**Elliot Haspel**

**Rafael Otto:** [00:00:00] This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. As usual, you can catch us on the airwaves on 99.1 FM in Portland on Sundays at 4:30 PM or subscribe and listen wherever you find your podcasts. Today, I'm speaking with Elliot Haspel, who is a nationally recognized early childhood policy expert and author of the book “Crawling Behind: America's Childcare Crisis and How to Fix It.”

Elliott's work has been featured in The New York Times and The Atlantic and The Washington Post among other places. And he is a program officer at a philanthropic foundation in Richmond, Virginia. Elliot, welcome! It's great to have you on the podcast today.

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:00:35] Thanks so much for having me.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:00:38] I wanted to start by talking to you about your book, which came out in 2019, and it takes a look at the childcare crisis in the country. I know things have changed or I'm hoping they've changed a little bit since 2019, but maybe not enough, but can you talk about the crisis and sort of where we are today?

Paint the picture for us.

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:00:57] Yeah. Yeah.

I mean, it's been an eventful year and a half since the book came out. So the childcare crisis in the US is still raging. It's just the contours look a little bit different now than they did back in 2019. So what is described as a childcare crisis is the fact that childcare is largely unaffordable, inaccessible, of questionable quality and is a sector where practitioners are getting paid miserably low wages.

So it's not working for anyone. There's no part of it that no one is benefiting from the system. It's not working for parents. It's not working for providers. It's not working for businesses and it's not working for kids. And a lot of that has historical roots going all the way back to the founding of the country and going through our history. But what's happening right now, you know, the pandemic really brought the hammer down on an already fragile industry. So, you know, where the beginning of the pandemic, when all the childcare programs had to basically close, except for those that were serving, the children of, healthcare workers and other truly for the frontline workers. It was an existential crisis because the way we treat childcare in this country, we treat childcare programs more like restaurants than we do, like, public schools or libraries. And what that means is they need paying customers to stay in business. And all of a sudden the customers were gone. There were surveys coming out, which I think were accurate, that without any kind of government assistance, we would lose half of the childcare

**Rafael Otto:** [00:02:25] right.

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:02:26] programs in the country.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:02:27] right.

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:02:28] Now there was some trials, some government assistance with the Cares act, and you know, the PPP loans, all those things, we're able to kind of keep the sector afloat during the worst of the pandemic. And then the American Rescue Plan, the December stimulus combined for about 49 billion dollars which is truly a historic investment in childcare.

So the sector has been stabilized. The devastation that we were facing didn't come to pass because we were able to glue it together with assistance. But now there's this sort of additional knock-on crisis, which is childcare programs are having a huge trouble finding staff.

So, while we've heard of labor issues across the country. In childcare, it is particularly bad because there are mandated child to adult ratios, right? That means that if you don't have enough teachers, you just can't open all the classrooms you otherwise would be able to.

That's becoming more of a problem as the median wage for childcare workers is about $11.65/hr. Other industries, fast food, retail, you know, are raising their wages, they're offering better benefits. Childcare programs have no ability to just take a little bit less profit and make that up cause they weren't making any real profit to begin with.

So, yeah, we're really in a moment where it's sort of been crisis after crisis after crisis.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:03:42] Can you talk a little bit about the historical background. I know you said going all the way back to the founding of the country, and a little bit more recently, we could point to maybe some progress that had been starting to get made in the sixties and the seventies. And that was held up.

Can you talk a little bit about the history that is informing the current crisis today?

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:04:01] Yeah.

So to begin with, you can't separate out understanding American childcare from understanding how ambivalent America has been about mothers of young children working. For the first childcare, sort of external childcare that existed in the country, came in two forms, right?

One were enslaved women who were forced to care for the children and their enslavers. And the second was sort of these charities set up basically as holding pans for kids of widowed mothers, or truly like, destitute mothers who had no choice but to go and work, you know, in the late 1800s we've never really shaken out of that.

There has always been sort of this reluctance, or exploitive, you know, system, that we've never sort of embraced the idea, even though we espouse gender equity these days, this idea that women and mothers should be able to go and work outside the home if they want to, and they should have viable high quality care options available to them so that they can do that.

Or if they don't, if they want to work part-time, whatever the situation that they want, they should be empowered. We've never acted that out. We have a childcare system that really rests on a welfare frame. You mentioned the sixties and and the seventies and there was this moment in that 1971 Congress passed the comprehensive child development act, which would have created a much more of a nationally or federally funded childcare system.

But it was vetoed by president Nixon, in pretty strong language and really, putting the kind of stake in the ground that the federal government should not be involved in the family. Right? And so it really cemented this idea that childcare is a family responsibility, it's not a societal responsibility and that the ghosts of ‘71 continues to haunt us to today.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:05:41] Right. How would you describe the shift in public opinion about this now?

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:05:46] The one thing that's happened, and this has actually been true since the late 1990s, is that regardless of what society wanted them to or not, women entered the workforce. Two-thirds of basically all kids under the age of six, have all of their available parents or guardians in the workforce.

Obviously, if you're a single parent you have to be working and so you need care, but it's also true for significant portions of mothers, too, in two income households or two parent households, rather. And as a result, you started to see this coupled with the brain science coming out around how much early childhood shapes future academic and life success, has been a broad shift where childcare now polls very very well. The idea that parents would have access to high quality childcare is something that you see a lot of support for, on both sides of the aisle, honestly. There's still a lot of ambivalence. There's still a lot of people that don't think particularly mothers of very young children should be working outside the home but there has absolutely been a shift where, when you come down to it. Most people recognize that this is a reality that we need to contend with. That the status quo isn't working. We have to do something about it rather than continue to cause this suffering for parents and children, just because we aren't seceding to the reality that they're working whether or not we would personally want them to be.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:07:00] Right. We're talking about childcare and I'm curious about how you think about childcare and preschool in this umbrella of early care and education, early childhood education, early learning... Childcare is really an early learning opportunity. That’s the way we typically think about it.

And yet I think there is a general understanding by the public that these are different things, and I'm not sure that they are. What are your thoughts on that?

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:07:25] I'm not sure that they are either. I think it has been fascinating. So first of all, I'm a proponent of thinking about this as one cohesive birth to five system, right? Like there's nothing magical that happens when a kid goes from being two to three or three to four and suddenly their brain kicks in and they're like, oh, I'm learning now.

Now it's not how brain development works. Brain development is cumulative where the foundations for everything start at birth. And frankly, learning the alphabet at age three or at age four and a half has very little ultimate impact on a kid's trajectory.

What's fascinating about the pre-K example though is what pre-K advocates have been able to do is by using an educational frame to circumvent the societal displeasure with the idea of women working, Right?

Because a pre-K program for a three-year-old - like if they go through that classroom. And a three-year-old classroom in a childcare center or a family childcare are very very very similar.

It's just different, what we call it. Yet, Pre-K is immensely popular. You know, some of the first universal pre-K programs in the country where in places like Oklahoma and Georgia. The one with the highest rated system is in Alabama, like it very much has bi-partisan support. And it's just generally free. It is treated as an extension of the public school system, which has pros and cons, but it shows you that we have this schism in our minds between education and care, which you can sort of use it for good sometimes, but it also has a lot of negative implications.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:08:48] You mentioned there are pros and cons of having a preschool childcare system embedded in K-12 or connected to K-12 as part of, like, the public good or the continuum of education. What are some of those pros? What are the cons?

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:09:01] Yeah. So some of the pros are for one thing, you can just gets a lot more public support and funding. So a pre-K teacher, attached to the public school, is a public school employee. And so their compensation is much, much better. They're getting paid on par with the kindergarten teacher. Their turnover is much lower. Their ability to get professional development is much better. All of those things that we, you know, we have, uh, an inadequate and inequitable public school system. That's absolutely true.

On the other hand, there are certain things, like if there is a floor of quality and you know, the floor of decent compensation. These opportunities that are presented to children and to the employees. So that's all to the good. The downside is, you know, public schools are sort of by their very nature standardized, right? They operate a certain number of hours. They tend to not... they even operate in certain kinds of facilities.

And what we know is that parents' preferences and needs, particularly for when their children are younger, really vary. Some parents really only want their child with a relative, with someone who speaks their language in a small, like family, childcare home. They want them in a childcare program attached to a church or synagogue or mosque, what have you.

And what we know is that any of those settings can be great for kids. Like little kids can thrive. Because you're not again we're not trying to teach them trigonometry. Like the content here is not like what's an issue. The issue is we need to have warm attentive caregivers who are following the children's lead and, naturally that will involve learning and they, you know, involve books and all the other stuff, but like the setting, we can be setting agnostics along that as that setting is high quality.

The problem with pre-K is that it sometimes gets you the sort of very academic eyes sort of version of: we want everyone in a classroom. And there's not actually a lot of evidence as to the idea that all the three and four year olds need to be in a classroom setting. That may work for some of them may not work for others.

The other piece of things I mentioned quickly is, just from the pure financing standpoint, most childcare programs make their budgets work on the back of their preschoolers because you can have.. the other ratios can be so much higher. You can have one teacher for four infants where you could have one teacher for 10 or 12 preschoolers.

One thing that some places have found when they have universal pre-K is that it sucks all the four-year-olds into the public system and the actual infant and toddler providers that really struggle as a result. There was a, I think something that actually Multnomah county did sort of very thoughtful about how they did their UPK measure cause they're aware of it.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:11:28] Yeah, the recent Preschool For All. And I mean, that kind of measure is something that's designed to address a number of the things that you're talking about. Increase wages early educators, help strengthen the supply of like physical space. And that's something that I know that we're with in the county.

And I think many places are. There's just a lack of infrastructure. There's a lack of classrooms and space to even expand childcare preschool. You seeing the same thing?

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:11:56] Yes, that is absolutely a national problem, facilities. And we want these facilities to be high quality like you don't necessarily want a childcare program at like a strip mall on the side of the road, right? Like you want these places to be where you can have good outdoor space for the kids, you know, all the facilities are high quality where there aren't any environmental toxins or like all of these things.

So yes, there is certainly a challenge that we see nationwide.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:12:24] There's also this idea, I know there are preschool programs out there. There's one in Oregon that is using a mixed delivery approach where a preschool classroom might be available, something that feels more like a traditional classroom, but there are in-home options.

That kind of thing does apply to childcare settings as well. Childcare is more likely to be provided in home. And then there are scenarios where parents are working at night and might need overnight childcare, things like that. So it does have a different feel in terms of what a public system might be able to offer.

How is that being handled?

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:13:01] Yeah. I mean, I think there's generally a consensus that mixed delivery is the way to go for exactly the reasons you just described. And then, because again, we know that a private program can be just as good as a public funded program. There are some ongoing debates. So for example, California is the middle of a conversation right now about whether they should just be delivered through public schools. Their sort of universal pre-K proposal. They call it transitional kindergarten there, or whether it should be delivered in private settings as well. And, you know, and then there's also an ongoing debate in the field. I think about the role of some of these large for-profit chains. Because right now they do serve a role inside of our pretty impoverished system.

But moving forward, what role do those chains play is also, I think, an open question. But yeah the idea of a mixed delivery system, you know, we do this in other sectors. So if you think about Medicare, right, like you can go to a private health clinic using your Medicaid dollars, you can take a Pell grant and you can go to a private college with that.

We have plenty of examples where we say like, yes, public money can be used in a private setting so long as that private setting agrees to abide by certain rules and regulations.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:14:06] Yeah, that makes sense. I know you talked about some of the infusion of dollars federally a little bit and looking at chapters in your book, one of them is called,” Childcare should be free for families in America. America can afford it.”

So, break that down.

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:14:25] Yeah. So, this is the thing. You look at the estimates of how much it would cost to run a really high quality childcare system in this country where it’s very affordable, you know, and where you're paying practitioners well. Like the low end estimate is probably around $140 billion a year.

High-end estimates are sort of more $300, $400 billion a year. That sounds like a big number, but then you start breaking it down in a couple of ways. First to put it in context, we spend $700 billion a year in this country on K-12 education. If you combine federal and state, local money we spend about $500 ish, $600 ish billion on things like Medicaid and Medicare.

So, you know, it's a big number, but it's also like up there with other major social programs that are impacting huge swaths of people. And we're talking about tens of millions of parents and kids here. So that's one. The other thing is unlike most social programs, childcare has an immediate return on investment.

Not just those sort of medium and long-term returns from children doing better in school and, you know, having better earnings as adults, which is true. Absolutely. But, what we see is that every place that has ever put in low cost or free childcare for some number of ages is the maternal employment rate jumps almost immediately because there are, it turns out, a lot women primarily were at home right now with a child who would like to increase their wages like who can start a number of hours working, or who would like to go and find part-time work or who would like to, you know, seek a promotion who can't because they just don't have the childcare situation that makes that work.

So for example, in Quebec, in Canada, although, they had some issues with the way they design their system, how fast they put it into place. So they've had some quality problems, but, what they've found financially is that the province is actually making money off of their system, because of the increased economic activity.

So there's a real point here that we just need a down payment to kind of get a good system up and running. And then, then it largely is going to offset its own costs to say...and that's as pure, we can't dollars and cents before you get to like questions of human flourishing and themselves, like, you know, the, how do we support families in this country?

How do we make sure that parents feel like they can have the number of kids that they want when they want them? You know, like they have these ideas of. That was more philosophical value questions around. What does it mean? to be able to have the self-determination and freedom to design the family and family situation that you want, which we fortunately, for far, far, far too many families in America right now, they don't have that choice.

They're very constrained in their freedom and how they choose to design their family.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:16:58] Yeah.

I know you mentioned the federal dollars, there's the federal block grant that's coming to help stabilize childcare providers and then there's money in The American Rescue Plan as well.

Can you talk about what you think the impact of those investments is going to do? And is that the down payment or is it not quite enough yet?

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:17:18] So I think it can be a down payment if it's seen as such. Right. So, it's an incredible infusion of one-time money, right? Like we've said, well, the block grant increases that were happening even in the last administration are permanent, but that was increasing it up to around, you know, it's at like 10 billion a year right now?

So not chump change, but also not enough to build a system off of. The nearly $50 billion coming from The American Rescue Plan on the December stimulus, you know, offers a really incredible opportunity, but you have to think about it again. The money is going away in a couple of years. And so, you know, how to use this to innovate, think about finally implementing things like more contract-based, program where programs aren't, reliant on just children attending. Basically, you kind of get it a little bit off of that restaurant model and more towards the public school or like library model of, you know, the public money is flowing, you know, just it's regardless of kind of whatis happening

With the number of people who were there every day, there are big opportunities around, again, this compensation issue and the workforce shortages are terrible right now. Like I was saying, there are some champ like to think about how do you offer some kind of health benefits through this? How do you raise the wages? But again, we're not going to be able to do that if all of a sudden in two years the money's gone and you can't keep the wages up and the more you can't keep offering health insurance. So, we have to, I think, think about this as the front end that then transitions into passing either a major piece of federal legislation, like the Childcare for Working Families Act and, or, major state and in some cases, local revenue sources that again, need to be permanent there year after year after year that actually let us build a system.

I think we have a ton of opportunity. This is more money than the field has seen probably ever. But the temporary nature of it means we have to leverage it well, or it's just gonna end up being a spike that then leaves us back in alert afterwards.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:19:15] So apart from the issue of needing to get some sort of permanent funding in place, what are the major threats to being able to build this system? What are the major obstacles?

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:19:27] Yeah, there were a couple of them. One is the workforce. So, one thing we've known for a while, this is not new, but there's not a flood of people who are trying to come into work in the childcare industry. Again, it's good work. And then you get to do good but it's hard work and it's very low paid.

We don't have a huge pipeline of folks, much less people who are qualified and talented and high quality. We've lost in our family childcare sector, somewhere around 50% of the entire supply nationwide has disappeared in the past 15 years. And again, that's because a lot of these women are reaching sort of retirement age more or less, or, you know, and they're starting to close their programs and there is not a whole ton of young folks who are wanting to come and do that work.

And that's a threat, this is something again, to go back to the Quebec example, part of the reason they had quality issues is because their workforce wasn't ready to fill their sort of expansion of slots. So, a lot of this comes down... like childcare is a very person centric sector, as it well should be. And if we aren't taking care of the people who are involved in it, then you know, it's going to be really hard to build a high quality system. So, as I was saying, the absolute number one threat is we won't have the workforce to make this happen. I think There's a question when it comes to actually implementing passing these legislation, you know. We haven't until pretty recently seen what I would consider an organized resistance to expanding public childcare, kind of floated under the surface and kind of, like I said, like pretty bi-partisan, your business groups, like the US Chamber of Commerce who were like very supportive of it.

I will say. Just to name it since a democratic president came in and embraced this issue is like a pretty important one and talked about it, you know, and has joined us to congress, we have seen more, active backlash to it than we have seen in a long time. Folks claiming that, we're trying to governments trying to, you can't take over, some of the family, um, You know, and things like that sort of is actually, you know, I mentioned ghosts Nixon and 71.

It does very much harken back to that. It's almost the same docking point. So that's another just sort of, I guess, kind of like because of capital people, political threat.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:21:36] Right. There's another effort that you're involved in, which is called Child Care NEXT. Can you talk about what that looks like and what you're hoping to accomplish with that?

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:21:46] Yeah. Child Care NEXT is a philanthropic, a basically grant, national grant competition. And the idea is to catalyze these transformative campaigns to change childcare in states. So, I sort of conceived this idea because many other sectors or any other industries than our issue areas, rather, are trying to fight for big policy wins.

You look at what they're able to do and they bring a very sophisticated political toolkit. They're doing polling, they're doing campaign contributions, they're doing events to mobilize voters. You know, all of these things. Traditionally the child care kind of advocacy and organizing field has been pretty under-resourced and hasn't really been able to pull out that level of sophistication. The other thing we've also do is we get very kind of stuck with like, what's the thing that's right in front of our faces, like the incremental changes. And so what this idea is there will be five states chosen. There were 36 states that applied. The five states that are chosen will be part of a cohort that receives significant six plus a year funding for hopefully through the rest of basically the 2020s. And what they're going to do is set a vision and say of by the end of the decade or so, here's where we want to be. Here's our big transformative vision for childcare.

We're gonna transform quality. We're gonna transform compensation. We're gonna transform affordability.We're gonna transform access. We're gonna put equity at the center of all of this. Make sure this works for parents. We're here and we're gonna figure how much it's gonna cost, we're gonna figure out how we might pay for it, and we're gonna figure out how we're going to win it at a state level.

And the ideas that we want to get. These five states, three proof points much in the way that Romney-Karen Massachusetts led to Obamacare is that we want the states often lead the way in these efforts to be able to say here's what an effective childcare system looks like and to do that, you know, in a multitude of different kinds of states to show, it's not just something that you need to be a small, you know, northeastern state in order to do it, but you can do it anywhere in the nation. So that's the hope and we'll be sort of interviewing finalists now and we'll be announcing the initial cohort by the end of July.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:23:45] Can you talk about the, you mentioned there's a focus on equity and I believe it's a focus on racial equity in particular in that project.

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:23:51] Yes.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:23:53] Talk about the importance of that. The focus on racial equity and what you're hoping to accomplish with that in mind.

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:24:00] Yes absolutely. I mean the focus on racial equity is one of our nonnegotiable. So we know that as many things in life, the people who are most impacted by the failure of our childcare system are people of color, families of color, kids of color.

They're the ones that have the least access to childcare programs. They're the ones that have the least access to quality childcare programs. The workforce itself is about 40% or more women of color and a significant portion of those are immigrants. You know, we have a very diverse workforce, which again gets very low wages and has largely been subsidizing the whole system on their backs for a very long time. And then, just everything in terms of the, where childcare is located, you know, within these like all of these dimensions come back to racial inequities. And so, if we're going to actually design an effective system, we have to share the decision-making power and really be led in the decision and the design by people who are most affected by this and by people who've been historically disenfranchised and discriminated against in access to childcare. You know, that really is something that we're looking for.

One of the other things that's really important to this project is the idea of shared power. So what I mean by that is, we're not just looking for traditional advocates, the grasp of the cocoon, good grasstops folks whom you know speak for parents and practitioners. We want to make sure that the grassroots are there at the table, too. They're helping, sharing the power, leading these efforts and truly shaping the decisions that are being made because we know that is what leads to the design actually working for the people who want to work for. Going back to the Multnomah Preschool For All campaign, right? There was a parent accountability council, and that was at the center of a lot of the decision making and they got to vet a lot of the plans and my understanding from doing some interviews with folks up there is that really shaped how a lot of how the final language and the proposal and the ballot measure ended up.

I think that we can't divorce racial equity from these conversations. It's just inherent in what we're trying to do.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:26:02] I have one more question for you and perhaps, maybe you've answered this to some degree, but I also wanted to take a quote from your book and it's the Fred Rogers quote that you have in there.

I, when I read it, I just loved it and I feel like I just want to read it quickly because it's good.

But the quote is "*We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say. It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem. Then there are those who see the need and respond. And I consider those people my heroes.*"

Tell me about why you picked the quote and who are those responders right now?

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:26:38] Yeah. So I picked that quote because I really think the mindset shift in this country we have to have is that childcare is a societal responsibility, not just an individual responsibility. Whether or not you even have kids, we all should care about whether American families are flourishing or whether these families have the care that they need for their kids to thrive for the parents to thrive and for everyone around them and the community to thrive.

And so that is the shift. I often say, like, if I could say one sort of significant change beyond what was already being talked about, I think childcare should be our right. You know, in all 50 state constitutions, families have a right to public education. Children have a right to public education. In zero state constitutions, do parents or children have a right to access early care and education or to access childcare. And that's, I think a real... it's very telling that we still consider childcare welfare. We consider it to be an individual responsibility. So I think what I liked about that Fred Rogers quote is it really speaks to the fact that we have to be able to see beyond our own locus and to the broader impacts that those around us thriving has on all of society.

I would say to who those are, I mean, there are people who are the advocates. People on the ground right now, who are striving day in and day out to draw attention to this issue, to tell their stories, the practitioners who have been... I mean, what we've been doing, we have a whole lot of child care practitioners who have never had their program close a day during this pandemic. They had been out there and they were caring for the kids of healthcare workers and sanitation workers. And during the first few months, and their programs never closed. And they're still doing it for $11 an hour with few of any benefits. And for those folks who, taking care of other people's children at risk to their own lives, I mean, that truly is to me, like those are heroes and right now the people who are trying to lift up and save the sector so that it can work for other parents so that we can have dignity for these workers who are doing it. Literally cultivating the brain development of a generation, I think that's to me is the definition of a hero.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:28:51] Thank you so much, Elliot. It was really great to have you on the podcast. Appreciate your time.

**Elliot Haspel:** [00:28:56] Thank you so much. Really appreciate the opportunity.