

## 5. Parents Work

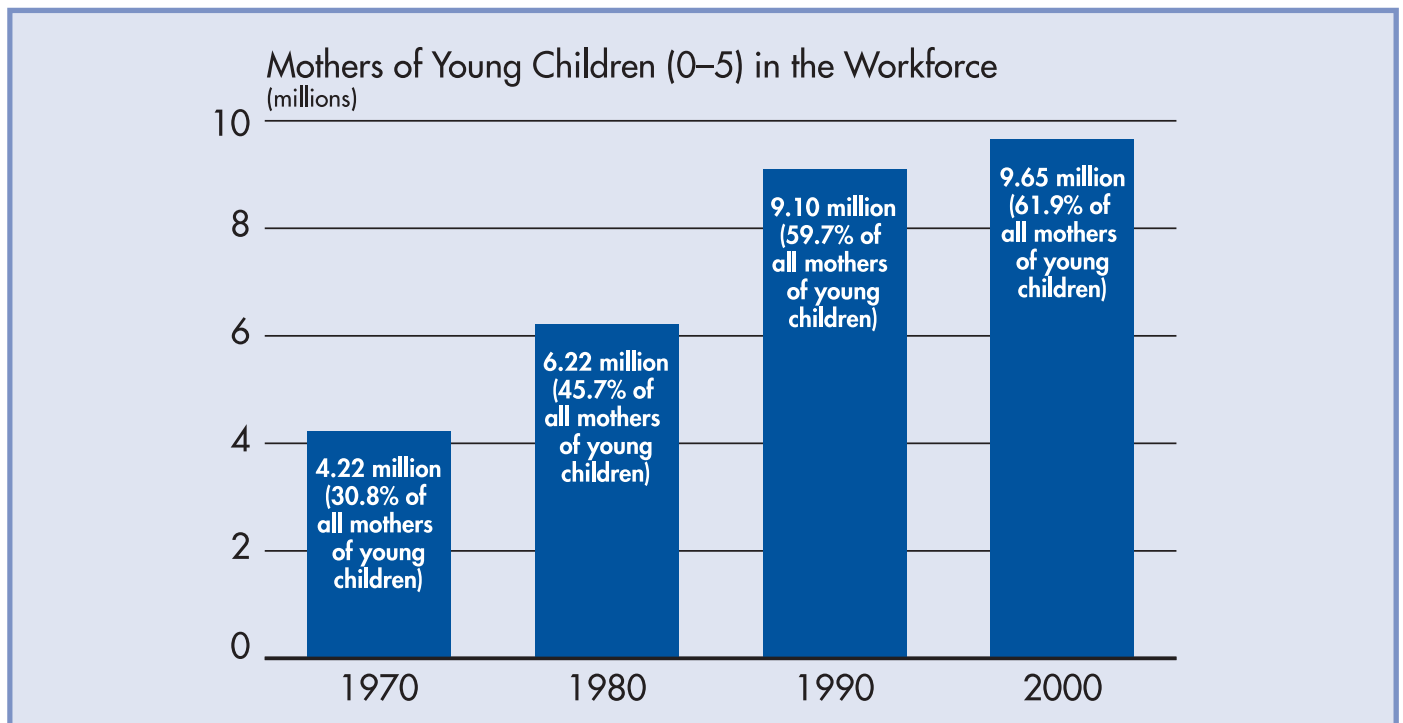
The simple fact is that most parents now work outside the home, even when their children are very young. For many parents, work now commands more of their daily time than their own children. Providing food and shelter often comes at the expense of time with family. Parents need support raising their children.

Economics have changed the structure of family life, particularly for families with young children. Over the past 30 years, the percentage of mothers of very young children who are in the workforce has doubled, from 30.8 percent in 1970 to 61.9 percent in 2000. Women's entry into the workforce over this period has contributed dramatically to the growth in the American economy, accounting for nearly one-quarter (23.6 percent) of overall growth in American employment (almost all of the rest

is the result of total population growth). As the table below shows, most of this growth occurred in the period from 1970 to 1990, but public policies have yet to catch up with this new reality.

Much of the increase in working mothers is the result of a decline over this period in real (inflation-adjusted) wages for men: families need the additional income. While public opinion polls show that the majority of parents would prefer to stay at home with their children, at least when they are very young (0-2), parents feel they must work to provide the basic necessities of food and shelter for their families.

Parents with young children struggle to meet their children's needs far more than parents with older children. Nationally, 36 percent of families with at least one young child (under age six) earn less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level (\$28,980 for a family



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of three in 2004), versus 26 percent of families with only older children. Recent efforts to establish self-sufficiency standards (the amount of resources families need to provide the basics) for families with young children have placed these standards at least at 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

The economic struggle of families with young children has a direct impact on the school readiness of these children. Since 1970, more than five million mothers of young children have joined the workforce, contributing to their family's financial security and to the country's overall economic growth—yet making it more difficult for them to meet their children's needs for guidance, nurturing, supervision, and educational instruction.

These economic changes to family life create new challenges and demands for young children and their development. At a minimum, there is a much greater need for child care arrangements that are both affordable and available. Further, since children spend more time away from home and their parents, it is increasingly important that child care arrangements address their developmental needs.

### Sources for More Information

Mishel, L., Bernstein, J., & Allegretto, S. (2005). *The state of working America 2004-2005*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Wider Opportunities for Women's "Family Economic Self-Sufficiency State Organizing Project" provides information about self-sufficiency standards in several states. Information can be retrieved from their website: <http://www.sixstrategies.org>.

