



What Does it Cost to Raise a Child?

April 2017 podcast episode transcript

Featuring [Harry Brighouse](#),

Professor of Philosophy, Carol Dickson-Bascom Professor of the Humanities, and Affiliate Professor of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison

Hosted by Dave Chancellor

Chancellor Hello and thanks for joining us for the April 2017 episode of the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor.

For this episode, I had the privilege of interviewing Harry Brighouse, who is a Professor of Philosophy and the Carol-Dickson Bascom Professor of the Humanities here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He's a faculty affiliate of IRP and gave a talk at IRP's weekly seminar series this past fall on what it costs to raise a child, which drew on work he did with Adam Swift for their book called *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships*.

In our interview, Professor Brighouse talked about how the role of the family matters when we think about the cost of raising a child and what all of this means for poverty policy. But, when we first began talking, I asked him a broader question about what philosophers can do for social scientists who study poverty.

Brighouse There are two kind of metaphors for philosophy, one is as an underlaborer. By that I mean, Locke had this idea that philosophy is an underlaborer for the sciences, basically we do this conceptual work so you know what it is that you're talking about and then you actually go and talk about it and find things out. And then the other, the other metaphor is from my friend Tony Laden who sort of thinks of philosophers as being like optometrists. They give you a different lens, a different focus, a different way of seeing things and so you see what it is you're studying slightly differently. You see a different problem than the problem you might have seen if you carried on seeing things the same way. So the thing that I think moral and political philosophers, (which is what I am) can do for social scientists is think rigorously about the value questions and offer resources for social scientists to do that rigorous thinking themselves. And I think when you do that you will see slightly different problems than if you're — a lot of social science training, you become really good at some method and then you look for things to apply the method to. And sometimes do that really excitingly and well. But those problems are not necessarily the problems that you would be approaching if thinking in value terms.

Chancellor Brighouse says philosophy can help us think about big picture goals guiding research and policy, and, as an example, he says we might look at the way we study charter schools.

Brighouse I've done a lot of work on charter schools and if you think about high-commitment charter schools which focus on very disadvantaged children in urban areas and try to serve those children, there's an enormous amount of research about the effects of those schools on those children. But the research tends to be done in terms of the goals that those charter schools actually have. So the charter schools say "we're going to send everybody to college" and so the research is "do they send everyone to college?" Well, maybe sending everybody to college isn't the right goal. Which doesn't mean that the charter schools are doing the wrong thing. It may be that whatever they're actually doing better meets the goal, the right goal, then sending

Brighthouse, continued everyone to college. There's very little research at all on the effects of those schools on the schools with which they compete, in the same ecosystem as them. If you care about disadvantaged kids, you don't just care about the disadvantaged kids who attend the charter schools, you also care about disadvantaged kids who don't attend the charter schools. There's very little research on the effects of those schools — however successful they are with the kids that they teach — on the kids who don't attend them. I'm completely open to the possibility that those effects are good. They might be bad. But having a good, normative framework helps you to see what goals you should be holding the charter schools to and who it is that you should be doing the research on.

Chancellor In part, Brighthouse's book with Swift does just this — it focuses on the way we think about the “big picture” goals of raising children and the role of the family in trying to achieve those goals.

Brighthouse One part of it [the book] is not very controversial, I think, which is that the parent-child relationship, having a parent, is good for children. So it's good for children because it contributes to their developmental needs, but it also enables them to have kind of a daily lived experience that's valuable in a way that we think is not sustainable by other kinds of institutions without the family. Other institutions just can't provide those goods. It's also valuable for adults. So we think adults get tremendous value and tremendous wellbeing from meeting the challenge, the very complex challenge that is overseeing a child's development. Especially because with children the aim is not — it's not like a pet, the aim is not to just make them happy. In fact, often the aim is to do things which you know are going to make them unhappy in the moment because what you're trying to do is get them to a point at which they can be independent of you. And so it's not the kind of relationship where you're loving the being and the being is loving you and that's the end of it. It's like you're loving the being, you're loving the child and the child might or might not love you depending on exactly what's going on. But your aim is to get it to the point where it can live without you and can reject you if it wants to.

Chancellor Raising a child so that they can live without you is a complex challenge and Brighthouse says there are two main themes or questions we should think about in trying to understand that challenge.

Brighthouse One is about, if you like, the relationship between the family and the world. So, parents pass on advantages to their children which enables children to compete better in a competitive society *and* compete better in a way that *harms* other people. It might also *benefit* other people, but immediately, if you're competing for a job and there's only one job you want to be better equipped than the next person in line for the job and that person loses out because they don't get the job. So, to what extent and in what ways is it ok for parents to confer those advantages on their children? Knowing that conferring advantages on your children, you're going to be giving them a leg up in competition with other people? And there's also an opportunity cost because you could be conferring advantage on other children who are not your own and who are worse off than your own.

So that's one set of questions. The other set of questions is about shaping children's values, to what extent is it ok to — in general, in liberal societies, we think it's not ok for adults to shape *one another's values*. You can argue with one another, and you can sort of give people reasons for having different values than they do, but you don't get authority over their value shaping environment. But, with *children*, you do. We think that's an inevitable part of the family, but we also think there are limits on what parents may legitimately do to shape their children's values.

Chancellor Professor Brighthouse says many parents face challenges when it comes to passing on advantages or values to their children that can help them ultimately be able to succeed.

Brighthouse When you come into the real world, away from philosophy, you see a world in which lots of the conditions that you might sort of ideally want are not present. And, in particular, we see that some people are raising their children — a significant swath of people in the U.S., you know, somewhere around 25%, maybe even more, of people are raising their children in circumstances which are extremely challenging and in which they don't necessarily have the resources that you would want them to have in order to be

Brighthouse, continued able to raise their child successfully. That means the child being able to — well, what I did in the talk was I sort of gave some conditions, certain capabilities that you want the child to have by the time they reach adulthood. The capability to get a non-low wage job, the capability to avoid high interest debt. The capability to avoid being involved in the criminal justice system on the wrong side [just to be clear, the wrong side is the criminal side!]. And the capability to defer biological parenthood until you can raise a child so they can meet these conditions themselves. So you want to develop these capabilities in children. We make it very difficult to develop those capabilities for certain parts of our population.

Chancellor Of course, it takes resources to raise and develop those capabilities in children. But Brighthouse says the question of how much it costs or what a reasonable level of resources would look like is actually something quite different from what is usually considered.

Brighthouse When you look at the USDA website and you ask how much it costs to raise a child, they just tell you how much people spend on their children, which doesn't tell you how much it costs to raise a child if you have a normative standard. And what I tried to do with the capabilities is to present a normative standard so that you can then use that standard to ask what would it cost to raise a child to succeed in that way? And to do so without having to make huge personal sacrifices as a parents, without sort of ruining your own life. Why does that matter? It matters because in a decent, successful society, we would want everybody to be in those conditions. And if that's an aim of public policy, it matters because that helps you think about what resources you need to provide what kind of structure you need to set it up for people to be able to do that.

Chancellor In thinking about parents' investments in their children, if we go back to Brighthouse and Swift's first question — about family's relationship to the world — we can see that there's this issue of distributive justice or fairness at work here.

Brighthouse There's a very long tradition in political thought, which goes back to Plato, in a way, of thinking of the family as being at odds with distributive justice, and distributive justice requires that we redistribute opportunities, it requires that we maybe redistribute resources beyond that. And the family stands in the way of that. And it stands in the way of that because of the kinds of intimate interactions that parents have with their children and the kinds of permissions they feel with respect to their children. So, that they can advantage their children, or, so they can do things which would end up disadvantaging their children. There are two standards of thinking, there are two kinds of reactions if you like. One is the conservative reaction which says, well, the family is really important so forget about distributive justice. It stands in the way of distributive justice, too bad for distributive justice. And we've got a lot of sympathy with that view, Swift and I. And then the other response is sort of the response of somebody like Alexandra Kollontai or the communists of the late 19th, early 20th century, which is "ahh! The family stands in the way of justice. The family is terrible. Let's get rid of the family and then we can just have justice." And our, you know. We *don't* have sympathy with that view of the *family*, but we *do* have sympathy with that view about *justice*. We think justice really matters. Our innovation, one of the innovations of the book is to think about the family in a different way and say the family is a *part of* justice. And part of what distributive justice requires is that we enable people to enjoy and succeed in family life.

Chancellor Brighthouse says that, for example, a government that is trying to make society more just should understand that, in doing so, it is also better enabling parents to meet their goals in relation to their children by helping create the conditions for families to succeed.

That matters particularly for poverty because poverty is just a condition that makes family life much harder to succeed in. It's a condition which, I sort of, well it's not funny, but the poor have less of lots of things. The poor have less money — obviously, they have less education, they have less safety in their communities, they have less quality health care. They have less good public health provision, typically. They tend to live in neighborhoods and areas which are more polluted, we have the example of Flint where the water isn't even properly treated. But they have more of one thing which is stress. And stress is toxic. It's toxic to family relationships, it's toxic to health, it's toxic to the ability to benefit from education. And relieving poverty lessens that toxicity, it lessens stress. That's

Brighthouse, why poverty is bad, because of all of these things, and that's why relieving poverty is good. It enables people to get continued more out of their lives. But especially it enables people to be more successful in their family life. That is it enables children to grow and develop more successfully. It reduces the amount of sacrifice that parents have to make in order to ensure that their children grow and develop successfully. And it makes their daily lived experience within the family a more fruitful, a more flourishing, a more enjoyable one.

Chancellor Thanks to Harry Brighthouse for taking the time to talk to us. If you want to learn more about this work, check out Brighthouse's and Swift's book, *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent Child Relationships* from Princeton University Press.

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