Why Rainy Days and Mondays Always Get You Down

Government policies can help Americans balance work and family responsibilities.
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These days millions of Americans are struggling to balance their workplace and family responsibilities. With the exception of those at the top of the economic pyramid, incomes are stagnant. For the middle-class, average family income, adjusted for inflation, is what it was in the mid-1990s. For low-income households, it’s $600 less than it was in 1979.

Moreover, as women have entered the workforce (because they want to – and because they have to) and the number of single-parent families has grown, fewer and fewer adults remain at home to take care of the kids and/or an elderly parent. Three-quarters of children age fourteen and under lived in a family with a stay-at-home caregiver in 1960; fewer than one-third of youngsters do so now.

Little wonder, then, that a 2014 survey conducted by the American Psychological Association reported that parents are more stressed than non-parents – and feel that they are not managing their stress very well.

In *Finding Time*, Heather Boushey, executive director and chief economist of the Washington Center for Economic Growth, maintains that work-life policies can support and empower
American workers. Noting that for decades stay at home wives provided a hidden subsidy to our nation’s businesses, she asserts that re-establishing boundaries between time for work and time for life that fit current realities is the right thing for employers to do. And she makes a powerful, empirically based argument that they are also good for the American economy.

Critics of these reforms (and, for that matter, of the minimum wage), Boushey points out, look only at short-time costs to the employer and ignore evidence that benefits are not “job killers.” Most important, they do not factor in gains in the productivity and purchasing power of workers, reductions in turnover (and the time-consuming and expensive task of replacing workers), and (among the hidden benefits) the enhanced health of children. When every employer has to pay more or provide a new government-mandated benefit, Boushey adds, no one business is put at a competitive disadvantage.

Boushey sees some signs of progress. In 2006, San Francisco became the first city in the United States to pass paid sick day legislation. Five years later, two thirds of employers supported the ordinance. The states of New Jersey, Rhode Island, and California now provide paid family and medical leave. And in 2013, Vermont passed a “right to request” law, giving workers the right to ask supervisors for a flexible schedule without fear of retaliation (and allowing employers to veto the request because of the cost, the difficulty of meeting customer demand, or the inability to reorganize existing staff in order to comply). And, Boushey reports, several employers, including Google and Netflix, have addressed work-life conflicts in significant ways.

But there is a long way to go. Paid sick days and family and medical leave are, of course, far from universal. Very few employers subsidize child care – and even fewer contribute to elder care. Many retail and food-service firms now have “just in time scheduling,” in which employers must call in to find out that day’s schedule. Obviously, just in time scheduling and mandatory overtime present often insurmountable challenges for low-income workers with children. And, Boushey notes, employers are often reluctant to hire individuals, especially women, who are the principal providers of child care.

Unlike most employees in western Europe, most Americans do not get the assistance they need to resolve work-life conflicts. Such assistance, Heather Boushey demonstrates, can contribute to sustainable economic efficiency and growth. As President Obama declared in 2014, “It’s time to do away with workplace policies that belong in a ‘Mad Man’ episode.”