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What Children Need

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Economic and Social Security and Substandard Working Conditions

What Children Need. By Jane Waldfogel. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006. 269 pp. ISBN 0-674-02212-2, \$35.00 (cloth).

Economic opportunity has long been a hallmark of America. This book is about what children need in a society that is firmly rooted in this principle. Bringing to bear her rich background in economics, social work, and child development, Jane Waldfogel marshals both argument and empirical evidence to back up a compelling set of recommendations for both researchers and policy-makers. Toward that end, she bridges a variety of social science disciplines and mediates among a gamut of special interests that influence policy-making, including political agendas, the demands of various advocacy groups, and the vagaries of public opinion. Her modus operandi is to elaborate, step by step, how to nurture a child—specifically, a typical child in the United States, one who has at least one employed parent. The chapters sequentially examine distinct, integral stages of children's cognitive, behavioral, and physical development. This child-oriented perspective is carefully balanced with a more holistic view of the family that explores the impact on children of the marketplace realities of parental employment, whether paid work is pursued out of necessity, by choice, or both. Achieving the delicate balance between work and family is a recurrent theme. Each chapter ends with concrete, and bold, policy recommendations as they relate to the children's developmental stage focused on in that chapter.

The book is refreshing in several ways. Waldfogel is determined to remain nonpartisan—a position she forthrightly explains and defends in the last chapter. For example, she gives equal weight to issues pertaining to fathers and mothers (and notes the dearth of research on the former), and is especially careful not to condemn the difficult decisions made by working mothers. She does not hesitate to explain to readers how and why research findings are often misinterpreted, and uses alternative perspectives, grounded in research evidence, to make her case. Cited evidence on children's reports of their general contentment with their parents' employment is an example.

The book begins with a lucid, tightly reasoned case for judging policies by several criteria—their consistency with generally accepted ethical values, for example; the thoroughness and rigor with which existing empirical evidence was brought to

bear in formulating them; the public and political prioritization they reflect; their benefits and costs; and their susceptibility to monitoring to ensure their continued effectiveness. An explicit assessment of these criteria as they apply to the substantive focus of each chapter would have helped. It would be useful, for example, to know how each age-group of children compares with the others in the quantity and quality of research evidence available on it, the amount of public investment allocated to it, and the specific ways in which the myriad of factors relevant to balancing work and family apply to it.

The book has several strengths. Most important is the basic underlying thesis that policies should be tailored to be "responsive ... to children's needs." To this thesis one might add "and continue to be responsive as children grow and develop" to emphasize that needs are not static. Waldfogel carefully distinguishes between children's needs and familial needs arising from socioeconomic status. Needs during early years of childhood are addressed particularly well and comprehensively. Throughout, comparisons with other developed nations are frequently brought into the discussion to prompt bolder thinking. (My only quibble is that these comparisons do not always duly acknowledge special difficulties arising from the historically based heterogeneity of the United States.) The policy recommendations include extensive discussion of possible workplace innovations, a subject that is often given short shrift in social policy debates despite the seriousness of productivity losses related to work/family stresses and the implications of these problems for America's future relative economic standing in the world. The author also invokes research-based evidence, and sometimes re-examines evidence that has been misapplied, to debunk several popular myths. One poignant example of past misapplication is the use of attachment theory to justify policies that penalize working mothers (page 42). Waldfogel shows that this same evidence in fact underscores the importance of sensitive and consistent parenting, irrespective of parents' employment status.

Although the book's strengths loom large, it is not without a few weaknesses. The brevity of the section on adolescence especially disappointed me. I think the author missed an opportunity to fill an important gap in the literature on this subject, which has attracted relatively less notice in research on parental employment (as compared to early childhood). Findings on early brain development spurred a new focus on early childhood among scientists, policy-makers, and journalists, helping to frame new policies and to

stimulate more rigorous research. With the right push, might not adolescent development receive similar attention? The important influence of peers, mentors, and communities on adolescents' health and development is not addressed in *What Children Need*. Yet, it is study of just such factors that could lead to more innovative thinking about housing- and neighborhood-based policies to assure that families and their youth are living in safe and nurturing communities. As adolescents may be even more susceptible than children of other ages to family conflict, family-focused interventions designed to diminish escalated and dangerous conflict might also be effective. If we are to seriously revisit extending the school day or supplementing it with after-school programs as recommended in the book, then school quality should be equally high on the policy agenda, as these programs will partly reflect the institutions they are built from.

While structuring the book around the needs of any "one" child helps to organize the presentation and make the subject conceptually tractable, one risk of such a perspective is that children will be treated as though they are all more or less alike, rather than beings living in, and shaped by, complex family forms. The book pays relatively little attention to family size, sibling relationships, and sibling spacing, influences that inevitably add layers of complexity to parenting and meeting the needs of children—particularly of older siblings, on whom demands are very sensitive to such variables—and to families' financial circumstances. Zooming in on the number and birth order of siblings might set the stage for programs that can more finely adjust for these powerful influences. Similarly, policy innovations designed to factor in the roles played by extended families, which commonly serve as a social and financial support for children, would lend policies a needed multi- and inter-generational dimension. Also salient in the lives of a sizeable minority of children are divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and stepfamily structure, each of which strongly affects the flow of resources into and out of the family. If "parents matter," it is important to know if parents have competing or conflicting priorities.

Waldfogel occasionally gives equal weight to both sides of a debate even when expert opinion disproportionately favors one side and advocacy for the other side is marginal. The policy recommendations that come out of this sometimes taxingly "fair" examination, however, are invigorating, not only because they in themselves are forceful and provocative but also because they stimulate yet more ideas. A number of questions occurred to me. For example, could equity be built into

policies so that they benefit childless individuals or couples as well as families with children? Can policies be designed to have enough flexibility to assure that they seamlessly follow a family as changes occur both in the family and in the child's developmental needs? And if parents matter the most, then might it not be in the best interest of children if parent-focused policies—from home-visiting programs to fatherhood and relationship education programs—continue to prevail?

What Children Need is an impressive, thought-provoking synthesis of information and ideas for designing social policy to support the healthy development of children living in an industrialized world. I recommend it for advanced students and policy researchers.

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The Evolving Pension System: Trends, Effects, and Proposals for Reform. Edited by William G. Gale, John B. Shoven, and Mark J. Warshawsky. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005. 226 pp. ISBN 0-8157-3118-3, \$59.95 (cloth); 0-8157-3117-5, \$26.95 (paper).

This volume delivers on its promise. It offers a contextual overview of the American private pension system that enhances our understanding of the role of employer-sponsored retirement plans and pension policy. It also provides sufficient background for evaluating reform proposals. Both the high quality of the writing in this collection and the complementarity of the papers are signs of a firm, sure editorial hand. First presented at a conference in 1999, the contributions to the volume have generally stood the test of time. They are grouped under three themes, as the aptly worded second part of the book's title indicates: trends, effects, and proposals for reform.

The introductory chapter, which is co-authored by the book's three editors, is succinct but remarkably thorough. In nine pages the editors successfully build the framework of the book, outlining the role of private pensions in the retirement income system and presenting detailed synopses of the volume's papers that adeptly isolate their main arguments. This chapter should provide valuable orientation for those who are not very familiar with the American private pension system and