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Real Child Care Flexibility Means More Choices for Families

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Parents don't need Washington to tell them how to care for their kids. They need something much simpler: affordable options that actually fit their lives. For a working parent, that might mean a child care center that stays open through the end of a shift. For another family, it might mean making it possible for a parent to stay home.

The Trump administration is pursuing two child care changes framed around greater family flexibility: the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) proposed overhaul of Head Start and a reported plan to expand child care subsidies to certain families with a stay-at-home parent. Both are pitched as giving families more choice. But in practice, they could do the opposite—leaving families with fewer options and lower-quality care.

That gets at a bigger problem in America's child care debate: what Washington defines as “flexibility” doesn't necessarily align with what families want or need. When evaluating the value of child care reforms, the test should be simple: do they give families more affordable, workable options? Not just flexibility on paper or new benefits for a select few. Below, we look at where the Trump administration's recent child care proposals fall short of that goal and what an actual family-first approach to child care looks like.

Less Red Tape Shouldn't Mean Less Care

Government programs like Head Start shouldn't be immune from criticism or reform. There are certainly program requirements that cost providers time and money without improving care. We've previously argued that policymakers need to cut red tape that does not improve the health, safety, or quality of care providers offer.

But not every federal standard is red tape, and cutting regulations without considering what they protect can cause serious damage. The proposed Head Start rule would give programs the flexibility to shorten the hours they offer and eliminate existing federal staff-to-child ratios in favor of state and local standards. On paper, these changes could make Head Start programs less expensive or easier to operate. But shorter hours could leave working parents scrambling to fill gaps in care, while changes to staff-to-child ratios could mean fewer adults supervising the same number of children.¹ HHS itself acknowledges that its proposed changes could cost parents time and money and leave children receiving less attention from providers than before.²

The Administration also describes the Head Start overhaul as a way to reduce administrative burdens. But the changes could actually create more work for some of America's most vulnerable families. The rule would eliminate the use of self-attestation to verify eligibility, including for homeless families or those who may struggle to produce traditional documentation. HHS acknowledges that some families could have greater difficulty proving their eligibility under this new approach.³

Expanding Eligibility isn't The Same as Expanding Choice

The Administration's reported proposal for stay-at-home parents starts from a real gap in federal family policy.⁴ Families who want to provide care at home get relatively little support, even though our polling shows how much this option matters to parents: half say they would prefer to stay home with their children rather than use center-based care.⁵

[chart]

But stretching an already limited child care subsidy program even further won't solve that problem. The Administration is reportedly considering expanding eligibility for federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies—which help parents pay for

child care while they work—to include assistance for stay-at-home parents. Yet existing assistance already reaches only a fraction of eligible children: the latest estimates suggest just 16% receive CCDF subsidies.⁶ Expanding eligibility without increasing funding would leave more families competing for the same limited pool of resources.

And the proposed expansion itself would define eligible families narrowly. Right now, the draft policy says only married households would qualify, shutting out unmarried parents with the same need for affordable child care.⁷ If the goal is to give families more flexibility and choice, tying child care support to marital status is the wrong approach.

A Pro-Family Child Care Agenda Creates Options

A better approach starts with a simple goal: make child care easier to provide, easier for families to use, and flexible enough to reflect how parents actually live and work.

Cut burdens that don't serve families. Child care rules should protect health, safety, and quality without creating paperwork just for the sake of it. Policymakers should streamline federal requirements to reduce cost and complexity, rather than shifting those burdens onto families or child care workers.

Protect what makes an option work. A benefit only matters if families can use it when and where they need it. A Head Start slot means little to a parent whose workday extends beyond when care is offered.

Expand options without prescribing them. Effective family policy recognizes that families use different combinations of centers, home-based care, relatives, and parental care. Policy should reflect that variation rather than steering support toward one specific household structure or care arrangement.

Real flexibility isn't measured by how many rules an administration slashes or how many families it adds to an eligibility list. It's measured by whether parents actually end up with more affordable, workable ways to care for their children.

ENDNOTES



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