Got Kids?: Childcare as a Means of Achieving Higher Level Education

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Abstract

I have recently noticed that many of my friends, no older than I at twenty-two, were having children. I saw these women struggling with being parents and making ends meet, all the while hoping to someday, get their degree. Resources like Bridge to Hope, Student Parents at Manoa or S.P.A.M., and University of Hawaii Childcare Center are excellent providers of services such as drop out counseling, State Childcare subsidy advise, high quality childcare, and liaisons for their student-parent issues. As I wrote this paper, it became more and more clear to me that through programs like Bridge to Hope and UH Childcare, more people can achieve a college education and therefore, better not only themselves and their children, but the whole community.
**Got Kids?: Childcare as a Means of Achieving Higher Level Education**

I’m twenty-two and I want children, just not now. It’s not a good time for me, for one. I’m a fulltime student at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, pursuing my Bachelor’s degree in English and hoping to pursue a P.H.D. so that I can teach college level English, specifically in the field Children’s and Young Adult Literature.

I want to have children: after I’m married, after I have more than three hundred dollars in my bank, and after I’m less selfish.

But sometimes fate has different plans for you.

Twenty-two and already five of my close friends have children. I’m happy to say that these are the friends that *should* have kids but since most of them are twenty-two as well, they weren’t prepared. Then again, who is really?

One of my friends was never supposed to have children biologically. All of the pregnancies were accidental. My friends all wanted their children, so happy accidents.

But some of these friends of mine are now faced with the fact that given their lack of experience in the workforce, and lack of financial standing, and lack of higher education, they have to use welfare to survive. Like many, in addition to having to take care of their child, my friends have to work full time. And working full-time often means childcare.

Then to make matters more complicated: there is college.

A lot of the young parents I know want desperately to return to a community college or to a university to find financially successful careers now that their children’s future may depend on it. But they are discouraged by the cost of attending even community college classes. They are also daunted by time, effort, and energy spent being a student-parent. Being a parent is already a full-time job.

One of my friends barely sleeps these days since her one-month old infant was born. The joy of her life, Takeo goes through at least fifteen diapers a day, and sleeps in what seems like fifteen-minute spurts. Her schedule goes around his. She wants to go back to school to be a nurse, but with the crazy schedule that comes with taking care of an infant, she knows she’ll have to wait on achieving her own dreams.
Got Kids?

Parents like her in Hawaii are pretty common. They want to go back to college or maybe even enroll in community college, but the issue of childcare keeps popping up. If the child is under preschool age, who’s going to watch them while the parent is at school or working?

Even if you decided to use childcare, childcare is expensive. Many childcare programs only accept children at age three or older, or the very least “potty trained.” The services are often provided for eight hours or less, forcing parents to work in different shifts, contributing to the social tension of having fewer hours of family time.

Even if the parent decides to have a regular baby sitter, instead of childcare, what if that babysitter moves out of state? If you decided on relatives taking care of your child, what if your Aunty who watches your child gets sick? Then what?

Do you have a back up plan? Who can you trust that is going to watch your toddler or infant while you go to work and class?

These are the kinds of questions a student parent is always thinking about.

Because of these kinds of questions, a person can wonder, why should I even try? Why should I take the time and money and headache to get a college degree? Getting a college degree doesn't matter in this day and age right?

Wrong.

According to Bridge to Hope’s website, “The poverty rate of minority households decreased by one-half after women who were the heads of their households attained just one year of post-secondary education. Women with college education were not likely to return to welfare rolls and most likely to escape poverty. In 2000 a woman with a high school degree earned an average of $15,983. In contrast, a woman who earned a 2-year Associate’s Degree earned an average of $23,731 (48% up) and with a Bachelor’s degree, average earnings almost double to $29,848 (85% up).”

Just how many people are on Welfare in Hawaii anyway? Not that many right?

Wrong again.

According to State of Hawaii Department of Human Services’ website, “In 2010 in Hawaii, low-income people receiving help from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program including food stamps and school nutrition programs totaled some
133,000 individuals at an average of $28.7 million monthly, according to the state Department of Human Services."

Luckily, as people and government institutions recognize that education can be the “silver bullet” for young women with children facing poverty, alternatives are developing to help them and their spouses. The ultimate goal is to provide the educational push that will eventually allow them to get off welfare subsidies, reduce the taxpayers’ burden, and end the potential cycle of government-supported subsidies among family members.

Two of the many resources available to student parents attending the University of Hawaii system, or parents who want to become students at the University of Hawaii, are and Bridge to Hope and S.P.A.M., otherwise known as Student Parents at Manoa.

Teresa Bill the coordinator of Bridge to Hope and S.P.A.M. was very helpful in answering my many questions on how their systems work.

She explained that programs like Bridge to Hope and S.P.A.M. were like intersecting circles, “because Bridge to Hope is a program at the University of Hawaii at Manoa that supports welfare participating parents to attend college or post-secondary education, as part of their welfare work requirements. Student Parents at Manoa sort of grew out of it to be able to serve a larger group of parents. But both of the programs tend to serve the needs of lower earning, lower waged, single parents. And both of them have need for childcare. If people are attending school because it’s part of their welfare program or they’re attending school as a part of their other life plan...”

So what can these programs do for you?

“We at Bridge to Hope and S.P.A.M. don’t have a lot of direct service, but we can help people. Particularly, we do outreach and information on Quest Heath Care for children, eligibility and applications as well as the childcare connection, subsidized childcare that’s offered through the state. So those are the two biggest things we do. Part of being a small office is that we developed a website so that people can access the same information online pretty much the same as if they talked to me. Actually the two sections that are well developed are the sections about childcare resources, and some on social services, which includes the Quest health application and eligibility. We have a section on if you’re expecting and enrolled. If you’re a new first time parent, what
Got Kids?
do you need to do with the University so that you can leave school and come back and still maintain your status as a student. And then we also have a section on returning to school. So if you’ve been out of school or never having gone to school, what do you need to do?"

“Quest” is a service that provides limited dental and health care services to poor Hawaii residents, including qualified single parents and pregnant women. According to the state Department of Human Services, Quest budget in 2005 was $365.7 million.

Bill went on to say that “Student-parents at Manoa is focused on parents on the Manoa campus, so it’s Manoa specific information and then Bridge to Hope is actually a program that is available to all ten UH campuses so the information is much more focused on the welfare system questions and some things about different UH campuses. “These two ambitious programs with a tiny staff of one, that one being Teresa Bill, has big goals for serving the student parents at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Bridge to Hope’s goal at this time is to, “to provide college access to welfare participants so that they can leave their welfare experience with a college degree which will increase their life long earnings when they become economically self-sufficient.

The overall goal for S.P.A.M. or Student-Parents at Manoa aims for a broader outcome, mostly to “increase visibility of the needs of student parents and… to address the issues that are particular to them, in terms of parents so usually it ends up being child care.”

Some of the academic concerns that Bill highlighted were liaison oriented. For example if a student-parent had to miss class time due to a sick child, The Bridge to Hope and S.P.A.M. programs may act as a third party “that shows that the student has access to University offices that it isn’t just the student that’s saying that they need this accommodation, that there are other people who know the situation and are asking on their behalf.”

Although Bill emphasized, whether or not a student can have accommodations for a sick child is a grey area, she also emphasized that the decision is entirely up to the discretion of a faculty member. While some faculty members are sympathetic and creative in finding other ways for the student to make up attendance, other faculty members are not.
Got Kids?

“[…]

What happens is[...]

if things fall apart I talk to students about what their formal processes are.” Bridge to Hope and S.P.A.M. are programs under the University of Hawaii Women’s center in general and this kind of liaison work is of a larger piece of it. “If we’re working, we do a lot of work with students who are evolved in sex assault issues and people who are working with police things that really impacts their ability to participate in class. And so in that capacity our larger office does contact faculty and ask them to make accommodations and do things and we don’t share a lot of detail. We just say this person is evolved with our office, and we’re asking you if you can make these accommodations. So that’s what I do mostly in the same vein, for students who are parents if they have a situation that’s really impacting their academic situation.”

Again childcare came up. Over and over again, with all the people I talked to, childcare kept being an issue. How expensive it was. How a parent worries about their child being taken care of by strangers. Does the child care center it fit their schedule? Did they agree with the way the childcare center was essentially, raising their child?

Like Teresa Bill, emphasized to me, one of the biggest priorities for student-parents of young children are childcare, and quality childcare. One way of affording quality childcare, on a student budget is State subsidized childcare for low-income families.

The maze of State Subsidies is just daunting as the prospect of being a student parent. However, like being a student parent, going through the labyrinth of understanding the state subsidy program comes with a big reward: affordable childcare. Also, many people use it. According to State of Hawaii Department of Human Services, Report on Fiscal Year 2005, “People receiving state partial or full childcare assistance totaled 20,744 totaling $33.9 million in fiscal 2005 according to the state.”

So how does it work?

Essentially, the Department of Human Services has a program that gives low-income parents state funded money for childcare. You have to be employed and work a certain amount hours, and for a student parent, class hours count towards these hours.

“[...]

A lot of people don’t know that you can be a student [not just working a job], and that, that qualifies you for using the childcare subsidy program. So the subsidy program is intended for employment, people who are working and in paid employment,
Got Kids?

but it’s not limited to that. [...] And then also people don’t know what their income eligibility or the payment options, like how much the subsidy is.”

“So our website has quite a bit of detailed information about income eligibility for childcare, subsidies and the subsidy can range depending on the kind of childcare, that the child is involved in, because the state actually pays more for more licensed accredited childcare. It’s not a flat across the board amount. They’re actually encouraging people to participate in using accredited licensed care. So because that costs more, the subsidies are greater for that kind of care. And then they also factor in how many hours a week you need child care for, like how many hours are you working, and this also impacts what kind of subsidy you can get.”

A little confusing? Just think of it this way: twenty percent of the subsidy+what the center is charging=what you pay. What amount of money you get from the subsidy depends on many different factors such as how much you make, what kind of child care you’re looking at, and if you are a single parent.

For example, while the maximum amount of money you can get from subsidy for a child from age two to five is roughly eight hundred and fifty dollars, the maximum amount for a child under the age of two, or infant child care, is fourteen hundred dollars.

Why? Because infant child care is very expensive, most infant care costing around sixteen hundred dollars. Aside from the fact that infants need more time consuming care then a two year old, there’s the issue that most people wouldn’t want to leave their infant with a stranger and would rather leave their child with a family member.

However, Bill advises that you need to be realistic about how consistent family childcare will be because your work, school, and home schedule will revolve around your childcare. And if that childcare schedule is disrupted, you miss class looking for a new childcare giver, and may not be able to find one that fits your needs and schedule. “[...]So part of the difficulty I would say and one of the first things to think about coming back to school is that if you are willing to utilize center based child care, then you need to spend time finding a slot for your infant because all of them have waiting lists.”

The Bridge to Hope’s website is an incredibly useful resource in itself covering a plethora of topics that student parents might want to know about from childcare and
where to find it, to subsidies to make the child care more affordable, to what qualities to look for when a student parent is finding childcare. The website was set up this way because not everyone, especially if you are busy raising a child, has the time to schedule an hour to talk to Bill.

One student parent Jason S., a father of three, and a part time student at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, talked about how he has chosen not use outside childcare due to his personal experience with it. “Personally, extreme neglect allowed for me to, from a tall toy structure to run, jump off the edge, and fall head first onto the a patch full of gravel, roughly the size of a quarter”.

Because of experiences like his, a parent should be wary of who they leave their child with. While Bridge to Hope’s website has a whole section on what a student parent should look for in their child care, The University of Hawaii at Manoa Children’s Center is one of the few childcare center’s near the University.

The University of Hawaii at Manoa Child Care Center comes highly recommended by Teresa Bill, “The staff are all professional early child hood educators. And the children will learn amazing things, and the child will get individualized attention […] they really run it like a school. And that it’s not just low-impact childcare providing. So kids love it. It’s convenient. They accept the state subsidy program. And that you won’t get that level of care for your child anywhere else. They’re really good. That’s why they have a waiting list.”

When I had asked Jason S. what would be the ideal care taker for his twenty-two month son, Seth, if he could have anyone, he had told me, “Ultimately someone who has a background in developmental psychology, who understands the developing mind of a child at their different years, where their areas of growth are, to allow it and express it and let it grow in that manner.”

The director of the University of Hawaii at Manoa Child Care Center, Wayne Watkins had heartily agreed with that sentiment. “The more that a teacher knows and understands about child development and how young children learn and grow, the better able the teacher is to create an environment that supports that growth and development. And it’s different for every child. So a teacher with a strong understanding of child development and a strong understand of how the brain works and how children
learn can design a curriculum that meets the individual needs of the twelve, fifteen, eighteen, twenty, children in their class.”

The University of Hawaii at Manoa Childcare Center, affectionately known as the “Big House in the Neighborhood” far exceeded my expectations and experiences of what childcare was. For one, I’m unsure of why I’d expected a long list of criteria of how a child could be admitted.

Watkins’ gently corrected me of that notion, “Well the fulltime classified students have priority on spaces here at the children’s center. And then beyond that, set twenty five percent of the spaces are allocated for the faculty and staff at the University. That’s the only qualifications.”

I then asked if children in diapers were an issue, since I knew that many childcare centers, don’t allow children who aren’t potty trained to be admitted into their programs. Again, I was corrected.

“No. That’s a—diapers, being potty trained is a, well developmentally it really doesn’t jive with when kids need childcare. I mean it’s an artificial breakdown primarily because teachers don’t want to change diapers. So that’s often used as a dividing line between, ‘Well your kid can come if they’re potty trained but not if they’re not.’ However, it’s, children learning to control their bowels and all is a very delicate operation and putting a lot of pressure and stress around that because it will determine whether they can go to pre-school or not, has, can have many unseen disastrous consequences. So if the child is two years old we can legally care for them according to our license with the Department of Human Services. And so there, they can come.”

I was also thought it was interesting how Watkins’ defined what I had termed in our interview “a good child care worker”.

He had explained to me that “[…]generally I would refer to somebody that would fall into the category of, as you said “good child care worker” as an early child hood educator. That person would be someone who has a love and passion for what they are doing. And by that, I don’t mean they just love children, I mean they love working with children and families in developing an environment where everyone is thriving and learning and growing. They have a passion for all aspects of life and are able to bring
that to in the classroom and outside in the kind of curriculum and activities that they develop."

He went on to say, “They need to have really strong observational skills, so that they notice and take note of the small, little indications within children as well as within their parents as to what they’re trying to communicate. Whether it’s overtly by words or more by their body language. And then they need to be able to communicate with the other adults that they’re working with so that they can find areas of cooperation, collaboration, and take advantage of that. And then they have to have a vision of what is important, for kids to learn. And that’s not a general list it’s more specific as to if they’re out in the garden, ‘What’s important here?’ And to be able to take advantage of that. They need to be able to have a conversation with a child and actually listen to what the child is saying and genuinely respond to that.”

After, the way Watkins spoke about ‘Early Childcare Educators’ it became obvious to me that he himself practiced what he preached. When we toured the facility, he called out to the children by name, and smiled, as he weaved through the various classrooms. The classrooms were neat but not sterile, the floors were covered by soft colorful rugs, the walls decorated by poster paint art and framed smiling children’s faces.

I was really struck by how Watkins defined a good childcare educator in comparison to a great one, because his standards for good could be anyone’s great. Therefore, I was really interested in seeing what his definition of “great” was.

“Well I am particularly impressed by a number of combinations of qualities. It is very impressive to see a teacher who is so attuned to the children that he or she [is] working with, that the kinds of interactions are just full of very rich language and actually conversing about ideas and the teacher able to build on little bits of information that the child shares. And [they are able to] look at connections to other aspects of a child’s life to put that into some context and then raise ideas or questions of things they might explore together. So that’s a little more of the intellectual side of it. There are other qualities, such as teachers that just express genuine excitement and wonder at seemingly very small things that children notice and point out.”
Then Watkins talked about a particular instance where a group of their children and their teachers had been gathered around a caterpillar box and were watching two butterflies emerge for the first time in absolute wonder and how their teachers had not only stood there but engaged. He emphasized to me that the profession of Early Childhood Educator was about more than loving kids, or even teaching, it was engaging with children on an intellectual level without condescending to them.

University of Hawaii at Manoa Childcare Center caters specifically to students and staff at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, and although due to high popularity of the center, the waiting list is infamous, U.H. students and staff are priority on this list.

“Well you can apply to the children’s center any time of the year. You can apply as soon as your child is born,” we both laughed but some childcare, especially infant childcare, lets women put their children on the wait list while they’re pregnant.

“And if you’re not a student but are planning to be a student in the future, then you apply as a “future student” and be on the student wait list. So what I, [would tell] any parent that thinks they might go to school or gonna be in school and they see they’re going to need child care, no matter what age their child is[that], they should go ahead and apply for the children’s center.”

Watkins went on to say that the center based childcare isn’t for everyone.

“[…]Just because we operate a group child care center, in no way that is meant to imply that putting your child in child care is best thing for your child. Parents are wonderful teachers. And a child would be very fortunate to spend their early years with, close to and within their family, if the family structure allows that and if it’s an interesting dynamic space. But we’re sort of the next best thing. We’re the big house in the neighborhood, where children play and families gather.”

The University of Hawaii at Manoa Childcare Center’s hours are from eight a.m. to five p.m., Monday through Friday and whenever U.H. is having classes or exams. This makes it especially convenient for the University of Hawaii student.

So how have other students managed to attain their degrees despite the challenges they face being student parents?

Melinda Gohn, middle school art teacher at Lokilani Intermediate School on Maui and coordinator for the Maui Live Poet’s society talked to me about how she wishes
Got Kids?

programs like Bridge to Hope were around for her when she was a student in college in the 1970’s.

“First time I went to college I was eighteen, at University of California Riverside right out of high school. And I dropped out to move to Albuquerque, to get married, and have a baby.”

At the time she felt pressured to drop out despite a straight A average, and a full ride scholarship. Also she was “[…] in love with the father and he was in love with me. I thought I could go back to school when the baby was older to in Albuquerque. It never worked out of course, because things happen.”

They didn’t have counseling services for students who are thinking of dropping out due to pregnancy when Melinda was attending college.

After getting pregnant, Melinda dropped out, and later attended night classes so that she could get her education as a nurse well as take care of her son Monty.

In her career path as a nurse she “fell in love with cardiac ultra-sound.”

“[…]So I took a lot of specialized courses to be an ultra sound tech so even as I wasn’t in college anymore I was still going to school, going to seminars. I have what equates to about a two-year degree in physics.”

Her life changed once more when she got hurt on the job in the year 2000, and became a student once more so that she could become an English teacher through a disability program.

“In the state of Hawaii when you are disabled, you have to train in Hawaii, to work in Hawaii, the type of work you do, they can’t make you a dish washer, the closest thing I thought was teaching, I thought I’d go into counseling, but counseling pays so poorly. It was an economic decision. Through teaching I could get retirement through the state. It’s a lot of work. Very hard work. I enjoy it. My degree is in English even though I don’t teach English, I love teaching art. I love giving the kids something new.”

When I asked her if she knew about the Bridge to Hope program which is also on Maui, at first she was unfamiliar with it, until she remembered seeing other student-parents in her more general education classes.
Got Kids?

“No, wait…actually I did meet some people who were using those programs. In some of the general education classes I took, people I ran into people that had kids in school and used the childcare center.”

Although Melinda was a student-parent with young children earlier in her life, by the time she went back school, her children, Monty and Mariah, were already adults.

However, just because she didn’t need childcare and programs like Bridge to Hope when she returned to school the third time around, doesn’t mean that Melinda doesn’t recognize their significance.

When I asked her if she thought programs like Bridge to Hope were important she answered, “It’s really important. If those programs, if I had been encouraged not to drop out, to consider it, I might have had a very different story.”

Programs like Bridge to Hope, S.P.A.M., and University of Hawaii at Manoa Childcare aren’t just programs for student-parents, but for the community as a whole. These programs’ goals: providing education for welfare participants as well as low income families, effects not just University of Hawaii at Manoa but Hawaii.

With more parents in school, their children are eventually better provided for. The pathway for those children to achieve a collegiate education is much more. That means that there is one less person on will be on welfare, one less person perpetuating the cycle of poverty. According to Support groups for single mothers in college by Diane Bruns, […] “One of the most important things a single mother can do for herself is to attend college. Nearly [twenty three] years ago, Johnson, Sum, and Weills (1988) reported that almost ninety percent of families headed by single mothers who lacked a high school diploma were living in poverty; for children living with mothers with a college degree, the poverty rate was sixteen percent.”

It starts with getting childcare and ends with achieving a better life not only for you and your child, but for their children, and maybe a whole generation.