

# At Work; Worthy Child-Care Pay Scales



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IF wages are any indication of the esteem in which a person's labor is held, consider the following fact, culled from the pages of the Federal Government's Occupational Outlook Handbook: People who take care of zoo animals make on average nearly \$2,500 a year more than most of the people who take care of human animals in child-care centers.

Should it gall a child-care worker that a python is thought to require more skillful handling than a toddler? No? Then try on these figures from an about-to-be-released survey and see how they fit your budget: In 1988, the lowest-paid workers in child care, assistant teachers in preschool centers, made \$5.16 an hour; in 1992, they made \$5.08, a figure that works out to about \$8,890 a year. The highest-paid teachers at the centers, most of whom have college-level training in early childhood education, were doing slightly better: in 1992 they made \$8.85 an hour, up from \$8.19 in 1988, for an annual salary of \$15,488. That's about twice as much as the burgermeisters at McDonald's make. The bad news is that, even as the number of centers has grown to accommodate the demands of working parents since the mid-1970's, salaries in real dollars are off by 20 percent. About a fifth of the 10 million American children in child care are in certified, regulated centers.

These figures come from the Child Care Employee Project, a research and advocacy project in Oakland, Calif., which has updated a survey of child-care centers it released in 1989. On Thursday, the project will release its new report in Washington as children, teachers and child-care providers call attention to its findings by observing Worthy Wage Day, a program sponsored by a group known as the Worthy Wage Coalition.

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In locations across the country, from Pacific Grove College in California to the Jelly Bean Child Care Center in Stamford, Conn., child-care advocates will take time off to march, rally and wear buttons in the service of a quest for higher -- or "worthy" -- wages and wild-and-crazy amenities like paid health benefits, which are now offered to less than a third of teachers.

The original study may be remembered for the chill it sent up many a working parent's spine: the high turnover of child-care workers, the survey concluded, hurt the children's language and social development. Between 1988 and 1991, 70 percent of the teaching staff interviewed had left their jobs. Turnover stabilized somewhat last year at about 26 percent. But, as the study notes, the turnover at all United States companies in 1992 was an average 9.6 percent.

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WHY are child-care workers badly paid? One clue comes from the survey's sample, which was drawn from centers in Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, Phoenix and Seattle: 98 percent of the workers were female and about a third were women of color. "We don't think women's work is valuable," said Marcy Whitebook, executive director of the Child Care Employee Project. "This is the quintessential women's work."

But there are other, more complicated reasons as well. "Child care is something families have not traditionally paid for," Ms. Whitebook said. "We don't think of it as skilled work that we want to pay for." And in many places an underground economy in child care allows consumers to opt for cheaper alternatives to regulated care. Workers in regulated centers subsidize the underground option with depressed wages.

The Worthy Wage Coalition is calling for a minimum average wage of \$10 an hour and comprehensive health care. Few experts in the area think the market will take care of workers' concerns. "The main way to increase wages in child care is through public subsidy," said Heidi Hartmann, an economist who directs the Institute for Women's Policy Research in Washington. "We want children to have a higher level of care than parents can afford. It's like public education, it's a social good."

Such a program requires what Ms. Whitebook and others say the country lacks: a national policy on child care. "We have a nonsystem system," she said. "We've never said to ourselves, 'Parents of young children are going to be in the labor force. What shall we do about it?'"

Perhaps Hillary Rodham Clinton will need another project after she whips the health-care system into shape.

Information on Worthy Wage Day is available from the Child Care Employee Project at 510-653-9889.

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