

Workplace Wars:
How Much Should I Be Required to Meet the Needs of Your Children?

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Johnny's mom leaves work early to coach Johnny's soccer game; Katie's dad leaves work early to attend Katie's kindergarten graduation -- while other, childless (or, alternatively, childfree) workers stay late to pick up the slack. Johnny's mom and Katie's dad both receive, as part of their benefit packages, health insurance for Johnny and Katie, as well as the opportunity to contribute to a tax-free childcare account -- benefits not available to colleagues without children. While many applaud such company efforts to assist working parents, struggling under a dual burden of employment and parenthood, recently a chorus of voices has been raised to challenge "family-friendly" policies, charging that they are friendly to families at the expense of fairness to fellow workers without children.

Are the special needs of parents ones we should be seeking to meet? If so, who is this "we" -- the government, employers, fellow workers? What policies in the workplace are most fair to parents and non-parents alike?

Responsibilities, Choices, and Needs

People with children have special needs. What responsibility, if any, should the rest of us bear for meeting those needs?

One first answer here, which I hear from some of my most environmentally conscious friends, is that the rest of us should bear no responsibility whatsoever for parents' special needs, because people shouldn't be becoming become parents in the first place. In a world as crowded as ours, and as environmentally threatened, people should not be having children at all. Admittedly, those in western, developed nations are not currently reproducing at greater than replacement rates; nonetheless, it is these children who have the heaviest and most destructive "ecological footprint." One of my friends, environmentally outraged, refused to speak to his own brother after his third nephew was born! Few of us subscribe to this draconian environmental ethic, however. Children provide such a great part of the good of life that it seems unreasonable to

expect people to forgo the central life experience of parenthood in exchange for environmental benefits that are speculative and diffuse.

On the other side of the spectrum, it is claimed that the continued production of children is a positive good for all of us, and parents are thus to be congratulated, and heartily and humbly assisted in their endeavor. On this view, those who do not have children, far from being paragons of environmental virtue, are parasites on those who do -- both in the crass sense that they will be depending on other people's children to provide the social security base to meet their own needs in their retirement years; and, less materialistically, that they richly benefit from living in a world that is producing a posterity for us all to pass something on to: that our own achievements take on more significance in a world that will continue beyond our own life spans. Sylvia Ann Hewlett, chairman of the National Parenting Association, is quoted in the Denver Rocky Mountain News as saying, "Children are 100 percent of the future and we are all stakeholder in their future because they are the folks who will be paying our Social Security. If you are a childless adult you are kind of a free rider on the effort of raising children." But this view as well seems overstated. Collectively we may need and want some people to be having children, but we hardly feel the more, the better. And most of those who have children don't approach the having of children in this light, as a duty grimly assumed for the benefit of humankind generally.

We are left, then, with a middle position. For most people in developed western countries, at the start of this new century, having children, I claim, is a morally permissible but not morally mandatory choice that they make to enrich their own lives. This would seem to support the view that the consequences of this choice -- the increased needs that parenthood brings -- should be regarded by and large as the responsibility of the parents alone. After all, if they didn't want to assume those burdens, they could have refrained from having children. We see a similar reaction in other areas in life in which special needs flow from voluntary choices rather than from the vagaries of chance and the uncertainties of fortune. We question whether we should be collectively providing medical care for those whose medical problems arise from poor lifestyle choices: smoking, over-eating, risky sexual behaviors. Moving closer to our current topic, some question whether welfare payments should be provided to mothers who repeatedly bear children out of wedlock.

However, even as we question the provision of assistance in such cases, by and large we do continue to provide it, and to

feel morally uncomfortable with the refusal to provide it. Our response to need, we hope, is not in the first place dictated by a detached judgment regarding the cause of that need; we aspire to be more open-hearted than that. However, as the need in question becomes chronic rather than acute, and poses a less dire threat to life and health, we rethink our willingness to offer aid. We would rescue a child drowning in a pond, however she came to be floundering there; we don't feel the same way about repeatedly picking up our neighbor's child from day care, when he could leave work on time but chooses to stay late.

Yet it may be a mistake to press too heavily on the voluntariness of the choice to bear and raise children. While this is indeed a choice we make, it seems to me to be misrepresented as a (mere) "lifestyle choice." Having children seems such a central part of a full human life, something Aristotle felt comfortable including as a fundamental element in eudaimonia, human flourishing. While some -- and perhaps a growing number -- obviously define flourishing for themselves differently, it is hardly eccentric to view a full human life as including children of one's own (biological or adopted) to love and care for. Life without children seems importantly similar, in my view, to life without sex. There are those who live a full and joyous life without participating in any sexual activities or sexually based relationships; yet most of us don't feel that sex is something we can simply ask people to renounce, as the price of absolving themselves of responsibility for any future offspring (though some of us do). So, while we can consider the bearing and raising of children as a choice, it is not a choice which most people feel blithely free to take or leave. (Consider the choice "Your money or your life," proposed by the gunman. It clearly is a choice, and yet. . . .)

It is not clear how relevant this concession is, however, to the question we are pursuing here. For even if we accept that parents' special needs don't flow from choices we can reasonably ask them to forgo, we may be wary of workplace policies which place too much weight on the meeting of particular, personal needs. To be blunt, "To each according to his needs," is not, contrary to what many Americans in a recent opinion poll reported believing, a creed enshrined in the American Constitution. Allocation according to need is only one of a plurality of distributive principles that we respect; other competing principles -- such as allocation according to effort, or to accomplishment -- also compete for our allegiance.

In the case of meeting parental need, it would seem strikingly unfair to most of us to pay parents more than non-parents for the same work, on the grounds that they have greater income requirements. In the past considerations such as this

provided the rationale for paying men higher salaries (as family "breadwinners") than women without dependents. It is not only the sexism here that troubles us, but also the unfairness of giving greater pay to one employee to another for the same contribution. At salary-setting time there is some natural pull toward considering people's differential needs: A has expensive private-college tuition to pay; B struggles under a large mortgage; C has a husband who makes a huge salary in another profession; D has independent sources of income. But this natural pull is, for the most part, rightly resisted. Except in special emergency circumstances, we do think it unfair to tailor salaries to individual needs, especially where, again, these are so often voluntarily assumed (she could have sent her daughter to the state university; he could have bought a less expensive house).

If we move toward the other extreme, however, of disregarding need, we can arrive at some seemingly ludicrous results. Should one worker complain that another, who suffers a heart attack, receives considerably greater benefits from his company-provided health insurance policy than she does from hers? Lisa Benenson, editor of Working Mother magazine, is quoted in The New York Times as asking, "If the person at the desk next to you gets cancer, do you think of them as 'earning' more because their health dollars costs are higher?" However, I think the health-insurance case is a special one, which can't be generalized too far. The whole idea of health insurance is based on a commitment to risk-sharing; if we were just going to pay for our own health-care needs, unwilling to take a chance on having to pay for anybody's else's, we wouldn't have gotten health insurance in the first place. We recognize that health insurance is in some respects a lottery, in which we may emerge either winners or losers. A better example to test our willingness to match benefits to needs might be: Suppose a company provides each employee with three days of bereavement leave annually, as needed. Would it make sense to allow the non-bereaved to use this leave to enjoy summer barbecues or time at the spa? Here, while intuitions may differ, this doesn't seem to me absurd. As we shall see below, many employers are moving in precisely this direction, of providing an extensive and variable menu of benefits from which both parents and non-parents can choose at will. Of course, what employers are willing and financially able to provide for all may fall considerably short of what employees in special circumstances need. But here it may be unreasonable for the needy to expect their plight to be addressed by their employer rather than by the general societal safety net.

My conclusion so far, then, is that greater parental need

is an insecure foundation for greater parental benefits -- partly because the need flows from a voluntary choice (though one that is hardly trivial or eccentric), partly because we are only moderately willing to apportion workplace benefits according to need, in any case.

A more promising approach, I would suggest, proceeds as follows. Whatever we decide about the choice to have children, and our appropriate response to the needs generated by it, nobody benefits when children are not raised well. It may or may not be in my interest that you have children; but it is definitely in my interest that your children, once here to share the planet with me, grow up to be as happy, loving, good, and decent as possible. These are the kinds of arguments that support the provision of free public education to all children, financed by the contributions of taxpaying parents and non-parents alike. The Supreme Court has gone as far as to mandate the provision of free public education even to the children of parents who entered the United States, and so acquired access to its social services, illegally. What good does it do anyone to have children growing up uneducated? And, we can also ask, what good does it do anyone to have children growing up with sub-optimal parenting? So even if we understand the choice to have children as one that implies the responsibility to assume at least some of the additional burdens involved in raising these children, we all -- parents and nonparents alike -- have a stake in seeing these children raised well. We all share an interest in the optimal raising of our future citizens, neighbors, colleagues, and friends.

Now, this argument appeals to the enlightened self-interest of non-parents, regarding the raising of other people's children. It may therefore seem to fall short of grounding actual moral obligations. What if someone were to listen to the argument just offered, and shrug and say, "Maybe I'm being foolishly short-sighted in not wanting to assist you with the raising of your children, but, frankly I just don't care"? Here my response is that one of the deepest problems of political philosophy is to establish actual obligations on the part of those who profess not to care about the collective benefits to be generated by collective cooperation: those who don't want to pay their share for national defense, or environmental protection, or other public goods. Let me set this problem aside, saying only that it is simply not feasible to permit individuals to opt out at will on the provision of collective benefits, while still remaining full-fledged citizens and members of our common life.

A final concession: the appeal to the widely shared benefits of optimal child-rearing can take us only so far.

Raising happy, healthy children is an important societal goal, but it is not our only societal goal. We also have obligations of justice toward the poor here and abroad; we also need to provide for a strong national defense, for transportation, for communication, for the arts. Indeed, raising happy, healthy children is not even the only goal of those children's parents, who presumably continue to care about other aspects of their lives as well: their work, their marriages, their contributions to the larger community. So we need now to turn to specifics and to consider actual policy proposals regarding the treatment of parents and non-parents in the workplace, and in the community beyond.

How Far Do We Go?

If we recognize some compelling reason to provide at least some assistance to parents in child-rearing, what does this mean in practice? Who should be assisting parents, and how? There is currently a wide range of options possible. Government provides tax breaks for parents by giving a \$2,800 tax deduction for each dependent in a family, as well as an additional dependent-care credit (up to \$4,800), and a recently added \$500 per child tax credit. There are calls for greater governmental subsidization of day care; and for stricter governmental regulation of day care. Employers can provide more or less "family-friendly" policies, ranging from the provision of health insurance benefits for family members, to tax-free dependent-care accounts, to on-site, company-sponsored day care, to flex time and other ways of structuring a more accommodating workplace. And fellow workers and neighbors also lend various amounts of informal assistance: staying late when working parents need to be at home, watching children when working parents need to be at work.

Note that some family-friendly policies make it easier for parents not to work (by easing the financial burden imposed by children, and so reducing the need for parents to generate additional income); some make it easier for parents to work (by, for example, providing high-quality, affordable day care). Which kind of policies we favor will depend on our other views about how children are best raised: by stay-at-home parents or by working parents. I will not enter that debate here, except to say that, just as children are an important part of a flourishing, full human life, so is work. Just as I am reluctant to ask workers to forgo being parents, so am I reluctant to ask parents to forgo being workers. I do happen to think it is beneficial for children to see both male and female parents as making some (paid or unpaid) contribution to the world beyond the home. But even if I didn't, I would not want

to insist that parents -- or any of the rest of us -- are required to do everything possible to raise the best possible children. I will return to this point below.

At this point, our question is, given the desirability of some family-friendly policies such as those cited above, who should bear the cost of putting family-friendly policies in place? I want to argue that it is best if this cost is shared as widely as possible, by all members of society. For the good in question -- the raising of healthy, happy children -- is a public good, equally shared by all. Thus, it is preferable, in my view, to provide family benefits through general governmental revenues. This would include tax deductions for dependents (I would limit this to deductions for two children, to address the environmental concerns raised above), deductions for child care as a legitimate business expense, and (in an ideal society) provision of health care to all children, as to all persons generally.

I find it more problematic when differential benefits are provided to parents not by the government, but by employers. Here it does seem to me that differential benefits to working parents violates our strong, long-standing commitment to the principle of equal pay for equal work. Elinor Burkett, author of The Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless, says (in a Denver Post article), "If a compensation packages given to parents are worth \$10,000 more than those given to nonparents, then we're compensating parents for their fertility and not their work."

Thus I would argue for company policies that, as far as possible, treat parents and non-parents alike, by extending to all the benefits needed primarily by parents. This would mean offering a menu of benefits from which workers could choose: stock options, health insurance for dependents, additional vacation time, flextime, and so forth. The case for uniform (but more generous) benefits goes like this. Many employees have many needs, beyond the need to care for small children. As we move through the cycle of life, the need to care for growing children is replaced by the need to care for aging parents (though some, in the so-called "sandwich generation" may face both needs simultaneously). Many employees struggle with poor health and would welcome a less strenuous schedule. Benefits such as flextime and enhanced personal leave would greatly enrich the lives of all workers, parents and non-parents alike. Many commentators have observed the extent to which the early 21st century workplace deforms and degrades human life. Juliet Schor, in The Overworked American, notes that Americans have fewer hours of leisure per month than they did several decades ago. **(I need to get this statistic.)** We work longer for less

satisfaction, neglecting other passions and interests. It would be in the interest of all of us to adopt a more graceful and humane pace of life. (**Maybe quote Jerome Segal here.**) Theda Skocpol, Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard, suggests that the solution to the workplace wars lies in looking for "ways to modify working conditions to facilitate both family and community involvements by everyone. In that way, contributions by parents can be considered one of a range of ways in which people engage in caring work and civic involvements" (quoted from The Communitarian Network Update).

Having It All

Would uniformly more benign workplace policies solve the conflict between parents and non-parents in the workplace? It may seem that uniform policies here would do violence to Aristotle's famous injunction to treat likes alike, and unlikes differently. Working parents may still come back and complain that uniform policies would continue to leave them significantly disadvantaged at the end of the day. They have the same health stresses of their own as non-parents, the same obligations to elderly parents, the same need for a more graceful and humane pace of life. Plus, they have kids. So they need financial support and release time to meet parental obligations in addition to what they need just to live.

Here, though, is where I think working parents go too far. Part of maturity, indeed part of living gracefully, is to accept that all resources, including life itself, are finite. Quite simply, the time I spend doing x will be time I will not spend doing y. It would be unreasonable for parents to expect to face no consequences whatsoever for their choice to become parents.

While I cannot document this, I suspect that some of the most bitter conflict with working parents comes from those who consciously chose not to have children so as to pursue other valued objectives. Workers who are not currently parents, but were in the past, may be able to sympathize with working parents, even as they may mourn that certain benefits were not in place when they were struggling to balance home and work. (Of course, some are not: "I struggled without affordable day care; you should have to struggle, too.") Workers who are not currently parents, but will be someday, have a clear interest in seeing family-friendly policies put firmly in place, though this may not be an interest they are able fully to recognize (many of us have stories of friends who made a comically abrupt turn-around here on the day they discovered they were about to become parents). Those unable to have children may have less sympathy for working parents' laments: they would give anything to be able to assume such a double "burden." And those who made the

decision not to have children just so that they could concentrate on professional success, or a strong marital relationship, or other interests, may well think: I made my choice and I'm living with it; why can't you live with yours?

A memory from my adolescent years comes to mind here. In the days before backpacks, I would limp home every day from school under the groaning weight of a huge armful of heavy textbooks. My best friend Debbie skipped and scampered beside me, unencumbered with any books whatsoever. Finally, one especially hot and weary afternoon, I asked her if she might want to help me out by carrying a few of my books. Her answer stayed in my mind for the next thirty years. "Claudia," Debbie told me, "if I wanted to carry home textbooks, I'd carry home textbooks, and I'd study, and I'd get good grades, but I don't want to carry home textbooks, so I don't." Her message was clear: if I wanted the good grades so badly, I would have to carry the weight of books that went with it.

To learn to live with our choices, and the inescapable limits they impose on us, is to give up the pipe dream of having it all. Yet one of the cruel paradoxes of our time is that just as parents are entering the work force in record numbers, the expectations for what counts as adequate parenting are also increasing. The less time parents have to give to parenting, the more we have come to expect of them as parents. Recent years have seen a staggering proliferation of extracurricular activities for children, all of which require parental chauffeuring, zealous attendance at games, endless recognition ceremonies. We not only have to be dutiful soccer moms, attending all their soccer games, but, with children playing in two sports simultaneously, and studying two musical instruments, we have to attend all the soccer games and all the swim meets and all the piano recitals as well as coach their Odyssey of the Mind teams and plan extravaganzas for Vacation Bible School. Oh, and creative Nobel-winning science fair experiments. And do their homework with them every night, too. We have seen the rise of what has been called "hyper-parenting."

Now, it is admittedly difficult to individuals to act alone to buck societal trends. Working parents do feel intense pressures today -- both to parent as if they were not workers, and to work as if they were not parents. But this can't be done. It is our early twentieth-century hubris to assume it can be done. Why should one think that if you are trying to do a and b, you should have as much of a and as much of b as someone who is trying only for a or b alone? One friend bewails the unfairness of a work force in which she can't find her dream job, which would have the following features: 1) high pay; 2) high prestige; 3) no requirements of special skills or training;

4) hours 9-3, with summers off, as well as spring break and two weeks at Christmas, with the ability to take off from work for all track and field days and any time a child is in a school play. This job doesn't exist. Should it exist? Certainly my friend has no claim on society to call such a job into being. It may truly be the case that we can't have it all.

A rich and full life is a great good. I for one do not want to force people to choose between work and parenthood; and we all share some responsibility for raising tomorrow's citizens. It is best when this responsibility is met by broadly shared tax policies and governmental programs, and by workplace policies that offer a more humane and graceful way of working to parents and non-parents alike. But working parents also need to be realistic and non-hubristic, to accept the limitations of time and life, and work within them as joyfully as possible.