

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
WEBINAR

EMPOWERING PARENTS TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT:
A CONVERSATION ABOUT BUILDING A "PARENT NATION"

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Panel Discussion:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. VALANT: Good morning and thanks for joining us. A special thanks too to those of you on the West Coast who are waking up early with us.

I'm Jon Valant, a Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and the Director of the Brown Center on Education Policy. And today we are very pleased to be hosting a conversation about parents and their children's education and development.

As just about anyone watching this webcast knows, I'm sure this is quite a time for parent engagement in education in the United States. From fiery school board meetings to book bans to parent hotlines for reporting divisive teaching practices. There's sort of a whole lot going on when it comes to parents and education and a whole lot of noise in that space. But I think regardless of what any of us believe of any of that stuff that's going on, we'd all agree that parents and other caregivers, whether it's grandparents and aunts and uncles or siblings, play incredibly important roles in children's development.

So today's discussion is going to focus especially on early childhood. We'll talk a little bit about the neuroscience of early childhood development and then what parents can do to facilitate that development and how policy makers and the rest of us, society as a whole or employers or anyone else, can support parents as they support their kids' development.

We have an hour together and we'll begin with a one-on-one discussion with Dr. Dana Suskind of the University of Chicago, who authored a new book on brain development in early childhood and how we can all support that development. We'll then transition to a panel discussion with a terrific group of panelists, Dana included, before turning to some Q&A time with panelists based on questions submitted by members of the audience. And we'd love to get those questions, so if you have questions that come up now or come up kind of as we're going, please feel free to send them in. You can send questions

via email to Events@Brookings.edu or via Twitter at @Brookingsgov or #ParentNation. And those will find their way to me and I'm happy to pass those questions along to our panelists.

And I too should thank the University of Chicago for their support in putting on this event.

Okay, so with that, let me introduce our first guest and we'll kick off the conversation.

So Dr. Dana Suskind is the founder and co-director of the TMW Center for Early Learning and Public Health, which is a research institute at the University of Chicago that works to translate brain science to tools and strategies that parents and other caregivers can use. She also directs the University of Chicago Medicine's Pediatric Hearing Loss and Cochlear Implant Program. She is a parent, a practicing pediatric surgeon, and a very well published researcher whose work focuses on foundational brain development.

Dana's latest book, "Parent Nation: Unlocking Every Child's Potential, Fulfilling Society's Promise", which I have right here, is very nice and digs into a lot of the topics that we'll be discussing today. Specifically, what it is that kids need for that healthy early childhood and how we can all work together TO make that happen.

So, Dana, welcome, and thanks for joining us.

DR. SUSKIND: Thanks so much for having me. Excited to be here.

MR. VALANT: So I'll kick off with kind of the big question about what it is, this project that you're working on. So in your book you talk about building a parent nation to better support the development of young children. What do you mean by a parent nation and why do you see that as such a priority?

DR. SUSKIND: Yeah, a parent nation really is at the end of the day a society that cherishes and importantly supports the love and often invisible labor that goes into nurturing, raising, and educating future generations. It's really a society that centers

itself on the health and well-being of children and therefore families. And, as you mentioned, there's no limit to who can provide that love and input. So any — I really mean any adult engaged in the work of raising children needs the support, including of course early childcare providers. And the pathway forward in this book and in much of my thinking is how early neuroscience foundational brain development can be a blueprint for this parent nation that will guide us not only to healthy development for all children, but gender equity, civil rights, you know, labor issues. And really, by following the neuroscience that tells us that we need to begin when learning begins on the first day of life, not the first day of school, and that we need to invest in those who are children's most important brain architects, parents and caregivers. Because the bottom line is the health and well-being of children is dependent absolutely on the support of parents.

So that is parent nation.

MR. VALANT: And so let's talk about those first few years of life and get in a little bit to the neuroscience if we can.

So what's happening inside of, you know, babies and very young children's brains in those first few years of life that make that period so consequential?

MR. VALANT: Absolutely. So, you know, I want to situate those first three years of life in a way that I think many people don't think about it. It is truly an evolutionary gift. Those first three years of life are why humans are the smartest of species. I mean, you probably haven't every thought about why do babies come out absolutely helpless. You know, unlike a horse or a zebra that can walk within minutes of being horse, you know, the human infant comes out totally undone, undercooked. They can't even hold up their heads for months, they can eat on their own for a good year. And there is a reason for this. The reason is is that the universe sort of made a trade-off. If we were to be as smart as we were and our brain development happened all in utero, we would not fit through a woman's pelvis

very easily. And as any woman can tell you, it's large enough as it is.

So, instead, the universe said, okay, you know what, the trade-off is those first months, years of life, we're going to finish cooking the brain, building the brain. But it was with the expectation that a parent or a caregiver would be there to be giving that rich input that was necessary for that brain development. It's why the pediatricians often call this the fourth trimester. And during that period of time, this evolutionary gift, 85 percent of the physical brain is being built. A million new neuro connections are happening with the input that's being provided by parents and caregivers. So you can think about it as, you know, every experience is sort of finishing that blueprint and it is a great potential for opportunity, right. You can have huge input. But it's also a huge potential of risk because if you don't get that input you're not fulfilling what, you know, the brain is expecting, all that positive input.

So in some ways not investing in those early years, you're squandering sort of — you know, one of our evolutionary greatest gifts.

MR. VALANT: And what do we know about that input should look? So when we're talking about how adults can engage kids and support that brain development, do we have sort of good information on what works at that stage as far as stimulating that development?

DR. SUSKIND: We have so much information. I mean obviously I'm a translational researcher, but I always say if we did have one more randomized control trial, we have a pretty good sense of the nurturing interaction that children need and protection from toxic stress that allows healthy brain development. And really this focus on what children need and what parents and caregivers can provide, has been really the core of the work that we do at the TMW Center here at the University, and actually the focus of my first book, which was called "Thirty Million Words: Building a Child's Brain".

But at the end of the day, the way I like to think about it is just like milk is

necessary to feed a baby's body, nurturing interaction, talk, and rich interaction builds a child's brain. And the center that run, many of those programs focused — you know, sort of culled down that science of what children need by the 3Ts. So by building a child's brain you need to tune in, talk more, and take turns, or what we call the 3Ts. And that provides the nurturing interaction that result in all those beautiful brain connections being built.

And the research that I do, the research that so many people across the country and the world do really have demonstrated that rich nurturing conversation is what is needed to unlock a child's potential and that any parent and loving caregiver holds the key. You know, no matter their wealth or education or work, almost all parents and providers can master the essentials for building a child's brain.

But, of course, there are always caveats. I can tell you from my own experience in this work, when people hear this they hear a silver bullet, right. That this is a straightforward approach to a complex problem, you just need to talk and interact. And obviously there are no silver bullets, which really brings me to the work that I'm doing now related to parent nation.

MR. VALANT: Yeah, so let's talk more about that, about some of those obstacles that can get in the way and what sort of keeps this from being a silver bullet.

So I'll — yeah, I'll lead with that. So what is it that does get in the way?

DR. SUSKIND: Yeah. No, no, no. I mean still the science is absolutely right on, right. Nurturing, interaction, the 3Ts are the key to building children's brains. But parenting doesn't happen in a vacuum. And I always say in this country we make it extremely hard on all parents and almost impossible for some. And many of the incredible families that we work with at the Center on the south side of Chicago really — you know, as we began working with these incredible individuals, it became so clear that the larger realities of a family's circumstance, you know, their work constraints, economic stressors,

bad luck, or injustices they are subject to, matter as much as those 3Ts for building healthy brain development, you know, either allow for the brain building power of talk and interaction to occur, or they don't, they stifle it off like a weed. And I'll tell you just even in our own work, working with incredible families like — I'll give you some — should I tell you some of the family's names, or we probably — you know, from — anything from the gig economy preventing one dad from spending any period of time with his children, less than 30 minutes a day, he didn't have the time to provide those 3Ts. There was another woman, Sabrina, who we worked with who gave up a well-paying job to care for her husband. They ended up on a homeless shelter for over two years with their youngest baby in a stressful and chaotic environment. To the issues of mass incarceration. From the mundane to the obscene, we get in the way of so many families in this country.

MR. VALANT: And so am I sort of hearing this right, that the 3Ts, they're tune in, talk more, and take turns. That it requires interaction and really is sort of meant to be in person conversational. And so a lot of these obstacles and sort of societal problems we have are ways in which we're keeping parents from spending time with their young kids in those formative months and years. Is that right?

DR. SUSKIND: Absolutely. I mean I don't want to say it's not rocket science, but that warm interaction, nurturing interaction is absolutely the key. And protection from the toxic stress. So we need to obviously provide parents time and enrichment, but also the ability to provide stable calm environments as well. So, yeah.

MR. VALANT: Great. So let's talk about some things that we could do as solutions, so ways of — whether it's eliminating those barriers altogether and giving families more opportunity to spend time with their kids or to sort of navigate their way around those barriers. What do you see as the sort of big societal solutions for that?

DR. SUSKIND: I mean the first — before we get into the details, at the end

of the day we need to start recognizing and elevating parents as the guardians of our future well-being of our country, right. The children today are the citizen of tomorrow. And I think we look at parenting in this country as like buying a puppy rather than seeing the incredibly important work that parents do day and day out for our country, today and in the future.

You know, in the same way as — I would say in the same way as healthy brain development requires all parts of the brain, a parent nation that truly values and supports parents requires all parts of society. I mean obviously government needs to invest more in parents. And we can talk about how little we invest in the early years compared to any other nation — paid parental leave, et cetera. But healthcare, healthcare plays a critically important role. Children don't go into school in the early years, nor should they, but we need to really be able to support parents in those early years and the healthcare system is a way to reach almost all families and children and support them.

In that same way, employers — employers play a critical role. I mean I think that they are suffering as much — not as much, but suffering greatly because of the lack of infrastructure of support for parents with this great resignation. So I think in that same light, employers can actually help lead the changes that we need to happen in this country. But really it's an all-hands-on deck, which is why selling this idea as opposed to 30 million words, is a much more complex issue, but the truth is, this is the only way we are going to sort of right the ship of this country.

MR. VALANT: And by all hands-on deck, if I'm hearing you right, so it's not that it's just all parents hands on deck, it's sort of all of society's hands on deck to support parents as sort of the drivers of their kids early development. Is that right?

DR. SUSKIND: Absolutely. Somebody recently told me they always talk about it takes a village to raise a child. No, no, no, it takes a parent and caregiver to raise a child, but it takes a nation or a village to support that parent in that important endeavor. So,

yeah.

MR. VALANT: And can you talk — well, so in a couple of minutes here we'll bring in the rest of the panel and I'm curious to hear their thoughts on this too, but do you have thoughts about why we haven't done that yet? Like why has this been such a struggle when it comes to, whether it's — you mentioned the healthcare system or it's policy or it's employers and employee benefits. I mean it seems like we sort of — it's not a knowledge issue so much. Like we know something about how young children are developing and we know something about what parents need in order to support that development, so what is getting in the way? Why aren't we doing the things that we should be doing?

DR. SUSKIND: Why in the face of the strongest scientific information, economic case, you know, people agree that this important. I really think at the end of the day that sort of idea of American individualism, the fact that people — in our society you need to be tough and independent has sort of embedded itself in this idea of parenting that anybody parents alone. And I think Covid-19 has made it clear that none of us parent alone. And we, especially moms, have internalized this propaganda that asking for help or expecting societal support in some ways is a form of weakness. And I think we have not demanded, we haven't been able to bring our voices together to ensure that we get the societal support for this important endeavor.

So burdened by guilt, I have heard day in and day out, parents asking why am I failing at this important job. People leaving the workforce or being profoundly unhappy instead of asking why has the system failed us. And I think the bottom line is there is no expectation that society should and can play a role. And I think this is what needs to change.

MR. VALANT: In the book — I was struck reading the book about how much you emphasized the collectivity of work. That it really is — especially because for me

when I think of parenting, I mean it can feel very individual, you have your child in front of you, your kids and your significant other maybe. It can feel very private and individual, but you really emphasize that it's a collective endeavor and that for progress to be made we need parents and others to sort of work and advocate together.

Can you say a little more about that?

DR. SUSKIND: Absolutely. And you know what, parenting is a beautiful individual endeavor, but it doesn't happen in a vacuum. I always like to say, if I ever took any parent's child back to do a surgery and they — nobody actually thinks I'm in the operating room by myself. I have my anesthesiologist, my circulating nurses. We know that I can only do my best job as a surgeon with all the right support. And I think in that same way we need to start seeing parenting in that way. And by elevating our expectations and seeing each other as allies, wanting the same thing, wanting to just give our children the best start, we can start bringing our voice together, because there is no reason that we don't have even paid parental leave in this country, that one in four mothers go back to work within two weeks. It's because at some level our politicians, our policy makers, our leaders don't feel like they need to speak — you know, don't have to answer to parents. It's because we haven't found this way to galvanize.

So my dream is to see parents and allies, really everyone across income, political, demographics coming together, really pushing forward, maybe in the form of a parent lobby. That's why I'm so excited that you have this panel, including the ex-CEO of the AARP, because that is the only — after looking through the history of this country, I think this is the only way that we're going to push forward change.

MR. VALANT: And I think that's a great transition. So maybe we can switch over now and I will welcome the rest of the panel.

And as we're doing that, I can start with reading some bios here. Hey,

everybody.

Okay. So we have — so Dana is going to stick with us and we have three panelists joining her to sort of continue the conversation. So we have Dr. Moira Szilagyi, the president of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Dr. Szilagyi is a primary care pediatrician and has worked as a professor of pediatrics at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital. She specializes in childhood trauma and resilience. And she led the development of what are now national health standards for children in foster care. Dr. Szilagyi received the AAP's lifetime achievement award for advocacy on behalf of vulnerable children.

So thanks for joining us, Dr. Szilagyi.

Natalie Vega O'Neil is the incoming president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, which of course is a professional membership organization that supports those who work with children ages eight and under. Currently she is the president and CEO of Junior Achievement of Washington State, which provides programs that prepare young people for career success in order to break cycles of poverty. She is both the first female and first person of color to lead Junior Achievement of Washington. And prior to that she was an associate vice president of Save the Children and the co-founder and director of early child education for a public charter school in Los Angeles.

Welcome, Natalie.

And Bill Novelli is the founder of the Georgetown Business for Impact Center at the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University. That's an initiative that partners with companies, nonprofits, and government to create social, environment, and economic impact. Bill is also the co-founder and co-chair of the Coalition to Transform Advanced Care, a national alliance focused on reforming advanced illness and end of life care. Previously he was CEO of AARP, as Dana mentioned, and before that the founder and president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, the EVP of CARE, the international

relief and development organization, and the co-founder and president of Porter Novelli, a global public relations firm.

So we have a really nice set of backgrounds from kind of specializing in early childhood and early childhood development, so sort of thinking about advocacy and how we actually get things done when it comes to making policy and changing practices.

So, Moira, Natalie, and Bill, I'll invite you to open up just to — and we can sort of go in that order. So, Moira, if you'd like to kick us off. Just to react to what you've heard. So whether it's a response to something that Dana said in our sort of initial conversation, or anything else that's on your mind when it comes to how we can best support parents as they support their kids' development in early childhood.

DR. SZILAGYI: I'd first like to say that I second everything that Dana has said. I think that our society does not do a very good job of supporting parents. And I think that paid family leave, or the sheer absence of it across the country in comparison to most other industrialized countries in the world is shameful actually. And I also second everything she said about what we know that nurtures the growth and development of children in healthy ways, and that is spending time in with your children. We know that something magical happens to the parent brain at the time of birth, both parents, where there's a flood of oxytocin, which is the relationship hormone in the brain, and it activates something called the affiliate network in the brain, which causes parents to orient toward their newborn and engage in typical human caregiving, to put it briefly. And there's this serve and return relationship between parent and infant that develops and that really stimulates the healthy growth of the infant's brain.

And we have a country right now I think, between all the social conflict, the lack of supports for parents, that parents are extremely stressed and distressed. And it is really challenging as parents who are just simply overwhelmed, some with just getting

through the day and providing basic necessities for their families, to have the time and those calm moments to really engage their children. And we're an individualistic society. We're also a nuclear family society. And I think that many other societies are much more communal in nature with extended families and neighbors being engaged or people from church in the rearing of their children. And I think that that's a different kind of support that families have and that that also nourishes the family, which in turn nourishes the child.

And so I think Dana has — this book is amazing and I think it has really thrown down a challenge that I think many of us in pediatrics have been talking about for decades, that we just simply have to do more to support our children. It's in everybody's interest. These are the adults of the future that we're growing, it's the future of — it's their future, the future of their families, but it's also the future of business, it's the future of the country, it's the future of education.

MR. VALANT: Thanks very much, Moira.

So, Natalie, if you'd like to jump in with us.

MS. O'NEIL: Yeah, thanks, Jon. Good morning, everyone. It's good to be here.

You know, I completely agree that Dana's book was so compelling and highlighted so much that those of us that have been in the world of early childhood education for so long have seen. And one of the things that I think of are many call to actions around parents and providers, it's really a call to action for business for as well. And one of the things that Covid really showed us was the economic fragility of early childhood, really looking at the mismatch between supply and demand when it comes to childcare providers in particular.

We saw an immediately 70 percent drop in enrollment at the onset of the pandemic and hundreds of thousands of early childhood educators lost their jobs. So that

left small childcare providers and early childhood educators putting payroll on their credit cards while moms and dads were trying to work from home and be full-time caregivers. And so what I think really is highlighted here is a call action when it comes to business and how can businesses provide more family friendly environments for those working moms and dads. And it's really about, you know as Moira has said, aligning employment practices to family friendly policies, like employer sponsored childcare, paid family leave, ensuring that businesses government affairs teams are leveraging a little co-capital to support sweeping investment that support early childhood education to help lift up quality in childcare settings.

And I think that it's really important that we use our collective voice. Parent nation is really about advocacy and empowerment and it's really important for all of us that we support quality for children and support optimal development for children. We lose our voice at every level of our abilities when it comes to voting, so from the school board to the mayor to legislators, governors, congressional delegations, senators, and president of the United States, vote for kids and vote for policies that support the healthy development of kids and high-quality learning environments for optimal development of children.

MR. VALANT: Thanks very much, Natalie.

Bill.

MR. NOVELLI: Jon, I want to echo what's just been said. I think this book is powerful. It's a compelling book. And Dana has laid out the science and the sociology and she says it's very clear. And then she asks the really best question of all, which is so why do we make it so hard.

And I want to focus a little bit on corporations. I think that business can be a powerful force for good. We need to create a movement, as Natalie was just saying. And we ask the question, why do corporations or why should they care about empowering parents to support children's development. And the answer is there's a business case,

there's a really big business case to be made. Employee health and well-being is a competitive advantage. It improves productivity. Talented people are really hard to recruit and retain and they represent an asset that you cannot duplicate. And younger employees want a healthy work culture. They're willing to work hard and they're willing to work well if they see that the company values them. And that includes valuing their families. And when women, especially millennials and Gen Z women, have to cut back on work or careers, or even as Dana said, leave the workforce to care for their kids, it reduces their earning power, their capacity, their security, but it hurts the company as well.

Now, at Georgetown we just did a study on millennials and Gen Z. We did it in two years during Covid. And the subject was young adults in a time of turbulence. And what we showed was that these millennial and Gen Z women were especially pressured. And many of them had to leave the workforce to care for their children. And studies show that an important way the public judges a company is how well it treats its people. So I think we can bring companies on board. And what we need here is a movement.

MR. VALANT: And, Bill, so to follow up on that, I mean I'm curious about why it hasn't happened. And so, as you know, we've seen kind of across the country I think more signs than usual of worker dissatisfaction in the aftermath of Covid and we've seen sort of a push for unionization. And workers are demanding that they're treated better by their employers. And I mean so I'm curious I guess both about why it hasn't worked and whether you think this sort of moment we're in gives reason for optimism that we might be headed in that direction.

MR. NOVELLI: Well, I think, as Dana said, we're a work, work, work culture. We pride ourselves in putting in the hours. And that in a way is good and in a way it works against parenting. It works against being a nation that supports its children.

I think there's change afoot. You know, I teach a lot of young people, MBAs

primarily, and what they talk about is they want purpose as well as a paycheck. And what they want is quality of life and they're not going to stand for the old ways. So I think we have something to build on.

MR. VALANT: Great.

And, Dana, I wanted to give to a chance to get in here too.

But as a quick reminder, I see some nice questions coming in. If you have questions, you can email the questions to Events@Brookings.edu or submit them via Twitter @Brookingsgov or #ParentNation.

Dana, anything you want to jump in on?

DR. SUSKIND: No, no, I think that just echoing what everyone has said, why are we not moving forward. And it feels like we are at a crossroads, that's for sure. You know, if not now, when. I mean seriously. I think that not only can business play an important role, but I think the business strategy can. The one thing that I hear as we are doing work across the country with other parent facing organizations is that, look, parents and caregivers are busy. Exactly this time period is when they don't have the bandwidth. And there's plenty of research claiming that voting goes down right after you have a child, especially in women.

So what to do about it. And really I — the AARP is such a guiding light, at least in my thinking, and I know in many other people's thinking, because it brought business acumen and strategy. You know, there are no — in terms of lobby organizations, they are — and I learned this from Bill — the only consumer facing lobbying organization. Everything else is healthcare, big pharma, internet. This is the only one that is actually advocating on behalf of a large swath of population. And the history of AARP shows how transformational it can be for a population. I mean it decreased their poverty rate by 70 percent, it empowered them to view themselves as worthy. And I think parents and caregivers can be

the same in their allies. I mean I say it in a large tent sort of way, but we need that same sort of strategy. I think that discontent and marching is really important. But this is a long game and this is — you know, your children are only young for a short period of time, so we need an infrastructure that continues as you — it's a like — my partner, who's an economist calls it the revolving door issue, right. Then you're out and you're not thinking about it. We need a strategy that keeps their eye on the prize.

MR. VALANT: So and can I ask — and anyone can feel free to jump in on this — so the sort of — the obvious contrast in my mind when I think of AARP versus the groups we're talking about is — I mean people talk often about how AARP members vote. And so there's political power that comes with voting and we're talking here about really young kids and very busy parents who — I mean young kids aren't voting and busy parents may not be voting in the same way. So how do we think about that when it comes to whether AARP can be that kind of model? Or what we might need if we're going to try to get these kind of parent friendly policies when it's not on the backs of AARP voters necessarily?

MR. NOVELLI: But it is, it really is. You know, I used to worry about the fact that kids don't vote and a lot of the money and the power goes to older people, but the most important thing I learned at AARP is how connected our generations are. Older people really care about their kids and their grandkids. Grandchildren care about their parents and their grandparents. So this connective tissue is really powerful. AARP ought to be a practicing important member of Dana's movement.

DR. SUSKIND: It's not my movement, it's everyone's movement.
(Laughter) But I do want to add something to it from a historical standpoint, because I think we can learn so much. I don't know if you know this, Bill, but actually back before the AARP really took hold, the least politically active age demographic were the elderly. We think of them now as the most politically active, but you look back — and I can give you the

references — back in the '50s, '40s, they were the most sort of sidelined. Because they didn't view themselves as a political block. I don't think parents and caregivers in this period of time view themselves as not just worthy, but a political block to be reckoned with. And some people talk, does policy create political blocks. It's bidirectional. And I actually think that when we start thinking that way we'll start voting that way.

MR. VALANT: That's interesting.

Yeah, Natalie, please.

MS. O'NEIL: Jon, you know, the other reason why this matters, especially when it comes to early childhood and childcare is that while we don't have exact data, we know that the public school perspective, you know, about half of public school teachers are also parents and they have children when they get home. That number is likely at least to that high in early childhood education settings. And so parents care about their children and so that is exactly why Dana's point to that it needs to be a movement of everyone. All of the people that care about children, all of the people that support parents and support parents in their caregiving, because it really is a universal issue. And while we can't say, you know, that our country is a country that doesn't care about children because children don't vote, there are so many different facets of our country that support children in one setting or another and that needs to come together to make changes that we need to see for kids.

MR. VALANT: Thanks.

Oh, I'm sorry, Moira. Go ahead.

DR. SZILAGYI: Yes, I was just going to third that. That I think that what we need is the coalition of those who parent, grandparent, and serve children and families. And if we did that, I think we would be over 100 million strong. And that would be a powerful set of voices on behalf of children.

And I think the whole healthcare system should be invested in this because

what we know in the healthcare world, the science is also in on this, is that long-term health, mental health, and social well-being is sown in childhood. Literally the seeds are in the earliest years of life. And so we all should be invested in this. And I think one of the big barriers as a society besides our whole individualist streak is our — I think we're very oriented towards short-term gains as opposed to standing back and looking at longer-term gains. And parenting is a long-term — you know, it's immediate and short-term, but we are all trying to grow. You know, when parents are up at night not getting any sleep when they have a newborn and we start talking about routines and trying to establish some sleep hygiene, what I tell them is you're trying to develop good habits for a lifetime, right. It's not just your immediate need to get five hours of sleep in a row and your child, but it's also you're trying to establish those good healthy habits here. And I feel as a society, and particularly in business, that we're often really interested in short-term gains and we lose sight of the long-term strategies that we need.

MR. VALANT: And let's talk now — so to that point, so we've talked a bit about sort of whether there's this power for advocacy to push for something, but then there's a question of what to push for, right. Like what matters enough that it should be sort of on top of the priority list. And, Natalie, I'm going to come to you first on this one if I can. I'm curious, especially I guess on the policy side, what you see and what are your sort of highest priority policies or what does the NAYECE see as the highest priority policies right now when it comes to supporting young children and their caregivers?

MS. O'NEIL: And I think that this can be a whole discussion itself. So at the risk of oversimplifying, right, a good policy is much like — I think that — you know, there is some key pieces that, you know, the states and the Federal Government (inaudible) to fix the broken economics of the system and for us to be able to unwind really unnecessary complications around our early childcare system. And then to ensure that the educators are

compensated appropriately, have professional salaries, health insurance, and retirement benefits, because I think that the thread through this conversation is really relationships. And so when we talk about quality, early childhood environments for children we're also talking about caring for the health and emotional well-being and the safety of the providers and educators as well. And so I think those kind of some key points that we look at from NAYECE's perspective. And number one is paying providers for the full cost of care. It's really the only way for us to get the kind of quality that changes outcomes for kids, really making it a full cost of — for caring for kids, to pay the providers in 12-month contracts based on enrollment, not on attendance. Providers are paid for (inaudible), which kids come on which days. And really paying them for full enrollment is the way to go. It really creates a predictable revenue stream for providers. And so then providers can reinvest in quality, they can invest in their workforce.

And then really thinking about building in the accountability to ensure that funding that providers are giving you is going to professional salaries, health insurance, retirement benefits for their early childhood educators and staff. And this doesn't need to be complex, but it has to be emphatic.

And I think also looking at funding, debt free associates degrees and bachelor's degrees. There's a lot of work that's happening right now around parity between states when it comes to professional standards and degrees for early childhood educators. And I think that that's really — those are the critical pieces of policy that when accomplished together than can fundamentally change the entire landscape of early childhood education in America and really bringing quality to scale and then attracting and retaining early childhood educators and professionalizing the field so that they're compensated appropriately for this critical work.

MR. VALANT: Yeah, the compensation really is stunning when you look at

early childhood teachers. It's really ghastly how low it is.

So, Dana, if I can invite you in on that same question about sort of what is top of line for you when it comes to policy priorities for this sort of group that you're talking about potentially has having more political power?

DR. SUSKIND: Yeah, no, you know obviously the framework of neuroscience pushing forward it includes everything from affordable housing to affordable childcare. But as I think about the AARP, they sort of doubled down on their non negotiables, Social Security and Medicare. And in that way, you know, in addition to what Natalie just put forward, which I think is critically important, I'm going to put out there paid family and medical leave, valuing caregiving and the invisible labor of so many, even outside of parenting a small child, that — child credit — I mean let's put in child credit as well as — this is going to sound a little bit off — portable benefits. I think that understanding that parenting and the economic shocks that come through life can be so mitigated through portable benefits because so many people are not working in the benefitted current jobs.

So those are sort of my top three in addition to what Natalie said. But we just need a norm shift so that it's all under building healthy development.

But I do want to mention one last thing, is that we always talk about this through the lens of children, but remember, when we build this type of country, not only do you benefit children, it's an issue of gender equity, it's an issue of civil rights, labor equity. I mean you get all of it under this one umbrella. And I think that's a critical point as well.

MR. VALANT: And to me — so can we stick on that topic for a second, on the equity topic. So about how this can be done in a way that we're sure will advance equity rather than something to the contrary. You know, I imagine some of you are familiar with the Nice White Parents podcast, for example, and there is sort of this question of what happens when you give more power to parents are you empowering the parents who themselves sort

of have some of that power and what does that mean? So are there ways to do this that we can make sure really are helping to address inequities rather than exacerbate them?

And, Dana, I'll start with you, but invite anyone else who thoughts on it.

DR. SUSKIND: No, I think that's a critical issue. And I think intentionality of bringing all voices, especially voices of parents that may not so easily come to the table, is critical. But I always think back — I keep going back to AARP, how they were able to bring together across socioeconomic, religious, political lines and they decreased poverty rate by 70 percent, right. I mean so they disproportionately positively impacted those didn't have as much. And you could imagine — the beauty of the first five years of life — not the beauty — is that we leave almost all parents high and dry. And by advancing these policies you're hopefully going to not just help everyone, but disproportionately help those who most need it in this country.

MR. VALANT: Bill or Moira, I want to give you an invitation to jump in.

DR. SZILAGYI: I agree with Dana. It certainly would help us achieve gender equity if we were somehow able to support parents who choose to remain at home with a child in the first year or two of life. That would be an amazing thing. And I would also like to reinforce I think the child tax credit that we had temporarily during the pandemic lifted 40 percent of our children out of poverty. It was astronomical and parents used it to pay off debt, they used it buy healthier food, they used it to invest in their child's childcare. You know, they used it for the things that any of us would use a little bit of extra cash for, right. To make our families lives better.

And my guess is it really significantly reduced stress in a family. And I think that stress is — it's hidden in so many ways in our society, but it is one of the most single most erosive things that happens to people's health. You know, it puts wear and tear on the body over time. And if parents are stressed because they don't have quality childcare and

they don't have paid family and medical leave, and they are living in poverty and dealing with so many other things in their lives, demands from employers that sometimes are unfair, that comes home to their children. And children growing up in a sea of stress, it affects their brain development.

So we really as a society have to make a huge commitment to changing this up.

MR. VALANT: And, Moira, if I can stick with you for a second, so we've talked a bit about the business side of this and we've talked about the policy side of this, I'm curious about the healthcare side. So you're a pediatrician and are obviously now thinking about this broadly and I'm curious to hear your thoughts about how pediatricians and parents or others could make early childhood healthcare more effective in doing some of the things we're talking about.

DR. SZILAGYI: Well, one of the ways I think we could do it is a real focus on relational care, which, you know, medicine has become commoditized, like so much else in our society so that we have little tiny short visits with families. And that's okay for some families, they don't need much from us, but many families need more. And I think we really need to — and we're having big conversations about this at the AAP, that we really need to change our approach, especially in those first five years of life to one in which we are spending a little bit more time with the families who need more from us, really focusing on parenting.

And as a group, we pediatricians are very active. We are out there advocating in our communities, our states, and nationally for paid family medical leave, earned income tax credit for children, quality childcare, better pay for childcare workers. Because, as Natalie said, just like medicine was professionalized in the 1920s — it was that recent — you know, where standards for training and education came into play, we need to

do the same thing with the professionals who take care of our children from their earliest days.

MR. VALANT: And in just a second here we're going to transition over to some audience Q&A. And just a reminder, and we have some questions, but if you have one, please feel free to send it in to Events@Brookings.edu.

Dana, any follow up on that as far as the healthcare side of things and what we might do better — what we might ask from the healthcare sector?

DR. SUSKIND: No. I mean the AAP is a shining light. But I do want to point out that we invest the least in those taking care of our children. And, actually, believe it or not, it even extends into medicine. Pediatrics and pediatric reimbursement — and this is not about this today — but they are on the pay scale the least paid of almost all the providers. And I think it just goes back to how we value children and those who care for them.

So we need to look ourselves in the mirror and say do we care about our children and those who take care of them. But that's beyond that. I'm in agreement with everything.

MS. O'NEIL: Jon, I just wanted to add to that, because you had mentioned (inaudible), you know, you were alarmed that — you know, pay for early childhood educators. And just to put some data behind that, on average early childhood educators earn about \$12 per hour, half of them qualify for government assistance, and only 15 percent have employer sponsored health insurance.

So this is a woefully underfunded, underappreciated field and we're not attracting a sustainable workforce to this field either because of all of what we've been discussing today and how woefully underpaid and underappreciated and compensated this workforce is.

MR. VALANT: Thank you, Natalie.

Okay. A couple of questions here from — that I'll open the first one to the group. And I think it's — this is really a question of what do parents do. So the question is how do working parents spend enough time developing children age zero to three when they're away from their children for most of the day? Like what do you do when — and especially in this time, maybe before we had some of the benefits that we're talking about.

MS. O'NEIL: Well, I'll just say — and I think Dana, when she kicked things off today, her 3Ts and anybody in early childhood or childcare field knows, talking is the magic bullet for kids, interaction and talking to your children and having conversations with your children. And, you know, I have done some programs at a national level and what we try to teach parents from the moment that they find out that they're pregnant, is start talking to your baby. You know, immediately and that, you know, in utero your child can recognize your voice. And start reading to them and the importance of the parental voice. And so conversations with kids is so powerful. I can't underscore that enough.

DR. SZILAGYI: One of the things we prescribe for parents is special time in, which is spending 15-20 minutes a day with your child doing something that the child chooses and likes to do. Now, if they're two, you might have to offer them some choices, but older kids could choose. And just turning off all the screens and the devices and that time is just your time with your child. And it is the magic of that everyday moment of spending that little bit of time with your child tells them, first of all, that they're very special, and you're continuing that, serve and return that back and forth conversation that you began with them as an infant, right, when you were cradling them in your arms, which I always call the first conversation that leads to so many more.

And I think just something as simple as that can really make a difference.

Having family night once a week if you can do that. Sitting down and

playing game together or doing something fun as a family.

MR. VALANT: Great. And then so we have a couple of questions here about Covid in particular. And they interestingly go in different directions. So one question asking about what we might be concerned about as far as Covid's effects on young children and whether we're seeing those negative effects. And then a second that asks whether there has been research that Covid babies — so babies born over the last few years here — might have spent more time with their parents because their parents may have been home more over the last few years and that it could actually be having benefits.

So do we know kind of what this cohort of kids who have been born over the last few years is going through?

DR. SUSKIND: I'll say a few things and then Moira I'm sure is even more steeped.

You know, you would hope that having more time, that that idea would have helped the kids, but actually there's a fair amount of research coming out — it's still early — that children born during the time of the pandemic are actually having delays in milestones and decreased exposure to interaction. And it's not because of actually parents having Covid, which is the interesting thing, it's really working through that toxic stress or stress that parents are holding in and transmitting to their children. And the mental health impacts that Moira brought up is so critically important. And it's another evidence of sort of how societal structures exacerbate what could be mitigated. But it's not looking positive.

But, Moira, I'm sure you can add much more.

DR. SZILAGYI: Yeah, Dana's right, the research is very early, what we're saying. The AAP and CDC did survey — I can't remember — 9,000 families during Covid. And a number of families did respond that the increased time with their children was really a positive benefit, but the vast majority of families report that it was such a stressful time

because, you know, many were working from home so even though you're home with your children you're trying to monitor their education or take care of a toddler. It's hard to work and do that when you have no other childcare help in your environment.

And so I think what happened overall was that the stress of Covid, that pandemic era, probably is on balance going to have outweighed any advantage for most families of having a little bit more time to spend with your families. Because a distracted, stressed parent is probably not the healthiest thing in the environment for a child. We know it's not. So I think it's going to be very interesting to see the data as it — we'll probably have more in the next year or so.

MR. VALANT: And, Bill, a question that I think I'll start with you. It's like kind of on the employer side, about whether there are any particular companies or practices that you would point to as being sort of good models of parent friendly policies.

MR. NOVELLI: Jon, I think that in general more and more companies are figuring out that if they integrate social and environmental strategies into their core business, they're going to do better. They're going to do better in terms of their stockholders, but they're going to do better for the rest of us and for society.

And Natalie and — well, everybody has been talking about public policy, the importance of public policy here. I think companies would support these public policies.

Another important point I think is that we are a nation divided. We've politicized everything. We talk about red states, blue states. I really believe that this is a bipartisan issue. You know, when you mentioned that I worked on advanced illness and end of life care, you go up on the Hill and talk to a senator about advanced illness and the first thing she's apt to say is let me tell you about my mother. It is a bipartisan issue. And I think this one is too.

So it's not red, it's not blue, it's about kids, it's about the nation. I see this

as an opportunity.

MR. VALANT: Great. Thanks, Bill.

Dana — but we're going to close up in just a second here — I want to give you kind of a last — an opportunity for last comments and what you're sort of most hoping that people will take, whether it's from this conversation or the book or the work that you've been doing, what are you seeing as kind of the bottom line here that we need to keep with us?

DR. SUSKIND: I mean my greatest hope is that we start elevating the importance of parents and caregivers in the desire to see all children thrive in this country. And that we find a way to bring our voices together. I mean everybody is talking about how polarized it is, but in my discussion with — spending hundreds of hours talking to families, and I know many of you all can agree with this, that at the end of the day, all parents want the same for their children, to give their kids the best possible start. And there is so much commonality that we could leverage. I think we need to start leaning into this for the betterment of our children and our country. And, yeah, that's my hope and dream, so.

MR. VALANT: Great. Well, let me thank our terrific panel. It's been a great discussion. So thanks to Dana Suskind, to Moira Szilagyi, to Natalie Vega O'Neil, and to Bill Novelli. And thank too to everyone at home watching. This video will be posted along with a recap in the days and weeks to come.

And I will say again that Dana has a really nice book on this if you're interested in learning more.

So thanks, everyone, and thanks again to our panel.

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