

PUBLIC AGENDA

*Independent, Thought-Provoking,
Always in the Public Interest*



Childcare

A PUBLIC AGENDA CITIZEN CHOICEWORK GUIDE

***FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS,
CLASSROOMS, STUDY GROUPS AND
INDIVIDUALS***

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A Note on Public Agenda’s Choicework Guides

Public Agenda Choicework Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations and classrooms, by journalists and researchers, and by individual citizens looking to gain perspective on public issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The different perspectives are drawn both from what the public thinks about an issue, based on surveys and focus groups, as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates.

Customizing to fit your situation

Note that the Choicework Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways--they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints necessarily mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people would mix and match from different perspectives, or add additional related ideas.

Additionally, users of these guides have the option of providing various kinds of nonpartisan information along with them as context for a conversation. For instance, for a guide on an education topic, a few well-chosen facts about local schools might be a useful adjunct to the guide if you are using it in a group setting.

Public Agenda’s Community Conversations Model

Public Agenda often uses these guides (and, when available, their video counterparts) as discussion starters for community conversations as part of a larger program of community dialogue and action. Such conversations are frequently a solid first step toward new partnerships and initiatives.

Public Agenda’s approach to community conversations involves several principles and guidelines that can be flexibly applied to different settings:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants, “beyond the usual suspects”
- Small, diverse dialogue groups with trained moderators and recorders
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives (Choicework)
- Strategic follow-up to connect dialogue to action

If you would like to learn more about Public Agenda’s approach to public engagement, or to see a full list of our Choicework Guides (including print and video versions), please visit our website www.publicagenda.org and click on “Public Engagement.”

Public Agenda Choicework Guides are provided free of charge. We encourage you to make and distribute as many copies as you like as long as it is for noncommercial or educational use only, and so long as the material is not altered and the Public Agenda copyright notice is maintained.



Introduction

How do we respond to the needs of today's children, families and communities? Should we encourage a parent to stay home even if that means a loss of financial security or a slow down in that parent's career? What if there's only one parent or if a family simply can't live on one income? What kinds of child care policies by government and employers would be the most helpful to today's families?

To help you and your neighbors talk through these questions and decide what's most important to you—as an individual and as a community—we've created three approaches to child care. Which would make the most sense, and why?



Choicework

Approach A: Help parents take care of their own children

This approach is based on the belief that one parent staying at home is best for young children, and aims to make it easier for parents to do so. If one parent cannot be home, child care by a close relative is best.

To help families, this approach would:

- Encourage legislators to provide tax breaks to parents of young children to help them better afford to keep one parent at home.
- Encourage employers to provide several months of paid leave to new parents and offer flexible work schedules so parents can work from home or reduce hours.
- Provide moral encouragement and support for families that choose to keep one parent home.

People who like this approach often say, “Parents and family members are best suited to care for their own children.”

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *Are there any downsides to this approach?*
- *Is it realistic to expect employers to give new parents several months of leave? How does this differ for smaller versus larger workplaces?*
- *Will this approach meet the needs of single parents or low-income families?*
- *Does this kind of child care do as good a job preparing most students for school as child care with a trained professional would?*
- *If we fail to provide better child care options outside the home, won't that limit the options of women who want to work?*
- *Are all parents indeed best suited to care for their own children?*
- *Is there a role for churches and social service agencies in this approach?*
- *If government and employers were to help pay for parents to stay home, is there some way to assure their money is being spent on quality care?*



Approach B: Provide quality, affordable child care options for those parents who need the most help

No matter how desirable, it's unrealistic to expect one parent to stay home with young children, especially single and low-income parents. This approach focuses resources on expanding existing programs and developing new ones aimed at helping those with the greatest need.

This approach would:

- Improve and subsidize top-notch day care in low-income neighborhoods.
- Provide tax breaks to parents to help them afford professional child care.
- Increase funding for state and Head Start programs and expand after-school programs for lower income families.

People who like this approach often say, "We need a high quality child care safety net for single parent and low-income families who don't have other options."

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *Are there any downsides to this?*
- *Isn't it true that some families just can't have one parent at home? Don't we need to provide for safety net for them?*
- *Doesn't it make the most sense to focus our resources on those who need the most help rather than create a universal program that will surely cost more and need a large bureaucracy to run it.*
- *Isn't this another form of welfare, where people become dependent on government and outside help? Isn't it better to help people solve their own problems than to solve them for them?*
- *Can professional child care ever be as good as having a parent at home? And if not, should we support what's best for kids?*
- *Will this kind of child care help students succeed in school?*



Approach C: Provide comprehensive, quality child care for all families

This approach stems from the belief that all families should have access to quality professional child care, not just lower income or single-parent families. The best way to do this is to create a comprehensive system that serves the whole community.

This approach would:

- Create pre-school and after-school child care programs, such as child care cooperatives, that would be open to every family, regardless of income.
- Encourage schools, employers, child care professionals and families to work together to make sure all of the community's child care needs are met.

People who like this approach often say, "A comprehensive system that serves everyone will meet the most needs and enjoy the most support."

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *Are there any downsides to this?*
- *This approach sounds expensive. Can we afford to go in this direction?*
- *Do you worry about creating a big bureaucracy that will waste resources and do a poor job?*
- *Will this kind of child care do a good a job preparing most students for school?*
- *Isn't there the danger that this is the first step to replacing the family as the first and lasting influence on children?*
- *What does good child care look like?*



Using the guide in a community conversation, discussion group or classroom setting

After discussing the choices on the previous pages, you may wish to consider and talk through the following questions.

Summarizing a Choicework Conversation

These questions are a good way to summarize a choicework dialogue, prior to considering more action-oriented questions.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?
2. What were our important areas of disagreement—the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?
3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

Bridging from Dialogue to Action

These questions can help you move from deliberation and dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today?

Note: If this question generates a long list of potential actions, they can be prioritized by asking each person to list his or her top three ideas.

2. Is there anything that you, as individuals, might do, or do differently, as a result of today's conversation?
3. What would you like to see happen to follow up on today's conversation? What should the immediate follow-up steps be?

