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POINT OF VIEW ABOUT MOTHERS AT HOME

In recent months, television viewers and newspaper readers have been given a steady stream of commentary about the alleged need for day-care subsidies for children whose mothers are in the paid labor force. TV segments portray the plight of the employed wife who must spend such a large portion of her salary for child care.

Clearly, there is a push for "somebody" to subsidize the cost of child care so that wives can remain on the job. But those agitating for this goal never seem to get around to addressing the questions, (a) how much will this cost? and (b) who will pay the costs?

Let's make it clear at the outset that this column, and the feature articles and TV segments referred to above, do NOT refer either to the single-parent family or welfare circumstances. We are discussing the intact family where the wife has taken a paid job in order to increase the family income, and then discovers how much it costs to hire someone else to care for her children.

Edward M. Levine, professor of social psychology at Loyola University in Chicago, estimates that the cost per child per year for quality day care ranges from $6,000 for children over age 3 to $18,000 for infant care. The cost is so high because guidelines for adult-child ratios are 1 to 4 for children over age 3, and 1 to 2 for infants.

When you add up the real costs of providing child-care by hired personnel who work a 40-hour week, the financial burden is immense. If parents want to pass this cost on to the taxpayers, that means that the real burden shifts from the parents of the two-income couples onto the backs of childless couples, unmarried persons, and single-earner couples who are farther down on the income scale.

U.S. Census Bureau figures show that the 14 million married couples who live on only the husband's income have an average family income $5,260 per year LOWER than the 26 million married couples where both husband and wife are in the labor force. Those 14 million wives will hardly take kindly to the notion that they be taxed in order to subsidize child-care for the 26 million wives whose average family income is $5,260 higher.

When I wrote about these Census Bureau figures in a column some weeks ago, I received a spontaneous letter from one wife in New York. I'm going to share it with you because she articulated her views so well.

"Dear Mrs. Schlafly. Ten years ago, I quit working outside the home (I am an RN) and began the part of my life devoted to raising our children. At that time, it cut our income in half and put us in the low end of low-middle income. There were many months when we didn't know how we were going to make it.

"We are now middle-income. Our children are 8 and 10 years old. We do not have many extras and do not have much left over for saving or entertainment. But I still count myself lucky to be able to stay home and be there for my chidren.

"We live in half of a double home which we own. We outgrew the apartment 5 years ago, but when I ask the children if they'd rather have me work to get a nicer house or stay home, they look at me as if I'm crazy. It is quite obvious that it is not the house that makes them warm, secure and happy -- it is the home!

"I am very tired of hearing from friends and family that they simply cannot get along on one income. I also feel that double income families are, to a large degree, responsible for inflation, making it more difficult for those of us who choose to stay at home.

"As to the notion that I am a woman of leisure, I have worked outside the home full time, and believe me, I remember it as a vacation. Having less money available requires a great deal more work to make it stretch. But then we don't waste a whole lot, either. When people ask me, 'do you work?', I reply, 'not outside the home.'

"What all I've said boils down to is that I feel, if you want to stay home for your children, it can be done. The exception is the single-parent homes, and my heart goes out to these parents and children.

"I also believe that no career can be as important as helping to form the future of our children in the best way we can. Their future is our future and, if we can raise them to be happy, healthy, secure and capable, that will be the future of our world. I can't even begin to equate this with owning a new house and going out to dinner.

"As one of the 14,000,000 parents who elect to put their children before the dollar, I applaud you for speaking out in our behalf and in behalf of the children. Thank you."