

INTRODUCTION: *We all want kids to have a first-class education and to be cared for in a loving environment. We know that many parents face a real challenge in finding the right situation for their children—they can't find high quality, affordable daycare providers to care for the youngest children, and preschool programs that get kids excited about learning and prepared to start school strong. Some have suggested that the solution is for government to expand its role in providing and subsidizing preschool and childcare.*

To start this conversation, **take the quiz** to see what you know about preschool and childcare policy.

1: Has the federal government ever created a program to make educational services available to people with children under age 5?

- A. No, it would be a new initiative for the federal government to become involved in providing preschool.
- B. Yes, the federal government has been involved in facilitating preschool for nearly 50 years.

ANSWER: B – Since 1965, the federal government has funded Head Start, a program that offers educational and other services to children in low-income families. ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#))

2: How much does the federal government spend each year on Head Start?

- A. \$100 million
- B. \$1 billion
- C. \$5 billion
- D. \$8 billion

ANSWER: D – In 2012, the federal government invested nearly \$8 billion dollars in the Head Start Program. ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#))

3: How much do taxpayers spend each year on Head Start for each child served?

- A. \$8,000

- B. \$5,000
- C. \$2,000
- D. \$1,000

ANSWER: A – In 2012, Head Start served approximately one million children, making the per student cost of the program \$8,000. ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#))

4: Proponents of expanding government’s investment in preschool argue that it will pay off in terms of better student outcomes, which will ultimately improve society and the economy. When reauthorizing the program in 1998, Congress mandated an empirical study to measure the program’s lasting impact. What did this study find about Head Start’s impact on children by the time they reached third grade?

- A. Head Start participants had superior reading and language abilities than the control group
- B. Head Start participants had superior math abilities than the control group\$1.08
- C. Head Start participants were better off in terms of other cognitive measures
- D. Researchers could discern no meaningful lasting impact attributable to participation in Head Start

ANSWER: D – Researchers could find no significant lasting benefits of Head Start participation. In January 2010, after four years of analysis, the HHS Department released the results on Head Start’s impact on first graders. The study found that, compared to their control group peers, Head Start failed to boost students’ cognitive abilities across 41 measures. Moreover, first grade teachers reported that former Head Start students were actually less prepared in math than the non-Head Start students. In 2012, the HHS issued a follow-up study on Head Start’s impact on third graders, confirming that the researchers could identify no meaningful lasting impact attributable to participation in the program (for more see [Forbes](#) and this final report by [HHS](#)).

5: When asked in a survey, what did most parents think was the best method for caring for young children?

- A. Government daycare centers
- B. Private daycare centers
- C. Small, home-based care centers
- D. Friends
- E. A parent or another family member

ANSWER: E – When the research firm [Public Agenda](#) asked parents of children under age five about the best childcare arrangement during a child’s earliest years, 70 percent thought it

was best for one parent to be at home, while just 6 percent thought a quality daycare center was optimal. More than seven-in-ten parents agreed with the statement, “Parents should only rely on a daycare center when they have no other option.” ([Public Agenda](#))

6: What percentage of children under five are cared for in an organized daycare facility?

- A. 75 percent
- B. 50 percent
- C. 25 percent
- D. Zero

ANSWER: C – According to the [Census Bureau](#), in 2011, less than one-quarter of children under age five were in an organized daycare facility, and just 13 percent were at daycare centers. About 60 percent of children under five spent some time in an alternative childcare arrangement, but most of that care was provided by a relative (such as a grandparent or father). Even among employed mothers, daycare remains relatively rarely used, especially for the youngest children. Just 15.9 percent of babies (under age one) of working moms were in a daycare center in 2011. ([Census Bureau](#))

How Did You Do?

Check your answers and give yourself one point for each question you got right.

Did you get fewer than 4 points? That’s okay! This information isn’t well known, and in fact, most of the discussion you hear about this topic ignores this kind of data and analysis. Take a look at our suggested readings to learn more.

Did you get 4 points or more? If so, congratulations! You know your stuff about government’s role in our daycare and preschool systems and you should speak up when you hear discussion about this topic since so many people haven’t heard this information!

Real World Examples

Here are a few examples of people I know who are impacted by government’s involvement in childcare and preschool.

Elizabeth and Jonathan

After Elizabeth and Jonathan had their first baby, Michael, they felt conflicted

about what to do for childcare. It would be very difficult financially for one of them to quit their job and stay home, and both actually really liked their current employers and positions. Yet they also wanted Michael to be cared for by someone who loved him, rather than in a daycare center, and paying for daycare would eat into their paychecks, making that option even less appealing. Elizabeth finally asked her mother, a widow, how she would feel about watching Michael during the day. Her mother said yes: They could drop their son off each morning at her house and pick him up in the evenings. At first Elizabeth's mother saw this arrangement as a sacrifice, but soon she came to relish the time with her grandson. It brought her closer to her daughter and son-in-law, and gave her a renewed sense of purpose. If there were a "free" daycare center in the area, or if the government offered a subsidy to make daycare low-cost to Elizabeth and Jonathan, they would have never asked her mother to help.

Brittany

Brittany dreaded dropping her one-year-old Lilly off at the local daycare center. The caregivers there were kind and she felt that her daughter was tended, but she hated missing the milestones of her growth and had always wanted to be a stay-at-home mom. While discussing this situation with two of her friends, who also had small children, they explained that they were also unsatisfied with their situation. They both really liked their jobs and didn't want to stay home, but were frustrated with the costs and inconvenience of daycare. Brittany asked if they would consider having her watch their children each day, and paying her a lesser fee than they were paying to the daycare center. Both friends were thrilled: With this arrangement, they would know for certain that their children were in a safe, stimulating, loving environment, and it was less expensive. Brittany was thrilled because this meant that she could stay home with Lilly, and without the costs of daycare and with the income brought in from watching her friends' two children, she'd be better off financially.

Kevin

Kevin wanted to do what was best for his twin sons and make sure that they were getting the grounding they needed to be ready to start school. He'd heard worrisome reports about his local public schools—too many kids were lagging behind in terms of critical skills like reading and mathematics, and he'd even heard alarming stories of bullying and neglect. Rather than enrolling his boys in preschool, he spent time each day with them, helping them learn their letters, improve their fine motor skills, and learn to count. In another year, he'll need to go back to work for financial reasons. He wishes he felt confident that the K-12 school would be as dedicated to his sons' learning as he's been, and hopes that

they will focus on improving their educational programs for school-age children, rather than trying to expand their lackluster services to 3 and 4 year olds.

Gloria

Gloria works part-time and uses a local daycare center that is run by a church. She loves that while she is at work her children are not only being well cared for, but that they are also surrounded by those who share her values. She knows that her daycare isn't for everyone and is glad that people have options that cater to their needs. She has a friend who uses daycare that is affiliated with her synagogue and others that have selected facilities that offer specific learning environments, include introducing children to different languages. She worries that if government starts offering care for 3 and 4 year olds at the public school, a lot of these programs will go out of business. She is willing to pay extra to have a school that reflects her values, but she knows that not everyone can. Government-subsidized care options would make it hard for places like her daycare center to compete, meaning there would ultimately be less variety and lower quality.

Discussion Questions

- Do you think that most public schools are doing a good job in educating kids?
- Are you surprised that Head Start participants are no better off than non-participants?
- Do you think that we should give public schools more to do, such as caring for 3 and 4 year olds, or do you think they should focus on improving educational services for K-12 students?
- What do you look for when you considering programs to enroll your own children? Do you want religious education to be a part of that program? Do you have any other special interests? Are you concerned that if government gets more in the business of daycare and preschool, there will be less of a variety of programs?
- Do you think that parents who pay someone to watch their children should get more government financial support than families who have a family member care for their kids?
- If you are a stay at home mom, how would you feel if someone offered a

“free” to the user (so all expenses are paid for by taxpayers) daycare center down the street. Would you use it? Would you feel like your contributions to your family would be seen as less valuable?

Articles to Read

Vicki Alger, [“Expanding Childcare and Preschool Choices,” Lean Together.](#)

Carrie Lukas, [“Labor, Tax, and Fiscal Reforms to Help Parents Balance Work and Family,” Room to Grow.](#)

Carrie Lukas, [“Parents Deserve to Know the Facts about Head Start,” Forbes.](#)

Action Items

- Ask your friends and family how they feel about greater government involvement in preschool and daycare. It’s always easier to see the benefits of new government programs – people receiving new subsidies or tax breaks – but it’s important to see the costs. Ask if they think that government would do a good job creating quality program. Ask if they are considered that government would prevent innovation and a greater variety of options. Ask if they think it’s fair for government to only provide additional financial support to parents who pay someone else to care for their children, but not for parents who sacrifice to keep their child at home.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local paper the next time you read about proposals for expanding government’s involvement in daycare and preschool. Explain the real cost of this intervention and why reducing the burden on all parents – not just those who use certain government-approved care programs – should be our priority.