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Work and Family: Introducing the Issue

Jane Waldfogel and Sara McLanahan

This issue of *The Future of Children* describes the challenges parents face in taking care of family responsibilities while also holding down a job and explores the implications of those challenges for child and family well-being. As children grow and develop, parents are the hub in a system of care to meet their needs, a system that includes extended family, preschools, schools, health care providers, community organizations, and others, but in which parents play the lead role. Often these same working parents have additional care responsibilities for other family members—in particular, the elderly—and are, for them too, the hub around which other caregivers, services, and programs revolve.

Work-family challenges are as varied as the families that must deal with them, and they change in nature over time. Some working parents are better positioned than others to meet their family's care needs because they have higher incomes, more access to informal support from family members and others, or more support from employers or public policies. But no families, even middle- and high-income families, are immune from the challenge of balancing work and family obligations. Employers' needs and capacities are tremendously varied as well, particularly

given the large role in the U.S. labor market of small, often family-owned businesses. Such wide variation suggests that meeting the work-family challenge will require flexibility and an array of options, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

The rising shares of women in the workforce and of families headed by single parents have made work-family issues especially prominent and challenging, as more employees, both men and women, face care responsibilities at home and fewer have a stay-at-home spouse to manage them. The work-family challenge has also been heightened by an increase in longevity that has boosted the share of the population that is elderly. Although many elderly Americans are healthy (and indeed provide assistance to their adult children and grandchildren), others require care and support from their family members.

Although these demographic trends have been observed to some extent in every modern economy, the challenges of meeting work and family obligations are particularly problematic in the United States. Simply put, U.S. work and family policies have not been updated to reflect the new reality of American family life. The social welfare system in the

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United States, more so than in other countries, is designed around the idea that government assistance is a last resort, provided only after families have first used available family, community, and employer supports, or in cases where such supports do not exist. Economists generally endorse limited government involvement but identify several types of situations where government may need to step in. For example, in cases where the benefits of a policy would accrue not just to the individual family or employer but to society more generally, it is in the public's interest for government to provide those benefits. That principle is the rationale for universal public education, where the United States has historically been a world leader, although its edge in higher education is eroding and it has fallen behind other countries in preschool education. In other situations, private insurance markets may not be able to cover a particular risk, necessitating public provision of social insurance. Social Security, for example, helps ensure that elders have adequate incomes; Medicare (and Medicaid) ensures that elders have health insurance coverage; and the Older Americans Act provides in-home services such as Meals on Wheels. These federal programs recognize the limits of family, community, or employer support for the elderly and fill in the gaps.

The U.S. system of public supports for families with children or families with elderly relatives who need more care is typically less well developed than the systems in other advanced countries, and U.S. parents continue to rely primarily on their families, communities, and employers for support. The advantage of this approach is that the United States has a larger community-based volunteer sector and a better-developed system of employer supports than do many other countries; the disadvantage is that these supports

do not reach all workers, particularly those of low socioeconomic status. Employer policies tend to be inequitably distributed, with the highest-paid workers receiving the best packages of benefits. In short, the employees who may most need family-support assistance from their employer may be least likely to receive it.

A further consequence of relying heavily on employer supports is that work-family policies are seen—often quite rightly—as imposing costs on employers, costs that may be particularly onerous for small businesses. At the same time, the extensive U.S. reliance on employer supports has caused public policies in this area to be underdeveloped compared with those in other peer nations. The United States, for example, is the only advanced country without paid maternity leave and one of the few without paid paternity leave, sick leave, or annual leave. It is also unique among peer nations in not providing universal public access to preschool in the year or two before school entry.

In thinking about policy solutions to the work-family challenge, it is important to keep the American context in mind and to focus on policies that are consistent with American values as well as with the best economic evidence. At the same time, it may be useful to rethink some common assumptions that may be interfering with progress in this area. One such assumption is that work-family issues necessarily represent an area where employer and employee interests collide. The need to meet both work and family responsibilities may well pose a conflict for the individual employee who is trying to be in two places at once, but addressing work-family issues does not necessarily pit the interests of employers against those of employees. In particular, a good deal of evidence shows that greater

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workplace flexibility benefits both employers and employees. Allowing employees more control over their work hours and more flexibility to adjust hours or work location when family demands arise can lead to increased employee productivity, satisfaction, and retention. Far from representing a cost to employers, such policies, if well designed to take into account the needs of both employers and employees, can yield benefits.

Another questionable assumption is that work-family issues are of concern to women only. Although women are more likely than men to have care responsibilities, and to spend more time on them, the gender gap in caring has narrowed significantly. Substantial numbers of male employees have family obligations, and they too face conflicts between managing those obligations and their responsibilities at work. The landmark U.S. legislation in the work-family area, the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act, recognized this new reality by adopting a gender-neutral approach, providing a period of leave for all new parents, both mothers and fathers, and for all employees, both male and female, who need leave because of their own health or the

health of a family member. The approach is promising and researchers should keep it in mind in considering other policies.

A third assumption that bears rethinking is that work-family challenges are problems that only families and employers need address. As noted, it may be appropriate for government to take on an expanded role in some situations. But other sectors may also have a role to play. The family members for whom employees are providing care are typically receiving care in other systems, such as pre-schools, schools, health care providers, and other community organizations. Could these other providers do more to help address work-family challenges, by, for example, changing their opening hours or providing more coordination of care or more transportation? Fifty years ago, when most children had a stay-at-home mom, preschools and kindergartens could reasonably operate on a two-hour-a-day schedule, schools could expect parents to come in for parent-teacher conferences after school or to take care of children during teacher training days and snow days, and doctors' offices could expect a parent to spend an hour or two at a child's routine checkup. But with most children no longer having a stay-at-home parent, it would be a great relief for both parents and employers if schools and doctors' offices were to modify these expectations to correspond to today's family and workplace realities. Although such changes are often difficult to make and cannot eliminate all, or even most, sources of work-family conflict, they could certainly help reduce it.

The Findings

To understand the extent to which work-family conflicts may be affecting the well-being of American employees and their families as well as the productivity of American

employers, it is necessary to answer several questions. First, what share of employees has care responsibilities, and for what types of family members do they care? To what extent are their work hours and work conditions compatible with their being able to meet those responsibilities? Can employees adjust their employment, on either an ongoing or an ad hoc basis, to meet family needs? Second, when obligations to employment and family come into conflict, what are the consequences, both at the workplace and in the family? What is the business case for providing employees with more flexibility? What does the evidence show about the consequences for child and family well-being? Third, what policy options might help employees better meet their obligations to work and family? What is the role of employers? What role might other organizations and systems play? What is the role of government? And what lessons do other countries offer? What policies have they adopted to address these issues, and what have researchers learned about the costs, benefits, and implementation of those policies? Should the United States consider adopting some of the policies that peer nations have?

To answer these questions, we commissioned a group of experts to write eight articles. The first article provides an overview of the demographic changes that set the stage for the current situation. The next four articles consider the challenges of employees who have care responsibilities for particular types of family members—young children, school-aged children, children with special health care needs, and elderly relatives. The final three articles consider possible policy responses, focusing, respectively, on the role of employers, the role of government, and what other countries do.

Demographic Changes

Suzanne Bianchi, of the University of California–Los Angeles, documents the dramatic changes in the American family and workplace over the past fifty years. The share of married mothers in the labor force has risen from a little over a quarter in 1960 to more than 70 percent today. During the 1960s, only 10 percent of mothers were at work within three months of giving birth; by the early years of the twenty-first century that figure had risen to over 40 percent, with 64 percent of women back at work within twelve months after a birth. Labor force participation rates are now nearly as high among women with preschool-aged children as they are among those with school-aged children. Over the same period, the share of children living with a single parent has grown sharply. Today about one-quarter of families with children are headed by single parents; the majority are single mothers, but single fathers represent about 15 percent of this group. Employment rates among single parents have always been high relative to those of married mothers and are particularly high now in the wake of welfare reforms that have promoted work. In 2009 single mothers had an overall labor force participation rate of 76 percent.

Bianchi notes one further demographic change—the aging of the population—that is likely to have a dramatic impact on work-family issues. The large baby boom generation raised much smaller families than the ones they were born into—with families averaging two children rather than three or four. As the baby boom generation ages, increasing elder care responsibilities will therefore fall to fewer siblings. Although it is difficult to find reliable estimates for both the number of older individuals who need care and the number of working adults who have elder care responsibilities, overall, the numbers for

both seem to be rising steadily. Elder care demands will play an increasingly central role in work-family balance, often compounding already challenging demands associated with child care.

Workplaces are also changing. Bianchi documents increases both in nonstandard work schedules and in job insecurity and earnings inequality. For high-income families, often the problem is too many hours of work, although the long workdays give these families enough private resources to purchase care needed for family members. For low-income families, the problem is often too few hours of work, too little control over those hours, and insufficient income, although these families may be eligible for public programs that help meet some of their needs. Families in the middle not only face insecurity about their jobs and financial situation, but also have limited resources to meet their family's needs; their incomes are too low to purchase high-quality care for their dependents but too high to qualify for help from public programs.

Bianchi stresses that these demographic and workplace changes have increased work-family conflicts across the board but that the dilemmas they pose vary across the income distribution. That families with differing income face differing types of issues reinforces the point that work-family problems are highly varied and unlikely to be amenable to a one-size-fits-all solution.

Families with Young Children

Taking care of young children while holding down a job is challenging in the best of times. But Christopher Ruhm, of the University of Virginia, explains that it is particularly difficult in the United States, where policies involving the care of children between birth and school entry are less comprehensive than

the early child care policies in many other developed countries.

Two principal types of policies help parents take care of young children: one is parental leave; and the other, early childhood education and care. Ruhm reviews current provisions in each of these policy domains in the United States and compares them with those in Western Europe and Canada. In both domains, he concludes that U.S. parents face particular challenges, because of the limited reach of public policies and the unequal array and distribution of private policies. He describes how European countries provide a more integrated set of supports that combine provisions for parental leave and child care. Despite tremendous variation across these countries, all provide at least some job-protected and paid parental leave followed by support for early childhood education and care, including, in most countries, universal preschool in the year or two before school entry.

Ruhm then reviews the evidence on the consequences of such policies, in terms both of economic outcomes and of child and family well-being. He concludes that short to moderate periods of parental leave (ranging from three to twelve months) are unlikely to have negative repercussions in the labor market and are likely to have benefits for child and family well-being. Periods of leave in excess of a year have less clear-cut benefits for children and families and pose some risks in terms of employment and earnings. These findings are relevant for U.S. policy, where current federal law provides just under three months of unpaid leave to about half the workforce and where only a handful of states provide a short period of paid leave to new mothers and, in some instances, fathers.

With regard to early childhood education and care, Ruhm's review of the evidence points to substantial benefits, particularly for disadvantaged children for whom preschool promotes sizable gains in school readiness. He notes that an important question for U.S. policy is whether child-care expansions should be universal, and available to all children, or targeted to disadvantaged groups. As he observes, most European countries have moved to universal preschool in the year or two before school entry, a model that both promotes public support and improves preschool quality. But given limited resources, and the larger documented benefits for disadvantaged children, a case can also be made for targeting program expansions. Another issue for policy makers to grapple with, Ruhm contends, is the quality of child care, particularly for children under three. Measures to raise quality will also raise the costs of care, straining family and public budgets.

Although the comparative evidence is not entirely conclusive, Ruhm suggests that it does indicate that moderate extensions of U.S. leave entitlements (up to several months) would improve child and family well-being by increasing mothers' time at home with infants and could also improve mothers' job continuity. He also suggests that the leave be paid to facilitate its use, particularly by low-income parents, and recommends improving both the quality of and access to early childhood education and care.

Families with School-Aged Children and Adolescents

Although it is often thought that family demands diminish when children start school, in fact, as Kathleen Christensen of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Barbara Schneider of Michigan State University, and Donnell Butler of Educational Testing Service point

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out, schools are open only 6.6 hours a day, on average, for only 180 days a year. That schedule leaves many hours and days during which parents must arrange care and supervision. And although school-aged children and adolescents may require less hands-on care than younger children, parents continue to have important roles in their lives. The authors describe the kinds of support that parents provide to older children, explain why that support is important for child health and development, and show how overly rigid work demands interfere with it.

The authors observe that many aspects of school design and policies reflect outdated notions of families and parental availability and that work-family conflicts could be reduced through school reforms that take into account the changed nature of families. Such reforms could include scheduling parent-teacher meetings outside of work hours, providing more services at schools, and providing child care before school, after school, and during school vacations. The authors note, however, that schools are not likely to implement such changes in the current economic climate and conclude that for the time being schools can play only a limited role in meeting families' needs. Workplaces, they argue, may be the better place for reform.

And, in fact, workplace flexibility is the strategy parents prefer for balancing work and family obligations. Christensen, Schneider, and Butler recommend two types of flexible work practices: flextime arrangements that allow parents to coordinate their work schedules with their children's school schedules, and policies that allow workers to take short periods of time off for either planned or unplanned occasions. Many companies that have implemented such policies, the authors say, have benefited through employee retention and higher job satisfaction.

Despite their benefits, however, flexible work practices are the exception, not the rule, in U.S. workplaces. And even when such practices are available, employees often hesitate to take advantage of them. The authors conclude by examining the factors that contribute to a culture of workplace flexibility that supports both employers and employees.

Families with Children with Special Health Care Needs

All families have children who are sick from time to time and who in addition require regular preventive and routine medical care such as checkups and immunizations. In addition, roughly 15 percent of families have children with ongoing special health care needs. Mark Schuster of Harvard Medical School and Children's Hospital Boston, Paul Chung of the University of California–Los Angeles, and Katherine Vestal of Children's Hospital Boston describe the burdens that these health care needs place on parents, who are central to the health care their children receive. In addition to providing a good deal of care directly, parents also coordinate and facilitate the often complex care their children receive.

Taking care of a child with special health care needs while also holding down a job presents

difficulties for both the employee and the employer. Neither benefits when employees come to work distracted and stressed because they need to be with an ill child, but employees who take time off on short notice or for extended periods can create problems as well.

The authors recognize that policy solutions are not straightforward. They review the existing policy framework and suggest a variety of changes that might make the workplace more responsive to the needs of families without placing an undue burden on employers. Virtually all employees, for instance, could benefit from access to discretionary leave to allow them to respond to routine, acute, or short-term health care needs of a child. This and other types of leave could be funded through employer-employee cost sharing and include protections against fraud as well as financial protections against the costs of employee absences. Such policies might substantially improve employees' ability to respond and care for children with health care needs, but would not necessarily address more challenging longer-term health care situations.

The authors suggest the health care system might be able to help ease the burden on parents by adapting its practices to reflect the new reality of American families. They detail some of the ways in which the system now makes demands on families, and they provide examples of ways in which the burden might be alleviated. For example, studies have shown that poor communication and coordination of care can have negative consequences for patients and their families. Enhancing comprehensive primary care through patient-centered medical homes might relieve parents of some of the difficulty of coordinating care and reduce their odds of work loss. Coordinating care with community-based

resources, such as schools (where children already spend much of their time), might also provide parents with more convenient options for more routine care.

Caring for the Elderly

One of the most striking aspects of the changing demography of the American population is its increased longevity. People are living, and staying healthy, longer. But, as Ann Bookman and Delia Kimbrel of Brandeis University point out in their article, most elderly Americans will eventually become frail and require extensive support and care, and even the nonfrail elderly typically receive a good deal of support and care from extended family members. Social Security benefits provide an income platform for the elderly, while Medicare provides health insurance coverage. Medicaid covers all nursing home care, but only for those with low income and minimal assets. In addition, the Older Americans Act provides services such as Meals on Wheels and day-to-day assistance with household chores and shopping. Although these services are helpful, they are subsidized only for the poor.

As is the case when children have special health care needs, employees who are caring for elderly relatives with special health care needs may require time off from work on short notice, or for extended periods of time. Experiences of elder care also vary by gender, race, and socioeconomic status. In this area as in others, families would benefit from government and employer policies that allow flexibility, provisions for care, and access to health care. Although government policies address some elder care needs, the authors note that they do not provide adequate support for chronic illnesses, home care services, or long-term care. Just as with child care, adult caregivers are at the hub of care

coordination, managing multiple systems to provide care for their elderly relatives.

As the population ages, an increasing share of employees will be involved with elder care, which will likely shape understandings of work-family balance. The political coalition behind the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 recognized that employees with care responsibilities are caring not only for young children, but also for adult relatives and elderly relatives. As more Americans age and require care, the constituency for better work-family supports will grow ever larger.

The Role of Employers in Providing More Flexibility

A recurring theme in the articles in this volume—the need for flexibility—is the central focus of the article by Ellen Galinsky, Kelly Sakai, and Tyler Wigton, of the Families and Work Institute. For much of the twentieth century, they note, research on work-family programs in the workplace concentrated on a small set of specific policies to help employees better meet their work-family obligations—policies such as allowing time off for new parents or providing information on, or financial assistance with, child care or elder care. But more recently researchers have zeroed in on the promise of workplace flexibility.

As the authors document, surveys of employees consistently show strong demand for flexibility. But these same surveys find that many employees, particularly those who are less advantaged, have no access at all to flexible work arrangements and that some who in principle do have such access hesitate to use it.

Although some employers are skeptical of the value and wary of the costs of workplace flexibility, the authors show that flexibility

offers several advantages to employers, including greater employee engagement, satisfaction, retention, and better health. A significant body of research shows that adopting flexibility in the workplace enhances productivity and is good for companies' "bottom line." It also shows that when employees are offered workplace flexibility, they tend to use it conservatively, minimizing costs to employers.

Even for employers who show interest in moving to more flexible workplaces, changing the culture of work can be difficult. The authors describe an extensive intervention they carried out that engages employers, employees, and their community to encourage and support employers in implementing more flexible workplace practices and to facilitate employees' use of these policies. The results of the intervention thus far are encouraging, with participating employers providing significantly more flexible options than the average nationwide.

The authors conclude by discussing the implications of their research for broader workplace change. They include a detailed list of "lessons learned," which they say are informing replications of their project in communities across the country.

The Role of Government

Another recurring theme in articles in this volume is the potentially important role of government in the work-family arena. Government at all levels—local, state, and federal—plays multiple roles here, as an employer, as a source of data and information, and, most important, as a source of policy. Heather Boushey, of the Center for American Progress, focuses specifically on the policy-making role and in particular discusses the evolution of three main types of

policies: those that address workplace hours and flexibility; those that provide paid time off for family responsibilities; and those that cover the costs of care when potential caregivers are at work or school.

Tracing the history of these policies since the 1930s, Boushey shows that policy developments have not kept pace with the changes in the American family and workplace. She also stresses that because policies have developed unevenly, their benefits have not been equitably distributed. She then discusses recent and current policy activity at the local, state, and federal levels and identifies what she sees as the most promising avenues for future policy action. For example, Boushey looks at a variety of pilot and experimental programs implemented by private employers and governments to provide workplace flexibility. Careful evaluations of these programs reveal that flexibility can be increased without adversely affecting employers. Examining paid family and medical leave policies, Boushey concludes that both are successful for employers as well as employees.

Boushey calls on policy makers to update labor standards and social insurance to reflect the country's changing demographics. In particular, she notes that paid family and medical leave is a missing piece of the nation's social insurance infrastructure and that states are developing viable programs that can serve as a model for federal policy makers.

What Other Countries Do

A final theme that recurs throughout the volume is the extent to which the United States might learn from what other countries do. In virtually every area of work-family policy, provisions in the United States tend to be less well developed and less equitably distributed than those in most peer countries.

In addition, many skeptics in the United States wonder whether more generous work-family policies would impose undue costs on businesses and impede American competitiveness. Although international comparisons cannot answer those questions definitively, they are useful in clarifying the policies of competitive nations abroad. As Alison Earle, of Northeastern University, Zitha Mokomane, of the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa, and Jody Heymann, of the Institute for Health and Social Policy at McGill University, document, the world's most competitive nations offer quite generous work-family supports, in most cases much more extensive than those in the United States, suggesting that it is possible for such supports to coexist with a robust economy.

Using indicators of competitiveness gathered by the World Economic Forum, the authors identify fifteen countries, including the United States, that have been among the top twenty countries in competitiveness rankings for at least eight years. To this group they add China and India, both rising competitors in the global economy. They find that every one of these countries, except the United States, guarantees some form of paid leave for new mothers. And all but Switzerland and the United States guarantee paid leave for new fathers. Most of these countries also provide paid leave to care for children's health care needs, breast-feeding breaks, paid vacation leave, and a weekly day of rest. Of these, the United States has only breast-feeding breaks (part of the recently passed health care legislation). Comparisons of the same work-family policies in a second group of countries with low unemployment produce similar results.

Policy Implications

Our review of the evidence points to three clear policy implications:

The first is the key role for more workplace flexibility. Although flexibility is not a panacea, it clearly would do more than any other single policy approach to meet the diverse needs of employees with caregiving responsibilities. But to be effective, flexibility must be truly flexible. Traditional flextime policies, whereby employees change their hours to one of a specific set of alternative schedules on a permanent basis with no day-to-day flexibility, may meet the needs of some employees but are likely to be insufficiently flexible for others. Two approaches are more promising. One is to give employees the right to request a change to part-time or flexible hours with the assurance that their requests will be seriously considered and that they will not suffer adverse repercussions for such requests. The other is compensatory time, whereby employees can work extra hours, bank them, and then take off those hours as needed, on a flexible basis.

The second implication is the need for more equitable policies, particularly with regard to paid time off for family responsibilities. The status quo, whereby the lowest-paid workers are least likely to have paid sick leave or other leave that enables them to take care of family responsibilities, forces working parents to choose between not taking care of their family or losing their wages (or losing their job altogether). Such a choice cannot be good for children and families, or for employers who must be paying a price in diminished employee productivity, engagement, and retention. Yet providing additional paid leave would be difficult for many U.S. small businesses, particularly as the nation continues to struggle with the aftereffects of the recession. We concur with Schuster, Chung, and Vestal that it would be reasonable to ask all employers to provide a minimal amount of paid sick leave and other leave time to all employees. But longer leaves, where required

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for parents of newborns or for caregivers of those with serious longer-term health conditions, would probably be better provided through some other mechanism, such as a social insurance fund, like the one that undergirds Social Security retirement and disability programs.

The third policy implication is the need to increase the involvement of sectors other than families and employers in addressing work-family issues. For too long, these issues have been seen as the responsibility solely of families and employers, with government stepping in as a last resort. But as several articles in this volume have pointed out, other service delivery systems could also help reduce demands on family caregivers. Particularly important in this regard are the schools, the health care system, and community-based and other providers serving the elderly, each of which can contribute by updating its assumptions about the availability of family members to acknowledge the reality that most caregivers today are also working in the labor market.

Conclusions

A strong work ethic is a core feature of American culture. Even in this recessionary

time, the majority of parents and other caregivers are working, typically long hours. But Americans are also deeply committed to their children and other loved ones. Both mothers and fathers are spending more time with their children today than they did a few decades ago, and time spent caring for or helping the elderly is also on the rise. Parents continue to be the hub of service delivery for their children, providing direct care and coordinating other care, and the same is often true for adults providing care for their parents or other elderly relatives.

It is no wonder, then, that employees are increasingly voicing concerns about having too little time for family life and that both employees and employers are actively exploring ways to create more workplace flexibility. Local, state, and federal governments are also experimenting with new policies to provide benefits such as paid sick leave, paid parental leave, and more extensive support for preschool and school-aged child care. These employer and public policy initiatives reflect a growing recognition that, with more parents working and elder care demands on the rise, policies must adapt.

Although there are no easy solutions to the work-family challenge, the evidence presented in this volume provides useful insights into the types of work-family conflicts American employees are experiencing, as well as the types of employer, governmental, and community policies that might most effectively address them. Particularly promising are employer and governmental initiatives that promote workplace flexibility, provide at least a minimal amount of paid sick leave and other needed leave to all employees, and cover the costs of longer-term leaves to care for newborns or family members with serious illness. Also promising are community

initiatives whereby schools, health care, and other service delivery systems acknowledge the realities of American family life and

adjust their services to meet the needs of the nation's families and workplaces.