Preface

Who Defines Childhood?

Few human activities are more essential, more joyful, than the act of raising a child. Until quite recently, bringing up our offspring took place solely within the family's private sphere, aided by kin or paid caregivers. The art of rearing a child—often with the coaching of self-assured male psychologists and their glossy guidebooks—remains primarily in parents' hands.

Early in life children do brush up against formal institutions. Church leaders still baptize babies. Parents dutifully drag their three-year-olds to the neighborhood library. For excitement we may visit the corner fire station or peer through the outgoing-mail slot down at the post office. Yet beyond such glancing exposures to civic organizations young children, historically speaking, have spent little time inside rationalized organizations before entering school.

A dramatic shift in the daily lives of America's youngest children arrived in the 1970s, in the wake of radical changes in their mothers' lives. Rising numbers of young women had been graduating from college since the postwar spread of higher education. The onset of the feminist movement then jolted women's aspirations and notions of how to construct a fulfilling identity amidst competing social expectations.

These breaks from the past recast how mothers, and even their partners, weighed the benefits and costs of raising children and advancing a career. As millions of women decided to juggle both children and work, young children began to spend more and more hours in the care of other adults. The term *preschooler* even seeped into everyday language, signifying that once those diapers (miraculously) remained dry, a toddler could promptly enter a child care center. The nation's short-lived war on poverty spawned thousands of Head Start preschools, establishing a firm public interest in young children.

As our society entered the twenty-first century, over nine million children under the age of five, whether from rich or poor families, attended a formal organization dubbed a *child care center* or *preschool* for at least part of each day.[1]

By the 1990s, the swirl of forces intensified, and a fresh civic discourse emerged centering on the family's faltering strength and whether a range of caregivers and formal organizations should play a larger part in raising young children. This debate grew louder, fed by the media's fascination with colorful photos of infant brains electrified by pulsating synapses, by surging concerns about poor families and welfare reform, and by the government's determined efforts to make public schools more accountable. Researchers began to detail how, even as youngsters entered kindergarten, the achievement gap between rich and poor students was starkly apparent.[2]

There's no turning back to the days when child rearing in America was merely a private concern. Children's activists and a growing range of political leaders have advanced a broad public awareness of young children's developmental potential and the telling consequences of their immediate environments, including the home and child care settings. Even so, debate persists over the optimal balance—for toddlers and parents alike—between time youngsters spend at home and time spent in formal institutions, especially preschools.

Preschoolers hit the political big-time in 1988, when then-presidential candidate George H. W. Bush proposed a national child care program—a provocative pledge, coming from Ronald Reagan's vice president, on which he would deliver two years later. Between the senior Bush's program—which funds vouchers for parents who (theoretically) choose from a variety of child care providers—and the steady growth of Head Start preschools, Washington now spends over $18 billion a year on early care and education. States spend another $4 billion for pre-kindergarten efforts.[3] If the costs absorbed by parents are included, about $48 billion was spent on the nation's archipelago of caregivers and preschools in 2005.[4]

These historical currents and the gaping holes in America's ragged nonsystem of child care—marked by a scarcity of affordable high-quality options—have spurred a variety of early education reformers to up the ante. Many have converged in recent years on a bold, narrowly drawn remedy: Make free, state-run preschools available to all three- and four-year-olds. Yes, another acronym—UPK, for universal pre-kindergarten—began to circulate among a widening circle of activists, foundation officials, and policy leaders.

The UPK movement is gaining traction—and political friction—in a variety of states. We will visit Oklahoma, where in 1998 the legislature quietly agreed to fold preschool enrollments into the routine calculation of state aid to local schools, prompting the robust spread of pre-kindergarten classrooms. Fully 63 percent of Oklahoma's four-year-olds were enrolled by 2004. Georgia is the better-known preschool pioneer; there, then-governor Zell Miller advanced the idea in the early 1990s, creating a half-day program for all that was first targeted on communities with the scarcest resources. Over 55 percent of Georgia's four-year-olds now attend preschool.

In New Jersey, an ambitious court settlement, the so-called Abbott decision, aims to equalize educational opportunity and achievement. It mandates free preschool for all kids within the state's poorest school districts. Almost three-quarters of all four-year-olds now attend. In Florida, voters approved a 2002 ballot initiative by a 59 percent plurality directing Governor Jeb Bush to create "high quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunities" for all families. In fact, this young program offers low-cost, portable vouchers to parents while leaning heavily on preschools run by community-based organizations (CBOs), not just on school-based programs.[5]

Building a One-Best System of Childhood?

Since the late 1990s the question of UPK has risen higher in the stump speeches of governors and school leaders. This book introduces you to a new generation of advocates who are eager to form alliances with education lobbies, teacher unions, even business groups—for in this brave new world of childhood the aim is to raise youngsters' tests scores not long after they shed those diapers.

What are the advantages and risks of the state's specifying, perhaps regimenting, what very young children are to learn and how they are to be socialized? Put plainly, should government—whether it is cast as progressively closing early learning gaps or viewed as an imperial "nanny state"—hold the authority to define how young children are raised?

The earlier policy line goes like this: if employers won't create greater job flexibility for young families, then government's best role is to enrich child care *options*, flexible choices for America's diverse parents. In stark contrast, the new, more convergent pitch that is gaining steam aims at building a one-best system of preschooling, largely attached to the public schools. The avant-garde UPK advocates argue that they are advancing the interests of children, given that the new *telos* of public schooling is to boost test scores beginning in the first or second grade. And besides, we can't narrow the achievement gap without moving youngsters toward English fluency more aggressively and earlier in their young childhoods, many UPK advocates argue. Other early educators, however, hearing that their liberal-humanist traditions have become old hat, fear that chanting phonemes and working on dittoed worksheets will replace colorful activity centers and "learning through play."

These are the prickly questions which parents are debating over the back fence, and which are discussed increasingly inside the halls of state capitals. When the topic of universal preschool hit conservative talk radio, you knew that it had arrived as a new front in the culture wars.

Few parents or child development experts argue against the urgent need to improve affordable child care options, especially in poor and blue-collar neighborhoods, where scarcity is stark and waiting lists run long. It's the notion of a universal, one-size-fits-all institution regulated by government that fuels the push-back.

One way to create universal preschool is to extend public schooling downward, to carve out new grade levels below kindergarten. The new generation of advocates propose far more ambitious measures than just expansion of Head Start or child care vouchers for poor families, measures that smell of welfare and would fail to reach middle-class families. Instead, like leaders of the kindergarten movement a century ago, the new UPK advocates have set their sights high.

By allying themselves with the broader school-accountability movement, via the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the new advocates have widened their political appeal. California schools chief Jack O'Connell recently led with UPK as he articulated his reform priorities for a new legislative session. "Universal preschool is an idea whose time has come," he said, claiming it would go a long way toward improving children's flagging test scores.[6] Free preschool has become seen as an education reform for the middle class, but does it yield miraculous benefits for all children, as the proponents allege? This book sorts out the evidence for these claims.

The disappointing history of the nation's kindergarten movement worries others. During a century-long campaign its advocates won legitimacy and resources by incorporating kinder programs, once run by community groups, into the public schools. But what was sold as a romantic and humanistic "garden of learning" threatens to become just another grade level, committed to narrow cognitive skills and didactic teaching. Little evidence suggests that kindergartens are closing achievement gaps, in part because the most qualified teachers migrate to better-off communities. The UPK movement now prompts an eerie feeling of déjà vu, along with the question of whether contemporary advocates have learned much from their predecessors.

The universal preschool story is reminiscent of New Englander Horace Mann's crusade in the mid-nineteenth century to build a state-run system of "common schools." We see the same trust in central rules, faith in well-credentialed experts, and belief that children's development can be better engineered inside classrooms. There's a similar yearning for a well-oiled institution, the kind that Mann grew to love while visiting Prussia. The contemporary preschool movement evokes the same Calvinist verve as Horace Mann's crusade. "Nap time needs to go away," announced school superintendent Andre J. Hornsby in 2004, testifying before a Maryland legislative committee looking at early education. "We need to get rid of all that baby school stuff they used to do." Hornsby vowed to purge those slick vinyl mats to which, you may remember, our sweaty cheeks and arms adhered after nodding off.[7]

The present-day advocates of universal preschool are often aligned rhetorically with the *liberal-humanist* frame that has characterized our understanding of children's early development over the past century. Oklahoma's and New Jersey's regulations, for example, mandate that classroom practices be "developmentally appropriate," drawing from the constructivist, Piagetian notion that motivated learning builds from the child's own curiosity and shared stages of cognitive development. These potentials are to naturally burst forth when nurtured and facilitated within that engaging garden of learning (which *this* time will be preserved by the state, claim some advocates). The socialization goal within middle-class America is to move this robust little creature toward greater self-direction, linguistic fluency, and the pursuit of intrinsically motivated passions. It's the individuated child with the chutzpah to reason through and voice his or her interests, along with the agility to work cooperatively, that old-line liberal-humanists are eager to protect and enhance.

But the new reformers, while perhaps adopting this child-rearing philosophy for their own children, now wonder how useful it is for other people's children who must become "ready for school." For sure, many youngsters from poor families move through elementary school unable to read, or become proficient in English at a snail's pace. So, it's specific *academic skills* defined as "basic" that now should be emphasized, say the new advocates. The state is to make sure that preschool teachers get with the program, focusing their more structured lessons, worksheets, didactics on elements of language, printed materials, and mathematical concepts. If preschool teachers are properly "aligned" to the state's curricular goals, test scores should rise once children enter real school, according to this tidy systems argument.

As one school official in Tulsa, Oklahoma, told me, "The principals are under such pressure (to raise test scores), they say the sooner we get started on this, the better." And UPK advocates find common cause with proponents of top-down school accountability. The leading pro-UPK lobby in Washington, originally dubbed the Trust for Early Education, was founded inside the Education Trust, dogged defenders of President Bush's NCLB initiative.

The new regimentation carries a socialization agenda as well, pressing to ensure that children become "better behaved in class" and able to sit at desks, focused on dittoed worksheets, as one advocacy group puts it.[8] When I asked one leading proponent of universal preschool if she saw any risks in shrinking the core aim of preschool to bumping up test scores, she said: "Yes, we've been pushing cognitive outcomes . . . learning to speak English. It's a risk to just push K-12 (accountability) down into preschools. But school readiness helps us get traction and resources. Then we'll move toward a more holistic approach."

The Push-back

From high above, as if peering down to earth from a jet liner, the push for universal preschool makes abundant sense. Framed as education reform, this suddenly robust movement seems so timely—an inevitable extension of government's decade-long drive to specify clear learning objectives for elementary schools, to align and intensify child testing, and to install curricular packages that channel teachers' everyday work.

But as we descend closer to earth, landing inside particular communities, we can see that support for UPK is far from universal. Indeed, elite movement leaders—backed largely by a pair of national foundations and their analysts, pollsters, and public relations specialists—exemplify how elites within civil society recurrently attempt to push a normative way of raising children, even a standard institution, into the lives of America's breathtakingly diverse array of families. The nation continues to grow more pluralistic, not simply in its demographic complexion but also in the range of local organizations that support working families, including a vast array of nonprofit organizations, churches, and paid caregivers that make up the political economy of child care. We are no longer in the late nineteenth century, when modern institution-building meant creating huge hospitals, expansive universities, or a network of post offices—that is, engineering mass organizations.

Since World War II, child care centers and individual caregivers have sprouted throughout the land, like weeds sustained by sporadic watering. They are situated in YWCAs, church basements, even in licensed homes where women take in small gaggles of children. At last count, over 113,000 nonprofit preschools operated across the nation, two-thirds supported by parent fees and many others, created during the community action movement of the 1960s, serving low-income families. This vast archipelago of decentralized nonprofits reflects both organizational diversity and uneven quality. These neighborhood firms also help to thicken civil society, providing a base for countless community leaders to advocate for families, from the inner city to leafy suburbs.

Some opponents of UPK, conservatives included, are sounding a lot like developmental psychologists, arguing that civil society might first attend to the quality of primary social relationships, such as those between parents and the child. "Earlier, child care advocates were in favor of options. It makes sense, given the different ways in which children develop," argues Darcy Olsen, director of the Goldwater Institute in Phoenix. She worries that advocates will push government to create disincentives for parents or kin who still want to raise their own children: "It's as if attachment theory just went out the window."

Olsen set her sights on a formidable foil during our interview: Arizona's Democratic governor, Janet Napolitano. Releasing a new "school readiness action plan" in 2004, Napolitano defined her end goal as "ensconcing early care and education as a lockstep component of public schooling."[9] In response, Olsen said: "Over time government would be requiring parents to send their four-year-old to preschool, and then their three-year-olds. It's like reading *Brave New World*, which is creepy, it doesn't bode well for our children."

The push-back comes from progressive activists as well, often leaders in nonprofit agencies worried about state control from above, the regimentation of preschool classrooms, and the trickle down of didactic instruction to ensure that all the curricular "standards" are covered. Patty Siegel, a mother of three in the early 1970s, when she helped to create a child care switchboard in San Francisco, rose to become California's most influential advocate in Sacramento for child care funding. "There's a history we are losing . . . all those original community-based centers in San Francisco, elsewhere. There must be a touch point with universality, otherwise it comes to be seen only as part of welfare. (But) don't families need to see their options?" As Libby Sholes, leader of the moderate California Council of Churches, put it, "We are moving so fast in the institutionalization of children. We're taking kids away from their parents. Government's deciding what's best for our kids."

Tensions are palpable in other states, pitting advocates of school-run programs against leaders of ethnic communities. One New Jersey scholar and activist described a major group that runs nonprofit preschools as a "banana republic," expressing worries over program quality and the organization's political tactics. Still, in New Jersey 72 percent of children enrolled attend a community preschool, not one located in a public school, while all programs must meet quality standards set by the state education department.

Nor are union leaders unified in their views of government moving toward one best system of preschooling. Both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have put preschool reform among their top three lobbying priorities.[10] Other labor groups have long been organizing child care workers. Michelle Cerecerez helped to unionize women who run licensed child care homes in Los Angeles for several years. A self-proclaimed "Head Start kid," Cerecerez attended preschool at East Los Angeles College. "I remember singing songs in French," she said with smiling delight. But Cerecerez is not convinced that preschool should be mandated for all kids: "It's kind of arrogant to say every kid should be in a center, an institution, at such a young age."

The push-back also comes from local activists and scholars who see children's development as being embedded within particular cultural contexts. After the liberal-humanist tradition and the new focus on academic skilling, the *cross-cultural* framing of children's socialization and their underlying cognitive structures also prompts worries over how a mass preschool system, run by state agencies that habitually narrow and standardize notions of learning, could be responsive to the diversity of families and children that characterizes American society.

This framework, advanced over the past half-century by cross-cultural psychologists and learning theorists, takes seriously the notion of scaffolding up from the daily activities, linguistic foundations, and behavioral norms that youngsters experience at home and within their immediate environs. The framework mitigates against universalist notions of how children grow, whether it's the liberal-humanist tenet that all children move through biologically determined stages on their way to individual autonomy or the notion that uniform academic skills advance the child's well-being over time.

This book also delves into how cultural forces cohere and are expressed at the *institutional* level. In trying to understand how universal preschool plays out differently (in quite non-universal) ways among states, I discovered that the character of preschool classrooms and their tolerance for different philosophies of child development, not to mention languages of instruction, is shaped in part by the *political culture* of the state or region in which UPK takes root and sprouts. In Oklahoma, for instance, few with any clout ever challenged the implicit assumption that UPK funding should flow through the public schools. In Los Angeles, that possibility never even surfaced as a credible path to take, given this city's pluralistic and community-rooted politics.

Down at the grassroots, conservatives well understand the preschool's utility in advancing a *particular* culture's bundle of norms and valued skills. David Brooks, the *New York Times* columnist, is enthusiastic about stronger government efforts when it comes to early education, starting with the expansion of Head Start: "Progressive conservatives understand that while culture matters most, government can alter culture. Government [is] now trying to design programs to encourage marriage. Early-intervention programs [in addition] were not a conservative idea, but they work."[11] Brooks nails the basic point with refreshing candor: how young children are nurtured and taught inside preschools is, unavoidably, a *cultural* act advanced by institutions.

This debate over the child's inner nature and how best to nurture children also bumps into a classic dilemma that has beset educators throughout the modern period: should child-rearing institutions seek to *transform* youngsters and their communities, making sure they become members of the nation-state, acquiring individualistic skills which allow them to fill jobs in a competitive economic system? Or, should schools be *conserving* institutions rooted in the knowledge, language, and cultural mores of particular groups, working as democratic organizations that build from the social foundations of family and community? The debate over universal preschool intersects similar contention around charter schools, small schools, and vouchers for private and religious schooling. At its core, the question is: can a bureaucratic state be trusted to build one best system of education for a feisty, pluralistic society? Who gets to decide what children should be learning, through what forms of social relations? And when the state gains authority to make these decisions, whose interests are being advanced?

My aim in this book is not to push a single philosophy of the child's in-born nature, nor to advance one uniform institution to advance children's development. Instead, I hope to spark and empirically inform this essential debate over how young children should be raised and taught within a pluralistic society, and who gets to decide on the goals and means of child rearing. Part of my point is that the new advocates are pushing a standard remedy with little understanding of historical context, of how they risk closing off options. We will see how proponents, obsessively focused on finding an effective political strategy, may inadvertently narrow the way parents come to see, and feel confident about, how they are supposed to raise their own children.

"All theories of learning are based on fundamental assumptions about the person, the world, and their relations," as theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger emphasize.[12] I would add that these assumptions become tacitly embedded in the *social organizations* that human beings create to nurture and teach their young children. And while good liberals and stalwart conservatives both pitch universal futures for America's children, this book urges you to think about whether modern systems-building assumptions still fit the diversity of families and neighborhoods that increasingly make up America's vibrant society. Overall, as the new advocates and a resurgent state pitch a universal institution for young children—seeking to reorder this early period of human life—I seek to unravel this tangled ball of contested philosophical stances and widening array of empirical findings.

Organization of the Book

Chapter 1 begins with the obvious question. Why did the UPK movement suddenly gained such political traction? We examine Americans' perennial belief in the boundless potential of the young child, a postulate of Enlightenment thinking now held by the middle class. But policy elites have come to think about the young child's cognitive potential in a new way. "We have recently come to understand that (preschoolers) are eager to learn . . . to be learning about reading and numbers," the developmental psychologist Deborah Phillips said in an interview. "From developmental science, not just the brain research, we now know they are eager to be learning. We used to think we should wait until age five."[13] Most well-off parents agreed with Phillips some time ago: almost 85 percent of four-year-olds in affluent families, those in the top fifth of the nation's income distribution, now attend preschool.[14]

We next consider the question of how best to define the public interest in expanding the state's role, in making government the paramount collective actor in casting preschool. Should government advance free, universally accessible preschool as the *exclusive* remedy—the single sanctioned organization in which all young children should be raised?

Chapter 2 examines how the period of early childhood has long been a contested area in Western society—both in our understanding of the child's inner nature and in theories of how youngsters' social settings can be better engineered by grown ups. We then fast-forward to contemporary times to see how some of these same forces are shaping how states and metropolitan areas design early education options today, looking in particular at the ongoing struggle of women to balance work and family, the fusion of school accountability reforms with the new push to standardize childhood, and the colorful, decentralized array of community programs that presently serve young children.

Chapter 3 invites you into the Rainbow Room to see how contested ideals of development and cultural diversity play out inside classrooms. In this chapter we place our feet squarely on the ground inside a region of the country that is strongly committed to universal preschool. Seeta Pai, my research team's ethnographic leader, spent a year in several classrooms, and what she discovered is eye-opening. The UPK system she looked at remains dedicated to liberal-humanist ideals in spades, centrally regulating what's progressively called *emergent curriculum*, a very constructivist classroom strategy. At the same time, kindergarten teachers in the public schools are pushing hard for their preschool colleagues to focus on narrower academic skills, urging parents to help get their kids ready for school. The contradictions in this colorful and diverse suburb are both hopeful and instructive for those who favor a well-oiled preschool system.

In Chapter 4 we visit the unlikely leader of the UPK movement—the state of Oklahoma. Here preschool enrollments have risen steadily, climbing to the highest rate in the nation. My account of the subdued revolution in Oklahoma delves into the actors, ideals, and political interests that have pushed the issue forward over the past two decades. The Oklahoma case is marked by a civil, even mellow, discourse among a small circle of early educators and community activists, including Head Start and the YWCA, a system loosely overseen by local school boards. Yet tensions exist beneath the surface, as Latino parents worry about their four-year-olds not wanting to speak Spanish at home and early educators wring their hands over getting what they had wished for. Pressures on preschool teachers are rising to conform to curricular guidelines, to specify daily activities, and to NCLB mandates that trickle down to preschool classrooms.

In vivid contrast, Chapter 5 moves to the context of Los Angeles. There, leaders in this expansive county have created a universal preschool system that is neither universal (it progressively targets poor communities) nor limited to preschool (it includes family child care homes). California's decentralized governance structure interacts with the ethnic, highly democratic politics of L.A.—leading to a contest over which school authorities and nonprofit agencies get to deliver the new UPK program. The L.A. story holds implications for who gets to hold the tail of the UPK tiger: whether the state tries to run and regulate it, or simply contracts out to a colorful variety of preschools that pursue the developmental aims put forth by these local organizations spread across diverse communities.

Chapter 6 turns to the bold claims advanced by UPK advocates, and Margaret Bridges and I review the empirical evidence for each. Eager to win middle-class political support, for example, UPK proponents have contended that preschools yield clear benefits to all children, and across various domains of development. But after five decades of empirical work, the evidence is not so tidy. Not all the assertions made by the new reformers can be settled with scientific investigation, since the aims of child development are rooted largely in culture and philosophy, not science. But evidence can be informative. We also examine what elements of preschool quality most consistently boost children's growth, and how preschool's benefits vary across differing facets of early development.

Chapter 7 moves to a nettlesome patch of philosophical and scientific questions related to how public efforts might advance the early development of Latino children. I documented well over a decade ago that Latino parents enroll their children in preschool at much lower rates than other groups do. This led to a series of studies, both quantitative and qualitative, to understand how cultural values, family structure, social support, and the local supply of preschools all contribute to family demand. In this chapter, we also arrive at the cultural revolution in learning theory that began early in the past century, but went unnoticed in mainstream child development studies until just a generation ago.

Chapter 8 concludes the volume by sketching a third pathway for moving forward—relying neither on the rough, unfair edges of child care markets nor on the homogenizing regulation of childhood that the rush to universal preschool risks. Placed on a broader canvas, the battle over universal preschool is one example of the growing disaffection with mass institutions and top-down policies that run against the grain of America's ongoing democratization of individual expression and social organizations.

You may realize partway through this volume that my own agenda is to delineate a clearer sociology of childhood, focusing largely on the interaction of state action, civil society, and local pluralism. Traditionally, developmentalists have been trained in psychology and socialized to focus on the individual child's motivation and growth. This is a crucial area of study, but it has historically eclipsed our understanding of the social ideals and institutional practices that, in the end, shape the everyday settings that the grown-ups create for their offspring.

Many developmental scientists like to claim that their work avoids the messiness of philosophy, ideology, and cultural variation. Like physicists, they are illuminating *universal* stages, psychological processes, or causal models of development. But when parents or scholars work to advance a desired outcome, they must necessarily work from within a child's social location that's bounded by social class, language, or cultural heritage. Certain individuals and organizations hold concentrated capital or power that allows them to advance their ideals about the young child, or their favored social organization for raising other people's children. But presuming to know how other parents want to raise their children and toward what ends is risky business.

I do worry that the push to universalize and standardize preschooling in America will disempower parents from the most essential human task of all: raising young children. In my travels and in countless interviews I never sensed that well-meaning advocates are ill intentioned or aiming to advance corrosive institutions. But as Foucault so powerfully argued, modern mechanisms of regulation and conformity to the demands of big organizations and the economy can be tacitly embedded even in benevolent institutions, like the state.

It doesn't have to be this way. Liberal-humanist thinkers have been working on ways to separate reflective youngsters from dominant structures and didactic forms of "official knowledge" over the past five centuries. More recently, cultural psychologists have emphasized how the child learns within the immediate community and the nurturing support it ideally offers. Obviously all children should acquire basic literacy and communication skills.

Still, much of the discourse around education reform once again centers on how the state can more tightly regulate human learning, ensuring that all children speak in one exclusive language, read identical textbooks, and recite officially sanctioned knowledge. At issue is whether eager institution builders are listening to this debate, a struggle which has long characterized and befuddled democratic societies.