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Paying for Child Care, Unless It's from a Parent

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Why is it a job when a person takes care of someone else's children, but not when the parent does it herself?

This is a tale of two women: Teresa Maldonado, a 29-year-old mother of four who works as a waitress, and Nadine Barbosa, 38, the registered family day care provider whom the government pays to watch Ms. Maldonado's children.



Nadine Barbosa, a child care provider, working from her apartment.

Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

Four or five days a week, either Ms. Maldonado or her husband, who live in the Bronx, drop their children off at Ms. Barbosa's apartment, a half-hour's subway ride away. Ms. Barbosa tests the girls, 8 and 10, on geography; keeps the two boys, ages 1 and 2, engaged with her stash of bright plastic toys; and regularly makes rice and beans for them all. While Ms. Maldonado is taking orders from customers and racing back to the kitchen at an all-night diner near her home, Ms. Barbosa is negotiating tweenage bickering or patting toddlers' backs to coax them into naps.

“Kids know who they can mess with and who they can’t,” said Ms. Barbosa, whose 19-year-old daughter no longer lives at home. “I’m stern, but playful in my sternness.”

For her hard work as a waitress, sometimes in 10-hour shifts, Ms. Maldonado estimates that she earns less than \$20,000 a year. For her hard work taking care of Ms. Maldonado’s children, Ms. Barbosa will probably earn upward of \$20,000, courtesy of the city, state and federal governments, through a program that covers child-care costs for poor people so they can work.

Clearly, the government values the work performed by Ms. Barbosa; but if Ms. Maldonado did it herself, the subsidies would disappear. (Her husband once worked providing security at Yankee Stadium but is currently unemployed and looking.)

The basic premise inspiring so many government subsidies — that any work, even menial work, is a first step out of poverty — has a hearty hopefulness to it and some logic. But arrangements like the one Ms. Barbosa and Ms. Maldonado share illustrate the absurdities that sometimes ensue — especially when there is little expectation in this jobless recovery that Ms. Maldonado’s waitressing would lead her to a career ladder with a gold watch at the end of it.

Perhaps Ms. Maldonado’s children benefit from seeing her hard work, but they surely did not benefit from the system on the nights when their mother had a late shift at the diner and their father still worked at the stadium at night. On those occasions, Ms. Maldonado left her job in the early hours of the morning, traveled to Ms. Barbosa’s home and roused her children from slumber so she could haul them home in a taxi.

“I do find it ridiculous in certain senses how they force certain things on you,” Ms. Maldonado said. “I would like to someday stay at home and just take care of my family.”

A recent report by the Citizens’ Committee for Children showed that most of the 63,000 children under age 5 in New York City whose care is paid for by the government were in registered home-based settings like Ms. Barbosa’s, or in informal child care — which is to say, in the home of virtually anyone up for the job. It was not until 2009 that New York had in place a citywide program to ensure that, say, convicted felons were not receiving public money to take care of other people’s children.

Now the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation, a nonprofit group, provides criminal background checks of those baby sitters (and the people with whom they live) and spot checks 20 percent of the home-based day care sites for compliance with health and safety guidelines. All of which is better than nothing, though less than wholly reassuring.

Nancy Biberman, president of the group, sees, in the story of Ms. Barbosa and Ms. Maldonado, one major upside: the financial stability of Ms. Barbosa. Originally an informal caregiver, she took classes and went through an elaborate state application process that made her a registered family day care provider and drastically increased her

income. Unlike Ms. Maldonado, Ms. Barbosa does see possibilities ahead paved by the arrangement, including perhaps running a day care center or two. Ms. Biberman's group assists and oversees a network of 180 caregivers whose average income is \$35,000.

"We'd love to create hundreds — maybe thousands — of Nadines," said Ms. Biberman, who hopes that through the screening process her group will entice more women into training programs (improving the care children receive), while helping build their businesses (improving the economic prospects for the women).

There is, of course, another path that prepares women to look after other people's children, and that is looking after their own. But a quick glance at the numbers reveals that kind of job training just does not pay.