



Work-Family Conflict: Look to Employers and Communities for Solutions

Ron Haskins, Jane Waldfogel, and Sara McLanahan

Most American parents are under severe time pressure because they need to work while simultaneously caring for their children and, increasingly, for elderly family members as well. Government mandates on businesses to provide workplace flexibility for employees to relieve some of this pressure are minimal to nonexistent, and most parents do not qualify for government child care programs. Unprecedented government budget strains make it unlikely that legislative bodies will provide relief in the foreseeable future. The best hope for struggling working parents lies in voluntary provision of workplace flexibility by employers and more support from community institutions.

Three demographic forces are putting intense pressure on America's working families. The continuing entry of mothers into the labor force complicates families' efforts to care for their children; high divorce rates and historically high and rising nonmarital birth rates intensify time pressures on working

single parents; and the unprecedented increase in the elderly population poses challenges for working families who need to care for older relatives.

Because women work to create a career, to maintain a middle-class lifestyle, or to avoid poverty, most mothers want to work or believe they must work. Although the rise in maternal employment may have slowed or even plateaued in recent years, it is unlikely to be reversed. Similarly, despite strong evidence that children fare better in stable married-couple families and that work-family challenges are reduced (but not eliminated) when two parents are available, the decline in marriage and rise in single parenthood are unlikely to be reversed anytime soon. Nor does the rise in longevity appear to be a short-term trend.

These three demographic changes, intertwined with the movement for gender equality and the imperative of women's work, have all but eclipsed the once traditional view of males as breadwinners and females

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Ron Haskins is a senior editor of *The Future of Children*, a senior fellow in Economic Studies and co-director of the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution, and a senior consultant at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Jane Waldfogel is a professor of social work and public affairs at Columbia University. Sara McLanahan is editor-in-chief of *The Future of Children*, as well as director of the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing and the William S. Tod Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University.

To read the full report on work and family, edited by Jane Waldfogel and Sara McLanahan, go to www.futureofchildren.org.

as homemakers. Women still spend more time than men keeping house and tending children, but the division of responsibility both inside and outside the home is becoming more equal and seems likely to continue moving in that direction. Work-family tension promises to be a permanent feature of American family life, one that affects men as well as women.

Efforts to Ease Work-Family Conflict

As the latest volume of the *Future of Children* attests, researchers and advocates in the field of work-family issues often call for more robust federal work-family policies resembling those in other industrialized nations. European countries, for example, with their expansive view of government responsibility, typically provide timely assistance to families caught in the work-family bind. Two policies are particularly common: paid parental leave for mothers or fathers who must care for newborns or sick family members and universal child care for three- and four-year-olds (and in some countries even younger children). By contrast, the United States, with its more limited view of the role of government, provides only unpaid leave—and only for some parents—and a system of child care that requires most parents to pay for care, although some families receive government subsidies.

The prospect of major U.S. legislation in this area is highly unlikely in the near future. Although members of Congress have introduced bills to expand the federal role in addressing work-family issues, no committee of jurisdiction in either the House or the Senate has made a serious effort to move such legislation in more than a decade, even during 2008–10, when Democrats, who are more favorably disposed to work-family legislation than Republicans, controlled both houses of Congress and the presidency. Furthermore, the federal budget deficit that is dominating debate in Washington today seems likely to do so for a decade or more. Government action to deal with the deficit will inevitably cut or even terminate many social programs in the next few years. Such a strong budget constraint, combined with the perilous condition of the American economy, will minimize the prospects for new social legislation.

So where might the nation find answers to its work-family dilemmas? The federal government can still make a difference to working families by taking incremental steps. States can also take action, although budget issues will limit their options as well. As we see it, employers will play the most important role in easing work-family conflicts. Community institutions too can take steps to ameliorate work-family tensions.

Although the statutory giants of American social policy have greatly increased the well-being of workers and their families, they were designed for an era when most families with children had a stay-at-home mother.

Federal Government

The federal government long ago established fundamental laws that govern work and workplaces. The three major laws that provide a framework for the nation's employment policy are the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which governs overtime pay, child labor, the minimum wage, and other work-related issues; Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which made it illegal to discriminate against workers with certain personal characteristics (such as race and gender) in hiring and pay; and the Social Security Act of 1935 and its subsequent expansions, which provide benefits to individuals and their families when unemployment, disability, or old age make further work impossible. Although these statutory giants of American social policy have greatly increased the well-being of workers and their families, they were designed for an era when most families with children had a stay-at-home mother. The entry of mothers into the labor force over the past fifty years raised a host of new issues, prompting the call by advocates and policy makers for additional government policies to give workers at least some control over their work schedules, reduce discrimination against women

(and indirectly against families) in hiring and promotion, and promote fairness.

The major goals of the work-family movement over the past three decades or so have been to ensure that parents have the right to take time off to care for babies, sick children, or elderly members of the extended family while retaining at least part of their income; to enable workers to have more flexibility in the days and hours they must be present in the workplace; and to expand subsidies for child care expenses. As would be expected given the often contentious nature of American politics, efforts to reach these goals have set off an ongoing political struggle between those who want to create legislative mandates to force employers to adopt such policies and those who want to let the market determine employers' work-family policies. Most Republicans are opposed to mandates on businesses, not just on work-family issues but on a wide array of statutory and regulatory matters such as the environment, union rules, and taxes. In many cases, elected Republicans have a business background and are almost instinctively opposed to government mandates. Their reluctance to support government-required employee benefits has usually been strong enough to block passage of federal work-family legislation.

But not always. In 1993 newly elected President Bill Clinton, together with a Congress controlled by Democrats, enacted the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to address the growing work-family tensions arising primarily from the increasing workforce participation by mothers. The law requires employers with fifty or more workers to provide unpaid leave to employees who meet qualifying conditions and need time off to address a serious medical condition, provide care for sick family members or for elders, or care for a baby or newly adopted child. But the law helps only about half of working families; the rest—workers in small firms or employees who fail to meet qualifying conditions—receive no help. And although FMLA supporters regarded it as only an opening act, the expected second act never materialized. Republican opposition to most work-family legislation together with the dire situation of

the economy and the federal budget make additional work-family legislation unlikely for the foreseeable future.

The prospects for federal child care legislation are equally bleak, even though Washington has in the past enacted legislation that provides support for child care and preschool education. Families with children that pay federal income taxes receive a child care tax credit that subsidizes the purchase of care and returns around \$3.5 billion a year, most of which goes to middle- and upper-income families. Poor and low-income families are eligible for a wide range of child care and preschool programs. The two most important are Head Start, which serves more than 900,000 children at a cost of about \$7 billion a year, and the Child Care and Development Fund, a joint federal and state effort, which provides around \$10 billion (\$7 billion federal) annually to pay for child care for just under 2 million children a month on average. Prospects of cuts in federal child care funding appear at least as likely as expansions, so here too it seems doubtful that families can expect more help with child care from the federal government.

But even if Congress is unlikely to enact legislation that addresses work-family issues, other federal actions, such as funding for research, could be important in the long run. Outstanding ongoing research by Phyllis Moen and others at the University of Minnesota, for example, is now being supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The Moen team is conducting research at Best Buy that attempts to refocus employers' attention from the number of hours employees work to what they accomplish. As pointed out by Suzanne Bianchi in her article in the latest *Future of Children* issue, so far the new focus has produced flexibility in work schedules accompanied by lower commuting times, more and better sleep, more energy, and lowered work-family conflict for employees—all without a loss in productivity. Research like this provides information that can enable employers to maintain or even improve productivity while granting additional flexibility in work schedules—ultimately helping their bottom line. Equally important, such research

findings provide employers with an incentive to increase flexibility in work schedules in the absence of government mandates. Advocates often claim that employers that focus on easing work-family conflict have happier and more productive employees, but without research like that of Moen and others in the NICHD network, such claims will remain untested.

The federal government can also serve as an exemplary employer, demonstrating for the rest of the nation the kinds of employee benefits and workplace flexibility that are possible. Federal employees already have world-class health insurance that offers numerous choices of coverage; generous retirement plans that include government contributions to a savings plan (in addition to regular Social Security contributions); up to twelve weeks of unpaid family leave and generous annual leave; and various options for flexibility in scheduling. And at the White House Forum on Workplace Flexibility last year, President Barack Obama announced a new initiative to expand flexibility for the federal workforce even further.

State Governments

State governments are another potential source of support for working families. Some states, for example, have enacted legislation that expands on the FMLA, and every state has passed legislation on child care. A comparative assessment of state policies related to the FMLA was recently conducted by the National Partnership for Women and Families. Using the FMLA as a kind of baseline, the partnership graded every state on whether it created programs that “provide job protection and/or benefits” beyond those guaranteed under the FMLA to both private-sector and state employees. Only one state (California) received a grade of “A-” while the federal government and nineteen states received a grade of “F.” It follows that although some states have enacted legislation that expands the limited worker rights under the FMLA, most states have either no benefits or only modest benefits beyond the FMLA.

Similar ratings based on child care rather than family and medical leave would give states higher grades. Forty states have created their own high-quality

prekindergarten (pre-K) programs, but only a few states cover all four-year-olds. In 2010 state pre-K spending, including funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, totaled about \$5.4 billion. In addition, as noted, states spent around \$3 billion providing child care for working families through the Child Care and Development Fund. The Great Recession, however, produced perhaps the worst financial crisis ever faced by states. Declining revenues (even in 2012 state revenues are projected to be lower than they were in 2008) have forced states both to increase taxes and to cut spending. Pre-K funding was cut for the first time in 2010, resulting in reduced per-child spending. Despite these cuts, enrollment in state pre-K programs increased slightly, to about 1.3 million children, representing about 27 percent of four-year-olds nationwide (an additional 11 percent of four-year-olds are enrolled in Head Start). Several states also cut spending on child care programs. State spending on all preschool programs must nevertheless be counted as a significant source of support for working families, even though many poor and middle-income families receive no or too little help. But the prospect for additional spending and additional coverage is bleak.

Employers

With both federal and state governments hamstrung by budget deficits, employers are in the best position to help employees deal with work-family tensions. The FMLA’s federal mandate is minimal, and most state laws are only slightly if at all broader than the FMLA. Both now and in the future, then, the market is the major force shaping business policies regarding work-family issues. For researchers and advocates, the question becomes how to encourage employers to use the broad authority they have to set work conditions to advance the goal of greater workplace flexibility.

A national survey conducted every five or six years by the Families and Work Institute, and highlighted by Ellen Galinsky and her colleagues in their article in the latest *Future of Children* volume, took a close look at workplace flexibility in 2008. In that survey,

75 percent of employees reported not having enough time with their children; 63 percent, not having enough time with their spouse. That 73 percent of parents as compared with only 52 percent of nonparents said they felt the lack of time with their spouse shows that the time crunch is especially acute for parents.

Families must thus look to their employers and to institutions in their communities to find ways to ease work-related burdens on family functioning.

Survey findings regarding employee flexibility in work arrangements offer a mixed picture. Although about 60 percent of employees believed their work schedule met their needs, less than 40 percent said they had “a lot of control” over that schedule. Similarly, although nearly 85 percent said they were allowed to make short-notice changes in their schedule, less than 40 percent said they were allowed to work a compressed week at least some of the time, and only 16 percent reported being allowed to work at least some paid hours at home. Although 99 percent of mothers and nearly 95 percent of fathers were allowed time off for new baby care, only 35 percent said it was “not hard” to take time off for personal or family matters. Perhaps the most troubling finding in the survey is that on almost every measure of work flexibility, highly educated workers had significantly more flexibility than workers with less education. As the authors conclude, “less [financially] advantaged employees are also less advantaged in having access to workplace flexibility.”

The Families and Work Institute survey also found that various measures of work flexibility were correlated with job engagement, job satisfaction, job retention, and employee health. These correlations are second-best evidence of causal effects, but they are at least suggestive and provide the impetus for

more definitive research studies like those we suggested above.

Community Institutions

One of the most striking insights to emerge from the latest *Future of Children* volume is the important role that can be played by community institutions such as schools, health care providers, and elder service organizations. Many of these institutions have not caught up with the changes in American families and still have schedules and policies that assume the presence of a stay-at-home caregiver. Although community institutions also have limited resources, researchers suggest that by making small changes, such as adopting more flexible opening hours, schools and health care clinics could make the work-family balance easier for employed caregivers. Schools can also relieve work-family problems by expanding after-school care. Many schools already provide after-school programs, supported in part by \$1 billion from the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. Because additional federal funds are not likely to be available in the near future, local sources such as the Community Way and parent fees are the most feasible source of funding for expansions. Community institutions also provide major support for elder care, as emphasized by Ann Bookman and Delia Kimbrel in their article in the latest *Future of Children* volume. Bookman and Kimbrel show that nongovernmental organization support allows 10 million elders a day to live independently in their own homes rather than in costly retirement communities or nursing homes.

Conclusion

Beginning in the 1930s and over the course of the twentieth century, the U.S. government created major programs to support workers, including insurance against the threats posed by unemployment, old age, and disability; protection against race and gender discrimination; and labor standards. But because these laws were enacted before married and single mothers began surging into the workforce in massive numbers, government policies today do not adequately address the work-family tensions and severe time pressures posed by this demographic revolution.

Although both federal and state governments have fashioned extensive child care policies and programs, their benefits are out of reach for many families with children because eligibility requirements are strict or because funding is not adequate to cover every eligible family. And policies to allow workers time off to address family issues, including the arrival of babies, illness among family members, and the need to care for elders, are even less well-developed than child care policies. The upshot is that work-family policies are now being shaped primarily by market forces. Although we by no means advocate abandoning attempts to expand government policies to help with child care and workplace flexibility, we think it unwise, in large part because of budget deficit issues, to count on major new government policies in the near and even middle term.

Families must thus look to their employers and to institutions in their communities to find ways to ease work-related burdens on family functioning. Companies are already allowing some flexibility to their workers, though lower-paid and less-educated workers are less likely than more advantaged workers to have access to jobs that provide such flexibility. A key task for social scientists is to build a database that

shows how greater and more equitable workplace flexibility can translate into an improved bottom line for employers and how reduced pressure from work-family issues can translate into greater efficiency and productivity at work. Researchers have already begun uncovering some evidence to this effect, but more is needed. In addition, social scientists can explore how community institutions such as schools, health care providers, and elder care programs can adapt their policies to better conform to the new reality of American families.

Work-family conflict promises to be on the nation's agenda for policy development in both the public and private sectors for many years to come. In the near term, improvements are likely to be achieved primarily by voluntary changes in work policy by employers and by adaptations made by communities and families themselves. Researchers should press on with their analysis of proposals for new federal and state work-family policies, and advocates should continue lobbying for government action at the federal and state level, but the movement to help families find a healthier balance between work and family life should not hinge on the prospect for government action.

Additional Reading

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Work, Family, and Health Network website, hosted by Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Research, available at www.kpchr.org/workfamilyhealthnetwork/public/default.aspx.



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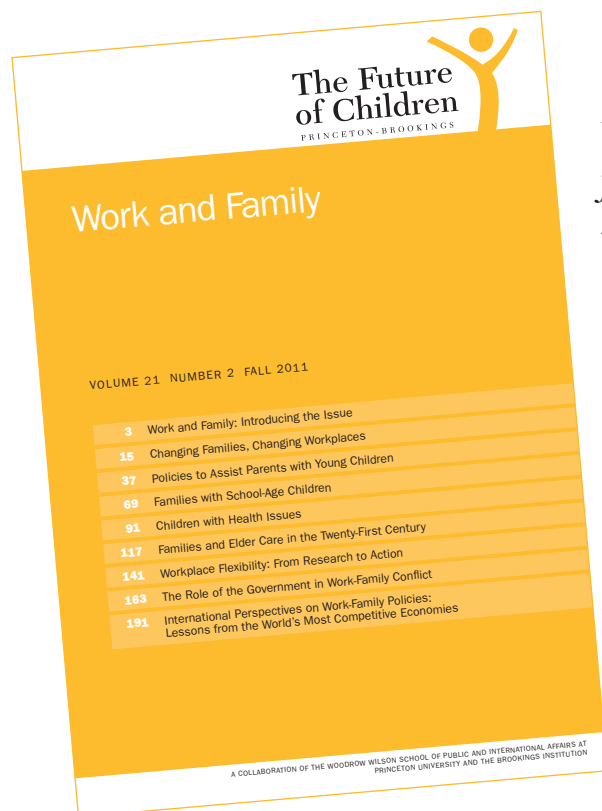
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The Future of Children
Princeton University
267 Wallace Hall
Princeton, NJ 08544

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