

## Guest column: Set child public policy beyond 'either-or' thinking

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"As president, I will expand early-childhood education, recruit new teachers and pay them better, but the truth is government can't do it all. As parents, we need to turn off the television, read to our kids, give them that thirst to learn. I approve this message because it's not just about their future - it's about ours."

- Barack Obama presidential campaign ad

This is my all-time favorite campaign advertisement, and not just because it is the first time a presidential candidate has talked about early childhood. It is because this short message goes beyond "either-or" thinking - either it's government's role or it's the role of family and community to protect and nurture children.

In the past, this "either-or" thinking too often has permeated policy debates over child policy: Either it's professional child care or it's personal choice and valuing grandmother caring for the kids. Either it's bad parenting that makes our children fail or it's the absence of parental choice that leaves children in bad schools. Either it's removing troubled children into foster care or it's leaving struggling families alone in their efforts to meet basic parenting responsibilities.

In his campaign, President-elect Obama began to articulate a new vision for child policy that combines these two. He not only advocated for investing in early childhood; he also spoke of the importance of spirituality in people's lives and the potential that faith-based initiatives can hold for helping people to help themselves. He advocated for fatherhood initiatives that place much higher parental expectations on dads to assume both nurturing and providing roles. He spoke of universal access to higher education for youth coupled with expectations of community service from them.

He stressed the importance of government investing in children and families, but always in ways that recognize and support families and their communities as primary to children's lives.

In fact, there is a strong research base that shows such an approach is essential for public programs to be successful in helping children grow and develop. When public programs are developed for children, the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," should not be translated into, "It takes a multidisciplinary team of professionals to raise a child." While professional services are needed, they cannot substitute for parental responsibility or community connections.

Polls show what has often separated liberals and conservatives in funding programs for children has been this very issue. Where conservatives have opposed government investments, it is not because they don't love children but rather because they view government as undermining the role of families and communities in parenting.

Too often, child advocates and those in the service community have proposed narrow agendas that speak solely to expanding public and professional services. Too many government programs designed to serve children and families fail to adequately recognize personal initiative and responsibility, foster reciprocity, value families, and work with and strengthen voluntary community institutions.

Going beyond an either government or family and community approach to child policy requires changing policy and practice. It requires broadening the way many publicly funded programs and institutions are financed and held accountable. And it requires doing so with an increased commitment to ensuring fundamental American values of equality, fairness and empathy are incorporated into program and practice.

This election was about change, and this includes how we choose to invest in children and families. The challenge now before child advocates is to press for the types of changes that bring government, community and family investments in children together to support their and our future. This will require a thirst to learn among all of us in developing such policies and practice. We need more investments in children, but we need better investments as well. We have a unique opportunity to be leaders in doing so, and an increasingly ready public looking for this change.

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