

Michaud: Early child care pays dividends

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Anne Michaud is the interactive editor for Newsday Opinion.



New York is sitting on a vast, untapped economic development tool that has received too little notice: our children.

Investing in children before they enter school pays dividends, and yet child care subsidies are at risk as Congress mulls

questions about how to reduce the federal deficit. Before you tune this out as the same old "it's for the kids" chorus, consider:

--Children in high-quality programs are more likely to be employed -- and paying taxes -- when they reach adulthood.

--Parents who receive child care subsidies are less likely to need other forms of public assistance. A 2006 report by the [Department of Health](#) and Human Services noted that the subsidies are associated with the largest increase in employment for people formerly on welfare.

--Children who receive high-quality care, either at home or outside, are ready to succeed in school, showing a reduced need for special education programs and increased graduation rates.

--Bad child care is more likely to produce juvenile criminals. A [Chicago](#) study showed that at-risk children not enrolled in early care and education programs were 70 percent more likely to be charged with a violent crime by age 18.

This last point prompted more than 600 police chiefs, sheriffs and prosecutors -- calling themselves Fight Crime: Invest in Kids -- to write to Congress this spring, urging continued funding for Child Care Development and Block Grants. The grants are the federal government's primary child care assistance to states.



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Despite a sizable budget -- \$19 billion in federal and state spending in 2008 -- child care subsidies have never kept up with the need. Only a fraction of eligible families received any subsidy that year, according to the Urban Institute; most were stuck on long waiting lists.

In February, [Republicans](#) in the House proposed cutting the child care block grants by \$39 million. That didn't happen, but the funding is still at risk. In the name of deficit reduction, Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan's (R-Wis.) plan for 2012 would reduce spending to 2008 levels. [Democrats](#) say that would cause 170,000 families trying to find or keep jobs to lose child care.

To be sure, we must get federal spending under control. But it's fair to ask our leaders to responsibly weigh the value of programs they want to cut.

Child care costs are mind-boggling. A survey by the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies found that, in every region of the United States, the average child care fees for an infant were higher than the average amount that families spend on food. In New York, infant care at a center averages \$13,630 a year.

One culprit in underfunding child care is the culture war. Often, those who believe that a parent -- a mom -- should stay home and raise children oppose child-care subsidies. But given modern economic realities, parents will work. Seventy percent of mothers with young children are employed outside the home. And census officials are predicting a boom in the number of single mothers on Long Island, as figures are released this week.

Besides, 50 years of research has found that children of working parents don't turn out to be much different from those with stay-at-home parents, at least when it comes to academic achievement and behavior. That's according to an analysis published in January in the journal *Psychological Bulletin*, which examined 69 child care studies conducted between 1960 and March 2010.

It's the decent thing to do to help families get on their feet and stay there, not to mention to raise a generation of kids who are prepared for success. But if decency isn't persuasive, think of all the money we'll save on special ed, public assistance and juvenile incarceration.

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