

# Child Care and the Middle Class

by Eric Karolak

When I interviewed Joan Lombardi for the last *Policy Matters* column, she shared that without child care, “far too many low- and middle-income families are losing ground,” and called for a national strategy for both policy reform and increased investments.

But putting child care on the national agenda is no easy task.

Back in the 1990s, when Dr. Lombardi headed the first federal child care office, early childhood education was front and center. Major newsweeklies covered the latest brain research, presidential



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candidates mentioned it on the campaign trail, a White House Conference was called, and major legislation was passed. The realization of the potential of the early years and the political consensus around welfare reform combined with many, many other factors to elevate early childhood.

Today, the economic and political picture is different. Still, you know that the importance of child care in the lives of working parents and their children has never been greater.

In today’s thinking, high-quality early care and education is essential for working families to keep from losing ground, and necessary to get a leg-up into the middle class for those less fortunate.

## Rebuilding America . . . with Child Care

Recently, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), influential chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, introduced the “Rebuild America Act” (S. 2252). The bill focuses on supporting middle-class families through a variety of strategies including provisions for rebuilding infrastructure and modernizing schools, a national manufacturing plan, and creating job training for 21st century jobs. The ideas and programs called for in the bill would be fully paid

for by revisions to the tax code. And right there in the middle of the section of the bill designed “to create financial stability and a better future for middle class families,” is child care.

The Rebuild America Act proposes to create a new, separate, and additional section of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). So, in addition to their current CCDBG grants, states could apply for “CCDBG Plus” grants to expand access for families to high-quality, affordable child care. With these five-year grants, states:

- Will be able to help families with slightly higher incomes (up to 200% of federal poverty level) afford the cost of child care
- Must use a portion of the funds to enhance the skills, knowledge, credentials, and compensation of the child care workforce
- Must use a portion of the funds for inspections and monitoring of all state-regulated child care, not less than twice per year
- Will make high-quality child care more affordable to families of eligible children by way of grants and contracts to eligible providers (programs that are accredited, are rated at the top level of a state’s quality rating system, or that meet Head Start standards) to enroll children of eligible parents

- Must target two-thirds of CCDBG Plus grant funds for care for infants and toddlers and one-third for children under the age of 13.

Including child care in the Rebuild America Act is a strong statement about the importance of child care for children of parents who work, seek jobs, and participate in job training, and the importance of the quality of that care.

It's also a sign that gaining traction with decision makers may rest on our ability to talk about our work as part of a larger goal, and to draw connections to our country's economic and community infrastructure. An essential immediate support for our most vulnerable children and families — Yes! — but also an investment in the long-term health of 'middle class America.' As Senator Harkin explained, "Americans should be working their way into the middle class, not falling out of it." Parents can't work without child care, and early learning opportunities matter to young children.

Introduction is just the first step in the process. The bill has been referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pension, which Senator Harkin chairs.

- Will the Senate have the courage to act?
- Will the House recognize the importance of child care?
- Will our presidential candidates be bold enough to make early childhood education a priority?

This remains to be seen. But by reframing child care as a critical lifeline for families to be able to reach and remain in the middle class, by speaking about early learning with the same gravity as others talk about roads, bridges, or the tax code, we may yet elevate child care on the national agenda.

## Update: Can You Prove Your Cribs Are Compliant?

At the end of 2010, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) approved new mandatory standards for full-size and non-full-size baby cribs. Federal crib standards had not been updated in nearly 30 years, and according to CPSC, "These new rules are expected to usher in a safer generation of cribs." *Policy Matters* covered this issue in depth in the May/June 2011 issue.

These new standards will directly affect the child care community, requiring providers to replace non-compliant cribs with cribs that have been manufactured to the specifications of the new standard.

To recap:

- After June 28, 2011, all cribs manufactured, sold, or leased in the U.S. must comply with the new federal standards.
- By December 28, 2012, "child care facilities, such as family child care homes and infant Head Start centers, and places of public accommodation, such as hotels and motels," must use only compliant cribs.

Recently, CPSC sponsored an informational conference call for state child care licensing officials to discuss compliance and the technical and legal aspects of the new crib requirements as they pertain to child care organizations. While CPSC officials made clear that CPSC enforces compliance with the crib standards, they also noted that understanding the new standards would help state officials enforce relevant child care licensing requirements.

*Licensing inspectors* who need to confirm that cribs meet current federal standards should look for a Certificate of Compliance issued by the manufacturer, according to CPSC officials. Receipts showing your crib was purchased after the June 28, 2011 manufacturer/retailer's compliance deadline won't suffice.

*For providers*, this means you will need to make sure your crib came with such a certificate and you kept it, or request a *Certificate of Compliance from the manufacturer or retailer*. The certificate should indicate several things, but especially the federal rule for which it assures the crib is compliant (either 16 CFR 1219 or 16 CFR 1220).

CPSC has posted online the essential information you need to comply: visit [www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/pubs/5023.pdf](http://www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/pubs/5023.pdf).

## Listening Sessions on Licensing

No matter what type of child care program you run or how parents pay their tuition and fees, licensing is an important part of the business of child care. It defines and separates the market and what parent and public consumers of child care can expect for their children.

This summer, the National Association for Regulatory Administration and the Early Care and Education Consortium will be hosting several listening sessions on the importance of licensing and how it can be improved:

- May 2 — **National Smart Start Conference** — Greensboro, North Carolina
- June 11 — **NAEYC Professional Development Institute** — Indianapolis, Indiana
- September 10-12 — **NARA Licensing Seminar** — San Francisco, California

Come share your thoughts with us! As Jana Martella, Executive Director of NARA, explains, "Strong licensing is the foundation of quality, and we all have a stake in that."