delays, the family finishes his sentences for him. This gets him in the habit of formulating his ideas better before he speaks. Children learn to speak quickly, and to be interesting.”

Even when French kids do say interesting things—or just give the correct answer—French adults are decidedly understated in response. They don’t act like every job well done is an occasion to say “good job.” When I take Bean to the free health clinic for a checkup, the pediatrician asks her to do a wooden puzzle. Bean does it. The doctor looks at the finished puzzle and then does something I’m not constitutionally capable of: practically nothing. She mutters the faintest “*bon*”—more of a “let’s move on” than a “good”—then proceeds with the checkup.

Not only don’t teachers and authority figures in France routinely praise children to their faces but, to my great disappointment, they also don’t routinely praise children to their parents. I had hoped this was a quirk of Bean’s rather sullen first-year teacher. The following year she has two alternating teachers. One is a dynamic, extremely warm young woman named Marina, with whom Bean has an excellent rapport. But when I ask Marina how things are going, she says that Bean is “*très compétente*.” (I type this into Google Translate, to make sure I haven’t missed some nuance of *compétente* that might suggest brilliance. It just means “competent.”)

It’s good that my expectations are low when Simon and I have a midsemester meeting with Agnès, Bean’s other teacher. She, too, is lovely and attentive. And yet she also seems reluctant to label Bean or make any general statements about her. She simply says, “Everything is fine.” Then she shows us the one worksheet—out of dozens—that Bean had trouble finishing. I leave the meeting having no idea of how Bean ranks against her peers.

After the meeting, I’m miffed that Agnès didn’t mention anything that Bean has done well. Simon points out that in France, that’s not a teacher’s job. Rather, Agnès’s role is to discover problems. If the child is struggling, the parents need to know. If the child is coping, there’s nothing more to say.

This focus on the negative, rather than on trying to boost kids’—and parents’—morales with positive reinforcement, is a well-known (and often criticized) feature of French schools. It’s almost impossible to get a perfect score on the French *baccalauréat*, the final exams at the end of high school. A score of 14:20 (14 out of a possible 20) is considered excellent, and 16:20 is almost like getting a perfect score.<sup>3</sup>

Through friends I meet Benoît, who’s a father of two and a professor at one of France’s elite universities. Benoît says his high-school-aged son is an excellent student. However, the most positive comment a teacher ever wrote on one of his papers was *des qualités* (some good qualities). Benoît says French teachers don’t grade their students on a curve, but rather against an ideal, which practically no one meets.<sup>4</sup> Even for an outstanding paper, “the French way would be to say ‘correct, not too bad, but this and this and this and this are wrong.’”

By high school, Benoît says there’s little value placed on letting students express their feelings and opinions. “If you say, ‘I love this poem because it makes me think of certain experiences I had,’ that’s completely wrong . . . What you’re taught in high school is to learn to reason. You’re not supposed to be creative. You’re supposed to be articulate.”

When Benoît took a temporary posting at Princeton, he was surprised when students accused him of being a harsh grader. “I learned that you had to say some positive things about even the worst essays,” he recalls. In one incident, he had to justify giving a student a D. Conversely, I hear that an American who taught at a French high school got complaints from parents when she gave grades of 18:20 and 20:20.

The parents assumed that the class was too easy and that the grades were “fake.”

All this criticism can intimidate kids. A girlfriend of mine who went to French schools until she moved to Chicago for high school, remembers being shocked by how American students spoke up confidently in class. She says that unlike in her French schools, students weren't immediately criticized for being wrong or for asking dumb questions. Another friend, a French physician who lives in Paris, tells me excitedly about the new yoga class she's taking, taught by an American woman. “She keeps telling me how well I'm doing and how beautiful I am!” she says of the teacher. In her many years of French schooling, my friend had probably never gotten so much praise.

*In general*, the French parents I know are a lot more supportive than French teachers. They do praise their kids and give them positive reinforcement. Even so, they don't slather on praise, the way we Americans do.

I'm starting to suspect that French parents may be right in giving less praise. Perhaps they realize that those little zaps of pleasure kids get each time a grown-up says “good job” could—if they arrive too often—simply make kids addicted to positive feedback. After a while, they'll need someone else's approval to feel good about themselves. And if kids are assured of praise for whatever they do, then they won't need to try very hard. They'll be praised anyway.

Since I'm American, what really convinces me is the research. Praise seems to be yet another realm in which French parents are doing—through tradition and intuition—what the latest scientific studies suggest.

In their 2009 book *NurtureShock*, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman write that the old conventional wisdom that “praise, self-esteem and performance rise and fall together” has been toppled by new re-

search showing that “excessive praise . . . distorts children's motivations; they begin doing things merely to hear the praise, losing sight of the intrinsic enjoyment.”<sup>25</sup>

Bronson and Merryman point to research showing that when heavily praised students get to college, they “become risk-averse and lack perceived autonomy.” These students “commonly drop out of classes rather than suffer a mediocre grade, and they have a hard time picking a major. They're afraid to commit to something because they're afraid of not succeeding.”<sup>25</sup>

This research also refutes the conventional American wisdom that when kids fail at something, parents should cushion the blow with positive feedback. A better tack is to gently delve into what went wrong, giving kids the confidence and the tools to improve. French schools may be a bit harsh, especially in the later years. But this is exactly what Bean's French teachers were doing, and it certainly reflects what French parents believe.

The French seem to proceed through parenting using a kind of scientific method, to test what works and what doesn't. In general, they are unmoved by ideas about what *should* work on their kids and clear-sighted about what actually does work. What they conclude is that some praise is good for a child, but that if you praise her too much, you're not letting her live her life.

Over the winter holidays I bring Bean back to the United States. At a family gathering, she starts putting on a one-child show, which mostly involves acting like a teacher and giving the grown-ups orders. It's cute but, frankly, not brilliant. Yet gradually, every adult in the room stops to watch and to remark on how adorable Bean is. (She wisely drops in some French phrases and songs, knowing that these always impress.)

By the time the show is over, Bean is beaming as she soaks up all the praise. I think it's the highlight of her visit. I'm beaming, too. I interpret the praise for her as praise for me, which I've been starving

for in France. All through dinner afterward, everyone talks—within earshot of both of us—about how terrific the show was.

This is great on vacation. But I'm not sure I'd want Bean to get that kind of unconditional praise all the time. It feels good, but it seems to come bundled with other things, including letting a child constantly interrupt because she's bursting with a sense of her own importance. It might also throw off Bean's internal calibration of what's truly entertaining and what's not.

*I've accepted that* if we stay in France, my kids probably won't ever learn to shoot a bow and arrow. (God forbid they're ever attacked by eighteenth-century American Indians.) I've even toned down my praise a bit. But adjusting to the overarching French view on autonomy is a lot harder. Of course I know that my children have an emotional life that's separate from mine, and that I can't constantly protect them from rejection and disappointment. Nevertheless, the idea that they have their lives and I have mine doesn't reflect my emotional map. Or maybe it just doesn't suit my emotional needs.

Still, I have to admit that my kids seem happiest when I trust them to do things for themselves. I don't hand them knives and tell them to go carve a watermelon. They mostly know when things are way beyond their abilities. But I do let them stretch a bit, even if it's just to carry a breakable plate to the dinner table. After these small achievements, they're calmer and happier. Dolto is most certainly right that autonomy is one of a child's most basic needs.

She also may be right about age six being the threshold. One night, I'm sick with the flu and keeping Simon awake with my coughing. I retreat to the couch in the middle of the night. When the kids march into the living room at about seven thirty A.M., I can hardly move. I don't start my usual routine of putting out breakfast.

So Bean does. I lie on the couch, still wearing my eyeshades. In the

background I hear her opening drawers, setting the table, and getting out the milk and cereal. She's five and a half years old. And she's taken my job. She's even subcontracted some of it to Joey, who's organizing the silverware.

After a few minutes, Bean comes over to me on the couch. "Breakfast is ready, but you have to do the coffee," she says. She's calm, and very pleased. I'm struck by how happy—or more specifically how *sage*—being autonomous makes her feel. I haven't praised or encouraged her. She's just done something new for herself, with me as a witness, and is feeling very good about it.

Dolto's idea that I should trust my children, and that trusting and respecting them will make them trust and respect me, is very appealing. In fact, it's a relief. The clutch of mutual dependency and worry that often seems to bind American parents to their kids feels inevitable at times, but it never feels good. It doesn't seem like the basis for the best parenting.

Letting children "live their lives" isn't about releasing them into the wild or abandoning them (though French school trips do feel a bit like that to me). It's about acknowledging that children aren't repositories for their parents' ambitions or projects for their parents to perfect. They are separate and capable, with their own tastes, pleasures, and experiences of the world. They even have their own secrets.

My friend Andi ended up letting her older son go on that trip to the salt marshes. She says he loved it. It seems he didn't need to be tucked in every night; it was Andi who needed to do the tucking. When it was time for Andi's younger son to start taking the same class trips, she just let him go.

Maybe I'll get used to these trips, though I haven't signed up Bean for one yet. My friend Esther proposes that we send our daughters off together to a *colonie de vacance* next summer, when they'll be six years old. I find this hard to imagine. I want my kids to be self-reliant, resilient, and happy. I just don't want to let go of their hands.



Edited by David Leonhardt

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## The Upshot

# The Economic Benefits of Paid Parental Leave

JAN. 30, 2015

Economic View

By **CLAIRE CAIN MILLER**

When Larisa Casillas gave birth to a boy two years ago, the Bay Area nonprofit organization where she worked gave her only four weeks of paid leave. But she took more than that, including 12 weeks paid by California’s state family leave program, one of the few of its kind in the nation.

Ms. Casillas said the extra time was essential for bonding with her son, meeting other mothers and staving off postpartum depression. “Honestly, without that income support, I wouldn’t have made it,” she said.

If President Obama has his way, paid leave for new parents and people caring for ailing relatives will become national policy. Last month, he gave federal employees the right to take six weeks of paid leave when they become parents. And in his State of the Union address, Mr. Obama framed paid leave as a crucial economic matter.

“It’s time we stop treating child care as a side issue or a women’s issue, and

treat it like the national economic priority that it is,” he said. Paid leave could help increase the percentage of women in the work force, he said, and help middle-class families earn stable incomes.

On the other hand, opponents of paid leave say it is an economic burden that can be expensive for businesses, which do not need more mandates from the government on how to operate their enterprises.

What are the true economic effects of paid leave? Real-life experiments are underway in three states that already have operational paid leave programs: California, New Jersey and Rhode Island. Their experiences — particularly California’s, where the policy is a decade old — offer some answers. (New Jersey’s started in 2009 and Rhode Island’s last year.)

Economists have found that with paid leave, more people take time off, particularly low-income parents who may have taken no leave or dropped out of the work force after the birth. Paid leave raises the probability that mothers return to employment later, and then work more hours and earn higher wages. Paid leave does not necessarily help businesses — but it does not seem to hurt them, either.

“For workers who use these programs, they are extremely beneficial,” said Ruth Milkman, a sociologist at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. “And the business lobby’s predictions about how these programs are really a big burden on employers are not accurate.”

The Obama plan would provide six weeks of paid leave — very little compared with other industrialized countries. Britain gives 52 weeks of leave, most of it paid, for instance. At the moment, though, only 11 percent of American workers have access to paid family leave, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The Family and Medical Leave Act gives workers 12 weeks of unpaid leave, but only about half of employees are eligible.

For mothers, social scientists say, the benefits of paid leave go well beyond the fact that newborns need round-the-clock care and mothers need time to recover from childbirth.

In California, for example, the paid leave law doubled typical maternity leaves to six to seven weeks, according to a study by three researchers, Maya Rossin-Slater, Christopher J. Ruhm and Jane Waldfogel. The increases were striking for unmarried and nonwhite women and those without a college degree, who have

been less likely to work at companies with paid leave. Leave-taking among high school graduates rose 8 percentage points and 12 points among black mothers. Among college-educated and white mothers, by contrast, it rose by a statistically insignificant amount.

“The punch line is it reduces disparities in leave-taking between low and high socioeconomic groups, and does so without damaging these women’s later labor market prospects,” said Ms. Rossin-Slater, an assistant professor of economics at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Still, only 36 percent of California voters were aware of the state’s program, a Field Poll in October found. Awareness has declined among nonwhite, noncollege-educated and female voters — exactly the people who benefit most from the policy.

Mothers in California who took leave were 6 percent more likely to be working a year later than those who did not, according to another study co-written by Mr. Ruhm of the University of Virginia. That matters because the percentage of women who work in the United States has been declining.

In New Jersey, in the year after giving birth, women who take paid leave have been about 40 percent less likely to receive public aid or food stamps, a Rutgers study commissioned by the National Partnership for Women and Families found.

Women who took leave and returned to their jobs worked 15 to 20 percent more hours during the second year of their child’s life than those who did not take leave, Mr. Ruhm found, and their hourly wages increased about 5 percent.

Jennie Pasquarella, who took paid leave from her job at a Los Angeles nonprofit organization when she had twin boys a year and a half ago, said the time off was an enormous help. “I was not sleeping for most of that period, so if the circumstances were different and I would have had to go back earlier, I don’t know how I would be able to properly function at work.”

The three states that offer paid family leave finance it through payroll taxes that pay into the states’ existing temporary disability insurance programs. Another state, Washington, which does not have temporary disability insurance, approved paid family leave in 2007 but has not started the program for financial reasons. At California companies, many of which lobbied against the law, fears about its effects have not played out. From 89 percent to 99 percent of employers say it has had no effect or a positive one on productivity, profitability, turnover and morale,

according to a report by Ms. Milkman and Eileen Appelbaum, an economist at the Center for Economic and Policy Research. Eighty-seven percent say it has not increased costs. Nine percent say they saved money, because of decreased turnover or benefit payments.

Still, social scientists say, leaves can backfire on workers if employers penalize them by denying promotions or raises.

In short, a paid leave law helps, but it is not enough. There must also be changes in public awareness and workplace culture. But a national policy would be a step in that direction.

***Correction: January 30, 2015***

*An earlier version of this article incorrectly described the leave given Larisa Casillas. She received one month of paid leave, not zero months. An earlier photo caption with this article misspelled the surname of the woman who took paid leave from her job at a Los Angeles nonprofit organization. She is Jennie Pasquarella, not Pasquerella.*

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Edited by David Leonhardt

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## The Upshot

NONEMPLOYED

# Why U.S. Women Are Leaving Jobs Behind

DEC. 12, 2014

By **Claire Cain Miller** and **Liz Alderman**

Since Kerry Devine, 32, and her friends began having children, she has noticed a stark difference between her female friends in Auburn, Wash., where she lives, and those in England and Cyprus, where she grew up. In the United States, they almost all stopped working outside the home, at least until their children were in school. Yet, she says, she can't think of a friend in Europe who left work after her children were born.

Ms. Devine quit her job after she had her first child, a girl, four years ago, because she thought 12 weeks of maternity leave was too short. "I just didn't want to leave her in day care or pay for the expenses of it," she said. When she gave birth to twin boys this year, a return to work — she had been a property manager for apartment buildings — looked even less plausible.

Her story would have played out differently, she said, if she had been living in her native England. Like many European countries, Britain offers a year of maternity leave, much of it paid, and protections for part-time workers, among other policies aimed at keeping women employed.

“I would have been O.K. putting a 1-year-old baby in day care, but not a 12-week-old,” Ms. Devine said. “More flexible hours and being able to work from home part of the time definitely would have made a big difference.”

Her thinking is shared by many American women — and plays a role in a significant economic reversal. As recently as 1990, the United States had one of the top employment rates in the world for women, but it has now fallen behind many European countries. After climbing for six decades, the percentage of women in the American work force peaked in 1999, at 74 percent for women between 25 and 54. It has fallen since, to 69 percent today.

In many other countries, however, the percentage of working women has continued to climb. Switzerland, Australia, Germany and France now outrank the United States in prime-age women’s labor force participation, as do Canada and Japan.

While the downturn and the weak economy of recent years have eliminated many of the jobs women held, a lack of family-friendly policies also appears to have contributed to the lower rate. In a New York Times/CBS News/Kaiser Family Foundation poll of nonworking adults aged 25 to 54 in the United States, conducted last month, 61 percent of women said family responsibilities were a reason they weren’t working, compared with 37 percent of men. Of women who identify as homemakers and have not looked for a job in the last year, nearly three-quarters said they would consider going back if a job offered flexible hours or allowed them to work from home.

The poll also showed a stark difference between the experiences of nonworking women and men. Although the numbers of both have risen in the last 15 years, many more women appear to be in a better position to re-enter the work force. Women are much more likely to have left their last job voluntarily and less likely to say they suffer from health problems that keep them from working.

But the experience of not working is also considerably more positive for women than men, the poll shows, which means that women are often not desperate to return to work. Women are more likely to say that not working has improved their romantic relationships, while men are more likely to say those relationships have suffered. Women who aren’t working spend more time exercising than they once did. Men spend less.

Still, many women also seem interested in working again — under the right conditions. And near the top of the list of those requirements is the flexibility to avoid upending their family life. Many fewer women than men said they would be willing to take a job with trade-offs that might significantly affect their lives: moving to a different city, commuting more than an hour each way, or working nontraditional hours. Notably, women with children at home account for many of the differences. Women without children often have attitudes about unemployment that are more similar to men's, the poll shows.

For many women with children, it seems, the decision about work involves weighing a particularly complex set of benefits and drawbacks. And often the challenge is insurmountable in part because there is a dearth of programs and policies in the United States to support women in their prime career and childbearing years. In Europe, meanwhile, such policies have continued to expand and evolve in recent years. They include subsidized child care, generous parental leaves and taxation of individuals instead of families, which encourages women's employment. Social acceptance of working motherhood has also made a difference in countries like France, where the birthrate has risen even as more women enter the work force.

“Equality, both in the larger society, but also in the family, seems to be advanced by having women work outside the home,” said Francine Blau, an economist at Cornell University.

That is not to say, however, that Europe has achieved workplace equality. The same policies that enable women to work in large numbers can also hold them back from reaching senior-level jobs. They become stuck in part-time work or fall behind during long leaves. Women are less likely to work in the United States, according to Ms. Blau's research, but when they do, they tend to be more successful.

The steepest declines in work-force participation were among unmarried, childless women. They are more likely to be young and unskilled, the people for whom job opportunities are scarcest regardless of sex, said Robert Moffitt, an economist at Johns Hopkins University.

But the reversal in the employment rate of prime-age women, most of whom have children, has been more surprising.

At the upper end of the economic ladder, said Pamela Stone, a sociologist at

Hunter College who studies gender and employment, the rapid increase in hours “has made it tough, and at the same time we have seemingly unending pressures on parents.”

Among less-educated and lower-income women, the stresses of trying to work and raise children are particularly challenging.

“It’s tougher and tougher for women to make it worthwhile to work,” Ms. Stone said. “For low- and middle-income families, it literally isn’t worth going to work if the cost of child care exceeds what you’d bring in, and that calculus is exacerbated in an economic downturn.”

Of American women who are not working, according to the Times/CBS/Kaiser poll, 17 percent did not graduate from high school and 77 percent did not graduate from college. Just 7 percent have a graduate degree.

Nearly a third of the relative decline in women’s labor-force participation in the United States, compared with European countries, can be explained by Europe’s expansion of policies like paid parental leave, part-time work and child care and the lack of those policies in the United States, according to a study by Ms. Blau and Lawrence Kahn, also of Cornell. Had the United States had the same policies, they calculated, women’s labor force participation rate would have been seven percentage points higher by 2010.

Starting in the 1970s, people began marrying later, having fewer children and divorcing more often, so women invested more in their education and careers. “Women could be more serious in college, plan for an independent future and form their identities before marriage and family,” Claudia Goldin, a Harvard economist, wrote in a history of women’s economic roles.

But some attitudes in the United States have also stalled since the feminist revolution. A Pew Research Centersurvey from 2007 reported that 41 percent of adults say it is bad for society when mothers with young children work and just 22 percent say it is good. A recent Harvard Business School study found that among its graduates in their 20s, men expected that their careers would be more important than their wives’ and that they would do less child care, while women expected equality. Because of these conflicting attitudes, women sometimes feel unable to work even if they want to, said Ms. Stone, an author of the Harvard study. “Often the best they can do is not what they prefer, but what’s available to them.”

Raquell Heredia, who is 27 and lives in Fontana, Calif., is an example. She is not working but wishes she were. “I just like working with people,” she said. “I like being able to provide for my family.”

After she became pregnant two years ago, she had severe morning sickness. She had no sick leave and had to quit her job as a waitress and bartender. When her first child, who is now 9, was born, she was working at a pharmacy, but left because it provided little maternity leave and no place to pump breast milk.

“I think that they should make it a lot easier, like for parents to have holidays off with their kids,” she said.

Women in France, meanwhile, tell a different story. In numerous interviews, they said the system supported them as they tried to keep their careers after having children.

“If you want to work full time, everything is there in France to make that possible,” said Abbey Ansart, 36, a strategic consultant at an American software company in Paris who has three children. “I couldn’t have had the career in the U.S. that I have here.”

Like every mother in France, Delphine Dubost, a public-school teacher in Paris, was required to take a month and a half off before the births of her children. She was also able to take two and a half months of maternity leave afterward, all while receiving her full paycheck. After her second child, the law permitted her to work 80 percent of full time without a salary cut. She enrolled her children in France’s state-run day care system where, for about \$740 a month, children receive organic meals and even diapers. “It was great,” she said. “You can keep working, but can also spend time with your children.”

The employment decline in the United States is especially striking, because it has long preferred flexible labor markets — rather than extensive benefits, like those in Europe — in the name of job growth. Europe’s long list of regulations and benefits, including family leave policies, still seem to be exacting a cost on the Continent’s economies. But it’s now clear the American approach has its costs, too: The free market leaves many families, particularly many women, struggling to find a solution that combines work and home life.

The policies that give European parents generous leaves and free diapers also influence attitudes.

“It is very intuitive that the fact that they provide more generous work-family policies and that they have been expanding these policies in recent years is one reason they have moved ahead of the U.S.,” Ms. Blau said.

In the United States, Congress passed a law in 1993 giving certain employees 12 weeks of unpaid family leave. That was the last major piece of family-friendly federal legislation. But many European countries, which have long had paid parental leave, have expanded such policies since 1990. They have also expanded subsidized child care and passed laws giving workers the right to demand a part-time schedule and prohibiting employers from discriminating against part-time workers.

These policies have been crucial for retaining mothers in the labor force. In a majority of countries in the eurozone, 20 to 40 percent of jobs held by women are part time, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

There is a flip side to these policies. Part-time jobs are often low-paid, with little opportunity for advancement. “From a gender-equality perspective, there are problems with this,” said Willem Adema, a senior economist in the O.E.C.D.’s social policy division in Paris. “It’s a sign of relatively limited access to good-quality jobs.”

The study by Ms. Blau and Mr. Kahn found that while men and women were equally likely to be managers in the United States, women were half as likely as men to be managers in Europe. The combined executive committees of the 40 biggest French blue-chip-listed companies have only 45 women. None of those companies have a female chief executive.

“Upward mobility is still not equal today,” said Muriel Pénicaud, chairwoman and chief executive of the Invest in France Agency and a former executive at Danone, the French food giant.

Daria Ostaptschuk had been in a diplomatic position with the O.E.C.D. in Paris when her child was born 10 years ago. When she returned to work part time, “my chances were not so good in advancing my career,” she said. “The trade-off is you are getting squeezed as a half-time worker, plus you don’t get the good jobs.” She now runs her own translation business.

The wage gap between men and women has shrunk in the United States and in

a number of European countries since the mid-1990s. But it hasn't budged in France — and has grown in Italy and Portugal.

Sometimes, cultural attitudes hold back working mothers. In Germany, labor market reforms in the 1990s led to more mothers entering the work force. But a cultural backlash rose in some corners against mothers who chose to spend time at work; a derogatory nickname — Rabenmutter, or “raven mothers” — was coined for those who pushed their children out of the house into day care.

Policy makers and employers in Europe and the United States seem to be making a calculation: Either keep a growing share of women employed or allow them good jobs and promising career paths. Neither seems to have figured out how to consistently do both.

There are signs that some American women, particularly college-educated ones, may be figuring out a new solution. They seem to be taking time out of the work force when they have children and returning when those children are older, according to data from Ms. Goldin at Harvard. That is certainly what many women would like to do. Of those women who are out of work and identify as homemakers in the Times/CBS/Kaiser poll, 67 percent said it was likely that they would be working five years from now.

Charlotte Mayo, 51, may be one of them. She left her job as a factory worker in her late 30s, when she began fertilization treatments. “I see a lot of middle-aged and older women becoming parents now, and they leave,” she said. She now stays home in Pomfret, Conn., with her 10-year-old twins, but said she would consider returning to work when they were older.

The plan is a gamble. Ms. Devine, the British mother who lives in Washington State with three children under 5 years old, would like to return to school to switch careers to a medical field like radiography when they are of school age. But she is pragmatic about it. “I don't know if I'm hireable anymore,” she said, “because I've been out of the work force for so long.”

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A version of this article appears in print on December 14, 2014, on page BU1 of the New York edition with the headline: The Flexibility Gap.

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## Geography

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### Managing population change

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#### Case study: pro-natalist policy in France

Many areas of Europe have a low *fertility rate* because of the following reasons:

**education** - people are more aware of the availability of contraception and consequences an unplanned pregnancy can have on their career

**women in careers** - Women may choose to follow their career choice rather than start a family while young

**later marriages**

**state benefits** - couples no longer need children to help care for them when older

France was a country with concerns that professional women were choosing not to have children. The government were worried that the population was not going to replace itself over time.

The policies that were put in place to encourage three-children families were:

a cash incentive of £675 monthly (nearly the minimum wage) for a mother to stay off work for one year following the birth of her third child  
the 'carte famille nombreuse' (large family card), giving large reductions on train fares

income tax based on the more children the less tax to pay

three years paid parental leave, which can be used by mothers or fathers

government subsidised daycare for children under the age of three, and full time school places for over threes paid for by the government

This has resulted in mothers considering having children and remaining in work. The *fertility rate* in France is one of Europe's highest.

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## fertility rate

The average number of babies born to each woman.

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# French birth rate falls below two children per woman

Tue, Jan 14 2014

PARIS (Reuters) - France's birth rate fell under the symbolically important bar of two children per woman and the country saw its lowest population growth in a decade in 2013, data showed on Tuesday in a blow to one of its economic strengths.

The population reached 66 million inhabitants on January 1 2014, up by 280,000 residents or 0.4 percent from the previous year. That was its weakest growth rate since 2000, a census by the INSEE statistics office showed.

The total fertility rate (TFR) fell to 1.99 children per woman in 2013 from 2.01 in 2012 and 2.03 in 2010. A rate of 2.1 children per woman is considered necessary to keep the population growing excluding migration.

While France remains the second most fertile nation in the European Union after Ireland, which had a TFR of 2.05 in 2011, the drop suggests that Europe's number two economy may be losing what has long been seen as a key strength.

Unlike EU economic powerhouse Germany, whose economy is heavily oriented toward exports, the French model has long emphasized domestic consumption supported by strong population growth as the main driver of its economy.

Pro-fertility policies such as free post-natal care, subsidized daycare, allowances for each child born and discounts on a range of services for large families have held up steady population growth in the post-war period.

But a fall in births, coupled with a rise in deaths, hints that France may be converging with more moderate growth rates like that of Britain, with a TFR of 1.98 in 2011, though it remains above fast shrinking countries like Hungary and Poland.

Unemployment stuck around 11 percent and high taxes hit household budgets hard in the past year, squeezing spending. Households' real gross disposable income fell 0.1 percent in the third quarter of 2013, data showed.

INSEE said an increase in the number of women over 40 years old had contributed to a drop in births, which fell to 810,000 in 2013, down 11,000 from 2012, while the number of deaths had risen slightly to 572,000, INSEE said.

Both Italy and Germany - with respective TFRs of 1.41 and 1.36 in 2011 - are grappling with population decline that is seen dragging on their economies as smaller workforces struggle to support larger numbers of inactive pensioners.

France is currently Europe's second most populous nation after Germany, whose 2012 population of around 82 million inhabitants is projected to fall to just over 70 million by 2050, below France and Britain. Economists say the drop is already taking an economic toll.

The life expectancy of French women rose to 85 years, up 2.1 years in the past decade, while it rose to 78.7 years for men, up 2.9 years in the same period.

(Reporting By Nicholas Vinocur and Marine Pennetier; editing by [Mark John](#))

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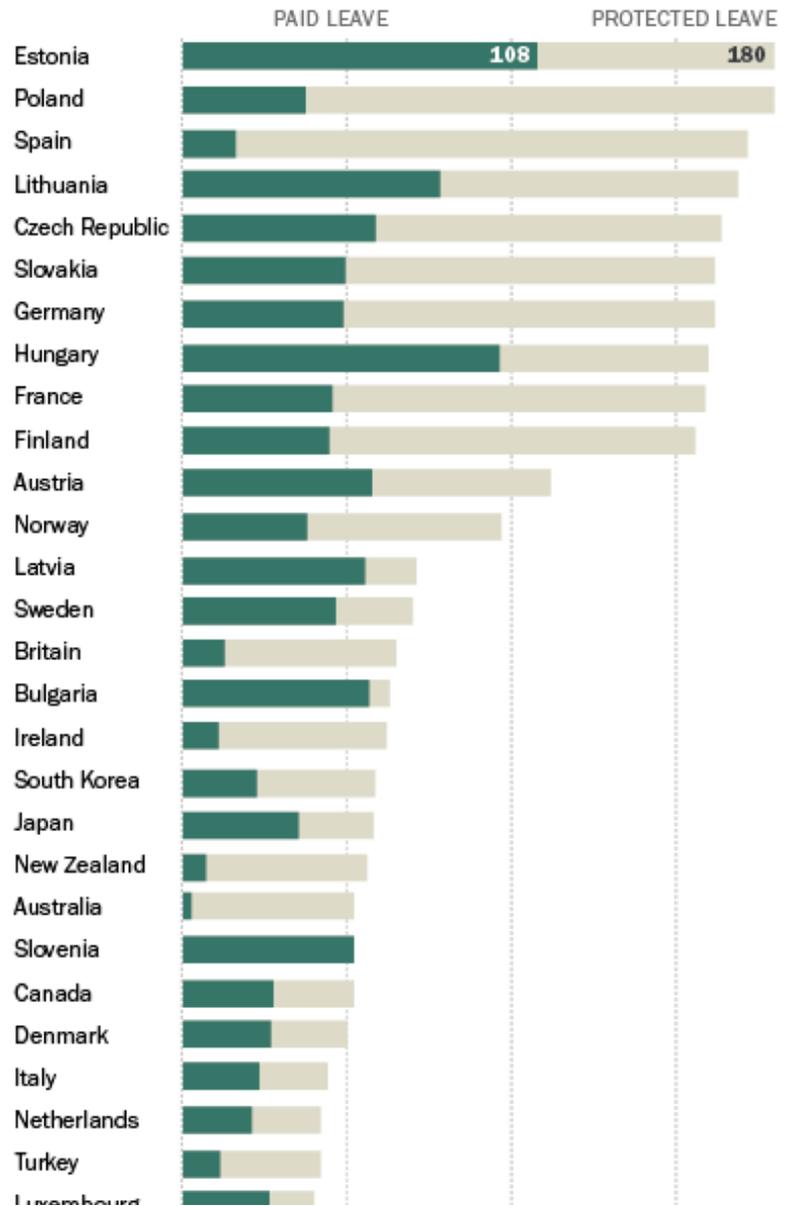
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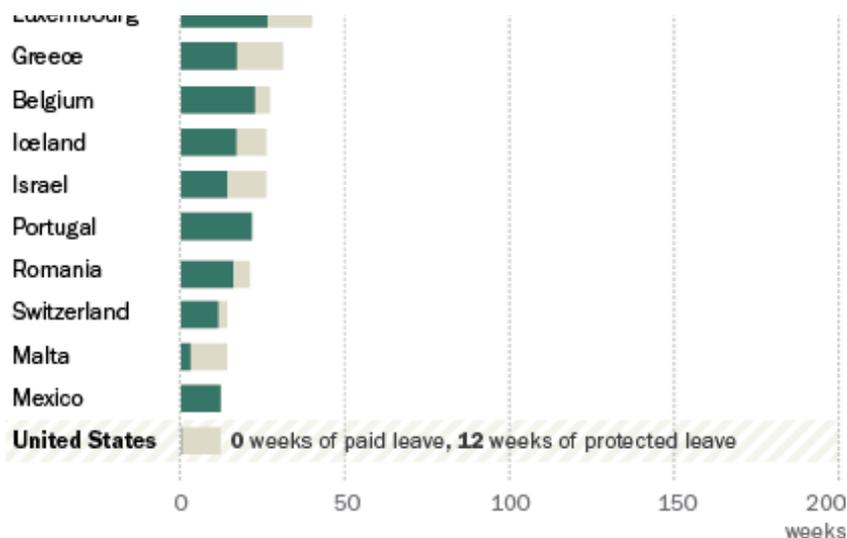
## Among 38 nations, U.S. is the outlier when it comes to paid parental leave

BY GRETCHEN LIVINGSTON ([HTTP://WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG/AUTHOR/GLIVINGSTON/](http://www.pewresearch.org/author/glivingston/))

### U.S. Ranks Last in Government-Supported Time Off for New Parents

*Leave, in weeks, as allowed by federal law*





Note: Includes all OECD member states except Chile; as well as Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Romania and Malta.

Source: OECD

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([http://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2.1\\_Parental\\_leave\\_systems%20-%20updated%20%2018\\_July\\_2012.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2.1_Parental_leave_systems%20-%20updated%20%2018_July_2012.pdf)) Women’s labor force participation has surged in recent decades, driven largely by increases in labor force participation among women with young children, according to a new Pew Research Center report (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/12/11/on-pay-gap-millennial-women-near-parity-for-now/>) . At the same time, fathers—virtually all of whom are in the labor force—are also taking on more child care responsibilities, as fatherhood has grown to encompass far more than just bringing home the bacon (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/14/the-new-american-father/>) .

Despite these transformations, the U.S. government support for working parents remains very limited, compared with 37 other nations, according to data ([http://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2.1\\_Parental\\_leave\\_systems%20-%20updated%20%2018\\_July\\_2012.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2.1_Parental_leave_systems%20-%20updated%20%2018_July_2012.pdf)) compiled by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The chart shows the number of weeks of federally-protected time off, as well as the amount of time off that is paid in full, available to employed new mothers in each country. The bars combine both maternity leave and parental leave (which is available to either a new mother or a new father).

The data do not address paid leave or other accommodations that individual employers make available to employees or guarantees provided by a few individual states.

Of the 38 countries represented, the U.S. is the only one that does not mandate any paid leave for new mothers. In comparison, Estonia offers about two years of paid leave, and Hungary and Lithuania offer one-and-a-half years or more of fully-paid leave. The median amount of fully-paid time off available to a mom for the birth of a child is about five-to-six months.

In the vast majority of countries ([http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS\\_124442/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_124442/lang--en/index.htm)) offering paid time off, the government is footing the bill, though in some cases employers are required to pony up, as well.

Then, there’s also protected leave, which essentially allows new parents to be away from their job to care for their baby, without fear of losing that job. Along with Mexico, the U.S. offers the smallest amount of leave protection related to the birth of a child

among these 38 countries—12 weeks. In the U.S., this is a result of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) which was enacted in 1993, and guarantees job security for those who have been employed for at least a year, and who work for an organization with 50 or more employees.

At the other end of the spectrum, Poland, Estonia, Spain, Lithuania, The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, Hungary, France and Finland offer three years or more of protection for leave related to motherhood. The median amount of protected leave for new mothers among these countries is about 13 months.

While not represented in this graphic, 25 of these countries also offer guaranteed paternity leave—leave that is specifically available for new fathers. Norway, Ireland, Iceland, Slovenia, Sweden and Germany all offer eight weeks or more of protected paternity leave, and with the exception of Ireland these countries also mandate that a portion of this time off be paid.

For the most part, though, paternity leave, where available, is more modest—in Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, South Korea, Austria and Hungary paternity leave is guaranteed for one week or less.



Gretchen Livingston (<http://www.pewresearch.org/author/glivingston/>) is a Senior Researcher at the Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project and the Pew Social & Demographic Trends Project.

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## 10 Comments



**Penny** • 1 week ago (#comment-649296)

Hmm. Europe is now in recession, with just about all its countries having higher unemployment and slower growth than the US. There does seem to be a correlation between slow or zero growth and paid parental leave, n'est-ce pas?

[Reply](#)



**Jessica Pasa** • 3 months ago (#comment-582262)

Is there an organization or movement supporting fair parental leave in California? We need to band together to fight for the right of every mother and father to care for their babies in at least the first months of life.

[Reply](#)



**John Doe** • 10 months ago (#comment-356167)

K. Brown: Plenty of those countries have healthier economies than the US does. That, despite the fact that most of them do not place paramount importance on economic growth. They prefer to balance growth with social protections and quality of life considerations for all. One of the lessons from the last economic crisis should be that balance is important. The developed countries that weathered the crisis the best were the relatively well run social-democracies of northern Europe and Canada. Countries that, for starters, regulate their banks more to prevent excesses and have social protections in place for citizens who do find themselves unemployed during a crisis. Not to mention they treat healthcare as a basic right and a public service and not as a profit center.

My biggest complaint about my fellow Americans is that we are too insular. We refuse to look around the world for ideas on how to improve and when ideas are presented to us we dismiss them as inferior because it's not the American way.

Take health care. America is the ONLY developed country in the world that doesn't have a single-payer, universal health care system. I have lived in several other countries, all of whom have universal health care. There is no healthcare debate in those countries. There is nobody trying to implement an American style, private, for profit healthcare system. The only discussion is how to make their already great system even better. People don't have to spend huge sums on private health insurance. They can spend it elsewhere, thus increasing consumption and economic activity. They don't have to stay in low paid jobs or pass up on new opportunities because they now have a medical condition that will disqualify them from getting new health insurance through their new employer. Universal healthcare is not a drag on the economic activity and mobility, private, for-profit healthcare is.

The subject of this article is maternity leave. I have lived in one of the countries near the top of this list. It has a strong economy. I never heard anybody complain that the maternity leave was too generous and it was a drag on the economy. I have also lived in the region that is almost always rated as the free-est free market in the world. Even they give 10 weeks fully paid maternity leave. The only complaints I heard while living there was that 10 weeks wasn't enough.

The rich right in the US want us all to believe that anything that restricts their ability to do whatever they want will hurt the economy. That's total BS. The rich don't drive the economy. Big business doesn't drive the economy it's a leech on the economy. Big businesses use their leverage to extract major lease, tax and other concessions from local and state governments in order to open factories/stores in their areas and "create jobs". That's not job creation, that's job redistribution. Taking jobs from one place in the US and moving them somewhere else. They then use the huge economic advantage they have negotiated to suppress wages and benefits for their workers. When a company like Walmart opens a store in a small town, most of the other retailers go out of business. All the workers have nowhere else to go so Walmart can pay whatever they want.

The economy is driven by small business and middle class consumption. The current attack on the middle class is only going to hasten the demise of the US as a global economic power.

[Reply](#)



**Steven Collins** • 10 months ago (#comment-350782)

I find it odd that on one hand I hear daily about family values, and how the family is the key to raising kids right. Heard about single parent households, especially in the AA community that is directly attributable to higher incarceration rates etc. On the other hand, we do absolutely NOTHING to promote birth rates or reinforce the family in congress or locally. Makes us seem kinda hypocritical to me.

[Reply](#)



**Matt** • 6 months ago (#comment-504764)

The only thing I disagree with in your statement is the word “kinda”.

[Reply](#)



**gwg** • 1 year ago (#comment-143974)

I believe the US is also the only country with no legally-mandated paid holiday. I guess there's no time for time off if you're pursuing the American dream... ugh.

[Reply](#)



**Eugenia Kaneshige** • 1 year ago (#comment-141285)

We're also an outlier when it comes to being an economic power. How many U.S. citizens applied for Estonia citizenship in this century?

[Reply](#)



**Buck** • 8 months ago (#comment-486992)

Eugenia K: Which makes it all the more shameful that US corporations provide such poor worker benefits.

[Reply](#)



**wwmike** • 1 year ago (#comment-141263)

this must be one of those things that makes us “the greatest” nation. Just joking.

[Reply](#)



**K Brown** • 1 year ago (#comment-140806)

Interesting article, The chart seems to show that government “protections” or involvement in private lives may have a snuffing effect on national economies.

[Reply](#)

## What Is the Case for Paid Maternity Leave?

Gordon B. Dahl, Katrine V. Løken, Magne Mogstad, and Kari Veia Salvanes

NBER Working Paper No. 19595

October 2013

JEL No. H42,J13,J18

### ABSTRACT

Paid maternity leave has gained greater salience in the past few decades as mothers have increasingly entered the workforce. Indeed, the median number of weeks of paid leave to mothers among OECD countries was 14 in 1980, but had risen to 42 by 2011. We assess the case for paid maternity leave, focusing on parents' responses to a series of policy reforms in Norway which expanded paid leave from 18 to 35 weeks (without changing the length of job protection). Our first empirical result is that none of the reforms seem to crowd out unpaid leave. Each reform increases the amount of time spent at home versus work by roughly the increased number of weeks allowed. Since income replacement was 100% for most women, the reforms caused an increase in mother's time spent at home after birth, without a reduction in family income. Our second set of empirical results reveals the expansions had little effect on a wide variety of outcomes, including children's school outcomes, parental earnings and participation in the labor market in the short or long run, completed fertility, marriage or divorce. Not only is there no evidence that each expansion in isolation had economically significant effects, but this null result holds even if we cumulate our estimates across all expansions from 18 to 35 weeks. Our third finding is that paid maternity leave is regressive in the sense that eligible mothers have higher family incomes compared to ineligible mothers or childless individuals. Within the group of eligibles, the program also pays higher amounts to mothers in wealthier families. Since there was no crowd out of unpaid leave, the extra leave benefits amounted to a pure leisure transfer, primarily to middle and upper income families. Finally, we investigate the financial costs of the extensions in paid maternity leave. We find these reforms had little impact on parents' future tax payments and benefit receipt. As a result, the large increases in public spending on maternity leave imply a considerable increase in taxes, at a cost to economic efficiency. Taken together, our findings suggest the generous extensions to paid leave were costly, had no measurable effect on outcomes and regressive redistribution properties. In a time of harsh budget realities, our findings have important implications for countries that are considering future expansions or contractions in the duration of paid leave.

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# Child care costs: how the UK compares with the world

How high are childcare costs in the UK? And how much worse is it than the US, Germany and France? . . .



Child in a nursery in London. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian David Levene/Guardian

**Simon Rogers**

Monday 21 May 2012 07.58 EDT

Bringing up a child is an expensive business - especially if you want to, you know, work. And childcare in the UK is in the spotlight today - with a report by Conservative MP Elizabeth Truss (PDF) for Centre Forum calling for a Dutch-style "one-stop shop" to register, train and act as an agency for childminders.

So, how bad are things in the UK? According to the OECD's family database and a recent report, *Doing better for Families*, it's not good, especially if you live in a household where both parents work.

The data shows

Interestingly, parents in the UK have a high reliance on 'informal' childcare, ie relying on non-official care from relatives or friends. Over a third of parents - 36.9% - use this kind of care for kids aged 3-5. In France it's 19.6% and even lower in Denmark, where it's 0.1%.

The full data is below for you to download. What can you do with it?

## Data summary

### UK childcare compared

Country	Maternal employment rate (child under 15)	Net Cost of child care, % of average income	Cost, as % of family income	Child care as % of GDP	Pre-primary spending as % of GDP
Switzerland	69.7	77.7	50.6	0.1	0.2
UK	67.1	40.9	26.6	0.4	1.1
Ireland	58.7	45.2	25.6	0.3	0.3
USA	66.7	38.1	23.1	0.1	0.4
New Zealand	62.2	28.6	18.6	0.1	0.8
Canada	70.5	29.5	18.5	..	0.2
Japan	52.5	28.1	16.9	0.2	0.3
Australia	61.9	22.5	14.5	0.2	0.4
Slovenia	85.7	19.9	13.7	..	0.5
OECD, all	66.2	18.4	11.8	0.2	0.6
Austria	75.4	16.8	11.8	0.3	0.3
Germany	70.8	14.1	11.1	0.1	0.4
Israel	64.1	18.3	11.0	0.1	0.7
Norway		16.8	10.8	0.7	1.0
France	73.6	16.5	10.4	0.4	1.0
Netherlands	78.5	13.2	10.1	0.3	0.7
Denmark	84	11.2	8.9	0.8	1.3
Korea		15.2	8.5	0.2	0.3
Finland	77.2	12.2	8.4	0.7	0.9
Czech Republic	58.8	10.6	6.6	0.1	0.4
Luxembourg	68.4	8.7	5.4	0.4	0.4
Iceland	84.8	7.9	5.0	0.2	0.9
Portugal	75.4	7.7	4.8	0.0	0.4
Poland	68.1	7.1	4.8	0.0	0.3
Spain	60	8.2	4.7	0.5	0.5
Belgium	70.9	5.8	4.7	0.2	0.8
Sweden	80.3	7.1	4.7	0.6	1.1
Hungary	54.4	6.2	4.2	0.1	0.6
Slovak Republic	59.3	7.4	3.9	0.1	0.4
Estonia	66.7	6.6	3.7	0.0	0.3
Greece	58.8	4.9	3.2	0.1	0.1

SOURCE: OECD

## Download the data

. DATA: download the full spreadsheet

Universal Childcare, Maternal Labor Supply, and Family Well-Being  
 Michael Baker, Jonathan Gruber, and Kevin Milligan  
 NBER Working Paper No. 11832  
 December 2005  
 JEL No. H2, J2

### ABSTRACT

The growing labor force participation of women with small children in both the U.S. and Canada has led to calls for increased public financing for childcare. The optimality of public financing depends on a host of factors, such as the “crowd-out” of existing childcare arrangements, the impact on female labor supply, and the effects on child well-being. The introduction of universal, highly-subsidized childcare in Quebec in the late 1990s provides an opportunity to address these issues. We carefully analyze the impacts of Quebec’s “\$5 per day childcare” program on childcare utilization, labor supply, and child (and parent) outcomes in two parent families. We find strong evidence of a shift into new childcare use, although approximately one third of the newly reported use appears to come from women who previously worked and had informal arrangements. The labor supply impact is highly significant, and our measured elasticity of 0.236 is slightly smaller than previous credible estimates. Finally, we uncover striking evidence that children are worse off in a variety of behavioral and health dimensions, ranging from aggression to motor-social skills to illness. Our analysis also suggests that the new childcare program led to more hostile, less consistent parenting, worse parental health, and lower-quality parental relationships.

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There has been a substantial rise in the share of mothers who work in the paid labor force in North America. In the U.S., the share of mothers with children under age 6 who worked rose from 34% in 1976 to 56% in 2004. In Canada, the employment rate of mothers with at least one child younger than 6 rose from 31% in 1976 to 67% in 2004. In neither country has this trend been offset by a decline in the proportion of working fathers, necessitating an increased use of paid and unpaid childcare. In 1984, 37% of children in the U.S. under age 6 were being cared for by someone other than a parent; by 2001 the proportion had increased to 56%. In Canada, the comparable percentages rose from 40% in 1994-95 to 51% in 2002-03.<sup>1</sup>

The increased demand for childcare accompanying the rise of two-earner couples has captured the attention of public policy makers. In both Canada and the United States, most childcare is provided by the private market. An alternative model is supplied by the universal public programs found in Europe (OECD, various years). Publicly-financed systems can provide more equitable access to quality childcare. This is important if there are cost barriers for low income families. Furthermore, given the evidence that the labor force decisions of secondary earners are very sensitive to their net earnings, subsidizing childcare can raise labor supply. Finally, childcare may improve child outcomes. Children in care may have better social or educational outcomes, or they may benefit from the additional income from secondary earners' labor supply.

That said, public systems require extensive public funding, which comes at a cost of higher taxes and therefore reduced economic efficiency. Moreover, it is possible that publicly-provided childcare simply "crowds out" the private provision of care, with no net increase in

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers in this paragraph are from the authors' calculations using the Current Population Survey (US) and Labour Force Survey (Canada) for mothers' labor supply, and the Survey of Income and Program Participation (US) and National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (Canada) for childcare use.

childcare use or labor supply to the market. Finally, it is also possible that time spent in childcare, with many children per caregiver, is worse for children than time spent with parents at home.

A full evaluation of publicly-financed childcare, therefore, requires answers to three questions. First, does public financing affect the quality or quantity of care provided, or does it just lead to a substitution from one form of care to another? Second, if childcare use does increase, how large is the associated increase in labor force participation of parents, and what does it suggest about the net cost of the policy (subsidies offered minus new tax revenue collected)? Third, what effect does any change in childcare (and associated increases in labor force participation) have on child and family outcomes? Previous studies of childcare policy offer at best incomplete answers to one or two of these questions. There has been no evaluation of a full-scale public intervention which can address all three questions.

This paper provides such an evaluation using a major policy innovation in the Canadian province of Quebec in the late 1990s. The Quebec Family Policy began in 1997 with the extension of full-time kindergarten to all 5 year olds and the provision of childcare at an out-of-pocket price of \$5 per day to all 4 year olds. This \$5 per day policy was extended to all 3 year olds in 1998, all 2 year olds in 1999, and finally all children aged less than 2 in 2000. This dramatic policy change in one of Canada's largest provinces provides a promising quasi-experimental environment for evaluating the effect of publicly-financed childcare.

Our analysis is based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY). The NLSCY is an ongoing panel data set which follows the progress of a large, nationally representative sample of Canadian children. We measure the impact of the policy change on mothers' labor supply, childcare utilization and child and parent outcomes. Because

concurrent program reforms complicate the inference for single mothers, we focus on married (and cohabitating) women and their children.

Our results are striking. The introduction of universal childcare in Quebec led to a very large increase in the use of care. The proportion of 0-4 year olds in care rose by 14 percentage points in Quebec relative to the rest of the country, or roughly one-third of the baseline childcare utilization rate. This rise in childcare was associated with a sizeable increase in the labor force participation of married women. Participation rose by 7.7 percentage points in Quebec, or about 14.5% of the baseline. The difference between the rise in participation and the rise in childcare utilization primarily reflects reduced use of informal childcare arrangements, or the “crowd out” of informal childcare by this new subsidized childcare. Partly as a result of this large “crowd out”, the taxes generated by the new maternal labor supply fall far short of paying for the costs of the increased childcare subsidies.

We also find consistent and robust evidence of *negative* effects of the policy change on child outcomes, parenting, and parent outcomes. Child outcomes are worse for a variety of parent-reported measures, such as hyperactivity, inattention, aggressiveness, motor/social skills, child health status, and illness. Parental interactions with children are worse along all measured dimensions, and there is some evidence of deterioration in parental health and a reduction in parental relationship quality. These are subjective measures, but the consistency of the results suggests that more access to childcare is bad for these children (and, at least along some dimensions, for these parents). There are, however, interpretations of these findings which are more benign. While some of these explanations appear inconsistent with the data, we cannot rule out the possibility that our findings represent a short term adjustment to childcare, and not a long-run negative impact.