Policy Brief

Balancing Work and Life - The Importance of Family Friendly Work Policies on Child and Family Well-being

Traci Sawyers, January/February 2015

THE PROBLEM

Research has clearly shown that the early years of life are critical in determining a range of health and social outcomes for children. [1] Family friendly social policies significantly enhance child and family well-being, promote optimal childhood brain development and much more.[2] Parents need to spend time with their children and in the parent's absence, a child needs to be in stable, nurturing and caring environments. However, far too many families are struggling to meet the stressful demands of both parenting and work. The United States is the only developed country in the world that doesn't mandate that parents of newborns get paid leave, high quality child care remains elusive for many families and workplace supports lag far behind those needed in today's workforce to promote optimal child and family well-being. [3]

BACKGROUND

Children's early environments have a profound impact on the way their brain develops. The more stimulating their environments, the more brain connections are made and this directly effects physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.[4] Therefore, having quality time with parents and being in high quality child care arrangements matters significantly.

When a baby is born, a critical period for attachment with the parent begins. Attachment is the process in which a parent and baby sensitively interact with each other from birth.[5] It is also a key time for early nutrition ideally in the form of breast-feeding. Breast-feeding is also a protective factor for closer positive parent child relationships throughout childhood.[6] In the early years, parents also support school readiness in the form of play, reading, exploration and much more - as does the child care environment if the child is in this care arrangement.

While family friendly policies are absolutely critical in early childhood, they continue to be needed as the child grows and develops. Well-child visits to primary care providers, dentist appointments, school meetings, and time to go on an occasional field trip or to attend a child's sports game or other activities are also very important to family connection and well-being. A child's need to connect with their parent doesn't diminish as they grow older, it just changes. Being a parent is extremely rewarding, the years are fleeting, and parents should not have to miss out on important time with their child because of work. A 2013 Pew Research Center study of parents found that caring for their children was much more exhausting than the work they do for pay, but at the same time, parents found much more meaning in the time they spend with their children than in the time they spend at work.[7]

Today's workforce is still largely based on an outdated version of a male breadwinner who works full-time and does not take time off for the birth of a child and has a wife at home who can attend children's events, care for

them when they are sick and have dinner ready each night.[8] However, nearly 65,000 Vermont children under age 13 currently live in households where all of the parents are in the labor force.[9] Mothers in particular have entered the workforce at umprecidented rates over the last 20 years.

Another 2013 Pew Research survey found that about half (53 percent) of all working parents with children under age 18 say it is difficult for them to balance the responsibilities of their job with the responsibilities of their family.[10] There was no significant gap in attitudes between mothers and fathers: 56 percent of mothers and 50 percent of fathers say juggling work and family life is difficult for them. Feeling rushed is also a part of everyday life for today's parents. Among those with children under age 18, 40 percent of working mothers and 34 percent of working fathers said they always feel rushed.[11]

Promoting family well-being and optimal child development includes at least five critical areas of support: (1) the ability to access jobs with a living wage, (2) the ability to access paid family leave, (3) the ability to access on going flexible work arrangements, (4) the ability to access to high quality child care and preschool, and (5) the ability to access enriching and safe after-school environments once the child reaches kindergarten.[12]

With regard to a living wage, family economic well-being is a key influence on the quality of life for children, youth and families. A livable wage is the hourly wage or annual income sufficient to meet a family's basic needs plus all applicable Federal and State taxes.[13] Basic needs include food, housing, child care, transportation, health care, clothing, household and personal expenses, insurance, and 5 percent savings. The Peace & Justice Center's landmark "Vermont Job Gap Study" found that 72 percent of single parents with one child, 82 percent of single parents with two children, 55 percent of families of four with one wage earner and 35 percent of families of four with two wage earners did not make a livable wage based on their family size in Vermont.[14] The situation has not improved over time. According to the 2013 Vermont Basic Needs Budget, the average Vermont family with two children must spend $77,880 a year to meet only their basic needs. However the median Vermont family household income is $54,168.[15]

Paid family leave must also be a basic employment standard for all workers.[16] This includes paid family leave for the birth or adoption of a child or so a parent can stay home with their child if he or she is sick. Because the only family leave currently available is limited and unpaid, many people can not afford to take advantage of what little is in place. In addition, family leave policies that exist are currently largely taken by women, which contributes to gender inequality in the workplace, the wage gap and stigmatizes parental leave.[17]

The absence of sick leave for many working parents is also a significant problem for families. Despite the changing workforce, women are still most likely to have primary family caregiving responsibilities. However, more than half of working mothers in the United States don't have even a few paid sick days they can use to care for a sick child.[18] Losing a day's pay causes serious economic hardship for families. According to Voices for Vermont's Children, a recent Vermont study suggests that parents with paid sick days are significantly less likely to send a sick child to school. Conversely, 32.4 percent of families in Vermont who had three or fewer paid sick days and no adult at home sent their child to school with what they judged to be significant illness. In addition, Vermont parents with paid time off are five times more likely to take time off from work to care for a sick child and 15 percent more likely to have taken their child to the doctor within the past year.[19] Also for a low-income family, going three and a half days without pay equates to losing a month's groceries.[20]

Both male and female employees state that one of the most valued aspects of any particular job is flexibility.[21]

Flexible work arrangements include flexibility in scheduling and hours worked, such as flextime, compressed work weeks and shift and break flexibility. It also includes the amount of hours worked and provides opportunities for meaningful part-time work or job shares. Flexibility also includes where the work takes place, such as from home or a satellite office. These policies rethink how work gets done. Employers trust employees that work will indeed get done regardless of the time or place. Studies have found that flexible work policies lead to improved performance and productivity, reduced turnover, increased retention and reduced absenteeism. [22]

Apart from the very real emotional and logistical challenges, child care is an ongoing and increasingly difficult financial burden for working families. Many families spend as much or more on child care each month than on food or rent. For example, two parent working families in Vermont earning just above $47,100 (>200% of poverty) but below $54,168 (the Vermont median household income) are expending 27-33 percent of total family income to pay for the up to 40 hours a week needed for child care. [23] These families would not meet the income eligibility guidelines for public child care financial assistance.

High quality child care can also be hard to find and pay for. Combined with women's unequal pay, which is worse for mothers, some see no choice but to stay home, because they can't afford child care. [24] However, forgoing one income, or the only income, is very challenging or impossible for middle and especially low-income families and can lead to poverty. At the same time, studies show that increased access to quality, affordable child care increases employees morale and loyalty to their company, and can save U.S. businesses as much as $3 billion a year. [25] In addition, quality learning environments during the critical years of brain development help children succeed in school and life. Of those children who arrive at school without the skills needed to succeed, 85 percent still lag behind in fourth-grade. [26]

Child care in this country remains extremely underfunded, quality varies greatly and parents are paying too much. Significant public and private investment is needed so that parents pay less, and early childhood professionals have excellent preparation, ongoing professional development, and compensation commensurate with their qualifications and experience.[27]

Finally, the extended care community, which includes after-school, summer and school vacation care, is often overshadowed by a focus on the earliest years or the actual school day. However, quality after-school programs provide children with expanded opportunities to learn and grow. [28] The end of the school day is much earlier than the end of a parent's work day, and in the summer, schools still are not in session for over two months, but parents must continue to work. Formal care is an absolute necessity for young children, and for older children, these arrangements provide supervision, productive activities and direction. After-school and summer learning programs fill the invaluable role of providing essential services to children and families in need of support, such as a safe and supervised environment, academically enriching activities, healthy snacks and meals, and caring and supportive mentors. With high quality extended care, a parent is reassured that their child is safe and productive when not in school and they can focus better on their own work.

WHAT IS BEING DONE

Former Vermont Governor Madeleine Kunin's important 2012 book *The New Feminist Agenda: Defining the Next Revolution for Women, Work and Family,* outlines how the social structures surrounding work and family have not changed and how affordable, high quality child care, paid family leave and other flexible work polices remain elusive for the majority of women, especially low income women. [29] She proposes a compelling road map to move this critical agenda forward that is based on organizing, mobilizing, coalition-building and advocating with fierce passion.

Sustaining strong families should be a major focus of the women's movement and all constituents, including men, women, children, liberals, conservatives, all income levels, employers and employees and more. She calls for three ingredients that she feels, when mixed carefully, can produce change: anger, imagination and optimism.

President Obama used his January 2015 State of the Union address to urge states to require that employers provide their workers with paid sick leave. In 2014, the President also convened a White House Summit on Working Families, focusing on strengthening workplaces to better support working families and to ensure the country's global economic competitiveness in the coming decades. The summit, hosted jointly by the Center for American Progress, the Department of Labor, and the White House Council on Women and Girls, convened businesses, economists, labor leaders, legislators, advocates, the media, and citizens for a discussion on issues such as affordable quality child care, workplace flexibility, equal pay, workplace discrimination, and worker retention and promotion.

Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) just reintroduced the *Healthy Families Act*, legislation that would allow workers to earn paid sick leave to use when they are sick, to care for a sick family member, to obtain preventive care, or to address the impacts of domestic violence, stalking or sexual assault. [30]

A bill (Act 31) strengthening protections for Vermont workers around a number of issues, most notably equal pay, was signed in to law in 2013. This law includes provisions for equal pay, protections for employees who ask coworkers what they are paid, certification of compliance of government contractors with Vermont's equal pay laws, protections for new mothers who need to express breast milk for their babies at work, protections for employees to request flexible working arrangements, and the establishment of a study committee looking at the mechanics of a paid family leave law in Vermont. [31]

The 2015 Vermont legislature is once again considering paid sick leave legislation after an unsuccessful legislative campaign in 2014. In the House version of the bill (H.187), the amount of paid sick leave employees can accrue starts at three days when the law is implemented, and then steps up to five days after two years. Employees accrue at a rate of one hour for every 40 hours worked. Employees begin accruing leave immediately, but cannot use it until after a 500 hour waiting period is over. This roughly corresponds to a three-month probation period that is standard in many industries. Currently, as many as 20 percent of working Vermonters, a estimated 60,000 people, can't earn any paid leave. [32] Those who lack this benefit are largely low wage workers who cannot afford to lose income from missed work.

The Vermont Department of Health (VDH) completed a *Health Impact Assessment of Paid Sick Leave in Vermont* in February 2015. Its findings show that the passage of paid sick leave would help low-wage workers. For those working for small businesses that currently don't offer this benefit, paid sick leave would decrease the spread of infectious disease annually, would increase access to health and social services for domestic violence victims and even prevent some hospitalizations. VDH also partners with the Vermont Commission on Women (VCW) and Vermont's Breast-feeding Network to help to Vermont businesses welcome back breast-feeding mothers into the workplace.

With regard to child care assistance, the Vermont Department for Children and Families has long been committed to providing subsides and other supports to working families. In particular, its STARS (STep Ahead Recognition System) program can make high quality child care more affordable to those who need it most. If a low-income, two-parent two-child family receives child care financial assistance *and* their children are enrolled in a four or five STARS-rated program, the cost of the care is reduced to less than 2.6 percent of the family's total income. The same family would pay 21

percent of their income for child care if their children were not enrolled in a STARS-rated program.[33]

Vermont workers are currently covered by some federal and state laws related to pregnancy protection and family care. VCW has several publications on its website related to economic equality and security including a publication called, *Important Workplace Laws Vermont Workers Should Know,* that summarizes family friendly laws currently in place. [34] For example, as noted in the equal pay law referenced above, employees in Vermont have a right to request a flexible work arrangement. The law defines "flexible working arrangements" as "intermediate or long-term changes in the employee's regular working arrangements, including changes in the number of days or hours worked, changes in the time the employee arrives at or departs from work, work from home or job sharing." However, the law does not require the request be granted. The employer only has to consider in good faith whether the requested arrangements can be granted, but the law provides a framework for workplace dialogue.

Pregnant workers have federal and state protections. Under the federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA) and Vermont's Fair Employment Practices Act (FEPA) employers are not allowed to make assumptions about what kinds of jobs pregnant woman can do and they cannot fire or refuse to hire a woman who can perform the major functions of her job.[35] Also, under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and Vermont's Parent and Family Leave Act (PFLA), covered employers must provide 12 weeks of unpaid leave and job protection for certain workers for pregnancy, birth or adoption of a child and some medical appointments.[36] The PFLA's parental leave provisions apply to employers with 10 or more employee who work at least 30 hours and its family/medical provisions apply to employers with 15 or more employees. The federal FMLA applies to government employers and business with 50 or more workers. Leave is not paid and not all employees are covered.

Finally, under both current Vermont state labor law and the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) employees in Vermont have the right to request time and space to express breast milk.[37] However, there is an employer exemption if providing these accommodations would "substantially disrupt the employer's operation."

A handful of other states have moved forward and implemented paid family leave. In 2004, California enacted a law that allows for six weeks of paid leave using payroll tax. [38] Employees are paid 55 percent of what they would normally make with a maximum of $1,067 per week (2013). A 2014 study 10 years after its implementation found that access to paid family leave (1) increased new mother's leave taking by three weeks with the largest effects on low-income women, (2) increased fathers leave taking by just under a week, still a small amount, but an increase nonetheless, (3) had positive medium-term effects on women's employment and wages, (4) positivity affected children and families by giving parents more time for child care and breast-feeding, and (5) increased or maintained positive effects on productivity or profitability, according to the vast majority of employers. [39]

It has been 23 years since the unpaid federal Family and Medical Leave Act finally became federal law. Although extremely modest compared to most leave policies in other industrialized countries, it took nine years of compromise and further negotiation to even pass. Over 30 years since the campaign for family leave in the United States began, we must reframe, reignite and broaden the cause. The stress on families and need for fundamental change in the workplace is indeed felt by every working parent, but middle- and low-income families are most affected and are continually challenged to make ends meet, both financially and emotionally as caregivers. We must make real changes and ensure that our nation is not a place where families just barley get by. It must be a place where families thrive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are many additional steps Vermont and the nation must take to strengthen child and family wellbeing:

- Work to ensure that Vermont families make a livable wage.

- Pass legislation during the 2015 legislative session that guarantees a minimum standard of paid sick leave for all Vermont employees.

- Identify new and creative ways to help close the wage gap between working men and women.

- Encourage employees, regardless of gender or position, to take family leave to create a work environment where taking this leave is acceptable. Also, ensure family leave is paid. Many families often do not take all the leave they are entitled to because they cannot afford to go without pay.

- Offer and promote workplace flexibility. Encourage options such as job sharing, telecommuting, and flextime and expand part-time employment opportunities to higher level jobs.

- Continue to work toward wage transparency. In April 2014, President Barack Obama signed an executive order on wage transparency aimed at income disparities based on gender and race.[40] Vermont's Act 31, referenced above, also provides protections for employees who ask coworkers what they are paid. By making wages more transparent, female employees can better determine if they are being paid less than their male coworkers for the same work.

- Provide access to affordable, high quality child care. This will take a significant increase in government and private sector investment to support families and pay for the true cost of quality care. Many families are now forced to choose between working and providing child care due to its high cost. Single parents or low-income workers are particularly challenged by the cost and inability to quit working for economic reasons.

- Recognize and adequately fund and support the extended care community that provides critical programming for children after-school and on school vacations.

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About These Policy Briefs:

This is one in a series of policy briefs designed to focus our collective attention on issues that affect our young children and families. These briefs, as well as an annual *How Are Vermont's Young Children?* report are part of an initiative by Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council, connected to the Vermont Early Childhood Framework recently unveiled at Governor Shumlin's Early Childhood Summit in 2013. For more information, call Building Bright Futures at 802-876-5010 or find out more on line: www.buildingbrightfutures.org)

About Project LAUNCH:

Project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Heath) is a federal initiative funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The Vermont Department of Health (VDH) received a five-year SAMHSA Project LAUNCH grant in 2012. Project LAUNCH is being piloted in Chittenden County and is grounded in a comprehensive view of health that addresses the physical, emotional, social, cognitive and behavioral

aspects of well-being. Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council, Inc. serves as the grantee of VDH for Project LAUNCH implementation.

About the Author:

Traci Sawyers holds a M.A. in public policy from Tufts University and has 25 years experience in child and family policy, maternal/child health and behavioral health. In these areas, she has been a writer, lobbyist, researcher, planner, program administrator, consultant, facilitator, grant writer/administrator, elected official, and organizational director. She is currently the Early Childhood Health Policy Expert for Building Bright Futures and Vermont's Project LAUNCH initiative.