

## MARCH/APRIL TOPIC ANALYSIS

**Resolved: The United States ought to guarantee universal child care.**

### DEFINITIONS:

**Ought:** The lexicon heroes at Merriam Webster remind us that [ought](#) is used to express duty or obligation. In this resolution, ought can be used to help justify the framework for each side by looking at the moral obligation that the United States has to its citizens. Ought also helps to shift emphasis of the debate on whether universal child care is a right that the government is obligated to fulfill.

**Guarantee:** Webster again notes that a [guarantee](#) is “an assurance for the fulfillment of a condition.” In the context of this debate, guarantee outlines the goal of the program: that the government would ensure access to childcare.

**Universal Child Care:** There are many variations of UCC that exist across the globe. There is no standardized definition of exactly what Universal Child Care would entail; however, to be considered “universal”, child care would need to meet the criteria of being 1) available to all individuals in a country and 2) affordable to anyone who would need to use it. Many current or proposed programs would provide this care either completely free of charge or with a cost that maxed out at a certain percentage of an individual’s salary.

### BACKGROUND:

While Universal Child Care has been discussed in some form for decades, it was a major topic of discussion in the lead up to the 2020 Presidential Election because it was a major part of the platforms for several prospective Democratic nominees. [This article](#) gives an overview of what UCC is and how it has been framed in the United States. Debaters may note as they are researching that several countries, including [Canada](#), [Sweden](#), Switzerland and Denmark, have successfully implemented Universal Child Care programs. While the resolution is US specific, debaters may find it helpful to look at examples from other countries when evaluating the impacts that Universal Child Care can have. In addition, debaters may find it helpful to look into the Universal Child Care initiative that took place [in the 1940’s](#).

While it is very important to note that the resolution does not specify a plan or type of UCC, it is likely that Elizabeth Warren’s plan will be the focus in many debates as it is discussed in much of the literature around this topic. It is worth reading [Warren's plan](#) but the key takeaways are:

- The government would partner with a variety of organizations including school districts, private day cares, faith based organizations, and other organizations to create a child care network.
- Families would pay no more than 7% of their income towards child care
- The remaining costs would be funded by a wealth tax

Another plan that is likely to come up is [HR 3315](#) Universal Child Care and Early Learning Act. This was introduced into the House in 2019 and outlines a plan for the Department of Health and Human Services to support child care providers that exist in a not-for-profit capacity and subsidize the cost of child care for families that meet certain income criteria. A foundational knowledge of this bill will help debaters to add greater depth and nuance to their engagement with the topic.

The research in the United States is fairly clear when it comes to the [overwhelming cost of childcare](#). There is a lot of agreement in the literature about the impact that high child care costs can have on the population and how these impacts disproportionately harm those in marginalized communities. Much of the clash that is likely to come out of debates on this resolution will focus around the effectiveness of UCC, rather than on the need for reform. As a whole, public opinion in the United States leans [fairly favorably](#) when it comes to Universal Child Care, however, because the issue has been heavily politicized, there are a fair amount of partisan articles on both sides. When researching, debaters should make sure that they take the time to consider the sources that they are using and to look into whatever research is being cited. Debaters will likely find that there is a high payoff from reading through and familiarizing themselves with the different studies that have been done over the last decade and the methodologies of those studies.

Another likely point of contention may be around the idea of “quality” child care. The research is fairly apparent on both sides: those who receive quality child care gain a wide variety of educational benefits. In programs that are not able to guarantee the same level of care, there have been some startlingly negative outcomes. Debaters who are able to win the link about whether child care in a world with UCC will result in high or low quality care will likely have a strategic advantage within the round. It may be beneficial for debaters to practice weighing the link evidence on both sides.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

[The costs of child care in other countries](#)

[Universal Child Care | Elizabeth Warren](#)

[Elizabeth Warren's universal child care plan, explained](#)

[The New America Care Report Better Life Lab Policy Paper](#)

[Expensive Childcare and Short School Days = Lower Maternal Employment and More Time in Childcare?](#)

[Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Estonia and Portugal rank highest for family-friendly policies in OECD and EU countries](#)

[This Is What Daycare Looks Like Around The World](#)

[Elizabeth Warren Proposes Universal Child Care](#)

[Universal Child Care Benefit Information Sheet](#)

[The History of Child Care in the U.S.](#)

## AFFIRMATIVE ARGUMENTS:

### Decrease the Income Gap

One potential argument for the affirmative is that providing Universal Child Care can help to close the increasing income gap in the United States. [One in nine](#) American workers are paid wages that leave them at the poverty level, even when working full time. The Economic Policy Institute notes in [this article](#) that access to childcare plays a crucial role widening inequalities based on socioeconomic status. This works on a number of different levels. First, parents who are able to secure reliable childcare are able to work more hours and bring in a higher net income. Additionally, the same families are benefited when they do not need to spend a large portion of their annual salaries on childcare.

[Many American households](#) are spending more on child care than what is considered “affordable” but working class families often feel this impact the hardest. The EPI article linked above notes that, for full time minimum wage workers, “the shares of annual minimum-wage earnings required to afford center-based infant care range from 31.8 percent in South Dakota to 103.6 percent in Washington, D.C.” Often, those who earn higher wages are more likely to have paid family leave or additional resources for child care. A Universal Child Care program would be a major step towards closing that gap and would give parents in lower SES brackets the opportunity to earn more money.

[Is universal child care leveling the playing field?](#)

[Leave benefits: Access](#)

[Parents and the High Cost of Child Care](#)

[High quality child care is out of reach for working families](#)

[Working to Afford Child Care So You Can Work](#)

### Increases Equity

There is a lot of research that highlights the disproportional way child care impacts parents in marginalized communities, specifically women of color. A [CAP survey](#) found that “36% of black women and 45% of Latinas report difficulty at work as a result of lack of reliable child care.” A Universal Child Care program would make affordable child care available to all individuals in the United States and would have several tangible benefits for individuals in marginalized communities for both employment and continuing education.

There are many positive impacts that debaters can explore based on this contention. For example, there has been [significant research](#) that links financial independence and reducing domestic abuse. Individuals who are able to work because they have access to reliable child care have more resources that can help them to escape violent situations. A Universal Child Care program can also have a positive impact on allowing young parents to [return to school](#). This can have intergenerational benefits in reducing poverty and benefiting the economy as a whole.

[The Effects of a Universal Child Care Reform on Child Health – Evidence from Sweden](#)  
[Strategies to Meet the Child Care Needs of Low-Income Parents Seeking Education and Training](#)  
[Black Families Work More, Earn Less, and Face Difficult Child Care Choices](#)  
[Calculating the Hidden Cost of Interrupting a Career for Child Care](#)  
[Equity Starts Early: Addressing Racial Inequities in Child Care and Early Education Policy](#)  
[Employment and the Risk of Domestic Abuse among Low-Income Women](#)  
[On-site school day care centers keep teen moms on track](#)  
[Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship](#)

## Economic Growth

While many of the arguments on the affirmative focus on the benefits that exist on the individual level, a Universal Child Care program could also lead to [more individuals](#) in the workforce, which is beneficial for the economy as a whole. With many parents [quitting their jobs](#) to take care of their kids, the need for affordable, accessible child care is apparent and could help increase the overall job force in America. This argument may be an important one for the affirmative to research because it can highlight some tangible impacts for the entire country.

While many teams on the negative may focus on the cost of UCC or the trade offs that may come as a result, debaters on the affirmative side may find that these impacts are mitigated when compared to the economic growth that an increased work force can have. A growing body of research notes that having [more women in the workforce](#) can strengthen the economy and is [linked to higher wages](#) and even [boosting the GDP](#).

[Why the federal government should subsidize childcare and how to pay for it](#)

[The Child Care Crisis Is Keeping Women Out of the Workforce](#)

[When childcare costs more than rent, fewer women choose to work](#)

[IMF Research on Closing the Gender Gap – IMF Finance & Development Magazine | March 2019](#)

[How The Astronomical Cost Of Child Care Is Forcing More Women To Quit](#)

[Women in Work Index 2020](#)

## Educational Growth

Another tangible benefit of a Universal Child Care program is that the children who attend would have access to all of the benefits of early childhood education. The research here is a bit

divided. For children in medium or higher income households, the gains were not as substantial; however, for children in less affluent households, there were a number of increases across cognitive and social development. Debaters looking to run this argument should be ready to defend why a UCC would result in “quality” childcare and should be familiar with how to respond to the [Baker study](#) based on the Quebec UCC program.

Yet, despite some instances to the contrary, there have been a number of examples that show how a UCC can close the achievement and educational gaps within a country. For example, according to [this article](#), a study of Norway’s UCC program which encompassed more than 60,000 children found that, “the language improvement of low-income children attending early education and care has led to a significant narrowing of the gaps in the language skills between low-income and high-income children.” Debaters looking to run this argument may benefit from highlighting that, while not all parents would need to use a Universal Child Care program, a country should be morally obligated to provide child care if it means reducing the achievement gap across the population.

[Education Inequality Begins With Child Care | Knowledge Bank](#)

[Universal Child Care Brings Language, Achievement Benefits, Report Researchers from Boston College and Norway report.](#)

[The US Is a Laggard on Child Care | Knowledge Bank | US News](#)

## Further Affirmative Reading

[Who Benefits from Universal Child Care? Estimating Marginal Returns to Early Child Care Attendance | Journal of Political Economy: Vol 126, No 6](#)

[It’s time for an ambitious national investment in America’s children](#)

[Working women and the child-care equation: No one has it figured out](#)

[Parents are spending \\$42 billion on early child care — that's more than federal and state spending combined](#)

[Child care costs in the United States](#)

[IMF Pursuing Women's Economic Empowerment](#)

[Child care and nursery school in U.S. city average, all urban consumers, seasonally adjusted](#)

[Insights on Access to Quality Child Care for Families with Nontraditional Work Schedules](#)

[6 State Strategies To Improve Child Care Policies During the Pandemic and Beyond](#)

[Why the federal government should subsidize childcare and how to pay for it](#)

## NEGATIVE ARGUMENTS

### Cost and Trade Offs

One of the more intuitive arguments on the negative is that Universal Child Care would be expensive. While few people dispute that child care in the status quo is costly, there are many who argue that, even if the cost is high, it is not the government's obligation to pay for child care. A [2018 study](#) found that Universal Child Care would cost an estimated \$140 billion dollars annually. While this is certainly not the largest expenditure in the US's budget, it would likely come with other fiscal or political trade offs.

Debaters looking to run this contention should explore the ways in which Congress may choose to fund a Universal Child Care program and what impact it might have on child tax credit reforms or pandemic relief packages. It is worth noting that, while the Warren plan specified funding through a wealth tax, this is not necessarily the plan that would pass. Other methods of funding could be through some combination of deficit spending, increasing overall taxes or consolidating existing programs. While the Democratic controlled House and Senate may lead to less direct political backlash, it is possible that a Universal Child Care bill would trade off with more direct ways to help families that are most in need.

[Financial Structure of Early Childhood Education Requires Overhaul to Make It Accessible and Affordable for All Families and to Strengthen the Workforce in This Field](#)

[Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education](#)

[Are Child-Care Subsidies Actually “Good For The Economy”?](#)

[Paying the price: constrained choice and the consumption of unregulated child care in Alberta](#)

[GSS 2011 Linked with TIFF: Exploring the Cost of Child Care in Canada and the Use of the Child Care Expense Deduction | Canadian Journal of Family and Youth / Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de la Jeunesse](#)

### Overwhelming the System

One argument that debaters can explore is that a Universal Child Care program would lead to an exponential increase in individuals using child care, whether or not they needed assistance to do so. Right now, the United States is facing [a massive shortage](#) of child care centers. Even if the funding exists to pay for child care, increasing the number of kids who are attempting to attend could potentially overwhelm the system and lead to wait lists or lower quality care. Some versions of a UCC program would require those working in a child care center to have a post-secondary degree, which would increase the quality of care but make it more difficult to staff day care centers. With a [teacher shortage](#) continuing to grow, child care shortages are likely to become problematic.

The pandemic adds a level of [uniqueness to this argument](#) as the Center for American Progress estimates that 4.5 million child care spots could be lost due to the pandemic. As child care

centers reopen, mitigation efforts often require smaller class sizes or a smaller child to adult ratio, in order to separate children throughout the day. While Universal Child Care would, in theory, make child care more accessible to everyone, if those who need that care are unable to get a spot, it stands to reason that it would not be a moral obligation for the United States government to pass.

[Warren's universal child care plan faces a worker shortage problem](#)

[‘Not enough spaces’: Families share child care wait-list nightmares](#)

[Child care options will be scarce after the pandemic](#)

[Researchers Warn Nearly Half Of U.S. Child Care Centers Could Be Lost To Pandemic](#)

## “Ought to Guarantee”

Another argument that debaters can explore is whether an action can be a duty or obligation if the government cannot feasibly guarantee it. The moral principle of “[ought implies can](#)” uses whether or not an action is physically possible as a basic test for whether it can be a moral obligation. Debaters running this argument should be aware that there will likely be pushback on this argument because other countries have been able to successfully implement universal child care programs; however, when taken with the wording of “guarantee” in the resolution, it is possible for debaters to argue that Universal Child Care is beneficial but is not a moral imperative. Particularly in the instance of worker shortages, if the government cannot guarantee access to all parents who would need child care, it would not be a moral obligation under this framing.

[Ought implies can | ethics and logic](#)

[Theoretical Motivation of “Ought Implies Can”](#)

## Can’t Guarantee Quality Care

One of the more popular arguments on this topic will likely be that Universal Child Care programs cannot guarantee quality care and, when child care is not of a certain quality, it can do a lot more harm than good. The [Baker study](#), based on the Quebec UCC program, is cited quite a bit because it found that “cohorts with increased child care access subsequently had worse health, lower life satisfaction, and higher crime rates later in life.” It is worth reading this study in its entirety so that debaters feel more comfortable being able to explain and answer questions throughout the round. There were also [findings](#) from a study of a UCC program in Norway that noted how child care programs continued to be segregated based on socioeconomic status, even when there was apparent “universal access.”

Debaters looking to run a variation of this argument should look to prove both why it is likely that the overall quality of child care centers would go down and the negative implications of



poor quality child care. Debaters may want to look into the difficulty that the government may have with regulating child care organizations that were receiving funding from a UCC program and how this might contribute to a lower quality of care for children at a critical developmental stage of their lives.

[The Long-Run Impacts of a Universal Child Care Program](#)

[Elizabeth Warren's Misguided Universal-Child-Care Dream](#)

[Segregation in a Universal Child Care System: Descriptive Findings from Norway](#)

[Report finds home-based programs largely responsible for segregation](#)

[The Impact of Racial Segregation in Public Preschools](#)

## Further Neg Reading

[Universal child care is the wrong approach | AEI](#)

[The Compelling Case Against Universal Child Care](#)

[Universal Childcare Could Have Terrible Social Consequences](#)

[Swedish daycare: International example or cautionary tale? | Archive of IMFC](#)

[Universal child care: A bad deal for kids? | AEI](#)

[Are there long-term effects of early child care?](#)

[Do Effects of Early Child Care Extend to Age 15 Years? Results From the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development](#)

[Elevated cortisol levels in Norwegian toddlers in childcare](#)

[Examining change in cortisol patterns during the 10-week transition to a new child-care setting](#)

[Improving early childhood development by allowing advanced child tax credits](#)

## **ADDITIONAL READING:**

[The Economic Consequences of Family Policies: Lessons from a Century of Legislation in High-Income Countries](#)

[Who Took Care of Rosie the Riveter's Kids?](#)

[This is how much child care costs in 2020](#)

[Study Shows Gendered Effects of Universal Child Care](#)

[House passes set of bills that give child care industry a more than \\$60 billion bailout](#)

[The Child Care Is Essential Act Child care providers are at the forefront of the nation's response to the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

[Does America Need Universal Child Care to Recover from the Pandemic?](#)

[The US Government Can Provide Universal Childcare — It's Done So in the Past](#)

[New bill would cap preschool, child care costs for all Mass. families - Boston Business Journal](#)

[The True Cost of Providing Safe Child Care During the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)

[Methodology for 'The Cost of Child Care During the Coronavirus Pandemic'](#)