

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

SAUL ROOM

THE PARENT TRAP:
REDUCING SOCIAL INEQUALITY BY SUPPORTING PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Tuesday, May 9, 2023

UNCORRECTED TRANSCRIPT – CHECK AGAINST RECORDING

WELCOME:

TARA WATSON

David M. Rubenstein Fellow and Director, Center on Children and Families
The Brookings Institution

PANEL DISCUSSION:

MELISSA S. KEARNEY (Moderator)

Nonresident Senior Fellow, Economic Studies, The Brookings Institution

NATE HILGER

Researcher and author

SHARITA GRUBERG

Vice President for Economic Justice, National Partnership for Women & Families

* * * * *

TARA WATSON: Hi, everyone. Welcome. We're delighted to have you here today on behalf of Brookings and the MIT Press to hear about parenting and inequality and how they relate to each other. I especially want to welcome our online audience, and if you have questions, feel free to submit them as we talk. I'm Tara Watson, I'm the director of the Center on Children and Families here at Brookings. We're in the process of re-imagining our center to broadly focus on opportunity and economic security. But of course, children and families are a key part of that, making sure they're supported and they have opportunities to thrive. It's important. And so, I am so excited to be able to welcome our panel today to talk about how parenting can promote the economic, security and well-being of children and families. And we have three incredible experts to speak with us today. Nate Hilger is the author of "The Parent Trap." It's available for sale in the back of The Parent Trap, How to Stop Overloading Parents and Fix Our Inequality Crisis, which has just been published by the MIT Press. We are also joined by Sharita Gruberg. She is the vice president for economic justice at the National Partnership for Women and Families. That organization centers women of color in the discussion of how to promote equality for women and improve the lives of women and children. And finally, Melissa Kearney will be moderating our panel today. She is the Neil Moskowitz professor of economics at the University of Maryland, also the director of the Aspen Economic Strategy Group and also a Brookings nonresident fellow. And also importantly for this conversation, she is the author of a forthcoming book that's related. It's called "The Two Parent Privilege" How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind." That will be coming out this fall and will be hosting an event centered on that book as well in the fall. So I encourage you to check that out. For now, I'm going to turn our conversation over to Melissa and our other panelists, and I hope you will join me in welcoming them.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Thanks so much, Tara, and thanks to Brookings for hosting this. I'm delighted to be here this morning to talk with Nate and Sharita about Nate's new book. If you haven't bought it, I highly recommend it. One of the reasons I'm so excited about this book is because it shines a spotlight on the need for children's investment in children's skill development in particular, and the critical role that parents play in all of that. So I'm going to jump right into this with questions for Nate to give me a chance to unearth some of the terrific ideas in this book that will bring street it into the conversation and will be sure to leave. Time for questions from you all who are here with us at Brookings and those of you joining us on the livecast. Okay. So, Nate, you start in the introduction with what I think is an awesome stat or a striking stat, which is that children spend only about 10% of their childhood time in schools, and yet we rely on schools to do so much when it comes to developing children's human capital that will set them up for adulthood. And I think this is just a really stark way to make the point that parents are critical to this. So highlighting the fact and acknowledging the fact that parents are so critical, what exactly do you mean when you refer to the parent trap?

NATE HILGER: So I lay out a few different traps in the book. The first and most obvious trap is the overwhelmingly unrealistic expectations that we're placing on parents without really acknowledging it or appreciating it. That's kind of what the 10% statistic is trying to get at. And by the way, for those of you who are skeptical or confused by that 10% statistic, because it might seem like kids are in school all day, every day, our K-12 school system only starts when kids are age five and then it's only in session about one out of two calendar days each year because of summer breaks, spring break, winter break, weekends, and then even on days when it's in session, it's only, you know, 7:30 to 2:00 or so. It's like a third of the hours in the day. So it really is nine out of 10 hours that kids have available to practice and learn skills. Parents are responsible for orchestrating that and managing it and making the most of that time. And that's a huge burden to place on parents. And in the book, I, I try to make it more clear that this skill development stuff we're asking parents to do, it's not like driving a car or making a sandwich. It's very complicated, difficult, professional work. So that's the first trap. I think we're placing too much expectations on parents to help kids build the skills that they need to succeed. The second trap is something that you have probably encountered in writing your book as well, which is that it's very hard to talk about the inequality that is associated with this burden we place on parents. The moment you start to highlight that, you know, a parents who don't have college degrees or don't have a lot of money or don't have a lot of social connections or a lot of professional experience are at a big disadvantage in terms of building these skills. On average, not in all cases, but on average moment. You start to talk about that. People in America start to shut down. They start to get defensive. They start to feel threatened. They feel like you're accusing some parents of failure or you're saying that rich parents are better parents than poor parents. And it just shuts down the conversation and it makes it impossible to talk about the reality and talk about potential solutions that we can all embrace together to address this problem. So in the book, I, I try to develop some language that we'll talk more about probably later today to make this conversation less threatening and and more comfortable for people and productive. And then the last trap I want to highlight is a political trap that parents have not come together to form a unified, bipartisan mass political movement, unlike elderly people, you know, who have the American Association of Retired People and have this bipartisan magic support for Social Security and Medicare. Impact. We're going to come back to that over and over because it's just this incredible magic trick that

falsifies a lot of assumptions about what is possible to achieve in our country. And I think that's a huge missed opportunity for parents to get the kinds of support that that that they need.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Yeah, I want to pick up on on your point about how tricky it can be. As soon as you try to talk about parenting in this country and in particular socioeconomic gaps in parenting and children's outcomes. Yes, I certainly encountered that in my book. And I, I tried very hard to do something that I think you clearly achieved, which is come across not as sounding like you're blaming any parents, but being very empathetic to all of the demands placed on parents. I think one of the things that you've done so masterfully is distinguished very explicitly between the parents role as caring for children and developing skills. So can you just articulate a little bit what you mean by that distinction and how I mean, again, it's so masterful the way he does this in the book. If you haven't read it yet, you relate it to managerial incentives in India. Like, how does that all come together and. What does it have to do, in particular with socioeconomic gaps in parenting?

NATE HILGER: So the way that I try to get around this problem that talking about inequality and parenting shuts everyone down. I try to develop this language that you mentioned caring and and skill development or skill building. That allows us to talk about stuff that all parents are really set up to succeed at and really can do across all socioeconomic groups. Caring involves sharing the things in your life that give you joy and meaning. It's laughing with your kid. It's it's the recipes that your your grandparents shared with you. It's. It's religion for a lot of people in your church and your community. That stuff that crosses class and race, racial lines. All parents are really good at that on average. And it's part of what parents take a lot of pride in. And when you survey parents about whether they're doing a good job, most parents of all groups say, yeah, I'm doing a great job, I'm not perfect, but I take a lot of pride in this work. It's very fulfilling. I think that is really about caring for kids. Let's put that aside and talk about another part of parenting called child skill development. Child skill development is about helping your kid with algebra at night. You know, it's about helping your kid deal with complicated conflict resolution, helping your kid deal with resilience when you know they are put on the bench for their basketball team and how to fight back from that and work through it. How to deal with behavioral problems like, you know, anxiety, depression, you know, nail biting, something I can relate to personally, you know, substance abuse, These are all things that are. Much easier to work through with professional experience and practice. These are things sort of like building a house or flying an airplane or conducting law or medicine. They are difficult, skilled professions and there is no reason to expect parents typically to succeed in these endeavors. And there is no shame in that. That is what professionals are for. So I'm hoping that this language about letting parents embrace what they're great at, which is caring for their kids, can create a little more space to embrace that. Parents might not be so great at many aspects of child's skill development, and that's okay. There's no shame in that. If there is, there shouldn't be so much of an expectation placed on parents to do this hard, difficult, complicated work. Now.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: I'm already thinking of all the ways I feel like I messed up before my kids got out the door for school this morning.

NATE HILGER: Oh, shoot.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: That is hard.

NATE HILGER: Well, I hope. I hope the book can help. Parents, forgive me.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: He's telling me not to feel bad.

NATE HILGER: Yeah. Yeah. Hmm. So you mentioned the Indian textile plant study and how that relates. I talk about I try to break apart to really convince people that child skill development is hard, serious, professional work. I go through all the roles that we're asking parents to play in terms of nutritionist and college guidance counselor and academic tutor and health care manager. And at the end, I sum it all up. As you know, parents are trying to be CEOs and doing a lot of logistics and business strategy kinds of decisions when it comes to raising a family. And there's a great study, which I think is a lot of find where some economists went to India and they ran a randomized controlled trial providing management training to some Indian textile factories. Nick Bloom and John Van Rijn and other economists were involved in this. And what they found is that a lot of Indian textile plants were not being run very effectively. They were using management practices that are outdated and are just not going to work very well. They're just they're letting the floor get messy. They're not keeping inventory at reasonable levels. Just comment. It's not rocket science, but a lot of these practices were being neglected and they found that changing this really was increasing profits, that it wasn't just a different culture or subjective, it was like it really mattered. And that the managers who are more likely to use effective management practices either had a lot of education or they were hired professionally. They didn't inherit the business from their family or they worked in parts of the

industry that were very competitive. If you didn't have those three attributes, you tended to be using very subpar management practices. And that's kind of scary if you apply that lesson to parents, because a lot of parents don't have a lot of education. They didn't have the opportunity to build that education when they were younger. A lot of parents, you know, no parents are hired professionally. They inherit their business in a sense, and or they make the business themselves and they don't work in a competitive industry where you go out of business if you're not adopting effective management practices. And that means there is no reason for economists to be expecting parents to do all this stuff rationally. If there is every reason to worry that millions of parents are making lots of systematic mistakes. That's the lesson from business research on management practices. So that means it's a great spot to expect interventions to have potential for a lot of positive impact.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Yeah, no, I so appreciate you saying that, because even like any of us who are parents and have tried to read parenting books, it's a bit it's a bit overwhelming. It's hard. It's really hard. It's really hard to implement. Yes. And sometimes when my kids get annoyed at me, they're like, aren't you a mom? I'm like, I didn't learn that at mom's school. Right.

NATE HILGER: You are a mom. You love your kids.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: I love them.

NATE HILGER: You're there for them in crisis. You know, you have their best interests deeply at, you know, at heart. But that doesn't mean you know how to coach them through every algebra foible.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: That's right. Okay, so now that you've laid out.

NATE HILGER: You probably do.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Probably like, maybe that's one of the things I'm better at than some of the other stuff. But okay, you've laid out the problem beautifully, I think, and very compellingly. I want to take a step back because I think something else you lay out in, like really fascinating with fascinating history in the book is how it's taken like a really long time for people and scholars to understand how important it is to develop kids skills. Like, I thought that was a really interesting history that psychologists for so long thought there was nothing really parents can do. And the other thing that I think is really important that I'd love for you to bring up on this panel is some of the really fascinating studies that show us that what happens in the home is so important to skill development. And I have to say, I mean, I feel like in DC policy conversations, we're always drawing lessons from early childhood education programs. Perry Preschool, Head Start. I in my experience, I hear much less about the kinds of studies you describe. The one in the Iowa Orphanage. Bruce Sacerdote Study of Korean Adoptees. Tell us a little bit about sort of that rich intellectual history.

NATE HILGER: That was. So this was a lot of fun writing this first chapter of the book. I didn't know about the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station until Greg. I'm going to forget his name at the moment, But the sort of the visionary behind the Abecedarian Early Learning program. He knows everything. And he I was interviewing him and he told me about this strange part of American history. I was unaware of. The Iowa Child Welfare Research Station was the brainchild of this remarkable woman named Corrales, who had this idea that, well, you know, it was the early 20th century where investing all this money and expertise in raising better livestock and better agriculture and bringing science into into that part of the economy. Why are we doing nothing to improve how we how we raise children? It was very puzzling to her. And so she fight, fight, fight to create the world's first child development research center. And it was in Iowa, and they were pushing back hard against the grain at the time of this biological determinism idea that kids are going to turn out, how they're going to turn out. And there's not much you can do about that. And it's amazing today if you Google like nature versus nurture, a lot of the top findings you see on the web are remnants of this biological determinism idea, which has been completely falsified by the data. Back in Iowa, they were doing these strange sort of ahead of their time studies where they they partnered up with a local orphanage and they wound up noticing that the kids who got adopted early into more advantageous foster care families had like bizarrely high IQ. And at the time, a lot of researchers would have ignored that finding or assumed they got something wrong or something, or they would have fudged the numbers because there was a lot of crazy stuff going on back then in this part of pseudoscience. But the people at this orphanage, they had kind of a different culture and they took the data seriously and they they thought, wow, this kind of suggests there is a big role for a family. The kids who happen to get adopted early wind up looking a lot like kids who are born into these more advantaged families. And that led that. A lot of the wild, interesting work at this this early center led directly into the more famous studies. Many of you have heard of Perry Preschool. Abecedarian I had a lot of fun talking about a couple of other studies that I think are underappreciated. One of them is the Infant Health and Development Program, which really replicated the ABC Derrion study at eight diverse cities

around the country. And the origin story of that program is also really fascinating. It goes back to this remarkable woman named Ruby Hern, who was an African-American scientist by training working at the Robert Wood Johnson Center. And she had experienced discrimination directly in her life. She grew up in the South, and that was one reason why she went into a hard science, because she wanted to just prove her points and leave color off the side. And that led her to design the infant Health and Development program with extraordinary statistical rigor, which was not conventional at the time, as a reaction to her experience with discrimination. And I found that really inspiring and fascinating. So that whole line of work kind of showcases the power of home environment and learning environments generally. And the last study that I that you mention is this also remarkable study by Bruce Sacerdote, who found that one of the world's biggest international adoption agencies, the whole agency, had been randomly assigning kids to parents for four decades. So it was this beautiful natural experiment. And he reached out to a lot of the families and got information on how the kids were doing who had been adopted by more versus less advantaged socioeconomic kinds of families and found pretty big impacts. And one of the themes I harp on in the book is that these impacts are dramatic underestimates of the importance of family environment, because to become an adopted parent and adopt an international participate in international adoption, you can't have a criminal record, you can't have a bankruptcy, you can't even be divorced. You can't you can't. You have to be kind of this straight laced picture perfect on paper type of parent. And that means if they'd be if being assigned to more versus less advantageous family in that sample really matters for kids, that means the overall influence of parents are probably 2 to 3 times bigger than that is the best estimate that I cite in the book.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Amazing. Okay, so you make this really strong case at drawing on all this research that what parents do really matters. Okay? And I and I think your case is as good of a case as I've ever seen on it, But you're not the first person who's had this idea that, like, parents need some skill building and we've got the nursing home visiting program. We have parenting classes for teens, juvenile offenders. Where do you come down on the value proposition of those programs and why? Why do you then go on like you seem to not think it's enough that we just scale up those programs?

NATE HILGER: Yeah. I wind up and emphasizing the need for professional support. So the same way, if you want to fly across the country, you don't learn how to fly an airplane. You hire a professional pilot. I go hard in that direction for what parents really need and what is really going to have a big impact on kids. I think parents really need professional tutors. They need professional child care workers. They need professional college counselors. I think that's really where we're going to see a big impact on leveling the economic playing field. This other approach training parents to do their job better. I explore it. I talk about some of the history of this, and I come down ultimately not being super optimistic about this path forward. As part of the book. I had a great time attending a three month parent training program, which had I chose this program because it addressed one of the main problems in these parent training programs, which is that parents don't want to attend them.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Right.

NATE HILGER: If you're I don't know how many people out listening here in the audience are parents, but you're tired If you're a parent, you finish your workday day. You know, you're there is your microwave is broken. You have to call the repair person. You have to be on hold with Verizon for some problem in your bill. Being an adult with kids is really exhausting. And to then ask parents to go and spend hours getting lectured at night is a lot to ask. And maybe unsurprisingly, parents haven't signed up for these programs, even even though in clinical trials, some of them do show positive impacts. Nothing like the impacts you see from professional tutoring or professional child care. It's like 1/50 as big, but you can see measurable impacts. And so I attended a program where the parents had largely been court ordered to attend because I wanted to see what would happen if we had a much broader representative sample of parents in these programs, not just the the go getter parents who have extra time and extra resources and are interested in self-development in this way. But of all parents and you know that this this program had a taco truck catering family. It had a basketball coach who wore cowboy hats and was a really charismatic, interesting guy. It had a chemist. It had a software engineer. It had people from all walks of life in a very diverse local metropolitan area. And I will say some parents were asleep during the trainings. Some parents were totally checked out. I would participate in the little discussions and problem sessions. A lot of parents hadn't really grasped what had been said because they were I'm sure their mind was on a thousand other problems. So it might have been beneficial for some parents, but I really it confirmed my sense from the literature that this was a tough path forward to really make a dent in our core problems.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Yeah, that makes sense. Okay, so. So you push on the need for professional skills, but you have a big program in mind. Family care. Yeah. Tell us about it.

NATE HILGER: This is my amateur attempt at branding. Okay, Family. I call it family Care because it's based. It's like inspired by Medicare. Because Medicare, I think, is the right size problem we should have in mind for child skill development. We're talking hundreds of billions of dollars. Raising kids is hard. Just like solving elderly people's health care problems is hard. Family care would take that 90% of time that is currently outside of our public K-12 school system, which is radically unequal, and it would start to chip away at that inequality. So it would start with child leave. You know, it would let more parents. Your organization does so much work in this area to help more parents take those first few months and build that that sacred bond with their kid and in a less stressed out way, then it would move on to more professional support. It would provide access to high quality child care from age 0 to 5. It would provide access to high quality extracurricular and summer activities like affluent kids routinely attend. It would provide access to professional tutoring if you were falling behind or needed some extra work, or if you are blazing ahead and you're super advanced and you're bored at school. It would provide mental, better mental health, better physical health care, because right now Medicaid is set up to reimburse physicians at \$0.72 on the dollar compared to Medicare. So if you're a physician and you want to treat kids, you are penalized. And that's why a lot of specialists don't even accept Medicaid because it's not worth their time. That's how we treat families and kids in our country. It would move on to provide much richer kinds of financial and professional counseling, support for college and career transitions, which again, is a major area where rich kids get a huge leg up with direct support from their parents. So it would really be providing the kind of upper middle class childhood opportunities that these kids are used to, to a much broader set of kids. And it would be taking some of the financial and logistical stress off of even higher income parents who do this. They pull it off, but it's very hard to do in your spare time. So that's what family cares about. And it would cost about half as much as Medicare, but it would get it would get way more bang for our buck. It would be it would largely pay for itself in terms of increasing kids future income, reducing crime, reducing dependance on. Welfare and and disability insurance and all kinds of things. And that's kind of where I think the country would have already gone if kids and parents had a real political voice.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Yeah, great. I love it. And I'm going to bring Sharita in on this point in a minute, but I just have to ask one more one thing and then and then we'll open it up because, you know, Tara referred to to my book, *The Two Parent Privilege*. I agree wholeheartedly with your call for increased resources in support of families and kids in this country. But in my view of the challenge, we also need to really focus on strengthening families. And I think that means addressing head on the challenge that, you know, one in five kids in this country only has one parent in their home. Mm hmm. 30% of kids whose parents don't have a four year college degree only have one parent in their home. Your book is conspicuously, in my view, silent on this. All of the challenges you talk about parents have, It's that much harder if you don't have a second parent in the home to turn to to help carry the load. Yeah. So why do you avoid this topic completely in your book?

NATE HILGER: Yeah, I, I think it's just not I don't think we really need to get into it, honestly. I think it's a little bit of a red herring. I'm really excited to dive into this more with you and your book and to engage with it. You could say the same thing about Medicare and Social Security. You know, if we were debating whether to adopt a big investment to make retirement and older life better and more accessible to more people, you could say, well, a lot of adults in this country are not married. Maybe if they got married, they could take better care of their aging parents. And I think, well, yeah, maybe a little bit, but maybe they need hundreds of billions of dollars to fund Social Security and Medicare. Another thought is that I think it's great to push for programs where you can go around the country and politicians can go around the country and they can look people in the eye and tell them, here's exactly what I want the public to provide for you. I hope you feel good about that. I feel comfortable going to families all around the country, including single parents, and say, hey, we're I think taxpayers should help you pay for tutoring for your kid when they're having algebra problems and make sure it's a good tutor. I think taxpayers should help you access good early childhood environment for your kid. I would feel weird going to single moms around the country and saying your problem is that you're not married.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: I don't feel weird going to the dads and saying, you know what? Your mom and kid could really use your help.

NATE HILGER: I think that's great, but I would feel a little more squeamish about that. I feel like there are reasons. There are reasons why people are not getting married. Some of them are none of my business. And I just don't it's I want to have it. If we can get ways to have more parent solidarity. Wonderful. I agree. Of course, that would be helpful. I think we know a lot less about how to change marriage rates dramatically than we know about how to build skills in kids, because we have, as I talk about in the book, 100 years of research on this. We know that a lot of the programs they advocate for in family care will have large positive impacts on kids if we can come together and implement them well. I'm less optimistic we can have huge

impacts on marriage rates without very coercive kinds of weird tactics. And even if we do that, I'm not sure those marginal marriages will be as helpful as we hope.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Yeah, so I agree with a lot of what you say. I'm going to think that having a dad in the home is going to be even more powerful than having a professional tutor. But we can come back to that. Okay, Sharita, I want to bring this. And I love this idea that we need an advocacy group for parents and kids like we have for the AARP. Why is that so hard? Why don't we have that? Do you think it's feasible?

SHARITA GRUBERG: I mean. Well, one thing I did want to respond to the parent like I'm a queer single person. Don't think I'm going to get married for, like, forming a family. But a lot of families look like mine. And so I think, like, there is a there there and like, why aren't we identifying the care supports people use? Like, I do a lot of work on shows and family care networks and whether you're straight or queer. Over half of Americans rely on so-called shows, families or extended networks to provide that support. So why aren't we supporting what families actually look like, which is cap estimated 80% plus of families don't look like a traditional nuclear family. So did want to put in a plug for kind of being broader and more creative on how we define family and care and our networks and supporting it. And, you know, that's the purpose of our kids. Like, I firmly believe there's no such thing as other people's children. And it really is part of all of us. But to your question, you asked me like, I think what's happening in Congress right now is a really great example of how far we are from the type of program that Nate's talking about. So like the House just passed a debt ceiling plan, only four Republicans voted against it. And I'm going to guess they were not championing women and children's social supports in their votes. It was more about who the speaker is. But it has Headstart cuts for 200,000 kids. 1.7 million women and children would be removed from food support, a \$120 billion cut to Medicaid SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families over a decade. That is where our current Congress stands right now. So they're not even talking about how do we support families right now. They're talking about how do we make massive cuts so that we can spend money on the things that they prioritize more than our families? And part of the reason for this is they don't feel like they have to respond to voters or families. We do a lot of polling research. And so going into the midterms, we talk to voters and found that 68% of voters, including like 53%, strongly agreed that economic security is strongly connected to care supports, to paid leave, to reproductive health access. These are linked issues. We don't see a response from voters when we poll on paid leave, when we poll on affordable child care, when we poll. And basically every issue that Nate puts forward, voters overwhelmingly support it. So why don't our electeds care? We have a democracy problem. The last midterm election, over 80% of races were uncontested. There is absolutely no reason why these electeds would have to do anything for families if they feel that safe. And so but it doesn't mean it has to be this way. But the other piece of it is.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Sorry, I just want to, this is really interesting. So it's you think hearts and minds are sort of behind this, but it's just not translating into what we're seeing at the government level.

SHARITA GRUBERG: Oh, yeah. So we have to make our elected sphere of parents and the like. Yeah, and it's possible. We we right now, the folks in power have done a great job of convincing parents that they're on their own, that they cannot expect our government to provide these core supports that we need for our well-being and livelihood, and that this, like 80 plus year old idea that your family needs to have a stay at home wife to take care of all these things is still like normal. And so I got to sit in on some focus groups on childcare, for example. And it was so outside of the participants idea that this would be something that government should help with.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Interesting.

SHARITA GRUBERG: Like, so first of all, it's convincing people like not only can government do this, government should do this. And that takes work like it is a big culture shift in terms of what we expect from our government that needs to happen. And I think there's a huge opportunity at this moment. Has the pandemic really shifted people's ideas of what government can do and what our expectations are? And that policy can work. Like we did cut child poverty in half for a little bit. Yeah, but having those proof points and explaining it really does help click in voters minds like, Oh, this is this is something I should have. This is something that I need. And I think like we can get there, but it's not just forming the organization. I think we need to start a couple of steps back and really working with parents and not just parents, but like everyone on, this is a role that government should play. And we expect.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: That when needs saying, parents feel trapped and they're not getting enough support. I think I'm hearing you say and they can't imagine it any other way. This is the way it's always been in America. And parents are just muddling along.

SHARITA GRUBERG: Exactly.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: So in your in your work, do you draw on lessons from what's happening in other high income countries that offer much more support to their families and kids?

SHARITA GRUBERG: I mean, we're just so special as Americans, it's really hard to look at paid leave. Yeah, it's us and Papua New Guinea. And Congress doesn't care about that. They're fine with it being US and Papua New Guinea. I mean, we do have some really great champions, but. For the most part, those international examples are surprisingly not convincing. Like for right now, the Department of Commerce announced that a \$150 million plus projects under the CHIPS law would have to find some way to provide child care. And the backlash they're getting is incredible from where the administration sits. We are falling behind in technology. It is imperative for our government to create an industrial policy that makes us competitive on the world stage. And we don't get there if we are not allowing workers to actually be able to take these jobs.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: You and I have already disagreed on this in another panel, so I know they're gone, but. Okay. But wait, So, you know, when I hear you say that parents aren't advocating enough for themselves, I think about like the Moms Demand Action Network that, like, sprung up to counter the NRA. Do we just need some parent champion out there to take this up as a national cause? Do you think do you do either one of you think the Congressional Dads Caucus is a step in the direction of getting Congress to care more about parents and their needs?

SHARITA GRUBERG: Well, we have moms rising like we do have these groups. It's just they're nowhere near as well funded or resourced.

NATE HILGER: Or bipartisan. Moms Rising, they try to be bipartisan, but in effect, they're a progressive membership group, unfortunately.

SHARITA GRUBERG: And the Dads caucus is open to conservative membership and no one wants to join.

NATE HILGER: And right now, they're advocating for more changing tables for congresspeople.

SHARITA GRUBERG: Oh.

NATE HILGER: It's not like a visionary.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: I see. I see. That's interesting. But but talk about this. This why is this not bipartisan? I mean, it seems pro-family, it seems pro-economic growth. It seems, you know, pro taking care of each other. Why? Why can why can't we craft a bipartisan agenda out of everything in your book?

NATE HILGER: I think we could get there over time. I think right now it's tough time. It's not going to be quick. You know, with Medicare, it took like 50 years and four attempts for big waves of effort to get it through. But there are a lot of rays of hope. Some of the earliest leaders in early learning and public support for early childhood education have been in in Republican leaning states, Georgia, Oklahoma, because they say it resonated with them. To hear that we need to be investing in our workers so that they can grow up and be self-sufficient and productive. And I think that that line you know, I've talked a little bit in other contexts about how maybe maybe it would work to talk more about how the best path to a smaller government for adults might be a bigger government for kids. And we need to experiment with different ways of getting more people on board. But Sherry, at this point, if democracy is broken, then yeah, it's maybe it's going to be a challenge to make a big shift toward public public will at that moment. So I love all the work people are doing on the ground to improve democratic accountability, but I really just would discourage hopelessness, it seems.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Yeah.

NATE HILGER: It seems wrong.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Good.

NATE HILGER: Historically. You know, we got Medicare, we got Social Security. We've made a lot of progress on early childhood education. We created kindergarten. And I added that to our public education system. There is all kinds of hope over the next ten, 20 years and changing how people think about this stuff so that they don't think parents should all be on their own. And child development is really easy and anybody

can do it if they love their kids. Changing those narratives will take time and it will over time. We'll see dividends eventually.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Okay, great. So if we're not going to get family care \$100 billion passed next year, where do we see like where where do you both see the sort of easiest or first place to start chipping away? What can we do in the next 1 to 3 years in getting some of this agenda moved forward?

SHARITA GRUBERG: I mean, the states are not waiting for us like we.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: That's great.

SHARITA GRUBERG: The midterm elections, we had pro-family trifecta take over and in more states than we've had in the past and they are getting to work. Minnesota Senate yesterday passed a comprehensive paid family and medical leave program. The House already passed it. That is going to be law in Minnesota. They're going to join the 12 states plus D.C. that have it. Vermont's on the precipice, Maine, New Mexico, Michigan, because they know that this is what their workers need with child care. We're seeing states putting forward a very innovative funding development, quality policies on child care here in D.C. We've done that. So it's one of those things where, unfortunately, you know, I wish this was happening across the country. I wish this was happening at the federal level, but the work is taking place, and I think we're going to start seeing more and more models of what Nate's putting forward. And I think there's some real opportunities here from states that really want to lead, that want to be the benchmarks and models to go even further and link these policies. And the other piece that I don't want to lose in this is, you know, we're looking at workers to fill these jobs. And I love the professionalization frame that you're bringing to this, because by and large, our care workers are low paid black and brown women, and they're also parents and caretakers. And so any program that's going to be successful is going to have to lift up the workers in those jobs, because right now we're struggling to like, you know, I'm trying to find care for my parents. We are struggling to find folks to do that because why would they at the treatment they receive, at the wages they receive? And so.

NATE HILGER: Yeah, family care would create good jobs all over the country. It would follow the distribution of kids, not the distribution of economic activity.

SHARITA GRUBERG: Right. So I think there's so many opportunities. And as frustrating as Congress is these days, it's not the only game in town. And so I think there's there's ways to move it forward and might not look like the big multi \$100 billion national program.

NATE HILGER: I mean, we were one vote away, weren't we, from some pretty big stuff. Joe Manchin was was the the gate you know like we.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Well there were 49 other people.

SHARITA GRUBERG: Yeah.

NATE HILGER: But a lot of big policies have won by a narrow margin. Yeah. Maybe the right approach is, you know, we need a major bipartisan parent political movement in West Virginia. Right. Maybe that's all we need.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Right. This is encouraging. So you just started touching on this Sharita. So I just want to ask directly and then and then I'll read some of the questions that were submitted with registrations. How does all of this relate to the issue of racial equality and justice in this country?

SHARITA GRUBERG: We you go through a lot of really great examples of your book on the ways that addressing some of these care support, some of these skills support, some of these access to education pathways are really going to help people of color, because when you look at, you know, who has access to these tools right now, it is very different racially right now and it doesn't have to be that way. So I think these programs are so important to use paid leave as an example. We helped enact the Family Medical Leave Act, but now we look back at who actually can afford to take paid time off of unpaid leave to welcome a new child. And it's not black and brown moms. It's we need a wage replacement and we need them to have the time and space that they need. And so when we're forcing folks to go it alone, we are exacerbating the inequalities that people of color face that they already have because of centuries of systemic, inequitable policies. The and, you know, one of the examples I love right now is we are at historic lows of black unemployment right now for men and women. And there are certain people in the economy who thought that that would have bad effects on white workers, but we're not seeing that. So I think this is another area where

a rising tide could lift all boats and the gains are going to be so much greater for black and brown women in particular.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Okay. Okay. So I so some of the questions that came in with with people's registrations really focused, I'm going to summarize a bunch of them. And one really focused on asking ways that schools and communities could support parents. And what struck me about that was I feel like we already ask schools to do so much. Right. To your point, we ask schools to do so much, but yet here's here's an A here's a question from an associate professor with the university. How can K-12 schools best support the challenges parents are facing today?

NATE HILGER: Yeah, I think it's hard. I think part of only getting 10% of kids time is you inherit a lot of obstacles. You know that you're not financed or or staffed to address. I think the community schools model is really interesting. If we can if communities can I, I don't feel good saying this because it's not a real solution. But if communities can scrounge up more resources and extend their school day to be more like 9 to 5 to match the parent work day, they can partner with local nonprofits and provide some of these good extracurricular activities, provide some support over holiday breaks if parents don't have the same matching holidays as the school. But really, this is a perfect case of a need for more public support. And until then, it's just going to be scrounging and making do in many ways.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Yeah, I think you just answer to this question, which I'll just read because I think it highlights this need, which is this question from a University of Denver graduate student asks, How can we promote communities to help each other with raising children and parenting? The common saying it takes a village is so true. Yet so many parents are so alone. And this gets back to what you said. Like there are no there's no somebody else's kids. Right. Okay. Along the same lines of helping out parents. From someone from the University of Minnesota Medical Center. How can developmental psychologist and other supporting parents advocate for their needs, children's needs and social equality?

NATE HILGER: Could you say that again? Sorry.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: How can development psychologists and other supporting parents advocate for their needs, children's needs and social equality? Do you want to take that one Sharita? I mean, I think this might you know, this in my mind speaks to what you're saying. There's a lot of activity at the state level.

SHARITA GRUBERG: Yeah. And I think, like, it's so important. I mean, the groups that are fighting for this are small, under-staffed, under-resourced, as would welcome more support. And so I think it's there's a lot of opportunities in your city and state if you have those skill sets and that expertise to lend it, it will be very appreciated.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: That's interesting. I could keep going, but is there anyone in the room who wants to ask a question of our panelists? Sarah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So hi, Sarah Reber from Brookings. I'm wondering if you could speak to the tradeoff between. Supporting parents with cash to sort of alleviate some of the stress in the home and things like that versus these supporting programs and which are also very both of those are very expensive programs, and so there's some sort of fiscal tradeoff to consider them.

NATE HILGER: Yeah, I have a whole section on that in the book, and I've done research on some stuff there myself, and I come down thinking that the direct approach of investing in kids skills with professional support is going to be go a lot further in terms of closing opportunity gaps. An analogy would be with with senior citizens, the cash approach to Social Security and the professional support approaches. Medicare and Social Security has been wonderful in terms of reducing elderly poverty rates, which is so important. You know, it doesn't need to have knock on benefits. Being in poverty is awful and reducing that is great in itself. But would that solve senior citizens health care problems? I don't think so, because if you get cancer, it's hundreds of thousands of dollars. You need access to high quality health insurance. And so Medicare is also really needed. I think kids are in a similar situation. It would be awesome if we didn't have so many kids in poverty. It's painful, but just giving parents money while it has more benefits in terms of, you know, long term impacts than giving other groups money, it has some externalities there that are great. The impacts of that, I think, are smaller than high quality child care, high quality afterschool and summer programs, tutoring, college preparation and application assistance, financial aid. I see more. If I had to choose Medicare or Social Security for kids. Medicare being the analog, the big portfolio of supports to address child skill development, I would choose the Medicare angle over the Social Security angle.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: So this is really interesting. I want to follow up on that question. It also seems to me that the amount of money that it would take to buy on today's market, the kind of high quality child care or professional tutors or safe and stable housing and decent neighborhoods probably exceeds the amount of cash we could ever get the political system to agree to give parents. Right?

NATE HILGER: Just like with the K-12 school system.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Right.

NATE HILGER: America wouldn't support giving families \$13,000 a year and hoping they spend it on education. They provide a K-12 education system.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Do you have I don't remember this. I apologize. Do you have any sort of basic income guarantee in your four kids in your family care program?

NATE HILGER: I did not prioritize that in family care.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Okay. Whatever we could add.

NATE HILGER: But it would have massive knock on effects financially for families. Of course, you know, families wouldn't be getting cash, but they would be getting child care and extracurricular activities and tutoring, and they would have more time to pursue their own careers. I think it would dramatically increase parents, parents, financial security indirectly.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Great. Thanks. Are there any other questions from the room?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Jerry Jones, National Alliance to End Homelessness. I was very intrigued by your observation. This would probably pay for itself and a reduction on the adult side if we are investing more in in families and young people, which seems definitely true. Probably just even within the criminal justice system, prisons, the amount of money we spend trying to remedy things that stronger families and the kind of skill development you're talking about would have given people an opportunity to avoid. Do you. Have you given any thought to sort of the fiscal mechanism for making that case or how those say, you know, because the savings there's a several decade lag and how this how this would benefit. And yet it's absolutely essential. We I think politically we kind of lacked the transmission belt to recognize we're taking dollars from this to pay for that there's social impact bonds. A few other things that I think of. But I'd be curious, have you have you given that more thought in terms of either how to build a public place or how to move the money?

NATE HILGER: That's that's a great question. No, I don't get into those technical details in the book. And it would be it would take those are complicated issues. It would I'd have to dedicate other things for that. It's a wonderful area. I think it would be a great white paper for Aspen or Brookings or somebody to work on to, like, really lay out the nuts and bolts of how we pay for a policy that is a big investment but will pay for itself over time in a protected way. It's not necessarily decades. The the savings would start flowing in sooner than that. You know, fewer kids would be repeating grades, there'd be less juvenile crime. Parents would increase their labor supply. Incorporating all of that stuff in a big simulation would be a really worthwhile enterprise.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: There is--

NATE HILGER: Unless I'm missing something.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: No, no, no. You know about that study I have in mind. Like the folks from the Opportunity Insights Lab and Nate Hendrin's work on. Marginal value of public funds shows that investments in kids and their human capital development really does have sort of the biggest social bang for the buck.

NATE HILGER: Yeah.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: So the case is there, and I love the idea of someone pulling that all together and making the case. Yeah, I think pulling the money from other programs is part of the part of the challenge, since other programs have stronger lobbying groups.

NATE HILGER: Exactly.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: And kids.

NATE HILGER: Yeah. I mean, got to get money from the military or senior citizens or or public sector unions or it's like. But that's why solving the political problem is a really important ingredient.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: That's right. Any money or.

SHARITA GRUBERG: Taxing people what they should be taxed to generate from that?

NATE HILGER: IRS Yeah, I.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Think the IRS is it. That seems like another low hanging fruit.

NATE HILGER: Absolutely.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Shawn Fromstead at CEPR. This is a great panel, so really enjoying it. My question is about what our kids like in an age sense, right? I think we think in a lot of social policy programs are set up to think of childhood as 0 to 18. You know, we have basically pretty close to universal health and care insurance for kids under 18, including, you know, very poor children. But then at 18, you kind of go down two separate paths, depending on, you know, on your parents. You know, you can stay on your parent's health policy, but otherwise you're kind of on the boat if you don't have that. And so I'm just wondering a kind of like what we should if you think about this kind of like, what is it that when's the cut off? Should we be thinking about youth more when we think about kids? And that is a transition that happens over time from like 16 to 30 rather than something that just boom at 18 or 19?

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: I want to add to that somebody from UCLA Center for the Developing Child asked specifically to hear you talk about the impacts and needs of adolescents.

NATE HILGER: Hmm. I don't really have I, I mean, one interesting thing that could be done to benchmark that is to look at the support that upper middle class kids receive. Those parents certainly don't view their support as stopping at age 18. Yeah, and some of that stuff is really impactful, like the the college assistance that kids get that the college counseling that they get from college educated parents who know the ins and outs of the system. That stuff continues into your twenties. So it would be interesting to look at what our more advantaged families provide us, kind of like a benchmark for what maybe we should consider providing to other folks. But I don't have a strong view about the exact age. You know, we got to draw a line somewhere.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: I guess the only thing I would do if I could, if I could add to that, is when you look at spending on kids and this contributes obviously to the socioeconomic gaps that you highlight, a lot of the spending now from higher income parents is happening in those like college age years.

NATE HILGER: Wow. It's early childhood.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: It was early childhood. And then like 18 to 22. Yeah. Which is which is I mean, this emphasizes your point that like upper income parents don't stop there. But that's.

NATE HILGER: You could probably.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Emphasizing the class gaps.

NATE HILGER: You can probably trace it all around the edges of the public school system.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: That's right.

NATE HILGER: It's early childhood. And then it's after school and summer breaks and then college.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: That's exactly right.

NATE HILGER: Yeah. Maybe it should be 22 or 23 when we view, you know, public support sort of transitions kids into contribution.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Yeah. Or again, this emphasizes what you're shining a light on, which is everything that happens outside the K-through-12 system is exacerbating class gaps.

NATE HILGER: Super unequal. Yeah in the book I there's one table in the book because I don't want people to get bored and put it down. And people don't like tables, But the one table has the spending gaps between rich and poor kids in our K-12 public school system. It's like 2%. People don't believe that. But you can read the book. I go into detail on that. The spending gaps on enrichment, spending like computers and tutoring and that kind of stuff outside of school, and that other 90% of time, the gap between rich and poor kids is like 1,500 percent. Yeah. So it's this time outside of our public school system that is really exacerbating inequalities.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: And I think the pandemic put that on full display when kids were sent home and we saw how unequal their home environments were. There's another question right here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Max Gannes from Policy Engine. And I want to drill into the two parent piece of it seems like you might disagree. It seems like there are maybe three different factors that could contribute to having that second parent in the home. One could be how much the tax and benefits are some sort of encourages one versus two parents and then how elastic, basically parents are to those that kind of incentive system. And that maybe let's it seems like you were talking about sort of public information campaigns or things outside the sort of public policy tax benefit piece. Is that the right kind of decomposition and where you fall on those, the importance of those three?

SHARITA GRUBERG: Okay, good. I'll take like 45 seconds and then you have to come back in September when we do this again. So I do think we might have talked about this a little bit ahead of time. I do think we both agree that the tax incentives and nudges are not all that important in explaining the changes over time and the sort of separation of marriage from having and raising kids. Nor is that where any sort of solution. If you do think it's a problem, then not everyone does. If you do think it's a problem, the solution is not going to be in changing the tax codes. And not just a little bit, though I would say the tax code shouldn't discourage two parent families, of course, and transfer systems shouldn't discourage it and it should be sort of agnostic on that. But so I don't think that's where where the answers lay. And so then I do think this is a complicated issue for economic policy folks to address, because our usual tax levers don't either really address this problem or or make up for it. Right. So if it were as easy as tweaking the ITC, that would be great to strengthen families or strengthen marriage. I don't think that's it. So I do think probably some of the answer lies with community groups, social norms, things that are a lot harder for us to figure out how to how to effect. But in my view, the fact that we don't really know what policy levers to pull doesn't mean we shouldn't have the conversation and think about it.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Okay. Okay. Last observations or comments from from our panelists.

SHARITA GRUBERG: I mean, I will say I feel like I'm doom and gloom, but I do think people have a lot of power. And I think there's a lot we can do in showing what's possible and what we can expect. And the points that you raise in your book really show like we don't have a choice here. We have to invest in our kids, we have to support our parents. And I think there is a lot we can do to build this movement, to build this advocacy up and directed at our electeds and really force them to the table and force them to listen. And so as an optimistic one, I'm talking about opportunities right now. I do think there's a lot of power in people and organizing and that we can we can get there.

NATE HILGER: Yeah, I agree. I mean, there's a group in California called Children Now, which is taking an interesting approach. They're not doing the American Association of Retired People approach, which is the mass membership nonpartizan approach. They're bringing together this sort of fragmented little groups that support kids and parents and having them all sign letters and pool political capital to request things of the state legislature. And they're having some success. But something to make sure these groups are not are as bipartisan as possible, maybe out you know, pick your issues really strategically. Don't attach all of your political views to your parenting advocacy and and try to bring the ecosystem together to speak with one voice as much as possible, just like senior citizens have done with AARP.

MELISSA S. KEARNEY: Terrific. Okay, last plug. It's amazing if you haven't read it. Okay, So thank you for being with us and thanks for your time.